

### Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier

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## Review

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**VanderVelde , Lea** *Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier*. Oxford University Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780195366563

### The Scotts' Case for Freedom

The United States Supreme Court's 1857 ruling in the Dred Scott case, with its profound legal and constitutional ramifications, is one of the Court's most historically significant decisions. Often lost in the broad discussions and debates about the court's landmark decision are the individuals most immediately affected by the ruling, the Scotts. The fact that the court's decision deemed them slaves is pushed aside as focus is placed on the ruling's larger meaning for citizenship, federal power over territories and slavery, and other constitutional issues. When attention is paid to the individuals behind the case, the contemporary and historical spotlight is focused on Dred, to almost the complete exclusion of his wife, Harriet. Lea VanderVelde seeks to counter this oversight in *Mrs. Dred Scott*.

*Mrs. Dred Scott* is a historical biography with an anthropological approach that painstakingly recreates Harriet's historical place and time on the frontier in the Indian Territory and in St. Louis. Harriet was brought to the Indian Territory by Lawrence Taliaferro, U.S. agent to the Sioux. There she met and married Dred, moving into the household of Dr. Emerson, his owner, and eventually leaving Fort Snelling for St. Louis. Much of the book concerns Harriet's years before the freedom suit. Through a reconstruction of the material culture VanderVelde recreates Harriet's living arrangements, labor, and social relationships and interactions between Indians, whites, and other blacks. Throughout the narrative, Harriet is portrayed as a modest, desperately poor, illiterate, private, and hardworking woman who simply wanted to be left alone to live her life, and to protect, care and provide for her children.

More than just the story of Harriet and her family, *Mrs. Dred Scott* details frontier living, agent-Indian relations, military life on the frontier, and race

relations. Harriet's life in both the northern wilderness and the frontier city of St. Louis serves as the background for a well rounded investigation of those two quite different areas. Because of the remarkable detail in which VanderVelde recreates the circumstances around Harriet, the narrative is often less about Harriet than the world of which she was a part. Harriet at times gets lost as the narrative focuses on Indian relations, fur trading, land grabbing, and other frontier issues. Ironically, the author at times knows more about the Indians, military, and settlers than the object of the biography. It is well to remember, however, that it is not intended to be a biography in the traditional sense. It is, rather, a historical biography of place and time.

*Mrs. Dred Scott* necessarily deals with conjecture. Any biography of an illiterate historical figure such as Harriet Scott includes what is known and what can be deduced from the evidence. In VanderVelde's case the conjecture sometimes seems a bit far-reaching as when the author makes a connection between the aurora borealis and the Scotts' decision to seek their freedom through the courts. Regardless, both author and readers need to have an imagination when retelling the story of those who left no records of their own thoughts and words behind. Perhaps as significant as the role of Harriet Scott in the legal actions that she and her husband took to claim their freedom is Harriet's life as a frontier slave. As VanderVelde rightly claims, hers is among the few historical studies to try and reclaim the circumstances of the lives of frontier slaves like Harriet. The lives of slaves on the frontier were not far different from that of poor settlers. Despite her status as a slave Harriet's daily routine probably differed little from most others around her. At the same time, Harriet's life on the frontier provided for very different circumstances than that of slaves in the more established areas of slavery in the antebellum south. By the 1830s, for instance, few slaves would have seen Native Americans in large numbers in their own environment. One of the notable differences in Harriet's life experiences on the frontier was her marriage ceremony and recorded marriage, a legality to which southern slaves would not have been privy.

The author recognizes that the Scotts did not live in a vacuum. Their lives and circumstances were affected by those around them just as their lives affected others. VanderVelde provides a great deal of contextual information and brings in various points of intersections between national events and their effects on the Scotts such as war with Mexico and the subsequent two year separation between Harriet and Dred. VanderVelde uses the lives of other slaves and free blacks to recreate the living conditions of the Scotts, and shows how the rising anti-black,

anti-abolition sentiment in Missouri affected their pursuit of freedom. At the same time, some points of discussion seem to have little direct relevance to Harriet. One wonders, for example, to what extent Harriet knew about, or if she was affected at all by some of the social happenings among the military leadership at Fort Snelling that the author details.

Most historians focus on Dred when trying to determine why the Scotts filed suit when they did, but that, as VanderVelde points out, neglects Harriet's agency. Unlike other scholars, VanderVelde portrays Harriet as the primary protagonist in the suit. She provides evidence, albeit circumstantial, that Harriet was the party who favored suing for freedom and was responsible for the timing of the lawsuit. VanderVelde argues that Harriet fit the profile of a freedom litigant in that she was a woman who had fewer paths to freedom, a woman desirous to protect her daughters. VanderVelde adeptly walks the reader through the years of complicated litigation, through the revolving doors of lawyers handling the Scotts' case, and through the legalisms of the case and decision.

Ironically, Harriet's case would get treated as an appendage to her husband's case when a judge, upon discovering that he had overlooked her case and not submitted it to the jury with Dred's, simply recopied the material in Dred's case with her name. When Emerson's widow appealed the first decision freeing the couple, the two cases were folded together into a single appeal, completing the suppression of Harriet's case. To her detriment, Harriet's fate now rested with that of her husband's case. As VanderVelde illustrates, her factual claim to freedom was stronger than her husband's case, and her case was more significant in that her fate determined that of her daughters. Nonetheless, her claim was now subsumed under that of her husband's.

What often gets lost in cases of such import as the Scott case is the human side of things, what the Scotts did and what they endured during the long years that the case wound its way through the judicial system. VanderVelde brings to the reader the human side of those years as she recounts the time the couple spent in jail, the seemingly interminable court delays, and the events, both local and national, that took place during those years.

Somewhat disappointingly after the detail of her earlier life and surroundings, VanderVelde does not, perhaps because of a lack of information, inform readers as to much of Harriet's life after the lawsuit. A mere few paragraphs provide a brief glimpse into the post-suit life of Mrs. Dred Scott even

though she lived for another twenty years in St. Louis as a washerwoman. Readers are not even told where she is buried. In death, as in life, more is known of Dred. Taylor Blow, the white man who posted the freedom bond for the Scotts after the court's decision, purchased a gravesite for Dred, but Harriet was not buried with her husband.

Utilizing a wide array of primary and secondary sources, VanderVelde pieces together an amazing amount of detail surrounding Harriet's life despite the lack of direct source material from Harriet herself. In lieu of Harriet's, or Dred's for that matter, own words, VanderVelde scoured military and trading house records, census and court records as well as other public documents. VanderVelde further took advantage of previously unknown or overlooked sources such as an extensive interview with Mrs. Scott in the *New York Times*, and the letters and diaries of Harriet's owner, Lawrence Taliaferro.

As daunting of a prospect as it is to piece together the lives of illiterate subordinate persons like Harriet Scott, it is equally as important, as VanderVelde acknowledges, that scholars accept the challenges in order to "understand our common history" (1). *Mrs Dred Scott* truly is history from the bottom up as its best.

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