

## Records

# The Freedmen's Bureau Records

**Diane L. Richard looks at a great resource for post Civil War research!**

TOO OFTEN IT IS assumed that Freedmen's Bureau Records only apply to ex-slaves and that couldn't be further from the truth. Though they are a great resource for researching emancipated slaves, they can also be helpful when researching "anyone" who lived post-war in those states directly impacted by the Civil War. If your family tree contains Confederate soldiers who were wounded or killed in action, their surviving parents, spouses or children might be found listed in these documents as they requested or received rations, were declared destitute, etc.

If your ancestors were freed, they might also be found receiving rations, or being a party to a contract, etc. Or, maybe their children attended a school. Maybe a soldier ended up at a hospital or your family returned to reclaim abandoned land — these and more are all reasons why "your" family might be found in these records, regardless of race or pre-war socioeconomic status.

Because the records of the "field offices" are the ones most likely to list the most "names," they are the easiest to discuss and research when first exploring these records for your ancestors. Think of "field offices" as the on-the-ground entity which your ancestor would have directly and personally (e.g., face-to-face) interacted with. So, unless stated otherwise, assume that the records below were found in the records of a "field office". The resource list pro-

vided will guide you to a lot of great information about this group of records!

### What is the Freedmen's Bureau?

Let's now talk a bit about the creation and operation of the Freedmen's Bureau (shorthand for



*African-American Union soldiers, undated.*

its full name), the records it produced and their utility to genealogists, and what resources will be helpful to you as you delve into these records. To help "focus" the discussion, North Carolina is used as an example, but do research the particulars for whichever state(s) interest you.

*"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 March 3, 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 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, 2004

### How Was it Organized?

There were many layers to the Freedmen's Bureau organization. You had Federal-level administration and bureaucracy and then each state had its own bureaucracy. For example, in North Carolina, there were originally four districts (New Bern, Raleigh, Wilmington and Goldsboro) divided into sub-districts. On 1 July 1867, the basic unit of organization for North Carolina was changed to the sub-district, of which 11 were established. Each

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sub-district would then have a small number of subdivisions. The organizational structure was again changed on 1 March 1868, when the state was again divided into the four sub-districts — Morganton, Wilmington, Raleigh and Goldsboro, with provisions for smaller subdivisions in each sub-district. By May 1869, all of the Bureau offices and functions, except education, were phased out in North Carolina. (Source: M1909 — this is the source for all subsequently quoted material.)

The key is to remember that the Freedmen's Bureau was established in the War Department. As with all Federal records, it is always important to know why, when, and where something was established. This knowledge is critical and directly influences how the entity operated, what records were kept and how they are organized.

This knowledge will help you efficiently and effectively identify which records you may want to examine and how you will do so.

## What Records Survive

Not all field offices operated for the duration and not all field offices performed the same functions. And, the finding aids for the microfilmed collections for each state tell you explicitly what records are extant for each field office, sub-district office and other entities as you move up the "chain of command" within the Freedmen's Bureau within each state and then at the Federal level.

Before you start researching into the records, do your homework regarding particular states and/or the various collections of this very large record group. A list of resources at the end of this piece will tell you more about the history, organization, record availability and much more.

This edited list gives you a sense of "some" of the records you might find listed for a certain office. **Bolded items** are probably of the broadest use for genealogical research, though all of these document types can be useful. Look at the example images for some of these "types" of records.

*Greensboro (Subassistant Commissioner).*

- Letters Sent — The single volume of letters sent, June 11-September 11, 1867, and October 3, 1867-November 1868
- Press Copies of Letters Sent — The single volume of press copies of letters sent, September 11-October 2, 1867
- Registers of Letters Received and Endorsements Sent — The two volumes of registers of letters received and endorsements sent are dated June 1867-November 1868
- Letters Received — Unbound letters received, June 1865-November 1868
- Special Orders and Circulars Issued — The single volume of special orders and circulars issued, June-November 1867. The volume also contains a **register of applications for employment**, June-Nov. 1867
- Reports of Operations — Unbound reports of operations, October 1865-November 1868
- Reports of Rations Issued — Unbound reports of rations issued, May 1866-July 1868
- Reports of Persons and Articles Hired — Unbound reports of persons and articles hired, September 1866 - October 1868
- Reports of Courts — Unbound reports of courts, January 1867-November 1868
- Reports of Outrages — Unbound reports of outrages, June 1867-October 1868
- Miscellaneous Reports — Unbound miscellaneous reports, 1866-68, are arranged by type of report. The series consists of **reports of arrests, sanitation, schools, indentures and indentures canceled.**
- Register of Rations Issued — The

single-volume register of rations issued, November 1865-May 1866 (109). The volume also contains a "**List of children bound**", a **register of the "police court of the Freedmen's Bureau," a list of indentures canceled, and a list of contracts made.**

