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History Matters ▶

History Of The Dred Scott Portrait

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Dred Scott Portrait by Louis Schultze Oil on canvas - 25" x 30" photo courtesy of the Missouri History Museum (click for larger version)

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There is, so far as we know, only one image of Dred Scott. It's the one that appears in textbooks, magazines, flyers and any other medium that discusses the slave and his wife and their unsuccessful suit for freedom. The Scotts' story, its outcome a major factor in the onset of our nation's civil war, is an important part of our history, but the story of his portrait even more intimately belongs to us.

Despite the U.S. Supreme Court decision of March 1857, Dred and Harriet Scott were freed a few weeks later, by their current "owner" and long-time supporter Taylor Blow. Ownership of the couple had been transferred to Blow by the embarrassed husband of the original owner's widow. After a decade of court battles, the Scotts were probably grateful and even more probably worn out but ready to begin a life of freedom.

Harriet took in laundry from various St. Louis families, and Dred got a job at Theron Barnum's new hotel on Second Street. He was already showing signs of the tuberculosis that would kill him the next year, but Barnum was pleased to have the famous ex-slave on his staff. The hotel owner no doubt welcomed the writer from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper when he came to interview Scott and may have even cooperated in getting a daguerreotype made for the article. At any rate he had in his possession a "faithful photograph" of that daguerreotype, which his widow presented to the Missouri History Museum in 1882.

That photograph is a valuable artifact in the museum's collections, but within a few years of its presentation, museum officials feared for its possible damage or even destruction. In 1887 they commissioned a portrait to be painted from the photo "to preserve what should be perpetuated ... as a safeguard against the accidental destruction of that which otherwise could never be rehabilitated," in the rather flamboyant words of Oscar Collet, the museum's treasurer.

The portrait, or a more recent copy, hangs in one of the galleries of the Missouri History Museum. Dred Scott, with sad eyes but a determined set to his mouth, looks out at a community who should absolutely value this image of courage and freedom.

Read more: <http://www.westendword.com/Articles-History-Matters-c-2012-01-31-178897.114137-History-Of-The-Dred-Scott-Portrait.html#ixzz1lAdU8JrR>