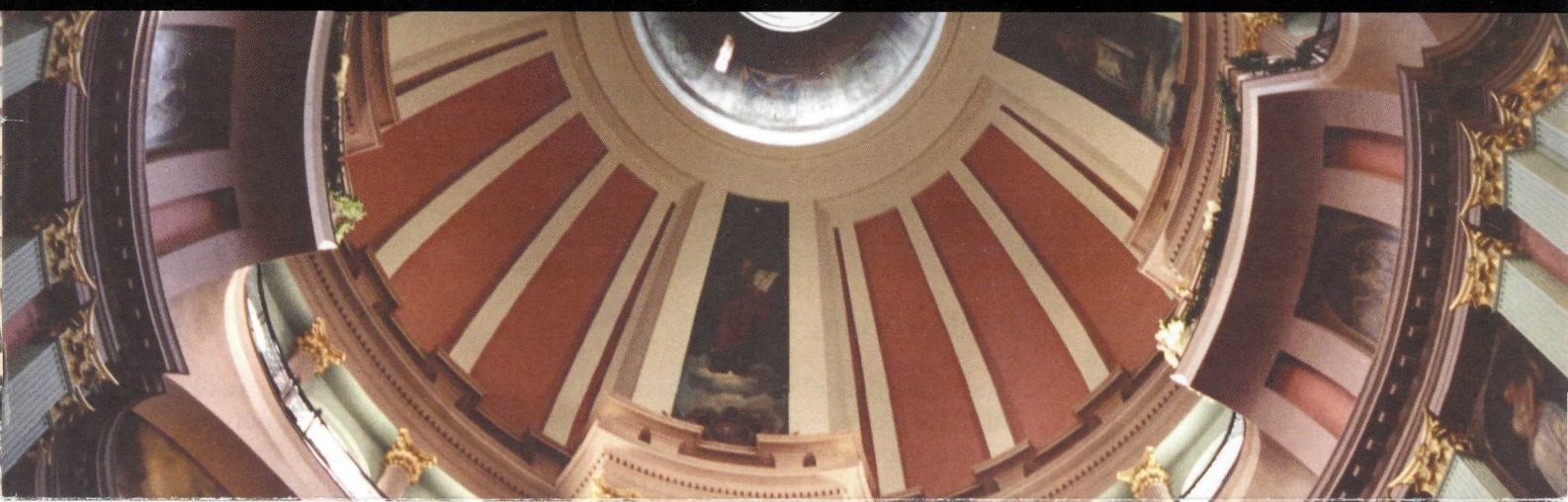


# OLD COURTHOUSE

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial



St. Louis' Old Courthouse is an important structure of both historical and architectural significance. This building was the center of activity for a developing city that became America's "Gateway to the West." Its stately appearance evolved to meet the needs of the city's courts and citizens. The famous Dred Scott case began here and led to a divisive U.S. Supreme Court decision. Today, the National Park Service preserves the Old Courthouse's local and national heritage for future generations.

Architecturally, the Old Courthouse dominated St. Louis' early skyline. The impressive iron-framed dome of the building greeted river travelers and set a standard for other government buildings throughout the land. The Old Courthouse exemplifies 19<sup>th</sup>-century public architecture in America and the civic pride of its people.

## A COURTHOUSE IN TRANSITION

### Early History

Until 1828, the St. Louis courts had been located in a series of inadequate structures, including a Baptist Church, the Yosti Tavern, and the abandoned commandant's house in the old Spanish fort. Construction of a two-story brick courthouse began in 1826 on land donated by Auguste Chouteau, one of the founders of St. Louis, and Judge John B. C. Lucas, an early official appointed by President Jefferson to administer the new Louisiana Territory. This county courthouse building was completed in 1828, but was soon insufficient to meet the needs of the expanding city.



