



Descendant keeps Dred Scott's legacy alive

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ST. LOUIS — For Lynne Jackson, the 11-year legal struggle of slaves Harriet and Dred Scott to win their freedom is more than a pivotal moment in history; it is the courageous saga of her own family.

"It's our story and our history," said Jackson, who is the Scotts' great-great-granddaughter. "Growing up in St. Louis, my cousins and I were continuously reminded of the story at school when some of our teachers would tell the class that we were descendents of Dred Scott. Other teachers wouldn't believe us, so some of my cousins were put out of the classroom for 'lying.'"

Dred Scott was a slave whose petition for freedom started in St. Louis at the Old Court House and was struck down time and time again between 1846 and 1857, garnering national attention and fueling abolitionist fervor.

The basis of the Scotts' suit was that they had lived in free territories and therefore should be recognized as free themselves.

Jackson believes that the Scotts' pastor, the Rev. John Anderson of Second African Church, helped them come to the decision to sue for their freedom. No stranger to the risks involved with this course of action, Anderson had worked for Elijah Lovejoy as a printer in Alton before the publisher's murder at the hands of an anti-abolitionist mob.

On March 6, 1857, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney delivered the majority opinion that Scott should remain a slave, noting that he was not a citizen but personal property. This decision further fragmented the country and mobilized abolitionists to action, leading to the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860.

In a year that marks the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, Jackson emphasizes the personal cost of the couple's landmark suit to gain their freedom.

"It was very dangerous for them to pursue this, and they sacrificed a lot to do it," she said. "But if they hadn't, there might not have been a civil rights movement. So, where would we be today?"

Jackson recalls seeing her ancestors' story re-enacted at the Old Court House in 1957, when she was just 5 years old.

"I remember being at the Old Court House and that it got national coverage, so there were lots of lights and cameras," she said. "Both my uncle, Dred Scott Madison, and my father, John Alexander Madison Jr., participated. Dad re-enacted the part of Dred Scott, and my Uncle Scott gave remarks. I didn't understand what they were saying, but I remember standing by the banister afterwards and thinking that the courtroom looked huge."

Since 1995, Jackson, a graduate of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, has been conducting extensive research to fill in the details of the story, including learning more about the individuals who helped Scott and specifics pertaining to the case.

Jackson founded the Dred Scott Heritage Foundation to support events commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Dred Scott Decision in 2007 and to promote education about the case and to further reconciliation.

"While doing research, I realized that there wasn't a statue of Harriet and Dred Scott anywhere," she said.

This realization prompted Jackson to begin a campaign to raise funds to erect a statue near the Old Court House. A committee selected St. Louis artist Harry Weber for the commission, leading to the unveiling of a maquette in 2010; Jackson said she hopes the statue will be completed sometime this year.

To support the capital campaign, the foundation also initiated a penny drive, because visitors to Dred Scott's grave in St. Louis' Calvary Cemetery often leave pennies on the headstone in tribute to President Lincoln. Jackson encourages schools, organizations, families and individuals to participate.

As a way of bringing together diverse voices and experiences, the foundation sponsored its first Dred and Harriet Scott Reconciliation Forum last year in Marshfield, Mo., in conjunction with its annual Cherry Blossom Festival.

Forum participants included descendents of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, Thomas and Martha Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemming, Jefferson Davis, Justice Curtis McLean and Dred Scott, with the goal of sharing how they are preserving the legacy of their ancestors together and working toward unity.

"There is something very special about this gathering," Jackson said. "Each year, an atmosphere of purpose has built up that everyone senses is about the future."

On Feb. 25, Jackson will speak at 1 p.m. at the Old Court House, sharing a thumbnail sketch of her ancestors' story and the amendments that followed.

"The event is part of Jefferson National Memorial Expansion's Black History Month," she said. "The focus of this particular program is citizenship."

For more information about Dred and Harriet Scott and the Dred Scott Heritage Foundation, visit www.thedredscottfoundation.org.

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