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RECORDS OF THE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER FOR THE STATE OF ARKANSAS
BUREAU OF REFUGEES, FREEDMEN AND ABANDON LANDS, 1865-1869

On the 52 rolls of this microfilm publication are reproduced the records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Arkansas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-69. The records consist of 24 volumes and some unbound documents. The volumes include letters, telegrams, and endorsements sent; circulars and special orders issued; registers of letters and telegrams received; bound letters sent and received; a register of abandoned and confiscated lands in the State of Arkansas; and a station book of officers and civilians employed by the Bureau. The unbound documents consist primarily of letters and reports received. The records are part of the Records of the Bureau of Refugees' Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105.

History And Organization

The Freedmen's Bureau, as the Bureau was commonly known, was established in the War Department by an act of March 3, 1865 (13 Stat. 507), and extended twice by acts of July 16, 1866 (14 Stat. 173), and July 6, 1868 (15 Stat. 83). Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, appointed Commissioner by the President in May 1865, served in that position throughout the life of the Bureau. In January 1869, in accordance with an act of July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), its operations in the States were terminated except for educational functions and collection of claims. These activities were terminated June 30, 1872, as required by an act of June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366).

Although the Bureau was part of the War Department, its work was primarily social and economic in nature. It cooperated with benevolent societies in issuing supplies to destitute persons and in maintaining freedmen's schools; supervised labor contracts between black employees and white employers; helped black soldiers and sailors collect bounty claims, pensions, and backpay; and attended to the disposition of confiscated or abandoned lands and other property. In Arkansas, the Bureau had a difficult time in protecting freedmen from persecution, intimidation, and physical violence at the hands of whites or other freedmen.

The act of March 3, 1865, authorized the appointment of assistant commissioners to aid the Commissioner in supervising the work of the Bureau in the States. In Arkansas, operations began in May 1865 when Brig. Gen. John W. Sprague took command as Assistant Commissioner and 1 month later established headquarters at St. Louis, Mo. Bvt. Maj. Gen. Edward O. C. Ord relieved Sprague in October 1866 and was succeeded by Bvt. Maj. Gen. Charles H. Smith in March 1867.

When Sprague arrived in St. Louis, his jurisdiction encompassed areas outside Arkansas including Missouri, Indian Territory, and parts of Kansas (around Fort Leavenworth and Fort

Scott) and Illinois (around Quincy and Cairo). Commissioner Howard felt by September 1865 that the laws of Missouri afforded enough protection to freedmen for the Bureau's activities to cease there. Therefore, on October 16, 1865, Sprague received orders from Commissioner Howard to transfer headquarters from St. Louis to Little Rock, Ark., and the operations of the Bureau were withdrawn from Missouri. The headquarters remained in Little Rock until the Bureau's activities were terminated.

The organization of the Bureau's staff in Arkansas was similar to that of the Bureau's headquarters in Washington, D.C. The Assistant Commissioner's staff consisted at various times of a Superintendent of Education, an Assistant Adjutant General, a Surgeon-in-Chief, a Chief Quartermaster, a Disbursing Officer, and an Assistant Superintendent of Education. Subordinate to these officers were the general superintendents or superintendents who commanded the subdistricts. The more important subdistricts in Arkansas included those with headquarters at Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Monticello, Washington, Jacksonport, Helena, and Fort Smith. Under direct supervision of the general superintendents or superintendents were the civilian and military agents. Occasionally military officers would be retained by the Bureau in a civilian capacity after the termination of their military service. Ultimately, Bureau personnel were stationed in 24 different counties.

