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RECORDS OF THE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER FOR THE STATE OF ALABAMA
BUREAU OF REFUGEES, FREEDMEN, AND ABANDONED LANDS, 1865-1870

On the 23 rolls of this microfilm publication are reproduced the records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-70. The records consist of 17 volumes and some unbound documents. The volumes include letters, reports, endorsements, and telegrams sent; orders issued; and registers of letters received. The unbound records include letters, reports, and issuances received. Except for some unfiled duplicate copies this microfilm publication contains all the records created or received in the office of the Assistant Commissioner for Alabama. The records are part of the Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105.

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 the acts of July 16, 1866 (14 Stat. 173), and July 6, 1868 (15 Stat. 3). Maj. Gen. Oliver Otis Howard was appointed Commissioner by the President in May 1865 and he served in that position until June 30, 1872 when the activities of the Bureau were terminated in accordance with an act of June 10, 1872 (17 Stat. 366). Although the Bureau was a part of the War Department, its work was primarily social and economic in nature. The Bureau cooperated with benevolent societies in issuing supplies to the destitute and in maintaining freedmens schools. Bureau officials supervised labor contracts between Negro employees and white employers; helped Negro soldiers and sailors to collect bounty claims, pensions, and backpay; and attended to the disposition of confiscated or abandoned lands and other property.

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 Alabama, operations began in July 1865 when Brig. Gen. Wager Swayne took command as Assistant Commissioner. Succeeding Swayne in January 1868 was Bvt. Brig. Julius Hayden who served until March 1868, Col. Oliver L. Shepherd who served from March to August 1868, and Col. T. H. Ruger who held the position of Assistant Commissioner for only a few days before the arrival of Bvt. Lt. Col. Edwin Beecher later in August 1868. In January 1869, in accordance with an act of July 25, 1868 (15 Stat. 193), Bureau operations in Alabama, as in other States, were terminated except for the educational functions and the collection of claims. Colonel Beecher remained to serve as Superintendent of Education and held that position until the office was closed in July 1870. Some of the records for Beecher's tenure as Superintendent of Education are among the records of the Assistant Commissioner, but most of them are in the records of the Superintendent of Education.

The Assistant Commissioner's staff consisted at various times of a Superintendent of Education, an Assistant Adjutant General, an Assistant Inspector General, a Disbursing Officer, a Chief Medical Officer, a Chief Quartermaster, and a Commissary of Subsistence. Subordinate to these officers were the assistant superintendents, or subassistant commissioners as they later became

known, who commanded the subdistricts. The more important subdistricts included those with headquarters at Demopolis, Eufaula, Greenville, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Opelika, Selma, Talladega, and Tuscaloosa. Under direct supervision of the subassistant commissioners were the civilian and military agents. Occasionally military officers would be retained by the Bureau in a civilian capacity after the termination of their military service. One such instance was the appointment of O. D. Kinsman in June 1867 as subassistant commissioner in charge of the Assistant Commissioner's office. Kinsman had served previously under General Swayne as Assistant Adjutant General.

The Assistant Commissioner corresponded extensively both with his superior in the Washington Bureau headquarters and with his subordinate officers in the subdistricts. Based upon reports submitted to him by the subassistant commissioners and other subordinate staff officers, he prepared reports that he sent to the Commissioner concerning Bureau activities in Alabama. The Assistant Commissioner also received letters from freedmen, local white citizens, State officials, and other non-Bureau personnel. These letters varied in nature from complaints to applications for jobs in the Bureau. Because the Assistant Adjutant General handled much of the mail for the Assistant Commissioner's office, it was often addressed to him instead of to the Assistant Commissioner.

From June 1866 to January 1868 the Assistant Commissioner, General Swayne, served also as the military commander of Alabama. He therefore created and received records in both capacities. The dual function of the Assistant Commissioner also resulted in a succession of changes in the official headings used on correspondence and issuances. The title "Office of the Assistant Commissioner" was changed in June 1866 to "Headquarters, District of Alabama" and in August 1866 to "Headquarters, Subdistrict of Alabama." The heading "District of Alabama" was used again from March 1867 until superseded by "State of Alabama" in February 1868.

The dual function of the office is also reflected in the recordkeeping practices for that period. Although the Assistant Commissioner generally maintained separate records for each of his capacities, in the case of letters and endorsements sent the records were frequently combined. Wherever separable the records created by the Assistant Commissioner in his military capacity are among Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393.

The volumes reproduced in this microfilm publication were originally arranged by type of record and thereunder in numerical sequence. Originally no numbers were assigned 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. In some volumes, and particularly in indexes and alphabetical headings of registers, there are a number of blank numbered pages that have not been filmed.

Series Listings and Remarks

Letters Sent

The five volumes of letters sent, July 1865-July 1870, are arranged chronologically and each volume contains a name index. The volumes also contain copies of annual reports, 1867-69, sent by the Assistant Commissioner to Commissioner Howard. The 1866 annual report is among the series of reports described below. Monthly reports from the Assistant Commissioner to the

Commissioner from January 1868 to January 1869 are also copied in the volumes. In addition to these reports, volume 5 also contains reports from the Superintendent of Education both to the General Superintendent of Schools and to the Commissioner in Washington.

