

Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes on the Missouri Compromise

(April 22, 1820)

The Missouri Compromise shattered the relative political calm during James Monroe's presidency. In 1819, Missouri appealed to Congress for its admission as a state and began to prepare its constitution. Debate over the fate of slavery in that territory raged in Congress until the Missouri Compromise was enacted. The plan admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, and prohibited slavery in all the remaining territories of the Louisiana Purchase north of the latitude 36°30". When it entered the union, Missouri's constitution not only protected slavery, but also prohibited free blacks from entering the state. This seemed to violate the "comity clause" of the constitution that required states to recognize each other's citizens. Still active in politics, Thomas Jefferson strongly opposed the attempt to keep slavery out of Missouri. As you examine this letter from Jefferson to John Holmes, consider his arguments against these restrictions and also against the geographical line drawn by the compromise between free and slave states. What doom did he foretell for the nation in relation to the issues of slavery and westward expansion? How did he propose to let go of this "wolf by the ears"?

—

To John Holmes Monticello, April 22, 1820

I thank you, dear Sir, for the copy you have been so kind as to send me of the letter to your constituents on the Missouri question. It is a perfect justification to them. I had for a long time ceased to read newspapers, or pay any attention to public affairs, confident they were in good hands, and content to be a passenger in our bark to the shore from which I am not distant. But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say, with conscious truth, that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. The cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected; and gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. Of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one State to another, would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burthen on a greater number of coadjutors. An abstinence too, from this act of power, would remove the jealousy excited by the undertaking of Congress to regulate the condition of the different descriptions of men composing a State. This certainly is the exclusive right of every State, which nothing in the constitution has taken from them and given to the General Government. Could Congress, for example, say, that the non-freemen of Connecticut shall be freemen, or that they shall not emigrate into any other State?

