

Freedman's Bureau 2.0: A Better Way to Do Slave Research

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Possible Information in Freedmen's Bureau Records

- Former slaveholder's name, births, marriages, deaths, names of other family members
- School records, hospital information, contracts, legal proceedings, travel

Background of the Freedmen's Bureau

- Official name: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands
 - Applicants did not have to be former slaves or of African descent
- Establishment and duration
 - Established by War Department through Freedmen's Bureau Bill March 3, 1865
 - Federal operation March 1865–June 1872
 - Some states had similar services before the federal operation
 - Operations were extended twice by acts of July 16, 1866 (14 Stat. 173) and July 6, 1868 (15 Stat. 83)
 - Most operations ceased early 1869 except those of superintendent of education and claims agents
- Duties
 - “. . . supervision and management of all abandoned lands, and the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen from rebel states, or from any district or county within the territory embraced in the operations of the army, under such rules and regulations as may be prescribed by the head of the bureau and approved by the President.” (Freedmen's Bureau Bill, Section 1)
- Could issue:
 - Provisions, clothing, fuel, immediate and temporary shelter, supply of destitute and suffering refugees and freedmen and their wives and children. (Freedmen's Bureau Bill, Section 2)

Bureau Organization

- Commissioner appointed by the President
 - Made full reports to President and Congress
 - Authority to convey and manage for the use of loyal refugees and freedmen (Homestead Act) “such tracts of land within the insurrectionary states as shall have been abandoned, or to which the United States shall have acquired title by confiscation or sale, or otherwise, and to every male citizen, whether refugee or freedman, as aforesaid, there shall be assigned not more than forty acres of such land, and the person to whom it was so assigned shall be protected in the use and enjoyment of the land for the term of three years at an annual rent not exceeding six per centum upon the value of such land . . .” (Freedmen's Bureau Bill, Section 4)
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- **Corresponding microfilm: Headquarters Records**
 - 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)
 - Clerks
 - “. . . assigned to [Commissioner] by the Secretary of War, not exceeding one chief clerk, two of the fourth class, two of the third class, and five of the first class.” (Freedmen’s Bureau Bill, Section 1)
 - Assistant Commissioners
 - One for each state that was part of the rebellion, not to exceed 10
 - Made quarterly reports to Commissioner
 - Divisions: Government-Controlled Lands, Records (included Education), Financial Affairs, and Medical Affairs
 - **Corresponding microfilm: State Records of Assistant Commissioners and Superintendents of Education (443 rolls)**
 - Records include “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.” (“The Freedmen’s Bureau, 1865–1872”, *African American Records: Freedmen’s Bureau*, National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/>)
 - Field Offices
 - Includes subassistant commissioners, superintendents, agents, claims officers, clerks, provost marshals, disbursing officers, and medical officers
 - **Corresponding microfilm: Field Office Records, Marriage Records (1,067 rolls)**
 - Records include “field office reports, letters received and sent, contracts, certificates, registers, censuses, affidavits, and other documents.” (“The Freedmen’s Bureau, 1865–1872”, *African American Records: Freedmen’s Bureau*, National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/>)
 - Freedmen’s Branch
 - “. . . assumed and continued the unfinished business of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen’s Bureau), which was ended by an act of Congress approved June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366), effective June 30, 1872.” (National Archives and Records Administration, *M2029: Records of the Field Offices of the Freedmen’s Branch, Office of the Adjutant General, 1872–1878*, Washington, DC: United States Congress and National Archives and Records Administration, 2006, page 1)
 - **Corresponding microfilm: Records of the Field Offices of the Freedmen’s Branch, Office of the Adjutant General, 1872–1878 (M2029, 58 rolls)**
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All Freedmen's Bureau Records Are Digitized and Online!

But not all the records have an index!

DiscoverFreedmen.org (now redirects to familysearch.org page), the FamilySearch Freedmen's Bureau project that ran from Juneteenth 2015 to Juneteenth 2016, used volunteers to create a searchable online index for about half the record groups. No index was created for field office records. In addition, names of Freedmen's Bureau employees that appear on the records were not included in the index.

