Freedmen's Bureau

The **Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands**, usually referred to as simply the **Freedmen's Bureau**,[1] was an agency of the United States Department of War to "direct such issues of provisions, clothing, and fuel, as he may deem needful for the immediate and temporary shelter and supply of destitute and suffering refugees and freedmen and their wives and children."[2]

A Bureau agent stands between armed groups of whites and freedmen in this 1868 drawing from *Harper's Weekly*.

The Freedmen's Bureau Bill, which established the Freedmen's Bureau on March 3, 1865, was initiated by U.S. President Abraham Lincoln and was intended to last for one year after the end of the Civil War.[3] The Freedmen's Bureau was an important agency of early Reconstruction, assisting freedmen in the South. The Bureau was made a part of the United States Department of War, as it was the only agency with an existing organization that could be assigned to the South. Headed by Union Army General Oliver O. Howard, the Bureau started operations in 1865. Throughout the first year, its representatives learned that these tasks would be very difficult, as Southern legislatures passed laws for Black Codes that restricted movement, conditions of labor, and other civil rights of African Americans, nearly duplicating conditions of slavery. The Freedmen's Bureau controlled a limited amount of arable land.[4]

The Bureau's powers were expanded to help African Americans find family members from whom they had become separated during the war. It arranged to teach them to read and write, considered critical by the freedmen themselves as well as the government.[5][6] Bureau agents also served as legal advocates for African Americans in both local and national courts, mostly in cases dealing with family issues.[5] The Bureau encouraged former major planters to rebuild their plantations and urged freed blacks to return to work for them, kept an eye on contracts between the newly free laborers and planters, and pushed whites and blacks to work together in a free labor market as employers and employees rather than as masters and slaves.[5]

In 1866, Congress renewed the charter for the Bureau. U.S. President Andrew Johnson, a southern Democrat who had succeeded to the office following Lincoln's assassination,[7] vetoed the bill because he believed that it encroached on states' rights, relied inappropriately on the military in peacetime, and would prevent freed slaves from becoming independent by offering too much assistance.[3][8] By 1869, the Bureau had lost most of its funding at the hands of southern Democrats and as a result was forced to cut much of its staff.[3][9] By 1870 the Bureau had been weakened further due to the rise of Ku Klux Klan violence across the South, whose members attacked both blacks and sympathetic white Republicans, including teachers.[3] Northern Democrats were against the program painting it as a program that would make African Americans "lazy".[10]

In 1872, Congress abruptly abandoned the program, refusing to approve renewal authorizing legislation. It did not inform Howard, who had been transferred to Arizona by U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant to settle hostilities between the Apache and settlers. Grant's Secretary of War William W. Belknap was hostile to Howard's leadership and authority at the Bureau. Belknap aroused controversy among Republicans by his reassignment of Howard.

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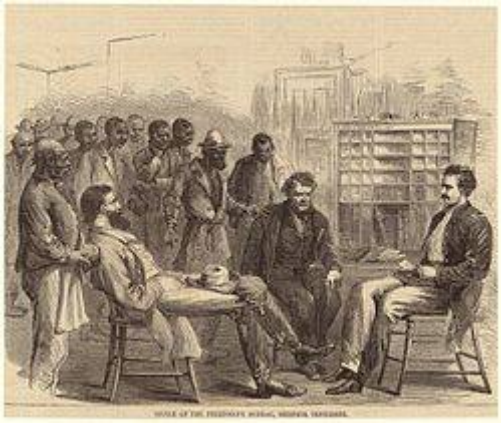
The Bureau helped solve everyday problems of the newly freed slaves, such as obtaining clothing, food, water, health care, communication with family members, and jobs. Between 1865 and 1869, it distributed 15 million rations of food to freed African Americans (as well as 5 million rations to impoverished whites),[11] and set up a system by which planters could borrow rations in order to feed freedmen they employed. Although the Bureau set aside $350,000 for this latter service, only $35,000 (10%) was borrowed by planters.



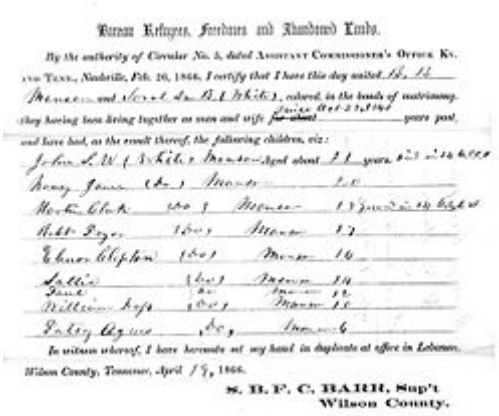
The Freedmen's Bureau office in Memphis, Tennessee, 1866.

