

# The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

Kahlil Chism

On March 3, 1865, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) within the War Department of the federal government (13 Stat. 507). Two months later, President Andrew Johnson appointed Major General Oliver Otis Howard as Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau. Howard, who served in this capacity until the bureau was discontinued in 1872, established bureau headquarters in Washington, D.C., in "a townhouse on the northeast corner of T and Nineteenth streets, which had been confiscated from a Congressman who defected to the Confederacy."<sup>1</sup> The bureau's operations were confined principally to the former Confederate states, the border states (the five slave states that bordered both Union and Confederate states), and the District of Columbia. Assistant commissioners who reported to Howard supervised the work of the bureau in the five military districts into which the states had been divided. Officers subordinate to the assistant commissioners carried out the policies and oversaw the operation of the 25 bureau field offices located throughout the five districts.<sup>2</sup>

During the years of its greatest activity, the operations of the Freedmen's Bureau resembled, in many ways, a modern-day social services agency. In addition to supervising the disposition of abandoned or confiscated lands

and property, bureau officers in each district supervised the writing of labor contracts, issued marriage licenses and certificates, and established schools. They also issued rations and clothing to destitute refugees and freedmen, operated hospitals, and assisted black soldiers and sailors and their heirs in filing and collecting claims for bounties, pensions, and pay arrearages. However, the bureau's legacy rests largely upon its efforts during more than three years to assist former slaves in acquiring land, securing employment, legalizing marriages, and pursuing education.<sup>3</sup>

By the beginning of 1869, most of the work of the Freedmen's Bureau had come to an end. An act of Congress approved on July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), provided that on January 1, 1869, the commissioner was to withdraw the bureau officers from the states and discontinue the functions of the bureau excepting those relating to education and to the collection and payment of claims. Effective June 30, 1872, the bureau was abolished by an act of Congress approved June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366).<sup>4</sup>

The records of the Freedmen's Bureau are in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration (more than 1,000 cubic feet of records have been preserved).<sup>5</sup> These records reveal a great deal about Reconstruction, the first comprehensive

government "social service" agency, and the transition of African Americans from enslavement, through emancipation, to citizenship. The four documents featured in this article provide an engaging entry point for learning and teaching about the Freedmen's Bureau.

## Acquiring Land:

Applications of Refugees and Freedmen for Government Lands, in accordance with Circular No. 10 ... State of Louisiana, October 3 – 9, 1865

On August 28, 1865, Louisiana's assistant commissioner, Thomas W. Conway, ordered his subordinate, First Lieutenant D.G. Fenno, to issue Circular Number 10, informing the state's freedmen and refugees that those "who desire to procure land for their own use, may send their applications to these headquarters at any time between this date and January 1, 1866." The circular spelled out the information that each applicant would be expected to submit to the bureau prior to obtaining land. This information included the number of his family, the number of acres desired, the amount of means at his command with which he intended to carry out the lease, and other information (see featured document, *Application of Refugees for Government Lands*). Circular Number 10 made no reference to female heads of households. While

## The Records of the Freedmen's Bureau

The four documents featured in this article, along with other select Freedmen's Bureau records, are included in the Public Vaults exhibit at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. In this new permanent, interactive exhibit, visitors can experience the feeling of going beyond the walls of the Rotunda into the stack areas of the National Archives.

As a result of the Freedmen's Bureau Records Preservation Act of 2000, thousands of selected records from the bureau's Washington headquarters and field offices have been reproduced on microfilm. For a detailed description of the agency's Freedmen's Bureau microfilm holdings, see the article by Archivist Reginald Washington, "From Slavery to Freedom: Preserving the Records of the Freedmen's Bureau," available online at [www.archives.gov/calendar/features/2002/01-02.html](http://www.archives.gov/calendar/features/2002/01-02.html).

During January and February of 2006, the National Archives will be hosting panel discussions—*Freedmen's Bureau Project Symposium, Parts I and II*—as well as short-term exhibits of additional Freedmen's Bureau records. For more information on these programs in Washington, D.C., visit [www.archives.gov/calendar/](http://www.archives.gov/calendar/).

Finally, Howard University has been working on a project to provide online access to select records of the Freedmen's Bureau. The searchable site is available at [hufast.howard.edu/freedmensbureau-website/goals.htm](http://hufast.howard.edu/freedmensbureau-website/goals.htm).

there is no documentation suggesting that women were barred from applying for land directly, none of the primary applicants from the pages of the registry book featured in this article were women.