The unbound letters sent, August 11-September 22, 1865, are arranged chronologically and are not duplicated in the volumes of letters sent described above.

Reports Sent

The annual report of the Assistant Commissioner, issued in October 1866, is in printed form and completes the series of reports included in the volumes of letters sent described above.

The volume of weekly reports of the Assistant Commissioner, July 24, 1865-January 31, 1866, is arranged chronologically and contains a name index. The reports consist of narrative weekly summaries of problems and developments relating to the Bureau during its organizing phase in the State.

Endorsements Sent

Endorsements sent are characteristic of 19th century record keeping practices. A reply to an incoming letter was frequently written on the letter itself or on a specially prepared wrapper. The reply, known as an endorsement, was then copied into an endorsement book, and the endorsed letter was returned to the sender or forwarded to another office. Endorsement books also usually include a summary of the incoming letter and sometimes previous endorsements that were recorded on it.

The three volumes of endorsements sent, October 2, 1865-July 7, 1866, and April 3, 1867-July 21, 1869, are arranged chronologically, and each volume contains a name index. The endorsements are cross-referenced by citations to other endorsements in the same series, to the registers of letters received, and to letters sent. The gap in the series, June 1866-April 1867, is filled by endorsements for that period among the records for the District of Alabama in Record Group 393, which are not reproduced in this publication.

Registers of Letters Received

Registers of letters received are also typical of 19th century recordkeeping practices. In addition to a summary of the contents of the incoming letter, the registers usually include such identifying information as the name and sometimes the office of the writer, the date of receipt, the date of the communication, the place from which it was written, and the entry number assigned at the time of receipt.

The entries in the two volumes of registers of letters received, June 1866-April 1869, are arranged alphabetically by initial letter of the correspondent's surname or office and there under chronologically by date of receipt of the communication. The volumes are cross-referenced to the endorsement books by a citation giving the file number of the endorsement.

The registers do not relate to the unbound series of letters received. Apparently most or all of the letters registered were either endorsed and returned to the sender or forwarded, generally to higher authorities in the Washington Bureau headquarters or to subordinates in the subdistricts.

The third register of letters received May 23, 1867-April 1, 1868, is arranged chronologically by date of receipt of communication. Unlike the other registers, which contain a summary of the incoming letter, the entries in this volume give only a brief statement indicating the content. Some of the letters registered in this volume are interfiled with the unbound series of letters received described below.

Letters Received

Most of the letters received, 1865-70, are unregistered. They are arranged by year and thereunder alphabetically by the initial letter of the correspondent's surname. In addition to the general correspondence addressed to the Assistant Commissioner are letters written to individuals other than the Assistant Commissioner, but they were forwarded to and retained by him. The series also includes letters written by the Assistant Commissioner himself, which were endorsed and returned to his office; these letters have been filed according to the initial letter of the Assistant Commissioner's surname. Petitions from more than one person have been filed under "P." Most of the letters received by Assistant Commissioner Beecher after 1869 were addressed to him as Superintendent of Education, but they are included in this microfilm publication. Occasionally, the letters from the subassistant commissioners will resemble or contain reports on conditions in the subdistricts.

Telegrams

Among the records of the Assistant Commissioner are a volume of telegrams sent and an unbound series of telegrams received. The volume of telegrams sent, July 28, 1865-September 17, 1868, is arranged chronologically and contains a name and subject index for 1865 and 1866. The unbound telegrams received, June 2- July 24, 1865, January 9, 1866-April 29, 1867, and June 5, 1867- November 12, 1868, are arranged chronologically. The telegrams were not entered in the registers of letter received.

Issuances

There are three volumes of issuances including one volume of general orders, circulars, and circular letters issued and two volumes of special orders issued. There are also three series of unbound issuances received. Separate numbering systems for each year are maintained for all issuances except circular letters. Circular letters are unnumbered and are usually interfiled with circulars or other issuances.

The volume of general orders, circulars, and circular letters issued, July 26, 1865-December 31, 1868, is generally arranged in chronological order and has a name index. For 1865 there are general orders only. In 1866 and 1867 general orders were interfiled with circulars and circular letters only. For 1868 there are circulars and circular letters only.

The two volumes of special orders issued July 28, 1865- May 11, 1869, are generally arranged in chronological order and contain name indexes. From July 1865 to January 1869, the special orders are interfiled with circulars and circular letter, some of which are duplicated in the above-cited volume of general orders, circulars, and circular letters issued. Beginning in January 1869, special orders and circulars are arranged according to type of issuance and thereunder chronologically.

The unbound general order, circulars, circular letters, and special orders received in the office of the Assistant Commissioner are arranged according to the type of issuance and thereunder chronologically. Generally, the issuances were received from the Bureau headquarters in Washington.

Reports

Narrative Reports Received

Three series of unbound narrative reports were received by the Assistant Commissioner: operations reports from subdistrict officers, annual reports from staff officers, and miscellaneous reports from staff and Bureau officials.

