

# Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records

Field Office Records of the Bureau of  
Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands  
(The Freedmen's Bureau), 1865–1872

*Emancipation left freed men, women, and children in desperate need of relief, medicine,  
housing, family, education, employment, and protection. The Freedmen's Bureau's field office records  
hold stories of their struggle and the unprecedented efforts to secure those needs.*



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*... an unequalled wealth of  
information that extends the  
reach of black family studies  
and social history.*

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## The Freedmen's Bureau

In the years following the Civil War, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau) provided assistance to tens of thousands of former slaves and impoverished whites in the Southern States and the District of Columbia. The war had liberated nearly four million slaves and destroyed the region's cities, towns, and plantation-based economy. It left former slaves and many whites dislocated from their homes, facing starvation, and owning only the clothes they wore. The challenge of establishing a new social order, founded on freedom and racial equality, was enormous.

The Bureau was established in the War Department in March 1865 to undertake the relief effort and the unprecedented social reconstruction that would bring freedpeople to full citizenship. It issued food and clothing, operated hospitals and temporary camps, helped locate family members, promoted education, helped freedmen legalize marriages, provided employment, supervised labor contracts, provided legal representation, investigated racial confrontations, settled freedmen on abandoned or confiscated lands, and worked with African American soldiers and sailors and their heirs to secure back pay, bounty payments, and pensions.

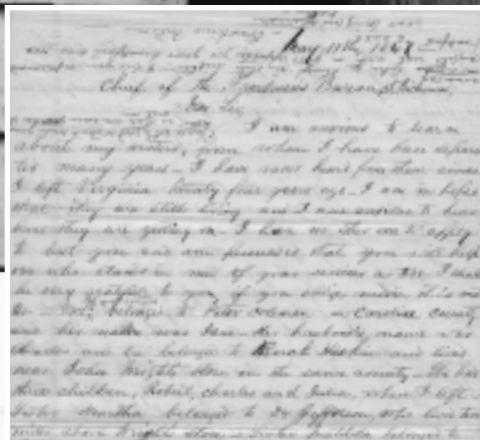
## A Rich Documentary Source

The records left by the Bureau through its work between 1865 and 1872 constitute the richest and most extensive documentary source available for investigating the African American experience in the post-Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Historians have used these materials to explore government and military policies, local conditions, and interactions between freedpeople, local white populations, and Bureau officials.

The National Archives has microfilmed these records in two stages. The first was completed in the 1970s with filming of the records of the Bureau's Washington, DC, headquarters and records of the Bureau's two most prominent state-level officers, the Assistant Commissioners and superintendents of education, in several Southern States.

## Headquarters Records

Headquarters files document the overall administration and operation of the Bureau and its education division and the supervision of state offices. Records include letters, telegrams, and cir-



Hawkins Wilson to "Chief of the Freedmen's Bureau, at Richmond," VA, May 11, 1867  
"I am anxious to learn about my sisters, from whom I have been separated many years\_\_I have never heard from them since I left Virginia twenty four years ago\_\_I am in hopes that they are still living and I am anxious to hear how they are getting on\_\_"  
Virginia, Bowling Green, Caroline County, Letters Received

cular letters sent; special orders issued by Commissioner O. O. Howard; annual reports to the President; records relating to appointments; and letters received by the Commissioner. There are summary reports and communications from the state Assistant Commissioners on relief efforts, hospitals and vaccination programs, labor and land issues, legal issues, field office management, and other activities, as well as school reports, schedules of schools, and rental accounts from state superintendents of education. Primarily official and statistical, these records can contain some information on the work and experiences of particular persons at the local level.

## State Records of Assistant Commissioners and Superintendents of Education

These records contain copies of letters and annual reports sent to the Commissioner in Washington; narrative weekly and monthly summaries of problems and developments in the state; letters received from subordinates in field offices; telegrams and issuances (general orders, circulars, and special orders) received from Washington; narrative reports from subordinates on such topics as condition of the destitute, misuse of public stores, status of Bureau property, abandoned and confiscated lands, murders and outrages, and other areas of concern; form reports on schools; labor and personnel records; returns of medical officers; letters sent; and miscellaneous records relating to other topics. While most of these records are summaries and reports, many, such as collected labor contracts and letters received, can provide detailed information on individuals.

## Field Office Records

The second stage of filming started in 2001 with processing of the Bureau's field office records from 15 Southern and border States and the District of Columbia. It was through those local offices that subassistant commissioners, superintendents, agents, claims officers, clerks, provost marshals, disbursing officers, and medical officers provided direct assistance to and had direct contact with freedpeople.

