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Writing Process

After studying the Civil War and the Reconstruction era in depth, I was required to choose one aspect of the Reconstruction era and write a historiography based on it. I researched how historians studied and interpreted the role of the Freedmen's Bureau, which was an agency established immediately after the end of the Civil War. I studied how these interpretations of the success of the Freedmen's Bureau's changed over time. I began by producing an annotated bibliography of the eight scholarly sources. I wrote three drafts and conferenced with my professor as well as the Write Place consultants. I revised and closely proofread my work several times. This historiography exemplifies how historians' view of the success of the Freedmen's Bureau altered over time.

***Editor's note:** For this paper, the author received the Barbara Farrelly Award for Best Writing of the Issue (\$200 prize)*

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The Bumpy Highway to Freedom: U.S. Reconstruction and the Freedmen's Bureau

Jenny Sobnosky

After the last Confederate army surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant in 1865, Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau. This agency was created in efforts to smooth blacks' abrupt transition to freedom after the end of the Civil War. The Freedmen's Bureau provided various forms of aid such as housing and medical services to millions of former slaves in the South. Bureau agents often operated as legal aids, as well as a reunification service for families who had been separated by the war or slavery. One of the Bureau's largest programs included helping former slaves obtain land to settle and foster as their own. The Bureau encouraged a free labor system and surveilled the contracts between former planters and former slaves in order to avoid a renewed system of slavery. It is arguable that blacks have yet to be fully integrated as free and equal into American society today, and thus that the Bureau was unsuccessful. I study the evolution of attitudes toward the goodwill, value, and success of the Freedmen's Bureau, using academic, historical conclusions. Through examining how historians' interpretations regarding the role of the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction have changed over time, I discovered three categories which illustrate this development.

The historical study of the success and goodwill of the Freedmen's Bureau has been ever-changing and slightly unpredictable. Over the course of history, different attitudes have surfaced toward how the Freedmen's Bureau actually assisted freedmen during Reconstruction. Historians tend to recognize either the complete success, partial success, or entire failure of the Freedmen's Bureau. Historians such as Paul Peirce and Mary Farmer-Kaiser who note the success of

the Freedmen's Bureau discuss how the Bureau and its agents were effective and cooperative with freedmen in helping integrate them into their new lives. Other individuals, including Martin Abbott, William Cohen, and Ira Colby, reveal how the Freedmen's Bureau was both effective and a failure simultaneously. They examine factors that influenced how far-reaching the Bureau's power could be, as well as how specific operations of the Bureau shaped racial segregation in the South. The third group of historians, which includes Donald Nieman, Richard Lowe, and Randy Finley, underline the ways in which the Bureau ultimately failed. These sources discuss the various internal and external forces that contributed to the botched operation of the Bureau. Historians' interpretations of the Freedmen's Bureau have changed over time, alternating among believing in the success of the Bureau; emphasizing how the Bureau was a failure to society and freedmen themselves; and a middle ground that recognized the partial failure and partial success of the Bureau. The earliest historian I have documented discusses the complete success of the Freedmen's Bureau, and this analysis is seen again in the most recent source in my collection. Generally, those which identify both the accomplishments and downfalls of the Bureau tend to have been published in the later time periods. Lastly, the most recently published interpretations tend to be those which note the failure of the Freedmen's Bureau, with the exception of Farmer-Kaiser. Among the sources examined in this essay, the interpretation that prevails in accuracy and neutrality is that which recognizes both the success and failure of the Freedmen's Bureau, as it properly takes into consideration the factors that influenced the Bureau during its work.

Understanding Success

Historians that portray the Freedmen's Bureau as successful, like Peirce, often highlight specific projects that Bureau agents carried out in order to assist freedmen. The following sources illustrate a positive view of the Freedmen's Bureau, identifying how the Bureau helped and accommodated freedmen during Reconstruction. In the earliest source, Chapter Nine of *The Freedmen's Bureau: A Chapter in the History of Reconstruction*, Peirce analyzes the role the Freedmen's Bureau's had in black suffrage and elections.¹ Peirce explains how Bureau agents helped the implementation of the Reconstruction Acts of March 1867. Bureau agents were employed in several states and even traveled to advise freedmen

¹ Paul S. Peirce, *The Freedmen's Bureau: A Chapter in the History of Reconstruction* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1904), 161.