- Register of Complaints and Letters Sent Relating to Complaints — The single-volume register of complaints and letters sent relating to complaints, June 1867-October 1868 (108) Records

- **Relating to Court Cases** — Unbound records relating to court cases, February 1865-December 1868

- Miscellaneous Records — Unbound miscellaneous records, 1865-67. The series consists of orders, bonds, **reports of sick and wounded, and freedmen's accounts relating to the receipt of supplies.**

As seen above, it is important to note that many of the records of interest for ancestral research are found in what is called "Miscellaneous" or "Miscellaneous Reports." Always check what is listed in these categories; if you don't, you will overlook some great gems!

## Select Record Types

Let's look closer at some of these record types and see how "juicy" they can be for one's research.

Rations were such a key need. If you were destitute, disabled, feeble, landless, etc., you could qualify for rations. Ration lists are probably the lists where you are the most likely to find many names listed, especially in the southern states where battles were waged, fields were trampled, cattle, pigs, grains and other supplies were confiscated, etc. Many individuals, especially in states like North Carolina, were desperate as the war ended.

Ration lists varied greatly in terms of their content. Some are basic lists of "head of households" stating how many adults, children and what rations were received.

Other lists also include information on how the household qualified for rations. Still others weren't lists, but rather applications where additional details might be found. And, on one list, those receiving rations were listed (with full names) along with the names of "who [they were] formerly owned by." This information is a bonanza for anyone researching slave ancestors — frequently the surnames differed. On another list, a woman states that she has four children and "never had a husband." Another ration list stated that "The colored people in my district are mostly employed by persons who paid them, none have applied to me for assistance, I have made enquire and do not hear of any who cannot get on by their own labor."

A goldmine of information on family composition, names, etc.

### Operated Hospitals

Health care was another need immediately after the war. Not only was the general population still going to have the types of medical/health needs it always has, you had returning soldiers suffering from unhealed wounds, unexplained fevers, venereal diseases (don't look at medical records unless you are willing to learn that your ancestor may have suffered from these), and many other maladies. This could be very valuable for you if you have someone in your family tree who you know served in the Civil War and yet whose compiled service record does not suggest a death during battle or in a military hospital. It may be that the soldier returned home to then be hospitalized.

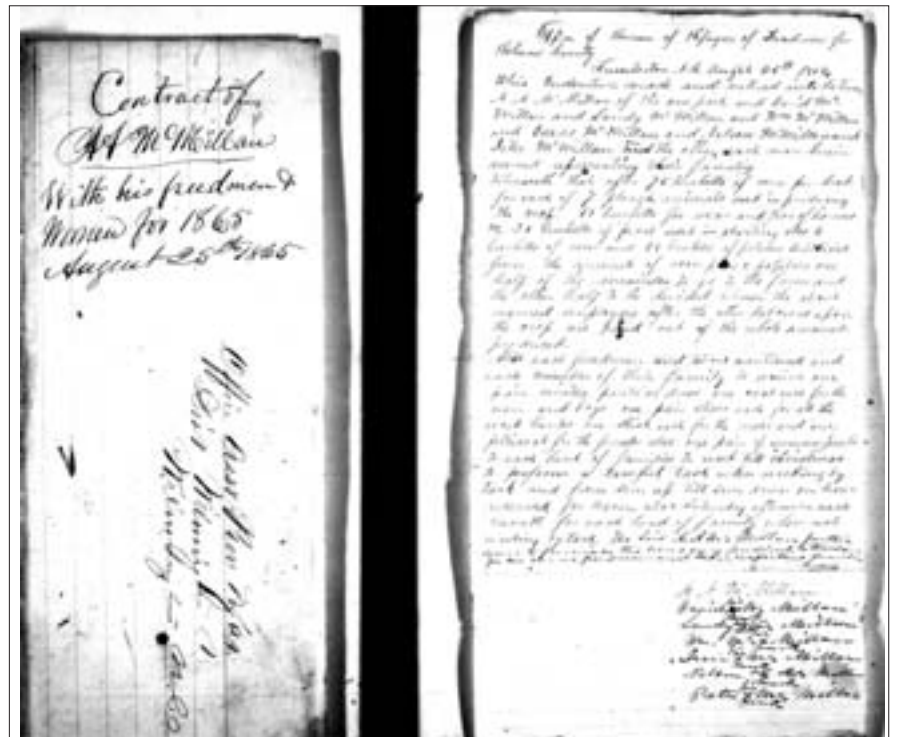
### Supervised Labor Contracts

A big area of concern was the regulation of written labor agreements between planters and freedmen. Essentially, freedmen were free to bargain with their prospective employers, though it was strongly suggested that both parties should sign written agreements in the presence of a Bureau official. This gave both parties some recourse for improperly dis-



Above: Ration Application from Burke County, NC lists out adults, children and reason for application.

