



Smithsonian

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Records of the Superintendent of Education for
the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees,
Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Museum of African American History and Culture
Title:	Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870
Date:	1865–1870
Identifier:	NMAAHC.FB.M1000
Extent:	9 Reels
Language:	English .
Summary:	This collection is comprised of digital surrogates previously available on the nine rolls of microfilm described in NARA publication M1000. These digital surrogates reproduced the records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870. The records consist of eight volumes and some unbound documents. The volumes include letters and endorsements sent and registers of letters received. The unbound documents consist primarily of letters and reports received.
Digital Content:	Image(s): M1900-Representative-Image

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Acquired from FamilySearch International in 2015.

Related Materials

See also [Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection](#)

Preferred Citation

Courtesy of the U. S. National Archives and Records Administration, FamilySearch International, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Restrictions

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Historical Note

[The following is reproduced from the original NARA descriptive pamphlet for M1000.]

HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION

The Freedmen's Bureau, as the Bureau was commonly known, was established in the War Department by an act of March 3, 1865 (13 Stat. 507), and extended twice by acts of July 16, 1866 (14 Stat. 173), and July 6, 1868 (15 Stat. 83). Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, appointed Commissioner by the President in May 1865, served in that position throughout the existence of the Bureau. In January 1869, in accordance with an act of July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), Bureau operations in the States were terminated except for educational functions and the collection of claims. These activities were terminated June 30, 1872, as required by an act of June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366).

Although the Bureau was part of the War Department, its work was primarily social and economic in nature. The Bureau cooperated with benevolent societies in issuing supplies to destitute persons and in maintaining freedmen's schools; supervised labor contracts between black employees and white employers; helped black soldiers and sailors collect bounty claims, pensions, and backpay; and attended to the disposition of confiscated or abandoned lands and property. In Tennessee, Bureau officials expended much time and effort seeking to protect freedmen from intimidation and physical violence at the hands of hostile whites.

The act of March 3, 1865, authorized the appointment of assistant commissioners to aid the Commissioner in supervising the work of the Bureau in the States. In July 1865, Brig. Gen. Clinton B. Fisk took command as the Assistant Commissioner in Tennessee with headquarters at Nashville. From July 1865 until June 1866 the Assistant Commissioner of Tennessee also had jurisdiction over the State of Kentucky and the northern part of Alabama.

In a circular issued by Commissioner Howard in July 1865, the Assistant commissioners were instructed to designate an officer in each State to serve as "General Superintendents of Schools." These official were to "take cognizance of all that is being done to educate refugees and freedmen, secure proper protection to schools and teachers, promote method and efficiency, correspond with the benevolent agencies which are supplying his field, and aid the Assistant Commissioner in making his required reports." In October 1865 a degree of centralized control was established over Bureau educational activities in the States when Rev. John W. Alvord was appointed Inspector of Finances and Schools. In January 1867 Alvord was divested of his financial responsibilities and was redesignated General Superintendent of Education.

The educational activity of the Bureau in Tennessee was under the direction of Brigadier General Fisk until the appointment of Lt. Col. Alexander M. York as Superintendent of Education on July 28, 1865. He was succeeded on August 23, 1865, by John Ogden, later President of Fisk University at Nashville, who served until May 1866. His successor, Rev. David Burt, served until April 1868, at which time Bvt. Lt. Col. James Thompson assumed the office. Thompson served concurrently as Assistant Commissioner of Tennessee until April 1869. In May 1869 Bvt. Lt. Col. Charles E. Compton, former Assistant Commissioner of North Carolina, became Superintendent of Education and served in that capacity until July 1870, when all Bureau educational activities in the State ceased. Information on educational matters during the tenures of York and Ogden may be found among the records of the Assistant Commissioner of Tennessee. There is very little documentation of educational efforts in the States prior to March 1866 in the records of the Superintendent of Education.

