Primary Sources: The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

By Original legislation from the U.S. Congress, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.22.16

Word Count 576

TOP: Titled “Practical illustration of the Fugitive Slave Law,” this political cartoon was published in Boston in 1851. It illustrates the struggle between Northern abolitionists and Sec. of State Daniel Webster and other enforcers of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. BOTTOM: An April 24, 1851 poster warning the "colored people of Boston" about policemen acting as slave catchers. Photos: Library of Congress

Editor’s Note: The Fugitive Slave Act was a deal between two groups of lawmakers in 1850. One group was against slavery. The other group was in favor. Those against slavery agreed to the Act so that California could join the United States. California would join as a free state, where slavery was not allowed. Also, slave trading would no longer be allowed in Washington, D.C. In exchange, the pro-slavery group got stricter laws that made it harder for slaves to reach their freedom. Below are parts of the act.

Section 1

The United States Congress has the power to name people as commissioners. Commissioners can arrest and put in jail anyone who commits a crime.
Section 2

Crimes are handled by a court called the Superior Court. By this Act, Superior Courts now have the power to name commissioners.

Section 3

Certain courts can name more commissioners when needed. These are called Circuit Courts. The courts should name as many commissioners as needed to handle all reports of runaway slaves. They should name as many as needed so that reports are handled swiftly.

Section 5

Officers who do not accept the Act will be fined $1,000. If they fail to do all they can to return a slave, they must pay a fine. They will also be fined if someone they capture escapes. All good citizens must help in carrying out this law.

Section 6

Owners of runaway slaves can legally chase and recapture them. These pursuers do not have to be officers of the law. They can go capture runaway slaves without the permission of an officer. Recaptured slaves will be moved back to the State from which they came. The captured slaves will not be allowed to speak for themselves in court. Their words cannot be used as evidence.

Section 7

No one is allowed to stand in the way of a slave capture. Rescuing or hiding a runaway slave is also not allowed. Anyone who tries must pay a $1,000 fine. They may also be put in jail for up to six months. On top of this, they will have to give money to whomever was chasing the slave. The sum will be $1,000 for each runaway slave they help.

Section 8

The officers of each court will be paid for their services. Commissioners will be given $10 for each case. Others who help with the legal duties will also be paid. They will be given $5 for each runaway they handle and bring to the commissioner.

Section 9

It is possible that a rescue force will try to free an escaped slave. The rescue will probably be attempted before the slave crosses State lines. By this Act, officers have the right to fight off the rescue force. The officer who made the arrest will have to personally return the
runaway to the place from which they escaped. The officer will have to deliver the runaway slave to the owner. To protect himself, the officer can and must hire help. The officer and his hired men will be paid to fight off any rescuers. They will receive the same pay that is normally rewarded for moving criminals. The officer and his men have to be approved by a judge. This judge must be in the state where the officer made the arrest. The officer and his men will be paid by the United States government.

The Act was passed Sept. 18, 1850