

## Before *Dred Scott*

Before *Dred Scott* draws on the freedom suits filed in the St. Louis circuit court to construct a ground-breaking history of slavery and legal culture within the American Confluence, a vast region where the Ohio, Mississippi, and the Missouri rivers converge. Formally divided between slave and free territories and states, the American Confluence was nevertheless a site where the borders between slavery and freedom, like the borders within the region itself, were fluid. Such ambiguity produced a radical indeterminacy of status, which, in turn, gave rise to a distinctive legal culture made manifest by the prosecution of hundreds of freedom suits, including the case that ultimately culminated in the landmark United States Supreme Court decision in *Scott v. Sandford* (1857). Challenging dominant trends in legal history, Before *Dred Scott* argues that this distinctive legal culture, above all, was defined by ordinary people's remarkable understanding of, and appreciation for, formal law.

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# Before *Dred Scott*

*Slavery and Legal Culture in the American  
Confluence, 1787–1857*

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-11206-3 — Before Dred Scott  
Anne Twitty  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107112063](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107112063)

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First published 2016

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Twitty, Anne Silverwood, 1980– author.

Title: *Before Dred Scott* : slavery and legal culture in the American confluence, 1787–1857 / Anne Twitty, University of Mississippi.

Description: New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016. |

Series: Cambridge historical studies in American law and society |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016021097 | ISBN 9781107112063 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Slaves – Legal status, laws, etc. – Missouri – St. Louis Region – History – 19th century. | Missouri. Circuit Court (22nd Circuit) – History – 19th century.

Classification: LCC KF482.T87 2016 | DDC 342.7308/7–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016021097>

ISBN 978-1-107-11206-3 Hardback

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*For Jonathan*

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## Acknowledgments

I did not set out to become a historian of slavery or the law when I began graduate school at Princeton University. But after some prodding, Chris Stansell convinced me to take a look at a recently digitized collection of freedom suits available through the St. Louis Circuit Court Historical Records Project, and I have never looked back. As important as her role as matchmaker was, however, her biggest contribution to my scholarly development has been her infectious enthusiasm for this project and her careful attention to the craft of historical writing. Under her guidance I became a better, more judicious writer. Although her health has prevented her from helping guide revisions, I hope she would be pleased with the finished product. In one way or another, Dirk Hartog has inspired much of what follows. His work continues to raise fascinating questions, questions I hope to someday address with the same clarity and insight his writing so regularly displays. Sean Wilentz has provided some much-needed encouragement at various stages of this very long process and has served as a model of scholarly engagement. Stephanie McCurry offered penetrating feedback and inspired a new resolve to draw out the larger implications of my work. Also at Princeton, I had the privilege of working with Dan Rodgers, Phil Morgan, and Kevin Kruse, all of whom challenged me to think more rigorously about the past.

In the six years I spent in Princeton, I had the chance to be a part of a wonderful, and wonderfully supportive, graduate program. I was lucky to participate in a number of organizations and groups that gave me the opportunity to leave the library behind, if only for a little while, including the Modern America Workshop, the Princeton Program in American Studies, the Graduate History Association, the Graduate Student



Government, Princeton Pro-Choice Vox, and the Diet of Dickinson. I would especially like to thank Alex Bick, Dan Bouk, Pey-Yi Chu, Will Deringer, Carrie Eisert, Lo Faber, Christienna Fryar, Dov Grohsgal, Chin Jou, Jamie Kreiner, Kyrill Kunkakhovich, Sarah Milov, Chris Moses, Dael Norwood, Ben Schmidt, Chris Shannon, Jason Sharples, Jeris Stueland, and Laura Weinrib, whose curiosity and friendship helped me grow intellectually while also offering much-needed relief from the stresses of graduate school. Finally, as soon as I met Jessica Lowe we bonded over a wide-ranging set of common interests, historical and otherwise. Ever since, her support – as a reader, an editor, and, always, a sympathetic ear – has been absolutely indispensable.

