

Frederick and Abraham

Primary Source Reading

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Anyone living in America during the 1800s could tell you that at that time, the nation was divided politically and ideologically. The division was between the North and the South, and while it was chiefly over the issue of slavery, it was also about power and economics.

The North wanted more free states (states where slavery had been abolished) so they could control more elections. The South wanted more slave states for the same reason. Furthermore, wage paying Northern businesses didn't like being forced to compete against slave labor in the South. Slavery supported not only the Southern economy, but Southern society as well.

There were only a few voices in America at the time that dared to make slavery a moral question. Among them were Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, who were all prominent abolitionists.

2. The majority of slave owners in America prohibited their slaves from learning to read or write because they feared slaves would use these skills to resist or escape oppression. One of the most extraordinary figures in history proved them right: Frederick Douglass, who was born a slave and would go on to become America's leading abolitionist.

After making an amazing escape from slavery, Douglass settled in Massachusetts, where his improvised speeches on the evils of slavery caught the ear of local abolitionists. William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent New England abolitionist, hired Douglass to give a series of talks that led to Douglass becoming a well-known and respected figure in the anti-slavery movement. Douglass would go on to counsel Abraham Lincoln during the war while also recruiting African-American soldiers to fight for the Union.

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3. As the debate over slavery continued, Andrew Jackson's Democratic Party grew in power and became the voice of the South. Northerners organized themselves to form the Republican Party, taking on the name of Jefferson's old party. Today, it sounds weird to have a Democratic majority in the South and a Republican majority in the North, but that just shows how the names of parties have shifted over the years.

With the tension between pro-slavery Democrats and mostly anti-slavery Republicans growing, the nation turned its attention to a Senate race in Illinois between Stephen Douglas and an unknown lawyer named Abraham Lincoln.

4. Lincoln ended up losing the seat to Douglas in 1858, but through a series of succinct and moving speeches that he gave during the race, he captured the attention of America. The "house divided" speech is Lincoln's first famous speech. He compared the nation to a house—a simple but powerful metaphor—and said the house "will become all one thing or all the other," meaning that slavery would either be abolished completely in both the North and South, or would become completely legal. Two years later, in 1860, Lincoln would become president.

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