

Lives of Free Blacks in Staunton and Augusta County

Free blacks in Staunton and Augusta County lived very restricted lives up until 1865 when the Civil War finally brought changes to the laws of Virginia. First of all, free blacks were discouraged from buying land and farming. They were employed as laborers at other farms, businesses, and factories, restricted to manual labor occupations.

Initially, blacks brought as slaves to the colony of Virginia were allowed to own land, run businesses, vote, and live as other settlers when they became free. Some even purchased slaves. The political atmosphere soon changed, however, and the General Assembly began to restrict and control the lives of free blacks whom they feared would cause the slaves to rise up in rebellion. In 1667, slaves who converted to Christianity and were baptized had to remain slaves. Free black men and women were taxed in 1668. In 1691, interracial marriage was outlawed and recently freed slaves were ordered out of the colony or risk re-enslavement. By 1723, no free black or mulattoes were allowed to vote. They had to carry certificates of freedom when they traveled. The government made it difficult to set slaves free, even through wills. Free blacks couldn't attend church or marry at the courthouse. Unlike whites, they had to register each year. No schools for blacks existed.

During the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, free blacks were recruited because of a man shortage, even drafted into service in some counties. They received land bounties and pensions after the wars and soon went west where they could live as whites. Others, such as William Cousins of Staunton, remained and bought a city lot in Staunton.

In Staunton and Augusta County, Virginia, free blacks were marginalized and kept in poverty by the various laws that controlled their lives. They were made aware of their status in society, below even the slaves. In 1860, there were 172 free blacks living in Augusta County. Only ten owned property. Most were laborers and domestic servants.

One exception to this was Robert Campbell who was born free in 1794. He is first listed on the Free Black Registry in 1814 when he presented a certificate from the Clerk of the Hustings Court in Fredericksburg. "Uncle Bob" was