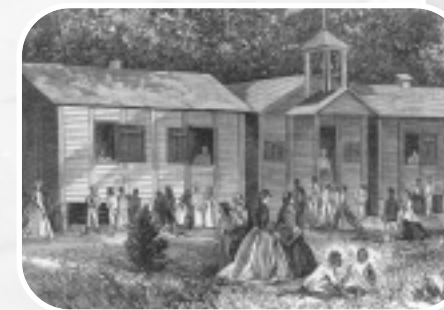
The field office reports, letters received and sent, contracts, certificates, registers, censuses, affidavits, and other documents preserve, directly and vividly, the experiences and circumstances of the individuals involved: freedpeople, Bureau officers, landowners and employers, and others. They contain desperate pleas for food, clothing, and medical care from rural communities; freedpeoples' testimonies about delinquent employers, continued use of forced labor and apprenticeship, violence, and restrictions due to the new state-legislated and repressive "black codes"; petitions for new schools, legal aid in courts, and protection from violence; applications for land; and marriage certificates. These records are filled with names and personal information, whether in marriage certificates, labor contracts, hospital records, complaints, relief rolls, or trial summaries. Further, many of these records preserve firsthand descriptions of the harsh and racially divisive conditions in

which these named individuals struggled to establish families, train and educate themselves, and live in self-sufficiency and freedom.

## Invaluable Records for Genealogists

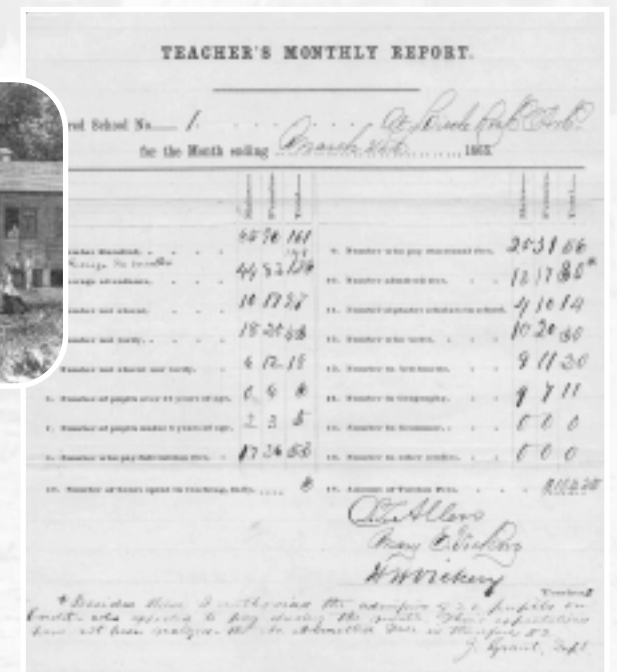
Together, these records present the genealogist and social historian with an unequalled wealth of information that extends the reach of black family studies. Documents such as local censuses, marriage records, and medical records provide freedpeople's full names and former masters; Federal censuses through 1860 listed slaves only statistically under the master's household. No name indexes are available at this time, but the documents can be rewarding, particularly since they provide full names, residences, and, often, the names of former masters and plantations.

These microfilm publications are part of a five-year, multiseries project made possible by the United States Congress through The Freedmen's Bureau Records Preservation Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-444). The act authorized funds to preserve these records through microfilm technology and to begin the process of indexing the records by universities and other institutions for more effective use by researchers. Filming of the Florida field office records had already started under agreement with the Department of Special Collections, Smathers Library, University of Florida at Gainesville, FL. A team of National Archives volunteers, archivists, conservationists, technicians, and editors from several units treated and housed the records, prepared introductory texts, and filmed the documents.

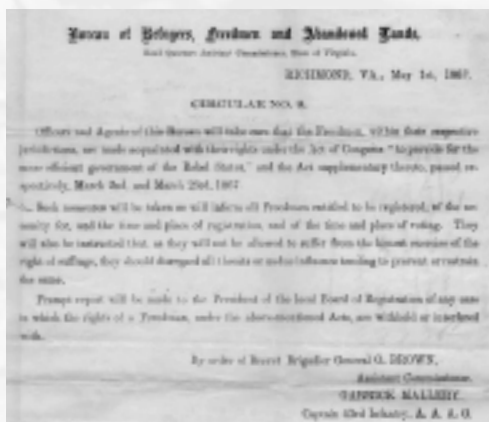


Teacher's Monthly Report, Little Rock, Arkansas, March 24, 1865

"Number enrolled: 65 males, 96 females, 161 total . . . Number who pay full tuition fees, 17 males, 36 females, 53 total."



