



Smithsonian

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

Records of the Assistant Commissioner for  
the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees,  
Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	National Museum of African American History and Culture
<b>Title:</b>	Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870
<b>Date:</b>	1865–1870
<b>Identifier:</b>	NMAAHC.FB.M809
<b>Extent:</b>	23 Reels
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	This collection is comprised of digital surrogates previously available on the 23 rolls of microfilm described in the NARA publication M809. These digital surrogates reproduced the records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–70. The records consist of 17 volumes and some unbound documents. The volumes include letters, reports, endorsements, and telegrams sent; orders issued; and registers of letters received. The unbound records include letters, reports, and issuances received. Except for some unfiled duplicate copies this microfilm publication contains all the records created or received in the office of the Assistant Commissioner for Alabama.
<b>Digital Content:</b>	<a href="#">Image(s): M809-Representative-Image</a>

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## 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 M809.]

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 the acts of July 16, 1866 (14 Stat. 173), and July 6, 1868 (15 Stat. 3). Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard was appointed Commissioner by the President in May 1865 and he served in that position until June 30, 1872 when the activities of the Bureau were terminated in accordance with an act of June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366). Although the Bureau was a part of the War Department, its work was primarily social and economic in nature. The Bureau cooperated with benevolent societies in issuing supplies to the destitute and in maintaining freedmen's schools. Bureau officials supervised labor contracts between Negro employees and white employers; helped Negro soldiers and sailors to collect bounty claims, pensions, and backpay; and attended to the disposition of confiscated or abandoned lands and other property.

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 Alabama, operations began in July 1868 when Brig. Gen. Wager Swayne took command as Assistant Commissioner. Succeeding Swayne in January 1868 was Bvt. Brig. Julius Hayden who served until March 1868, Col. Oliver L. Shepherd who served from March to August 1868, and Col. T. H. Ruger who held the position of Assistant Commissioner for only a few days before the arrival of Bvt. Lt. Col. Edwin Beecher later in August 1868. In January 1869, in accordance with an act of July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), Bureau operations in Alabama, as in other States, were terminated except for the educational functions and the collection of claims. Colonel Beecher remained to serve as Superintendent of Education and held that position until the office was closed in July 1870. Some of the records for Beecher's tenure as Superintendent of Education are among the records of the Assistant Commissioner, but most of them are in the records of the Superintendent of Education.

The Assistant Commissioner's staff consisted at various times of a Superintendent of Education, an Assistant Adjutant General, an Assistant Inspector General, a Disbursing Officer, a Chief Medical Officer, a Chief Quartermaster, and a Commissary of Subsistence. Subordinate to these officers were the assistant superintendents, or subassistant commissioners as they later became known, who commanded the subdistricts. The more important subdistricts included those with headquarters at Demopolis, Eufaula, Greenville, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Opelika, Selma, Talladega, and Tuscaloosa. Under direct supervision of the subassistant commissioners were the civilian and military agents. Occasionally military officers would be retained by the Bureau in a civilian capacity after the termination of their military service. One such instance was the appointment of O. D. Kinsman in June 1867 as subassistant commissioner in charge of the Assistant Commissioner's office. Kinsman had served previously under General Swayne as Assistant Adjutant General.

The Assistant Commissioner corresponded extensively both with his superior in the Washington Bureau headquarters and with his subordinate officers in the subdistricts. Based upon reports submitted to him by the subassistant commissioners and other subordinate staff officers, he prepared reports that he sent to the Commissioner concerning Bureau activities in Alabama. The Assistant Commissioner also received letters from freedmen, local white citizens, State officials, and other non-Bureau personnel. These letters varied in nature from complaints to applications for jobs in the Bureau. Because the Assistant Adjutant General handled much of the mail for the Assistant Commissioner's office, it was often addressed to him instead of to the Assistant Commissioner.

From June 1866 to January 1868 the Assistant Commissioner, General Swayne, served also as the military commander of Alabama. He therefore created and received records in both capacities. The dual function of the Assistant Commissioner also resulted in a succession of changes in the official headings used on correspondence and issuances. The title "Office of the Assistant Commissioner" was changed in June 1866 to "Headquarters, District of Alabama" and in August 1866 to "Headquarters, Subdistrict of Alabama." The heading "District of Alabama" was used again from March 1867 until superseded by "State of Alabama" in February 1868. The dual function of the office is also reflected in the recordkeeping practices for that period.

Although the Assistant Commissioner generally maintained separate records for each of his capacities, in the case of letters and endorsements sent the records were frequently combined. Wherever separable the records created by the Assistant Commissioner in his military capacity are among Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821–1920, Record Group 393.

The volumes reproduced in this microfilm publication were originally arranged by type of record and thereunder in numerical sequence. Originally no numbers were assigned 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 as an aid in identifying the volumes. In some volumes, and particularly in indexes and alphabetical headings of registers, there are a number of blank numbered pages that have not been filmed.

