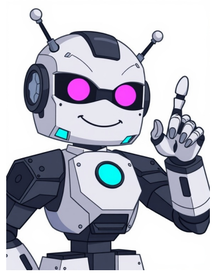
I'm not a bot



I don't have a definitive answer to this question. But I want to point out a couple of things that surprised me when I looked into possible differences between "free of" and "free from." First, I ran an Ngram Viewer search across the years 1800 to 2007, of four phrases: "are free of," "are free from," "is free of," and "is free from." Since these are all fairly common phrases today, I wanted to see whether they had always been so, and whether any change in the relative frequency of "is/are free of" and "is/are free from" had occurred. As the following Ngram graph shows, there has been a significant rise in frequency of the two "free of" phrases (blue and green lines) over the past 100 years, and that increase seems to have come largely at the expense of the two "free from" phrases" (red and yellow lines): Second (and even more surprising to me), I found more instances in the search results of sentences where "free of" sounded right to me and "free from" would have sounded wrong, than instances where "free from" sounded right and "free of" would have sounded wrong. First and most obviously, consider the phrase "free of charge": While here, Mr. Riddle ascertained that the transfer agencies of other western banks were conducted in some instances free of charge. The phrase "free of charge" (blue line) has always been vastly more common than "free from charge" (red line), as this Ngram graph shows. Other instances where "free of" sounds distinctly better to my ear than "free from" include these: It is free of the barren, sandy tracts, and great swamps, so common in the states of the south, and enjoys a richer soil and better climate than those of the north. This date will be as soon as Lake Erie is free of ice. Neither of these positions is free of serious objections. When it is free of admixture with quartz and feldspar, it forms an excellent flux for iron ores. For six inches in depth of the surface of the mounds, the soil is free of stones. The strongest instance of "free from" I found was this: They were indeed free from tyranny; but they wanted also that elegance which compensates for a thousand of the evils that luxury produces. All of the preceding examples are from the nineteenth century, when "free of" was far less common than "free from" overall. In each case, the phrase "free of" means "clear of," "untainted by," or simply "without." In contrast, "free from" suggests "liberated from" or "no longer oppressed by." The example listed above that seems to me to be least consistent with this framework is "free of ice," which usually appears in the context of geographical locations where ice is sometimes present but is absent at the time being discussed. Here, I suppose, a writer could make an argument either way: that the phrase means simply "clear of" and therefore should be "free of"; or that the phrase means "no longer fettered by" and therefore should be "free from." Both forms are still found today, though Ngram (with a smoothing factor of 3) shows "free of ice" (blue line) surpassing "free from ice" (red line) in frequency from the late 1940s onward: Applying these subtle (and perhaps idiosyncratic) distinctions to the three examples in the poster's question, I would get, first, The people were free from the barbaric dictator. if (as the sentence implies) the dictator had once ruled them but now no longer did. I would prefer The mashed potatoes were free from lumps. if the mashed potatoes were originally lumpy but had subsequently had their lumps removed; but I would choose The mashed potatoes were free of lumps. if the mashed potatoes had come straight from the food processor lump-free, say, or if they were made from instant mashed-potato powder. And finally I would choose I wish I could be free from this terrible cold. because the writer is expressing a desire to escape from the cold's dominion over his body. Here, however, I like John M. Landsberg's alternative (using "rid of") better still. (And logic aside, the wording "free of this terrible cold" seems to me to be not at all outlandish.) As I said, I'm not entirely sold on this analysis, because I think most people either use "free of" and "free from" interchangeably—except in the case of "free of charge"—or arbitrarily prefer one or the other form to express the same idea, without having any finer distinctions in mind. If so, my analysis amounts to a rule in search of actual usage—a prescription rather than a description. In any event, the impressive rise of "free of" against "free from" over the past 100 years suggests that the English-speaking world has become more receptive to using "free of" in place of "free from" during that period. Closed. This question is opinion-based. It is not currently accepting answers. Want to improve this question? Because this question may lead to opinionated discussion, debate, and answers, it has been closed. You may edit the question if you feel you can improve it so that it requires answers that include facts and citations or a detailed explanation of the proposed solution. If edited, the question will be reviewed and might be reopened. I want to make a official call and ask the other person whether he is free or not at that particular time. I think asking, “Are you free now?” does't sound formal. So, are there any alternatives to it? Bryan Garner, Garner's Modern American Usage, second edition (2003) has a typically (for him) sensible view of the subject: free; for free. Because free by itself can function as an adverb in the sense "at no cost," some critics reject the phrase for free. A phrase such as for nothing, at no cost, or a similar substitute will often work