



Smithsonian

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Records of the Superintendent of Education
for the State of Arkansas Bureau of Refugees,
Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1871

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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 Arkansas Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1871
Date:	1865–1871
Identifier:	NMAAHC.FB.M980
Extent:	5 Reels
Language:	English .
Summary:	The collection is comprised of digital surrogates previously available on the five rolls of microfilm described in the NARA publication M980. These digital surrogates reproduced the records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Arkansas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–71. The records consist of 10 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.

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 M980.]

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 life of the Bureau. In January 1869, in accordance with an act of July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), its operations in the States were terminated except for educational functions and 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. It 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 other property. In Arkansas, the Bureau had a difficult time in protecting freedmen from persecution, intimidation, and physical violence at hands of whites or other freedmen.

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 Arkansas, operations began in May 1865 when Brig. Gen. John W. Sprague took command as Assistant Commissioner and 1 month later established headquarters at St. Louis, Mo. Bvt. Maj. Gen. Edward O.C. Ord relieved Sprague in October 1866 and was succeeded by Bvt. Maj. Gen. Charles H. Smith in March 1867.

In a circular issued by Commissioner Howard on July 12, 1865, the assistant commissioners were instructed to designate an 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 some centralized control was established over the educational activities of the Bureau in the States with the appointment of Rev. John W. Alvord as Inspector of Finances and Schools. In January 1867 Alvord was divested of the financial responsibilities and was redesignated General Superintendent of Education.

The educational activity of the Bureau in Arkansas was under the control of Brig. Gen. John W. Sprague until the appointment of William M. Colby as Superintendent of Schools (later Education) on March 1, 1866. Colby, a former lieutenant and agent under Sprague's command, served as the Bureau's Superintendent of Education until January 1, 1869. At the time, Bvt. Maj. Gen. Charles H. Smith reorganized the education branch. He divided the State into three districts, with an Assistant Superintendent for each, for the purpose of cooperating with State officials in the transfer of the Bureau schools to the State system. William M. Colby, David C. Casey, and James T. Watson were appointed to these new positions. General Smith held the position of Chief Superintendent of Education. The Assistant Commissioner Howard reappointed Colby as the Superintendent of Education, May 1, 1869. Colby held that position until July 1870. By that time the Bureau had turned over most of the schools to the State Board 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 the general superintendents, superintendents, or agents who commanded the local field offices into which the State was divided for administrative purposes. These superintendents 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. After December 1868 the superintendents were withdrawn from Arkansas in accordance with the act of July 25, 1868. The teachers, who had reported to the superintendents for their subdistricts before 1869, then reported directly to the Superintendent of Education.

The schools maintained by the Bureau in Arkansas included day schools for children, night schools for adults, and Sabbath (Sunday) schools for both groups. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were studies of greatest of importance to freedmen, and these subjects received the greatest emphasis in most Bureau schools in Arkansas. Teachers were recruited from the local white population, from among the freedmen themselves, and from the North by freedmen's aid societies, such as the Western Department of the American's Aid Commission, the American Missionary Association, and the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends.

The Bureau's responsibility for education included the establishment and maintenance of schools and the examination and appointment of teachers. Bureau funds were used to pay for the construction and repair of school buildings, for rent of properties used for educational purposes, and for providing the teachers with transportation. Private organizations and individuals also helped in establishing and financing freedmen's schools in Arkansas. A number of schools were established upon the initiative of local whites and freedmen, although subsequently they were given direction and support by the Bureau. The American Missionary Association and the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends provided some of the pay for the teachers they recruited, and salaries were partially subsidized by contributions from the freedmen. Bureau policy dictated that, whenever possible, subscriptions be solicited from freedmen for the establishment of schools and that tuition be charged for each student attending. However, most freedmen plantation laborers were paid yearly and consequently had difficulty in making regular tuition payments. Many of the schools established on plantations, therefore, foundered because teachers failed to receive funds to meet monthly expenses.

GENERAL RECORDKEEPING PRACTICES

The correspondence of the Superintendent of Education was handled in accordance with typical 19th-century recordkeeping practices. The letters are either fair or press copies. The fair copies are handwritten duplicates of the originals. They are clear and easy to read. The press copies were obtained by writing a piece of thin paper and pressing it on the original letter through the use of a press-copying machine, which caused the image to be transferred 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. Because fair copies were not made of all the letters sent, some press copies are reproduced in this microfilm publication. Replies to incoming letters were frequently written on the letters themselves or on specially prepared wrappers. The replies, known as endorsements, were then copied into endorsement books, and the endorsed letter was returned to the sender or forwarded to another office. Endorsement books usually included a summary of the incoming letter and sometimes previous endorsements that were recorded on it. Incoming correspondence was frequently entered in the registers of letters received. In addition to a summary of the contents of the incoming letters, the registers usually included such identifying information as the name, and sometimes the office, of the writer; the date of receipt; the date of the communication; the place of origin; and the entry number assigned at the time of the receipt.

There are name indexes in the volumes of letters sent, endorsements, and registers of letters received. The indexes provide references mainly to personal names but also include a few citations to places, groups, and titles of organizations. The names in the indexes are followed by black and red numbers. The black numbers refer to the letters and endorsements in which the names are addressees and to registers of letters received in which the names are correspondents. The red numbers refer to the letters to make the distinction between the red and black numbers observers on microfilm, the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) has underlined the black numbers.

