A Boundary for Slavery

Read how an early federal law shaped the future of new states.

SS24.US1.4b "Explain why the Northwest Ordinance's ban on slavery in new states north of the Ohio River (1787) was significant."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the rule against slavery, number two statements that explain why it mattered for future states, and circle one limit on the ban.

The Northwest Ordinance and New States

1. In 1787, the political future of the land north of the Ohio River was unsettled. Congress, then operating under the Articles of Confederation, passed the Northwest Ordinance to organize that land as the Northwest Territory. The law set a path from federally governed territory to new states, with conditions for joining the Union. One condition declared that slavery and involuntary servitude would not be allowed in the territory. As the region became states, that rule helped establish a large area where slavery was legally prohibited. Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin eventually grew from territory covered by the ordinance.

2. The slavery rule mattered because Congress made it part of a plan for building the nation, not merely a decision about one farm or town. Americans disagreed over whether slavery should spread as settlers moved west. By setting a rule for an entire territory that could become several states, Congress created a federal precedent for limiting slavery's expansion. The law did not free enslaved people in existing states or ban slavery in every future territory. Still, it showed that decisions about new land could shape the balance between free and slave states in the growing Union.

3. The ban also had a sharp limit. The ordinance said that a person escaping into the territory could be returned if their labor or service was lawfully claimed in one of the original states. It did not authorize the return of everyone who fled into the region. This provision protected certain claims even while the ordinance prohibited slavery within the territory. In practice, slavery and coerced labor persisted in parts of the region despite the ban. The ordinance was significant both for the boundary it drew against slavery's legal expansion and for the limits of that boundary.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did the ban affect more than one future state?

2. Why was it significant that Congress put the ban in a plan for the territory?

3. How did the provision about people escaping into the territory limit the ban?

4. Why did the ordinance not settle the question of slavery throughout the United States?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a five-sentence letter from a resident in 1790 urging Congress either to extend this slavery rule to another future territory or to leave that decision open. Explain how the choice could shape future states, use two details from the passage, and acknowledge one limit of the ordinance.

ANSWER KEY

A Boundary for Slavery

GRADE 10 · SS24.US1.4b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the rule against slavery, number two statements that explain why it mattered for future states, and circle one limit on the ban. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did the ban affect more than one future state?	**It applied to the Northwest Territory, which had a path to becoming several states.**
2	Why was it significant that Congress put the ban in a plan for the territory?	**Congress established a federal precedent for limiting the spread of slavery as new states formed.**
3	How did the provision about people escaping into the territory limit the ban?	**A person could be returned if their labor or service was lawfully claimed in one of the original states.**
4	Why did the ordinance not settle the question of slavery throughout the United States?	**It did not free enslaved people in existing states or ban slavery in every future territory.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Members of Congress, please extend the Northwest Ordinance's slavery rule to another future territory. The Northwest Territory may become several states, so a rule made now can shape their laws for years to come. Its ban shows that Congress can limit where slavery is legally allowed as the nation grows. Yet the ordinance also permits the return of a person whose labor or service is lawfully claimed in an original state, so its protection has a limit. Extending the ban would help prevent slavery from becoming legal in still more new states.

Accept explanations that connect the territorial ban to the formation of multiple states and to a federal precedent. For the escape provision, require a lawful claim to the person's labor or service in an original state, not a claim that everyone who escaped could be returned.