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'Free' absolutely means 'free from any sorts constraints or controls. The context determines its different denotations, if any, as in 'free press', 'fee speech', 'free stuff' etc. Free (adj.) Old English free "free, exempt from, not in bondage, acting of one's own will," also "noble; joyful," from Proto-Germanic *frija- "beloved; not in bondage" (source also of Old Frisian frii, Old Saxon vri, Old High German vri, German frei, Dutch vrij, Gothic freis "free", from PIE *friya- "dear, beloved," from root *fri- "to love" (source also of Sanskrit priyah "own, dear, beloved," priyate "loves;" Old Church Slavonic prijati "to help," prijatelj "friend;" Welsh rhydd "free"). Meaning "clear of obstruction" is from mid-13c.; sense of "unrestrained in movement" is from c. 1300; of animals, "loose, at liberty, wild," late 14c. Meaning "liberal, not parsimonious" is from c. 1300. Sense of "characterized by liberty of action or expression" is from 1630s; of art, etc., "not holding strictly to rule or form," from 1813. Of nations, "not subject to foreign rule or to despotism," recorded in English from late 14c. (Free world "non-communist nations" attested from 1950 on notion of "based on principles of civil liberty.") Sense of "given without cost" is 1580s, from notion of "free of cost." The expression "free, white, and twenty-one" goes back at least a bit farther than 1854, when the first through third editions of Alone (Richmond, Virginia; 1854), by Marion Harland (pen name of Mary Virginia Terhune) seem to have been published. That occurrence is the earliest instance of the expression mentioned in FumbleFingers's answer.The practical sense of the expression is evident in the following longer wording, which embeds the gist of the expression. From "An Act to Amend the Acts Relating to the Town of Georgetown," in Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky: Passed at the Session Which Was Begun and Held in the City of Frankfort, on Saturday the 31st of December, 1853, and Ended Friday the 10th of March, 1854 (1854):Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, That section fourth an act to amend and reduce into one the several acts in relation to the town of Georgetown, approved March 1st, 1847, be so amended as to read as follows to-wit: That said Chairman and Trustees shall be elected annually, on the first Saturday in January, by the free white inhabitants of said town over the age of twenty one years, who shall have been bona fide residents of said town for six months next preceding the election, and who shall have paid their poll tax to said town chargeable to them for the year next preceding the election at which they claim to vote; also by the free white male inhabitants of Scott county, over the age of twenty one years, who shall be owners of real property lying within the limits of said town. ... Approved March 1, 1854.The language in this act regarding "free white male inhabitants of said town" and "of Scott county" was the same in section 4 of the 1847 act; the amended language of 1854 simply added the requirement about paying a poll tax. In fact, the wording "free white male inhabitants over the age of twenty one years" appears multiple times in the 1847 Kentucky statutes.Much earlier, the same prerequisites are mentioned in "South Carolina" in A System of Geography; or, A Descriptive, Historical, and Philosophical View of the Several Quarters of the World (Glasgow, 1805).In South Carolina, as in other American States, the legislative power is vested in a general assembly, consisting of a senate and a house of representatives. The number of senators is 35; that of representatives 124. The representatives are chosen biennially. To be qualified for this office, a person must be a free white man, 21 years of age; must have been an inhabitant of the state three years, and, if he reside in the district for which he is chosen, he must have a freehold clear of debt to the amount of 150 sterling. ... To be entitled to the privilege of voting for members of the legislative body, a person must be a free white man, 21 years of age, must have been an inhabitant of the state two years, and must have been, for six months preceding the election, possessed of a freehold of 50 acres of land, or a lot in a town.The earliest instance of the exact expression "free, white and twenty-one" that I have found is from "The Right Key," an article originally printed in the Fredericksburg [Virginia] Recorder (September 3, 1845), reprinted in Niles' National Register (Baltimore, Maryland; September 13, 1845).Our appeal is to the people! We are satisfied that editors may impurture the legislature till the crack of doom, without one particle of effect. The experiment has been tried frequently and ardently, but yet the humiliating truth will still stare us in the face that 58,000 of our people'free, white and 21,cannot write their name, or read it when in print! Will the legislature try to remedy this monstrous evil? No; not until each member is made to feel that his official existence depends upon his action on this subject.The fact that wording "free, white and 21" appears in quotation marks suggests that the writer was invoking a formulation that was already (in 1845) a familiar phrasepresumably one used to identify the prerequisites for