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RECORDS OF THE EDUCATION DIVISION
OF THE BUREAU OF REFUGEES, FREEDMEN, AND ABANDONED LANDS,
1865-1871

On the 35 rolls of this microfilm publication are reproduced the 23 volumes and the unbound records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-71. The records are part of Record Group 105, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, and consist mainly of letters sent, letters received, and reports of schools by the State superintendents of education on a monthly, quarterly, and annual basis.

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands was established in the War Department by an act of Congress approved March 3, 1865 (13 Stat. 507). The legislation provided that the Freedmen's Bureau, as it was often called, would be headed by a Commissioner appointed by the President with the approval of the Senate. Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard was appointed as Commissioner in May 1865 and served in the Bureau Headquarters in Washington, D.C., until the activities of the Bureau were terminated in 1872. With minor variations in size and organization, General Howard's staff consisted of an Assistant Adjutant General, an Assistant Inspector General, a Chief Medical Officer, a Chief Quartermaster, a Chief Disbursing Officer, and officers in charge of the Claim Division, the Education Division, and the Land Division.

The Bureau confined its operations to the District of Columbia and to the area of the former Confederate and border States. Assistant Commissioners supervised the work of the Bureau in the districts into which the States were divided. The initial legislation provided for only 10 Assistant Commissioners, necessitating some of the districts to encompass more than one State. The number of Assistant Commissioners was increased later to 14.

During the years of its greatest activity the operations of the Freedmen's Bureau resembled, in many ways, the work of later Federal social agencies. In addition to supervising the disposition of abandoned or confiscated lands, Bureau officers issued rations, clothing, and medicine to destitute refugees and freedmen; established hospitals and dispensaries; and supervised camps and settlements for the homeless. Bureau officers worked with members of benevolent and philanthropic organizations in dispensing relief, operating employment offices, and establishing schools. The schools were of four types: day schools for instruction of young children; night schools for older children and parents; industrial schools for practical instruction in such skills as sewing; and Sunday or Sabbath schools for religious instruction.

Although the establishment of schools was an important aspect of improving the lives of the newly freed slaves, there was no organized department concerned with matters of education when the Bureau began operations in 1865. The educational activities of the Bureau and the organization for supervising these activities grew as the educational needs of the freedmen increased.

During the early months of the Bureau's existence there was no apparent attempt by the Government to finance freedmen's schools on a large scale. This inactivity on the part of the Bureau was due primarily to the fact that benevolent societies in the North maintained schools in many parts of the South, and a few in some of the Northern States, and continued to do so for some months after the establishment of the Bureau. In July 1865 Commissioner Howard directed the Assistant Commissioners in the States to appoint general superintendents of schools to assist them in making reports on educational matters.

In October 1865 Rev. John W. Alvord was appointed Inspector of Finances and Schools. In the months after his appointment the educational needs of the freedmen grew rapidly and many benevolent societies learned that their financial resources were inadequate to meet the demand for educational development. By an act of July 13, 1866 (14 Stat. 92), Congress authorized funds for the salaries of State superintendents of education and for the repair and rental of school buildings. The appropriation aided in establishing the Education Division as a separate entity within the Freedmen's Bureau. Reverend Alvord was relieved of his responsibilities for the inspection of the Bureau's finances in January 1867 when he was appointed as General Superintendent of Education. He retained the new position until his resignation in late 1870.

Throughout its existence the Bureau maintained close ties with the benevolent societies who retained control of such administrative matters as the selection and the specific school assignments of teachers. In many instances when the philanthropic societies had to curtail their financial support, the Bureau provided funds that were channeled through the societies.

The period from late 1866 until far into 1868 was one of great activity for the Education Division. Enrollment in Bureau financed schools grew rapidly, new school buildings were constructed in many communities, and the curriculum was expanded. But by late 1868 much of the work in other divisions of the Freedmen's Bureau was coming to an end.

An act of July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), provided that on January 1, 1869, the Commissioner was to withdraw the Assistant Commissioners and most Bureau officers from the States and to discontinue the functions of the Bureau except those relating to education and to the collection and payment of claims. Although educational activities were to continue for an unspecified period, by late 1870 most offices of the State superintendents of education had closed, and on November 30, 1870, Reverend Alvord resigned as General Superintendent of Education.

