Issues that Divided the Nation

(Build Up to the American Civil War)

During the build up to the Civil War, sectionalism began to develop in the United States. **Sectionalism** is the belief that a person’s region was superior to other sections of the country. The most sectional tension was between the North and South, but the West was also developing an identity of its own and was willing to side with either of the other sections if it would help them grow. All of the issues that divided the nation during the build up to the Civil War, there are four categories they can be classified under: Slavery, Cultural (Social), Economic, and Constitutional (Political). All of these issues led to sectionalism in the United States and pushed the country to the brink of war.

The two sides of the debate over slavery were divided between the two main sections of the United States; the North and South. Many Northerners viewed slavery as evil and wrong and some were involved in the abolitionist movement. The North did not obey fugitive slave laws because they said they were cruel and inhumane. No states in the North allowed slavery and the North and the abolitionists who lived there harbored fugitive slaves and helped them escape to Canada along the Underground Railroad. In the South, on the other hand, the people said that slavery was necessary to their way of life even though the majority of southerners did not even own slaves. Those who did own slaves, said slavery was good for the slaves because they were cared for in every way and given a job and that slavery was good for the slave owners because it allowed southern whites to achieve a high level of culture. Some people in both the North and the South even justified or condemned slavery through references in the Bible. Both sides of the slavery argument had strong supporters and both disliked the other side.

The cultural (social) differences between the North and South also caused conflict and added to sectional differences. In the North, society was much more urban (cities) and industrial while the majority of people were employed. Northerners tended to be less religious but more educated and the section was the power base of several political groups, including the Whigs, Republicans, and the Northern part of the Democratic Party. In the South, most people made a living through agriculture (farming) and lived further apart than people in the congested cities of the North. Religion was more important in the daily life of southerners but the average person was less educated and nearly all southerners were Democrats. These cultural differences made both the North and South think it was better than the other and kept the sections from trying to understand each other.

Economics was another large difference between the two major sections of the United States. The Northern economy was centered on manufacturing and industry (factories). They called for a high tariff (tax on imported goods) to protect that industry from foreign competition. The North was dependant on other parts of the country for most of its agricultural needs. The northern part of the country also had most of the country’s factories, roads, canals, and railroads. In the South, agriculture and large plantations were the basis of the economy centered on “king cotton.” The South opposed tariffs because they believed they would scare off foreign buyers of their goods and cost them more to live the lives they were used to because they had to import many of their goods. The people in the South were more self-sufficient than the North, but still needed some goods produced the northern industries. The South also wanted to develop more infrastructure (roads, cities, railroads, etc.), but felt like they were neglected by the government and other sections when it came to development. Economics only furthered the issues between the North and South.
The biggest issue that divided the North and South, however, was their views on the Constitution (Political). The North tended to have a “looser” interpretation of the Constitution and wanted a strong national government. They believed that the national government had absolute power and more authority over the country’s issues. Some Northern politicians, like Abraham Lincoln, believed that the United States was one nation and not a collection of independent states. They said the nation could not be separated or divided. The South, on the other hand, supported state’s rights (the idea that the individual states should have more power than the federal government). They read the Constitution more “strictly” than the northerners and also believed that state governments could nullify (or do away with) federal laws they did not agree with. Most Southerners also believed that because the states had freely created and joined the union (country) they could freely leave it as well. Constitutional (Political) issues caused the most conflict between the North and South leading up to the Civil War.

These issues that divided the nation leading up to the Civil War, created social, economic, and political tensions within the United States. Only temporary fixes through compromises and laws, such as the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act kept the peace. By 1860, however, the election of Abraham Lincoln made the South feel that no compromises could cure the wounds of so many years of disagreement. Fort Sumter, South Carolina provided the stage for the first sign of open aggression between the Union and the newly formed Confederate States of America.