

John Crittenden

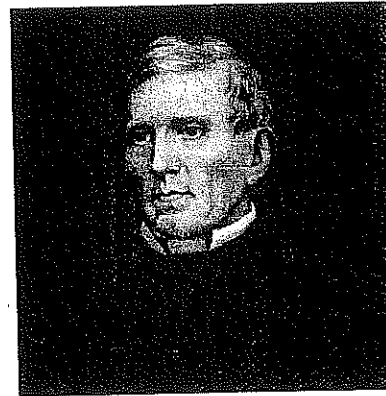
1786–1863



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Senator John Crittenden wrote the Crittenden Compromise. Committed to preserving the Union, Crittenden sought a compromise that would avoid civil war.



As you read the biography below, think about what John Crittenden was trying to accomplish with his proposal. Why do you think the Crittenden Compromise failed?



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In 1860, as North and South drew apart, some Americans looked desperately for a way to hold the country together. Eventually, more than 30 plans for compromise were introduced in Congress. Powerful leaders in both the North and the South opposed any compromise. But one plan presented by Kentucky Senator John Crittenden inspired hope.

John Crittenden was born in 1786 in Woodford County, Kentucky. Crittenden studied law in Lexington, Kentucky; then continued his studies in Virginia at Washington Academy and the College of William and Mary. In 1807 he graduated from college and moved back to Kentucky to practice law.

Crittenden's political career began when an acquaintance, Ninia Edwards, was named governor of the Illinois Territory. In 1809 Edwards appointed Crittenden to be his attorney general. Two years later, Crittenden returned to Kentucky and was elected to the first of six consecutive terms in the state legislature.

During the War of 1812 Crittenden served on the staffs of General Sam Hopkins and Governor Isaac Shelby, commander of the Kentucky forces. The state leaders were so impressed with Crittenden that they asked him to represent Kentucky in the U.S. Senate. He was only 27 at the time, and too young to serve. Instead, he became speaker in the Kentucky state house. In 1817 Crittenden was selected to fill a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate.

Crittenden served one term before heading back to Kentucky in 1819. He opened a law practice in Frankfort, the state capitol, and became a successful defense and appeals court attorney. His clients included former presidents James Madison and James Monroe, as well as Henry Clay who would become a friend and mentor. Between 1825 and 1853, Crittenden held several positions in state and national government, including U.S. district attorney, attorney general, and senator.

The Nation Splits Apart**Biography**

During his last term in the U.S. Senate, Crittenden worked, as his mentor Henry Clay had done, to resolve the conflict over slavery. In 1860, one month after President Lincoln's election, he introduced the Crittenden Compromise. The proposed amendment to the Constitution suggested that the nation restore and extend the line set by the Missouri Compromise to the Pacific Ocean. In effect, this meant that slavery would continue in the South. New states would determine for themselves whether they would be slave or free. Pro-slavery southerners and antislavery Republicans joined together to defeat the compromise.

In 1861 as the war began, Crittenden returned to Kentucky and worked to keep his state in the Union. Both of his sons joined the war but chose to fight on different sides of the conflict. In July of that year Crittenden was elected to a special session of Congress. He was a candidate for re-election to the House of Representatives when he died in 1863.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Describe** What was the Crittenden Compromise?

2. **Analyze** Why would a group of pro-slavery southerners and antislavery Republicans join together to reject the compromise?

ACTIVITY

In groups of six to eight, debate the pros and cons of the Crittenden Compromise. Argue from the position of a pro-slavery southerner or antislavery Republican. Be sure you have representatives of both parties in your group. Discuss possible revisions to the compromise and try to draft a version that would preserve the Union and be agreeable to all parties. At the end of discussion, take a vote on the compromise you have drafted.