Long before I began graduate school, I had excellent teachers who put me on the path to academia. Tim Roberts made middle school bearable. Bill Jordan taught me the fundamentals of research, analysis, and argumentation. Tyler Anbinder introduced me to the professional study of history. And Gregg Bucken-Knapp always encouraged me to apply to Princeton – albeit in political science.

I also had a fantastic group of friends whose loyalty and encouragement has always been humbling. Jason Cabrera has bailed me out, bucked me up, and generally come to my rescue more times than I can count. Ben Johnson deserves much of the blame – or credit – for convincing me to pursue a graduate degree in the humanities. Alex Michael could always be counted on when the going got rough. And Sara Guccini and Justin Oshana provided some much-needed distractions.

A number of people have been essential to researching this project. I am grateful for the help of Mike Everman and Pat Barge of the Missouri State Archives-St. Louis, the staff of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, Karen Glover of the Circuit Court of Bedford County, Virginia, and Elder Robert Webb of the Primitive Baptist Library in Carthage, Illinois, all of whom helped dig up documents along the way.

In the process of transforming what began as a dissertation into a book, I have benefitted tremendously from the comments and advice of an incredibly generous community of scholars. Kirt von Daacke, Sally Hadden, Kelly Kennington, Rebecca Scott, Dylan Penningroth, and Kim Welch have joined me on panels from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. and forced me to think more carefully about how subordinated people relate to and use the law. Stephen Aron, David Konig, and several anonymous reviewers have helped strengthen this project immensely.

Cambridge University Press has proved an ideal home for my work. Chris Tomlins, in his role as series editor, has been a committed

*Acknowledgments*

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advocate from the beginning, not only carefully shepherding the book to a contract but also offering unusually comprehensive feedback. Debbie Gershenowitz, Amanda George, and Ramesh Karunakaran, meanwhile, ushered it through various stages of the publishing process with skill. Raymond Doherty created a beautiful map for me. And Christine Rizzi and Bryan Kessler stepped in at a critical juncture to provide much needed editorial assistance.

It has been my great fortune that fate brought me to the University of Mississippi. My colleagues and friends there have made me feel exceedingly welcome. Jesse Cromwell, Oliver Dinius, Charles Eagles, Joshua First, Darren Grem, April Holm, Vivian Ibrahim, Theresa Levitt, John Neff, Paul Polgar, Antoinette Sutto, Joseph Ward, Jeff Watt, and Jessie Wilkerson have all cheered me across the finish line, demonstrating again and again how remarkably collegial our department is. Mikaëla Adams, David Fragoso Gonzalez, Zack Kagan Guthrie, Melissa Ondrovcik, and Nina Rifkind have been a constant source of camaraderie that has helped me feel at home in Oxford. Marc Lerner, John Ondrovcik, Sheila Skemp, and Jarod Roll deserve special mention, not only for their tremendous friendship, but also for reading drafts of chapters, listening to me puzzle through ideas, providing professional advice, and, throughout, offering enthusiastic and resolute support for the project.

I sometimes marvel at my good fortune in winding up with such a wonderful family. My grandparents – John and Virginia Twitty and Don and Mary Lee Sands – spoiled me. They told me stories, read to me, entertained me, and listened to me. Although none of them lived to see this project completed, I think about them often. I could not have asked for better parents. John Twitty fed my interest in history throughout my childhood. Jean Twitty has been my faithful sounding board and co-conspirator. Their love has made this, and so much more, possible.

By all accounts, Jonathan Gienapp came into my life about midway through this project, just as I was preparing to leave the east coast for Mississippi. I do not remember meeting him, however, when our paths crossed in April 2010 or October 2010. Fortunately, the third time was the charm, because, in January 2013, when I encountered him yet again, he stuck. It is a good thing, too, because it is hard to imagine that I would have been able to complete this project without his encouragement and support. Every day I am grateful for his incisive mind, his patience, his faith in me, and his seemingly endless good cheer. This book is for him.