

# Freedmen's Bureau: The Purpose, Organization & Records

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## Introduction

A persistent desire among family history researchers is to learn how their enslaved ancestors lived and what their community was like. This is especially true of the transition period from slavery to freedom immediately following the Civil War. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands operated in 15 southern states and the District of Columbia to help freedmen, white refugees and the community as a whole recover from the ravages of the institution of slavery and a destructive war. Known as the Freedmen's Bureau, this complex military and government bureaucracy collected data and wrote first-person narrative reports on a wide range of community indicators including the health, education, race relations, general well-being, and status of the crops and labor. In true government fashion, they collected multiple and frequent reports to document the progress toward their objectives. The records represent a treasure trove of information waiting for researchers to discover, especially about the lives of formerly enslaved people and the conditions under which they lived.

The records are voluminous, with over 1918 rolls of microfilm, now digitized, giving researchers access to these important records at the desktop. Although some of the records are name-indexed, a successful targeted search depends on use of finding aids as the indispensable guides to navigating the contents of the record group.

## Learning Outcomes

- Describe the history and purpose of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands and its significance to African American research.
- Explain the organization of the Bureau and its reporting protocols including its relationship to the type of records that may be found at each level of the FB.
- Utilize descriptive finding aids to target Freedmen's Bureau records for a state and field office(s) of research.
- Analyze record content for details of the social, cultural and economic lives of freedmen during Reconstruction.

## History and Purpose

The Freedmen's Bureau was established in the War Department in 1865 and operated in 15 southern states and the District of Columbia until 1872. The Bureau's mission was to provide aid to the people of the South, including freedmen and white refugees, and to restore the economy of the South that had been destroyed by the Civil War.

The Bureau operated in:

Alabama Arkansas District of Columbia (Washington, DC) Florida Georgia	Kentucky Louisiana Maryland & Delaware Mississippi Missouri North Carolina	South Carolina Tennessee Texas Virginia
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Bureau functions were very broad:

- Establish and monitor labor contracts between freedmen, planters and former enslavers;
- Monitor plantation operations;
- Establish schools;
- Solemnize marriages;
- Reunite families;
- Render relief and medical assistance;
- Administer justice; more...

➔ Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands are located in National Archives Record Group 105. Review the information provided by NARA for this federal record group here <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau>

➔ Each set of microfilmed records is assigned its own “M” number. As an example, in the state of Alabama, the Records of the Assistant Commissioner are assigned M809; Records of the Superintendent of Education is assigned M810 and Records of the Field Offices are assigned M1900. These “M” numbers are provided in the previous link on the NARA page and also links researchers to images and information at FamilySearch.org. Use the NARA page to explore the drop-down menu for each state of research. (More about accessing record images will be provided in subsequent sections of this syllabus.)

### Bureau Organization and Records

The Bureau was organized as a top-down military hierarchy in which orders flowed down the chain of command and reports flowed up the chain of command. **The organizational structure of the Freedmen’s Bureau directly affects the type and content of the records** as well as how researchers target the locations of records that may help answer research questions.

Many different types of reports and records were generated by Bureau personnel at the various levels of operation in each state. The type of record you search for is determined by your defined research goal. If you are researching family names and circumstances, the records generated by the Bureau Commissioner in Washington, DC are not likely to include information related to your family history goals, but will have relevant information for those researching administrative and legal issues.

➔ The most name-specific information is likely to be found at the local levels where residents and Bureau personnel were in direct contact. This interaction occurred at the field-office and district levels.

Records were generated locally in the field offices established by the Bureau and filed to the next highest reporting office. As the information proceeded up the chain of command, it was consolidated and became more statistical in content.

➡ The types of records that researchers should search for in order to locate name-specific information includes (but is not limited to) **applications, registers, lists, marriage records, complaints, labor contracts and medical reports.**

Reporting Level	Who Generated the Records	Characteristics	Record Types Generated
Bureau Headquarters, Washington, DC	Commissioner	Official, statistical, administrative data; rarely includes family personal information	Letters, telegrams, reports to Congress and President, legal correspondence, personnel appointments
State	Assistant Commissioner	Consolidated numerical data collected from subordinates about the delivery of services; summary and periodic overviews on progress in the area; limited personal information	State-wide condition and status reports; periodic narrative reports on conditions and progress; consolidated lists and statistical data; applications and reports related to abandoned lands
	Superintendent of Education	Bureau educational activity on the establishment, operation and maintenance of schools; may contain names of teachers and locations of schools	Area-wide consolidated information on schools including the number of students, locations of schools, financial accounting,
District and/or Sub-Districts (in heavily populated areas with multiple field offices)	Sub-Assistant Commissioner	Consolidated information collected from field offices; some name-specific information may be present in less detail	Registers and lists with consolidated information on labor, education, destitution, medical aid; unexpected other record types
Field Office	Field Agent	Name-specific information collected locally from residents; greatest presence of names and personal information	Applications, appeals, complaints, contracts, censuses, plantation status reports, condition reports, marriage records, medical reports; unexpected other record types

Although there was some consistency to the hierarchical organization of the Bureau in the states of operation, there was much variation in *how* the work was carried out. It is important that researchers carefully explore Bureau operations in each state of research.