The Superintendent of Education served under the Assistant Commissioner as a staff officer. Subordinate to both the Assistant Commissioner and the Superintendent of Education were subassistant commissioners (with headquarters at Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Pulaski) who commanded the five subdistricts into which the State was divided. Subassistant commissioners supervised all Bureau activities, including education, in their respective areas and reported on educational matters to both the Superintendent of Education and the Assistant Commissioner. The subdistricts were further subdivided into agencies, usually coinciding with counties. Among the more significant of these local offices were those headquartered at Columbia, Gallatin, Jackson, Lebanon, Murfreesboro, Springfield, and Trenton.

The schools maintained by the Bureau in Tennessee included day schools for children, night schools for adults, and Sabbath schools. Rudimentary education, including reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography, received primary emphasis in most Bureau schools. Teachers were recruited from the local white population, from among the freedmen themselves, and from the North by the freedmen's aid societies.

The Bureau's responsibility for education in Tennessee included establishment and maintenance of schools and the examination and appointment of teachers. Bureau funds were used to pay for construction and repair of school buildings, for rental of properties used for educational purposes, and for providing teachers with transportation. A number of schools established by local whites and freedmen were subsequently given direction and support by the Bureau. Teachers' salaries and cost of textbooks were provided by the aid societies and the freedmen.

The volumes reproduced in this microfilm publication were originally arranged by type of record and thereunder by volume number. Originally, no numbers were assigned to series consisting of single volumes; later, all volumes were arbitrarily assigned numbers by the Adjutant General's Office of the War Department after the records came into its custody. In this microfilm publication, the last set of assigned numbers are shown in parentheses and are useful as an aid in identifying the volumes. Numbered blank pages have not been filmed.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

American South
Freedmen's Bureau
Reconstruction, U.S. history, 1865-1877
Slaves -- Emancipation

Container Listing

Series 1: Press Copies of Letters Sent

Scope and Contents: The records of the Superintendent of Education include four volumes of letters sent: three volumes of press copies of miscellaneous letters sent and one volume of press copies of letters sent to General Howard and staff.

Press copies were made by moistening a piece of thin paper and pressing it on the original letter through the use of a press copying machine, which transferred some of the ink to the moistened paper. Because of the relative crudeness of this method, many of the press copies are difficult to read and some are virtually illegible.

1.1: Volume 1 (36)

Scope and Contents: The three volumes of press copies of miscellaneous letters sent, February 26–May 8, 1866, September 26, 1866–July 15, 1870, are arranged chronologically, and each volume contains a name index. Letters sent to Howard prior to July 19, 1869, are included in the first two volumes of miscellaneous letters sent described above.

Most of the letters sent are either to officials of aid societies in the North or teachers and other Bureau officials on the field. Letters to the aid societies generally sought additional money and personnel, whereas correspondence with teachers and district superintendents dealt primarily with routine matters of forms, salaries, and repairs to school buildings. Occasionally, however, the Superintendent wrote to reprimand a teacher regarding the performance of duties. More frequently, he wrote letters to editors or other influential persons praising the work of Bureau teachers. Also included among the letters sent are numerous letters of transmittal and one lengthy report of David Burt, dated May 8, 1867, on education at Knoxville.

1.1.1: [Volume 1 \(36\), Feb. 26–May 8, 1866](#)

1.1.2: [Volume 1 \(36\), Sept. 26, 1866–Aug. 26, 1868](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

1.2: Volume 2 (37), Aug. 26, 1868–July 15, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and Contents: The three volumes of press copies of miscellaneous letters sent, February 26–May 8, 1866, September 26, 1866–July 15, 1870, are arranged chronologically, and each volume contains a name index. Letters sent to Howard prior to July 19, 1869, are included in the first two volumes of miscellaneous letters sent described above.

Most of the letters sent are either to officials of aid societies in the North or teachers and other Bureau officials on the field. Letters to the aid societies generally sought additional money and personnel, whereas correspondence with teachers and district superintendents dealt primarily with routine matters of forms, salaries, and repairs to school buildings. Occasionally, however, the Superintendent wrote to reprimand a teacher regarding the performance of duties. More frequently, he wrote letters to editors or other influential persons praising the work of Bureau teachers. Also included among the letters sent are

numerous letters of transmittal and one lengthy report of David Burt, dated May 8, 1867, on education at Knoxville.

