

- **Frederick Douglass**—He was the son of a Negro slave and white slaveholder who taught himself secretly to read and write which was a serious crime in itself in the antebellum South. His book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845 recounted the harsh life in the pre-Civil War plantations in which he lived and worked before escaping to New York. He described the senseless cruelty of masters and the debased lives of slaves. His contribution to the emancipation cause included recruiting Negro volunteers during the Civil War and he was also instrumental in safeguarding and preserving the rights of the freedmen after the war.
- **Underground Railroad**—The Underground Railroad refers to the effort—sometimes spontaneous, sometimes highly organized—to assist persons held in bondage to escape from slavery. The system even used terms used in railroading: the homes and businesses where fugitives would rest and eat were called “stations” and “depots” and were run by “stationmasters,” those who contributed money or goods were “stockholders,” and the “conductor” was responsible for moving fugitives from one station to the next. Stations were usually about twenty miles apart and conductors used covered wagons or carts with false bottoms to carry slaves from one station to another. By the middle of the 19th century it was estimated that over 50,000 slaves had escaped from the South using the “underground railroad.” The “underground railroad” had many notable participants, including Levi Coffin, a Quaker who assisted more than 3,000 slaves, and Harriet Tubman, who made 19 trips into the South and escorted over 300 slaves to freedom.
- **Slave Insurrections**—
 1. **Stono Rebellion**—In 1739, slaves met in secret near the Stono River in South Carolina and planned an escape to freedom. They killed the two storekeepers and stole guns and powder from a store. As they headed south the group grew larger until slave owners caught up with them and engaged from 60 to 100 slaves in a battle. In the battle more than 20 whites would be killed along with 40 slaves. Most of the captured slaves would be decapitated although some did manage to escape. As a result of this rebellion South Carolina’s lawmakers enacted a harsher slave code.
 2. **Gabriel Prosser**—Virginia slave who planned a scheme for a slave revolt to slay all the whites and take control of Richmond. He recruited supporters and organized them into military units. Authorities never discovered how many slaves were involved, but there could have been several thousand, many armed with swords and pikes made from farm tools by slave blacksmiths. On the day of the attack in 1800 the plot was disclosed by two slaves who did not want their masters slain. Some slaves, in order to save their own lives, testified against the ringleaders, about 35 of them were executed including Prosser.
 3. **Denmark Vesey**—On July 2, 1822 former slave Denmark Vesey was executed after being tried as the leader of a conspiracy to rebel against slave owners and other whites in Charleston, South Carolina. Vesey was a well-respected carpenter, minister and former household slave who had won \$1,500 in a lottery, which he used to buy his freedom and set up a carpentry shop. In 1822 he was accused of being behind a secret plot to rebel against whites, a plot that involved 9,000 slaves and more than two years of preparation. Their plan was to murder as many whites as they could, then set sail for Africa or Haiti. In the wake of rumors of the plot, Charleston authorities charged 131 people with conspiracy, convicted 67 and executed at least 35.
 4. **Nat Turner**—Slave Baptist preacher Nat Turner believed that God had called on him to lead his people out of slavery. A solar eclipse in 1831 was God’s sign to Turner that the time had come to strike the blow for freedom and Turner and seven fellow slaves murdered their master and his family while they slept, and then set out on a campaign that terrorized the countryside and killed 55 white people. Picking up slave recruits as they

traveled from plantation to plantation, Turner and his followers moved through Southampton county toward the county seat of Jerusalem, where they planned to capture the armory. For 48 hours, Turner and his undisciplined followers rampaged and killed until they were killed, captured, or dispersed in a confrontation with armed citizens and the state militia outside Jerusalem. Turner managed to escape and hide out for six weeks before he was captured. He and 16 of his followers were hung. Nat Turner's rebellion set off a reign of terror for all blacks in the area as state and federal troops swept through, killing as many as 200. To avoid future uprisings, new slave codes were enacted outlawing the education of slaves and putting strict controls on their movements. After this rebellion a policy of not questioning the slave system was adopted in the South because it was felt that any discussion might encourage similar slave revolts.

- **Virginia Emancipation Failure**—In 1831-32 emancipation was narrowly defeated by 7 votes by the delegates at a Virginia constitutional convention. After this vote and Nat Turner's rebellion, the South became a closed society and there was no discussion of emancipation.
- **Amistad Case**—In 1839, 53 slaves led by Joseph Cinque, killed Ramon Ferrer, and took possession of his ship the *Amistad* as it was attempting to move them from Havana, Cuba to Port a Prince. Cinque ordered the navigator to take them back to Africa but after 63 days at sea the ship was seized by a U.S. ship, half a mile from Long Island. The ship was towed into New London, Connecticut and the Africans were imprisoned. The Spanish government insisted that the mutineers be returned to Cuba. President Martin Van Buren was sympathetic to these demands but insisted that the men would be first tried for murder. Abolitionists took up the African's case and argued that while slavery was legal in Cuba, importation of slaves from Africa was not. The judge agreed, and ruled that the Africans had been kidnapped and had the right to use violence to escape from captivity. The United States government appealed this decision and the case went before the Supreme Court. Former President John Quincy Adams at seventy-three, defended them and his emotional eight-hour speech won the argument and the mutineers were released. Lewis Tappan and the anti-slavery movement helped fund the return of the 35 surviving Africans to Sierra Leone where they formed a Christian anti-slavery mission.

Political Events Leading to the Civil War—

- **Gag Resolutions**—In 1836 southern Congressmen passed a “gag rule” that provided for the House to automatically table any petitions against slavery. John Quincy Adams, former President now representing Plymouth in Congress, tirelessly fought the rule for eight years until finally he obtained its repeal.
- **Status of New Territory**—After its acquisition Polk failed to get Congress to organize the new territories acquired in the Mexican War. The issues of California, New Mexico, and Utah were unresolved and threatened to destroy the union.
- **Wilmot Proviso**—In 1846, freshman Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot introduced an amendment to a bill stipulating that none of the territory acquired in the Mexican War should be open to slavery. The amended bill was passed in the House but was rejected by the Senate. The Wilmot Proviso created great bitterness between North and South and helped crystallize the conflict over the extension of slavery. It would lead to the Compromise of 1850.