

# A day of demand: call for a new national reparations day, mark your calendar for March 6, 2013

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## Practical Politics

Although clearly the 17th and 18th centuries were crucial to American history—bringing the Mayflower Compact, the House of Burgesses home rule, America’s first constitution called the Articles of Confederation, the Declaration of Independence, then the Constitutional Convention and the Constitution itself—the 19th century was the most foundational for the American character.

That was the period when America won its sovereignty as a nation from Britain in the War of 1812 (even though the Brits burned the White House down twice), the ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (also called the Maafa) and the surge of the domestic slave trade from Virginia, Kentucky and Maryland down river to Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi, and all of the events that led to the Civil War.

Within the rise and expansion of antebellum slavery in America and the embedding of “White Privilege, Manifest Destiny” and the idea that Blacks were permanently inferior, several generations of free Blacks and a Black propertied class grew up in daily opposition to the idea that Blacks deserved inequality and third-class treatment.

Calling themselves the Free African Society, the Prince Hall Masons, the A.M.E. Church, Free African School Society, and other names linked to a positive African heritage, these groups and individuals waged a relentless battle against seeing themselves as less than others. Many Blacks owned land, some Black men voted regularly in New York, Rhode Island and Philadelphia, and a small handful of Blacks owned slaves themselves for various reasons. During the 19th century, following up on the same theme established in the 18th century, Black men and women fought in America’s wars, invented major technological contributions to America’s progress, developed newspapers, wrote short stories, poems and novels, and created America’s greatest contribution to world music.

During the 19th century as now, there was no one way to be Black. The Black experience covered all 360 degrees and more.

In essence, in spite of the negative images thrust upon them, Black Americans fought hard to define themselves, to live their own lives of substance and progress, and to be real Americans (with an African past).

Part of that process saw Biddie Mason come to California (supposedly a non-slave state) as a slave and rise to own a major portion of downtown Los Angeles and found the A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles.

It also saw major slave revolts in alliances with Seminole and Yamasee Native Americans, fiery Black abolition speeches from the likes of David Walker and Maria Stewart, and the rise of Frederick Douglass as a profound thinker, scholar and American hero.

In 1857, one of the most disturbing and influential Supreme Court cases was made public—the Dred Scott v. Sandford case (Sanford is actually the correct spelling, but the court clerk's misspelling has become standard over the years). It was a ruinous decision right on the heels of the 1850 Compromise, which included the Fugitive Slave Act that imposed the daily possibility that any Black person could be instantly arrested and sent down river into slavery, and the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act which expanded the reach of slavery in the states.

Scott had been a slave in Missouri, had been moved to Illinois and free Wisconsin Territory, then back to Missouri, where his owner died in 1846. Aided by an ardent abolitionist, Scott sued for his freedom based on the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which said that slaves taken into a free state or territory had a right to manumission. The lower courts in Missouri freed Mr. Scott, but the owner's relatives sued. By the time the case got to the Missouri Supreme Court it was 1852 and the Compromise of 1850 had been passed, putting all Black folks in jeopardy. The Missouri Supreme Court reversed all prior lower court decisions and returned Scott into slavery.

After five more years of appeals, the U.S. Supreme Court finally heard the case in 1856-57, and in an infamous ruling by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, the Court declared the 1820 Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, said that neither slaves nor any Blacks in America had legal standing in Court so they could not testify or give witness, that Blacks could not be citizens of America in any case, and finally, "... there are no rights that the Colored man has in America that the White man is bound to respect."

In response, a New York free Black newspaper raged, “When you repeal the Fugitive Slave Law, reverse the Dred Scott decision, and give us the rights of citizenship in the free states, and break up the internal slave trade between the slave states, then, and not until then, you may expect us to be silent. But just so long as the enemies of the colored men’s rights are to be found skulking behind the pillars of the church, and seeking security in the strong arm of the law, we can never remain silent.”

As most of us know, it took the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution to overturn the Dred Scott decision as it pertained to Black citizenship and civil rights.

Regarding the importance and long-lasting impact of that decision—it is very evident that too many people and officials in America still believe in Taney’s ruling and put it into practice whenever they can—a coalition of reparations activists in Southern California met and concluded that Justice Taney’s ruling, particularly that part regarding ‘no rights the Colored man has that Whites are bound to respect,’ needed to be part of a national reparations demand day. The group decided it could not be silent.

The national reparations movement is currently moribund and needs a solid jolt of energy and inspiration. The local mobilization now calling itself the National Reparations Day Committee-Day of Demand, is scheduled to participate in this year’s Juneteenth Day celebrations in Leimert Park next week, June 16-19. There they will announce the coming of the new national reparations demand day, March 6, 2013, in memory of the Taney Court’s publication of the ruling on March 6, 1857.

This is a very important topic and a significant positive effort forged out of the negativity of a nasty past. We urge you to attend and participate in the Juneteenth festivities this year, and besides the red soda water, the ribs and the watermelon, let’s focus on A Day of Demand-A National Reparations Day.

Like Douglass said, ‘power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.’ It’s time not to be silent; it’s time for a national reparations