Despite the good intentions, efforts, and limited success of the Bureau, medical treatment of the freedmen was severely deficient.[12] Most southern white doctors and nurses would not treat freedmen, infrastructure of many areas had been destroyed by the war, and people had few means of improving sanitation. Blacks had little opportunity to develop their own medical personnel. In this period, epidemics of cholera and yellow fever were carried by travelers along the river corridors, breaking out across the South and causing high fatalities, especially among the

poor.

Gender roles

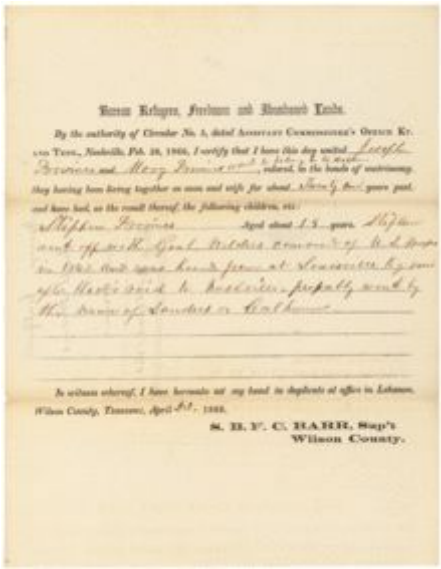
Freedman's Bureau agents initially complained that freedwomen were refusing to contract their labor. One of the first actions black families took for independence was to withdraw women's labor from fieldwork. The Bureau attempted to force freedwomen to work by insisting that their husbands sign contracts making the whole family available as field labor in the cotton industry, and by declaring that unemployed freedwomen should be treated as vagrants just as black men were.[13] The Bureau did allow some exceptions, such as married women with employed husbands, and some "worthy" women who had been widowed or abandoned and had large families of small children to care for. "Unworthy" women, meaning the unruly and prostitutes, were usually the ones subjected to punishment for vagrancy.[14]


Bureau Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands.

S. H. P. C. HARR, Sup't
Wilson County.

Marriage certificate issued by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Wilson County, Tennessee, 1866.

Under slavery, most marriages had been informal, as slaveholders refused to acknowledge slave marriages. They were not legally recognized, although planters often presided over marriage ceremonies for their slaves. After the war, the Freedmen's Bureau performed numerous marriages for freed couples who asked for it. As many husbands and wives had been separated during wartime chaos, the Bureau agents helped families in their attempts to reunite after the war. The Bureau had an informal regional communications system that allowed agents to send inquiries and provide answers. It sometimes provided transportation to reunite families. Freedmen and freedwomen turned to the Bureau for assistance in resolving issues of abandonment and divorce.


Bureau Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands.

S. H. P. C. HARR, Sup't
Wilson County.

A certificate of marriage issued by the Freedmen's Bureau

Education

The most widely recognized accomplishments of the Freedman's Bureau were in education. Prior to the Civil War, no southern state had a system of universal, state-supported public education and prohibited slaves and free blacks from gaining an education. Former slaves wanted public education while the wealthier whites opposed the idea. Freedmen had a strong desire to learn to read and write; some had already started schools at refugee camps; others worked hard to establish schools in their communities even prior to the advent of the Freedmen's Bureau.

Oliver Otis Howard was appointed as the first Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner. Through his leadership, the bureau set up four divisions: Government-Controlled Lands, Records, Financial Affairs, and Medical Affairs. Education was considered part of the Records division. Howard turned over confiscated property including planters' mansions, government buildings, books, and furniture to superintendents to be used in the education of freedmen. He provided transportation and room and board for teachers. Many Northerners came south to educate freedmen.

By 1866, northern missionary and aid societies worked in conjunction with the Freedmen's Bureau to provide education for former slaves. The American Missionary Association was particularly active, establishing eleven colleges in southern states for the education of freedmen. The primary focus of these groups was to raise funds to pay teachers and manage schools, while the secondary focus was the day-to-day operation of individual schools. After 1866, Congress appropriated some funds to operate the freedmen's schools. The main source of educational revenue for these schools came through a Congressional Act that gave the Freedmen's Bureau the power to seize Confederate property for educational use.

