

Life of Free Blacks in Staunton and Augusta County, Virginia before the Civil War

Blacks initially brought from Africa to the colony of Virginia were allowed to earn their freedom. Once free, they bought land, ran businesses, voted, and lived like other settlers, even buying slaves of their own to help with their plantations. After the Nat Turner Rebellion, however, the political atmosphere changed. The General Assembly began to restrict and control the lives of free blacks whom they saw as a threat to the colony and a source of discontentment among the slaves.

As early as 1667, the General Assembly ordered slaves who converted to Christianity and were baptized had to remain slaves. Religion could not change their social status. Taxation of free blacks, both men and women, began in 1668. By 1691, interracial marriage was outlawed and all recently freed blacks had to leave Virginia or face re-enslavement. The rights of free blacks to vote was taken away in 1723. They could not travel without papers identifying their status, marry at the court house., or attend church with whites. To keep track of the free black population, they were ordered to register each year at the courthouse where their physical characteristics, age, scars, and circumstances that allowed them to be free were recorded. Few could read or write because no black schools existed.

During the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, free blacks and mulattoes were recruited and drafted due to a troop shortage. They received land bounties and pensions like their white counterparts. Using these advantages, many free blacks and mulattoes moved to Kentucky and Ohio, leaving their racial status behind.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, free blacks were forced into occupations that required manual labor. They worked as laborers on farms, in factories, in mills, or served as domestic servants. Barber and shoemaker were two acceptable occupations free blacks could take up without opposition. In 1860, there were 172 free blacks living in Augusta County. Only ten owned property.

Two successful free blacks before the Civil War were William Cousins and Robert Campbell. William Cousins, born 1773, was discharged from the militia Of Virginia October 1794. In 1808 he bought a lot of land in Staunton for eighteen pounds.

Robert Campbell, "Uncle Bob" was a free black born in Spotsylvania County in 1794. He is first listed in the *Free Black Registry* in 1814 in Staunton when he presented a certificate from the Clerk of Gusting Court in Fredericksburg. As a young man, he was served as a servant to British officer John Stannard during the War of 1812. After the war, he and his family moved to Staunton where he bought several house lots and opened a barber shop on the corner of Beverly and New Streets. His business was so successful that by the 1850 census, he was worth \$10,000 in real estate and \$9,000 in personal property. He eventually owned five buildings downtown. Robert was not optimistic for his sons whom he sent to Philadelphia for education. All of his sons remained in the barber business with the exception of James. He did not return to Staunton after the Civil War started.

Robert Campbell died in 1860 and had a short obituary in the *Staunton Spectator*. Sons Lewis, William, and Charles carried on the family business. Overall, however, most free blacks before the Civil War lived in poverty and fear of re-enslavement. Their social status and worth was considered beneath those of slaves. Free blacks faced harsher penalties from the law, were conscripted to work for the Confederate Army, and were regarded as non-citizens. When the war finally started, many loaded their wagons and fled to West Virginia to begin new lives in the north.

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