Most of the freedmen whose names appear in the registry book probably learned of the land opportunity via *The New Orleans Tribune*, a local African American newspaper printed in both English and French that advertised the details of Circular Number 10. The featured document shows that between October 3 and October 9 of 1865, 51 freedmen—acting on behalf of themselves, 45 women, and 83 children—applied for 530 acres of land. Under the terms described in the act of Congress of March 3, which created the bureau (13 Stat. 507), certain confiscated lands were to be leased to male heads-of-households for a period of three years, at an annual rate not greater than six percent of the 1860 appraisal value of the land. During the three years, the applicant had the right to purchase the land at the 1860 value.

Freedmen who were interested in leasing land from the bureau had to have resources and a plan ("Means" and "Remarks") in order to apply. These requirements varied by applicant. Some, such as applicant number 189, Napoleon Bonaparte, who was only applying for 10 acres of land, had only \$30 in cash and 25 barrels of corn with which to begin his life as a free man. Others, such as Andrew Green and nine associates, requested 100 acres, and had \$200 in cash, 5 bales of cotton, 600 barrels of corn, and \$300 in wages due. Their plan was to raise cotton, sugar cane, and corn on the former Ashland Plantation, in the Parish of Ascension. Interestingly, entry number 191 shows Alexander Eubanks and 10 others applying for the same 100 acres of the Ashland Plantation as the Green group. Considering that the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery, would not be ratified until December of that year, the applicants' ranges of accumulated wealth suggests a spirit of

thrift, cooperation, and industriousness among the formerly enslaved that some may find surprising.

### Securing Employment: Labor Agreement between James Mitchell and Richard and Mary, for the Year of 1866, Tennessee

The bureau helped freedmen transition from being enslaved to being wage-earning laborers. Labor contracts, such as the one entered into by formerly enslaved couple Richard and Mary, capture some of the employment conditions faced immediately after emancipation (see *Agreement between James Mitchell and Richard and Mary*). The couple, whose surnames have been lost to history like that of so many others, were hired by James Mitchell to labor on Mitchell's land for all but the last five days of 1866. In addition to the quota of crops they agreed to grow for him, they were expected "to do any kind of labor Said James Mitchell may deem necessary outside of the crop." Richard and Mary indicated their consent to the agreement by placing an "X" by their names, signifying that they could not write.

During Reconstruction, planters throughout the South contracted with former slaves for their labor. All labor contracts between planters and freedmen had to be in writing and approved by Freedmen's Bureau officials. The bureau also supervised indenture and apprenticeship agreements. Under many of those contracts, black school-aged, orphaned, and destitute children were bound to former owners as laborers.

### Legalizing Marriages: Certificate of Matrimony for Joseph and Mary Provines of Nashville, Tennessee, April 23, 1866

On May 30, 1865, Commissioner Howard issued Circular Number 5, which told his subordinates "in places where the local statutes make no provisions for the marriage of persons of color, the Assistant Commissioners are

*continued on page 26*

Applications of Polignos & Engstrom for  
 Headquarters Bonds of Polignos, Engstrom and

No	Name	Date of Application	No of Bonds	No of Bonds
103	Henry J. Tucker Frederman	New Orleans Oct 4	2	
104	Henry Robert & others Frederman	New Orleans Oct 5	5	4
105	Rich Amour & David Bral Frederman	New Orleans Oct 5	2	2
106	David Ross & S. Horton Frederman	New Orleans Oct 5	4	4
107	Robert Butler and S. Alton Engstrom do do do	New Orleans Oct 7	6	4
108	John Ponce Frederman	New Orleans Oct 7	1	1
109	Napoleon Bonapart Frederman	New Orleans Oct 7	1	1
110	Andrew Green and others Frederman	New Orleans Oct 7	10	10
111	Marquise Kirkland and others Frederman	New Orleans Oct 7	11	8
112	John Miller and others Frederman	New Orleans Oct 8	6	0
113	Thomas Butler Frederman	New Orleans Oct 8	1	1
114	Samuel Thomas and Butler Frederman	New Orleans Oct 9	2	2
			51	45

Appraisal made in advantage with Amador & Co  
 Montreal Canada State of Louisiana

