Dred Scott: Heirs to history

By Tim O'Neil | ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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From left to right: Lynne Jackson, William Blow Mill and Martin Field
(P-D)

Lynne M. Jackson is an administrator for a law firm downtown. Martin R. Field is a stay-at-home dad in Mehlville. William B. Mill is a retired doctor in Ballwin.

Until this past week, they hadn't heard one another's names. Yet each is linked by family heritage to major players in the 19th century drama of law and morality that fractured America's uneasy compromise over slavery — a story that began in St. Louis, a frontier commercial hub that barely reached where City Hall stands today.

The central characters were Dred and Harriet Scott, slaves who briefly won their freedom in a trial in the Old Courthouse only to lose a series of appeals. The final decision from the U.S. Supreme Court on March 6, 1857 — 150 years ago today — said that blacks had no rights

and that slavery could spread into the western territories.

The decision emboldened slaveholders and frightened abolitionists and free-soilers. It pushed the United States toward the four years of the nation-reshaping carnage called the Civil War.

Slave owners Peter and Elizabeth Blow of Virginia brought Dred Scott to St. Louis in 1830. The lawyer who took the case to the federal courts was Roswell Field, who moved here from Vermont in 1839, the year St. Louis began building its courthouse. Taylor Blow, a son of the Blows, freed the Scotts quickly after the decision.

From their alley address near present-day Cole and 10th streets, the newly freed Harriet Scott took in laundry. Roswell Field got Dred Scott a job at Barnum's Hotel, just east of the Old Cathedral, where he was a porter and enjoyed celebrity until his death on Sept. 17, 1858.

Fast-forward five generations. Lynne Jackson of Florissant is a great-great-granddaughter of the Scotts. Martin Roswell Field is a great-great-grandson of Roswell Martin Field. William Blow Mill is a great-great-grandson of Taylor Blow.

Their lives are pleasantly ordinary by contemporary standards. They're married with children and are churchgoing citizens. They heard family stories growing up but reached adulthood before fully understanding the complicated tale of human bondage, politics and courage.

She was 4 years old when she attended the 100th anniversary of the case at the Old Courthouse in 1957. Her father, John Madison Sr., gave a speech arguing for racial justice. Her family then went to Calvary Cemetery, where the Rev. Edward Dowling, a Jesuit raising money for a monument over Dred Scott's unmarked grave, led a prayer service. No major political officeholders attended.

"There were lights and a lot of people," Lynne Jackson recalled. "Something big had happened with my great-great-grandfather."

In school, teachers would fuss over her lineage when textbooks opened to the case. They also fussed over her two children — continuing testimony to the story's power.

"Ours is an understanding and pride of how there were courageous people who stood up to the law of the land," Jackson said of her family. "You cannot go back and change history, but in our time, we all need to make our marks. And we know that we have that blood running through us."

Among the Scotts' great-grandchildren was John A. Madison, who earned a degree from the old Lincoln University School of Law and taught in the St. Louis public schools. He and his wife, Marsulite, had four children. The oldest is Jackson.

"My father told us a lot about the case and how getting a good education is our legacy," said Jackson, 54. "Our family was never one to walk around and say, 'We're related to Dred Scott.' We were taught our responsibility today — the courage to do what's right. Dred and Harriet had the courage to pursue it over 11 years and put their lives on the line. We owe them to see this through."

Shortly after Jackson graduated from Northwest High School in 1970, her family moved to Ballwin. She graduated from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, married Brian Jackson and had two children, one of whom played Dred Scott in a first-grade presentation. Ten years ago, she was hired by the law firm Bryan Cave, where she is general services manager.

From the firm's suites in the Metropolitan Square Building downtown, she can look upon the Old Courthouse. Had her ancestors not sought redress there, she said, "We could very well have been a slave nation much longer."

Last June, she helped create a foundation — thedredscottfoundation.org — that wants to erect a statue in Scott's honor. She has assumed the role of family spokeswoman from her father, who is 81, and helped to plan local commemorations. Relatives are gathering today at an event at the Main Library downtown.

Thinking back to the 100-year anniversary in 1957, Jackson said proudly, "It's a much bigger event today."

