

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

Prior to 1860 the two great regions of the country, “the North” and “the South,” were finding it increasingly difficult to agree on several matters. One of the causes of constant trouble was the issue of slavery. In an effort to resolve some of the differences between the regions, the Compromise of 1850 was passed. As you may know, in a compromise each side “gives in” a little in order to solve a problem.

One of the parts of the Compromise was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This act was an attempt to calm Southerners who were suffering financial loss because many of their slaves were escaping to the North with help from people who lived there.

Here are some of the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act:

1. Runaway slaves were to be returned to the state or territory from which they had escaped.
2. All citizens were to aid in carrying out the law; for example, citizens had to assist in the capture of slaves.
3. Anyone who in any way aided a slave to escape would be fined \$1000 and imprisoned for six months for each slave helped. Of course, this meant that anyone who was a part of the Underground Railroad would be severely punished.

Attempts to enforce the law were strongly resisted by those who hated slavery. They especially disliked “slave hunters”—who collected rewards for captured slaves—and officers of the law whose responsibility it was to apprehend slaves. Many runaway slaves were, themselves, prepared to fight to the death rather than return to the South.

To do:

1. Suppose you were an ordinary citizen who was called upon to help capture a runaway slave under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act. Circle the sentence that tells what you would be expected to do.



An officer attempts to arrest a runaway

2. Suppose you were a member of the Underground Railroad. As such you helped nine slaves to escape. What would be your punishment, if caught?

3. Write a sentence that might tell what each numbered person in the picture was thinking at the time of the event.

① Officer with badge and stick: _____

② Man holding warrant that gives legal permission to arrest the runaway: _____

③ Man standing in front of the runaway: _____

④ Boy with hoop and stick: _____

⑤ The runaway: _____