General Recordkeeping Practices

The correspondence of the Assistant Commissioner was handled in accordance with typical 19th-century recordkeeping practices. The letters sent are either fair or press copies. The fair copies are handwritten duplicates of the originals. They are clear and easy to read. The press copies were obtained by wetting a piece of thin paper and pressing it on the original letter through the use of a press-copying machine that caused the image to be transferred to the moistened paper. Because of the relative crudeness of this method, many of the press copies are difficult to read and some are virtually illegible. Because fair copies were not made of all the letters sent, some press copies are reproduced in this microfilm publication. Replies to incoming letters frequently were written on the letters themselves or on specially prepared wrappers. The replies, known as endorsements, were then copied into endorsement books, and the endorsed letter was returned to the sender or forwarded to another office. Endorsement books usually included a summary of the incoming letter and sometimes previous endorsements that were recorded on it. Incoming correspondence was frequently entered in the registers of letters received. In addition to a summary of the contents of the incoming letters, the registers usually included such identifying information as the name, and sometimes the office, of the writer; the date of receipt; the date of the communication; the place of origin; and the entry number assigned at the time of receipt.

The letters, telegrams, and endorsements sent; registers of letters and telegrams received; registered letters and telegrams received; and special orders, which are reproduced in this microfilm publication, are cross-referenced to each other by the use of various symbols. Letters sent (both fair and press copies) are designated "L.S.," or "L.B.," or "L.S.B.," followed by the page and sometimes by the volume number. Endorsement books are designated "E." or "E. & M." Registers of letters received are referenced as "L.R." or "L.R.B.," followed by the appropriate file number and sometimes the volume number. Special orders issued by the

Assistant Commissioner are referred to by the symbol "S.O." followed by the number of the order.

The Assistant Commissioner utilized various types of issuances to convey information to staff and subordinate officers. Circulars and circular letters related to matters of general interest, including implementation of Bureau policies throughout the State, duties of subordinate personnel, administrative procedures to be followed, relevant acts of Congress or issuances from Bureau headquarters, and the appointment or relief of staff officers. In other States, the assistant commissioners may have issued these directives as general orders. Special orders were used to communicate information of less general interest such as duty assignments of individual field officers; however, in Arkansas, many pertained to the transfer of abandoned lands to their former owners.

There are name indexes in the volumes of letters and telegrams sent, endorsements, registers of letters and telegrams received, and issuances. The indexes provide references mainly to personal names but also include a few citations to places, groups, and titles of organizations. The names in the indexes for the volumes of letters and telegrams sent, registers of letters received, and special orders are followed by black and red numbers. The black numbers refer to letters and endorsements sent in which the names are addressees and to registers of letters received in which the names are correspondents. The red numbers refer to names contained in the body of the letter or endorsement. In order to make the distinction between the red and black numbers observable on microfilm, the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) has underlined the black numbers.

The volumes of letters and telegrams sent, registers of letters and telegrams received, and special orders for 1867 are divided into two parts. The letters, telegrams, and issuances were numbered consecutively for January through March 1867 and were entitled "General Ord's Series." Beginning in April 1867, they were numbered consecutively in a second series entitled "General Smith's Series."

The volumes reproduced in this microfilm publication were originally arranged by type of record and thereunder in sequence by volume number. Originally, no numbers were assigned to series consisting of single volumes; later, all volumes were arbitrarily assigned numbers by the Adjutant General's Office of the War Department after the records passed into its custody. In this microfilm publication, the last set of numbers assigned are shown in parentheses and are used as an aid in identifying the volumes. Numbered blank pages have not been filmed.

Series Listings And Remarks

General Records

Letters and Telegrams Sent

The six volumes of letters and telegrams sent, June 1865-May 1869, are arranged in two parallel subseries and thereunder generally chronologically. Each volume contains a name index. Volume 1(14), which constitutes the first subseries, consists of fair copies of letters sent to

Commissioner Howard or his staff officers in Washington for the period 1865-69. Also in this volume are letters and telegrams to military commanders, a few to the Adjutant General of the Army, various military department commanders, neighboring Governors, and some to assistant commissioners in other States. The remaining five volumes, comprising the second subseries, contain press copies of letters and telegrams sent to subordinate officers and civilians.

