



Smithsonian

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Selected Series of Records Issued by the
Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees,
Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Museum of African American History and Culture
Title:	Selected Series of Records Issued by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872
Date:	1865–1872
Identifier:	NMAAHC.FB.M742
Extent:	7 Reels
Language:	English .
Summary:	This collection is comprised of digital surrogates previously available on the 7 rolls of microfilm described in NARA publication M742. These digital surrogates reproduced the records of the Selected Series of Records Issued by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872. This collection contains seven volumes of letters sent, six volumes of endorsements sent, one volume of circulars issued, and one volume of special orders issued by the Commissioner. Also included are fourteen volumes of indexes. These records relate to the general operation of the Bureau.

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 M742.]

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands often referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau , was established in the War Department by an act of Congress approved March 3, 1865 (13 Stat. 507).

Congress assigned to the Bureau responsibilities previously shared by the military commanders and the agents of the Treasury Department, which included the supervision of all affairs relating to refugees and freedmen and the custody of all abandoned or confiscated lands and property. The act also provided that the Bureau was to be headed by a Commissioner, appointed by the President by and with the advice and consent of the Senate.

In May 1865 the President appointed Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard as Commissioner. Howard, who served until the Bureau was discontinued in 1872, established his headquarters in Washington, D. C. Although the size and organization of the Bureau headquarters varied from time to time, Howard's staff consist primarily of an Assistant Adjutant General, an Assistant Inspector General, a Chief Medical Officer, a Chief Quartermaster, a Chief Disbursing Officer, and officers in charge of the Claim Division, the Education Division, and the Land Division.

The Bureau's operations were confined principally to the former Confederate States, the border states, and the District of Columbia. Assistant Commissioners supervised the work of the Bureau in the districts into which the States were divided. Officers subordinate to the Assistant Commissioners carried out the policies of the Bureau within the districts.

During the years of its greatest activity, the operations of the Freedmen's Bureau resembled, in many ways, the work of later Federal social agencies. In addition to supervising the disposition of the abandoned or confiscated lands, Bureau officers issued rations, clothing, and medicine to destitute refugees and freedmen. They established hospitals and dispensaries and supervised tenement and camps for the homeless. Bureau officers and members of philanthropic organizations cooperated in establishing schools, operating employment offices, and dispensing relief.

The main concern of the Bureau was the freedman. Bureau officers supervised the writing of labor contracts and terms of indenture, registered marriages, listened to complaints, and generally concerned themselves with improving almost all aspects of the freedman's life. In March 1866 the Bureau assumed the function of helping colored soldiers and sailors to file and collect claims for bounties, pensions, and pay arrearages.

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 except those relating to education and to the collection and payment of claims, effective June 30, 1872 (17 Stat. 366). All unfinished work, which by this time related chiefly to the collection and payment of claims, was transferred to the Freedmen's Branch that was established in the Office of the Adjutant General.

The volumes reproduced in the microcopy were originally arranged by type of record and thereunder in numerical sequence, with no numbers assigned to index books or to series consisting of single volumes. Later all the volumes were arbitrarily assigned numbers. In this microfilm publication the last set of numbers assigned are in parentheses and are useful only as an aid in identifying the volume.

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: Letters Sent

Scope and Contents: In this publication the index book is filmed before the related volume of letters sent. There are name and subject index books to volume 1 – 4 and name index books to volume 5 – 7. Volume 5 also has a subject index that is bound at the front of the volume. The name and subject indexes are arranged alphabetically, with the name listed first. In the index books to volume 1 and 2 the number after the name refers to the page in the letterbook, and the number after the subject refers to the file number of the letter. This practice is also true for volume 3, except that the number after the subject refers to either the file number or the page number.

The 7 volumes of letters sent are dated 1865 to 1872 and contain copies of letters, telegrams, and circulars letters sent by Commissioner Howard and his Assistant Adjutant General. Also included are copies of Howard's annual reports to the President. The documents in the letterbooks are generally arranged in chronological order. In the first three volumes each letter, telegram, circular letter, or report was assigned a number. In many volumes there are fractions in the left margin of the pages. The numerator is the number of the page in the same volume on which a preceding letter to the same correspondent appears, and the denominator is the number of the page on which there is a subsequent letter. Frequently noted in the letterbooks is the file number of the letter received or the number of the order issued that relates to the subject of the letter.

A series of press copies of letters sent is not included in this publication. Most of the press copies relate mainly to requests for transportation or applications for positions in the Bureau.

From October 1867 to June 1872 letters of appointment and revocation were kept as a separate series and are not included in this publication.