through the process of their newly gained right to vote, pressing them to take advantage of their opportunity. Agents informed freedmen of where and how to register and the places that elections would be held. Peirce discusses the “confidence of the negro race” that the Freedmen’s Bureau upheld and how this drove the agents’ hard work and persistence in encouraging freedmen to vote.² He emphasizes the strong relationship Bureau agents maintained with freedmen, which enabled greater support for black suffrage. This source reveals the Bureau agents’ passionate efforts to enfranchise African Americans and their ultimate success in getting freedmen to practice their suffrage. While Peirce does mention that enforcing black suffrage was a difficult project, Peirce states that the Bureau agents achieved a significant level of black participation in elections.

Farmer-Kaiser also notes the accomplishments of the Freedmen’s Bureau and specifically examines how the Bureau dealt with the issue of vagrancy during Reconstruction. In 2004, Farmer-Kaiser returned to noting the success of the Bureau in “‘Are they not in some sorts vagrants?’ Gender and the Efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau to Combat Vagrancy in the Reconstruction South.” Farmer-Kaiser builds upon Peirce’s point by noting the success of how the Bureau responded to the discrepancies concerning the role that freedwomen should play in the workforce.³ After the end of the Civil War, the Freedmen’s Bureau firmly believed that men and women who were previously slaves should continue working in the new free labor system. However, Farmer-Kaiser points out, African American men and women were persistent to be in control of the place, time, and conditions of their labor. Farmer-Kaiser discusses how the Bureau responded appropriately by giving freedmen and freedwomen the liberty to choose their conditions of work but created vagrancy policies which did not allow freedmen or women to refuse any labor. Bureau agents reacted fairly to the criticisms toward unemployed freedwomen by addressing freedwomen’s requirement to work based on the specific individual, taking into consideration whether she was married or had children. This source shows how the Bureau worked well with freedmen to agree upon reasonable terms that were best for freedmen and women themselves as well as society, thus generating more employment as well as a positive relationship with freedmen and freedwomen.

² Ibid., 164.

³ Mary Farmer-Kaiser, “‘Are they not in some sorts vagrants?’ Gender and the Efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau to Combat Vagrancy in the Reconstruction South,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2004), 29-30. Humanities International Complete.

The Middle Ground

Other historians such as Abbott note the partial success of the Freedmen's Bureau, recognizing the various factors that interfered with the Bureau's work. In "Free Land, Free Labor, and the Freedmen's Bureau," Abbott discusses how the Freedmen's Bureau helped with both the distribution of land to former slaves and creation of a free labor system.⁴ Abbott explains the strong passion of freedmen to own their own land and create a home for themselves and family. The Bureau owned all of the seized lands from the war and decided to divide this land into slots and charge a small fee, specifically targeting freedmen to participate in this operation. The goal of this operation was multifaceted, as the Bureau both hoped to fulfill freedmen's dream of owning land as well as obtain a means of profit to fund the Bureau. Abbott described the Freedmen's Bureau as "the midwife at the birth of a Negro landowning class."⁵ After complication with President Johnson's demands, much of the land given to freedmen was restored back to whites, and this source notes the efforts of the Bureau to instill a fair system of contract labor by monitoring the contracts between former planters and freedmen. However, Abbott states that the freedmen's condition of work and well-being deteriorated by the end of the Bureau's life. From 1867 to 1868, the wage for laborers on Southern farms greatly decreased, for instance "in Georgia, from \$125 to \$83."⁶ Overall, Abbott emphasizes the fairness of the Bureau and its effective protection of freedmen's rights through "the creation of special tribunals and by the supervision of state courts."⁷ Abbott recognizes how difficult this monitoring process was due to a lack of funds, unwillingness of planters to cooperate, and the freedmen's unawareness of new rights, yet he still emphasizes the forward movement of integration of freedmen into society.