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## 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

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Letters Sent

Scope and Contents: The five volumes of letters sent, July 1865–July 1870, are arranged chronologically and each volume contains a name index. The volumes also contain copies of annual reports, 1867–69, sent by the Assistant Commissioner to Commissioner Howard. The 1866 annual report is among the series of reports described below. Monthly reports from the Assistant Commissioner to the Commissioner from January 1868 to January 1869 are also copied in the volumes. In addition to these reports, volume 5 also contains reports from the Superintendent of Education both to the General Superintendent of Schools and to the Commissioner in Washington.

1.1: Volume 1 (4), July 27, 1865–May 2, 1866

[Image\(s\)](#)

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1.2: Volume 2 (5), May 2–June 27, 1866

[Image\(s\)](#)

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1.3: Volume 3 (8), June 4, 1866–Apr. 6, 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

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1.4: Volume 4 (9), Apr. 2, 1867–Dec. 28 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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1.5: Volume 5 (10), Jan. 4, 1869–July 1, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 2: Unbound Letters Sent, Aug. 11–Sept. 22, 1865

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

Scope and Contents: The unbound letters sent, August 11–September 22, 1865, are arranged chronologically and are not duplicated in the volumes of letters sent described above.

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*

## Series 3: Annual Report of the Assistant Commissioner, Oct. 1866

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

Scope and Contents: The annual report of the Assistant Commissioner, issued in October 1866, is in printed form and completes the series of reports included in the volumes of letters sent described above.

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## Series 4: Weekly Reports of the Assistant Commissioner

Scope and Contents: The volume of weekly reports of the Assistant Commissioner, July 24, 1865–January 31, 1866, is arranged chronologically and contains a name index. The reports consist of narrative weekly summaries of problems and developments relating to the Bureau during its organizing phase in the State.

### 4.1: Volume (7), July 24, 1865–Jan. 31, 1866

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 5: Endorsements Sent

**Scope and Contents:** Endorsements sent are characteristic of nineteenth-century record keeping practices. A reply to an incoming letter was frequently written on the letter itself or on a specially prepared wrapper. The reply, known as an endorsement, was then copied into an endorsement book, and the endorsed letter was returned to the sender or forwarded to another office. Endorsement books also usually include a summary of the incoming letter and sometimes previous endorsements that were recorded on it.

The three volumes of endorsements sent, October 2, 1865–July 7, 1866, and April 3, 1867–July 21, 1869, are arranged chronologically, and each volume contains a name index. The endorsements are cross-referenced by citations to other endorsements in the same series, to the registers of letters received, and to letters sent. The gap in the series, June 1866–April 1867, is filled by endorsements for that period among the records for the District of Alabama in Record Group 393, which are not reproduced in this publication.

### 5.1: Volume 1 (12), Oct. 2, 1865–July 7, 1866

[Image\(s\)](#)

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### 5.2: Volume 2 (13), Apr. 3, 1867–Dec. 24, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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### 5.3: Volume 3 (14), Feb. 11–July 21, 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 6: Registers of Letters Received

**Scope and Contents:** Registers of letters received are also typical of nineteenth-century recordkeeping practices. 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 the communication, the place from which it was written, and the entry number assigned at the time of receipt. The entries in the two volumes of registers of letters received, June 1866–April 1869, are arranged alphabetically by initial letter of the correspondent's surname or office and there under chronologically by date of receipt of the communication. The volumes are cross-referenced to the endorsement books by a citation giving the file number of the endorsement.

The registers do not relate to the unbound series of letters received. Apparently most or all of the letters registered were either endorsed and returned to the sender or forwarded, generally to higher authorities in the Washington Bureau headquarters or to subordinates in the subdistricts.

The third register of letters received May 23, 1867–April 1, 1868, is arranged chronologically by date of receipt of communication. Unlike the other registers, which contain a summary of the incoming letter, the entries in this volume give only a brief statement indicating the content.

Some of the letters registered in this volume are interfiled with the unbound series of letters received described below.

### 6.1: Volume 1 (1), June 1866–Dec. 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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### 6.2: Volume 2 (2), Jan.–Apr. 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

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### 6.3: Volume 3 (3), May 23, 1867–Apr. 1, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 7: Letters Received

Scope and Contents: Most of the letters received, 1865–70, are unregistered. They are arranged by year and thereunder alphabetically by the initial letter of the correspondent's surname. In addition to the general correspondence addressed to the Assistant Commissioner are letters written to individuals other than the Assistant Commissioner, but they were forwarded to and retained by him. The series also includes letters written by the Assistant Commissioner himself, which were endorsed and returned to his office; these letters have been filed according to the initial letter of the Assistant Commissioner's surname. Petitions from more than one person have been filed under "P." Most of the letters received by Assistant Commissioner Beecher after 1869 were addressed to him as Superintendent of Education, but they are included in this microfilm publication. Occasionally, the letters from the subassistant commissioners will resemble or contain reports on conditions in the subdistricts.

