



Online Freedmen's Bureau Records

Diane L Richard looks at how a big push to digitize and index these records makes them more available than ever to those doing Southern research

THESE ARE SOME OF MY FAVORITE RECORDS AND IT'S SO NICE to see them getting the exposure they deserve. What's great for genealogists is that this exposure is because there have been massive digitizing projects and more importantly, an indexing project, to make these accessible to researchers. The goal for the indexing project is to be completed by the opening of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), <http://nmaahc.si.edu>, scheduled to open 24 September 2016.

Before talking more about the indexing project and the records themselves, let's review the history.

Overview



The Freedmen's Bureau / Drawn by A.R. Waud. (1868). (Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92514996)

"The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, also known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was established in the War Department by an act of Congress on 3 March 1865 (13 Stat. 507). The Bureau was responsible for the supervision and management of all matters relating to refugees and freedmen, and of lands abandoned or seized

during the Civil War ... While a major part of the Bureau's early activities involved the supervision of abandoned and confiscated property, its mission was to provide relief and help freedmen become self-sufficient. Bureau officials issued rations and clothing, operated hospitals and refugee camps, and supervised labor contracts. In addition, the Bureau managed apprenticeship disputes and complaints, assisted benevolent societies in the establishment of schools, helped freedmen in legalizing marriages that were entered into during slavery, and provided transportation to refugees and freedmen who were attempting to reunite with their family or relocate to other parts of the country. The Bureau also helped black soldiers, sailors, and their heirs collect bounty claims, pensions, and back pay."

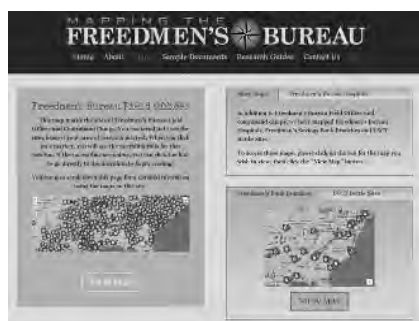
SOURCE:

Records of Field Offices for the State of North Carolina, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, National Archives microfilm publication M1909 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), 2004, www.archives.gov/research/microfilm/m1909.pdf).



Unfortunately, its official moniker doesn't adequately capture the full scope of the services provided by the Freedmen's Bureau. It was much more than what is stated. After the Civil War, especially in the southern states, many citizens were poor and unable to feed themselves – disabled veterans, the widows and children of deceased veterans, aged individuals, new emigrants, and others. Because of this, the Freedmen's Bureau also provided rations and other services not just to freedmen, but to any needy individuals.

So, while the Freedmen's Bureau records do contain records of freedmen, they also include documents regarding all impoverished individuals, regardless of race, who lived from DE to TX. Maps found at Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau, <http://mappingthefreedmensbureau.com>, give



a great perspective on where Freedmen's Bureau Offices were located. Note that not all offices existed for the entire duration of the Bureau's existence. These were not permanent institutions and so came, went, were combined, and otherwise morphed through time to fit the needs of the population being served and the War Department. Check the finding aids particular to your state of interest for specific details.

This broader scope of who was served is significant and why I

suggest that everyone researching southern ancestry consult these records. It is also important because, as easier access is now available to these records, one needs to be careful in interpreting the records found. Do not assume that a found record is that of a freed slave, it might be that of a Confederate widow, or the soldier's aged and feeble parents, or that of someone else.

Many records, especially in North Carolina (the basis for the examples I'll be sharing), were not color blind. This means that

Freedmen's Bureau – Accessing the Records (Online)

Ancestry.com (\$)

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1105>

Digital images with NO indexing on personal names. You can search on locations (or browse by location). You can select what "type" of record interests you. This makes this database very difficult and time-consuming to use.

FamilySearch (FREE)

Has many records online, some are "searchable" and some can be "viewed" like digital microfilm. When the mentioned indexing project is complete, I anticipate that more, if not all, of these records will be "searchable".