No of Bonds	Location	Measure	Remarks
	Stamora, Louisiana Br of West Louisiana	Stakes as appraised -	Price paid seven be-
50	Miss Taylor Stake Land complete	3 Acres, 1/2 mile, 1 cent 400 bonds of coin	
25		2 and 1/2 hrs.	
20	New York Stake Br of Orleans	4 Acres, Orleans best \$100 in cash	The appraised value of under others
	Agnes Plantation St. Charles	2 Acres, 2 plots land \$100 worth of rice, sugar and \$100.00	Wish to plant cotton &c
15	Advantage Stake Br of St. Charles	None	
10		\$25 in cash & \$10 coin	
100	Subland Plantation Br of Monroe	\$200 in cash & 1/2 lbs cotton 200 bonds coin & 1/2 lbs sugar \$100.	Wish to raise cotton, corn
100	Subland Plantation Br of Monroe	\$500 cash & 1/2 lbs cotton 500 lbs coin	Wish to raise coin cotton &c
150	Ed. Tucker Plantation Br of Bayou	5 Acres, stock poultry &c	Ask an early start
40	Exploit Plantation Br of Bayou	1 Acres, sugar &c 1/2 lbs coin	
		\$175 cash & \$100 coin	

We the undersigned have this day agreed  
to hire to James Mitchell for the year 1866  
for the following considerations Viz. Two bales  
cotton 500 each ten barrels corn five bushels  
wheat. Said James Mitchell is to furnish us  
in meat + bread. We are to furnish ourselves  
in clothing also we are to pay our own Doc-  
tors bills We also agree to do any kind  
of labor said James Mitchell may deem  
necessary outside of the crop, and at  
all times obeying strictly the instruction  
of the same Service to commence Janry  
1<sup>st</sup> Dec 25<sup>th</sup> Dec 1866

Attest  
J. W. Wilkes  
P. T. Kelly

James Mitchell  
Richard +  
Mary +  
Approved Janry 19<sup>th</sup> 1866  
John D. Gibson at Robert  
By J. B. W. Fennier at

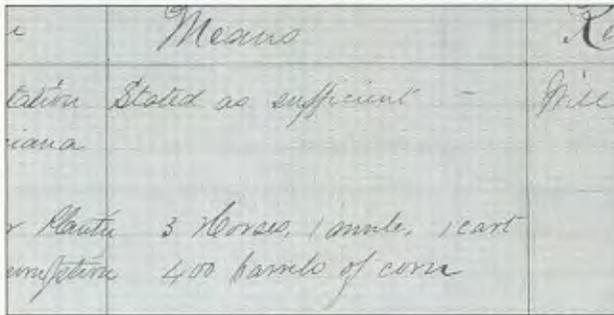


# TEACHING ACTIVITIES

## 1. Paired Brainstorming Activity

Remind students that President Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, the defeat of the Confederate army, and the passage of the 13th Amendment resulted in the freeing of approximately four million black people. Upon being freed, the former slaves found themselves in dire straits. Ask pairs of students to consider the following questions, and list their answers on the board:

- What needs did the ex-slaves have after slavery ended? (Answers might include: food, clothing, housing, employment, education, and voting rights.)
- What wants did the ex-slaves have after being freed? (Answers might include: education, political rights, land, and social equality.)
- What resources did they have at their disposal to meet their needs and wants? (Answers might include: money, farming implements, or work experience.)
- Which of the freedmen's needs and wants were tangible? (Answers might include: land, money, or housing.)
- Which of the freedmen's needs and wants were intangible? (Answers might include: political rights, social equality, equal protection of the law, safety from acts of violence, or education.)



## 2. Small-group Activity

Divide students into groups of four or five and inform them that in March of 1865, the federal government established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau) to address many of the concerns that students listed in Activity #1. Instruct students to take on the role of government officials working for the bureau and to select the four most important issues from their list. Ask them to come up with a strategy for addressing each of the four issues. Ask a representative from each group to share their strategy with the class.

## 3. Document Analysis Activity and Discussion

Duplicate and distribute the featured documents to students. Ask them to consider the following questions, and lead a class discussion based on their answers:

- What types of documents are these?
- What dates are listed in the documents?
- Who created the documents (position and title)?
- Why do you think these documents were written?
- List two things each document tells you about life in the United States at the time the documents were created.
- List two things from each document that you were surprised to learn about the conditions the freedmen were facing, about the institution of slavery, and about the Freedmen's Bureau.