The unbound reports of operations from the subdistrict officers, September 1865- December 1868, are arranged alphabetically by name of subdistrict and thereunder chronologically. These weekly, monthly, and annual reports pertain to the performance of Bureau functions at the subdistrict level. Reports frequently contain information relating to school matters, the administration of relief, agriculture and labor conditions, the operation of laws, outrages committed upon freedmen, and the relationship between races. Sometimes there are also reports on conditions in the subdistricts among the letters received by the Assistant Commissioner.

The unbound annual reports from staff officers, 1866-68, are arranged chronologically. They include reports from the Disbursing Officer, the Subsistence Department, and the Medical Department. The Assistant Commissioner apparently used these reports to compile his annual reports to the Commissioner.

Unbound miscellaneous reports from staff and Bureau officials, August 1865-April 1868, are arranged chronologically. The papers consist primarily of reports of inspection tours undertaken by Bureau personnel. There are reports on such subjects as the condition of prisoners, the misuse of public stores, the condition of the destitute, and the status of Bureau property.

Form Reports

Five types of reports were submitted on forms, including those received by the Assistant Commissioner from staff and subordinate officers as well as retained copies of reports sent by him to Bureau headquarters in Washington.

The unbound personal reports, February-December 1868, are generally arranged alphabetically by surname of reporter and thereunder chronologically. The reports were received periodically from Bureau personnel and include such information as name of employee, rank, station, nature of duty, date of assignment, and source of authority for appointment. A few reports for 1866 and 1867 are also included.

The unbound consolidated tri-monthly reports concerning destitute freedman, July 1865-June 1866, are generally arranged alphabetically by name of subdistrict and thereunder chronologically. The reports contain information relating to the number of men, women, and children fit or unfit for work. The figures were apparently used as a basis for establishing the degree of destitution so that rations could be issued.

The unbound monthly reports of rations issued, July 1865-December 1868, are generally arranged chronologically by month and thereunder alphabetically by subdistrict. The reports contain statistical data on the number and types of persons receiving rations and the value of the rations issued. From the reports submitted by the subdistricts the Assistant Commissioner prepared a monthly consolidated report that contained most of the information given in the individual subdistrict reports. Consolidated reports are filed before the subdistrict reports for each month.

The unbound monthly reports of abandoned and confiscated lands, August 1865-December 1868, are arranged chronologically by month and thereunder alphabetically by subdistrict. The land reports usually contain information on the name of the former owner; location, boundaries, and acreage of land; whether the property was abandoned or confiscated; and types of buildings on the property. As in the case of ration reports, the Assistant Commissioner generally prepared a consolidated report based on reports received from the subdistricts. These consolidated reports contain most of the information submitted in the subdistrict reports, and they are filed at the beginning of the reports for each month.

There are two unbound series of rosters of Bureau personnel, July 1865-May 1869: a series of consolidated rosters for the State arranged chronologically, September 1865-May 1869, and a series of subdistrict rosters arranged alphabetically by subdistrict, July 1865-December 1868. Both types of rosters contain information relating to the names, locations, and ranks of both military and civilian Bureau personnel.

Other Records

Filmed directly after the form reports are the unbound oaths of office, 1865-69, which are arranged alphabetically by surname of the individual who took the oath of loyalty to the United States. These oaths were required by an act of July 2, 1862 (12 Stat. 502), for all officeholders whether elected or appointed.

On the last roll of this microfilm publication are a register of claims and an unbound series of miscellaneous papers. The entries in the register of claims, July 23, 1866-July 27, 1869, are arranged chronologically by date of receipt of claim; the register has a name index types of claims registered include applications for bounties, backpay, pensions, and rations. The volume also contains information on the name and rank of the claimant, the immediate action taken, the date of transmission, and the type of claim. There is no information on the specific nature of the claim or the eventual outcome.

The unbound miscellaneous paper, July 1865-October 1867, are arranged by subject in accordance with a subject index prepared by the Adjutant General's Office. Most of the papers relate to property, claims, frauds, and contracts.

Related Records

In the same record group and related to records of the Assistant Commissioner are those of the Bureau headquarters in Washington. Available on microfilm are Selected Series of Records Issued by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-72 (M742), which includes the letters, endorsements, and issuances sent; Registers and Letters Received by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

1865-72 (M752); and Records of the Education Division, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-71 (M803).

Also in Record Group 105 are records pertaining to the State of Alabama, including records of the Acting Assistant Inspector General and Disbursing Officer, the Chief Quartermaster, the Chief Medical Officer, and the individual subdistricts. The records of the Superintendent of Education, 1865-70, are available of microfilm (M810). In the same record group are records for other State offices and individual subdistricts.

There are also records in other record groups that supplement those of the Assistant Commissioner. In Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, are records of the military district of Alabama. Records of abandoned property before the establishment of the Bureau are among Records of Civil War Special Agencies of the Treasury Department, Record Group 366.

The records reproduced in this microfilm publication were prepared for filming by Robert H. Gruber, who also wrote these introductory remarks and provided the other editorial material.

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