

Background for details regarding slavery in Huckleberry Finn – Dr. Flora Armetta

SOURCE: Selections from the Missouri State Archives Online:

<https://s1.sos.mo.gov/archives/education/aahi/earlyslavelaws/slavelaws>

“Missouri statehood became a national controversy as Congress debated the future status of slavery in the land acquired through the Louisiana Purchase. The “Missouri Compromise” allowed Missouri to enter the Union as a slave state and Maine as a free state, thus keeping the balance of slave and free states equal in Congress. Although Missouri entered as a slave state in 1821, the Compromise outlawed slavery in the remaining portion of the Louisiana Purchase area north of the 36°30’ line, Missouri’s southern border.”

“The law prohibited slaves from leaving their master’s property without permission and/or a written pass. Slaves could not own or carry a gun, powder, shot, club, or other weapon. / The black code forbade slaves to take part in riots and unlawful assemblies, or make seditious speeches; all infractions were punishable by public whipping. / To further limit slaves’ interaction with free society, the legislature restricted commercial dealings between a slave and a free man, white or black; to do business with a slave required permission of the owner.”

“The law considered any black person, free or slave, who conspired to incite a rebellion or commit murder, guilty of a felony; in such instances, the slaves usually received a death sentence.”

“Slaveholders assumed most of the responsibility for the conduct of their slaves, but other groups in free society were expected to adhere to the rules of the black code, as well. Legislation outlawed the transportation of slaves by ships or other water vessels unless owners specifically granted their permission. The law imposed a penalty of \$150 for each illegally transported slave; in addition, the master could recover damages, including the market value for a lost or runaway slave, from the ship’s captain or ship’s owner in court.” // “By 1845, patrols had permission to administer up to ten lashes to slaves found “strolling about from one plantation to another, without a pass from his master, mistress, or overseer” (*Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri*, 1845, p. 404). The justice of the peace could direct that up to twenty lashes be administered.” // “Legislators tightened slave laws throughout the 1830s, primarily with an increase in monetary fines. Masters who allowed their slaves to go at large, hire their own time, or deal as a free person, were fined between \$20 and \$100 for each offense. Laws prohibited selling, bartering, or delivering “vinous or spirituous liquor” to a slave. Masters who allowed the commercial interaction were fined \$300; slaves who sold or delivered alcohol to other slaves could receive up to twenty-five lashes.”

“In 1837, the General Assembly passed an act to ‘prohibit the publication, circulation, and promulgation of the abolition doctrines.’ A conviction subjected the offending person to a maximum fine of \$1000 and two years in the state penitentiary. A second offense brought twenty years in prison; and a third offense translated to a life sentence.”