

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

FREEDMEN'S BUREAU TRANSCRIPTION PROJECT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I participate in the Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project?

Anyone can participate in the project by going to the Freedmen's Bureau page on the Smithsonian Transcription Center's website (<https://transcription.si.edu/freedmens-bureau>).

How does the transcription process work?

Volunteers can begin by transcribing a new document or continuing the work that another volunteer has started. Once a volunteer decides he or she has "finished" a document and the document is ready for review, a different volunteer (who must have an account on the site) can review the transcription and either send it back for edits or complete the transcription. The finished transcript is sent to the Smithsonian for one final review, where it may then be used immediately, or undergo additional work.

What is the Freedmen's Bureau?

As the Civil War drew to a close, President Lincoln and members of Congress debated how to reunite the nation, reconstruct Southern society, and help formerly enslaved individuals make the transition to freedom and citizenship. As one response, in March 1865 Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly referred to as The Freedmen's Bureau.

The Bureau was responsible for providing assistance to four million formerly enslaved individuals and hundreds of thousands of impoverished Southern whites. The Bureau set up offices in major cities in the 15 Southern and border states and the District of Columbia.

The Bureau provided food, clothing, medical care, and legal representation; promoted education; helped legalize marriages; and assisted African American soldiers and sailors in securing back pay, enlistment bounties and pensions. In addition, the Bureau promoted a system of labor contracts to replace the slavery system and tried to settle freedmen and women on abandoned or confiscated land. The Bureau was also responsible for protecting freedmen and women from intimidation and assaults by Southern whites.

By most accounts, the Bureau was only partially successful. Congress did not provide sufficient funds or staff for the Bureau to be truly effective. The Bureau only operated from 1865 to 1872. It generally failed to protect the freedmen or their political and civil rights from white Southerners intent on re-establishing their local power.

Administered by the War Department, the Bureau followed the record-keeping system inspired by the war effort and the expansion of the Federal Government it required. Those hundreds of thousands of documents provide an unexcelled view into the lives of the newly freed slaves.

Why is transcribing the Freedmen's Bureau records important?

Family historians, genealogists, students and scholars around the world will have easy online access to these records. In addition, these transcribed records will be word searchable, vastly reducing the effort required to find a person or topic. Anyone who has tried to read 19th century handwritten letters knows just how frustrating and time-consuming this can be. Providing typed versions of the original documents will make it more likely that more people will use these records. These records will enhance our understanding of the post-Civil War era and expand our knowledge of African American life in the South during this period.

What's the difference between the FamilySearch genealogical indexing project and the NMAAHC Smithsonian Transcription Center project?

The FamilySearch indexing project has created a searchable database of genealogical material drawn from the Freedmen's Bureau records: primarily, names, places, dates (<http://www.discoverfreedmen.org/>). This information is particularly useful for African American family historians who cannot rely on their ancestors appearing in the pre-1870 United State census or many other official records.

The NMAAHC Smithsonian Transcription Center project will transcribe every word of every document in the Freedmen's Bureau records. Once transcribed, those records will be word searchable. This will allow anyone to search for a name, a place, a topic and to read the full document and connect it to related documents.

Where are the original documents located/what if I want to see the original document?

The original Freedmen's Bureau records are preserved by the National Archives and Record Administration, headquartered in Washington, D. C. The original documents are not accessible to individuals but researchers can view microfilm copies of the records at many of the Federal Record Centers.

Where can I go to learn more about the Freedmen's Bureau?

National Archives and Records Administration

Custodian of the original Freedmen's Bureau records. NARA has microfilmed and made available the Freedmen's Bureau records for in person research at the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. and at 13 regional archives nationwide. Resources and additional information are available on the NARA website. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau>

FamilySearch.org

Genealogical database that allows researchers to search for indexed names, dates, and locations in most of the Freedmen's Bureau records. Through the online database, a researcher can conduct a general search or browse by NARA microfilm publication. Great for searching names and locations that are hard to determine while transcribing. <https://familysearch.org>

Freedmen and Southern Society Project

Print and online resource. This project has published six volumes of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*. Selected records from the print publications have been transcribed and made available on the Freedmen and Southern Society Project's website. <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/>

Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau

Website that maps the location of Freedmen's Bureau field offices, schools, banks, contraband camps, and battle sites where US Colored Troops fought during the Civil War. www.mappingthefreedmensbureau.com

The Freedmen's Bureau Online

Online resource with transcriptions of key documents from the Freedmen's Bureau records and links to related websites and resources. www.freedmensbureau.com

What if I have additional questions about the Freedmen's Bureau or the transcription project?

Please contact the Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project team via email: FreedmensBureau@si.edu.