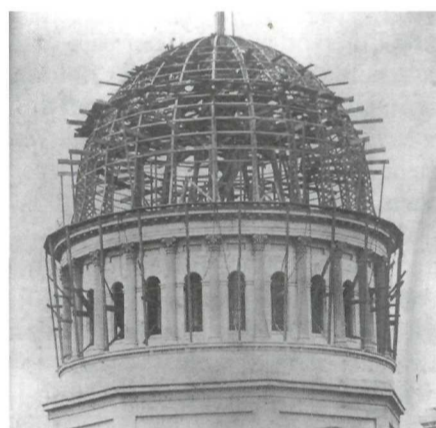
St. Louis County Courthouse in transition, ca. 1850. The early brick courthouse once served as an entranceway and the east wing of the developing courthouse. (Courtesy of Missouri Historical Society)



The first Federal-style courthouse was completed in 1828. (Plan drawing by architects Morton & Leveille)

### Development of the Building

St. Louis experienced a large population increase and new demands on its court system during the 1830s. The city announced plans to hold a contest for the best design of a new courthouse. Though a prize of \$100 was awarded, county officials never acted on the winning design. Instead, they accepted the plan of Henry Singleton, an architect who proposed building an addition to the small brick courthouse, resulting in a four-winged structure with a dome in the center. The design reflected the prevailing mid-19<sup>th</sup> century architectural style known as Greek Revival. The cornerstone for the new courthouse was laid on October 21, 1839, and the new building was officially opened on February 22, 1845.



After years of delay, the courthouse was finished in 1862 when the cast- and wrought-iron dome was completed by architect William Rumbold. The height of the dome measured 192 feet, making the Old Courthouse the tallest structure in the city for many years. (NPS photo)

Over the next three decades, the St. Louis County Courthouse developed. Local politics, different architects, and a lack of funding slowed its progress. During this period of transition, the original 1828 brick courthouse served as the east wing entrance to the building and a wooden dome capped the rotunda. The brick courthouse demolition was completed in 1851. Around this same time, officials hired architect Robert S. Mitchell and accepted his plan for the completion of the courthouse. This plan included building a new east wing and additional south and north wings.

William Rumbold's impressive dome completed the construction of the courthouse in 1862. The *Missouri Democrat* on July 4 of that year reported: "It is such a piece of beautiful massiveness as will command the admiration of mankind long after all now living are dead, and for many generations to come."



Architect Robert Mitchell's 1854 concept drawing of the proposed final courthouse. (From Thoughts About St. Louis, Rev. John Hogan, Chambers and Knapp, 1854)

### Later Years

The St. Louis County Courthouse became the St. Louis City Courthouse in 1876 after the city separated from the county government. In addition to housing the civil courts, various city offices were located here over the years. Official use of the Old Courthouse ended in 1930 when the courts moved to a new Civil Courts building six blocks to the west. In 1936, a fire in the dome caused limited damage to the Old Courthouse structure. Restoration work began in 1940 when the Old Courthouse became part of Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. Today, the National Park Service preserves this important historic building for future generations.



The Old Courthouse and Gateway Arch are part of Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. (NPS photo)

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART AND ARCHITECTURE



Charles Wimar painted this fresco on the west side in the upper rotunda to commemorate the proposed route for the first transcontinental railroad. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton backed a railroad route from St. Louis to San Francisco that would have used this pass in the Colorado Rockies. This dream was never realized. (NPS photo)



Charles Wimar was commissioned to paint a series of murals in the courthouse after its completion in 1862. Shortly after finishing the murals, he died of tuberculosis. (Courtesy of St. Louis Art Museum)

### Classical Architecture

The Old Courthouse reflects classical architectural styles popular in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Its magnificent iron dome is in the Italian-Renaissance style, similar to the one on the National Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Both domes were under construction at the same time, yet the dome of the Old Courthouse was completed first, thereby setting a standard for other public buildings in America, including many statehouses.



This courtroom dates from 1844, but was remodeled several years later with its ornate features. Last used in 1930, it has been restored to its ca. 1860 appearance. (NPS photo)

### Artists and Their Works

Artists were commissioned to paint and decorate the upper levels of the interior dome of the courthouse. August Becker and his half-brother, Charles Wimar, were the original artists commissioned to paint a series of frescos in 1862. Wimar, the principal artist, was born in Germany and traveled extensively in the West. He painted four historical vignette murals known as lunettes. Each lunette portrays scenes relevant to St. Louis history, such as "The Founding of St. Louis: Pierre Laclède Coming Ashore" and "Cochetopa Pass in Colorado."



Ettore Miragoli painted many of the murals in the Old Courthouse beginning in 1880. He was criticized for painting over some of Charles Wimar's original artwork. (NPS photo)

The interior beauty of the courthouse rotunda matches the dignity of the structure's exterior. A series of Greek Revival columns and pilasters climb upward between four ornamental balconies under the circular dome representing classical orders of Greek and Roman architecture.

