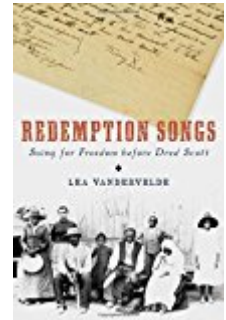


**Lea VanderVelde.** *Redemption Songs: Suing for Freedom before Dred Scott*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$31.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-992729-6.



**Reviewed by** Dominic DeBrincat

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**Commissioned by** Camarin M. Porter (Western Colorado University)

The history of emancipation, manumission, and the legal demise of slavery in the United States is well-covered ground. Scholars have studied legislative enactments, antislavery advocacy, and wars between Americans as the foundations of freedom from slavery. These stories of liberation, however, offer a distinctly white perspective. Notably underrepresented are the slaves who made that freedom necessary. Joining a recent wave of scholarship examining African-descendant roles in liberation studies, Lea VanderVelde rewrites the score by repositioning slaves as the central agents in their own freedom narratives. Their mode of agency was unique—not as runaways, rebels, ministers, or abolitionists—but as courtroom litigants suing for their freedom.

VanderVelde researched three hundred freedom suits from the first half of the nineteenth century that she discovered in St. Louis trial records. What she found is fascinating. Missouri, a state that protected and perpetuated race-based chattel slavery, was much more open to granting freedom requests than its free-soil neighbor, Illi-

nois. The grounds for successful freedom suits fell into four general categories. A small number of cases were brought by slaves who were not of African descent, but Native American. Some litigants argued their masters had mistaken their statuses as slaves, usually because the plaintiffs' mothers were free themselves. Another category involved those whose masters had breached their promise to set their bondsmen free. The final, and most numerous grouping, was made up of slaves who claimed freedom by residence. They sued to secure their right to be free because they (or their maternal ancestors) once lived on land where slavery was prohibited, in particular, the Northwest Territory. All told, these cases illustrate an area where slaves successfully acted as legal agents asking courts to overturn masters' authority or plans.

*Redemption Songs* reframes the historical range of freedom suits by setting its sights on Missouri trial courts. Antebellum American scholars have long been indebted to Helen Tunnicliffe Catterall and her appellate-based compilation of free-

dom suits, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (1968). VanderVelde separates herself from this compendium by examining records at the trial court level, which reveal plaintiffs' experiences, motives, and emotions more richly than appellate opinions. Her focus on St. Louis makes her work all the more powerful. Seated in a state that proudly reinforced slavery, St. Louis was the marketplace to and from the West, and the ideal setting for migration and commercial interactions, all of which involved slaves. The city drew the necessary players into its orbit: merchants, farmers, and miners; slaves, servants, and runaways; criminals, kidnappers, and bounty hunters. All would find an audience in St. Louis trial courts, which proved to be surprisingly accommodating to freedom seekers.

VanderVelde creatively builds her narrative on the motif of the redemption song. The lawsuits' structure would have been familiar to slaves who once sang these melodies: "It has a beginning, the petition; a middle, the lawsuit; and an end, the judgment, for that's what must be sung in public" (p. 1). It was a call-and-answer composition, as servants beckoned their masters to respond to their moves for liberation. But they were not like most redemption songs in which slaves pleaded as supplicants. Instead, these legal songs were demands, expressing their right to be free. And for decades, Missouri courts stood as ideal amphitheatres for these overtures. That was until the freedom suits of Dred and Harriet Scott, where the highest courts in Missouri and the United States reversed a half-century of precedents that emancipated slaves by residence. The Scotts' ordeal silenced the redemption chorus with a discordant coda that disenfranchised blacks in their legal quests for freedom. Only the Civil War would undo those damages, and let the songs of liberty ring again.