The work of the Education Division was greatly reduced after Reverend Alvord's resignation, but school reports and correspondence continued to arrive during the next several months and some clerical functions were continued. Because no further appropriations were made by Congress the educational activities of the Freedmen's Bureau terminated in March 1871.

The volumes reproduced in this microcopy were originally arranged by type of record and thereunder in numerical sequence, with no numbers assigned to index books or to series consisting of single volumes. Later all the volumes were arbitrarily assigned numbers. In this microfilm publication the last set of numbers assigned are in parentheses and are useful as an aid in identifying the volumes.

Letters Sent (Vols. 1(8), 2(10), and A-F(11-16))

The 8 volumes of letters sent contain copies of the letters dispatched by Reverend Alvord or by a subordinate acting for him. There are a few copies with General Howard's signature. The letters are either fair or press copies, illustrating two distinctive record keeping practices of the mid-19th century. The press copies were obtained by wetting a piece of thin paper and pressing it on the original letter through the use of a press-copying machine, which caused the ink 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. The fair copies are handwritten duplicates of the press copies and are clear and easy to read. Because fair copies were not made of all the letters, the press copies also have been reproduced in this microfilm publication.

The fair-copy letters are in volumes 1 (8) and 2 (10), January 1, 1866-January 1, 1868. Also included are lengthy narrative reports submitted to the Commissioner by Reverend Alvord. The letters and the reports are arranged in chronological order but the reports, which are only in the fair-copy volumes, were prepared at 6-month intervals. The first document in volume 1 is a report on freedmen's schools, dated January 1, 1866, submitted by Reverend Alvord at the conclusion of a 3-month inspection trip in late 1865. The next document is dated July 1, 1866. A name index to volume 1 is bound at the beginning of the volume.

Each letter in the fair-copy volumes is duplicated in the press-copy books. Beginning October 10, 1866, this duplication is indicated in the fair-copy volumes by a designation such as "P L B 'A' 162," which appears in the lower left corner of the copies. "P L B" means, "press letter book" and "'A' 162" indicates the duplicate is on page 162 of volume A.

The press-copy letters are in volumes A-F (11-16), July 18, 1866-March 3, 1871. The copies are arranged in chronological order. At the beginning of each volume is a name index.

Endorsements Sent

Often instead of dispatching a letter in reply to a letter received, the incoming letter was endorsed. This meant that the reply or forwarding statement was written on the incoming letter, which was either returned to the sender or forwarded to another office. These replies or statements were copied into endorsement books, with a summary of the incoming letter on which the endorsement was written.

The volume of endorsements sent by the Education Division is dated June 13, 1867-September 1, 1870. The endorsements are arranged in chronological order by date the endorsement was sent. The volume has no index.

From June 13, 1867, through April 21, 1869, the name of the writer of the incoming letter is in the left margin of the endorsement page. Beginning on August 14, 1869, cross-reference notations of either of two types occur at irregular intervals: "E B Vol. 1 #20," or "P E on page 29." Both references indicate that preceding or subsequent endorsements to the same correspondent are elsewhere in the same volume. "E B" means "endorsement book" and "P E" means "previous endorsement." The numerical notation refers to the page in the volume on which there is an additional endorsement.

Registers of Unbound Letters Received (Vols. 1-3)

According to the record keeping practice of the time, letters received were entered in registers alphabetically by initial letter of surname or office of writer and thereunder chronologically by date of receipt. Each entry consists of the date the letter was received, the name or the office of the writer, the date the letter was written³ and the purpose of the letter.

The 3 registers of letters received by the Education Division are dated from 1866 to 1871. The entries in register 1 (September 27, 1866-June 7, 1869) are arranged in a separate numerical sequence within each alphabetical section for each year. The entries in register 2 (May 27, 1869-January 13, 1870) and register 3 (January 5, 1870-January 5, 1871) are in a continuous numerical sequence within each alphabetical section without regard to year. When a letter was written in reply and was copied in the press-copy books, a cross-reference designation such as "P L B Vol. C 234" was placed in the lower left corner of the entry. The designation indicates that the reply is on page 234 in volume C of the press-copy letter book.

Name and subject indexes are filmed before the registers to which they relate. The entries in the indexes are of two types: if the letter was entered under the same alphabetical section in both the register and the index, only an entry number was given; if the letter was entered under a different alphabetical section, the combination of a letter and a number was used to indicate the section of the register in which the letter was entered. The entries in the indexes to register 1 indicate the page number in the register in which the letter was entered. The entries in the indexes to registers 2 and 3 indicate the entry (not page) number of the specific letter in the registers.