George Ruby, an African American, served as a teacher and school administrator and as a traveling inspector for the Bureau, observing local conditions, aiding in the establishment of black schools, and evaluating the performance of Bureau field officers. Blacks supported him, but planters and other whites opposed him.[15]

The Misses Cooke's school room, Freedman's Bureau, Richmond, Virginia, 1866.

Overall, the Bureau spent $5 million to set up schools for blacks. By the end of 1865, more than 90,000 former slaves were enrolled as students in such public schools. Attendance rates at the new schools for freedmen were between 79 and 82 percent. Brigadier General Samuel Chapman Armstrong created and led Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia in 1868. It is now known as Hampton University.

The Freedmen's Bureau published their own freedmen's textbook. They emphasized the bootstrap philosophy, encouraging freedmen to believe that each person had the ability to work hard and to do better in life. These readers included traditional literacy lessons, as well as selections on the life and works of Abraham Lincoln, excerpts from the Bible focused on forgiveness, biographies of famous African Americans with emphasis on their piety, humbleness and industry; and essays on humility, the work ethic, temperance, loving your enemies, and avoiding bitterness.[16]

By 1870, there were more than 1,000 schools for freedmen in the South.[17] J. W. Alvord, an inspector for the Bureau, wrote that the freedmen "have the natural thirst for knowledge," aspire to "power and influence … coupled with learning," and are excited by "the special study of books." Among the former slaves, both children and adults sought this new opportunity to learn. After the Bureau was abolished, some of its achievements collapsed under the weight of white violence against schools and teachers for blacks. Most Reconstruction-era legislatures had established public education but, after the 1870s, when white Democrats regained power of Southern governments, they reduced funds available to fund public education, particularly for blacks. Beginning in 1890 in Mississippi, Democratic-dominated legislatures in the South passed new state constitutions disenfranchising most blacks by creating barriers to voter registration. They then passed Jim Crow laws establishing legal segregation of public places. Segregated schools and other services for blacks were consistently underfunded by the Southern legislatures.[18]

By 1871, Northerners' interest in reconstructing the South with military power had waned. Northerners were beginning to tire of the effort that Reconstruction required, were discouraged by the high rate of continuing violence around elections, and were ready for the South to take care of itself. All of the Southern states had created new constitutions that established universal, publicly funded education. Groups based in the North began to redirect their money toward universities and colleges founded to educate African-American leaders.

Teachers

Written accounts by northern women and missionary societies resulted in historians' overestimating their influence, writing that most Bureau teachers were well-educated women from the North, motivated by religion and abolitionism to teach in the South. In the early 21st century, new research has found that half the teachers were southern whites; one-third were blacks (mostly southern), and one-sixth were northern whites.[19] Few were abolitionists; few came from New England. Men outnumbered women. The salary was the strongest motivation except for the northerners, who were typically funded by northern organizations and had a humanitarian motivation. As a group, the black cohort showed the greatest commitment to racial equality; and they were the ones most likely to remain teachers. The school curriculum resembled that of schools in the north.[20]

Colleges

The building and opening by the AMA and other missionary societies of schools of higher learning for African Americans coincided with the shift in focus for the Freedmen's Aid Societies from supporting an elementary education for all African Americans to enabling African-American leaders to gain high school and college educations. Some white officials working with African Americans in the South were concerned about what they considered the lack of a moral or financial foundation seen in the African-American community and traced that lack of foundation back to slavery.

Generally, they believed that blacks needed help to enter a free labor market and reconstruct stable family life. Heads of local American Missionary Associations sponsored various educational and religious efforts for African Americans. Later efforts for higher education were supported by such leaders as Samuel Chapman Armstrong of the Hampton Institute and Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute (from 1881). They said that black students should be able to leave home and "live in an atmosphere conducive not only to scholarship but to culture and refinement".[21]

Most of these colleges, universities and normal schools combined what they believed were the best fundamentals of a college with that of the home, giving students a basic structure to build acceptable practices of upstanding lives. For instance, at the majority of these schools, students were expected to bathe a prescribed number of times per week, maintain an orderly living space, and present a particular appearance. At many of these institutions, Christian principles and practices were also part of the daily regime.