Some letters, generally relating to appointments and resignations, bear the notation "Filed" followed by a number to indicate sequence. This indicated that the original letter had been endorsed back to the Assistant Commissioner from Commissioner Howard's office and then registered and filed separately. These letters have been filmed on roll 20.

In the left margin of the pages of the first volume are names of persons to whom the letters or telegrams were sent and fractional notations. In the latter, the numerator is the number of the page in the volume on which there is a preceding letter or telegram to the same person, and the denominator is the number of the page containing the next subsequent letter or telegram to the same person.

Endorsements Sent

The three volumes of endorsements sent, July 1865-April 1869, are arranged generally chronologically. Each contains a name index. In the left margin of the pages is the name of the person or title of the officer to whom the endorsement was sent.

Registers of Letters and Telegrams Received

The four volumes of registers of letters and telegrams received, June 1865-April 1869, each contain a name index. Volume 1(1) contains two parts -- the first being for June-December 1865, the second being for January-June 1866. In each part, entries are arranged alphabetically by initial letter of surname or office of correspondent and are then numbered strictly by date of receipt, beginning with "1" for each part (e.g., the first four letters received under letter "A" for June-December 1865 are numbered 15, 54, 61, and 74; the first four letters received under letter "A" for January-June 1866 are numbered 3, 19, 42, and 68).

In volumes 2(2), 3(3), and 4(4), entries are arranged generally by time period. Within volume 2(2), entries are then arranged alphabetically by initial letter of surname or office of correspondent. Numbers are consecutive by date of receipt within each alphabetical division; i.e., beginning with "1" under each alphabetical heading. In volumes 3(3) and 4(4), entries are arranged and numbered in chronological order, with separate numerical sequences for each year within each register.

Since the number of pages allotted to each alphabetical division in the first two volumes often proved insufficient, it became necessary to continue the entries elsewhere in the volume. NARS has filmed the registers in alphabetical order; therefore, some of the pages are not in the original numbered sequence.

A number of documents entered in the registers are no longer to be found among the series of registered letters and telegrams received. Often, communications were forwarded to Bureau headquarters, referred to staff or subordinate officers, or returned with endorsements to the sender. NARS has placed asterisks near the writers' names in the registers where corresponding letters and telegrams are still to be found among the registered letters and telegrams received. A single asterisk denotes letters and telegrams among the unbound subseries. A double asterisk denotes letters and telegrams bound in the three-volume subseries of letters and telegrams received from subordinate officers [vols. 1(5), 2(6), and 3(7)]. A triple asterisk denotes letters and telegrams bound in the one-volume subseries of letters and telegrams received from Commissioner Howard's office. Reports from the superintendents, agents, the Superintendent of Education, and the Surgeon-in-Chief were entered in the registers as correspondence. However, only the letter of transmittal was kept with the registered letters received; the reports were filed in separate series.

Some letters, although normally among registered letters and telegrams received, are no longer to be found filed under their original registry designation. Some were subsequently placed in consolidated files with related documents. When this occurred, Bureau clerks entered the marginal note "Filed With" together with the designation under which the document was refiled and under which it can currently be found.

Letters and Telegrams Received

The letters and telegrams received by the Assistant Commissioner are in two series: one registered, one unregistered.

The registered correspondence is arranged in three subseries. Correspondence received primarily from subordinate officers for the period May 1865-December 1866 was registered and then bound in three volumes [vols. 1(5), 2(6), and 3(7)] that are arranged generally chronologically. A name index is in volume 3(7) for the period October 22-December 31, 1866. The second subseries contains registered correspondence from Bureau headquarters in Washington for the period December 9, 1865-November 12, 1866. This correspondence was bound in volume 4(8), which is arranged generally chronologically. Before December 9, 1865, letters and telegrams from the Bureau were bound in the first volume of the previous subseries. The majority of correspondence is to be found in the third--the unbound--subseries, June 1865-April 1869. It is arranged in accordance with the order of entries in the register. For the period June 1865-December 1866, the communications in this subseries appear to consist mainly of reports or letters relating to policy or administrative matters; thereafter, communications concern daily routine matters. Many of the 1867-69 communications have another number in addition to the entry number by which they are now filed. The registers are also annotated with these additional "file numbers," but they are of no apparent significance.

