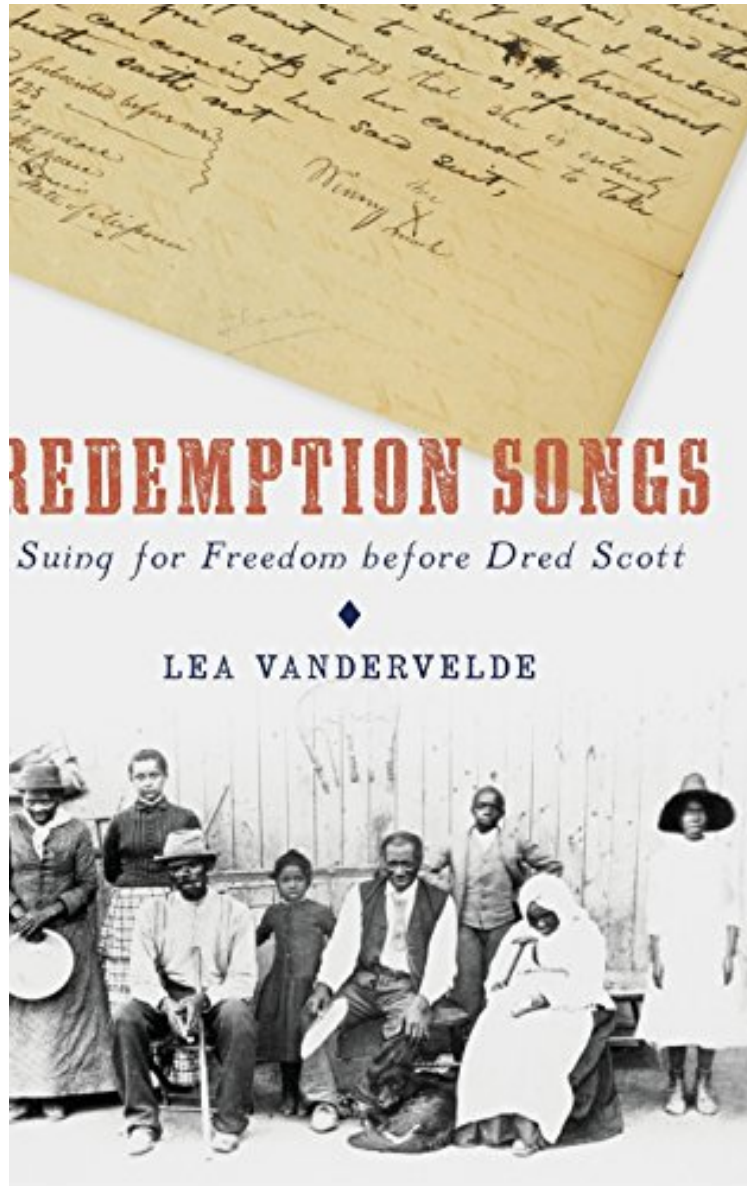


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# Redemption Songs: Suing for Freedom before Dred Scott

*Lea VanderVelde*

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**Lea VanderVelde : Redemption Songs: Suing for Freedom before Dred Scott** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Redemption Songs: Suing for Freedom before Dred Scott:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Winning Freedom in St Louis - "By the help of God and a good

lawyer" - and the Courage of the Enslaved By Jim Schmidt "This gave my mother an immense amount of trouble, but she had girded up her loins for the fight, and, knowing that she was right, was resolved, by the help of God and a good lawyer, to win my case against all opposition." - Lucy A. Delaney., "From the Darkness Cometh the Light" This is a really interesting book that covers about a dozen of approximately 300 "freedom suits" that took place in St Louis in the early- to mid-1800s, almost all before the infamous Dred Scott decision. The documentation of the suits has been collected, collated, and digitized in the past several years, and anyone can see the original documents at the St Louis Circuit Court Historical Records Project at [stlcourtrecords dot wustl dot edu](http://stlcourtrecords.dot.wustl.edu) Each of the cases is very interesting from so many angles - the judges, the lawyers, the slaveholding defendants, the enslaved plaintiffs, St Louis and Illinois history, state, federal, and territorial law, the frontier, international law, and much more. I knew some about the slaveholding sympathies in downstate Illinois from reading about Abraham Lincoln's role in the Matson Slave Trial, but the facts of institutionalized slavery in a supposedly "free state" is made very clear in this book - likewise, the irony of a good number of successful freedom suits in the courts of a slaveholding city, such as St Louis. There is a lot of tragedy here, with murders, kidnappings, mistreatment, etc., on top of the horrors of slavery. But also a lot of inspiration in the agency shown by enslaved persons to courageously press for their freedom against a slaveholding oligarchy, especially the power and generational vendettas of the Choteau family - founders of St Louis - against slaves seeking their freedom A few things kept me from giving this 5 stars - a) the presentation here of isolated cases is necessarily anecdotal, and the summary at the end is pretty cursory - there are two other books in just the past few months/year that seem to take more of a synthesis approach and comparing the experience of St Louis claimants to courtroom experiences around the country - I look forward to reading those; b) though it didn't detract from the quality of the scholarship, the copyediting throughout, esp. in the last 25%, is sloppy enough to be distracting; and c) the author's metaphor of "redemption songs" was forced and strained in the introduction and the closing chapters - but was not pressed in the heart of the book, which was good Highly Recommended