➡ To learn more about the organization of the Freedmen’s Bureau and the records generated at each level of the Bureau, read “Navigating Freedmen’s Bureau Records for Research

Success". *National Genealogical Society Magazine*. National Genealogical Society, 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2021.

- ➡ To learn about Bureau operation in each state, read the state-specific description of operations located in the finding aids or descriptive pamphlets for each state (described below). The finding aids or descriptive pamphlets will be found at the beginning of EVERY database for EVERY Microfilm Collection for EVERY state in which Freedmen's Bureau records will be found. Researchers should not skip this step as this state-specific description will provide important background about how the Bureau operated in your state of research.

### Identify the Field Office(s)

**Locate the field offices closest to where your research** subject lived. Be sure to research surrounding field offices.

- ➡ Find the field offices here: Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau <https://mappingthefreedmensbureau.com/> . This important resource, developed by Angela Walton-Raji and Toni Carrier, contains interactive maps, active links to the Descriptive Pamphlets, sample documents, locations of a wide range of Freedmen's Bureau facilities and so much more. Researchers should thank these genealogy educators for the work they continue to pour into this resource.

### The Finding Aids—The Descriptive Pamphlet and Beyond

Freedmen's Bureau records are uniquely identified by the National Archives as Record Group (RG) 105. The Descriptive Pamphlet (DP) is the finding aid developed by the National Archives at the time the records were microfilmed. The DP describes the contents of the record group, and each microfilm collection in the RG 105. This includes the Washington, DC headquarters and each state and field office in which the Freedmen's Bureau operated. The DP's Table of Contents consists of a series of paragraphs with italicized headings that describe the unbound records and volumes on the roll and their inclusive dates.

- ➡ You may download and study the DP for your state and region of research as it was written and laid out at the time the records were microfilmed.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau>

- ➡ Changes in technology have improved the way researchers can access Freedmen's Bureau records, making it easier for researchers to navigate the records. However, the order and organization of the records has not changed since established by the National Archives.
- ➡ The Descriptive Pamphlet has been reformatted at the Smithsonian Online Virtual Archive (SOVA) to enable researchers to download a key-word

searchable pdf with active links to images of the that group of images.  
Remember, the order and organization of the records remains the same.

This researcher finds it most useful to use both the original Descriptive Pamphlet in conjunction with the digitized Finding Aid at SOVA in navigating the records.

### Options for Record Access

The most widely used digital portals to access Freedmen's Bureau records are listed below. Try each one and discover the one that works best for your research style.

- ➔ Each database has unique capabilities and a different user interface, but the contents and order of the records remain consistent with NARA's original organization of the records and descriptions in the DP.

Internet Archive <https://archive.org/> (digitized microfilm rolls)

FamilySearch.org <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2721171>  
(digitized microfilm rolls, some searchable indexes) Also conduct a place search by state of research, >Slavery and Bondage>Records of the Assistant Commissioner or Records of the Field Offices

Ancestry.com <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/62309/>

Smithsonian Online Virtual Archive <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAAHC.FB>  
(digitized

- ➔ The Freedmen's Bureau Collection at the Smithsonian Online Virtual Archive has the most innovative and user-friendly interface that links researchers directly to the contents of the records. Despite digital access and continually increasing indexing, a page-by-page search for specific names is recommended in addition to using available name indexed searches.

### Freedmen's Bureau Research Strategy

- Study the organization of the Bureau and history of operations in the state of research.
- Study the Descriptive Pamphlet and/or finding aid of state of research, *really study*.
- Locate the field office(s) nearest to your ancestor, then the district and/or state office.
- Focus your research on record types that will advance your research goals.
- Identify the Microfilm Roll number that contains the types of records that could possibly answer your research question.

- Access the desired Microfilm Roll; microfilm on site, online at FamilySearch.org, Internet Archive, Smithsonian Online Virtual Archive, Ancestry.com or other online sources.
- Conduct a name-indexed search; follow with page-by-page search to locate research subjects. Don't forget to search the names of possible enslavers, family members, neighbors and associates.
- Repeat at the district and state levels.

## References

Crouch, Barry A. The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1992.

Everly, Elaine C. "Freedmen's Bureau Records: An Overview". *Prologue* 29, no.2 (Summer 1997): 95-99.