The unregistered correspondence also contains three subseries. The first consists of letters and telegrams received by the Assistant Adjutant General (or in some cases the Acting Assistant Adjutant General), January 1867-April 1869. They are primarily from Commissioner Howard, his Disbursing Officer, and agents and superintendents in Arkansas, relating to such routine matters as requests for transportation orders and requests for or acknowledgments of receipt of

War Department and Bureau publications and issuances. Most of the letters and telegrams bear file numbers that do not seem to correspond with the registers of letters and telegrams received. The second subseries contains letters and telegrams sent to Bureau headquarters in Washington and returned with endorsements, December 1866-February 1869, arranged chronologically. Most of the letters and telegrams were sent to Commissioner Howard and sought approval of appointments or the revocation of appointments of agents and clerks, while some requested clarification or explanation of Bureau policy or procedure on a specific matter. The final subseries contains other unregistered letters and telegrams, February 1865-March 1869, and is arranged chronologically. Most of these letters and telegrams are dated June 1865-December 1866. A few letters and telegrams dated prior to June 1865 were addressed to the military officer serving as General Superintendent of Refugees and Freedmen, Department of Tennessee and Arkansas. He performed many of the same duties as the Assistant Commissioner when the Bureau became operative in Arkansas. NARS has prepared a name index to the last subseries of unregistered letters and telegrams; this has been filmed preceding the unregistered letters and telegrams on roll 20.

Issuances

Among the records of the Assistant Commissioner are one volume of circulars issued, three volumes of special orders, and unbound special orders, circulars, and circular letters.

The one volume (22) of circulars, June 1865-March 1869, was arranged by year and thereunder numerically. For 1865 and 1866, however, a single number sequence was used. A name index is included.

The special orders issued are in two subseries. Volume 1(19) contains fair copies and covers the period June 1865-April 1866. It is arranged by year and thereunder numerically. A name index exists for the year 1865. The second subseries [vols. 2(20) and 3(21)] consists of press copies, January 1866-December 1868, arranged by year and thereunder numerically. Name indexes exist for both volumes. The orders for January-April 1866 are duplicated in the first subseries.

The unbound special orders received, June 1865-April 1869, are arranged chronologically. They are either printed or manuscript copies of extracts of special orders issued by Bureau headquarters, the War Department, the Department of Arkansas, the Subdistrict of Arkansas, and other Army commands, relating to the assignment, transfer, relief, and discharge of officers as Bureau agents and to the transfer or muster out of Army units in Arkansas. Some relate to procedures for handling property and money. Most of the orders are dated 1865 or 1866.

The unbound circulars and circular letters received, May 1865-February 1868, are arranged chronologically. They consist of printed and manuscript copies of circulars and circular letters issued by Bureau headquarters or the Assistant Commissioner for Arkansas and his subassistant commissioners. They relate primarily to Bureau policy and procedures.

Reports of Bureau Operations in Arkansas

There are two series of unbound narrative reports of operations. Monthly and quarterly reports of operations, June 1865-May 1868, are arranged chronologically. They are retained copies of reports sent to Commissioner Howard on Bureau operations in Arkansas. They summarize activities for a given period, mention problems, and give the Assistant Commissioner's opinions concerning the relationship between freedmen and the white populace. The reports are similar in content and format to those submitted by subordinate officers and probably were compiled from them.

The operations reports from subordinate officers, June 1865-December 1868, are arranged chronologically. They usually were submitted monthly, although some quarterly reports are included. Some are reports of the number of destitute people in the subdistrict.