### 7.1: A – J, 1865

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

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### 7.2: K – Y, 1865

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

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### 7.3: A – G, 1866

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

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### 7.4: H – P, 1866

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

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### 7.5: R – Y, 1866

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

[Image\(s\)](#)

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7.6: A – F, 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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7.7: G – L, 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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7.8: M – R, 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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7.9: S – Z, 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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7.10: A – R, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

---

7.11: S – Y, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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7.12: A – W, 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

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7.13: A – R, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 8: Telegrams Sent

Scope and Contents: Among the records of the Assistant Commissioner are a volume of telegrams sent. The volume of telegrams sent, July 28, 1865–September 17 1868, is arranged chronologically and contains a name and subject index for 1865 and 1866. The telegrams were not entered in the registers of letter received.

### 8.1: Volume (11), July 28, 1865–Sept.17, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 9: Telegrams Received

Scope and Contents: Among the records of the Assistant Commissioner are a volume of an unbound series of telegrams received. The unbound telegrams received, June 2–July 24, 1865, January 9, 1866–April 29, 1867, and June 5, 1867–November 12, 1868, are arranged chronologically. The telegrams were not entered in the registers of letter received.

### 9.1: Telegrams Received, June 21–July 24, 1865

[Image\(s\)](#)

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### 9.2: Telegrams Received, Jan. 9, 1866–Apr. 29, 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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### 9.3: Telegrams Received, June 5, 1867–Nov. 12, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 10: Issuances

**Scope and Contents:** There are three volumes of issuances including one volume of general orders, circulars, and circular letters issued. There are also three series of unbound issuances received. Separate numbering systems for each year are maintained for all issuances except circular letters. Circular letters are unnumbered and are usually interfiled with circulars or other issuances.

### 10.1: General Orders, Circulars, and Circular Letters Issued

**Scope and Contents:** The volume of general orders, circulars, and circular letters issued, July 26, 1865–December 31, 1868, is generally arranged in chronological order and has a name index. For 1865, there are general orders only. In 1866 and 1867, general orders were interfiled with circulars and circular letters only. For 1868, there are circulars and circular letters only.

10.1.1: [Volume \(15\), July 26, 1865–Dec. 31, 1868](#)

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### 10.2: Special Orders Issued

**Scope and Contents:** The two volumes of special orders issued July 28, 1865–May 11, 1869, are generally arranged in chronological order and contain name indexes. From July 1865 to January 1869, the special orders are interfiled with circulars and circular letter, some of which are duplicated in the above cited volume of general orders, circulars, and circular letters issued. Beginning in January 1869, special orders and circulars are arranged according to type of issuance and thereunder chronologically.

10.2.1: [Volume 1 \(16\), July 28, 1865–Dec. 31, 1868](#)

10.2.2: [Volume 2 \(17\), Jan. 15–May 11, 1869](#)

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### 10.3: General Orders Received, Aug. 9, 1865–Dec. 13, 1867

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

**Scope and Contents:** The unbound general order received in the office of the Assistant Commissioner are arranged according to the type of issuance and thereunder chronologically. Generally, the issuances were received from the Bureau headquarters in Washington.

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### 10.4: Circulars and Circular Letters Received, June 14, 1865–Dec. 18, 1868

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

**Scope and Contents:** The unbound circulars and circular letters received in the office of the Assistant Commissioner are arranged according to the type of issuance and thereunder chronologically. Generally, the issuances were received from the Bureau headquarters in Washington.

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## 10.5: Special Orders Received, May 8, 1865–July 24, 1869

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

Scope and Contents: The unbound special orders received in the office of the Assistant Commissioner are arranged according to the type of issuance and thereunder chronologically. Generally, the issuances were received from the Bureau headquarters in Washington.

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## Series 11: Reports of Operations from the Subdistricts, Sept. 1865–Dec. 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and  
Contents:

A series of unbound narrative reports were received by the Assistant Commissioner, which includes operations reports from subdistrict officers.

The unbound reports of operations from the subdistrict officers, September 1865–December 1868, are arranged alphabetically by name of subdistrict and thereunder chronologically. These weekly, monthly, and annual reports pertain to the performance of Bureau functions at the subdistrict level. Reports frequently contain information relating to school matters, the administration of relief, agriculture and labor conditions, the operation of laws, outrages committed upon freedmen, and the relationship between races. Sometimes there are also reports on conditions in the subdistricts among the letters received by the Assistant Commissioner.

