

Dred Scott

c. 1795–1858



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Dred Scott was a slave who sued for his freedom. The outcome of his trial widened the divide between the North and South over the issue of slavery. Scott became a powerful figure in the abolitionist movement.



As you read the biography below, think about how Dred Scott's persistence brought his case to the U.S Supreme Court.



State Historical Society of Missouri

In 1846 Dred Scott began the fight for his freedom, as well as the freedom of his family. His trial came at a time when the United States was being torn between abolitionists and supporters of slavery. The outcome of the trial, known as the Dred Scott decision, angered abolitionists and many people in the North.

Scott was born around 1795 in Virginia, which was then a slave state. His owner was Peter Blow, who eventually moved his family and Scott to St. Louis, Missouri. Scott was then sold to Dr. John Emerson. Emerson was a military doctor and moved around frequently.

Sometime around 1833, Emerson moved to Illinois with Scott. Illinois was a free state. After living there for more than two years, Emerson and Scott moved to the Wisconsin Territory, where the Missouri Compromise prohibited slavery. But Scott remained a slave with Emerson.

In 1846 Emerson died and Scott sued Emerson's widow for freedom for himself and his family. Scott argued that since he had spent an extended amount of time in the free state of Illinois and the free

VOCABULARY

emancipated freed

territory of Wisconsin, he was owed his freedom. Scott was granted his freedom by a court in St. Louis. The good news was short-lived.

The Missouri State Supreme Court reversed the lower court's decision. Scott took his case to the federal courts, and it eventually landed before the U.S. Supreme Court. Scott's trial was not a fair one. Most of the justices were from southern states and had been appointed by pro-slavery presidents. In 1857 the court ruled against Scott, stating that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional. As a further insult, the court ruled that slaves were not citizens and, therefore, had no right to sue.

The decision fueled the fire between the North and the South. Slaveholders applauded the decision. Abolitionists were angry. The decision played a large role in Abraham Lincoln's election.

For Scott and his wife, the decision was disappointing. In a twist of fate, the sons of Scott's former owner, Peter Blow, purchased Scott and his wife and **emancipated** them.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Draw Conclusions** Why do you think the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that slaves were not citizens?

- 2. Expressing and Supporting a Point of View** What do you think was the most important outcome of the Dred Scott decision? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

ACTIVITY

- 3.** Imagine that you are Dred Scott. Write a letter to the court explaining why you want your freedom and why you believe that the laws of the United States provide you with that freedom.