The Dred Scott case is the most notorious example of slaves suing for freedom. Most examinations of the case focus on its notorious verdict, and the repercussions that the decision set off-especially the worsening of the sectional crisis that would eventually lead to the Civil War-were extreme. In conventional assessment, a slave losing a lawsuit against his master seems unremarkable. But in fact, that case was just one of many freedom suits brought by slaves in the antebellum period; an example of slaves working within the confines of the U.S. legal system (and defying their masters in the process) in an attempt to win the ultimate prize: their freedom. And until Dred Scott, the St. Louis courts adhered to the rule of law to serve justice by recognizing the legal rights of the least well-off. For over a decade, legal scholar Lea VanderVelde has been building and examining a collection of more than 300 newly discovered freedom suits in St. Louis. In *Redemption Songs*, VanderVelde describes twelve of these never-before analyzed cases in close detail. Through these remarkable accounts, she takes readers beyond the narrative of the Dred Scott case to weave a diverse tapestry of freedom suits and slave lives on the frontier. By grounding this research in St. Louis, a city defined by the Antebellum frontier, VanderVelde reveals the unique circumstances surrounding the institution of slavery in westward expansion. Her investigation shows the enormous degree of variation among the individual litigants in the lives that lead to their decision to file suit for freedom. Although Dred Scott's loss is the most widely remembered, over 100 of the 300 St. Louis cases that went to court resulted in the plaintiff's emancipation. Beyond the successful outcomes, the very existence of these freedom suits helped to reshape the parameters of American slavery in the nation's expansion. Thanks to VanderVelde's thorough and original research, we can hear for the first time the vivid stories of a seemingly powerless group who chose to use a legal system that was so often arrayed against them in their fight for freedom from slavery.

"Redemption Songs is a much-needed addition to the historiography of slavery, American legal history, and the history of the legal profession in the United States." -Annette Gordon-Reed, *Journal of American History* "Of the more than 300 newly discovered suits filed during this period, the author examines 12 in detail. The cases reveal much about freedom and the law of slavery in the antebellum West. ... This book goes a long way toward filling the vacuum in which the Dred Scott decision has for so long existed." --CHOICE "[VanderVelde's] impressive collection paints a broad, incisive, and intriguing portrait of the condition of African Americans in the years preceding the Supreme Court's infamous 1857 Dred Scott decision. ... These cases...provide curious historians vivid insights into the values and customs of an era quite at odds with our own." --Gateway Magazine "VanderVelde makes palpable the bravery and fortitude of the men and women who sought freedom for themselves and their families." --Kirkus "A landmark volume in our understanding of the law of slavery. VanderVelde's *Redemption Songs* is the indispensable capstone to almost two decades of pathbreaking research." --John Fabian Witt, author of *Lincoln's Code* "Carefully examining recently unearthed court documents, census records, and much more, Lea VanderVelde constructs a nuanced portrait of slavery and freedom in the antebellum West. This is an important contribution to our understanding of slavery and its legal history." --Mark Tushnet, Harvard Law School "Lea VanderVelde's *Redemption Songs* is a stunning account of the efforts of ordinary African Americans to secure freedom through the courts. In graceful prose, VanderVelde highlights

the surprising promise of freedom suits but also the staggering toll the effort took on those who turned to them. Recovering the voices of those long thought voiceless, VanderVelde tells even experts things we did not know. Equally important, she brings to life things we know in theory." --Michael Les Benedict, Ohio State University About the Author  
Lea VanderVelde is Professor of Law at the University of Iowa and author of Mrs. Dred Scott.