1.3: Volume 3

1.3.1: [Descriptive Name Index to Volume 3](#)

Notes: A separate descriptive name index to the third volume of letters sent, July 19, 1869–July 15, 1870, provides a brief one–line summary of each letter. Included in these volumes are copies of a few letters sent by J. H. Barnum, Assistant Superintendent of Education.

Most of the letters sent are either to officials of aid societies in the North or teachers and other Bureau officials on the field. Letters to the aid societies generally sought additional money and personnel, whereas correspondence with teachers and district superintendents dealt primarily with routine matters of forms, salaries, and repairs to school buildings. Occasionally, however, the Superintendent wrote to reprimand a teacher regarding the performance of duties. More frequently, he wrote letters to editors or other influential persons praising the work of Bureau teachers. Also included among the letters sent are numerous letters of transmittal and one lengthy report of David Burt, dated May 8, 1867, on education at Knoxville.

1.3.2: Volume 3 (38), July 19, 1869–July 15, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 2: Press Copies of Letters Sent to General Howard and Staff

Scope and Contents: The volume of press copies of letters sent to General Howard, July 19, 1869–July 15, 1870, is arranged chronologically. A chronological listing at the beginning of this volume provides a brief one–line summary of each letter. Letters sent to Howard prior to July 19, 1869, are included in the first two volumes of miscellaneous letters sent described above.

Most of the letters sent are either to officials of aid societies in the North or teachers and other Bureau officials on the field. Letters to the aid societies generally sought additional money and personnel, whereas correspondence with teachers and district superintendents dealt primarily with routine matters of forms, salaries, and repairs to school buildings. Occasionally, however, the Superintendent wrote to reprimand a teacher regarding the performance of duties. More frequently, he wrote letters to editors or other influential persons praising the work of Bureau teachers. Also included among the letters sent are numerous letters of transmittal and one lengthy report of David Burt, dated May 8, 1867, on education at Knoxville.

2.1: Volume 1 (35), July 19, 1869–July 15, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 3: Registers of Letters Received and Endorsements Sent

Scope and Contents: According to the record-keeping practices of the 19th-century, incoming communications were entered in registers of letters received. In addition to a summary of the contents of the incoming letter, the registers usually include such identifying information as the name and sometimes the office of the writer, the date of receipt, the date of communication, the place from which it was written, and the entry number assigned. Endorsements sent are also characteristics of 19th-century record-keeping practices. A reply to an incoming letters was frequently written on the letter itself or on a specially prepared wrapper. The reply, termed an endorsement, was then copied into an endorsement book (or, in this case, a register of letters received), and the endorsed letter was returned to the sender or forwarded to another office.

Entries in the two volumes of registers of letters received and endorsement sent, September 1, 1866–July 20, 1870, are arranged and numbered by date of receipt. There are two numerical sequences, the first for the period September 1866–December 1869 and the second for the period January–July 1870. There is a separate name index volume covering both registers. The numbers in the index refer to both page and entry numbers.

A number of documents entered in the registers are no longer to be found among the series of registered letters received. Most of the missing letters were forwarded to another office or returned to the sender. The National Archives and Records Services (NARS) staff has placed an asterisk near the writer's name in the register for each letter that is still present in the registered series. School reports from the subordinate officers and teachers were entered in the registers as correspondence, but only the letter of transmittal was filed with the letters received; the actual reports were filed in separate series that have been reproduced on Rolls 6 – 9 of this microfilm publication.

3.1: Index of Volumes 1 and 2 (35), Sept. 1, 1866–July 20, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

3.2: Volume 1 (33), Sept.1, 1866–Sept.14, 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

3.3: Volume 2 (34), Sept. 14, 1869–July 20, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 4: Registered Letters Received

Scope and Contents: The letters received by the Superintendent of Education include both registered and unregistered letters received. The registered letters received by the Superintendent of Education, September 6, 1866–July 15, 1870, are arranged as entered in the registers. They include correspondence written to individuals other than the Superintendent but forwarded to and retained by his office. Letters written by and subsequently returned to the Superintendent are also included.

