



Smithsonian

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Registers and Letters Received 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:	Registers and Letters Received by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872
Date:	1865–1872
Identifier:	NMAAHC.FB.M752
Extent:	74 Reels
Language:	English .
Summary:	This collection is comprised of digital surrogates previously available on the 74 rolls of microfilm described in NARA publication M752. These digital surrogates reproduced 33 volumes of registers and indexes and the related unbound letters received by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872.

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 M752.]

HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION

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 matters relating to the 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 to be Commissioner of the Bureau. Howard, who served until the Bureau was discontinued in 1872, established his headquarters in Washington, D. C. Although the size and organization of the central office varied from time to time, Howard's staff consisted 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.

Assistant Commissioners supervised the work of the Bureau in the States. The Bureau's operations were mainly confined to the former Confederate States, the border states, and the District of Columbia. Assistant Commissioners had staff offices comparable to those of the Commissioner and performed all functions of the Bureau under the direction of the central office in Washington. Officers subordinate to the Assistant Commissioner carried out the Bureau's policies and programs within the districts.

During the years of its greatest activity, the operations of the Freedmen's Bureau resembled the work of later Federal welfare agencies. In addition to supervising the disposition of abandoned and confiscated lands, Bureau officers issued rations, clothing, and medicine to destitute refugees and freedmen. They established hospitals and dispensaries and supervised tenements 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 were concerned with improving the life of the freedman. In March 1866 the Bureau assumed the function of helping colored soldiers and sailors to file and collect claims for bounties, pensions, and pay in arrears.

On July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), Congress ordered the Commissioner to withdraw Bureau officers from the States by January 1, 1869, and to discontinue Bureau activities except those relating to education and to the collection and payment of claims. The Bureau was abolished by an Act of Congress approved June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366), and effective June 30, 1872. 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 records reproduced in this microcopy include the registers of letters received, the indexes to the registers, and the letters themselves. According to recordkeeping practices of the time, incoming letters were entered in registers of letters received. The registers include such information as the name or office of the correspondent, the date of the letter, the place from which the letter was sent, the date of receipt, and an abstract of its contents.

Before 1871, letters were entered in registers alphabetically by the initial letter of the surname or office of the writer and thereunder by date of receipt. Each entry was numbered according to a separate numerical sequence used for each letter of the alphabet, and the clerks usually began new sequences each January. Registers 2 and 3, which cover the period from October 1865 to February 1866, are an exception because separate numerical sequences were begun in October 1865 and in January 1866. Consequently, two numerical sequences exist under each alphabetical division in these two registers. In January 1871, the Freedmen's Bureau began to enter letters chronologically by date of receipt and to number them consecutively within each year. For this reason, register 18 (1871–1872) has two separate numerical sequences.

There are some variations in the order in which letters were entered in the registers. In registers with alphabetical divisions, letters of recommendation were entered under the name of either the person recommended, the person making the recommendation, or the person transmitting the recommendation to the Commissioner. Particularly in register 1, letters were not always entered upon receipt, and letters of application were entered at the end of each alphabetical division without regard to the date of receipt. In register 1 a few letters referred from other Government agencies antedate the establishment of the Bureau.

There are numerous breaks in the alphabetical sequences within the registers. These breaks occur because the number of pages allotted to each letter of the alphabet often proved to be insufficient, making it necessary to continue the entries elsewhere in the register. In each case, the National Archives has filmed the register in correct order so that these breaks do not appear on the microfilm. There are also breaks in the pagination of some registers because blank numbered pages were not filmed.

From time to time the clerks in the Commissioner's Office made errors in entering letters received in the registers. Some numbers in the sequences of assigned numbers were inadvertently omitted; consequently, there are no letters bearing such numbers. Occasionally registry numbers were repeated, giving two different letters the same file designation. The clerks usually added "1/2" to the second designation; but in cases where this correction was not made, the National Archives has added in brackets, "No. 1" and "No. 2," respectively.

