



# Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South

*Michael P. Johnson, James L. Roark*

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"A remarkably fine work of creative scholarship." —C. Vann Woodward, *New York Review of Books*

In 1860, when four million African Americans were enslaved, a quarter-million others, including William Ellison, were "free people of color." But Ellison was remarkable. Born a slave, his experience spans the history of the South from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis. In a day when most Americans, black and white, worked the soil, barely scraping together a living, Ellison was a cotton-gin maker—a master craftsman. When nearly all free blacks were destitute, Ellison was wealthy and well-established. He owned a large plantation and more slaves than all but the richest white planters.

While Ellison was exceptional in many respects, the story of his life sheds light on the collective experience of African Americans in the antebellum South to whom he remained bound by race. His family history emphasizes the fine line separating freedom from slavery.

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