

Status without rights: African Americans and the tangled history of law and governance in the nineteenth-century US South.

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Status without Rights: African Americans and the Tangled History of Law and Governance in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. South FREE

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DURING THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION, black southerners regularly made claims through formal legal channels. The documentary record—which is voluminous at the federal, state, and local levels—has inspired a new generation of scholarship that explores how former slaves used the legal system to express and pursue their goals as free people.¹ Generally, historians place African Americans' actions against the backdrop of the era's dramatic legal changes—the abolition of slavery, the extension of civil and political rights with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, and the democratization of southern state governments. Few of us, however, have stopped to consider why African Americans thought to make their claims in legal forums in the first place. Yet the fact that African Americans *could* use the legal system does not explain why they *did*. Why law? In...

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