



Smithsonian
*National Museum of African American
History and Culture*

Records of the Superintendent of Education
for the State of Alabama, 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 Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870
Identifier:	NMAAHC.FB.M810
Date:	1865–1870
Extent:	8 Reels
Language:	English
Summary:	The collection is comprised of digital surrogates previously available on the 8 rolls of microfilm described in the NARA publication M810. These digital surrogates reproduced the records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–70. The bound records include four volumes of letters and endorsements sent, a register of letters received, and a miscellaneous account book. The unbound records include letters and issuances received, reports issued and received, and miscellaneous papers.

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 M810.]

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. 83). 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 destitute persons 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. Brig. Gen. Wager Swayne was appointed Assistant Commissioner for the State of Alabama. In a circular issued by Commissioner Howard in July 1865, the Assistant Commissioners were instructed to designate one officer in each State to serve as "general Superintendents of Schools." These officials 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 he was appointed General Superintendent of Education.

Bureau educational activity in Alabama officially began with the appointment of Rev. Charles W. Buckley as Bureau Inspector and Superintendent of Schools in October 1865. Buckley was succeeded by Henry M. Bush, who served as Acting Superintendent from January 1868 until the appointment of R. D. Harper in March of the same year. Harper served during 1868 but because he was frequently away on leave, Bush was authorized by Assistant Commissioner Oliver L. Shepherd to administer the office in Harper's absence. 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. Edwin Beecher, formerly Assistant Commissioner, became Superintendent of Education at that time and served in that capacity until July 1870 when the remaining Bureau activities in Alabama were also terminated.

Heading the Bureau's educational system was the Superintendent of Education who served under the Assistant Commissioner as a Staff Officer. Subordinate to both the Assistant Commissioner and the Superintendent of Education were the assistant superintendents, later called subassistant commissioners, who commanded the subdistricts into which the State was divided. Some of the more important subdistricts included those with headquarters at Demopolis, Eufaula, Greenville, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Opelika, Selma, Talladega, and Tuscaloosa. A subassistant commissioner supervised all Bureau activities in his area, including education, and reported on educational matters to both the Superintendent of Education and the Assistant Commissioner. After January 1869, when the function of the Bureau became almost entirely educational, subassistant commissioners became local superintendents of education. Each teacher reported to the subassistant commissioner of his subdistrict.

The schools maintained by the Bureau in Alabama 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.

No single policy of assigning responsibilities in the maintenance of the schools was followed consistently. The Bureau generally supplied buildings for schools and transportation for teachers and relied on the aid societies and freedmen to pay for textbooks and teachers' salaries, although at times teachers were paid from Bureau funds. The Superintendent of Education reported to and corresponded with the Assistant Commissioner and with superiors in the Bureau's Washington headquarters. In addition he corresponded with and received reports from subordinate officers and teachers in the subdistricts. The Superintendent also corresponded extensively with aid societies regarding their contributions to the educational effort in the State.

When Assistant Commissioner Beecher became Superintendent of Education in 1869 he failed to separate completely the records of the new office from those of the old. Consequently, some of his reports and letters sent and a few endorsements and issuances created in his capacity as Superintendent of Education are among the records of the Assistant Commissioner. The volumes reproduced in this microfilm publication were originally unnumbered. Later they were arbitrarily assigned numbers, which are shown in parentheses and which serve as an aid in identifying the volumes. Black numbered pages in the volumes 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
Education
Freedmen's Bureau
Reconstruction, U.S. history, 1865-1877
Slaves -- Emancipation

Container Listing

Series 1: Letters Sent

The records of the Superintendent of Education include three volumes of letters sent: two volumes of fair copies and one volume of press copies.

The two volumes of fair copies of letters sent, November 30, 1866–August 31, 1868, are arranged generally in chronological order and each volume contains a name index. The second volume also contains reports by the Superintendent of Education for May, June, and August 1868. From February through June 1868 there are some marginal notations in the volumes of letters sent to other related letters sent and to endorsements and entries in the register of letters received.

1.1: Volume 1 (52), Nov. 30, 1866–Jan. 27, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

1.2: Volume 2 (53), Feb. 13–Aug. 31, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 2: Press Copies of Letters Sent

The records of the Superintendent of Education include three volumes of letters sent: two volumes of fair copies and one volume of press copies. The volume of press copies of letters sent, September 16, 1863–July 1, 1870, is arranged chronologically and contains an incomplete name index. Most of the press copies are of poor quality and some are partially or completely unreadable.

2.1: Volume (54), Sept. 16, 1868–July 1, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 3: Reports Sent

The three series of unbound narrative reports consist of monthly, annual, and special reports from the Superintendent of Education.

3.1: Monthly, Mar. and Apr. 1866, Mar. and Apr. 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

The monthly reports dated March and April 1866 are drafts of reports made to the Assistant Commissioner, and the reports dated March and April 1868 are apparently retained copies of reports made to Commissioner Howard.

3.2: Annual, 1866–1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

The three annual reports of the Superintendent of Education are dated 1866, 1867, and 1868. The annual reports summarize educational developments in the State during the previous year and provide statistics on schools, teachers, and pupils. The Superintendent of Education submitted the reports to the Assistant Commissioner who used the statistics in preparing his own annual report. Other general reports of the Superintendent of Education are included in Volume 5 of letters sent among the records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Alabama (Roll 2 of Microfilm Publication M809).

