

## Maryland plaque reminds of historic Dred Scott case

By *theGrio*

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AP Photo/Rob Carr

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FREDERICK, Maryland (AP) -- More than 150 years after the U.S. Supreme Court issued the notorious Dred Scott decision affirming slavery, a Maryland city unveiled a plaque Tuesday to educate visitors about the opinion and the local man who wrote it -- and to quell a local controversy. The rectangular bronze marker stands on a granite pedestal at Frederick City Hall about eight feet from a stern bust of Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney that has occupied the plaza for nearly 80 years despite calls for its removal.

The plaque is a compromise between residents who wanted the Taney statue gone and those who consider him a great jurist whose racial views reflected the tenor of his times. Frederick, roughly 50 miles (80 kilometers) from Washington and Baltimore, has population of about 59,000, and is about 15 percent black.

Taney practiced law in Frederick from 1801 to 1823. As a Supreme Court justice, he wrote the 1857 decision that said even freed slaves and their descendants could never be U.S. citizens. The case became a catalyst for the Civil War.

He based the ruling upon his assertion that when the Constitution was framed, educated whites generally regarded "negroes" as "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race."

The 7-2 decision also held that Congress had no authority to prohibit slavery in new territories. Maryland Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert Bell said Tuesday that the Dred Scott opinion was "the ultimate bad decision," written by a justice who "relied on poor scholarship and weak reasoning."

The ruling, Bell said, "left America in shock and throes and convulsions" that could only be cured by slavery's abolition.

The plaque's dedication comes 2½ years after some local civil-rights leaders called for removal of the Taney statue. The local president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People, Guy Djoken, said the plaque turned out to be a better solution. By seeing both Taney's face and his words, "children will now have the opportunity to know why this was a problem," Djoken said. A similar plaque should be placed near a Taney statue at the Maryland State House in Annapolis, said Theodore Mack, chairman of the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture.

"You have to level the playing field," Mack said. "You can't have one side of the story and not the other."

Dred Scott and his wife Harriet were slaves who sued for their freedom after they were taken from the slave state of Missouri into territory where slavery had been prohibited by the Missouri Compromise.

Bell said that while the Supreme Court decision incensed most abolitionists, it heartened fellow Maryland native Frederick Douglass, who saw the outrage it generated as a step toward abolishment of what Southern slavery supporters euphemistically called "our peculiar institution."

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