The letters received cover many subjects. Most deal with routine matters regarding the regular operation of Bureau schools in Tennessee; they were sent by teachers in the field or by representatives of aid societies in the North. Teachers asked advice on a difficult matter, sought payment for transportation fees, complained about inadequate support, and occasionally, asked for better protection. Freedmen who were anxious to organize a school wrote frequently to the Superintendent for help. Also included among the letters received are directives from Bureau headquarters at Washington or Nashville, applications from teachers for positions, requests for authorization to purchase or repair property, and letters of transmittal.

4.1: Letters Received (Entered in Register 1), Sept. 1866–Dec.1867

[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)

4.2: Letters Received (Entered in Register 1), Jan. 1868–June 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)

4.3: Letters Received (Entered in Registers 1 and 2), July 1869–July 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)
[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 5: Unregistered Letters Received

5.1: Unregistered Letters Received, Nov. 13, 1865–Feb. 8, 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and Contents:

The letters received by the Superintendent of Education include both registered and unregistered letters received. The small number of unregistered letters received, November 13, 1865–February 8, 1869, are arranged chronologically. The NARS staff has prepared a name index to these documents; the index has been filmed on roll 5 immediately preceding the unregistered letters.

The letters received cover many subjects. Most deal with routine matters regarding the regular operation of Bureau schools in Tennessee; they were sent by teachers in the field or by representatives of aid societies in the North. Teachers asked advice on a difficult matter, sought payment for transportation fees, complained about inadequate support, and occasionally, asked for better protection. Freedmen who were anxious to organize a school wrote frequently to the Superintendent for help. Also included among the letters received are directives from Bureau headquarters at Washington or Nashville, applications from teachers for positions, requests for authorization to purchase or repair property, and letters of transmittal.

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Series 6: School Reports

Scope and Contents: Among the records of the Superintendent of Education are three series of reports sent and three series of reports received from Bureau personnel. The three series of copies of retained reports include (1) annual narrative reports submitted to Bureau headquarters at Washington, (2) monthly school reports also submitted to Bureau headquarters at Washington, and (3) a small number of special reports submitted to Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee. Reports received by the Superintendent from subordinates include monthly school reports by subassistant commissioners and agents, by district superintendents, and by teachers.

6.1: Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Education, (bulk Jan.–Mar. 1866, Oct. 31, 1866, June 29, 1867, Sept. 30, 1867, June 30, 1868, June 30, 1869, Dec. 31, 1869 and June 30, 1870)

Image(s)

Scope and Contents: The four annual reports of the Superintendent of Education are dated October 31, 1866, September 30, 1867, June 30, 1868, and June 30, 1869. Interfiled with the annual reports are a quarterly statistical report of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Kentucky and Tennessee, January–March 1866, and three semiannual reports dated June 29, 1867, December 31, 1869, and June 30, 1870. These reports summarize educational developments in the State during the designated periods and provide statistical information on pupils, teachers, and schools. Subjects discussed in the reports include the status of day schools, night schools, and Sabbath schools; the cooperation with the aid societies; the impact of the State School Law, passed by the Tennessee Legislature on February 5, 1867, and revoked on May 31, 1869; and the popular attitude toward freedmen's school.

6.2: Monthly Reports of the Superintendent of Education, Oct. 1866–June 1870

Image(s)

Scope and Contents: The monthly school reports of the Superintendent of Education, October 1866–June 1870, are arranged chronologically. The information given on the form is largely statistical and relates to the number of pupils, teachers, and schools. For the period December 1868–March 1869, narrative reports of the Assistant Superintendent of Education, J. H. Barum, are interfiled with the monthly school reports. This series also includes monthly statistical reports submitted to the Superintendent by educational institutions, such as Fisk University and the Colored Baptist Institute in Nashville.