better. Yet while it's true that for free is a casualism and a severely overworked ad cliche, the expression is far too common to be called an error. Sometimes the syntax all but demands it—e.g.: "Soft-dollar arrangements ... include various services like research and information that big institutional clients receive for free from brokers." Anita Raghavan, "Pension Fund Plans to Scrap Certain Deals," Wall St[reet] J[ournal], 26 Jan. 1995, at A5. That same writer, however, omitted the for when it wasn't needed: "That research is sent free to the client." Ibid. "For free" as a way of saying "at no cost" has been circulating in speech and in the popular press for more than half a century. I first took conscious note of it in 1970, when Joni Mitchell included a song titled "For Free" on her album of that year, Ladies of the Canyon. One instance from the song: I was standing on a noisy corner/Waiting for the walking green/Across the street he stood/And he played real good/On his clarinet for free It seems not at all inconsistent to include "for free" in a song that elsewhere uses such homely phrasing as "playing real good." Mitchell was born in Alberta and grew up in Saskatchewan, but she had been living in the U.S. for three years (and California for two) by 1970, so I have no idea where she picked up the expression "for free." To gauge the use of "for free" in copyedited publications, I ran Google Books search results for word strings in which "for free" would be likely to appear only as an end phrase in a sentence or independent clause. Here is the resulting Ngram chart, for the years 1900–2005, for the strings "for free the" (blue line) "for free a" (red line), "for free can" (green line), "for free could" (yellow line), "for free would" (real line), and "for free do" (purple line): False positives in the line graphs give the erroneous impression that attested instances in the Google Books database go to the first decade of the twentieth century (if not farther). In fact, the earliest confirmed instance of "for free" in the sense of "at no cost" that I could find was this one from Starr De Belle, "Ballyhoo Bros.' Circulating Expo," in The Billboard magazine (1947): Thinking that he was an old wanderer from his gray beard, they dined him and as Lem didn't tip his duke they gave him a buck and two years subscription for the Hog Cholera Monthly for free. Before our hero could locate a hotel he was surrounded by a group of natives, who greeted him royally, offering him free room and board (pitch-'til-you-win style). Suddenly a group of local business men kidnaped him from the crowd and rushed him to the best hotel in town where he was given for free a suite of rooms. After being wined and dined Lem was rushed to the burg's best club where he learned what it was all about. Presumably, since Starr De Belle presents this item as being an epistolary effort by one "Major Privilege" of Goat's Whiskers, Kentucky, the use of "for free" reflects the author's notions of colorful but substandard hick U.S. English from what would later become known as "flyover country." In any event, the next two Google Books matches for "for free" in the relevant sense are from 1960. From a company's anti-unionizing message cited in Decisions and Orders of the National Labor Relations Board, volume 126 (1960): It has been tough enough trying to provide steady work without having to deal with a bunch of outside organizers like operate most unions. YOU can vote NO and save your money because you know that you can tell management about the things you want and they will do their best to give these things free. ... If times get a little better in the future additional benefits will be added—again for free. ... Note that, as in Garner's example from the Wall Street Journal, the author of this message chose not to use "for free" at another point in the same piece. And from Kansas Government Journal (1960): In these days of high overhead of running a private business a "free" engineering service probably would be worth just about that much to the city. The old saying, "Nothing comes for free" could never be so readily applied. In recent decades, however, use of "for free" to mean "at no cost" has skyrocketed. Search results for the period 2001–2008 alone yield hundreds of matches in all sorts of edited publications, including books from university presses. There is no denying that, seventy years ago, "for free" was not in widespread use in edited publications—and that it conveyed an informal and perhaps even unsavory tone. Such pasts are not irrelevant when you are trying to pitch your language at a certain level—and in some parts of the English-speaking world, "for free" may still strike many listeners or readers as outlandish. But in the United States the days when using "for free" marked you as a probable resident of Goat's Whiskers, Kentucky, are long gone. Update (March 8, 2023): Earlier instances of 'for free' in U.S. publications Although the earliest match for "for free" in my original answer was from the August 16, 1947 issue of The Billboard magazine, I have subsequently run more-extensive searches in Google Books and Hathi Trust and turned up multiple matches from as early as February 1943. Here is a rundown of the matches I found from 1943 and 1944. From "Supplee Gets Milked," in The Billboard (February 6, 1943): Only as recently as New Year's Eve, it is said, the band booked itself to play for the annual party of the Northeast Shrine Club, an engagement that always went to local musicians. What burned up the union is that the club charged $10 per couple for the affair, and the coast guard supplied the music for free. From "'The Adcomber' Looks at Hygeia