The National Archives has placed an asterisk beside the entry number in the registers if the letter is in the letters received file. The fact that no asterisk appears beside a specific entry does not necessarily mean that the letter is missing. A common practice of the Education Division was to enter school reports and schedules of schools and rental accounts in the registers as letters received and then to place the records in other series. These series of school reports and rental accounts are reproduced on Rolls 15-35 of this microcopy.

Unbound Letters Received

The unbound letters received consist of one series of letters entered in registers 1-3 and three series of unregistered letters.

The series of registered letters received, September 27, 1866-January 5, 1871, are arranged in the order in which they are entered in the registers. The letters received from State superintendents of education, assistant commissioners, subassistant commissioners, and Bureau agents, and from secretaries of benevolent societies and private citizens relating to education. The series also contains such related documents as copies of congressional legislation concerning education and copies of various State constitutions containing educational provisions.

Near the top of the outside fold of the letters is the register file number in script or as part of a preprinted statement. The notation "E. D." indicates that the letter is entered in the Education Division register. The notation "R.F.A.L." as part of the file number on many letters indicates that the letter is entered in the Bureau registers.

The outside fold also contains the name of the writer, the purpose of the letter, and frequently the circular Bureau stamp showing the date the letter was received by the Bureau. Notations by the Education Division show the date the letter was received and filed in that Division.

The three series of unregistered letters, 1865-1870, consist of letters from Bureau officials, miscellaneous letters, and letters pertaining to financial matters. The letters from Bureau officials (August 1865-May 1870) are arranged alphabetically by name of State in which the official served and thereunder chronologically. The miscellaneous letters (June 1865-March 1871) were received from private citizens and from officials of benevolent societies. Also included are such related documents as histories of some philanthropic societies. The communications are arranged chronologically. A few miscellaneous circulars working copies of reports, and undated letters and reports are filed at the end of the series. The letters pertaining to financial affairs (March 1865-March 1870) were received by Reverend Levered in his dual capacity as General Superintendent of Education and as President of the Freedman's Savings and the Trust Company, the letters are relevant to the activities of the Education Division.

School Reports (Unbound)

Three types of reports from June 1865 to December 1870 were submitted to the Bureau Headquarters in Washington by the State superintendents of education: monthly reports, consolidated reports for individual States for varying time periods, and monthly reports beginning in late 1868 about school buildings and teachers.

The reports are arranged alphabetically by name of State and thereunder chronologically by type of report, with a few consolidated reports for all 15 States and the District of Columbia at the end of the series. The monthly reports are filed at the beginning of the reports for each State, followed by the consolidated or miscellaneous reports and the reports about school buildings and teachers. The reports for the border States of Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia are filed with the reports of the District of Columbia although an Assistant Commissioner was assigned to Maryland for a time.

The outside fold of the reports contain: the Bureau stamp showing the date of receipt, the month and year of the report, and the name of the State from which the report was received. The reports bear the file designation of the Education Division ("E. D.") and also, in some cases, of the Bureau Headquarters; ("R.F.A.L."). Dual designations indicate that many reports were first received in the Bureau Headquarters, entered as incoming communications in the registers of letters received, and then forwarded to the Education Division.

The monthly reports from the State superintendents of education were made in either statistical or narrative form. The statistical reports give the names and locations of schools, names of benevolent societies sponsoring the schools, whether the school was a day or night school, and whether the building was owned by the freedmen or by other persons. The reports contain information about the pupils, including sex, race, age, degree of literacy, and whether or not they were free before the war. The reports also show the number of pupils in such types of classes as geography, arithmetic, writing, and needlework and in the "higher branches"; how much tuition was paid by the freedmen; and the expenses of the schools. These statistical reports were generally made on preprinted forms supplied by the Bureau Headquarters. The monthly reports in narrative form generally contain information about the attitudes of the community toward freedmen's schools, any personnel or other administrative problems that a State superintendent might have, suggestions by a State superintendent for the improvement of schools in the State assigned to him or for freedmen's schools in general, and any other information that could not be included in reports of a statistical nature.