This book's greatest asset is its chapter-length examinations of individual freedom suits. VanderVelde organizes her book around twelve di-

gestible case studies that lend themselves well to classroom study. Each chapter centers on the freedom suits of one slave (or several) as a path for exploring unique legal developments. Readers can follow the ordeals of Marie Scypion's daughters to examine the legal effects that international transfers of western lands had on slaves living in French, British, and then US territories (chapter 3). Winny's case—involving a slave whose master lived successively in Illinois and Missouri—gave birth to the freedom-by-residence rule that would be so critical to later freedom suits (chapter 4). By emancipating slaves who had lived in the free-soil Northwest Territory, even after they had been moved to a slave territory, Missouri trial courts created "a public basis for severing a private relationship, against the will of the stronger party" (p. 63). On occasion, third parties stepped in to disrupt a master's designs to free his slaves, as was the case when estate administrators and creditors thwarted Milton Duty's authority to manumit thirty slaves in his will (chapter 12). As a final example, VanderVelde analyzes the only known first-person account of a freedom suit—Lucy Delany's "From Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggle for Freedom" (1891). This presents a rare opportunity to study freedom litigation through the lens of historical memory, which is especially important because Delaney's account differs considerably from legal and factual reality (chapter 11). Whether used in its entirety, or by pulling out exemplary chapters, the book works well to introduce readers to the narratives of slave-initiated freedom suits.

Another benefit is the author's commitment to giving her readers a glimpse of the primary sources that make up the book's stories—a rarity in secondary history monographs. Many chapters feature an edited excerpt of a document found in the redemption suit. VanderVelde includes a variety of sources: a local judge's handwritten notes revealing his impressions on a freedom suit, an auction notice detailing the values and "features" of slaves for sale, a freedom petition found in the

Missouri Supreme Court records, and a master's will assigning the futures of his slaves from beyond the grave. She also incorporates lengthy excerpts from Delaney's narrative, underscoring the dynamism of materials that serve as both primary and secondary sources. Delaney's writings provide a secondhand retelling of her mother's redemption as well as a first-person account of how she understood the ordeal. These primary-source illustrations are sewn into the stories they create, permitting readers to make easy connections between the unfiltered past and the scholarly interpretations that they breed.

VanderVelde's book can also serve a special role in history methods courses because she pulls back the curtain to show readers what it means to be a researcher. At various points, she shares her joys and her frustrations in uncovering St. Louis's underexplored freedom suits. Her preface offers a concise and compelling path to discovering this history. Readers can relive her excitement as she negotiated with archivists, dug through brittle files and dusty shoeboxes, and yearned for showers and clean clothes after long days of dirty work. Typically, students read secondary works to see what history has been made, but VanderVelde takes them with her to see *how* history gets made.

While not central to the book, VanderVelde pays special attention to the gender distinctions that emerged from these redemption cases. The evidence shows that fathers were virtually absent from these cases. In fact, the author describes a father's status and life history as "irrelevant" in freedom suits (pp. 42, 131). At the heart of most of these cases was a determination of a mother's servile status. Where the rule of matrilinearity reigned, a mother's freedom was transmitted to her children and grandchildren. In addition, some women were able to use freedom litigation to break the chains of their master's sexual prerogative. VanderVelde also argues that women were more likely than men to sue for freedom in a system that was more responsive to mothers and

their families. Instead, men more often ran away because of their strength, stamina, and marketable skills as laborers. Her claim on the likelihood of running away might a bit overstated because she never really substantiates it, and women's freedom actions in St. Louis only outnumbered men's 153 to 126 (p. 5). Nonetheless, gender played an important role in a system that gave women distinct advantages to exercise control over herself and her descendants.

The book is limited only by the author's occasional tendency to put the analytical cart before the factual horse. Several chapters open with key analysis of their content before actually laying out the facts of the selected case. For example, in chapter 2, VanderVelde rightly highlights the importance of Peter McNelly's freedom suit under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the value of the historical record's completeness. However, she begins the chapter with these evaluative bites before describing who McNelly was, the grounds for his redemption, and the results of his legal actions. In doing so, she compromises the power of her presentation. The reader can gain a fuller appreciation for the evidence that supports her savvy analysis if the facts come first. This inverted approach, however, is not a fatal disruption. At best, it is a useful pedagogical tool in itself, giving teachers and students the opportunity to explore varied argumentative structures and organization.

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A Hopeful Chorus, Drowned Out by a Dissonant Coda

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