Educational legacy

Despite the untimely dissolution of the Freedman's Bureau, its legacy influenced the important historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which were the chief institutions of higher learning for blacks in the South through the decades of segregation into the mid-20th century. Under the direction and sponsorship of the Bureau, together with the American Missionary Association in many cases, from approximately 1866 until its termination in 1872, an estimated 25 institutions of higher learning for black youth were established.[22] The leaders among them continue to operate as highly ranked institutions in the 21st century and have seen increasing enrollment.[23] (Examples of HBCUs include Howard University, St. Augustine's College, Fisk University, Johnson C. Smith University, Clark Atlanta University, Dillard University, Shaw University, Virginia Union University, and Tougaloo College).

As of 2009, there exist approximately 105 HBCUs that range in scope, size, organization, and orientation. Under the Education Act of 1965, Congress officially defined an HBCU as "an institution whose principal missions were and are the education of Black Americans". HBCUs graduate over 50% of African-American professionals, 50% of African-American public school teachers, and 70% of African-American dentists. In addition, 50% of African Americans who graduate from HBCUs pursue graduate or professional degrees. One in three degrees held by African Americans in the natural sciences, and half the degrees held by African Americans in mathematics, were earned at HBCUs.[24]

Perhaps the best known of these institutions is Howard University, founded in Washington, D.C., in 1867, with the aid of the Freedmen's Bureau. It was named for the commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, General Oliver Otis Howard.[25]

Church establishment

After the Civil War, control over existing churches was a contentious issue. The Methodist denomination had split into regional associations in the 1840s prior to the war, as had the Baptists, when Southern Baptists were founded. In some cities, Northern Methodists seized control of Southern Methodist buildings. Numerous northern denominations, including the independent black denominations of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion, sent missionaries to the South to help the freedmen and plant new congregations. By this time the independent black denominations were increasingly well organized and prepared to evangelize to the freedmen. Within a decade, the AME and AME Zion churches had gained hundreds of thousands of new members and were rapidly organizing new congregations.[26]

Even before the war, blacks had established independent Baptist congregations in some cities and towns, such as Silver Bluff and Charleston, South Carolina; and Petersburg and Richmond, Virginia. In many places, especially in more rural areas, they shared public services with whites. Often enslaved blacks met secretly to conduct their own services away from white supervision or oversight.[26] After the war, freedmen mostly withdrew from the white-dominated congregations of the Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches in order to be free of white supervision. Within a short time, they were organizing black Baptist state associations and organized a national association in the 1890s.

Northern mission societies raised funds for land, buildings, teachers' salaries, and basic necessities such as books and furniture. For years they used networks throughout their churches to raise money for freedmen's education and worship.[27]

Continuing insurgency

Most of the assistant commissioners, realizing that African Americans would not receive fair trials in the civil courts, tried to handle black cases in their own Bureau courts. Southern whites objected that this was unconstitutional. In Alabama, the Bureau commissioned state and county judges as Bureau agents. They were to try cases involving blacks with no distinctions on racial grounds. If a judge refused, the Freedmen's Bureau could institute martial law in his district. All but three judges accepted their unwanted commissions, and the governor urged compliance.[28]

An 1866 poster attacking the Freedmen's Bureau.

Perhaps the most difficult region reported by the Freedmen's Bureau was Louisiana's Caddo and Bossier parishes in the northwest part of the state. It had not suffered wartime devastation or Union occupation, but white hostility was high against the black majority population. Well-meaning Bureau agents were understaffed and weakly supported by federal troops, and found their investigations blocked and authority undermined at every turn by recalcitrant plantation owners. Murders of freedmen were common, and white suspects in these cases were not prosecuted. Bureau agents did negotiate labor contracts, build schools and hospitals, and aid freedmen, but they struggled against the violence of the oppressive environment.[29]

In addition to internal parish problems, this area was reportedly invaded by insurgents from Arkansas, described as Desperadoes by the Bureau agent in 1868.[30] In September 1868, for example, whites arrested and convicted 21 blacks accused of planning an insurrection in Bossier Parish. Henry Jones, accused of being the leader of the purported insurrection, was shot and left to burn by whites, but he survived, badly hurt. Other freedmen were killed or driven from their land by Arkansas Desperadoes.[30] Whites were anxious about their power as blacks were to receive the franchise, and tensions were rising over land use. In early October, blacks arrested two whites from Arkansas "accused of being part of a mob... that killed several Negroes." The agent reported 14 blacks had been killed in this incident, then said that another eight to ten had been killed by the same Desperadoes. Blacks were reported to have killed the two white men in the altercation.[30] The whites' Arkansas friends and local whites went on a rampage against blacks in the area, resulting in more than 150 blacks being killed.[31][30]