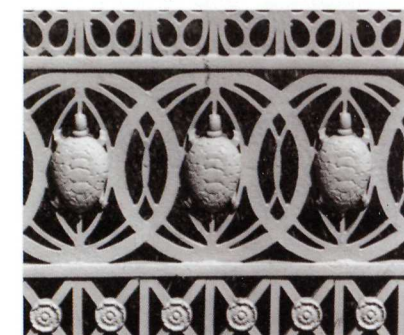


The winding stairway with no middle vertical support was installed and embedded in the walls of the courthouse in 1854. It reflects the prevalent use of cast iron in construction during this era in St. Louis. (NPS photo)

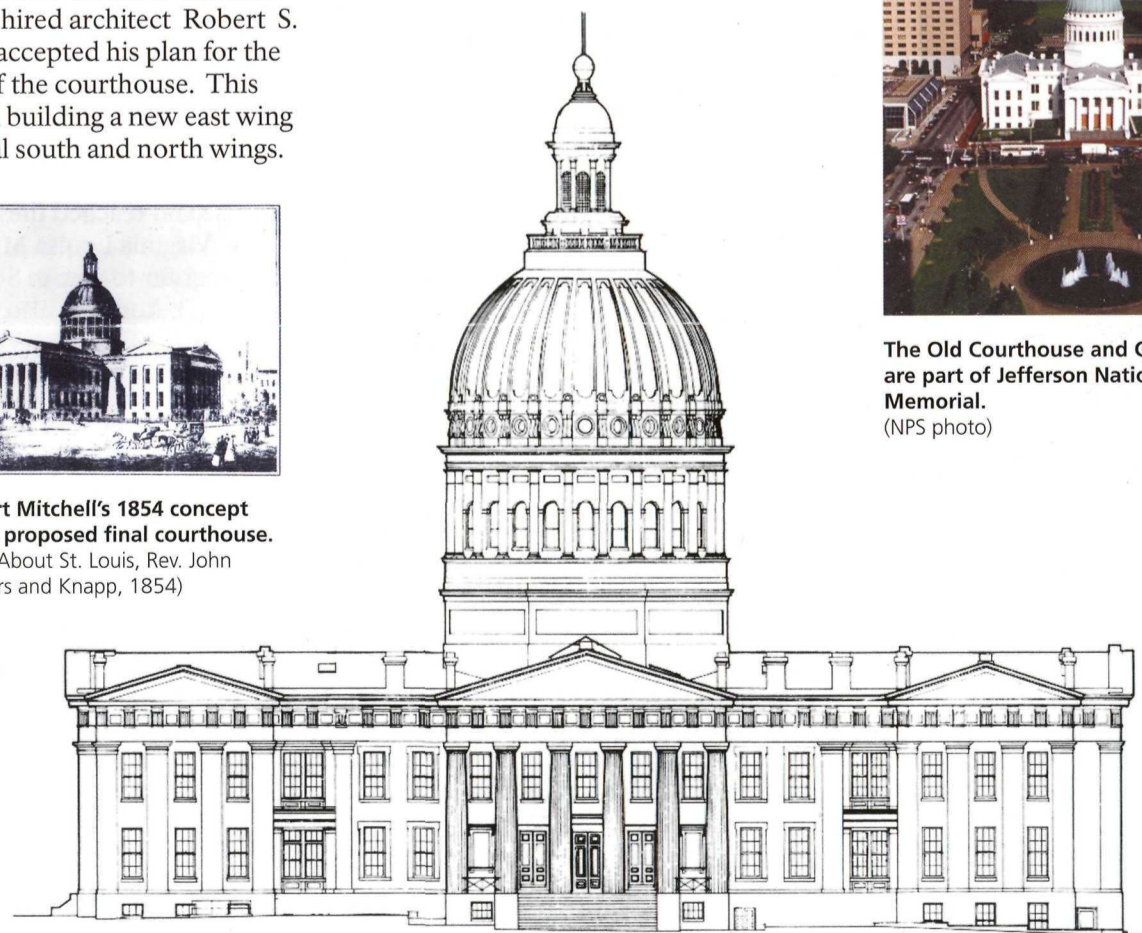


The ornate design of the Old Courthouse rotunda is consistent with the Greek Revival style of 19<sup>th</sup>-century public architecture. Each level of columns and balconies becomes progressively more ornamental and complex from the floor toward the top of the dome. (NPS photo)

Wimar painted additional murals, but these works did not survive. In 1880 another artist, Ettore Miragoli, was commissioned to conserve the earlier murals and further decorate the interior of the rotunda with new paintings. It was discovered, however, that Miragoli actually painted over some of Wimar's original murals. Most of the artwork decorating the rotunda today was done by Miragoli, while the lunettes are the only surviving work of Charles Wimar. The murals have been restored by other artists over the years.



