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Politics and Crisis in the 1850s: An Interview with Rachel Shelden

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Abstract
Today we are speaking with Rachel Shelden, Associate Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma. She is the author of Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), which received honorable mention for the Wiley-Silver Prize for the best first book on the Civil War and was a selection of the History book club. She is also the co-editor, with Gary W. Gallagher, of A Political Nation: New Directions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Political History (University of Virginia Press, 2012). Dr. Shelden serves as the book review editor for the Journal of the Civil War Era. Her current book project explores the political culture of the U.S. Supreme Court in the long Civil War era, from the 1830s to the 1890s. [*excerpt*]

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Comments
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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Politics and Crisis in the 1850s: An Interview with Rachel Shelden

By Ashley Whitehead Luskey

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming 2019 CWI Conference about their talks. Today we are speaking with Rachel Shelden, Associate Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma. She is the author of Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), which received honorable mention for the Wiley-Silver Prize for the best first book on the Civil War and was a selection of the History book club. She is also the co-editor, with Gary W. Gallagher, of A Political Nation: New Directions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Political History (University of Virginia Press, 2012). Dr. Shelden serves as the book review editor for the Journal of the Civil War Era. Her current book project explores the political culture of the U.S. Supreme Court in the long Civil War era, from the 1830s to the 1890s.


Dr. Rachel Shelden

CWI: What were the major thematic undercurrents that defined the political debates of the 1850s? Who were the major players in these debates, and what roles did they play?

SHELDEN: Three of the most important themes that you can see pop up in political conversations over the course of the 1850s were anxieties about the role of slavery in American society (and especially the expansion of African American slavery into the western territories); a growing fear of immigrants and especially Catholics in many northern communities; and continuing frustration that politics – and Washington, D.C. in particular – were contaminated by corruption. These three issues interacted to create an explosive political atmosphere that helped destroy one of the major parties of the era (the Whigs), fueled increasing sectionalization (between slave and free states), and created a searing mistrust of Washington, D.C. Among the more important personalities who tried to grapple with these problems in Congress and through party politics were Stephen Douglas of Illinois, President James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, William Henry Seward of New York, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, Alexander Stephens of Georgia, and a number of others.

CWI: Who was Dred Scott? Can you explain, in a nutshell, the major contours of the Dred Scott case and its significance to both the political debates of the 1850s and to the coming of the Civil War?

SHELDEN: Dred Scott v. Sandford (60 U.S. 393 (1857)) is a notoriously challenging case both in the ways it traveled through the state and federal court system and also in the contours of its decision(s). Briefly, Scott was enslaved in Missouri but sued for his freedom in St. Louis on the basis of having lived with his owner for two years in a free territory – designated as such by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. In 1850, the St. Louis court declared him free but in 1852, the Missouri Supreme Court overturned this decision. When the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court under new circumstances, the majority ruled in March 1857 that Scott was still a slave, with Chief Justice Roger Taney delivering the 7-2 opinion. Taney made two pronouncements: 1) that no black person could ever be a citizen of the United States and therefore could not sue in federal court; and 2) that Congress did not have the power to prohibit slavery in the territories and therefore the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional. The first of these pronouncements was problematic enough for a number of antislavery activists and politicians, but the second was downright provocative. The Republican Party had staked its very existence on the idea of limiting slavery in the territories – a feat they firmly believed Congress had every right to enact. The decision, therefore, enraged many Northerners, even as most white Southerners celebrated Taney's ruling (though even some white Southerners found themselves confused by Taney's assertions about congressional power). This decision, and the potential that the Court might go even further – invalidating northern states' right to ban slavery – hung over much of the politics of the late 1850s as the Republican Party warned of a "slave power" conspiracy to nationalize the peculiar institution.
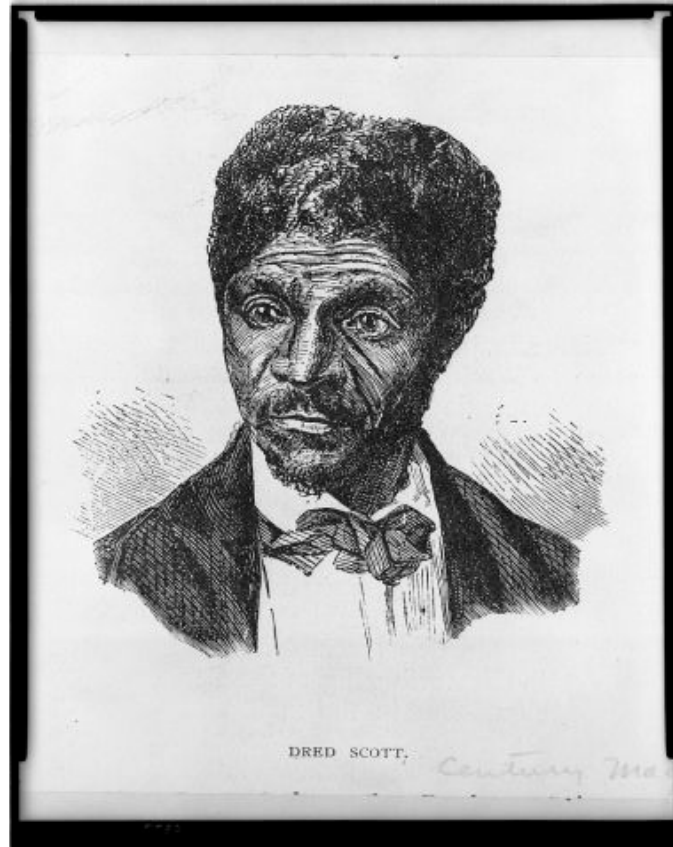
Dred Scott (via Library of Congress)

CWI: How might a close analysis of the political crisis of the 1850s, as well as of the players and institutions involved, inform our understanding of our own political culture and institutions? How do the varying success and failures of the 1850s help inform our own understanding of useful contours for contemporary political debate?

SHELDEN: Using the past to explain phenomena in the present is always tricky. In particular, the ways in which Dred Scott, Taney, the Republican Party, and other critical actors of the period behaved were very much a product of their time. Still, understanding that context can remind us that our current perceptions of politics do not operate in a vacuum. In the case of Dred Scott, Taney's ruling – and the general manner in which many of the justices operated in the mid-nineteenth century both in relationship to and outside of critical legal decisions – can remind us that current insistence that the Supreme Court is above politics or outside the political realm was never a truism, among the founding generation or the several generations beyond it.