



## ***Records of the Mississippi Freedmen's Department (Pre-Bureau Records), 1863–1865***

During the Civil War, thousands of refugees sought protection behind Union lines. In November 1862, the War Department appointed Col. John Eaton general superintendent of contraband in the Department of the Tennessee and the State of Arkansas. The Department had responsibility for the territory ranging from Cairo, Illinois, southward to the Mississippi Valley, including the cities of Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, and Little Rock, and the military posts of Columbus, Island 10, Corinth, Helena, Du Vall's Bluff, Pine Bluff, Fort Smith, Goodrich Landing, Milliken's Bend, and Davis Bend. In 1863, Eaton became the general superintendent of freedmen.

In June 1863, Capt. Samuel Thomas was appointed Assistant Superintendent of contrabands, under Colonel Eaton, for the Department in the area of Helena. Eaton's position and title was eventually changed to General Superintendent of freedmen, and Thomas became the Assistant Superintendent of freedmen. When Colonel Thomas assumed supervisory responsibilities for the provost marshal in various districts and posts, his title was changed to provost marshal of freedmen. The positions of both Eaton and Thomas, coupled with the office of the medical director, inspector of freedmen, and several freedmen's hospitals and homes, constituted the Freedmen's Department of the Department of the Tennessee.

In November 1864, the Freedmen's Department became part of the Department of the Mississippi. By summer 1865, the functions and activities of the Freedmen's Department were assumed by the recently formed Freedmen's Bureau, so that the Department was the precursor the Bureau's Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Mississippi.

The Freedmen's Department assisted freedmen in obtaining clothing, education, employment, food, land, medicine and medical attention, shelter, and solemnizing slave marriages. Special Order Number 15, dated March 28, 1864, granted ministers the authority to issue marriage certificates and licenses. They were required to keep marriage records that were sent to post superintendents.

The records often lack useful name indexes, and in some instances, the arrangement of the records prevents easy access. Some of the volumes contain more than one type of record, thus, researchers should carefully read the table of contents in the descriptive pamphlet (DP).

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

\_\_\_\_M1914, *Records of the Mississippi Freedmen's Department ("Pre-Bureau Records")*, Office of the Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863–1865. 5 rolls. DP. Some information about pre-Bureau activities in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee also appear. The records include oaths of allegiance and evidence of amnesty, registers of contracts and rations issued, registers of patients and hospital reports, reports of operations and abandoned property, school lists, and reports of teachers and missionaries.

### **Other Records**

\_\_\_\_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. The 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. Rolls 2–3 contain marriage records for Mississippi from 1864 to 1866.

For more information, see the following reference report: *Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) for Mississippi, 1865–1872*.

Rev. December 2010