

# Records of the Freedmen's Bureau: There's Something for Everyone

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## What was the Freedmen's Bureau?

In March of 1865, the United States Congress passed "An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees" and thus created a new division of the War Department, **The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands** – which has become more commonly known as "*The Freedmen's Bureau*." The function of the Bureau was to supervise and manage all business pertaining to refugees, freedmen, and lands that had been abandoned or seized during the tumultuous Civil War. To accomplish this, personnel and offices were set up in all of the former Confederate and border states, as well as in the District of Columbia. Originally planned to be a one year initiative, a bill was passed in 1866 to extend the Bureau's work through 1868. After that, the Bureau's efforts became focused mostly on education, while other services dwindled out. The Freedmen's Bureau was permanently abolished in 1872.

The "**refugees**" assisted by the Freedmen's Bureau were people who had fled their usual place of residency during and because of the Civil War. Typically, these were *white* home, land, and/or business owners escaping areas that had become Union occupied (or were under the threat thereof).

"**Freedmen**" referred to persons of African descent who had been previously enslaved. The term applied to males and females.

"**Abandoned lands**" were lands (and properties) that had been left behind by refugees or confiscated by Army troops, during the war, in former Confederate and border states, Washington, D.C., and in Indian Territory. Initially, the Bureau was given authority to divide these lands into 40-acre plots and distribute them to freed blacks and white refugees loyal to the Union, but this authority was taken away by President Andrew Johnson, who pardoned former Confederates, and restored properties to the original owners.

## **Structure of the Bureau**

Like other agencies of the Federal Government, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned lands was headquartered in Washington, D.C. Appointed as its leader was General Oliver Otis Howard, who went on to become the founder and president of Howard University, in Washington, D.C. Within the Bureau Headquarters there were Division Offices for each service of the Bureau, as well as an Archives Division. In addition to the Federal Headquarters, each of the former Confederate and border states were headed by Assistant Commissioners, and within those states were local (subordinate) field offices, headed by Sub-Assistant Commissioners. Also within each state, were Staff Offices over Education, an Inspector General and Disbursing Officer, and several other lead administrative positions that mirrored those at the Federal Headquarters.

## **Functions of the Bureau**

The Freedmen's Bureau is often casually referred to as our nation's first "social services" office. This can be attributed to the wide variety of services this entity provided. These included the following: relief services, healthcare, land redistribution, judicial functions, labor relations, and education services.

## **Helpful records for researchers**

As a result of the Bureau's many functions, records were generated that offer today's researchers a glimpse into the lives of our post-bellum ancestors that we may not otherwise have records of. Although not every descendant will find their ancestors in these documents, many will; and, for those who don't, the records still offer insight as to what was going on in their ancestral communities, which can help create new research questions and guide our work in new directions.

To name all of the types of records created by the Freedmen's Bureau would be difficult, since variations are found in what was recorded in different locales. For this reason, it's suggested that researchers take advantage of the **Descriptive Pamphlets**, prepared by NARA, which outline exactly which types of records will be found for each of the Bureau Offices within each of the included states. Also helpful is the three volume *Preliminary inventory of the records of the field offices of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands: record group*

*105*, compiled by Willna Pacheli and Elaine Everly, which even further breaks down and describes the available records for each state and location and provides coverage tables and additional information about the records. Using these resources will save valuable time and energy and will help to increase the researcher's understanding of the full depth and breadth of this record set.

The following list reveals some of the most helpful record types that are most commonly found across field office locations, and which often hold genealogically relevant information. These records may often also inform researchers of enslaved/enslaver relationships – a vital component of successful slave ancestral research. In this regard, some of the most enlightening records of the Freedmen's Bureau include:

- Reports of rations issued
- Records relating to transportation
- Reports of persons and articles hired
- Freedmen's labor contracts
- Registers of complaints
- Reports related to court cases
- Records relating to indentures
- Records relating to land and property
- Reports on freedmen available to work
- Reports of outrages and arrests
- Letters sent and received
- Miscellaneous reports

### **Something for Everyone**

Not only do these records include information about persons who were formerly enslaved, but they also reveal much about poor, or destitute whites, land, property, and business owners (most often, white), community members and officials (white), and even the Bureau workers, themselves. Information such as full names, ages, names and relationships of family members, place(s) of residence, and migration details might be given. Every human demographic of post-Civil War society in these southern and border states is represented in these documents. For this reason, records of the Freedmen's Bureau hold value for *all researchers*, not just those who descend from

enslaved ancestors. Everyone should explore these records for mentions of their ancestral persons of interest.

### Organization of the Records

Records of the Freedmen's Bureau are physically housed at the National Archives and Records Administration, in Washington, D.C. and are found in Microfilm Record Group 105. Each state has a designated "M-number," which represents a Microfilm reel number, assigned by NARA. When searching for field office (Sub-Assistant Commissioner) and state level (Assistant Commissioner) records from a particular state, use these numbers as a guide.

Alabama	M1900	34 rolls
Arkansas	M1901	23 rolls
District of Columbia	M1902	21 rolls
Florida	M1869	15 rolls
Georgia	M1903	90 rolls
Kentucky	M1904	133 rolls
Louisiana	M1905	111 rolls
Maryland/Delaware	M1906	42 rolls
Mississippi	M1907	65 rolls
Missouri	M1908	24 rolls
North Carolina	M1909	78 rolls
South Carolina	M1910	106 rolls
Tennessee	M1911	89 rolls
Texas	M1912	28 rolls
Virginia	M1913	203 rolls

Freedmen's Bureau Microfilm Chart ©Renate Yarborough Sanders

Additional records related to the Commissioner's office, in Washington, DC, and to the Education Departments for each state are also included in Record Group 105.

### How can researchers access records of the Freedmen's Bureau?

The original records of the Freedmen's Bureau are housed at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in Washington, DC, and are available for viewing on microfilm, there, as well as on the NARA website. Today's researchers are fortunate that these valuable records are also available on several other websites, with variations on availability of transcription and indexing. The indexed records are searchable on Ancestry ([ancestry.com/freedmens](https://www.ancestry.com/freedmens)) and FamilySearch ([discoverfreedmen.org](https://www.familysearch.org/discoverfreedmen.org)), where they have also been added to the Full Text Search experiment. The National Archives

NARA)(and The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) are both hosting crowdsourced transcription projects on their websites and are releasing records as they are completed. A wonderful resource for finding and navigating these amazing records is, “*Mapping the Freedmen’s Bureau*,” found at [mappingthefreedmensbureau.org](https://mappingthefreedmensbureau.org). Using maps to guide the user, this site points out the locations of Freedmen’s Bureau offices, schools, and hospitals, and links researchers to the records (via FamilySearch or Internet Archive) for each location. In addition, links to other institutions that served the formerly enslaved are also included on the maps, making it a one-stop guide for researching ancestors who were living during the Reconstruction period.

## **Conclusion**

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, aka, “The Freedmen’s Bureau,” was created in 1865 and abolished in 1872, to assist and supervise all matters related to freedmen, refugees, and land abandoned or confiscated during the Civil War. Records of the Freedmen’s Bureau can be useful for all researchers who had ancestors in America during the Reconstruction years, or who have interest in learning more about what was going on in the communities your ancestors lived in during this important and transformative time in our nation’s history.

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\* *All links reviewed and revisited, June 2025.*