Freedmen's Bureau WIKI

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African\\_American\\_Freedmen%27s\\_Bureau\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African_American_Freedmen%27s_Bureau_Records)

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Warwick, Rick. Freedom and Work in the Reconstruction Era: The Freedmen's Bureau Labor Contracts of Williamson County, Tennessee. Heritage Foundation of Franklin and Williamson County, Tennessee, 2006.

White, Howard A. The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana. Louisiana State University Press, 1970.

Sample Freedmen's Bureau Records from Headquarters, State and Field Offices

Although marriage records were generated at the field offices, they were consolidated at the state and ultimately Commissioner's headquarters because of the importance the Bureau placed on solemnizing new and long-standing existing marriages.

[ RETURN TO BE MADE TO POST SUPERINTENDENT. ]

*Bulletin Bayou La Poudre December 11, 1864.*

I HAVE this day united in Matrimony, *William Austin* of *Louisiana* and *Sally Brooks* of *Louisiana*. Age of man *72* years; color, *Black*; do. of his father, *African*; do. of his mother, *African*; lived with another woman *one* years; separated from her by *death*. Age of woman, *55* years; color, *Black*; do. of her father, *African*; do. of her mother, *African*; lived with another man *—* years; separated from him by *—*. They, unitedly, have *three* children; do. of the man by previous connection, *—*; do. of the woman by do. *—*.

WITNESS:

*William Hancock*

*Maria Bonshores*

[ RETURN TO BE MADE TO POST SUPERINTENDENT. ]

*Concordia Parish La. May 1, 1865.*

I HAVE this day united in Matrimony, *Mr. George Anderson* of *Concordia La.* and *Mrs. Ann Mason* of *Concordia La.*. Age of man, *56* years; color, *Black*. do. of his father, *Black*; do. of his mother, *Black*; lived with another woman, *H* years; separated from her by *death*. Age of woman, *52* years; color, *Black*; do. of her father, *Black*; do. of her mother, *Black*; lived with another man, *S* years; separated from him by *death*. They, unitedly, have *three* children; do. of the man by previous connection, *—*; do. of the woman by do., *—*.

WITNESS:

*Mark Bergant*

*E. S. Trud*  
*Missionary.*

**Series Title:** Office of the Commissioner  
**Collection Title:** **Marriage Records** of the Office of the Commissioner, Washington Headquarters of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1861-1869  
**Image name:** 004420238\_00434.jpg



The Assistant Commissioner of each state held responsibility for records related to crimes against freedmen and committed by freedmen. This information would have been originally generated at the local field office level, and filed for adjudication at the state level.

18.

Receipt of Criminal Offenses

No.	City of Offense	Name of Criminal	Race	Charge	Name of Party Charged	Race
193	Houston	Montgomery	Weggs, W. J.	Homicide	Oleary	Black
194	Houston	Harris	Charles Henry Lawrence Bittel	Homicide	Jerry L. Lott	Black
195	Houston	Harris		Homicide	Stanley	Black
196	Houston	Garza	Stephen Rowland	Homicide		Black
197	Houston	Garza	Alta Brown	Homicide		Black
198	Houston	Bryant	C. C. Wilcox & S. Spang	Whipping boy		Black
199	Houston	Bryant	S. Spang & C. C. Wilcox	Whipping & poisoning	Kelsoe	Black
200	Houston	Leahy	Jerome DeBlanc	Whipping & holding for kidnapping	Sept. Bryant	Black
201	Houston	Leahy	Jerome DeBlanc	Whipping & holding after kidnapping	Bryant	Black (arriving)
202	Houston	Leahy	Jerome DeBlanc	Whipping after kidnap	Leahy	Black
203	Houston	Montgomery	Dr. Phillips	Whipping, poisoning, holding to kill	Leahy	Black

**Series Title:** Records Relating to Murders, Outrages, and Other Criminal Offenses  
**Collection:** Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869  
**Title:**  
**Image name:** 007676787\_00056.jpg



Due to the ravages of war, disease and natural disaster, black and white residents applied for rations and other assistance at the local field office level.

[No. 2.]  
CERTIFICATE OF APPLICANT.

Boston Bay Mar 26 1868

I (or we) *Julia Freeman* head of a family, consisting of  
*Myself and two children*  
of ..... County of *E. Bay*  
and State of *La.* do hereby solemnly declare, and upon *My* word of honor,  
certify that I (or we) *are* in absolute need of food "to prevent starvation and extreme  
want," rendered so by the following circumstances:  
*Old Age*

Signed by *he J*  
*Julia Freeman*  
the  
Applicants.

RECEIPT.

RECEIVED of *G. M. A. P. Co. P. R. La. H.* in the service of the United  
States of America, *16* lbs. of Pork, and *102* lbs. of Corn,  
issued under authority of Joint Resolution of Congress, approved March 30, 1867, "to pre-  
vent starvation," etc.