1.1: Letters Sent Volume 1

1.1.1: [Name and Subject Index \(65\) to Volume 1, May 16-Dec. 30, 1865](#)

1.1.2: [Volume 1 \(64\), May 16–Dec. 30, 1865](#)

1.2: Letters Sent Volume 2

1.2.1: [Name and Subject Index \(No Number\) to Volume 2](#)

1.2.2: [Volume 2 \(66\), Jan. 1–Dec. 29, 1866](#)

1.3: Letters Sent Volume 3

1.3.1: [Name and Subject Index \(68\) to Volume 3](#)

1.3.2: [Volume 3 \(67\), Jan. 2–Sept. 30, 1867](#)

1.4: Letters Sent Volume 4

1.4.1: [Name and Subject Index \(70\) to Volume 4](#)

1.4.2: [Volume 4 \(69\), Oct. 1, 1867–Aug. 31, 1868](#)

1.5: Letters Sent Volume 5

1.5.1: [Name and Subject Index \(72\) to Volume 5](#)

1.5.2: [Volume 5 \(71\), Sept. 1, 1868–Oct. 30, 1869](#)

1.6: Letters Sent Volume 6

1.6.1: [Name Index \(74\) to Volume 6](#)

1.6.2: [Volume 6 \(73\), Oct. 20, 1869–Dec. 28, 1870](#)

1.7: Letters Sent Volume 7

1.7.1: [Name Index \(76\) to Volume 7](#)

1.7.2: [Volume 7 \(75\), Jan. 3, 1871–June 30, 1872](#)

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Series 2: Endorsements Sent

Scope and Contents: According to the recordkeeping practice of the day, the Commissioner kept a series of records known as endorsement books. Frequently, instead of writing a letter, the Commissioner or the Assistant Adjutant General wrote the reply or forwarding statement on the incoming letter and either returned the communication to the sender or forwarded it to another officer. These replies or statements were copied into endorsement books, with a summary of the contents of the related incoming communication on which the statement had been written.

The six volumes of endorsements sent are dated from May 22 to September 28, 1865, and from August 25, 1866 to January 4, 1871. Between September 29, 1865 and August 24, 1866, the endorsements were copied into a series of registers of letters received, NMAAHC.FB.M752. After January 1871 the endorsements were copied into the volume of letters sent or letterbooks.

The endorsements sent are generally arranged in chronological order. In the left margin of the page in the endorsement books is the name of the person or title of the officer to whom the endorsement was sent.

There are name index books to all the endorsement books except volume 2, which has a name index bound at the front of the volume. The two subject indexes are a subject index book to volume 4 of the endorsement books, and a subject index bound at the front of volume 5.

2.1: Endorsements Sent Volume 1

2.1.1: [Name Index \(85\) to Volume 1](#)

2.1.2: [Volume 1 \(84\), May 22–Sept. 28, 1865](#)

2.2: Endorsements Sent Volume 2

2.2.1: [Volume 2 \(86\), Aug. 25, 1866–Mar. 18, 1867](#)

2.3: Endorsements Sent Volume 3

2.3.1: [Name Index \(88\) to Volume 3](#)

2.3.2: [Volume 3 \(87\), Mar. 18–Sept. 27, 1867](#)

2.4: Endorsements Sent Volume 4

2.4.1: [Name Index \(90\) to Volume 4](#)

2.4.2: [Subject Index \(91\) to Volume 4](#)

2.4.3: [Volume 4 \(89\), Sept. 27, 1867–Aug. 18, 1868](#)

2.5: Endorsements Sent Volume 5

[2.5.1: Name Index \(130\) to Volume 5](#)

[2.5.2: Volume 5 \(129\), Aug. 18, 1868–Oct. 25, 1869](#)

2.6: Endorsements Sent Volume 6

[2.6.1: Name Index \(132\) to Volume 6](#)

[2.6.2: Volume 6 \(131\), Oct. 26, 1869–Jan. 4, 1871](#)

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Series 3: Circulars Issued

Scope and Contents: The single volume of circulars issued, 1865–69, contains instructions relating to the organization and operation of the Bureau. The circulars are arranged by year and thereunder numerically. At the beginning of the volume is a list of officers to whom the circulars were issued. The subject index book, which refers only to the circulars issued in 1865, has been filmed before the volume of circulars. Also included in the volume are some unnumbered circulars letters that are not duplicated in the letterbooks.

3.1: [Subject Index \(140\)](#)

3.2: [Circulars Issued \(139\), May 15, 1865–June 19, 1869](#)

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Series 4: Special Orders Issued

Scope and Contents: The single volume of special orders, 1865–72, relates mainly to personnel, although there are a few orders that pertain to the general administration of the Bureau. The orders are arranged by year and thereunder numerically with the exception of those for those period 1870–71, which are arranged in one numerical series. In the left margin are the names of the people mentioned in the orders. In the name and subject index at the page in the volume, and the number after the subject refers to the number of the special order. The volume also contains the special field orders issued by Commissioner Howard from October 19 to November 6, 1865; they are placed between Special Orders 117 and 118.

4.1: [Special Orders Issued \(137\), May 22, 1865–June 27, 1872](#)

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