Ads" in Hygeia (April 1943): Milk for calcium plus molasses for iron equals Brer Rabbit Milk Shake—which is another name of Youngsters' Delight! Then, too, there's good news and good nourishment in Brer Rabbit molasses cookies. . . . Yours FOR FREE—116 recipes, offered, page 288. From "An Open Letter to Congress" (an advertisement for Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe club in New York City), reproduced in Life magazine (July 26, 1943): Now that you've gone in for double talk, standing on your heads and making funny noises, high-diving into the pork barrel, and sawing the Statue of Liberty in half, we must, as rival showmen, protest. We can't stand off the three-ring circus being given for free on Capitol Hill. You boys are taking the caviar right out of our mouths. From a statement by Bert Lytell, president of Actors Equity Association, New York City, in House Ways and Means Committee, "Revenue Revision of 1943" (October 16, 1943): I am on the board of the U. S. O. camp shows and, without giving any exact figures, we have entered every zone of operations [in World War II], men and women actors, entertainers well up into the hundreds. We send them by bomber to Alaska, Hawaii, Australia; we have had them in Salamaua, Guadalcanal, and the Caribbean; and our biggest group is at the moment in London, going to the European theater of operations. Every hick show has pledged its services to the U. S. O. camp shows, to go as far away as a night's journey in any direction. Especially are we anxious to go to the ports of embarkation, where those boys go in and do not come out until they get on the transport. They are given the best that the theater has to offer, and they get it "for free." From "Tow Target" in The Rip Chord (December 25, 1943): Sgt. Ben (Spendthrift) Eisenberg is fi[n]ding things tough on furlough in Tacoma. They don't throw in meals for free at the YMCA. Rumors have it that Benny was seen mooching at the Mess Hall. From Georgia Craig, Substitute Angel (1944): "I've got another job." "For free, again?" "No, this time I'm going to be paid—but good! With room and board included," answered Arden, and described the new job. From "Treasury Defines 'Cabaret'; Juke Spots Escape; Acts Hit," in The Billboard (February 19, 1944): "A performance shall be regarded as being furnished for profit for the purpose of this section even tho the charge of admission, refreshments or merchandise is not increased by reason of furnishing of such performance." This points out clearly that operators cannot disqualify themselves from the tax bite by claiming they are throwing in the show for free, and that the patron doesn't have to be taxed for it. From "Labor Highlights," in American Federationist (July 1944): An advertising agency in Cambridge, Mass., throwing caution to the winds, comes right out and invites businessmen to send for a pamphlet which explains in detail how much money a company can spend for advertising without increasing its tax bill. Employers' advertising is today being subsidized by the taxpayers, quite a few of whom are, of course, working people. In some of this advertising, propaganda is made for "free enterprise" as narrowly and unacceptably defined by the National Association of Manufacturers. Fairly frequently these subsidized advertisements blast labor. It would be bad enough if industry were spending its own money to try to put spurious ideas in the public mind, but when industry is permitted to do it "for free," someone in a high place ought to stand up and holler. Interestingly, an otherwise verbatim reprint of this item in The Catering Industry Employees a month later (August 12, 1944) changes the key wording from "but when industry is permitted to do it 'for free'..." to "but when industry is permitted to do it for 'free enterprise'..." which of course completely changes the sense of the sentence and the point that the original author was trying to make. From "Remotes for $$ Coming Up as Free Lines Nixed," in The Billboard (August 19, 1944): Time was when radio stations fought for the rights of broadcasting quarter to half-hour late-evening shots of bands from niteries, ballrooms and hotels. ... But that may be changed in time. Stations are short of help and their time is pretty filled up anyway. They are reluctant to put on any show for free, let alone a band. The time may come when all operators, maybe even bands, will have to pay their own freight. From "D.C.'s Latest Gimmick, Inc., Is Pepper Bill on Broadcasting," in The Billboard (August 26, 1944): As the Pepper Bill is set up, it contains a proviso that permits the cutting of e. t.'s. If the bill goes thru, it is said, permission might be granted to have [elected official's] remarks extended into disks and mailed back home for free airings.One radio man said that it might also provide a way for locals with poor programing to get public service for free. On the other hand, he said, it might also prove a plague to stations tight on time who don't want to handle Congressional effusions. From "Show Time," in All Hands (December 1944): Big-time performers, or the movie studios to which they are under contract, donate their services. Those who can't afford to work for free are paid small salaries by USO-Camp Shows, Inc., which also meets personal expenses of the entertainers, from a share of the National War Fund collected annually by voluntary home-front subscriptions to support various wartime relief and welfare activities. Transportation, quarters and rations for the touring troupes are provided by the Army and Navy. Updated conclusions These matches cast a rather different light on the probable locus of early use of the expression. Although