Many symbols, cross–references, and abbreviations were entered in the registers by the Commissioner's Office and by the National Archives. The latter has stamped an asterisk (-*) near the entry number for letters that are still in the series of letters received. The notation "F/W" before a cross–reference indicates that the letter received is filed with a related letter. There are some references to other series of records in the Commissioner's Office. The notations "LB" and "PLB" refer to the letter book and press letter book series of outgoing letters, and "EB" and "SO" refer to endorsement books and special orders, respectively.

Although a separate series of Endorsement Books was kept by Commissioner Howard's office, the endorsements from October 1865 to August 1866 were copied into the registers of letters received and are reproduced in this microcopy.

Two consolidated indexes, a general name index and a general subject index, are filmed on roll 1 of this microcopy. The general name index covers registers 1 – 12 and "A – H" of register 13; the general subject index covers registers 1 – 13. In the latter index the subject is entered alphabetically by initial letter. The entry identifies the letter received pertaining to a specific subject by giving either the number of the register and the file citation of the letter, or the register number and page number in the register on which the letter is entered.

Also reproduced are separate name and subject indexes to many of the registers. Neither kind of index exists for entries A – M in registers 4 and 5. Some of the indexes are bound in the registers; others are bound as separate volumes. On each roll the index has been filmed before the register to which it relates.

The registers reproduced in this microcopy were arranged in rough chronological order and numbered in sequence, but no volume numbers were assigned to the index books. Later all volumes were arbitrarily assigned numbers, which appear in parentheses in this microfilm publication and which are useful in identifying the volume.

The letters reproduced are arranged by order of their entry in the registers. According to the custom of other War Department offices, the Freedmen's Bureau generally filed correspondence under the name of the office of origin rather than the name of the writer. Letters from local agents and superintendents of Baton Rouge, for example, were forwarded through the Office of the Assistant Commissioner of Louisiana, and upon receipt in the central office at Washington they were entered in the register under "L" for Louisiana.

The file citation that appears on the back of registered letters is taken from the entry number in the register. In a citation such as "S 204 BRF&AL Vol. 9 1867," "S" is the initial letter of the correspondent's name or office; the number "204" indicates that it is the 204th letter recorded under "S"; "BRF&AL," that it was received by the Commissioner's Office; "Vol. 9," the register in which the letter was entered; and "1867," the year in which the letter was written.

Enclosures such as reports, newspaper clippings, manuscripts, and printed publications were often registered and filed with their letters of transmittal. When the Commissioner's Office received a letter accompanied by enclosures, the clerks usually mentioned them in the register and on the back of the letter and indicated the number of enclosures.

Some letters, reports, and enclosures originally filed with the letters received are no longer in this series. Each of the Commissioner's staff offices maintained its own series of registers and letters received. Correspondence and reports received by Commissioner Howard were occasionally referred to staff offices and became part of their permanent records. Not all enclosures are filed with their letters of transmittal.

Enclosures containing information that the central office wanted to keep together, such as reports on schools, lands, rations, and operations, were sometimes separated from their letters of transmittal and filed elsewhere in separate series. For this reason some of the reports that are registered as letters received and bear the file citation of the Office of the Commissioner are not among the series filmed in this microcopy.

Because the registers frequently were used to record the disposition of documents, they are useful in tracing documents that have been removed from the file. By 1871 the Commissioner's Office had added an "action" column to the register for this purpose, but even the earlier registers include such information as the name of the official or office to which a letter was referred, a cross-reference to indicate consolidation with other letters, and the disposition of enclosures.

A few letters received that were not registered and a few unidentified enclosures that were separated from their letters of transmittal have been arranged by year and are filmed on the last roll of this microcopy.

In the same record group as the documents described above are related records. Letters sent, endorsements sent, circulars issued, and special orders issued by the Commissioner are in Selected Series of Records Issued by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872 (Microcopy 742). There also are several series of reports and returns received by the Commissioner and records of staff and field offices.