- United States, Freedmen's Bureau, Records of the Assistant Commissioner, 1865-1872, <http://familysearch.org/search/collection/2427901>
- United States, Freedmen's Bureau, Records of the Commissioner, 1865-1872, <http://familysearch.org/search/collection/2431126>
- United States, Records of the Superintendent of Education and of the Division of Education, 1864-1879, <http://familysearch.org/search/collection/2427894>
- Different types of state-level records
- United States Freedmen's Bank Records, 1865-1874, <http://familysearch.org/search/collection/1417695>, NOTE: these records are NOT part of the Freedmen's Bureau collection
- United States Freedmen's Bureau Marriages, 1815-1869, <http://familysearch.org/search/collection/1414908>

ration lists, court cases and other records do indicate whether a person was "white" or "colored/black". And, there are just as many records that do not indicate color – many are about freedmen and not all. Take the time to explore any found record, especially in the context of its creation – after all, we do want to make sure that we are attributing the records to the correct family members!

Our focus here is the records of the Field Offices of the Freedmen's Bureau. These are the broadest records of most help

to genealogists because these are the records of the entities created to interact directly with those being served by the Freedmen's Bureau. Most of these records are about serving individuals, by name.

Remember the map I mentioned above — check it out. Field offices were not located in every county in a state. Your ancestors may have had to determine which field office was closest to them, in another county, and travel there to get services. Or, representatives from a nearby county may have “set up shop” to serve a community and took the paperwork created back to their home office. As with all genealogical research – don't limit your search to the most obvious.

There are several other extant record collections covering everything from the records of assistant commissioners (state-level), to superintendents of education (state-level), to records of the education division, to headquarters records, to Adjutant General office records regarding black soldiers and sailors, etc., which are not discussed here.

Why Look at These Records?

We've talked about how the Freedmen's Bureau was created to fill social needs in communities impacted by the Civil War.

We also have some compelling genealogical research reasons for looking at these records:

- Records for the immediate post-Civil War time period, 5 years or so before the next Federal Census (1870)
- Many families still living near where they were raised/living/enslaved, whereas by 1880, many have moved away

- We no longer have access to probate records, which include slave-holding lists
- African-American newspapers were not really in existence yet. In North Carolina, there were 1 or 2 that came to be in the 1860s, followed by a few more in the 1880s
- 1867 Voter Registration is not extant (in North Carolina) for all counties and blacks are definitely underrepresented

As mentioned, there is an indexing project that will facilitate our access to these records. Here are a few more details.

Discover Freedmen (Indexing Project)

www.discoverfreedmen.org

As stated on the project page “To help bring thousands of records to light, the Freedmen's Bureau Project was created as a set of partnerships between FamilySearch International and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS), and the California African American Museum.”

In essence, the records had been digitized and to make them more easily available to researchers, they were in need of indexing. As of 1 June 2016, about 86% of the records have been indexed and the goal is for the indexing to be completed by the opening of NMAAHC.

The indexed records seem to encompass ALL collections of Freedmen's Bureau Records including Freedman's Bank Records (which in actuality is a separate collection).

Via the link on the project page, it's important to know that you can only search on first & last name. There is no means of limiting by location. Though, when you click on “see all results” and go to the FamilySearch interface, you can then “narrow” your search to a select place, specific dates, etc.

Now let's take a look at some examples of the rich records to be found in this collection.



Examples of Freedmen's Bureau Records ...

Ration Lists and Applications

Documents about providing rations to individuals come in many different formats. Even within the same county within a year, different types of documentation might be found.

Sometimes you find applications. These often provide details on names, how large the family is, a declaration of being "in absolute need of food, "to prevent starvation and extreme want," rendered so by the following circumstances", (often these

circumstances are husbandless (killed in war), elderly & feeble, destitute, etc.), what rations were received, and signature(s) of the applicant.

Other times, you find a ration list or register. These are often lists of names, family composition and remarks about the basis for their need. Often such lists/registers are separated into White/Black (or Colored).

Sometimes one is fortunate enough to come across a really neat list, like one found in the Central District of Raleigh where a Ration list provides the names of the "former owners" of the individual receiving rations. These were households located in the community where I currently live!