A turtle design on the reproduction courtyard gates commemorates a turtle that once lived in the courthouse fountain. Legend claims that custodian James Quigley brought the turtle to the courthouse where it had the distinction of being called "the only thing connected with the building that did not require an appropriation of the taxpayers' money." (NPS photo)



A Historic American Buildings Survey drawing from 1937 showing the east view of the Old Courthouse. (HABS drawing by Frank Leslie)

Wheelchair access to the first floor is by the Broadway entrance. A computer/video kiosk, audio enhancement headsets, open caption video, and photo book are available upon request for those with specific needs. There is no elevator to the upper levels.

For your safety, remember that you are visiting a restored 19<sup>th</sup>-century building. Remain alert and exercise caution near irregular or uneven walking surfaces and floor levels, steep and winding stairs, and low railings in the upper level rotunda.

“The Rotunda . . . is well adapted to popular assemblies. No room of the same dimensions in the city is better suited to the voice. In the upper tiers every word uttered with common force is plainly distinguishable.”

*St. Louis Missouri Republican, May 2, 1855*

## A PUBLIC MEETING PLACE

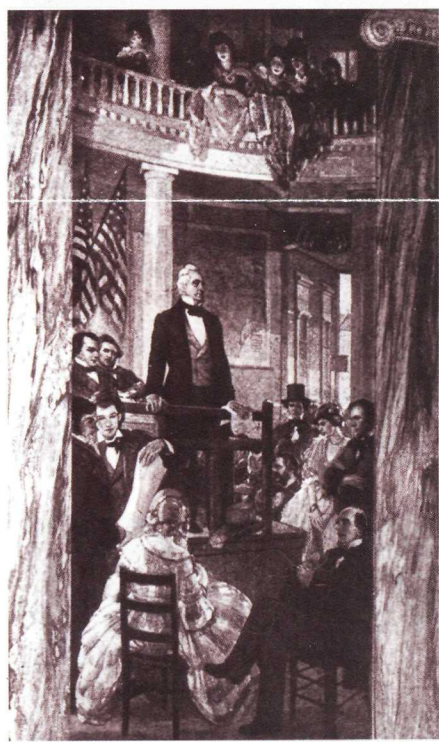
### Public Forum

During the time of the great westward migrations, the courthouse was a gathering point for many people heading west. St. Louis served as a major outfitter for pioneers going to Oregon or California during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Early wagon parties assembled in and around the courthouse to prepare for their long overland journeys. Throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, St. Louis' Courthouse served as the gateway city's center for many public gatherings and celebrations. It provided a forum where citizens voiced and debated important local and national issues.

The first public event held in the rotunda of the new courthouse was its opening ceremony on February 22, 1845. Large crowds continued to gather inside the rotunda, one of the largest public rooms in St. Louis. Originally, there was a spiral stairway in the center of the rotunda where speakers addressed crowds gathered on the ground floor and in the balconies. This early stairway was removed in 1862, opening up the area to larger crowds. Orators took advantage of the acoustical qualities provided under the high dome of the courthouse.



