Tips and Tricks: Using the Freedmen’s Bureau Collection for African American Research

Navigating a sea of 4 million Bureau records to find your ancestors

The Freedman’s Bureau was formed by Congressional decree to assist freed slaves transition to citizenship after the Civil War. Imagine literally overnight, in the spring of 1865, following this nation’s first Civil War, being one of 4 million people who went from being a slave or indentured servant to being a new citizen of the United States of America. You most likely found yourself as a refugee. You, and your family, were most likely illiterate. You needed to legally establish your name and identity, and to receive some formal education to learn how to at least read and write. You might have been in need of healthcare assistance for medical problems. You certainly needed a place to call your own, so you needed to understand how to navigate the court system to be a landowner or find a place to stay until you could afford rent. This insight helps to understand the many services provided by the newly established Freedmen’s Bureau during reconstruction following the Civil War, and where you might look to find your ancestors from the Bureau’s many records of operations or correspondence.

The Bureau supervised all relief and educational activities relating to freedmen in 15 states and the District of Columbia, including issuing rations, clothing and medicine. Though its seven-year life span was fraught with problems that limited its effectiveness, a wealth of records was kept for all its activities.

As DiscoverFreedmen.org volunteers make these precious documents easily searchable online, descendants of the emerging citizens/patrons of the Bureau can emancipate a treasure trove of precious details about their ancestors hidden and locked within the musty record books that have been virtually mute until now.

Quick Steps

First of all, it helps to know that with all the Bureau was tasked with, what kinds of records were kept and the types of information you’ll find in each.

Information by Record Type for Family History Research

Freedmen names and other personal data and information can be found in records such as:
➢ **Hospital patient records**: Records from hospitals and dispensaries may include the names of patients or those who requested admittance, and sometimes their ages, residences, and dates of death.

➢ **Bounty registers and registers of military claimants**: Freedmen and refugees who served in the military could claim military benefits. These applications often include the name of the claimant, company and regiment, the date of the claim, and possibly the names of surviving relatives.

➢ **Labor contracts, apprenticeships, and indentures**: Contracts between employers (usually farmers and plantation owners) and freedmen or apprentices include the names of the contracting parties, periods of service, rate of wages, and other contract details.

➢ **Registers of complaints**: Complaints reported to bureau officers for a large variety of situations: wages withheld, children not being returned to their parents after their apprenticeships ended, abuse or threats of violence, and more. These registers include the names of freedmen, the nature of the complaints, and sometimes the case summaries and names of the defendants.

➢ **Registers of marriages**: Registers kept by Bureau officers give the names of the couple and date the marriage was registered. They may also include the name of the minister who performed the ceremony and information on previous marriages such as the number of children from those marriages.

➢ **Ration reports and applications**: Requests for rations, clothing, and medicine made to bureau officials may include the name of the person requesting the rations, his or her age, gender, race, residence, the reason for the request, and possibly the number and names of his or her family members.

➢ **Land records**: Lists of abandoned or confiscated lands held by Bureau officers often give the name of the former owner, the location of the property, how the property was acquired, when it was restored to the former owner, and other details.

➢ **Court records**: Records of court cases usually include the names of the plaintiffs and the defendants, details about the case, and the decision or verdict.

### How to Access the Freedmen’s Bureau Records

To view these incredible records online, follow these steps:

➢ Go to FamilySearch.org
➢ Select the SEARCH icon from the menu
➢ Under the world map, click on the link **Browse All Published Collections**

![Browse All Published Collections](image)

➢ In the upper left corner you will find a search box to **Filter by collection name** – type in Freedmen’s Bureau

![Filter by collection name](image)

➢ This will bring up a list of all digital collections, organized alphabetically by state.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Records</th>
<th>Last Updated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1872</td>
<td>Browse Images</td>
<td>07 Jul 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1864-1872</td>
<td>Browse Images</td>
<td>18 Jun 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SEARCHING THE COLLECTIONS

Click on the Title to open your selected collection.

➢ If online volunteers have finished indexing the collection, you will see search boxes that enable you to enter an ancestor’s name and other criteria to help filter your search.
➢ If the collection has not been indexed yet, you’ll be offered the opportunity to search the digital images of the collection. Click on Browse Images to see a list of that state’s records and subordinate field offices within the state by city name. Click on an item to open the digital images, and use the tools available to navigate the images in search of your ancestors.

VIEWING THE IMAGES

➢ If a collection is indexed, you’ll just need to click on the camera icon next to a name in your search results to see the original image.
➢ If the collection is browse images only, the digital photos have been grouped and “waypointed” at a high level to help facilitate your manual navigation. You can look at the original images in the image viewer and use the viewer’s tools to navigate, zoom, download, or print.