I have also found ration lists where it was stated: "The colored people in my district are mostly Employed by persons who feed them, none have applied to me for assistance, I have made Enquiries, and do not hear of any who cannot get on by their own labor." [source: Miscellaneous Records, 1865-1867, M1909, Roll 17, Target 3]

It is recognized that maybe this individual did not work as hard as he could have to identify freedmen in need, or that supplies were insufficient, and, if one thinks about it, who were able-bodied and knew the local farms? Those who were freed. Who was better able to work a farm – a freed slave or the mother of small children, the elderly or the infirm? Those who were freed. So, it's possible that his statement is true.

There are also affidavits provided by members of the community in support of a person's petition or request for rations. Sometimes it's a group of people in support of a person or family, and sometimes it's an individual connected to those in need such as when David Grantham states: "This is to certify that Redie lives on my land has 2 in family besides him self, his wife and aged Mother, his mother dependent on him for support ...". Sometimes it's a family member as when John Haywood states "Sir I send this note by Oliver to you to inform you that my Mother is needing provisions ..."



Application for Rations.

White				Black			
Name	Age	Sex	Remarks	Name	Age	Sex	Remarks
William A. Miller	2	M
...

Register of Rations. Left column is labeled "white", and right column is labeled "black".

School Records

These are more limited records and do focus on freedmen. What I found interesting were that the individuals listed were often older than what we consider as "children". Up to this time, infants, in NC, were considered children ages 5-21 and these were listed on school lists. In this list, you can see

Freedmens School near Thomasville, N.C.

No.	Males Names	Age	No.	Males Names	Age
1	Daniel Livingston	14	27	Levin Thompson	6
2	Doug Livingston	6	28	Joseph Hurrell	25
3	Lewis Smith	7	29	Hatcher Hurrell	5
4	Levi Obier	7	30	Henry Hogue	10
5	Harry Thomas	8	31	Worner Blouse	6
6	Samuel Goodloe	6	32	Samuel Conrad	9
7	D. L. Gosssett	17	33	Samuel May	4
8	John Nelson	9	34	Branson Obier	5
9	Lander Thomas	10	35	Lewis Wagoner	10
10	Amulius Joice	28	36	Shadrach Thomas	11
11	Lewis Hazy	25	37	B. F. Abrahm	37
12	Lewis Hurrell	12	38	Jerry Thomas	20
13	Layfayette Hurrell	11	39	Joseph Hurrell	24
14	Abraham Thomas	9	40	Major Chavis	31
15	Richard Day	7	41	Conrad Holt	9
16	James Day	6	42	John Police	7
17	Cliff Clark	10	43	William Police	9
18	Samuel Clark	12	44	Lucas Johnson	10
19	John Gaskin	13	45	Adam Thomas	8
20	Golden Simmons	15	46	Madison Lindsey	9
21	John Gray	8	47	Henry Hopley	10
22	Alc Thomas	12	48	Daniel Hogg	11
23	Albert Thomas	10	49	Robert Thomas	8
24	Harry Lindsey	13	50	Nathan Hurrell	5
25	Lewis Thomas	8	51	Madison Moore	10
26	Prince Davis	10	52	Lewis Thomas	8

Police Court of Anderson Bureau

Greenville N.C. J. Lee Seal Supt

Trials

Aug 1st 1865 *Jess Edward Glass (Colored)*
Charge - Assault & Battery
Finding of Court - Guilty
Sentence to hard labor on streets with belt & chain attached to left leg for the period of thirty (30) days

Aug 1st 1865 *Jess Edgith J. Clark (White)*
Charge - Assault & Battery
Finding - Guilty
Order, Bond, was to keep the peace for twelve years in the sum of two hundred dollars
Securities W. J. C. Clark & H. C. Johnson

Aug 18th 1865 *Jess John Callison and James Sings (White)*
Charge - Whipping a colored man free
R. Searcy
Finding - Guilty
Bond - Bond over to keep the peace for two (2) years in the sum of three hundred dollars
Securities W. J. C. Clark & H. C. Johnson

Nov 14th 1865 *Jess Luanda & Polly (Colored)*
Charge - Petit Larceny
Finding - Guilty
Sentence ten (10) days imprisonment in the County

Nov 15th 1865 *Jess Andy Wright (Colored)*
Charge - Petit Larceny
Finding - Guilty
Sentence ten (10) days imprisonment in the County

LEFT: Miscellaneous Records, March-July 1867, Thomasville Freedmen School. RIGHT: Court record.

that a couple of individuals were older than 21. I appreciate that education was not being limited to “school age” children, and that anyone who wanted an educational opportunity might have been allowed to do so.

