Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

In payment for Southern support for California's admission to the Union as a free state and ending the slave trade in the District of Columbia, Congress enacted the Fugitive Slave Act to assist the South with maintaining a tight rein on slaveholders' property.

The new law created a force of federal commissioners empowered to pursue fugitive slaves in any state and return them to their owners. No statute of limitations applied, so that even those slaves who had been free for many years could be (and were) returned.

The commissioners enjoyed broad powers, including the right to compel citizens to assist in the pursuit and apprehension of runaways; fines and imprisonment awaited those who refused to cooperate. A captured runaway could not testify on his own behalf and was not entitled to a court trial. The commissioners received a fee of 10 dollars for every slave returned; the fee was reduced to five dollars if the accused slave were released.

The passage and enforcement of this law enraged many in the North. Some states reacted by passing legislation designed to hamper the federal commissioners' activities, but such laws were declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. Riots occurred in some Northern communities and soldiers were deployed to restore order.

The 1852 publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin capitalized upon the Northern anger, which had been increased by the Fugitive Slave Act.

I. The Fugitive Slave Act
   A. Introduction
      1. What did the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 require? ____________________________
      2. What did free African Americans and whites who opposed slavery set up to help runaways escape? ____________________________
      3. Who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin? ____________________________
      4. What did Uncle Tom's Cabin show about slavery? ____________________________