having come of age and entered into the full rights of citizenship in Virginia at that time.The wording "free, white and 21 years of age" also appears in A Conservative, "Thoughts on the Virginia Convention," in The Jefferson Monument Magazine (Charlottesville, Virginia; November 1850).The next great change which is proposed [for the Virginia state constitution], is to have universal suffrage. If it does occur, we will have universal degradation with it. Under the present system, Free-holders, House-keepers and Lease-holders are voters, whose property may be as little as \$25 or a house 12 feet square. Now we confidently assert that any man who is incapable of obtaining a vote under these conditions, is unworthy of it. If he does not possess that much mental, moral and physical energy, his vote would degrade the candidate, the office, and, if possible, himself. He is unworthy the title of citizen, and should not participate in the government. Suppose, for an instance, that we gave every man who was free, white and 21 years of age, a right to vote--what would be the result? The suffrages of the idle, indolent and ignorant would be as valuable, and in many cases contract those of industrious, active, and learned.From "Free Speech in Virginia" in the Norfolk[Virginia] Herald (circa November 1859) reprinted in Anti-Slavery Tracts, series 2, numbers 114 (1860):The other [instance of a person committing the "indictable offence, punishable by fine and imprisonment, to give utterance to Abolition language and sentiments" in the state of Virginia] was that of a resident of Ferry Point, opposite the city, John Fletcher by name, who came from Washington City some five years ago. On Tuesday last, in the grocery store of his neighbor, Mr. James P. Jones, in the presence of ten credible witnesses, while in conversation about the Harper's Ferry affair, he avowed himself an Abolitionist, and asserted that there were many in Norfolk and Portsmouth, but that they were afraid to say so; but he was free, white and twenty-one, and had no hesitation in declaring that if he had five thousand dollars, he would give one-half of it for the release or rescue of John Brown."And from "Communicated,," in the Alexandria [Virginia] Gazette (February 9, 1860):At a meeting of several citizens of Alexandria, held on the 8th instant, composed of men, "free, white, and 21," of sufficient intelligence to know their legal privileges, and duties of citizens, and of sufficient dependence to maintain them, and not dependent, in any way, upon the present Administration, or professing to be its apologists or supporters, it was unanimously resolved, "That Nevertheless, the expression appears in some early contexts in which voter qualifications are clearly not the intended implication. From The Undercurrent, serialized in Scott's Monthly Magazine (Atlanta, Georgia; November 1868):The morning lessons of the children are done, their books are ranged neatly on the opposite shelves, they dismissed for their daily walk with the nurse, and Lina is employing the moments of their absence in jottings in her journal. We will look over her shoulder and read as she writes:'Today I complete my twenty-first year.'Free, white and twenty-oneMy woman's life scarce begun.'Yet how old and worn I am beginning to feel beneath the pressure of these daily cares, trials and disappointments.Revisiting the wording in Alone (1854), we see that "free, white and twenty-one" is again being "sung" by a female character:'Never fear," said Emma [to Ida]. "Your Richmond party could consume it [all of the food being prepared] in a week. How many are there?" "Let me see! Arthur, Carry, and my petthreeMr. and Mrs. Dana, three children, and Charleyine. They will be here to-morrow nightEllen, Morris, Monday or Tuesday. I have invited Anna Talbot and Josephine,but do not expect them. Then for Tuesday eveningfrom the neighbourhoodDr. Hall and lady, and a friend, who shall be nameless," pinching Emma's cheek"the Strattons, Kingtons, Frenches, and oh! I gave Charley a carte-blanche to ask any of my Richmond acquaintancesand all for what? To hear that Miss Ida Ross iss"Free, white, and twenty-one" sang Emma, cheerily.So if Emma in 1854 and Lina in 1868 are both either singing or quoting an actual song, it may be that "Free, white, and twenty-one" are lyrics from it. AssessmentIn the antebellum U.S. South, the privileges associated with being "free, white, and twenty-one"and male and a property owner, and (if applicable) a poll tax payerwere widely understood to represent a legal statuthat of a person who possessed full citizenship: the rights to vote, to hold (some) political offices, to serve on juries, to enter into binding contracts, to marry without parental permission, to serve in a militia or other military organization. The formulation seems to have been common enough to support its adoption as a diplomatic equivalent of "independent" full rights as a citizen."Fanny Whiting, Modern Proverbs and Proverbal Sayings (1989) cites instances of "free, white and twenty-one" as a proverbial phrase going back to 1932, in Cecil Gregg, The Body Behind the Bar: A Tale of Inspector Higgins. "She's free, white, and twenty-one." (Oddly enough, Gregg was a British writer, and this mystery novel was published in London.) 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