Arkansas, Little Rock Superintendent of Freedmen, Narrative School Reports from Teachers



Freedmen's Right to Vote, May 1, 1867

"... measures will be taken as will inform all Freedmen entitled to be registered, of the necessity for, and the time and place of registration, and the time and place of voting."

Virginia, Jerusalem (Southampton County), Letters and Orders Received

## Newly Available

Now the field office records for Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, totaling 657 cubic feet, have been filmed. Also available are the marriage records of Bureau headquarters, 1861–69, and the post-Bureau records created by the Freedmen's Branch in the Adjutant General's Office, 1872–78.

Combined with the records of Bureau headquarters and of selected state Assistant Commissioners and supervisors of education previously filmed, the wider availability of these field office records enables researchers to take a closer look at the African American experience and the personal histories of individuals in that critical and unprecedented period of social reconstruction.



**Form of Marriage, Freedom and Abandoned Lands.**

By the authority of Circular No. 6, dated ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE KY. AND TENN., Nashville, Feb. 26, 1866, I certify that I have this day united *Thomas Harris and Jane Harris (Shute)* colored, in the bonds of matrimony, they having been living together as man and wife for about *Fifteen* years past, and have had, as the result thereof, the following children, viz:

<i>Marietta Harris</i>	<i>born April about Feb 1<sup>st</sup> 1856</i>
<i>Eliza Harris</i>	<i>born April 24<sup>th</sup> 1857</i>
<i>Frank Harris</i>	<i>born Sept 26<sup>th</sup> 1857</i>
<i>Tom Harris</i>	<i>born Aug 9<sup>th</sup> 1858</i>
<i>Bethu Harris</i>	<i>born Feb 1<sup>st</sup> 1859</i>
<i>Mary Harris</i>	<i>born March 12 1860</i>
<i>George Harris</i>	<i>born Nov 11 1861</i>
<i>Lewis Harris</i>	<i>born May 20 1862</i>

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand in duplicate of office in Lebanon, Wilson County, Tennessee, April 28 1866.

**S. B. F. C. BARR, Sup't**  
Wilson County.

### Marriage Certificate of Thomas Harris and Jane Harris (Shute), Issued April 28, 1866

"I have this day united Thomas Harris and Jane Harris (Shute), colored, in the bonds of matrimony, they having been living together as man and wife for about Fifteen years past, and have had, as the result, the following children, viz:"

Tennessee, Lebanon, Wilson County, sent to Freedmen's Bureau Headquarters, Washington, DC

## Field Office Records \*NEW

The recently filmed field office records of the Freedmen's Bureau are organized by state. The records are available in the following M-numbered National Archives microfilm publications:

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Alabama (M1900, 34 rolls)              | Missouri (M1908, 24 rolls)        |
| Arkansas (M1901, 23 rolls)             | North Carolina (M1909, 78 rolls)  |
| District of Columbia (M1902, 21 rolls) | South Carolina (M1910, 106 rolls) |
| Florida (M1869, 15 rolls)              | Tennessee (M1911, 89 rolls)       |
| Georgia (M1903, 90 rolls)              | Texas (M1912, 28 rolls)           |
| Kentucky (M1904, 133 rolls)            | Virginia (M1913, 203 rolls)       |
| Louisiana (M1905, 111 rolls)           |                                   |
| Maryland/Delaware (M1906, 42 rolls)    |                                   |
| Mississippi                            |                                   |
| • Pre-Bureau Records, (M1914, 5 rolls) |                                   |
| • Freedmen's Bureau (M1907, 65 rolls)  |                                   |

## Marriage Records \*NEW

*Marriage Records of the Office of the Commissioner, Washington Headquarters of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1861–1869 (M1875, 5 rolls)*

This microfilm series contains hundreds of marriage records of newly liberated African Americans in the post-Civil War era collected from 1861 through 1869 first by the Union Army and then the Freedmen's Bureau in its field offices in the Southern States and the District of Columbia, and sent to the Washington, DC, headquarters. Record types include unbound marriage certificates, marriage licenses, monthly reports of marriages, and other proofs of marriages. Record type and quantity varies with each state.