Martin Field Admiring Roswell's role in history

Martin Field, 47, grew up in suburban Detroit hearing about Roswell Field's famous son, newspaperman-poet Eugene Field. Teachers fussed over him about Eugene's famous poems, not his connection to Dred Scott.

Until his 20s, he knew of Roswell Field primarily as the inspiration for his name "and that he was a famous lawyer." He began reading much more.

"As I learned about the (Scott) case from my father, I admired what Roswell did," said Martin Field. "He was able to represent someone who was a slave, not a real popular undertaking, and he was able to do that beyond (seeking) any kind of fame. He really shunned the spotlight."

In 1993, Martin Field took a computer tech job at the former McDonnell Douglas Corp. He and his wife, Sheila, moved here from Peoria, Ill., with the first of their two children. They proudly take the kids to the Eugene Field House and St. Louis Toy Museum, 634 South Broadway — one block south of Busch Stadium. It was the home that Roswell Field rented in 1851 to escape the central city.

Roswell's wife, Frances, died five years later. Eugene Field went to the University of Missouri and worked at several newspapers, ending up in Chicago, and writing poems such as "Wynken, Blynken and Nod" and "Little Boy Blue."

Roswell Field died in 1869 and was buried next to his wife in Bellefontaine Cemetery.

Martin Field and his wife now have a business, the Riverfront Soap Works, they run from home.

Because of the Eugene Field connection, he has been invited to his children's schools to read poetry. Few people know about Eugene's father.

"People generally recognize Eugene's name," he said. "People will say, 'Oh, I have read

his poems.' When I bring up Dred Scott, they'll say, 'That's a familiar case.' The name (Roswell) doesn't ring unless you're pretty steeped in history.

"Maybe that's the way Roswell wanted it."

He can pass along the stories to his children in practical ways. In addition to the museum, there are streets named after his ancestors in the neighborhood south of Carondelet Park. Roswell Field owned land there.

"It doesn't feel like 150 years ago when it's right there before us," he said. "Dred Scott is not just on a shelf and forgotten. Students are reading and studying the case. It's very interesting, whether I'm connected or not. It does seem that (Roswell Field) took a real interest in Dred Scott's welfare and his rights as a citizen.

"That's a lot to admire."

William Blow Mill Looking for good side

Mill grew up with family stories tracing lineage to 17th century Westminster Abbey in England. He was aware of the connection to the Scotts but only vaguely.

"I didn't think much about it in high school," he said.

These days, the family line is most known for Susan Blow, who in 1873 founded the nation's first successful public kindergarten at the former Des Peres School in Carondelet. Peter and Elizabeth Blow were Susan Blow's grandparents, and her father was Henry T. Blow, a prominent businessman and namesake of Blow School and Blow Street in Carondelet.

Mill, 74, grew up here and in Cincinnati. While he was a student at Washington University, his history-minded grandmother inspired him to write a lengthy paper for an English class about the Dred Scott case, for which he received a B+. He did not mention his lineage in the text.

"It isn't my story, it's their story," Mill said of his ancestors. "I think that Taylor and Dred may have been good friends. … The Blows give the picture of good slaveholders, if there can be such a thing."

After college, Mill flew submarine hunters for the Navy and received his medical degree from the University of Tennessee. He returned to St. Louis and worked as a radiation oncologist. He and his wife, Dorothy, have three grown children and live in the unincorporated Ballwin area.

Mill said he finds consolation in historical evidence that the Blows helped the Scotts. He noted that Taylor Blow saw to Dred Scott's burial in 1858 in the old Wesleyan Cemetery, near South Grand Boulevard and Laclede Avenue, and then had his remains moved to

Calvary in 1867 because Wesleyan was being abandoned. Taylor Blow had converted to Catholicism, and the cemetery rule at the time was that whites could bury servants there.

At Calvary Cemetery, the top of the tombstone erected over Dred Scott's grave in 1957 is covered with pennies. The Rev. Robert Tabscott, a lifelong student of the Scott case, called it an old African good-luck tradition. Lynne Jackson suggested the connection is to Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, whose face is on the penny.

The back of the stone says, "Freed from slavery by his Friend Taylor Blow."

"Friend," William Mill said. "That's a nice thing to say about somebody."