the 1947 instance of the expression cited in my original answer appears in The Billboard, I interpreted it as an attempt at faux hick talk by the reporter. But The Billboard is also the source of four of the eleven matches from 1943–1944, including the earliest one, and none of those instances show any sign of working in an unfamiliar dialect. In addition the four Billboard occurrences, three others come from the world of entertainment, one from advertising, one from military camp talk, one from organized labor, and one from a novel. The circumstantial evidence for early use of "for free" in the entertainment industry—and specifically in New York—is fairly strong, although not overwhelming. On the other hand, the possibility that it originated in a backwoods place like Goat's Whiskers, Kentucky, seems far less likely to me now than it did seven years ago. '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 freo "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 fri, Old Saxon vri, Old High German vri, German frei, Dutch vrij, Gothic freis "free"), from PIE *priy-a- "dear, beloved," from root *pri- "to love" (source also of Sanskrit priyah "own, dear, beloved," priyate "loves;" Old Church Slavonic prijati "to help," prijatelji "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." They are seems to be similar in meaning, however in a specific context Googling vote for the first. ... teaching users for free. I think free of charge(s) is more appropriate choice but I couldn't find convincing support for the idea. Are those really equivalent and what is the best for the context? Is there another alternative? 2 The idiom is less than 100 years old. The first recorded uses date back to the 1930's. There's more detail in the Wiki article The original reads There ain't no such thing as a free lunch. There are variations, including There's no free lunch in physics. The general meaning is that everything is a trade-off; you can't get anything for nothing; getting something for nothing is a fool's (impossible) dream. This applies to economics, physics, relationships - everything. A close cousin expression goes If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. Do not be discouraged. From en.wiktionary, freebie means “(informal) Something which is free; a giveaway or handout”. Thus, the item given you is a freebie; it was given to you gratis or on the house, as mentioned in previous answers, or free of charge. If you had purchased something, and another item were thrown in for free, the term lagniappe could be used. From en.wiktionary, lagniappe means “An extra or unexpected gift or benefit, such as that given to a customer when they purchase something else”. Both are correct, but swag is the earlier word, and the one I would use. It was used for promotional items in 2001. Before this new meaning, I knew it to mean the stuff a thief has stolen (often hauled in a swag bag in cartoons). From etymonline: The noun sense of "ornamental festoon" is first found 1794. Colloquial sense of "promotional material" (from recording companies, etc.) was in use by 2001; swag was English criminal's slang for "quantity of stolen property, loot" from c.1839. Earlier senses of "bulky bag" (c.1300) and "big, blustering fellow" (1580s) may represent separate borrowings from the Scandinavian source. Stuff We All Get is a later "backronym". The first schwag as promo stuff I heard was stickers and so on given out by Flickr mid last decade, as their fun variation of swag. (See also here for schwag as low grade marijuana, possibly from Yiddish.) Edit: promotional swag dates back to at least 1961, and promotional schwag to at least 2001: "Of course, one must never underestimate the influence of Wayne’s World [1988-1994] and schwing." The answers given thus far are great contributions since they raise the various ways that 'free' might be used and different antonyms for different situations. I don't know that we've come up with a precise answer to the question. An example sentence would be really useful to show what you want the opposite of. Any word that can be used and interpreted in so many ways as free needs contextual background if we are to understand what you're asking for. If I assume that you want to say the opposite of e.g. 'The popcorn is free of charge when you purchase a ticket', the opposite would be e.g. 'The popcorn comes at a cost', 'The popcorn isn't free', 'The popcorn cost $10', 'You have to pay for the popcorn' or, simply, 'The popcorn isn't free'. The statement, 'You can take your baby on the flight free of charge' would be in opposition to 'You have to pay to take your baby on a plane' or 'It's not free', or informally, 'You gotta pay for it'. To say something is not included (if, for example, popcorn weren't free of charge, even with ticket) one could say 'The popcorn is not included in the ticket price'. I'm sorry that I haven't given you one particular word as you requested but I have given some examples by which you can effectively (and nicely) state that something is not free of charge without having to use a statement like 'The product is not free of charge'. There is nothing wrong with changing your choice of words slightly to convey the same sentiment. If we become too fixated on using a particular phrase it can detract from what we finally say. So rather than searching to find a perfect antonym, make use of all the other beautiful words we have which will get your point across. The expression "free, white, and twenty-one" goes back at least a bit farther then 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 importune 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 phrase—presumably 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 counteract 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 1–14 (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 creditable 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 independence 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-one My 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 pet—three—Mr. and Mrs. Dana, three children, and Charley—nine. They will be here to-morrow night—Ellen, Morris, Monday or Tuesday. I have invited Anna Talbot and Josephine,but do not expect them. Then for Tuesday evening—from the neighbourhood—Dr. 