



Redemption Songs: Sing for Freedom before Dred Scott

Lea VanderVelde

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The Dred Scott case is the most notorious example of slaves suing for freedom. Most examinations of the case focus on its notorious verdict, and the repercussions that the decision set off—especially the worsening of the sectional crisis that would eventually lead to the Civil War—were extreme. In conventional assessment, a slave losing a lawsuit against his master seems unremarkable. But in fact, that case was just one of many freedom suits brought by slaves in the antebellum period; an example of slaves working within the confines of the U.S. legal system (and defying their masters in the process) in an attempt to win the ultimate prize: their freedom. And until Dred Scott, the St. Louis courts adhered to the rule of law to serve justice by recognizing the legal rights of the least well-off.

For over a decade, legal scholar Lea VanderVelde has been building and examining a collection of more than 300 newly discovered freedom suits in St. Louis. In *Redemption Songs*, VanderVelde describes twelve of these never-before-analyzed cases in close detail. Through these remarkable accounts, she takes readers beyond the narrative of the Dred Scott case to weave a diverse tapestry of freedom suits and slave lives on the frontier. By grounding this research in St. Louis, a city defined by the Antebellum frontier, VanderVelde reveals the unique circumstances surrounding the institution of slavery in westward expansion. Her investigation shows the enormous degree of variation among the individual litigants in the lives that lead to their decision to file suit for freedom. Although Dred Scott's loss is the most widely remembered, over 100 of the 300 St. Louis cases that went to court resulted in the plaintiff's emancipation.

Beyond the successful outcomes, the very existence of these freedom suits helped to reshape the parameters of American slavery in the nation's expansion. Thanks to VanderVelde's thorough and original research, we can hear for the first time the vivid stories of a seemingly powerless group who chose to use a legal system that was so often arrayed against them in their fight for freedom from slavery.

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