

Chapter Two: Bleeding Kansas_1850s

Chapter Two: Bleeding Kansas | 1850s, The Small and the Mighty

In this chapter, a historical examination reveals the profound impact of Andrew Jackson's presidency, particularly through the lens of the infamously flawed Dred Scott Supreme Court decision of 1857. Dred Scott, an enslaved man from Missouri, asserted his claim to freedom after being taken to free territories. However, the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Roger Taney, ruled that he lacked standing in court since all African Americans, enslaved or free, were not considered U.S. citizens. This decision was reflective of the deeply entrenched systemic racism present in American society at the time.

Taney, a close advisor to Jackson and himself an enslaver, articulated that African Americans were viewed as an inferior class, devoid of rights unless granted by the government. This legal ruling also coincided with the broader backdrop of the nation grappling with the divisive issue of slavery, a conflict that would unravel into the Civil War.

The chapter further explores the Missouri Compromise and subsequent Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which introduced the concept of popular sovereignty, allowing new territories to decide their stance on slavery. This political maneuver caught the attention of abolitionists and proslavery advocates, culminating in the violent confrontations known as Bleeding Kansas. This turmoil arose as both factions flooded into the territory to influence the direction of its laws, leading to murders and destruction.

Franklin Pierce, the president at the time, faced personal tragedies, including the death of his children and a troubled marriage, while his administration struggled to maintain order amid rising tensions. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, while aimed at facilitating westward expansion, exacerbated divisions and set the stage for civil unrest.

As tensions escalated, a notable incident depicted is the attack by Preston Brooks on Senator Charles Sumner in May 1856, a physical manifestation of the violence permeating American political discourse. Brooks's assault on Sumner demonstrated how deeply personal and virulent the conflict over slavery had become, further polarizing the nation.

The aftermath of these events shaped the landscape leading to the Civil War, highlighting the fragility of American democracy when it struggled to reconcile the complex issues of state rights and human rights. Overall, the chapter underscores the significant role of individual actions and legislative decisions in shaping a tumultuous period in American history.