

The Dred Scott Decision Inflames the Nation In 1857, a Supreme Court decision widened the growing divisions over slavery. Dred Scott, an enslaved African American from Missouri, had sued for his freedom, based on the fact that he had traveled with his master into free territory.

In *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the Court made a sweeping ruling that went far beyond the particulars of Scott's case. The Court declared that African Americans were not citizens, and therefore were not entitled to sue in the courts. Furthermore, the Court ruled that the federal government did not have the power to ban slavery in any territory and that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, since it could deprive citizens of their property without due process of law. Southerners were delighted with the Dred Scott decision, but northerners were outraged.

John Brown Plans a Revolt In 1859, a violent attack on slavery occurred in northern Virginia. In the fall of 1859, white abolitionist **John Brown** led a small band of white and black followers in an attempt to seize a federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now in West Virginia). He hoped to inspire local enslaved African Americans to join a revolution that would destroy slavery in the South. Brown's plan failed.

Put on trial for treason, Brown proclaimed his willingness to “mingle my blood . . . with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments.” In the eyes of many abolitionists, Brown's defense of his actions and the dignified calm with which he faced execution made him a heroic martyr to the antislavery cause. Northern support for Brown further inflamed southern anger.

Lincoln Proclaims Emancipation

Early in the war, President Lincoln insisted that he did not have the authority to end slavery. In his public statements, he emphasized the fact that his chief goal was to preserve the Union. Although Lincoln personally opposed slavery, he did not want to lose the support of the four slave states—Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri—that had remained loyal to the Union.

However, by the autumn of 1862, Lincoln decided that he did, indeed, have the authority to proclaim the end of slavery, and that as a “practical war measure” he wished to do so. In January 1863, he issued the **Emancipation Proclamation**. This presidential decree declared that “all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”

The Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to the loyal slave states or to those areas of the South already under Union control. As a result, it did not immediately free a single slave. Nevertheless, it was an important turning point because it encouraged enslaved African Americans in the South to run away to Union army encampments and to aid the Union cause. It also symbolically redefined the war as being “about slavery.”

African Americans had always believed that the war should be about slavery, and they had volunteered to fight as soon as the war began. But at first they were turned away and told “this is a white man’s war.” After the Emancipation Proclamation, however, the Union began to actively recruit both free blacks from the North and newly freed African Americans from the South. Eventually, some 180,000 African American men served in the Union Army.