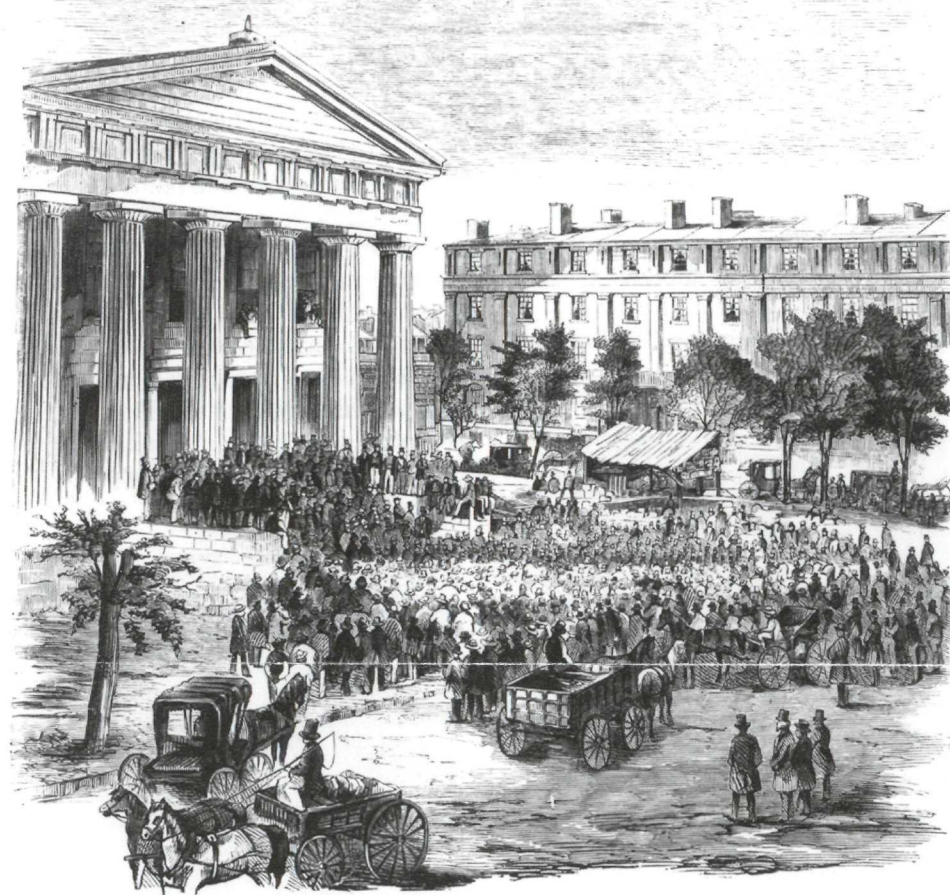
Today, large crowds still gather at the Old Courthouse for special ceremonies and public events. This rally took place to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on his birthday. (NPS photo)



Senator Thomas Hart Benton addressed a crowd gathered in the rotunda of the St. Louis Courthouse during the 1849 National Railroad Convention. (Painting by Richard Miller—Courtesy of Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City)

In the rotunda, dignitaries were honored, politics and wars were debated, and the potential benefits of a national railroad were proclaimed. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton welcomed delegates from 14 states to St. Louis in 1849 for the National Railroad Convention, which promoted the construction of a transcontinental railroad from Missouri to California. Another notable event was a public reception for President Grover Cleveland in 1887.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the divisive issue of slavery grasped the nation. Both pro-slavery and anti-slavery groups assembled at the courthouse for their causes. One of the larger public gatherings took place in August 1856, when both factions descended on the courthouse in reaction to the political strife in bordering Kansas. “Bleeding Kansas” as it was called, was catapulted toward anarchy over the slavery issue. The assemblage at the St. Louis Courthouse was described in the September 13, 1856 issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*: “The line of demarcation [sic] was down this afternoon, and hereafter there are but two parties in this city—Proslavery and Antislavery.”



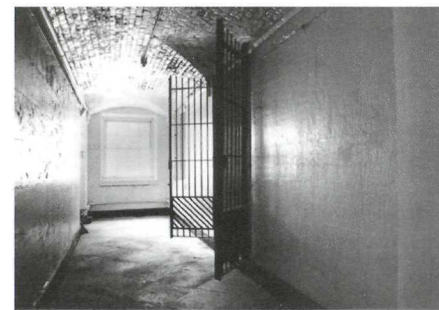
A meeting concerning the slavery issue in Kansas started in the rotunda of the courthouse, but moved outside when the crowds became too large. (Engraving from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 13, 1856)

## SLAVERY AND THE OLD COURTHOUSE

The history of the Old Courthouse includes many important associations with the subject of slavery in St. Louis. Though slaves were sometimes sold from the steps of this building, the circumstances around these events are often misunderstood. Slave auctions from the Old Courthouse were usually related to the settlement of estates in the probate courts. These slave sales were few in number, compared to the larger number of commercial auctions and private sales that took place throughout the city.