The consolidated or miscellaneous reports were made at intervals ranging from quarterly to annual and are either statistical or narrative in form. The statistical type are compilations of the monthly statistical reports for the period cited. The narrative reports summarize the operations for the reporting period and generally include recommendations more comprehensive than those contained in the monthly narrative reports.

The reports about buildings and teachers contain information relating to school buildings owned by the Bureau or by private citizens and information relating to teachers and their school assignments. The reports submitted concerning the buildings give the location of the school, the type of materials used in constructing the building, the dimensions of the building, and the estimated value of the building and of the land upon which it was situated. The reports submitted pertaining to each teacher show the society that sponsored him, his full name, the name and location of the school, the number of pupils for each teacher, and the total number of teachers sponsored by each society.

School Reports (Bound)

The volumes consist of an index to only volume 1 of synopses of school reports, volumes 1(18) and 2(20) of synopses of school reports, a volume of consolidated statistical reports (21), a register of reports received (22), and a volume containing a list of names of teachers (23).

The 2 volume, of synopses of school reports, January 2, 1867-January 20, 1870, contain narrative abstracts of monthly reports submitted by the State superintendents of education. The reports are arranged chronologically by date of receipt. The name of the State from which the report was received is written in the left margin.

The volume of consolidated statistical reports, October 1866-June 1870, contains abstracts of statistics from the monthly reports. The abstracts are arranged chronologically.

The register of reports received, 1865-69, is a list of reports showing the type of report submitted, the month and year of the report, and the month it was received. The volume also contains such information as teachers' names and addresses, the name of the school to which the teacher was assigned, and addresses of secretaries of benevolent societies.

The volume containing a list of teachers' names shows their full names and the names of the societies employing them.

Schedules of Schools and Rental Accounts

These records consist of reports submitted to the Bureau by benevolent societies to verify payments made by the Bureau for operating freedmen's schools. The reports, September 1867-December 1870, were made for varying time periods and were generally submitted on preprinted forms. Information in the reports gives the name of the society that sponsored the school, the location of the school, the name of the teacher, the number of months the teacher had been employed, the average number of pupils, and the amount of rent due. Reports are arranged alphabetically by name of State and thereunder chronologically.

The outside fold of the report shows the name of the society that prepared the report, the period covered by the report, and the name of the State concerned. Also included are the date the report was received and the file designation of the Education Division. Virtually all the reports are marked with a file designation indicating that they were entered in the register of letters received as incoming communications and then placed in a separate file. Arranged chronologically at the end of the series are a few miscellaneous summary reports listing schools managed by benevolent societies for the period October 1868-June 1869.

Related Records

Related records also in Record Group 105 that have been microfilmed are Selected Series of Records Issued by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-72 (Microcopy 742); Registers and Letters Received by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-72 (Microcopy 752); Records of the Assistant Commissioner or the State of Georgia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-69 (Microcopy 79g); Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Georgia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-70 (Microcopy 799).

Many records relating to the Freedmen's Bureau are in other record groups in the National Archives. Among them are records of military districts and departments in Record Group 393, Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920; records of abandoned property in Record Group 366, Records of Civil War Special Agencies of the Treasury Department; and records relating to the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company in Record Group 101, Records of the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency.

The records reproduced in this microcopy were prepared for filming by David A. Gibson, who also wrote these introductory remarks and provided the other editorial material.

CONTENTS

<u>Roll</u>	<u>Description; Dates</u>
1	Letters Sent: Volume 1 (8); Jan. 1, 1866-Oct. 10, 1867 Volume 2 (10); Oct. 11, 1867-Jan. 1, 1868
2	Volume A (11); July 18, 1866-Jan. 30, 1867 Volume B (12); Jan. 28-Sept. 4, 1867
3	Volume C (13); Sept. 7, 1867-July 17, 1868 Volume D (14); July 17, 1868-May 27, 1869
4	Volume E (15); May 27, 1869-Aug. 11, 1870 Volume F (16); Aug. 15, 1870-Mar. 3, 1871 Endorsements Sent (17); June 13, 1867-Sept. 1, 1870
5	Name Index (2) Subject Index (3) Register of Letters Received Volume 1 (1); Sept. 27, 1866-June 7, 1869 Name Index (5) Subject Index (n.n)