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 acquaintances—and all for what? To hear that Miss Ida Ross is—" "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. Assessment In 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 payer—were widely understood to represent a legal status—that 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 idiomatic equivalent of "independent adult with full rights as a citizen." Bartlett Whiting, Modern Proverbs and Proverbial 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.) I couldn't find a searchable copy of this novel online to confirm the fuller context in which the expression appears. As documented elsewhere in this answer, however, the phrase appears as a sort of proverbial expression or descriptive shorthand long before 1932. A typical instance is from "A Fighting Kentuckian Meets Adventure on the Western Front," in The Literary Digest (March 16, 1918): Of the many thrilling accounts of life in the trenches under fire that have been published in the last year or two, none is more vivid and stirring to the blood than the story of the experience of a hardy son of the Blue Grass State who decided in October, 1915, that being free, white, and twenty-one, it was his manifest duty to strike a blow for democracy. So he traveled in hot haste to Canada and enlisted in the Canadian Grenadier Guards. However, the expression in something close to its later, aggressively egocentric, unbeholden-to-anyone sense appears by the early 1920s. One instance where the expression seems to be used in a strikingly pejorative way is in J.A. Dickey & E.C. Branson, "How Farm Tenants Live in Mid-State Carolina," in Home and Farm Ownership: North Carolina Club Year-Book, 1921–22 (1923): Civic Consciousness. But there are comforting signs of intelligent appreciation of the way-out in Baldwin and Williams townships. The straw ballot taken in the fifty-one tenant households shows that only seven of the ninety-nine voters were opposed to consolidated schools, only three were opposed to cooperative marketing, road bonds, or 'book farming,' only two thought college education a waste of time, and only two considered themselves free, white, and twenty-one and privileged to do as they pleased without regard to morals, law and order. And mark this—of these ninety-nine voters, seventy-two are in the habit of voting regularly. Similarly—and even earlier, is this instance from Ruthella Bibbins, Mammy 'mongst the Wild Nations of Europe (New York, 1904): Every now and then, as if to point Manny's remarks, a party of Americans sped by—some with the polished cosmopolitan manner and well-groomed suitably dressed exterior which stamps the cultivated American, the world over. Others there were, with the loud aggressive air, which the Professor says indicates: "Please note I am free, white, and twenty-one." These are they whom one is glad one doesn't know; but, as Mr. Howells says, "gladder still to know they are here, finding out how much they didn't know before." It thus appears that "free white and twenty-one" was for a considerable amount of time in the first half of the twentieth century a double-edged sword that could emphasize a (white) person's arrival at full and sober maturity or a (white) person's arrogant claim to unchecked autonomy, regardless if the effects exercising that autonomy might have on others. There is also some suggestion that the expression was associated with rustic or poorly educated people and not with sophisticated urban people. For example, from Francis Smith, Kennedy Square (New York, 1911): "But the next one [dance] is mine," exclaimed Harry suddenly, examining his own dancing-card. He had not shifted his position a hair's breadth, nor did he intend to—although he had been outwardly polite to the intruder [Willits] "Yes—they'd all be yours, Harry, if you had your way," this in a thin, dry tone"—but you mustn't forget that Miss Kate's free, white, and twenty-one, and can do as she pleases." Harry's lips straightened. He did not like Willits's manner an he was somewhat shocked at his expression; it seemed to smack more of the cabin than of the boudoir—especially the boudoir of a princess like his precious Kate. The farther "free, white, and twenty-one" got from its roots in the Southern U.S. as an encapsulation of the most-favored-citizenship status under law, the less it became about formal rights and responsibilities and the more it became simply a declaration of freedom to do as one pleased. By the time it began appearing in Hollywood movies of the 1930s, it seems to have become a nonregional catch phrase to indicate a headstrong (and sometimes reckless) belief in one's autonomy and self-sufficiency. As an aside, I note that I grew up on the edge of the Old South (in southeast Texas) in the 1960s and 1970s, and I never heard anyone use the expression "free, white, and twenty-one." (I can't say the same about certain other racially fatuous expressions such as "that's mighty white of you.") So it may be that this catch phrase was already obsolescent—at least in the U.S. South—by the end of the 1940s.