Records Relating to Specific Bureau Functions

Reports Relating to the Education of Freedmen

Two series of unbound reports are from the Superintendent of Education to the Assistant Commissioner. First are monthly reports from the Superintendent of Education, February 1867-April 1869, arranged chronologically. They give information about the education available to freedmen, the condition of the schools, progress of the pupils, and the attitudes of local white inhabitants toward the schools.

The second series consists of monthly statistical school reports from the Superintendent of Education, February 1866-July 1867, May 1868, and January-March 1869, arranged chronologically. They contain data about the number of pupils, teachers, and schools in the State and the attendance of students at the various schools.

Records Relating to Abandoned and Confiscated Lands

Three series of records relate to abandoned and confiscated lands and include such information as the name of the former owner; its location; the size, number, and type of buildings on it; and the name of the person or persons to whom it was leased. Also noted was the return of land to its original owner and the special order authorizing such return. The Assistant Commissioner's monthly reports of abandoned and confiscated lands, September 1865-December 1868, are arranged chronologically. These unbound reports were consolidated from the reports of subordinate officers and agents. The unbound monthly and quarterly reports of abandoned and confiscated lands from subordinate officers, August 1865-September 1868, were arranged by State for 1865 and thereafter alphabetically by initial letter of station of office. Volume (24) is a register of confiscated and abandoned lands in the State of Arkansas, 1856-68, and it is arranged alphabetically by county and thereunder by initial letter of surname of former owner.

Records Relating to Issuance of Rations

Five unbound series relate to rations issued to refugees and freedmen. The first three contain such information as the number of men, women, and children receiving rations and the condition of their health; the number of rations received and issued; and the total value of rations and

medicine issued. The first series, consisting of the Assistant Commissioner's reports of rations, clothing, and medicine issued, July 1865-December 1868, is arranged chronologically. These reports were consolidated from the monthly reports received from subordinate officers. The second series, monthly reports of rations, clothing, and medicine from subordinate officers, June 1865-December 1868, is arranged by State for 1865 and thereafter chronologically. Included are several quarterly reports. The third series, monthly reports of rations issued to refugees and freedmen by the Surgeon-in-Chief, February 1867-April 1868, is arranged chronologically. These reports pertain to rations issued at the refugees' and freedmen's hospitals and orphan asylums.

The monthly estimates of clothing and rations needed by agents and superintendents, July 1865-April 1867, are arranged chronologically.

The petitions of destitute citizens for rations, February-August 1866, are arranged chronologically. Some of the petitions or letters include lists of destitute people. Notations are often on the petition indicating whether the request was granted. Many appear to have been forwarded to the Bureau by Isaac Murphy; Provisional Governor of Arkansas.

Records Relating to Freedmen's Labor

Five unbound series relate to freedmen's labor. The labor contracts, 1865-68, are arranged by year and thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of surname of employer. These agreements between freedmen laborers and employers stated terms of employment, such as pay, clothing, and medical care due the freedmen; the part of the crop to be retained; and sometimes whether a plot of ground for growing subsistence crops was to be provided.

The reports of contracts made, November-December 1866, are arranged chronologically. Some reports are tabular statements that show the number of contracts approved by the Bureau; others are narrative reports.

The freedmen's accounts with employers, 1865-68, are arranged by year and thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of surname of employer. They show the amount and value of goods and provisions furnished the freedmen, which was apparently deducted from their wages, and the wages due them.

The employers' reports of time lost by freedmen, 1866-68, are arranged by year and thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of surname of employer. The few reports for 1868 are dated with the year only. The reports vary in both form and content but usually list the names of the freedmen, the amount of time lost, and the reason for the loss (e.g., sickness, idleness, and making clothes).

The monthly reports of indentures, December 1865-November 1868, are arranged by year, thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of station of agent or superintendent, and thereunder chronologically. Some reports are narrative while others list persons apprenticed, to whom apprenticed, date of indenture, when the indenture was recorded, and when it was approved by probate court. There appear to be very few indentures after 1866.