How to Start Your Search

- Go to DiscoverFreedmen.org and click on the "Search Records" link.
- At "Search for an Ancestor", enter your name of interest in the "First Name" and "Last Name" boxes.
- This performs a search in the 15 indexed Freedmen's Bureau databases. You will be taken to the FamilySearch.org site in a new tab. You see the list of results and in which databases the results were found.
- Click the "x" to delete those databases which are not relevant to your search. For example, if I am looking for my relative Harry Adams in Georgia, I can get rid of the databases for Virginia and Washington, D.C.
- If desired, refine your search using the options available in the left column. For example, I can restrict my search for Harry to Georgia, because Harry lived his entire life in Georgia. That does not mean all the records will be from Georgia; it means that Georgia will appear as a location somewhere on each record.
- If you want the list to be a more manageable size, you can restrict your search with additional variables, such as age, spouse, other person, etc.
- Look at each record in the results.

Most people did not move around a lot immediately after Emancipation, but sometimes records may be filed in places you don't expect.

Usually the most important piece of information you are looking for is a record for your ancestor/relative that states who the last slaveholder was. That name is key to finding your family member in records prior to Emancipation.

If you do not find your relative in the indexed collections, the next step is to set aside some time to browse the unindexed field office records. These are available on FamilySearch.org.

- Go to FamilySearch.org. Mouse over "Search" and click on "Records."
 - On the lower right section of the page, click on "Browse all published collections."
 - Under "Filter by collection name", type in "freed" (without quotation marks), and the list will shrink to only 31 collections. The collections with a number in the "Records" column are the indexed ones that are searched by the DiscoverFreedmen.org site. The collections with "Browse Images" in the "Records" column are those with no index; most are field office records.
 - Check the next page of this handout for steps to consider if you need to browse records. Some records that do not have indices on FamilySearch.org are somewhat searchable on Ancestry.com and on Archive.org.
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Steps to Consider When Researching Freedmen's Bureau Records

- Step 1: Determine Your Goal
 - Where was my family living before, during, and after the Civil War?
 - Am I trying to find the last slaveholder's name?
 - Am I trying to locate additional branches of the family?
 - What time period do I want to research? Do records exist?
 - Step 2: Location Research
 - Learn the history of the area where your family lived following Emancipation or in the 1870 census (depending on your knowledge; tax and voter lists can help you get closer to 1865)
 - Civil War history
 - County and state boundary changes
 - Step 3: Access Records
 - Online: More available and indexed, but still not all.
 - FamilySearch.org: All are digitized (see above). All Freedman's Bank records are indexed and searchable.
 - Ancestry.com: Find through catalog (Freedmen's Bureau). All searchable, but not all location information is included in index and can't browse by location. Currently cannot tell which locations are included, but marketed as all. Marriage records as separate database. Because this is Ancestry.com, some of these record sets are poorly labeled and described. Information about collection is well done and worth reading.
 - Archive.org (<http://archive.org/details/refugeesfreedmenabandonedlands>): digitized microfilm rolls for Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland/Delaware
 - Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau (<http://mappingthefreedmensbureau.com/>)
 - Step 4 (if necessary): Determine the Microfilm Rolls You Want to Review
 - Use Microfilm Guides, <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/> (these guides are also helpful to learn about the Freedmen's Bureau in general)
 - Guides give the following information:
 - Introduction
 - History
 - Organization
 - Activities
 - Records Description
 - Related Records: other records/microfilms of interest
 - Appendix: usually details dates of service of bureau personnel
 - Table of Contents: details what is on each roll of film
 - Allow time to review the guides: Many guides are more than 100 pages long.
 - TIP: Start with field office records first
 - Determine the field office closest to the ancestral location identified in Step 2
 - TIP: Determine whether the area you're researching had pre-Bureau records
 - Example: Northeastern Louisiana has pre-Bureau records that are part of Mississippi's collection. It was also at one time part of Tennessee's jurisdiction.
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