



National Archives and Records Administration

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Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) for Kentucky, 1865–1872

Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) on March 3, 1865. Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard served as the only Commissioner of the Bureau. Part of the War Department, the Bureau managed all matters relating to refugees, freedmen, and lands abandoned or seized by Federal authorities during the Civil War. Providing relief and assistance to freedmen, the Bureau issued rations and clothing, operated hospitals and refugee camps, and supervised labor contracts. It also managed apprenticeship disputes, assisted in the establishment of schools, helped former slaves legalize their marriages, and provided transportation to refugees and freedmen. The Freedmen's Bureau was headquartered in Washington, DC, with field offices located in the former Confederate states, the Border States, and the District of Columbia. The Freedmen's Bureau operated until June 30, 1872, although most of its work concluded by December 1868. After 1872, the Bureau's records and activities were transferred to the Freedmen's Branch, Office of the Adjutant General, in Washington, DC.

From July 1865 to June 1866, Maj. Gen. Clinton B. Fisk served as the Assistant Commissioner for both Kentucky and Tennessee. Fisk appointed Bvt. Brig. Gen. John Ely as the Chief Superintendent for the Bureau in Kentucky. Records relating to Kentucky prior to Ely's appointment in March 1866, may be included among the files for the Assistant Commissioner for Tennessee. For more information, see the following reference report: *Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) for Tennessee, 1865–1872*.

In June 1866 Fisk appointed Maj. Gen. Jefferson C. Davis as the first Assistant Commissioner for Kentucky. From January to May 1869, Maj. Benjamin Runkle served as both the Assistant Commissioner and the Superintendent of Education for Kentucky. In August 1870, the Bureau withdrew Superintendents of Education from the states. Runkle, however, continued to serve as the claims agent for the Kentucky Bureau until 1871.

In Kentucky, widespread violence forced the closure of many schools. The Bureau worked to reopen the schools and to establish new schools. By September 1868, despite continued opposition and violence, the Bureau had provided support for 135 day schools and one night school. The student population increased to more than 6,000.

On February 14, 1866, the Kentucky State Legislature passed an act legalizing slave marriages. On February 26, Fisk issued a circular directing freedmen to the county clerk for a marriage license. If a clerk refused to issue a license, Bureau officials were authorized to solemnize the marriage and issue a marriage license. Local Bureau officers were required to maintain a register of marriages and forward a report of such marriages to the Assistant Commissioner on a monthly basis. Bureau officials also notified individuals to have their marriages legalized. Those who failed to comply were charged with a misdemeanor and faced fines and imprisonment.

These records are part of **Record Group 105, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau)**.

Field Office Records

___M1904, *Records of the Field Offices for the State of Kentucky, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872*. 133 rolls. DP. The records document such activities as administering justice, assisting freedmen in the establishment of schools, legalizing marriages, processing claims relating to military service, and supervising labor contracts. They consist of monthly reports, registers of complaints, labor contracts, and school reports as well as records relating to claims. Also included are marriage licenses, certificates, and registers of marriages for the Kentucky subdistricts of Augusta, Bowling Green, Columbus, Cynthiana, Owensboro, Paducah, Mt. Sterling, and Winchester.

Other Records

___M803, *Records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1871*. 35 rolls. DP. This publication contains correspondence and school reports that document efforts to establish and promote schools for freedmen, including day schools, night schools for adults, industrial (vocational) schools, and Sunday schools for religious instruction. Roll 5 contains name and subject indexes. Rolls 20–21 specifically relate to activities in Kentucky.

___M1875, *Marriage Records of the Office of the Commissioner, Washington Headquarters of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1861–1869*. 5 rolls. DP. These records consist of marriage certificates, licenses, monthly reports of marriages, and other proofs of wedlock submitted by freedmen who wanted to legitimize marriages entered into during slavery. The records are arranged alphabetically by state, then alphabetically by the initial letter of the bridegroom's surname. Roll 1 contains the Kentucky marriage certificates for Charles Anderson and Sarah Walker, dated January 23, 1865, as well as Ben Laughlin and Alice Veeney, dated January 8, 1867.

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