In March 1872, at the request of President Ulysses S. Grant and the Secretary of the Interior, Columbus Delano, General Howard was asked to temporarily leave his duties as Commissioner of the Bureau to deal with Indian affairs in the west. Upon returning from his assignment in November 1872, General Howard discovered that the Bureau and all of its activities had been officially terminated by Congress, effective as of June (Howard, 1907). While General Howard was dealing with Indian affairs in the west, the Freedmen's Bureau was steadily losing its support in Congress. President Johnson had opposed the Freedmen's Bureau and his attitude encouraged many people, especially white Southerners, to challenge the Bureau. But insurgents showed that the war had not ended, as armed whites attacked black Republicans and their sympathizers, including teachers and officeholders. Congress dismantled the Bureau in 1872 due to pressure from white Southerners. The Bureau was unable to change much of the social dynamic as whites continued to seek supremacy over blacks, frequently with violence. [32]

In his autobiography, General Howard expressed great frustration about Congress having closed down the bureau. He said, "the legislative action, however, was just what I desired, except that I would have preferred to close out my own Bureau and not have another do it for me in an unfriendly manner in my absence."[33] All documents and matters pertaining to the Freedmen's Bureau were transferred from the office of General Howard to the War Department of the United States Congress.

State effectiveness

Alabama

The Bureau began distributing rations in the summer of 1865. Drought conditions resulted in so much need that the state established its own Office of the Commissioner of the Destitute to provide additional relief. The two agencies coordinated their efforts starting in 1866. The Bureau established depots in eight major cities. Counties were allocated aid in kind each month based on the number of poor reported. The counties were required to provide transportation from the depots for the supplies. The ration was larger in winter and spring, and reduced in seasons when locally grown food was available.

In 1866, the depot at Huntsville provided five thousand rations a day. The food was distributed without regard to race. Corruption and abuse was so great that in October 1866, President Johnson ended in-kind aid in that state. One hundred twenty thousand dollars was given to the state to provide relief to the end of January 1867. Aid was ended in the state. Records show that by the end of the program, four times as many White people received aid than did Black people.[34]

Florida

The Florida Bureau was assessed to be working effectively. Thomas Ward Osborne, the assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau for Florida, was an astute politician who collaborated with the leadership of both parties in the state. He was warmly praised by observers on all sides.[35][36]

Georgia

The Bureau played a major role in Georgia politics.[37] It was especially active in setting up, monitoring, and enforcing labor contracts for both men and women.[38] It also set up a new system of healthcare for the freedmen.[39] Although a majority of the agency's relief rations went to freedpeople, a large number of whites also benefited. In Georgia, poor whites received almost one-fifth of the Bureau's rations. [40]

North Carolina

In North Carolina, the bureau employed: 9 contract surgeons, at $100 per month; 26 hospital attendants, at average pay each per month $11.25; 18 civilian employees, clerks, agents, etc., at an average pay per month of $17.20; 4 laborers, at an average pay per month of $11.90; enlisted men are detailed as orderlies, guards, etc., by commanding officers of the different military posts where officers of the Bureau are serving.[41]

Some misconduct was reported to the bureau main office that bureau agents were using their posts for personal gains. Colonel E. Whittlesey was questioned but said he was not involved in nor knew of anyone involved in such activities. The bureau exercised what whites believed were arbitrary powers: making arrests, imposing fines, and inflicting punishments. They were considered to be disregarding the local laws and especially the statute of limitations. Their activities resulted in resentment among whites toward the federal government in general. These powers invoked negative feelings in many southerners that sparked many to want the agency to leave. In their review, Steedman and Fullerton repeated their conclusion from Virginia, which was to withdraw the Bureau and turn daily operations over to the military.[42]

South Carolina

In South Carolina, the bureau employed, nine clerks, at average pay each per month $108.33, one rental agent, at monthly pay of $75.00, one clerk, at monthly pay of $50.00, one storekeeper, at monthly pay of $85.00, one counselor, at monthly pay of $125.00, one superintendent of education, at monthly pay of $150.00, one printer, at monthly pay of $100.00, one contract surgeon, at monthly pay of $100.00, twenty-five laborers, at average pay per month $19.20.

General Saxton was head of the bureau operations in South Carolina; he was reported by Steedman and Fullerton to have made so many "mistakes and blunders" that he made matters worse for the freedmen. He was replaced by Brigadier General R.K. Scott. Steedman and Fullerton described Scott as energetic and a competent officer. It appeared that he took great pains to turn things around and correct the mistakes made by his predecessors.

