

# Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom (Carter G. Woodson Institute Series in Black Studies)

Tommy L. Bogger

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Very few studies of free blacks have attempted to interpret the actions and events affecting them from their own perspectives. At the same time, the search for understanding the antebellum black experience in the South usually has centered on slaves. In Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860, Tommy L. Bogger portrays lives somewhere between slavery and freedom.

A free black community of skilled artisans and semi-skilled laborers emerged in Norfolk around 1800. Some free blacks earned the respect of leading white businessmen, and many enjoyed easy access to credit and steady employment. They showed no hesitation in suing recalcitrant debtors -- black or white -- and until 1805 they could count on the cooperation of court officials in helping them to collect. But from then on. free blacks experienced a steady decline in status that continued throughout the antebellum period. Legal restraints were placed on them at the same time that Norfolk's economy stagnated. and white immigrants arriving in the 1830s entered fields once monopolized by blacks. By the 1850s the free black community was sunk in hopelessness and despair.

Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860 discusses the active roles that blacks played in creating their community, contradicting prevalent images of free blacks at the mercy of whites. While previous studies of Virginia's free blacks have focused on Richmond or Petersburg, developments in Norfolk's free black community also merit analysis. Norfolk also offers the advantage of a population large enough to provide a reliable data base yet small enough to preserve the stories of individual lives. Those interested in African-American history, Virginia history, orthe South in general will find this book a valuable new resource.



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