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

Lea VanderVelde
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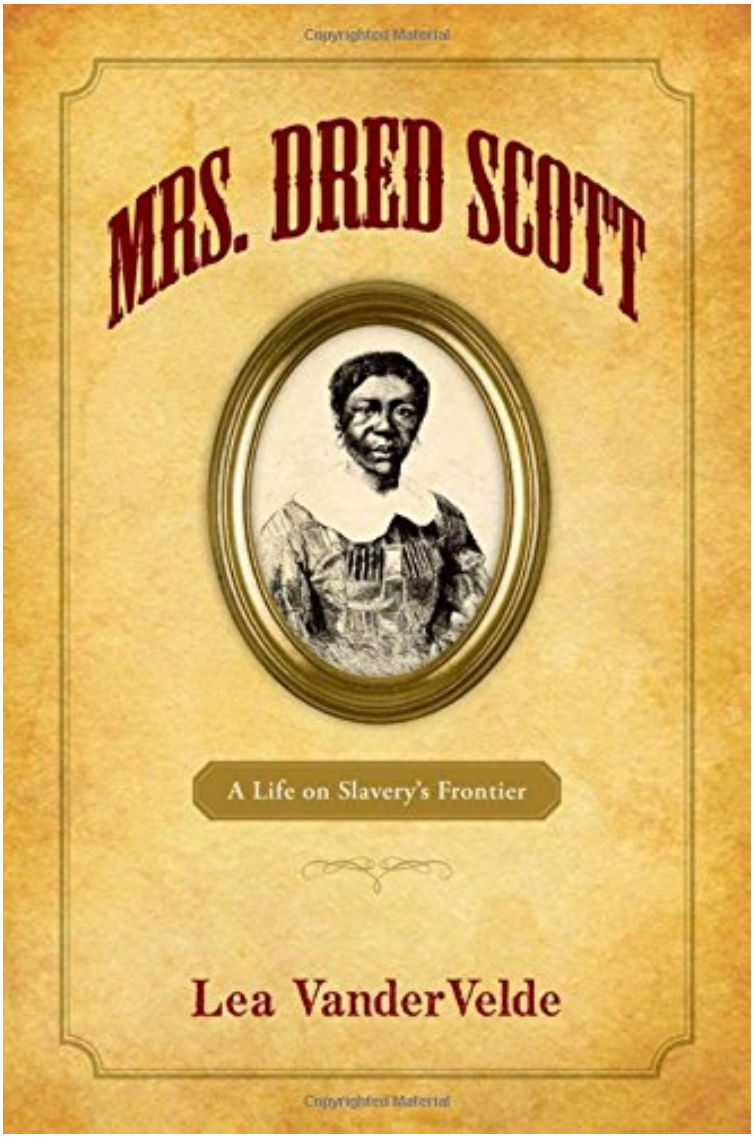

#2724309 in Books 2009-02-17Ingredients: Example IngredientsOriginal language:EnglishPDF # 1 6.20 x 1.50 x 9.30l, 1.80 #File Name: 0195366565496 pages | File size: 75.Mb

Lea VanderVelde : Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Recommended for anybody who likes American historyBy Michael L. BatesI haven't finished the book, but it's well-written and fascinating: Not only a glimpse of a slave's life in a Northern household, but also of life at the leading edge of the frontier in Minnesota. Recommended for anybody who likes American history.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Wonderful information.By Lorraine JacobsIt was more than I expected! Wonderful information....Great research in this.0 of 0 people found the following review

helpful. packed with informationBy DandelionWho knew Dred Scott even had a wife? VanderVelde explains slavery at Fort Snelling (MN), Harriet Scott the Supreme Court case

