# **Slavery in St. Louis: Short Biographies**

## **William Wells Brown (1814-1884), 70 years old**

William Wells Brown was born in Kentucky but spent most of his early years living in St. Louis. He worked on steamboats that traveled on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Most of the time he worked as a waiter and made sure that passengers had food, drinks, and other supplies to make the trip enjoyable.

Brown suffered abuse while enslaved and he later said slavery in St. Louis was horrible. He decided to run away but was captured. On his third try, Brown successfully ran away to Ohio. He learned how to read and write and decided to write a book about his life in slavery. Brown became famous and even lived in London for a while. He spoke about the evils of slavery to large audiences and became the first African American to write a play.

## **Lucy Delaney (1830-around 1891), 61 years old**

Lucy Delaney was born and raised in St. Louis. When she was 14 years old, her mother filed a lawsuit at the St. Louis courthouse. She claimed that she had been unlawfully enslaved in Illinois, a free state. Edward Bates, a lawyer who later worked with President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, represented Lucy’s mother during the trial. The court determined that Lucy and her family should have their freedom.

Lucy was a devoted Christian and an active member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in St. Louis. She also worked to provide support to African American veterans who served in the United States military during the American Civil War. In 1891, Lucy wrote a book about her mother’s “freedom suit” and what life was like for African Americans in St. Louis. It is the only book written by someone who participated in a freedom suit in St. Louis.

## **Mary Meachum (1801-1869), 68 years old**

Mary Meachum was born and raised in Kentucky, but she moved with her enslaver to St. Louis when she was a teenager. Although enslaved people could not legally marry in Missouri, Mary met her future husband, John Berry Meachum, and they had a wedding that was attended by other enslaved family members and friends. John Meachum then used some money he had made as a carpenter to purchase Mary’s freedom.

Mary and John Meachum were conductors on the Underground Railroad in St. Louis and helped enslaved runaways get to Illinois. Sometimes they used their own money to purchase enslaved people and free them. Mary and John eventually bought their own steamboat and used it to teach African Americans (both free and enslaved) how to read and write in the 1840s and 1850s. Today there is a park in North St. Louis named after Mary Meachum.

## **Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907), 89 years old**

Elizabeth Keckley was born and raised in Virginia and lived in North Carolina before moving with her enslaver to St. Louis when she was almost 30 years old. She learned how to sew and became a talented dressmaker. While living in St. Louis she became well-known for her dressmaking. Wealthy white and free black residents paid lots of money for her dresses, and eventually Elizabeth was able to purchase her freedom.

Elizabeth moved to Washington, D.C. when the American Civil War broke out. She eventually met Mary Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln’s wife. Mrs. Lincoln hired Elizabeth to be her dressmaker while living at the White House. Elizabeth also raised money to help other African Americans living in Washington, D.C. A few years after President Lincoln died, Elizabeth wrote a book about her life journey and her relationship with the Lincolns.

## **Dred Scott (1799-1858), 59 years old**

Dred Scott was born and raised in Virginia but moved to St. Louis with his enslaver when he was 30 years old. He did all sorts of work, including farming, cooking, and cleaning house. Although enslaved people could not have legal marriages, he met a woman named Harriet. They married and raised two daughters. Dred’s enslaver worked for the U.S. Army and moved around a lot. In addition to living in St. Louis, the Scott family also lived in Illinois and Wisconsin Territory.

Dred and Harriet thought they should have their freedom because slavery was banned in Illinois and Wisconsin. They filed a lawsuit at the St. Louis courthouse and won their case, but Dred’s enslaver protested and wanted to have another court hear the case. In 1857 the case went to the Supreme Court, the highest court in the United States. The Supreme Court said that the Scotts could not have their freedom and that Black Americans could not be U.S. citizens. Although they lost their case, Dred and Harriet Scott are considered heroes today for their fight against slavery.

## **James Milton Turner (1840-1915), 75 years old**

James Milton Turner was born and raised in St. Louis. As a boy he was sold at the St. Louis Courthouse for $50. However, James’ father was very good at caring for horses and eventually earned enough money to buy his family’s freedom. James then learned to read and write and briefly attended Oberlin college in Ohio.

During the American Civil War, James worked to promote Black education in Missouri. He also worked with other Black leaders to establish Lincoln University, which remains the only Historically Black College or University in Missouri today. When Ulysses S. Grant became president, he appointed James to serve as a Minister to Liberia, which is in West Africa. While living in Liberia, James tried to help the Liberian people and promote good relations between the two countries.