## Freedmen's Branch, Office of the Adjutant General \*NEW

*Records of the Field Offices of the Freedmen's Branch, Office of the Adjutant General, 1872–1878 (M2029, 58 rolls)*

The records of the Freedmen's Branch of the Adjutant General's Office (1872–78) contain valuable genealogical information on black soldiers and sailors found in documents and letters they submitted for bounty, pension, arrears of pay, commutation of rations, and prize money. The branch continued the work of the Freedmen's Bureau in receiving, passing upon, and paying military claims. Other documents include letters sent, lists and registers of claimants, reports of persons and articles hired, returns of public property, and affidavits. The records can be useful when used in conjunction with military service and pension records. The records are from field offices in Charleston, SC; Fort Johnston, NC; Louisville, KY; Fort Macon, NC; Fort Leavenworth, KS; Fort Monroe, VA; Memphis, TN; Nashville, TN; Natchez, MS; New Orleans, LA; St. Louis, MO; Savannah, GA; and Vicksburg, MS.

### Rations Issued at Fort Smith, Arkansas, in June and July 1867

Name of person, no. of adults and children, dates of issue, no. of days, no. of lbs. of bacon and corn, and remarks [race].

Arkansas, Fort Smith (Sebastian County), Register of Persons Drawing Rations

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*Jane Harris continued 1867*

Name of person	no. of adults	no. of children	date of issue	no. of days	no. of lbs.	remarks
<i>John Harris</i>	1	1	June 2 <sup>nd</sup>	10	100	Black
<i>John Harris</i>	1	1	June 10 <sup>th</sup>	10	100	Black
<i>John Harris</i>	1	1	June 18 <sup>th</sup>	10	100	Black
<i>John Harris</i>	1	1	June 26 <sup>th</sup>	10	100	Black
<i>John Harris</i>	1	1	July 4 <sup>th</sup>	10	100	Black
<i>John Harris</i>	1	1	July 12 <sup>th</sup>	10	100	Black
<i>John Harris</i>	1	1	July 20 <sup>th</sup>	10	100	Black

## Bureau Records of Related Interest

### Additional State Records

Records of many state Assistant Commissioners and superintendents of education were filmed in previous years, and should be researched for more information on activities at the local level. In addition to administrative letters, monthly summaries, and annual reports sent to Washington, DC, these records also include reports, registers, and letters from subordinates that provide important details about circumstances and individuals in the localities.

They are available in the following M-numbered publications:

#### Records of Assistant Commissioners

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Alabama (M809, 23 rolls)                      | Mississippi (M826, 50 rolls)    |
| Arkansas (M979, 52 rolls)                     | North Carolina (M843, 38 rolls) |
| District of Columbia (M1055, 21 rolls)        | South Carolina (M869, 44 rolls) |
| Georgia (M798, 36 rolls)                      | Tennessee (M999, 34 rolls)      |
| Louisiana                                     | Texas (M821, 32 rolls)          |
| • Assistant Commissioner (M1027, 37 rolls)    | Virginia (M1048, 67 rolls)      |
| • New Orleans Field Offices (M1483, 10 rolls) |                                 |

#### Records of Superintendents of Education

- |  |                                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Alabama (M810, 8 rolls)                | North Carolina (M844, 16 rolls) |
| Arkansas (M980, 5 rolls)               | Tennessee (M1000, 9 rolls)      |
| District of Columbia (M1056, 24 rolls) | Texas (M822, 18 rolls)          |
| Georgia (M799, 28 rolls)               | Virginia (M1053, 20 rolls)      |
| Louisiana (M1026, 12 rolls)            |                                 |

Name	Age	Sex	Street	Former Owner	Occupation	County	State	Remarks
Elizabeth Smith	57	F	Sumner	Smith	Washer	Madison	Ala.	Washing
John	de	M	"	"	Washing	"	"	"
Alvina	de	F	"	"	Washing	"	"	Wash along side
Sarah Martin	1	F	"	Price	Washer	"	"	Washing
M. Martin	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
Robert P. Smith	1	M	"	Robertson	Servant	"	"	School
Wm. B. de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
James Ray	1	M	Church	Spencer	Washer	"	"	Washing
Martha Wright	1	F	"	John Wright	Washer	"	"	Washing
John Washburn	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
John de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
William de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
Sally de	1	F	"	"	"	"	"	"
Maria Wood	1	F	"	Benjamin Washburn	Washer	"	"	Washing
John de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
William de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
Rachon de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
Nancy Pope	1	F	"	Pope	Washer	"	"	Washing
John de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"
Joseph de	1	M	"	"	School	"	"	School
William de	1	M	"	Hambley	Washer	"	"	Washing
Shoemaker de	1	M	"	M. Brown	Washer	"	"	Washing
James de	1	M	"	"	School	"	"	School
William de	1	M	"	"	"	"	"	"

"Colored Census," Huntsville and Athens, Alabama, ca. 1865

Census of black residents at Huntsville and Athens, Alabama, ca. 1865, listing name, age, sex, street, former owner, occupation, and county.

