

Taylor, Marquis. "Contested Freedom: Free Persons of Color in Savannah, GA, 1823-1842."
Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation 1, no. 2 (2020): 22-25.
<https://doi.org/10.12921/0d5c-y839>.

Contested Freedom: Free Persons of Color in Savannah, GA, 1823-1842

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

Article Authors

Marquis Taylor, Northwestern University

Dataset Creators

Marquis Taylor, Northwestern University

Contributors

Eric Hagerman, Web Designer

Description

The "Contested Freedom" dataset is compiled entirely of information for free persons of color who resided in the city of Savannah, Georgia, registered between 1823 and 1842. The dataset contains 1,321 named individuals residing in Chatham County.

In 1818 the Georgia state legislature enacted a law with the mandate for all free persons of color to register themselves with the clerk of the Inferior Court each year before March 1. Free people of color in Savannah performed this duty every year until 1864, when Union troops seized the city during the United States Civil War. In instances when Savannah's free persons of color failed to register, they were fined and risked re-enslavement.

Savannah's free Black population was made up of previously enslaved people who were manumitted by their owners, Black children born to free mothers, and emigrés from St. Domingue who fled to Savannah directly after the Haitian Revolution. Members of this community occupied a low status in antebellum Savannah. In 1842, the Georgia Legislature rendered, "Free persons of color have never been recognized here as citizens. . . . They have always been considered in a state of pupilage, and have been regarded as our wards."¹ The lack of citizenship denied to people deemed free had a substantive impact on their political, economic, and social lives.

This population of free people of color within the city of Savannah was relatively small. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, there were 112 recorded free people of color living within the city limits. By the start of the Civil War, the number of free people of color had risen to about 705, still only three percent of the Black population in Savannah.²

This dataset, extracted from the "Savannah, Georgia, Registers of Free People of Color, 1817-1864," includes the years 1823-1829 and 1833, 1835, and 1842. The information includes: names, age, current residence, occupation(s), and guardian(s), and, in some instances, property (or lack thereof), number of slaves owned, and parentage. Although the original source material does not record information about place of birth or the names of former masters, this dataset provides insight into the lives of free persons of color of a large Atlantic port city, their communities, family structures, and forms of labor, among other things.

Dates of Data Collection

2019

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Savannah, GA

Temporal Coverage

1823-1842

Documents Types

Census or Register

¹ *Cooper and Worsham v. Savannah*, 4 Ga. 68 (1848).

² Janice L. Sumler-Edmond, "Free Black Life in Savannah," in *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, ed. Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 130.

Sources

Savannah, Georgia, Registers of Free Persons of Color. 5600CL-130 (mf). Microfilm, 3 rolls. City of Savannah, Research Library & Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Methodology

The information for this dataset was transcribed from the register "Savannah, Georgia, Registers of Free People of Color, 1817-1864." This register was collected by the city of Savannah throughout the antebellum era and right before the close of the Civil War. The information was collected and maintained by the Clerk of Council. This initial set of data comes from Volume 1, containing information primarily from years 1823-1829 and 1835, with very limited entries for years 1833 and 1842. The entries captured in this particular dataset reflect the years as they appear in the county ledger.

Although the dataset does not include unique identifiers suitable for disambiguation, it is clear that the original source material includes multiple entries for the same person, as free people of color in Savannah were required, by law, to register themselves with the Clerk of Council each year. This allows researchers to identify trends over time, which will stimulate thoughtful discussion and research concerning this integral community in antebellum Savannah.

All information in each entry comes directly from the county ledger, which was transcribed verbatim. The columns replicate information presented on those ledgers.

Date of Publication

2020

Use Permissions

[CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International

Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DRJEF1>

Linked Data Representation: *Enslaved.org* [Summary Visualization](#)

Acknowledgments

Mellon-Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Howard University

Ancestry.com

Georgia Archives Virtual Vault

Cite this Article

Taylor, Marquis. "Contested Freedom: Free Persons of Color in Savannah, GA, 1823-1842."
Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation 1, no. 2 (2020): 22-25.

<https://doi.org/10.12921/0d5c-y839>.

Copyright

© 2020 Marquis Taylor. This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction provided the original creator and source are credited and transformations are released on the same license. See

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.