Court Records

Even though there were existing civil and criminal courts in place as the war ended, with so much going on, the courts were overwhelmed and I suspect that there was some concern about the parity of the treatment meted out to offenders.

Now, your more egregious crimes of rape, murder, etc., were still handled by the existing county courts where other types of crimes – assault & battery, petty larceny, whipping a colored man, etc., were handled by the Freedmen’s Bureau.

These are fascinating records to look at. There are many instances where a colored man and a white man were both charged with the same crime and yet assigned different punishments – often the colored man was put on the chain gang and the white man was ordered to pay a fine. Now, this did not always

hold true, and if you think about who had money right now and who didn’t, the different forms of punishment do make some sense. On the other hand, I have seen colored men charged a fine, and seen white men put on the chain gang.

Letters

Given that we are discussing a government entity under the war department – there is a lot of correspondence to be found. Even at the Field Office level, there is a lot of correspondence and as one moves higher up the command structure, we find even more letters recorded.

Now, some of these letters refer to an employee going on leave, returning from leave, acknowledging receipt of a circular, responding to a request for information, etc. This is your typical administrative-type correspondence.

Alternately, there is correspondence that is very personal and can be emotion provoking and that is the correspondence by individuals seeking information on family members.

I was researching Nat Wilson and looked through



the entire collection of letters sent and received for one field office. I came across a letter stating: "Nat Wilsons Grand-child aged 12 years formerly a slave of Robt Jones has been retained by said Jones. Members of said Wilsons family have made repeated application for him but said Jones will not give him up to them. Can anything be done under present orders to restore the child." I found this heartbreaking to read.

Unfortunately, we don't always get the full story with correspondence. For the situation above, I never found more paperwork. Remember, field offices were temporary and existed for a short period of time, and it was not unusual for nearby ones to merge their operations or be subsumed under a larger regional office. We also don't know whether all the paperwork created is extant, but probably not. I am actually looking forward to the completion of the indexing project because I want to see whether anything more can be learned about Nat Wilson's grandchild!

There are many other types of records here including, and not limited to, hospital records, apprentice records, employment contracts, cancelled indentures, abandoned land records, US Colored Troop-related records, short-term employment records of those engaged to build Freedmen Bureau facilities, marriage records (not for NC, but for other states), and much more.

Conclusion

Obviously, this was just a quick overview of Freedmen's Bureau Records. There are many more types of records that can be found in this collection. Each is invaluable in its own way. And, hopefully this "taste" of what these records can provide has you excited to learn more about them and explore them yourself.

If you have ancestors, living in mid-Atlantic or Southern states in the immediate post-Civil War years, consider checking out these records that are now readily available online. You might find them listed in a ration list, on a document with a former owner identified, attending school, brought before the court for some transgression, or corresponding with officials to find a loved one or report unjust treatment. There is no other record group that I have come across that documents a short period of time in such detail as the records of the Freedmen's Bureau. ©

Freedmen's Bureau – Select Online Resources

- NARA website *The Freedmen's Bureau, 1865-1872*, www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau



- Another online map showing Freedmen's Bureau locations (created by the Newberry Library (Chicago)), <http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=110416325353435229667.00045740b293fb14f6f59>
- *Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records* -- available in the microfilm room at NARA in Washington DC and online, www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/brochure.pdf
- *Black Family Research, Records of Post-Civil War Federal Agencies at the National Archives*, Reference Information Paper 108, Revised 2006, available online at www.archives.gov/publications/ref-info-papers/rip108.pdf
- *Freedmen's Bureau Records: An Overview* by Elaine C. Everly – *Prologue Magazine*, Summer 1997, Vol. 29, No. 2, available online at www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/freedmens-bureau-records.html
- "A window into the lives of black and white ancestors: Freedmen's Bureau field office records", by Sharon Batiste Gillins, Jan/Feb/Mar 2013 issue of the *NGS Magazine*, www.ngsgenealogy.org/galleries/magazine/JanuaryMarch_13.pdf [NGS Members can access for free]

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