Below: This Wilmington, NC contract summarizes details of both parties responsibilities.



missed freedmen and freedmen who did not satisfy their part of the contract.

Some records are lists of contracts stating the contractor, contractee (often freed slaves, but not always), duration of the contract

and sometimes, additional information. Other found records are complete contracts stipulating the parties to the contract, the work requirements for the "freed" slaves, provision requirements for the contractor (e.g., clothing,

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shoes), and the working rules (e.g., sun up till sun down, hour for lunch, time off).

## Supervised Apprenticeships

Apprentice arrangements were also still needed after the war. There were still orphaned children with no means of support.

Unfortunately, not all indentures provide "surnames" for the children apprenticed. Though, when you find a list of children, with descending ages, and connected to one household, there is a good chance that they might be siblings or related. It will require further research to prove or disprove any familial connection.

Do recognize that following the Civil War, "several Southern states, including North Carolina, enacted a series of laws commonly known as "black codes," which restricted the rights and legal status of freedmen." How involved the Freedmen's bureau could be with supporting the rights of the accused varied with time and the content of North Carolina law. As an example, "Discriminatory clauses in the laws regarding the apprenticing of black children by North Carolina courts seriously hindered the Freedmen's Bureau's efforts to obtain justice for freedmen." It wasn't until the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in January 1867, that all apprenticeship contracts (regardless of the child's color) were "null and void", were some of these abuses addressed.

## Operated Courts

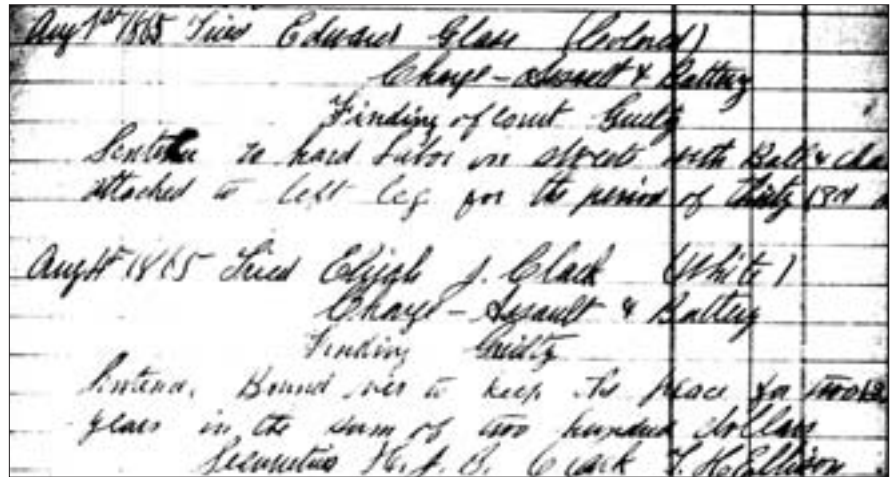
With this explosion of contracts and indentures, as well as a much larger "general population" (remember that under slavery, for the most part, the slave owners were given a lot of latitude in how to police their own plantations and mete out punishments), this was more than the courts could handle, and also probably reflected some concern about "how" equitably the courts might handle the new emancipated population.

The Freedmen's Bureau courts did not handle all cases — the more egregious crimes, such as

rape, murder, etc., were turned over to the standing court of the jurisdiction and, in North Carolina records, were noted as such in the Freedmen's Bureau court records.

The found records typically

lished Freedmen's schools. It was an opportunity for those "freed" to learn to read and write. It was interesting to see that, though traditionally, those enrolled in school and deemed as "infants" were



Above: Police Court Entries from Greensboro, NC detail who, what crime and the sentence passed.

Below: Thomasville, NC Freedmen's School list — Note that individuals older than 21 are listed.