## 4. Writing Activity

Provide students with a copy of the article; ask them to read it and then to write a two-page essay comparing what the Freedmen's Bureau actually did with what they thought the bureau would do (in Activity #2).

## 5. Writing Activity

Inform students that the Freedmen's Bureau records still exist and that in 2000, with the passage of congressional legislation and appropriations, National Archives staff members and volunteers began a five-year project to preserve, microfilm, and make available to a variety of audiences, the records created by the bureau. Ask student to identify, in writing, the value that these records hold for each of the following groups: (Genealogists, Historians, Educators, Filmmakers).

Ask students to identify other groups that may have a particular interest in Freedmen's Bureau records.

## 6. Extended Research Activity

Encourage students to conduct research on one of the following topics, and to share their findings with the class.

- Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard
- The founding of Howard University
- The legislation that created the Freedmen's Bureau
- The abolishment of the Freedmen's Bureau
- The Freedmen's Savings Bank and Trust Company
- Southern whites' reaction to the Freedmen's Bureau.

Bureau Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands.

By the authority of Circular No. 5, dated ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE KY. AND TENN., Nashville, Feb. 26, 1866, I certify that I have this day united Joseph Provinces and Mary Provinces <sup>used to belong to W. Hatcher</sup>, colored, in the bonds of matrimony, they having been living together as man and wife for about Twenty and years past. and have had, as the result thereof, the following children, viz:

Stephen Provinces Aged about 19 years. Stephen went off with Genl. Wilders command of U. S. Troops in 1863. and was heard from at Louisville Ky soon after Hood's raid to Nashville, probably went by the name of Sanders or Colhoun.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand in duplicate at office in Lebanon, Wilson County, Tennessee, April 23, 1866.

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

SUB-ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER'S (OR AGENT'S) MONTHLY REPORT

on Education of Freedmen and Refugees in Sub-District, State of North Carolina, in charge of Wm. Moore Agent,  
for the Month of November 1868, [in accordance with order contained in Circular No. 5, Bureau R., F., & A.I.]

1. Name of your Sub-District? Amherst
2. Whole number of Refuges or Freedmen's Schools in the District? Day? / Night? / 2 Sabbath?
3. Location of Schools? Leicester on near Beatty Ford Lincoln Co. near Dallas and at High Shoals Garden County, Washington 8 miles from Cherryville Gaston Co. in Chatham Co. near White Plains P.O. Chatham Co. called Institute. Western # 7 Miles White Plains P.O. Chatham Co. called Tompkins. at a School house called Philo Alpha near Gardner Ford P.O. Chatham Co.
4. Whole number of Teachers? White? 21 Colored?
5. Names and post office address of Day-School Teachers? H. C. Meade White Plains Reynolds Co. Leic education James Lewis Esq. Beatty Ford P.O. Lincoln Co. Misses Wilkes High Shoals P.O. Gaston Co. Mrs. Sophia C. Jones Dallas Garden Co. Susan Wellman Esq. Gardner Ford P.O. Chatham Co. Miss Adeline Clark Esq. White Plains P.O. Chatham Co. Miss Caroline Hays Esq. White Plains P.O. Chatham Co. Miss Elizabeth A. Church Gardner Ford P.O. Chatham Co. N. C.
6. Whole number of School-houses for Freedmen in your District? 17. Their condition, capacity, value, and by whom owned? See letter herewith enclosed.
7. Number of your visits to Schools? 8 Day? - Night? 3 Sabbath?
8. Number of educational meetings held by you during the month? 2 Where? Beatty Ford + Washington S House
9. Number and names of places, now destitute, in which Day-Schools might be organized? Edwards Settlement Garden Co. Rushington, Washington Co. also Perry Ridge Columbus + near Mill Spring Polk Co. Brooks + Shelby Chatham Co.
10. Number of pupils (estimated) who would attend such Schools? Edwards Settlement 50 Rushington 70 Perry Ridge 60 Columbus 50 Mill Spring 40 Shelby 50 Brooks 40 Chatham Co.
11. Amount which would probably be raised by the Freedmen, for school purposes, in each destitute neighborhood? Sufficient to board the teachers.
12. What efforts are you making to secure the support of schools by pupils, parents, boards of education, or the State government? I am trying to get the Freedmen to sustain their own schools. but they expect the State to do this, as provided for by the Constitution.
13. Whole number of additional School-houses, for Freedmen, now wanted in your Sub-District? 0.
14. Could you organize your Sub-District into School Districts, each with a School Committee pledged to carry on schools therein? Not without assistance from the Bureau or State.
15. To what extent would help from without be needed in such cases? By the teachers, board would be formed by the Freedmen.
16. What is the public sentiment as to the education of the Freedmen and Poor Whites? There is little encouragement, the people have false ideas. they imagine you must associate with the Negro exclusively. if you do any thing to improve his race, and they contribute nothing to the support of their schools, and Christian and Social Circles all strive to improve the condition of the Freedmen.
17. Are Night-Schools for Adults needed in your District? Yes. In what way could they be carried out? by a Free school system.
18. What more can this Bureau do for educating the children of Refugees (or Poor Whites)? Keep up the good work it has established until the State can carry the same on as successfully as the Bureau has.
19. How long will Northern charitable aid be needed for Freedmen and Refugee Schools of your District? Until the State makes the necessary provisions.

