

# Digital History

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## **Increasing Restrictions on African Americans** **Digital History ID 162**

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### **Annotation:**

The antebellum period, which witnessed the extension of the right to vote and hold public office to all white men, was also a period when free blacks faced increasing restrictions on their freedom.

After the Revolution, slaveowners had freed thousands of slaves, while other slaves freed themselves by fleeing to freedom in the midst of wartime disruption. In Louisiana, a large free black creole population had emerged under French rule, and in South Carolina a much smaller creole population had arrived from Barbados. The number of free blacks in the Deep South increased rapidly with the arrival of thousands of light colored mulattoes from Haiti.

Free blacks varied profoundly in status. Most lived in poverty, but in a few cities such as New Orleans, Charleston, and Baltimore, some worked as skilled carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, and millwrights. In the lower South, a few free blacks achieved high occupational status and actually bought slaves. One of the wealthiest was William Ellison, the son of a slave mother and a white planter. Ellison learned how to make cotton gins and at the age of 26 bought his freedom with his overtime earnings. At the time of his death he owned 63 slaves worth more than a \$100,000. In the South, free people of color occupied an uneasy middle ground between the dominant whites and the mass of slaves. Some distanced themselves from blacks who remained in slavery; other identified with slaves and took the lead establishing separate black churches.

Although free blacks comprised no more than 3.8 percent of the population of any northern state, they faced mounting legal, economic, and social discrimination. They were denied the right to serve on juries or testify against whites. They were prohibited from marrying whites, were relegated to segregated jails, cemeteries, asylums, and schools. All but four New England states denied them the right to vote. By the 1830s, they began to suffer heightened competition from white immigrants in the skilled trades and even in such traditional occupations such as domestic service.

Whether African Americans were legally citizens of the United States was a controversial issue in the decades before the Civil War. The following document, issued by the state of Massachusetts, formally recognizes the citizenship rights of John Harris, a free black, who currently lived in the city of Salem, and as a black sailor faced the danger of being imprisoned if his ship landed in South Carolina, where, following the exposure of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, all free blacks were seen as a threat to public security.

**Document:**

...John Harris...is a Citizen of the United States of America, born in the City of Alexandria State of Virginia, that he is a free colored man, now residing in said Salem and never has been under allegiance to any foreign Prince or States. He is five feet six inches high, thirty two years of age, black complexioned.... And I do hereby Certify, that the Act of the Congress of the United States, "for the relief and protection of American Seamen" not having made provision for Persons of Colour to obtain Certificates of Citizenship at the Custom Houses; this is granted to show that the said John Harris is a Citizen of the United States of America, and ought to be respected accordingly, in his Person and Property, at all times by Sea and Land in the Prosecution of his lawful concerns.

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