

Lincoln on Slavery: The Dred Scott Decision

In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court passed its infamous Dred Scott decision, allowing a slaveholder to cross state lines, into a free state, to reclaim his “property”—a former slave who had gained his freedom. Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote in his opinion on the case, that the Declaration of Independence did not apply to the Negroes, who “had no rights that the white man was bound to respect.”

Lincoln, in a speech in Springfield, Illinois, on June 26, 1857, had this to say on the matter:

In those days [of the American Revolution], our Declaration of Independence was held sacred by all, and thought to include all; but now, to aid in making the bondage of the Negro universal and eternal, it is assailed, and sneered at, and construed, and hawked at, and torn till, if its framers could rise from their graves, they could not at all recognize it. All the powers of earth seem rapidly combining against him. Mammon is after him; ambition follows, and philosophy follows, and the Theology of the day is fast joining the cry. They have him in his prison house; they have searched his person, and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is.