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## Series 12: Annual Reports from Staff Officers, 1866–68

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

#### Scope and Contents:

A series of unbound narrative reports were received by the Assistant Commissioner, which includes annual reports from staff officers. The unbound annual reports from staff officers, 1866–68, are arranged chronologically. They include reports from the Disbursing Officer, the Subsistence Department, and the Medical Department. The Assistant Commissioner apparently used these reports to compile his annual reports to the Commissioner.

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## Series 13: Miscellaneous Reports from Staff and Bureau Officials, Aug. 1865– Apr. 1868

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

#### Scope and

#### Contents:

A series of unbound narrative reports were received by the Assistant Commissioner, which includes miscellaneous reports from staff and Bureau officials. Unbound miscellaneous reports from staff and Bureau officials, August 1865–April 1868, are arranged chronologically. The papers consist primarily of reports of inspection tours undertaken by Bureau personnel. There are reports on such subjects as the condition of prisoners, the misuse of public stores, the condition of the destitute, and the status of Bureau property.

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## Series 14: Personal Reports, Feb.–Dec. 1865

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

#### Scope and Contents:

The unbound personal reports, February–December 1865, are generally arranged alphabetically by surname of reporter and thereunder chronologically. The reports were received periodically from Bureau personnel and include such information as name of employee, rank, station, nature of duty, date of assignment, and source of authority for appointment. A few reports for 1866 and 1867 are also included.

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## Series 15: Consolidated Trimonthly Reports of Destitute Freedmen, July 1865– June 1866

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

#### Scope and Contents:

The unbound consolidated trimonthly reports concerning destitute freedman, July 1865–June 1866, are generally arranged alphabetically by name of subdistrict and thereunder chronologically. The reports contain information relating to the number of men, women, and children fit or unfit for work. The figures were apparently used as a basis for establishing the degree of destitution so that rations could be issued.

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## Series 16: Monthly Reports of Rations Issued, July 1865–Dec. 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and  
Contents:

The unbound monthly reports of rations issued, July 1865–December 1868, are generally arranged chronologically by month and thereunder alphabetically by subdistrict. The reports contain statistical data on the number and types of persons receiving rations and the value of the rations issued. From the reports submitted by the subdistricts the Assistant Commissioner prepared a monthly consolidated report that contained most of the information given in the individual subdistrict reports. Consolidated reports are filed before the subdistrict reports for each month.

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## Series 17: Monthly Reports of Abandoned and Confiscated Lands, Aug. 1865– Dec. 1868

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

#### Scope and

#### Contents:

The unbound monthly reports of abandoned and confiscated lands, August 1865–December 1868, are arranged chronologically by month and thereunder alphabetically by subdistrict. The land reports usually contain information on the name of the former owner; location, boundaries, and acreage of land; whether the property was abandoned or confiscated; and types of buildings on the property. As in the case of ration reports, the Assistant Commissioner generally prepared a consolidated report based on reports received from the subdistricts. These consolidated reports contain most of the information submitted in the subdistrict reports, and they are filed at the beginning of the reports for each month.

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## Series 18: State Rosters of Bureau Personnel, Sept. 1865–May 1869

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

#### Scope and Contents:

Five types of reports were submitted on forms, including those received by the Assistant Commissioner from staff and subordinate officers as well as retained copies of reports sent by him to Bureau headquarters in Washington.

There is a series of consolidated rosters for the State arranged chronologically, September 1865–May 1869. The roster contains information relating to the names, locations, and ranks of both military and civilian Bureau personnel.

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## Series 19: Subdistrict Rosters of Bureau Personnel, July 1865–Dec. 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and  
Contents:

The series of subdistrict rosters is arranged alphabetically by subdistrict, July 1865–December 1868. The roster contains information relating to the names, locations, and ranks of both military and civilian Bureau personnel.

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## Series 20: Oaths of Office, 1865–69

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

Scope and Contents: The unbound oaths of office, 1865–69, which are arranged alphabetically by surname of the individual who took the oath of loyalty to the United States. These oaths were required by an act of July 2, 1862 (12 Stat. 502), for all officeholders whether elected or appointed.

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## Series 21: Register of Claims

Scope and Contents: The entries in the register of claims, July 23, 1866–July 27, 1869, are arranged chronologically by date of receipt of claim; the register has a name index. Types of claims registered include applications for bounties, backpay, pensions, and rations. The volume also contains information on the name and rank of the claimant, the immediate action taken, the date of transmission, and the type of claim. There is no information on the specific nature of the claim or the eventual outcome.

### 21.1: Volume (18), July 23, 1866–July 27, 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

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## Series 22: Miscellaneous Papers, July 1865–Oct. 1867

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

Scope and Contents: The unbound miscellaneous papers, July 1865–October 1867, are arranged by subject in accordance with a subject index prepared by the Adjutant General's Office. Most of the papers relate to property, claims, frauds, and contracts.

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