Alabama, Huntsville and Athens (Claims Agent), Census of Black Citizens

## Headquarters Records

These previously filmed series include most records of the Bureau's headquarters in Washington, DC. The telegrams, letters, and orders sent, and the annual reports, summaries, and schedules received by the Commissioner's office document the overall administration of the Bureau. They contain only limited information about particular individuals at the local level.

#### Selected Series of Records Issued by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872 (M742, 7 rolls)

#### Registers and Letters Received by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872 (M752, 74 rolls)

#### Records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1871 (M803, 35 rolls)

## Where to View Microfilm

Copies of field office records microfilm are available for viewing at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, and at each of the agency's 13 regional archives. For locations and hours, visit [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov).

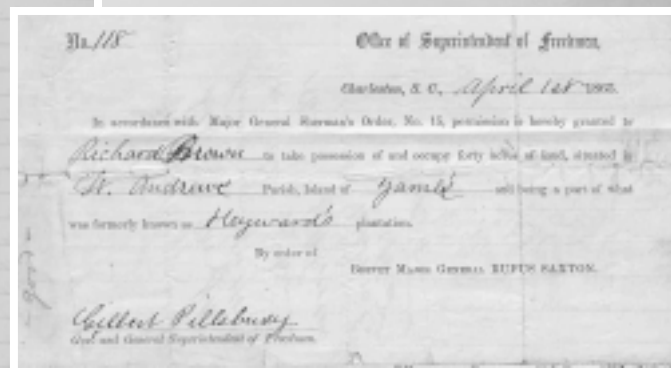
## Prices

Black-and-white microfilm is \$65 per roll for domestic orders and \$68 for foreign orders; shipping and handling fees are included.

### Below: Land Order for Richard Brown, April 1, 1865

"... permission is hereby granted to Richard Brown to take possession of and occupy forty acres of land, situated in St. Andrews Parish, Island of James."

South Carolina, Berkley District, Labor Contracts



Cover: Many freedmen found work in Alexandria, VA, near the coal wharf, ca. 1865 (111-B-400).

## How to Order Microfilm

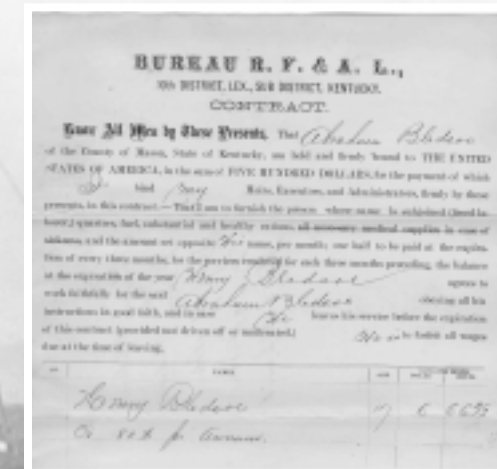
- Online—Go to the National Archives Order Online system at [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov).
- Telephone—Credit card orders call toll free 1-800-234-8861 (301-837-2000 in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area), 8 A.M.–4:30 P.M. EST. Visa, MasterCard, American Express, and Discover are accepted.
- Fax—Fax your order to 301-837-3191.
- Mail—Mail checks or money orders to the National Archives Trust Fund, P.O. Box 100793, Atlanta, GA 30384-0793. Include daytime telephone number with order.

Please identify the microfilm publication number (e.g., M1875) and the specific roll number(s) you wish to order.

## Need more information about specific rolls?

View listings of roll contents and descriptions of the record series

- through the National Archives Order Online system at [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov) or at the start of each roll.
- in the published descriptive pamphlets for each series, which are available by calling toll free 1-866-325-7208.



### Labor Contract Between Abraham Bledsoe and Henry Bledsoe (freedman), commencing January 19, 1866

"I am to furnish . . . quarters, fuel, substantial and healthy rations, and the amount set opposite His name, per month."

Kentucky, Office of the Assistant Commissioner, Other Records, Labor Contracts, 1866