No.	Male's Name	Age	No.	Male's Name	Age
1	Daniel Gungren	12	27	Lewis Gungren	6
2	Dony Gungren	6	28	Josef Hays	25
3	Lewis Smith	7	29	Stitcher Hays	5
4	Levi Obin	7	31	Henry Hays	10
5	Henry Thomas	8	31	Wagner Brown	6
6	Samuel Gooden	6	32	Samuel Brown	9
7	D. J. Gooden	17	33	Samuel May	4
8	John Nelson	9	34	Branson Ober	5
9	Sandra Thomas	10	35	Lincy Wagoner	10
10	Samuel Gungren	28	36	Andreas Thomas	11

listed when, who was tried (sometimes "color" is noted), the charge, the finding and the sentence imposed. Some sentences were monetary fines, some were "hard labor with ball & chain," some were a combination of fines and hard labor and some sentences were quite creative and very interesting to read.

## Established Schools

The Freedmen's Bureau also estab-

lished when, who was tried (sometimes "color" is noted), the charge, the finding and the sentence imposed. Some sentences were monetary fines, some were "hard labor with ball & chain," some were a combination of fines and hard labor and some sentences were quite creative and very interesting to read.

between the ages of 5 and 21, there were individuals attending the Thomasville (NC) Freedmen's school who were as old as 35. These are just a few examples of what the Freedmen's Bureau did to help look after the desperate needs of the US and its citizens in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Basically, the Freedmen's Bureau had responsibility for almost everything you can

imagine was needed after a devastating war as communities “picked up the pieces” and adjusted to a different state of affairs, in terms of personal freedom and circumstances, than was experienced before the war.

### What Else You Need to Know About These Records

Now that you are convinced that these records might help your research, there are a few things you need to realize about these records:

- Since not all counties (in a state) had an office, you sometimes have to dig around a bit to determine which sub-district or subdivision might be applicable for your family and then check its records.
- Some of the larger offices handled paperwork covering many counties. Do not assume that because a county was not contiguous to where you are looking, that there might not be records located in a sub-district office’s collection.
- Many ration (and other) records were separated into “White” and “Freed People” lists.
- After the initial extensive issuing of rations in 1865, by 1 January 1866, aid was refused to those persons able to work. Though, between 1867 and 1868, crop failures and other emergencies necessitated further issuance of rations.
- As with any document collection, do not assume that this collection is complete. There may be many reasons why you won’t find an ancestor listed.
- As we know from individual state research, the records for all of one county within a state are not identical in content, format, etc. And, this holds true for the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau, as you saw from the discussion about Rations.
- Records are found in funny places sometimes. Think of a mover packing your stuff and

labeling the boxes — even if they put some stuff from elsewhere in the household in the box, often it is only labeled with where the majority of the stuff came from. The identifying information provided for each item found in the microfilm is typically accurate, though not always complete. For example, some Hospital Records were found listed under “Register of Rations Issued.” And, don’t forget, as mentioned, many important records are part of the “Miscellaneous Category.”

- Services were provided based on need and for finite times. You won’t find rations records that go on for months and months at a time — you might find a two-month window where rations were issued for that year to hold the community until the next crop came in. Other “needs” were handled for similar “short spurts.” The detailed microfilms will tell you exactly the period encompassed by each record type that survives for each field office, district office, etc.

The above examples are all from the Field Office records for North Carolina and do know that for each state, there is more than one collection of applicable Freedmen’s Bureau records. For example, for North Carolina, there are the following collections:

- M1909, Records of Field Offices for the State of North Carolina, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872 (78 rolls) — these records are the type already discussed.
- M843, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of North Carolina Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870 (38 rolls) — Records regarding the “Boston Fund” and reports on sanitary conditions, rations, outrages, arrests, court cases, labor contracts, indentures and much more.
- M844, Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of North Carolina Bureau of

Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870 (16 rolls) — Records related to efforts to establish schools for freedman and includes school report, reports of persons hired, etc.

- M803, Records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1871 (35 rolls) — Covers all states.

### In Conclusion

The Freedmen’s Bureau records are an incredibly rich research resource for anyone researching ancestors who lived in post-Civil War Delaware to Texas. As one can imagine, they are particularly relevant for the states where battles took place and destruction was widespread, or in states like North Carolina, which lost at least 35,000 soldiers (Confederate and Union) leaving a largely poverty-stricken state. So many widows caring for small children, children left orphaned, and the old, were no longer able to care for themselves, with no sons who survived the war to help out.

Records of slave unions/marriages, rations, contracts, medical care, court actions, abandoned land, apprenticeships, schooling and so much more, provide a very detailed “slice of life” of the time period from 1865-1868 (and sometimes later). Whether your ancestors were emancipated slaves, former plantation owners or just regular folks, there is a very good chance that they will be found in the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau.

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*Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for over 24 years. She discovered Freedmen’s Bureau Records in the summer of 2010 and has given several talks on them. She currently does professional research in NC and DC and can be found online at [www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy](http://www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy).*