6.3: Special Reports, Sept. 1865–June 1870

Image(s)

Scope and Contents: The special reports, September 1865–June 1870, are arranged generally in chronological order. Primarily narrative in form, the reports provide information on property owned, rented, or required by the Bureau in Tennessee and on the general condition of education in various parts of the State.

6.4: Monthly Reports from Subassistant Commissioners and Agents, May 1867–June 1870

Image(s)

Scope and Contents:

The monthly school reports from subassistant commissioners and agents, May 1867–June 1870, are arranged chronologically. They generally contain information on schools in an entire subdistrict, although some are for smaller jurisdictions. Most of the reports were submitted on forms containing 19 questions relating to the number of schools in operation and teachers employed, the need for additional schools and teachers, the efforts and ability of the freedmen and the aid societies to meet the educational needs of the subdistrict, and the public sentiment toward the education of freedmen and impoverished whites.

6.5: Monthly Reports from District Superintendents

Scope and Contents:

The monthly school reports from district superintendents, January–March 1866 and October 1866–June 1870, are arranged chronologically. They generally report on the schools in a single city or county, though occasionally the information covers several counties, an entire subdistrict, or a single school. The reports are statistical in nature, and were submitted on a variety of forms. They usually list the names and locations of schools and their sponsoring Societies. The reports show whether the schools were maintained by the freedmen or by societies, who owned the building, the amount of tuition paid by the freedmen, and the Bureau's expense for the school. The reports also give a large number of categories of information relating to the pupils at each school as follows: sex; color; number of pupils over 16 years of age; degree of literacy; number of pupils in writing, arithmetic, geography, needlework, and the "higher branches;" and the number who were free before the war. The reports from district superintendents give essentially the same kind of information as the monthly reports prepared by the Superintendent of Education, and were evidently used by him in compiling his reports. Filed at the beginning of the monthly reports from district superintendents are some undated monthly reports, which probably were submitted between October and December 1865. They include reports from Stevenson, ALA., and Paducah, KY.

6.5.1: Monthly Reports from District Superintendents, (bulk Jan.–Mar. 1866 and Oct. 1866–June 1870)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

6.6: Monthly Reports from Teachers

Scope and Contents:

The teacher's monthly school reports, September–December 1865 and October 1866–June 1870, are arranged chronologically and thereunder numerically, in part. Many of the reports are unnumbered, and numbers are frequently duplicated for a given month. The reports give much of the same statistical information that is provided in the reports from district superintendents and subassistant commissioners. Interfiled with the reports dated September–December 1865 are several letters responding to a circular issued by John Ogden on September 1, 1865, which asked 18 questions on the form submitted by subassistant commissioners and agents. A copy of the circular has been reproduced at the beginning of this subseries.

6.6.1: Monthly Reports from Teachers, (bulk Sept.–Dec. 1865 and Oct. 1866–May 1867)

[Image\(s\)](#)

Image(s)

6.6.2: Monthly Reports from Teachers, June 1867–Apr. 1869

Image(s)

Image(s)

Image(s)

Image(s)

Image(s)

Image(s)

Image(s)

6.6.3: Monthly Reports from Teachers, May 1869–June 1870

Image(s)

Image(s)

Image(s)

Image(s)

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Series 7: Other Records

Scope and Contents: The unbound miscellaneous papers, 1865–1870, are arranged by type of record and thereunder generally in chronological order. They include the following kinds of records: receipts from teachers for the payment of transportation fees, affidavits filed by teachers certifying they had been at their posts, circulars and orders emanating from Bureau headquarters at Washington or Nashville, financial records and miscellaneous lists of the counties.

7.1: Receipts From Teachers, Oct. 1866–Dec. 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

7.2: Teachers' Affidavits, Jan.–June 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

7.3: Circulars and Orders, Sept. 1865–Sept. 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

7.4: Copies of Deeds and Other Financial Records, Sept. 1867–Apr. 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

7.5: Miscellaneous Lists, Oct. 1867–Mar. 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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