Personnel Records

One volume and six unbound series relate to personnel: a station book of officers and civilians employed by the Bureau, monthly State rosters of officers and civilians employed by the Bureau, monthly rosters of officers and civilians submitted by subordinate officers, "personal reports," monthly returns of medical officers and of attendants employed by the medical department, lists of teachers entitled to purchase rations, and oaths of office of agents, superintendents, and clerks.

The Station Book (23) of officers and civilians employed by the Bureau, 1865-69, is arranged by year and thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of officer's surname. It contains a name index and indicates the duty, rank, date of employment, and title of the Assistant Commissioner's staff officers and officers and civilians employed in the field.

Two series of monthly rosters consist of officers and civilians employed by the Bureau. The State rosters, August 1865-April 1869, are arranged chronologically. Evidently compiled in the Assistant Commissioner's office from rosters submitted by subordinate officers, they are similar to those rosters in form and content. Each State roster covers all or most of the Bureau personnel in Arkansas and indicates names, ranks, stations, and duties of officers and civilians; numbers, sources, and dates of orders assigning officers; and rates of pay to civilians. The rosters submitted by subordinate officers, June 1865-November 1868, are arranged by year and thereunder by initial letter of station of agent or superintendent.

The "personal reports," November-December 1866, are arranged chronologically. They consist of notifications sent to the Assistant Commissioner by officers and agents informing him that they were on duty.

The monthly returns of medical officers and of attendants employed by the medical department, May 1866-December 1868, are arranged chronologically. They show the names of the medical officers or attendants, their stations and positions, and their terms of service.

The lists of teachers entitled to purchase rations, May 1867-November 1868, are arranged chronologically. They were submitted monthly by the Superintendent of Education to the Assistant Commissioner so that teachers would be able to purchase commissary supplies on the same terms as Army officers.

The oaths of office of agents, superintendents, and clerks, December 1865-December 1868, are arranged by year and thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of employee's surname. Oaths were required by an act of July 2, 1862 (12 Stat. 502), for all officeholders whether elected or appointed.

Miscellaneous Records

This series of unbound records, 1865-68, is arranged chronologically. It includes a copy of the amnesty proclamation of President Johnson, May 1865; a report of the number of military posts in Arkansas and Missouri, June 1865; a copy of a report of Bvt. Maj. Gen. J. B. Sanborn to the Secretary of the Interior on the condition of affairs between freedmen and Indians in Indian

Territory, January 1866; a record of the trial of Capt. John Sweeny, June 1866; a report of contracts made and approved for 1866; a list of murders and assaults with intent to kill committed in Arkansas during the year March 1867-March 1868; and other items.

Related Records

In Record Group 105 and related to records of the Assistant Commissioner are records of the Bureau headquarters in Washington. NARS microfilm publications containing some of these related records are M742, *Selected Series of Records Issued by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872*, which includes letters, endorsements, and issuances sent; M752, *Registers and Letters Received by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872*; and M803, *Records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1871*.

In the same record group and pertaining to the State of Arkansas are records of the Superintendent of Education (reproduced as M980, *Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Arkansas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1871*), the Assistant Quartermaster and Disbursing Officer, and the superintendents and agents who commanded the local field offices. There are also records of the General Superintendent of Refugees and Freedmen under the Military Department of Arkansas for the period 1864-65. In the same record group are records for other State offices and their subordinate field offices. The records of assistant commissioners in other States have been reproduced on the following NARS microfilm publications: M809, Alabama; M798, Georgia; M826, Mississippi; M843, North Carolina; M869, South Carolina; and M821, Texas.

Records in other record groups supplement those of the Assistant Commissioner. In Records of the United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, are records of the Military District of Arkansas and the Fourth Military District. Records of abandoned property for the period before the establishment of the Bureau are among Records of Civil War Special Agencies of the Treasury Department, Record Group 366.

The records reproduced in this microfilm publication were prepared for filming by Robert J. Plowman, who also wrote these introductory remarks and provided the other editorial material.

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