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: Indexes and Registers of Letters Received

1.1: General Index

1.1.1: [General Name Index \(62\) to Registers 1 – 12](#)

1.1.2: [General Subject Index \(63\) to Registers 1 – 13](#)

1.2: Register 1

1.2.1: [Name and Subject Indexes \(31\) to Register 1](#)

1.2.2: [Register 1 \(30\), May–Oct. 1865](#)

1.3: Registers 2 and 3

1.3.1: [Register 2 \(33\) A – M, Oct. 1865–Feb. 1866](#)

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1.3.2: [Register 3 \(34\) N – Z, Oct. 1865–Feb. 1866](#)

1.4: Registers 4 and 5

Scope and Contents: The name and subject index, N-Z, was bound in register 5, but relates to entries in both registers. There is no corresponding index, A-N, bound in register 4.

1.4.1: [Name and Subject Index \(N – Z\) to Registers 4 and 5](#)

1.4.2: [Register 4 \(35\) A – M, Mar. 1–May 21, 1866](#)

1.4.3: [Register 5 \(36\) N – Z, Mar. 1–May 21, 1866](#)

1.5: Registers 6 and 7

Scope and Contents: The names and subject indexes, A–M bound in register 6 and N–Z bound in register 7, have been grouped together. Each part of the index related to entries in both registers.

1.5.1: [Name and Subject Index to Registers 6 and 7](#)

1.5.2: [Register 6 \(37\) A – M, May–Aug. 1866](#)

1.5.3: [Register 7 \(38\) N – Z, May–Aug. 1866](#)

1.6: Register 8

1.6.1: [Name and Subject Index to Register 8](#)

1.6.2: [Register 8 \(39\), Aug.–Dec. 1866](#)

1.7: Register 9

1.7.1: [Name Index \(41\) to Register 9, Jan.–May 1867](#)

1.7.2: [Register 9 \(40\), Jan.–May 1867](#)

1.8: Register 10

1.8.1: [Name Index \(43\) to Register 10, June–Aug. 1867](#)

1.8.2: [Register 10 \(42\), June–Aug. 1867](#)

1.9: Register 11

1.9.1: [Name Index \(45\) to Register 11, Sept.–Dec. 1867](#)

1.9.2: [Register 11 \(44\), Sept. 2–Dec. 31, 1867](#)

1.10: Register 12

1.10.1: [Name Index \(47\) to Register 12, Jan. 2–June 30, 1868](#)

1.10.2: [Subject Index \(48\) to Register 12, Jan.–June 1868](#)

1.10.3: [Register 12 \(46\), Jan.–June 1868](#)

1.11: Register 13

1.11.1: [Name Index \(50\) to Register 13, July 1–Dec. 31, 1868](#)

1.11.2: [Subject Index \(51\) to Register 13, July 1–Dec. 31, 1868](#)

1.11.3: [Register 13 \(49\), July–Dec. 1868](#)

1.12: Register 14

1.12.1: [Name Index \(53\) to Register 14, Jan. 1–July 31, 1869](#)

1.12.2: [Register 14 \(52\), Jan. 1–July 31, 1869](#)

1.13: Register 15

1.13.1: [Name Index \(55\) to Register 15, Aug.–Dec. 1869](#)

1.13.2: [Register 15 \(54\), Aug.–Dec. 1869](#)

1.14: Register 16

1.14.1: [Name Index \(57\) to Register 16, Jan. 1, 1870–Aug. 6, 1870](#)

1.14.2: [Register 16 \(56\), Jan. 1, 1870–Aug. 6, 1870](#)

1.15: Register 17

1.15.1: [Name Index \(59\) to Register 17, Aug. 8, 1870–Jan. 5, 1871](#)

1.15.2: [Register 17 \(58\), Aug. 8, 1870–Jan. 5, 1871](#)

1.16: Register 18

1.16.1: [Name Index \(61\) to Register 18, Jan. 3, 1871–May 9, 1873](#)

1.16.2: [Register 18 \(60\), Jan. 3, 1871–May 9, 1873](#)

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