3.3: Special, May 25, 1866 and Feb. 9, 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

Two special reports dated May 25, 1866, and February 9, 1867, to the Assistant Commissioner concern inspection visits made by the Superintendent.

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Series 4: Endorsements Sent

Endorsements sent are characteristic of 19th-century recordkeeping 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 volume of endorsements sent, January 27–November 27, 1868, is arranged chronologically and contains a name index. The endorsements relate to the register of letters received for the same period. Most endorsements include citations to related entries in the register of letters received. There are also some citations to related letters sent.

4.1: Volume (55), Jan. 27–Nov. 27, 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 5: Registers of Letters Received

Registers of letters received are also typical of 19th-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.

The entries in the register of letters received, January 1868–January 1869, are arranged alphabetically by surname of correspondent and thereunder chronologically. There is also a name index in the volume. Marginal notations are to letters sent and endorsements. The letters entered in the register are filmed as a unit before the unregistered series of letters received.

5.1: Register of Letters Received (51), Jan. 1868 - Jan. 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 6: Letters Received

The letters received consist of registered and unregistered series. The registered letters received, January–December 1868, are arranged alphabetically and thereunder chronologically by date of receipt; they constitute most of the incoming correspondence for that year.

The unregistered letters received, December 1865–July 1870, are arranged chronologically by year, thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of the correspondent's surname, and thereunder chronologically by date of receipt. Both series include correspondence written to individuals other than the Superintendent of Education but which was forwarded to and retained by his office. Letters written by and subsequently returned to the Superintendent of Education are also included. Such letters have been filed alphabetically by the Superintendent's surname.

6.1: Entered in Register (51), 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

6.2: Unregistered Letters, Dec. 1865–July 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 7: Special Orders Received

The unbound series of special orders received, primarily from Bureau headquarters in Washington, November 6, 1865–March 7, 1870, is arranged chronologically.

7.1: Special Orders Received, Nov. 6, 1865–Mar. 7, 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 8: School Reports

Among the records of the Superintendent of Education are four unbound series of reports prepared on forms. There are retained copies of monthly school reports submitted by the Superintendent to Bureau headquarters in Washington, and reports received by the Superintendent from subordinates. The reports received include surveys of educational conditions in the subdistricts and monthly school reports by district superintendents and by teachers.

8.1: Monthly Reports of the Superintendent of Education, Feb. 1866–June 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

The monthly school reports of the Superintendent of Education, February 1866–June 1870, are generally arranged in chronological order. The information given on the form is largely statistical and relates to pupils, teachers, and schools. A change in the form during the summer of 1866, and another change in early 1869 that required the submission of separate forms on schools and teachers, made more information available.

8.2: Surveys of Educational Conditions in the Subdistricts, Mar. 1867–Nov. 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

The surveys of educational conditions received from the subdistricts, March 1867–November 1868, are arranged alphabetically by the name of the subdistrict. Most of the reports were submitted on forms containing 16–questions relating to the current number of schools in operation and teachers employed, the need for additional schools and teachers, and the efforts and ability of the freedmen and the aid societies to meet the educational needs of the subdistrict.

8.3: Monthly Reports of the District Superintendents, Jan. 1866–June 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

The monthly school reports of the district superintendents, January 1866–June 1870, are arranged chronologically by month and thereunder alphabetically by name of the subdistrict. The reports are statistical in nature and were often submitted on a variety of forms. The reports from the district superintendents give essentially the same kind of information as that given on reports prepared by the Superintendent and were evidently used by him in compiling his reports. Beginning in January 1868, a 19–question form is interfiled with the regular monthly school reports. This form is similar in structure and purpose to the 16–question form relating to educational conditions. One additional question was asked, however, concerning public sentiment toward the education of Negroes and impoverished white persons.

8.4: Monthly Reports of Teachers, Mar. 1866–Feb. 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

The arrangement of the teachers' monthly school reports, March 1866–June 1870, is generally chronological by month and thereunder alphabetical by name of county or of subdistrict. The forms used until the summer of 1866 were essentially the same as those used by the State Superintendent and district superintendents at that time; thereafter, a questionnaire was used. Both forms give statistics concerning pupils taught and subjects studied.

8.5: Monthly Reports of Teachers, Mar. 1869–June 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 9: Miscellaneous Records

9.1: Miscellaneous Account Book, 1867–68

[Image\(s\)](#)

The miscellaneous account book, 1867–68, is arranged by type of record. Included are some lists of expenditures for school buildings, school supplies, and teachers' salaries; a register of payments received from Bureau headquarters in Washington for the period from July 1867 to May 1868; and names and addresses of teachers.

9.2: Miscellaneous Papers, 1865–70

[Image\(s\)](#)

The unbound miscellaneous papers, 1865–70, are arranged by subject in accordance with an index system prepared by the Adjutant General's Office. Most of the papers are records of Bureau expenditures, but there are also some lists of teachers and a descriptive list of Bureau-owned school buildings.

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