

What Do We Stand For?

The legacy of slavery, has left scars on this country that are still visible today. It was an era of cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity. In the decades before the Civil War, as the pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions became well defined, it was a time when passions were at their hottest. But it was also an era of courage, friendship and devotion to a cause. In the 1840's and 50's, many Missourians, both black and white, fought slavery, with one of the few weapons they had available—the law. They wanted their day in court.

This is the old courthouse in downtown St. Louis. From the very beginning of the city, this has been the site of a courthouse. This particular building, was built in 1839. It's ironic that a magnificently beautiful building such as this, the repository of our laws, a place where justice was supposed to be administered, was also the site of a great evil. Men, women, and even children, were sold right here on these steps as slaves. It's also reputed that this was the sight of the inhumane and violent whipping post.

In the 1850's the majority of Americans were against slavery. But, many influential southerners, including Missourians, continued to defend the institution. In 1846, a black slave named Dred Scott, and his wife Harriet, sued to free themselves from slavery. The name Dred Scott will forever remain synonymous with St. Louis and this court house.

"Yeah, I've heard of Dred Scott. I think he was found guilty, but I'm not sure."

"Eventually, he won...."

"They overruled it, and he lost....."

"Dred Scott was an escaped slave, he had a big trial up here..."

"Well, he had a big case, but I don't remember what the case was about..."

"Now, you're asking too much, it's a long time since I been in school...."

Dred Scott was brought to St. Louis from Virginia in 1830, by his master, Peter Blow. Later, the Blow family sold Scott to an army surgeon, Dr. John Emerson. Dred accompanied his new owner to army posts in Illinois and Minnesota where he met and married his wife, Harriet. In 1863, Emerson died, leaving the Scotts to his widow. In April, 1846, Dred and Harriet Scott filed suit against Irene Emerson for their freedom, on grounds of previous residence in a free territory. They were helped in their suit by Taylor Blow, the son of Scott's former owner. The two men were life long friends, and Blow, though a man of modest means, spared no expense to help Dred win his freedom. The legal battle that ensued took over ten years, and eventually reached the Supreme Court of the United States. With the eyes of the nation upon him, 80-year-old Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney, announced the decision. By a vote of 7 to 2, the court decided that Dred and his wife were still slaves. That no Negro could be a United States citizen, and that congress had no power to exclude slavery from federal territories. Effectively overruling the Missouri Compromise, and its division of free and slave states.

I think it was a great division, that compromise seemed not possible, I think that the fact that the decision said Scott wasn't a citizen because of that, an American couldn't sue in a court, and this is very significant because one way in which African-Americans were being freed at this time was through petitions and suits to the court. And this completely closed that door. And, there are historians that believe that this decision divided the democratic party and allowed for the triumph of the republican party and the triumph of Lincoln, which, you know, in effect brought on a civil war.

You know, Dred Scott wasn't the only person fighting for freedom. Men, women, black, white, freemen and slaves, were also fighting to create a more just society.

John Berry Mechem was a preacher and organized the first African Baptist church. He was a real leader of the black community, working constantly to improve its economic and educational opportunities. When the legislature passed its anti-black education law in 1847, he purchased a steamboat, and turned it into a freedom school. Operating in the middle of the Mississippi River, he contended that his school was under federal rather than state jurisdiction. Mechem was also active in purchasing slaves, freeing them, and helping them find jobs to repay him, so he could help buy freedom for another.

Today the courthouse is used to teach people about the Dred Scott case, and other Missouri history. In this courtroom, they're reenacting one of the Dred Scott cases. Shhhh...let's go check it out.

The case of Dred Scott vs. Irene Emerson, Your Honor.

Are the lawyers in this case ready?

We are, Your Honor.

As a member of the black race, my client, Dred Scott, is never allowed to tell you his side of the story. I have to tell it to you for him. Dred Scott has been a slave all his life, his master, Dr. John Emerson, took him to Fort Armstrong in the State of Illinois and kept him as a slave. As all of you know, the laws of Illinois do not allow slavery.

It is true that slavery is not allowed in Illinois or the Wisconsin territory, but Dr. Emerson was ordered to go there by the Army. Dred Scott was his property and he wanted to take him along. The laws of the United States army, not those of Illinois or the Wisconsin territory should be followed in this case.

Members of the jury, we say that Dred Scott became a free man when taken to Illinois and the Wisconsin territory. Just because he was brought back to the state of Missouri where slavery is allowed, does not make him a slave again.

Why should we let the laws of other places change things here in Missouri? I am sure that when you think of these things that you will decide that Dred Scott is a slave. Thank you.

Dred Scott should be a free man. Not only Dred himself, but his wife Harriet, and his young daughters Louise and Eliza, depend on your decision.

Has the jury reached a verdict?

Yes, your honor. We the jury, find the defendant, Mrs. Irene Emerson guilty of unlawfully holding the plaintiff, Dred Scott, a slave.

Though Scott lost his case, and was still technically a slave, he enjoyed a considerable amount of notoriety. His owner, probably weary after all the court battles, sold Harriet and Dred back to their lifelong friend, Taylor Blow, Taylor immediately came to this courthouse and set them free. Unfortunately, Dred Scott wasn't able to enjoy his freedom for long. For he died a year later.

From all reports, Dred was a simple man. All he wanted was a good life for himself and his family, but he was also a hero. Even though he lost his attempt to sue for his freedom in the courts, the outrage that the majority of Americans felt at the supreme court's decision eventually led to the civil war, and freedom for all the slaves.

Dred Scott and the old courthouse. A part of our Missouri heritage.