- Register of Letters Received
 Volume 2 (4); May 27, 1869-Jan. 13, 1870
 Name and Subject Index (7)
 Register of Letters Received
 Volume 3 (6); Jan. 5, 1870-Jan. 5, 1871
- 6 Letters Received:
 (Entered in Register 1)
 A-F; Sept. 1866-May 1869
- 7 G-M; Sept. 1866-May 1869
- 8 N-Y; Oct. 1866-May 1869
- 9 (Entered in Register 2):
 A-P; June 1869-Jan. 1870
- 10 R-Y; May 1869-Jan. 1870
 (Entered in Register 3):
 A-F; Jan.-Dec. 1870
- 11 G-Y; Jan. 1870-Jan. 1871
- 12 Unregistered Letters Received from Bureau Officials; Aug. 1865-May 1870
- 13 Miscellaneous Unregistered Letters Received; June 1865-Mar. 1871
- 14 Unregistered Letters Received Pertaining to Financial Affairs; Mar. 1865-Mar. 1870
- 15 School Reports:
 Alabama:
 Monthly; Sept. 1865-Dec. 1869
 Miscellaneous; Oct. 1865-June 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Nov. 1868-Mar. 1870
- Arkansas:
 Monthly; Oct. 1865-June 1870
 Miscellaneous; June 1866-July 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Nov. 1868-Mar. 1870
- 16 District of Columbia (incl. Delaware, Maryland and West Virginia):
 Monthly; Oct. 1865-June 1868
- 17 Monthly; July 1868-Feb. 1870
- 18 Monthly; Mar.-June 1870
 Miscellaneous; Apr. 1866-July 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Oct. 1868-Sept. 1869
- 19 Florida:
 Monthly; Nov. 1865-Apr. 1870
 Miscellaneous; Oct. 1865-June 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Apr. 1869-Apr. 1870
- Georgia:
 Monthly; Nov. 1865-Dec. 1870
 Miscellaneous; Apr. 1869-July 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Oct. 1868-May 1870
- 20 Kentucky:
 Monthly; June 1866-Jan. 1869
- 21 Monthly; Feb. 1869-June 1870
 Miscellaneous; Apr. 1866-July 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Jan. 1868-June 1870
- 22 Louisiana:

- 23 Monthly; June 1865-Jan. 1868
 Monthly; Feb.-Dec. 1868
 Miscellaneous; Jan. 1866-June 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Mar.-May 1870
- 24 Mississippi:
 Monthly; Aug. 1865-June 1870
 Miscellaneous; 1869
 Buildings and Teachers; Nov. 1868-Apr. 1870
- 25 Missouri:
 Monthly; Apr. 1867-Jan. 1869
 Miscellaneous; Jan. 1868-July 1870
 Building; Mar. 1870
- 26 North Carolina:
 Monthly; July 1865-July 1868
- 27 Monthly; Aug. 1868-June 1869
- 28 Monthly; July 1869-Dec. 1870
 Miscellaneous; July 1868-July 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Jan. 1869-Jan. 1870
- 29 South Carolina:
 Monthly; Oct. 1865-Dec. 1870
 Miscellaneous; Nov. 1865-Apr. 1871
 Buildings and Teachers; Nov. 1868-June 1870
- 30 Tennessee:
 Monthly; Aug. 1865-Dec. 1870
 Miscellaneous; June 1867-June 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Mar. 1867-June 1870
- 31 Texas:
 Monthly; July 1865-May 1870
 Miscellaneous; July 1868-June 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Oct. 1868-Apr. 1870
- 32 Virginia:
 Monthly; July 1865-Dec. 1870
 Miscellaneous; Oct. 1865-Aug. 1870
 Buildings and Teachers; Oct. 1868-Dec. 1870
- 33 Index (19) to Volume 1 of Synopses of School Reports
 Synopses of School Reports
 Volume 1 (18); Jan. 2, 1867-July 19, 1869
 Volume 2 (20); July 19, 1869-Jan. 20, 1870
 Consolidated Statistical Reports (21); Oct. 1866-June 1870
 Register of Reports Received (22); 1865-69
 List of Names of Teachers (23); (n.d.)
- 34 Schedules of Schools and Rental Accounts:
 Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia (incl. Delaware, Maryland, and
 West Virginia), Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi,
 Missouri, and North Carolina; Oct. 1868-Dec. 1870
- 35 South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia; Sept. 1867-Dec. 1870
 Miscellaneous Summary Reports; Oct. 1868-June 1869

