

Five Milestone Documents in Black American History

Before February ends, take time to reflect on these watershed moments

February 26, 2008 (Dallas): Black History Month is often a time for reflection on the contributions of individuals. But according to Paul Finkelman, legal historian and editor in chief of *Milestone Documents in American History* (Schlager Group, 2008), if Americans want to truly feel the impact of African American history, they should study its written artifacts. He says that reviewing the documents at the center of watershed events, with their unfiltered perspective, delivers the immediacy of the moment.

So, before the month closes, here's a starting point: Finkelman has named five essential documents that show the pace of civil rights over the course of 100 pivotal years—a century of heartbreaks and victories.

1. ***Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857)***—The Court's most important decision ever issued on slavery. The Missouri slave Dred Scott claimed freedom when his master took him to what was then the Wisconsin Territory, where slavery had been abolished. In a 50-page opinion, Chief Justice Roger Taney held that Scott was still a slave and declared that blacks were "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Taney's decision infuriated northerners and helped lead to the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860.
2. ***Emancipation Proclamation (1862)***—Undeniably a tool used by Lincoln to vanquish the South, the proclamation freed slaves in Confederate states but not those in the Union. Nevertheless, it inspired some 200,000 black soldiers and sailors to enlist in the Union army and navy—a significant surge in manpower for the North.
3. ***Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)***—A result of Plessy's arrest for refusing to sit in a train car assigned for "colored" people, this case is one of the most repudiated the Supreme Court has ever decided. It greased the wheels for segregation and Jim Crow laws by establishing the doctrine of "separate but equal."
4. ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)***—This landmark case declared that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and marked the beginning of the end of the Supreme Court's sanctions of state-sponsored segregation. The first decision authored by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the case revealed the new, more activist role that the Court would take in protecting civil rights under his leadership.
5. **Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech (1963)**—King was the final speaker at the massive March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Speaking in front of the Lincoln Memorial, King departed from his prepared text to deliver his most memorable words—"I have a dream"—and shared his vision of a country free of racial hatred. Eclipsing the remarks of all other speakers that day, the speech is among the most quoted American public addresses.

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To read the full texts of these landmarks of African American history, visit www.schlagergroup.com.

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