The volumes reproduced in this microfilm publication were originally arranged by type of record and thereunder in sequence by volume number. Originally, no numbers were assigned to series consisting of single volumes; later, all volumes were arbitrarily assigned numbers by the Adjunct General's Office of the War Department after the records passed into its custody. In this microfilm publication, the last set of numbers assigned are shown in parentheses and are used 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: Letters Sent

Scope and Contents: The four volumes of letters sent, March 1866–July 1870, are arranged chronologically; each volume contains a name index. The letters in Volume 1 (29) are unnumbered; those in the remaining volumes are numbered consecutively by date of receipt within a year. The first three volumes contain fair copies of letters sent; Volume 4 (32) contains press copies. The letters dated January–February 1869 in the second volume (pages 134 – 144) are duplicated in the third volume (pages 9 – 20). Duplicate letters were microfilmed and digitized because they were indexed in both volumes.

In the left margin of the pages in Volume 1 (29) are names of the persons to whom the letters were sent and fractional notations. In these notations, the numerator refers to the page number in the volume on which the last preceding letter to the same person is listed, and the denominator refers to the page containing the next subsequent letter to the same person.

1.1: Volume 1 (29), Mar. 1866–Dec. 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

1.2: Volume 2 (30), 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

1.3: Volume 3 (31), 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

1.4: Volume 4 (32), Jan.–July 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 2: Endorsements Sent

Scope and Contents: The three volumes of endorsements sent, April 1866–January 1870, are generally arranged chronologically, and each contains a name index. The name of the person or title of the officer to whom the endorsement was sent is shown in the left margin of the pages. The endorsements for the period January–July 1870 have been entered on odd-numbered pages in Volume 3 (28) of registers of letters and telegrams received.

2.1: Volume 1 (33), Apr. 1866–Dec. 1867

[Image\(s\)](#)

2.2: Volume 2 (34), 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

2.3: Volume 3 (35), Jan. 1869–Jan. 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 3: Registers of Letters and Telegrams Received

Scope and Contents: There are three volumes of registers of letters and telegrams received, January 1868–July 1870, each containing a name index. The entries in the registers are arranged by year and thereunder are arranged and numbered in order of receipt. Volume 3 (28) also contains copies of endorsements sent; these are found on the odd numbered pages. The index to this volume covers both the entries to letters and telegrams received and endorsements.

A number of documents entered in the registers are no longer to be found among the series of registered letters and telegrams received. NARA has placed an asterisk near the writer's name in the register for each letter that is still in the series of registered letters and telegrams received. School reports from the subordinate officers and the teachers were entered in the registers as correspondence. However, all that was kept with the letters and telegrams received was the letter of transmittal; the reports were filmed in separate series and are available in Series 5: School Reports.

3.1: Volume 1 (26), 1868

[Image\(s\)](#)

3.2: Volume 2 (27), 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

3.3: Volume 3 (28), Jan.–July 1870

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 4: Letters and Telegrams Received

Scope and Contents: The registered letters and telegrams received, March 1866–July 1870, are arranged in accordance with the order of entries in the registers of letters and telegrams received. However, no register for the period March 1866–December 1867 has been found. Therefore, a name index to the letters has been prepared by NARA for that period and is available in Series 3.1 before the first volume of the registers of letters and telegrams received.

Many of the letters and telegrams, January 1868–July 1870, have another number in addition to the entry number by which they are now filed. The registers are also annotated with these additional "File Numbers," but they are no apparent significance.

4.1: Letters and Telegrams Received, Mar. 1866–Dec. 1867

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

4.2: Letters and Telegrams Received (Entered in Register 1), 1868

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

4.3: Letters and Telegrams Received (Entered in Registers 2 and 3), Jan. 1869–July 1870

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

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Series 5: School Reports

Scope and Contents: There are two series of school reports: monthly school reports from superintendents and agents and monthly reports from the teachers of freedmen's schools. Generally, both reports were submitted on printed forms and both give statistical information about schools.

5.1: Monthly Reports From Superintendents and Agents, (bulk June–Sept. 1865, Nov. 1866–Oct. 1868)

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and Contents: The reports from superintendents and agents, June–September 1865 and November 1866–October 1868, are arranged by month and thereunder alphabetically by initial letter of name of county. They usually list names and locations of the schools and the societies that sponsored them. The reports show whether the schools were maintained by the freedmen or by societies, whether the building was supplied by the Bureau or by owned by the freedmen, the amount of tuition paid by the freedmen, and the Bureau's expenses for the school. The reports also give the following information about the pupils at each school: sex; color; number of pupils over 16 years of age; degree of literacy; number of pupils in geography, arithmetic, writing, needlework, and the "Higher Branches"; and the number who were free before the war. Interfiled with the reports described above are forms submitted in 1868 by the superintendents and agents concerning education in the subdistrict. The 19 questions on the form relate to the number of visits by the officer to the school, the established of new schools in the area, the need for continued northern charitable aid, and public sentiment toward education for the freedmen.

5.2: Monthly Reports From Teachers, (bulk Apr. 1866–Nov. 1868, Jan.–Mar. 1871)

[Image\(s\)](#)

[Image\(s\)](#)

Scope and Contents: The monthly school reports from teachers, April 1866–November 1868 and January–March 1871, are arranged chronologically by month. The reports give much of the same information as those from superintendents and agents.

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