The investigators learned of reported murders of freedmen by a band of outlaws. These outlaws were thought to be people from other states, such as Texas, Kentucky and Tennessee, who had been part of the rebel army (Ku Klux Klan chapters were similarly started by veterans in the first years after the war.) When citizens were asked why the perpetrators had not been arrested, many answered that the Bureau, with the support of the military, had the primary authority.[42]

In certain areas, such as the Sea Islands, many freedmen were destitute. Many had tried to cultivate the land and began businesses with little to no success in the social disruption of the period.[43]

Texas

Suffering much less damage in the war than some other Deep South states, Texas became a destination for some 200,000 refugee blacks from other parts of the South, in addition to 200,000 already in Texas. Slavery had been prevalent only in East Texas, and some freedmen hoped for the chance of new types of opportunity in the lightly populated but booming state. The Bureau's political role was central, as was close attention to the need for schools.[44][45][46]

Virginia

The Freedmen's Bureau had 58 clerks and superintendents of farms, paid average monthly wages $78.50; 12 assistant superintendents, paid average monthly wages 87.00; and 163 laborers, paid average monthly wages 11.75; as personnel in the state of Virginia. Other personnel included orderlies and guards.[42]

During the war, slaves had escaped to Union lines and forts in the Tidewater, where contraband camps were established. Many stayed in that area after the war, seeking protection near the federal forts. The Bureau fed 9,000 to 10,000 blacks a month over the winter, explaining:

> "A majority of the freedmen to whom this subsistence has been furnished are undoubtedly able to earn a living if they were removed to localities where labor could be procured. The necessity for issuing rations to this class of persons results from their accumulation in large numbers in certain places where the land is unproductive and the demand for labor is limited. As long as these people remain in the present localities, the civil authorities refuse to provide for the able-bodied, and are unable to care for the helpless and destitute among them, owing to their great number and the fact that very few are residents of the counties in which they have congregated during the war. The necessity for the relief extended to these people, both able-bodied and helpless, by the Government, will continue as long as they remain in their present condition, and while rations are issued to the able-bodied they will not voluntarily change their localities to seek places where they can procure labor.'[47]

Bureau records

In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed the Freedmen's Bureau Preservation Act, which directed the National Archivist to preserve the extensive records of the Bureau on microfilm, and work with educational institutions to index the records.[48] In addition to those records of the Bureau headquarters, assistant commissioners, and superintendents of education, the National Archives now has records of the field offices, marriage records, and records of the Freedmen's Branch of the Adjutant General on microfilm. They are being digitized and made available through online databases. These constitute a major source of documentation on the operations of the Bureau, political and social conditions in the Reconstruction Era, and the genealogies of freedpeople.[49][50][a] The Freedmen's Bureau Project[52] (announced on June 19, 2015) was created as a set of partnerships between FamilySearch International and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS), and the California African American Museum. Tens of thousands of volunteers are needed to make these records searchable online. No specific time commitment is required, and anyone may participate. Volunteers simply log on (http://www.discoverfreedmen.org/), pull up as many scanned documents as they like, and enter the names and dates into the fields provided. Once published, information for millions of African Americans will be accessible, allowing families to build their family trees and connect with their ancestors. As of February 2016, the project was 51% complete.

In October 2006, Virginia governor Tim Kaine announced that Virginia would be the first state to index and digitize Freedmen's Bureau records.[53]

See also

- United States House Committee on Freedmen's Affairs
- Freedmen's Savings Bank
- Forty acres and a mule

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- see also Reconstruction: Bibliography

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Notes

a. For access and inquires about the use of the records, researchers should visit or write (e-mail) the Old Military and Civil Branch, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20408. For the location of previously filmed and future Freedmen's Bureau microfilm publications, researchers should contact the nearest regional archives or visit the NARA online microfilm catalog. By 2014, under arrangement with the National Archives, records are available online through FamilySearch [51] and Ancestry.

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   Freedmen's Bureau Bill First Veto: 1. Opposed to the use of the military during peacetime. 2. Believed the Bill was a Federal encroachment into state matters. 3. Believed this was "class legislation" for a particular segment of society that: a. Would keep the ex-slaves from being self-sustaining, and b. Had not been done previously for struggling poor whites (as he had been as an ex-apprentice). 4. Johnson did not believe that Congress should be making such decisions for states that were not represented in Congress at that point Second veto: Johnson's second objections were the same as his first.
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