Among the most infamous U.S. Supreme Court decisions is Dred Scott v. Sandford . Despite the case's signal importance as a turning point in America's history, the lives of the slave litigants have receded to the margins of the record, as conventional accounts have focused on the case's judges and lawyers. In telling the life of Harriet, Dred's wife and co-litigant in the case, this book provides a compensatory history to the generations of work that missed key sources only recently brought to light. Moreover, it gives insight into the reasons and ways that slaves used the courts to establish their freedom. A remarkable piece of historical detective work, Mrs. Dred Scott chronicles Harriet's life from her adolescence on the 1830s Minnesota-Wisconsin frontier, to slavery-era St. Louis, through the eleven years of legal wrangling that ended with the high court's notorious decision. The book not only recovers her story, but also reveals that Harriet may well have been the lynchpin in this pivotal episode in American legal history. Reconstructing Harriet Scott's life through innovative readings of journals, military records, court dockets, and even frontier store ledgers, VanderVelde offers a stunningly detailed account that is at once a rich portrait of slave life, an engrossing legal drama, and a provocative reassessment of a central event in U.S. constitutional history. More than a biography, the book is a deep social history that freshly illuminates some of the major issues confronting antebellum America, including the status of women, slaves, Free Blacks, and Native Americans.

"Through Harriet Scott's life, the author is able to create a valuable portrait of the development of slavery on the U.S. frontier during an era in which that scourge was leading the country toward civil war. Despite the wealth of historical knowledge presented, the heart of this well-researched work is the tragic tale of how a loving family's effort to gain their freedom was brutally rejected by Supreme Court justices bent on maintaining the institution of slavery at all costs. Essential for academic libraries and highly recommended for public libraries."--Library Journal, starred review"In a remarkable act of historical recovery, VanderVelde resurrects the life of Harriet Scott."--Martha A. Sandweiss, The Washington Post"Through Harriet Scott's life, the author is able to create a valuable portrait of the development of slavery on the U.S. frontier during an era in which that scourge was leading the country toward civil war. Despite the wealth of historical knowledge presented, the heart of this well-researched work is the tragic tale of how a loving family's effort to gain their freedom was brutally rejected by Supreme Court justices bent on maintaining the institution of slavery at all costs. Essential for academic libraries and highly recommended for public libraries."--Library Journal, starred review"Groundbreaking.... Mrs. Dred Scott is a sophisticated reconstruction revealing a fundamental dimension of the Dred Scott saga." --Books Culture "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.... Mrs. Dred Scott truly is history from the bottom up as its best."--Sharon A. Roger Hepburn, Civil War Book "This is an extraordinary piece of historical research. In Mrs. Dred Scott, Lea VanderVelde provides, for the first time, a full picture of the role and significance of Scott's wife, Harriet Robinson Scott, in one of the most important cases ever decided by the Supreme Court. VanderVelde presents a powerful description of the Scotts' experiences at various military posts on the rough northwest frontier. In doing so, she adds an important dimension to understanding Justice Taney's opinion in the Dred Scott case."--Mary Frances Berry, Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania"The fascinating, fact-filled story of an illiterate slave woman who sued persistently for her freedom over an eleven-year period and gained it in the end -- no thanks to the most notorious Supreme Court decision in U.S. history."--Daniel Walker Howe, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848"Lea VanderVelde reminds us of what lawyers too often forget, that very real human beings are the subjects of the 'great cases' of constitutional law. Among the human beings involved in the infamous Dred Scott case was Harriet Scott, Dred's wife. Given the paucity of conventional materials about specific slaves, VanderVelde does a remarkable job of historical excavation to reconstruct the circumstances of her life. She illuminates American social, as well as legal, history. A bravura performance!"--Sanford Levinson, University of Texas Law School and author of Our Undemocratic Constitution"Lea VanderVelde wisely appreciates the significance of lives that have long been invisible to historians and constitutional scholars. She has worked with diligence and ingenuity to recover the lost voice of Harriet Robinson Scott. Our understanding of the Supreme Court's infamous and consequential decision in Dred Scott v. Sanford will be forever changed and profoundly enriched by her work."--Peggy Cooper Davis, author of Neglected Stories: The Constitution and Family Values"VanderVelde is to be congratulated for uncovering every possible source that could shed light on Harriet [Scott's] life." -- American Historical VanderVelde does what no other biographer has. She places Mrs. Dred Scott at the center of a well-known moment in American history for a greater understanding of the "significant efforts by subordinate individuals to influence the circumstances of their lives." -- Journal of American HistoryAbout the AuthorLea VanderVelde is Josephine Witte Professor of Law at the University of Iowa. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa.From The Washington PostFrom The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com ed by Martha A. Sandweiss In 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in Scott v. Sandford that African Americans -- whether free or