I hereby certify, on honor, that I have given personal attention to the matters herein named, and that the answers given are, according to my best knowledge and belief, correct.

Wm. Moore Agent  
Sub-Ass. Com., Bureau R., F., & A.I.

authorized to designate officers who shall keep a record of marriages, which may be solemnized by any ordained minister of the gospel.”

While many slave couples formed lasting bonds during their enslavement, slave marriages had no legal foundation or protection. The abolishment of slavery not only meant citizenship, but the ability to have legally recognized marriages without fear of the loss of a spouse through sale. The bureau facilitated new marriages, and recorded preexisting ones, such as the marriage of Joseph and Mary Provines, of Lebanon, Tennessee. Mr. and Mrs. Provines, whose marriage was legally recognized by the bureau on April 23, 1866, had in fact been married for about 21 years (see *Certificate of Matrimony for Joseph and Mary Provines*).

Tennessee and Mississippi enacted laws by 1867 requiring former slave couples to register their marriages with local county officials. In Tennessee, if local officials refused to issue licenses, qualified Freedmen’s Bureau officers were autho-

rized to perform marriage ceremonies and issue licenses and certificates.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Pursuing Education:**

Agent’s Monthly Report on Education of Freedmen and Refugees in Sub-District, North Carolina, November 1868.

Although the education work of the bureau began in the summer of 1865 with the appointment of superintendents of education in each of the states in which the bureau operated, the Education Division at bureau headquarters was not established until July 1866.<sup>7</sup> The bureau facilitated the founding of nearly 3,000 schools for the formerly enslaved and their children. The records they created include reports on the conditions and progress in these schools.

Many freedmen’s schools were supervised and staffed by members of private benevolent societies. Freedmen’s Bureau agents were required to submit reports on educational efforts in the locations where

they were assigned. Reports on schools often included information about the number of students attending school, student progress, and the effectiveness of teachers.

As revealed in a report from Lincolnton, North Carolina, despite their impoverished condition, freedmen often contributed to the support of their teacher by providing him or her food and a place to live. The push for public education in the former slaveholding states led by black politicians who were elected during Reconstruction was supported by freedmen and women in places like Lincolnton. Their attitudes regarding education can be gleaned from the answers to questions number 12 and 19 (see *Agent’s Monthly Report on Education of Freedmen*, page 25).<sup>8</sup>

#### **Notes**

1. William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O.O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New York: Norton & Company, 1994), 65.
2. Reginald Washington, “Marriage Records of the Office of the Commissioner, Washington Headquarters of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1861-1869,” National Archives and Records Administration Microfilm Publication M1875.
3. Ibid.
4. Elaine C. Everly, “Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Washington Headquarters,” National Archives Preliminary Inventory 174/RG 105, (1973).
5. The headquarters’ records and those for the field offices of the state assistant and subordinate offices consist of more than 1,000 cubic feet of records and contain nearly 5,000 separate series.
6. Washington, “Sealing the Sacred Bonds of Holy Matrimony: Freedmen’s Bureau Marriage Records,” *Prologue* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2005), [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/spring/freedman-marriage-recs.html](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/spring/freedman-marriage-recs.html)
7. Everly, “Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Washington Headquarters.”

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**KARLIL CHISM** is an education specialist at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. He would like to extend special thanks to archivist Reginald Washington for his assistance with the research for this article. You may reproduce the documents shown here in any quantity.

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