

# ROAD TO FREEDOM

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Political Influence

In the period leading up to the American Civil War, there were two dominant political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats. Each side had strong political views about slavery. The Republican Party often took the side of the abolitionists. Well-known Republicans, such as Abraham Lincoln and William Seward, often spoke out against slavery. Members of the Democratic Party used the Republican's opposition to slavery to support the view that the Republicans were in favor of racial equality. This was too radical of a position for the Republicans to take if they were going to keep the voting public happy. Instead, the Republicans stated that they were concerned with the welfare of the white worker and committed to maintaining job security.

Democrats countered that the welfare of the white worker was dependent on the preservation of slavery. They said that if slavery were limited, white workers would be competing with free black workers in the work force. The Democrats explained that this competition would weaken the status of the white worker, both politically and economically. They argued that slavery needed to be preserved if they were to guarantee the welfare of the white worker. By taking this position, the Democratic Party appealed to both northern and southern voters.

### The Conflict Heats Up

As time passed, many southerners became increasingly passionate about their pro-slavery position. This was in direct response to the antislavery attitude growing in the north. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill in 1850 and a surge in political support for the Republican Party, things really began to heat up. Southerners defended the right to own slaves and northern abolitionists supported the antislavery movement. One of these abolitionists was John Brown. In 1859, he led a raid on the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. His goal was to prompt a radical, armed uprising of slaves. Before this could happen though, Brown and his followers were caught and Brown was hung. Although Brown had attacked an arsenal under the jurisdiction of the Federal government, many southern slaveholders were shocked to learn that northerners who were opposed to slavery supported Brown's actions and mourned his death.

Adapted from: Carter, Alice. *The valley of the shadow*. *Virginia Center for Digital History*. Retrieved August 11, 2005, from <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/teaching/vclassroom/Northernatt.html#histbck>.