Another misconception about the Old Courthouse is that the building had a jail or “slave cells” in the east basement. Slaves were not actually housed in the courthouse when estate sales were settled. If slaves were confined at these times, they were taken to the county jail at Sixth and Chestnut Streets, two blocks away.

Just as slaves were sometimes sold at the Old Courthouse, they could also gain their freedom here. In 1859, St. Louis resident Ulysses S. Grant came here to free his only slave. Numerous other slaves were emancipated at the courthouse by their owners. Once free, blacks received their required licenses in this building so that they could reside in the county at a time when restrictive “Black Codes” were enforced. The courts were another avenue for slaves to gain freedom. Over 200 slaves sued their owners for freedom at the Old Courthouse, including Dred and Harriet Scott.



Records were stored in the basement of the Old Courthouse behind these iron doors. This civil court building did not have a jail facility and never housed any slaves or prisoners. (NPS photo)



Thomas Noble depicted the “Last Sale of Slaves on the Courthouse steps” in this painting completed in 1870. The artist's rendering of a slave auction was the second painting of the subject after the original was destroyed in a fire in 1867. (Courtesy of Missouri Historical Society)

The Old Courthouse, a part of Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The building is open daily 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. except for Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1, and is free of charge.

For additional information, write the Superintendent, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, 11 North Fourth Street, St. Louis, MO 63102-1810; call 314-655-1700; or [www.nps.gov/jeff](http://www.nps.gov/jeff).

“The right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution. The right of traffic in it, like an ordinary article of merchandise and property, was guaranteed to the citizens of the United States . . . and the Government is pledged to protect it in all future time . . .”

*Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's Opinion, U.S. Supreme Court, March 6, 1857*

## CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE COURTS

### The Dred Scott Case in St. Louis

One of the most important cases tried in the American court system began in St. Louis' Old Courthouse in 1846, when a slave family initiated a lawsuit for their freedom. Dred and Harriet Scott's lawsuit was not considered newsworthy at the time, however this case ultimately reached the United States Supreme Court where the Dred Scott Decision of 1857 pushed the nation into the bloody Civil War.

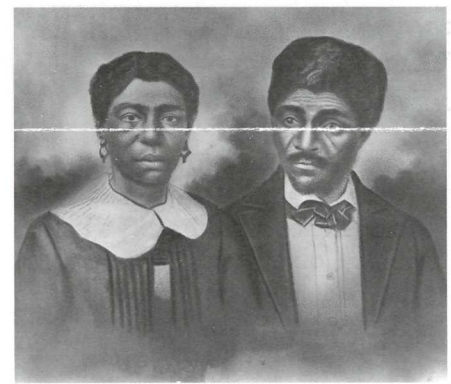
In a courtroom once located on the first floor of the courthouse's west wing, two trials were heard in 1847 and 1850. The courts in St. Louis decided if Dred and Harriet Scott and their daughters, Eliza and Lizzie, should be free from slavery according to the laws of the day. Previous Missouri courts supported a doctrine of “once free, always free” if it was shown that a slave was held in bondage in a free state or territory for an extended period of time.

Dred Scott had been taken from Missouri, a slave state, to Fort Armstrong in the free state of Illinois by his owner Dr. John Emerson, a military surgeon. Scott was later taken to Fort Snelling in the Wisconsin Territory, another free area. There he lived as a slave and met another slave, Harriet, who became his wife. In 1842, the Scott family returned to St. Louis and the following year Dr. Emerson died.

On April 6, 1846, Dred and Harriet Scott filed suit against Irene Emerson, the widow of their owner. In St. Louis, over 200 slaves were known to have petitioned the courts for freedom based on similar circumstances as the Scotts. In approximately half the cases, the slaves were freed when residency in a free area was proven in court. After a new trial was requested after the 1847 hearing, a St. Louis jury decided in the 1850 trial that the Scott family should be free.