enslaved -- could not be citizens of the United States. The plaintiff, Dred Scott, an enslaved resident of St. Louis, had sued for his freedom 11 years earlier on the grounds that he once lived in a territory where Congress had prohibited slavery. The Supreme Court not only denied Scott any and all rights within the American legal system, it also declared that Congress could not prohibit slavery in an American territory. In negating the limits on the expansion of slavery established by the Northwest Ordinance and the Missouri Compromise, the infamous Supreme Court ruling exacerbated the tensions between North and South that led, a few years later, to civil war. Previous historians have examined the life of Dred Scott for clues that might explain the timing of his lawsuit and his stubborn perseverance in the courts. A Virginia-born slave, he was sold to an Army doctor who took him to the free state of Illinois and to Wisconsin Territory; eventually master and slave returned to St. Louis. Along the way, Scott likely gained some medical expertise and a taste of relative independence. He may also have had the temperament and resilience for a tough legal fight. But in "Mrs. Dred Scott," University of Iowa law professor Lea VanderVelde argues that the real impetus for the legal case came from Dred's wife, Harriet, a woman heretofore all but unknown. Originally a co-plaintiff with her husband, Harriet watched her case become subordinated to his as the lawsuit moved through the appellate process. But, VanderVelde insists, she probably instigated the court battle. In a remarkable act of historical recovery, VanderVelde resurrects the life of Harriet Scott. As a woman, a slave, an illiterate person and a resident of a frontier community, Harriet left few traces in the historical records. But drawing largely on the diary of Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent and slave owner who brought the teenaged Harriet with him from Pennsylvania to Fort Snelling in Wisconsin (later Minnesota) Territory in 1835, VanderVelde recreates the world in which Harriet lived before her marriage to Dred in 1837. And what a remarkable world it was. In the remote outpost where her master engaged in diplomatic negotiations with Indian tribes, Harriet likely encountered the painter George Catlin, the French geographer Joseph Nicollet and the future president Zachary Taylor, and she probably observed the Ojibwa treaty negotiations of 1837. Drawing inferences from the experiences of others, VanderVelde paints a compelling picture of Harriet's everyday life -- where she slept, what she ate, how she stayed warm through frigid winters. When she turns to Harriet and Dred's later married life in St. Louis, VanderVelde again relies largely on the experiences of others -- particularly of other enslaved people who came to public attention through freedom suits of their own -- to infer the shape of the Scotts' daily life. The detail is rich and suggestive, but keeping Harriet Scott at the center of the story proves challenging. The reader often loses sight of Scott amid all the events that transpired around her. And for all we learn about the circumstances of Harriet's life, her inner thoughts remain unknown. VanderVelde tries to argue that Harriet acquired her passion for justice from watching her master be fair to Indian tribes. But it remains difficult to understand how a young woman might learn about justice from the man who owned her. Harriet Scott's practical concerns seem more compelling than her philosophical beliefs. The Scotts created an acceptable life for themselves in St. Louis in the early 1840s. "Having a nominal master who left one alone," VanderVelde notes, "may have, in certain circumstances, been more secure than being free and subject to the random persecutions to which free blacks were sometimes exposed." But when Dred's mistress declined his offer to purchase his freedom, Harriet came to understand that the family's value as property lay not in her aging husband but in herself and her two daughters, the eldest of whom was now old enough to be hired out or sold away. The evidence presented here suggests that her decision to press for legal freedom stemmed not from some abstract desire for justice but from a very immediate desire to protect her family. After the Scotts lost their appeal to the Supreme Court in 1857, a benefactor purchased their freedom. Dred died a free man in 1858. Harriet lived until 1876, supporting herself as a washerwoman. She had little interest in talking about her life or explaining what motivated her to go to court. But rescued here from the dustbin of history, she becomes the face of an infamous trial and a reminder of how immediate personal concerns can compel one to take extraordinary risks.