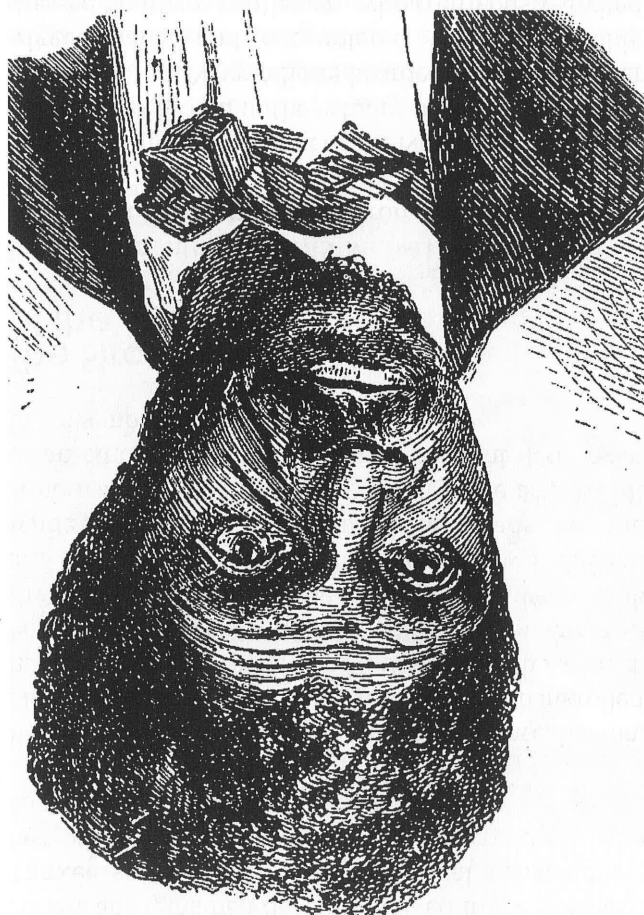


# The Dred Scott Decision

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The Case That Sparked the Civil War



Dred Scott

ery forces were erupting throughout the country. It was clear that if the issue was not resolved soon, the Union would be in danger of breaking up.

At 11 A.M., the justices entered the room and the chief justice read the Court's decision. By the time he finished two hours later, the room was buzzing: The highest Court in the land had ruled that Congress did not have the power to restrict slavery in the territories. At last the country had its answer. But far from easing sectional tensions, the *Dred Scott* decision ripped the country further apart. This decision, on which some politicians had pinned hopes of unification, instead placed the nation firmly on the road to civil war.

**O**n March 6, 1857, an unusually large crowd of journalists and other spectators crammed inside the Washington, D.C., courtroom where the U.S. Supreme Court would soon issue its decision in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. The decision was greatly anticipated by abolitionists and slavery supporters alike. Although the case ultimately concerned the question of whether a person named Dred Scott was a free man or a slave, many hoped that the Court, in ruling upon Dred Scott's status, would answer a constitutional question that had plagued the nation for decades: Did the federal government have the power to limit the spread of slavery in Western territories?

The question was literally tearing the country in two. By the late 1850s, slavery had been outlawed in every state north of Pennsylvania but continued to thrive in the South. Southerners – whose livelihood depended upon free labor – were determined to see the practice expand into the Western territories. Northerners wanted to see it halted.

Congress had sought to bridge the widening divide between the North and South by creating various "compromises" designed to permit slavery in the Southern states but restrict it in the territories. But neither region was wholly satisfied. There were increasingly fierce arguments from slaveholding states that the U.S. Constitution did not permit Congress to restrict slavery, and outbreaks of violence between anti- and proslav-