The courtroom in the Old Courthouse where Dred and Harriet Scott sued for their freedom no longer exists. It was located on the lower floor in the west wing of the building and converted into two courtrooms with a hallway between them when the west wing was renovated in 1855. (NPS photo)



Dred and Harriet Scott (Painting based upon an engraving from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, June 27, 1857)

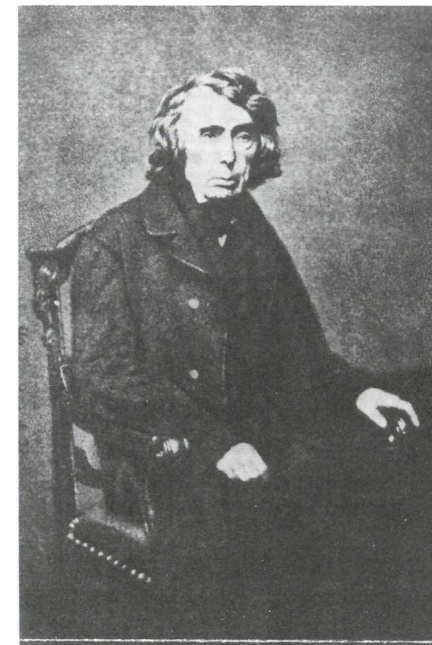
### 1857 U.S. Supreme Court Decision and its Impact

Irene Emerson appealed her case to the Missouri State Supreme Court, after she was found guilty of unlawfully holding Dred Scott and his family as slaves. In 1852, the State Supreme Court reversed the lower court decision, stating that “*Times now are not as they were when the previous decisions on this subject were made.*” The doctrine of “once free, always free,” previously supported in the Missouri courts, was now overturned.

Dred Scott's plea for freedom continued in St. Louis Federal Court in 1854, when Scott sued Mrs. Emerson's brother, John F. A. Sanford, who was the executor of the Emerson estate. Since Sanford was a citizen of New York, and the case represented a diversity of citizenship, the suit was heard in federal court, where the Scotts lost once more. The case was then appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

Chief Justice Roger B. Taney rendered the Dred Scott Decision on March 6, 1857. Seven of the nine Supreme Court Justices agreed that Dred Scott and his family should remain in slavery. Slaves were considered personal property, and the U.S. Constitution guaranteed property rights to citizens of the United States. Taney said the Scotts, being of African descent, were not U.S. citizens and therefore were not guaranteed the rights of citizenship. Taney also declared that the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which restricted slavery in the Wisconsin Territory under federal law, was unconstitutional. The United States Supreme Court sanctioned slavery with this decision, leading opponents to fear that the institution of slavery would spread unchecked through the expanding nation. This reaction helped move the country toward Civil War and a time when slavery would be abolished in America.

Though the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled against him, Dred Scott and his family were freed after the high court's decision. In 1850 Irene Emerson married Calvin Chaffee, a northern Congressman who was opposed to slavery. In 1857 she transferred ownership of the Scott family to Taylor Blow who freed them in St. Louis' Old Courthouse. Dred Scott died on September 17, 1858, and was buried in Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis.



Roger B. Taney of Maryland was Chief Justice of the United States in 1857 when he presented the high court's Dred Scott Decision. (Courtesy of National Archives)

### Crusade for Women's Rights

Another significant trial started as a lawsuit in St. Louis' Old Courthouse and reached the U.S. Supreme Court at a time when women's rights were being redefined in America. Virginia Louisa Minor, an early founder of the women's suffrage movement in Missouri, attempted to register to vote in St. Louis on October 15, 1872. During this time, other suffrage leaders, such as Susan B. Anthony, also challenged the existing voting laws of the states. Reese Happersett, the local voter registrar in St. Louis, denied Minor's request for voter registration on the basis of Missouri law, which prohibited women from voting. Along with her husband, Mrs. Minor sued Happersett for the right to vote based upon the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Minor's case argued that citizenship and voting rights were guaranteed by the Constitution and extended to women.

The local court in St. Louis and the State Supreme Court both decided against Minor. After an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1874, a unanimous decision was handed down by Chief Justice Morrison R. Waite stating that “*all the citizens of the states were not invested with the right of suffrage . . .*” and that “*the Constitution of the United States does not confer the right of suffrage upon anyone . . .*” The Supreme Court upheld the right for individual states to decide who could vote in elections within their borders.

Virginia Minor died in 1894. However, the crusade for women's suffrage that she helped lead continued in America until the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was ratified on August 18, 1920, finally granting women the freedom to exercise their right at the ballot box. Minor's challenge in the courts, along with the earlier Dred Scott case, pushed our nation to define citizenship and civil rights for all its people.



Virginia Minor ca. 1866 (From History of Woman Suffrage)



This photo shows the Old Courthouse around the time that Virginia Minor began her lawsuit for the right to vote in Missouri. (NPS photo)