(Signed) *he J*  
*Julia Freeman*

Witness *J. M. S. S. S.*  
IN DUPLICATE

Note.—The legal bushel of Corn is fifty-six pounds.

**Series Title:** Subordinate Field Offices, Applications for Rations  
**Collection** Records of the Field Offices for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of  
**Title:** Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863-1872  
**Image name:** 007641652\_00399.jpg

Indenture for Orphan Children

This Indenture the 30<sup>th</sup> Day of March in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Sixty Six Witnesseth

That I Lieut Charles E. Merrill Asst Supt of Freedmen Parish St. Mary State of Louisiana acting as guardian of Silvia Barron aged 8 years an Orphan of Austin Barron Freedman

And in consideration of the services to be rendered by Silvia Barron to Jo<sup>s</sup> J. Hawkins and also for divers good causes hath bound and put the said Silvia Barron as servant to the said Jo<sup>s</sup> J. Hawkins to serve him his executors and assigns from the day of the date hereof for and during the term of seven years thence next ensuing during which term the said Silvia Barron faithfully shall serve and honestly and obediently do all things that a good servant ought to do

And the said Jo<sup>s</sup> J. Hawkins during the said term shall find said Silvia Barron with good and sufficient clothing board washing lodging and schooling and shall be allowed to attend Church on each Sabbath day

In Witness whereof the said Jo<sup>s</sup> J. Hawkins hath hereunto set his hand and seal the day and year above written

Signed Sealed and  
 attested in presence of } Jo<sup>s</sup> J. Hawkins  
P. C. Vestal  
V. J. Rice

Lieut Charles E. Merrill  
 Asst Supt of Freedmen  
 Parish St. Mary La

(Duplicate)

The Freedmen's Bureau had responsibility to place children who were orphaned or who could not be cared for in homes of selected white residents as "indentures".

**Series Title:** Subordinate Field Offices, **Indentures**  
**Collection** Records of the Field Offices for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of  
**Title:** Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863-1872  
**Image name:** 007641666\_01021.jpg

REGISTER OF							COLORED PERSONS.			
No. of Person	Name	Age	Sex	Class Laborer	Value	Former Owner	Former Residence	Rank Employer	Rank	REMARKS
27	Allen	27	Female	First	\$500	Adams & Edwards	Union Parish	A. Edwards	Plaquemine	
28	Ann	27	Female		\$500					
29	Augusta	20		Second	\$500					
30	Anna	15	Female		\$500					
31	Arcon	21	Male	First	\$500		Union	J. Wilson		
32	Augustine	25			\$500					
33	Anna (Kozak)	29	Female	Third	\$100					
34	Anna (Kozak)	25			\$100					
35	Aquid	15	Male							
36	Anna	1	Female							
37	Arabella	39	Female	First	\$500	Geo. W. Rogers	Orange Parish	Geo. W. Rogers		
38	Anna	9	Female							
39	Aranna	14		Third	\$500	W. H. Edwards	Carlow	J. E. Davis		
40	Archie	22			\$500					
41	Anna	22			\$500					
42	Anna (Kozak)	25		Fourth	\$500	W. H. Edwards	Carlow Parish	Edwards		
43	Arline	25	Female	First	\$500					
44	Arline (Kozak)	25			\$500					
45	Arline	20		Second	\$500					
46	Arline	18		Fourth	\$500					
47	Arline	27		First	\$500	J. A. Edwards	Star Parish	W. A. Had		
48	Arline	25			\$500					
49	Arline	17	Female							
50	Arline	8	Female							
51	Arline	11		Second	\$500			W. A. Had		Continued on Page 52
52	Arline	10		Fifth	\$500					
53	Arline	39	Female	First	\$500					
54	Arline	20		Third	\$500					
55	Arline	18	Female	Second	\$500					
56	Anderson Farm	21		First	\$500	J. A. Edwards	Carlow	W. A. Had		
57	Anna	25	Female		\$500					
58	Anna	26	Female		\$500	M. White	Union Parish	M. White		
59	Anna	12		Fourth	\$500					
60	Anna	20	Female	Third	\$500					
61	Anna	30		Fourth	\$500					
62	Anna	3								
63	Anna	14	Female	Third	\$500	M. White	Opelousas	A. Grant		
64	Anna	22	Female	First	\$500	Dr. Spence	Bayou de l'Asse			
65	Anna (Kozak)	24			\$500	John W. Stoney	Carlow			Continued on this page
66	Anderson (Kozak)	20								

**Series Title:** Subordinate Office, Registers of Colored Persons  
**Collection:** Records of the Field Offices for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863-1872  
**Title:**  
**Image name:** 007641622\_00411.jpg