Cohen's interpretation of the Freedmen's Bureau's contribution to a new labor system elaborates upon Abbott's view of its partial success. Cohen, in "Black Immobility and Free Labor: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Relocation of Black Labor, 1865-1868," examines how the Freedmen's Bureau facilitated transportation of thousands of freedmen to desired areas or locations that had a

⁴ Martin Abbott, "Free Land, Free Labor, and the Freedmen's Bureau," *Agricultural History* 30, no. 4 (1956), 150. JSTOR.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

shortage of labor and oversaw the establishment of a free labor system.⁸ Cohen explains that General O. O. Howard, the commissioner of the Bureau, planned to reestablish the Southern economy by forcing planters and freedmen to create and obey contracts. Howard also unconsciously created a massive employment agency that provided relocation services. Cohen discusses that Bureau agents were aware of the harsh racial oppression and white violence that occurred in certain areas and used caution when sending black freedmen to these places like, for example, Texas. However, Cohen recognizes that the Bureau often failed because freedmen would refuse to be relocated to certain places. Cohen talks specifically about blacks in Washington, D.C., stating that despite efforts to relocate the overwhelming amount of blacks in D.C., the black population actually grew from 31,549 to 43,404 between 1866 and 1870.⁹ Also, the Bureau lacked resources and funds to oversee the entirety of their relocation project. This source looks at the many dilemmas the Freedmen's Bureau faced while attempting to oversee the conditions of labor throughout the country during the relocation process, stating that it worked hard to provide as much surveillance as it could but was "hardly an unqualified success."¹⁰ While Cohen does recognize that the Bureau was successful in relocating thousands of freedmen to obtain employment, his interpretation emphasizes more how obstacles made the Bureau inadequate.

Colby also highlights both the shortcomings and achievements of the Freedmen's Bureau and focuses on how some projects of the Bureau led to negative outcomes. In "The Freedmen's Bureau: From Social Welfare to Segregation," Colby looks at how the Freedmen's Bureau served as a national welfare program and the lasting impacts the Bureau had on racial borders in the South.¹¹ Colby discusses four main services the Bureau provided including education programs, health care assistance, legal services, and the allocation of rations. Colby views the Freedmen's Bureau as both a positive and negative addition to the U.S. during Reconstruction. He argues that by providing services to blacks, separate from whites, the Bureau created a segregated South and

⁸ William Cohen, "Black Immobility and Free Labor: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Relocation of Black Labor, 1865-1868," *Civil War History* 30, no. 3 (1984), 222. *America: History & Life*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹¹ Ira C. Colby, "The Freedmen's Bureau: From Social Welfare to Segregation," *Phylon* 46, no. 3 (1985), 219. *America: History & Life*.

enhanced the social awareness of segregation in the U.S. According to this article, the benefits and welfare services that freedmen received from the Bureau were outweighed by the continued segregation and racism that was increased by the operations of the Bureau, leaving behind lasting consequences for society. Colby rightfully begs the question “was it possible for the Bureau to institute social equality during the 1860s?”¹² Colby points out that due to principal beliefs during this time, the goal of the Bureau may have been unrealistic, which is why it was only partially successful in its efforts.

Recognizing Failure

Other historians such as Nieman believe the Freedmen’s Bureau was a failure as a whole. An example of this interpretation is evident in Nieman’s “Andrew Johnson, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the Problem of Equal Rights, 1865-1866” as he looks at how the Freedmen’s Bureau and the implementation of Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction policy operated simultaneously.¹³ Nieman explains how President Johnson worked to shape the Bureau’s legal plans so that they would coincide with his Reconstruction plans. Specifically, Nieman notes that “given Johnson’s bitter opposition to federal protection of civil rights,” Johnson made it difficult for the Bureau to provide freedmen equal legal protection by declining many acts that the Bureau created.¹⁴ This article points out that even changes in civil rights laws, like the Civil Rights Act, did not help the Bureau gain more power because government officials were able to prevent the implementation of this legislation. Overall, according to Nieman, Andrew Johnson’s presidential authority significantly halted the growth and success of Bureau operations that were meant to gain legal rights and equality for freedmen. This source reveals how other political actors of the time interfered and ultimately ruined certain operations of the Bureau, thus leaving its impacts invisible.

Another source by Lowe highlights the Bureau’s shortcomings and talks particularly about how the Bureau did not properly achieve the inclusion of blacks into its leadership roles. In “The Freedmen’s Bureau and Local Black Leadership,” Lowe looks at black leadership in the Freedmen’s Bureau as well as

¹² *Ibid.*, 229.

¹³ Donald G. Nieman, “Andrew Johnson, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the Problem of Equal Rights, 1865-1866,” *The Journal of Southern History* 44, no. 3 (1978). 399. JSTOR.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 419.

the Bureau's attitude and response towards this arising group.¹⁵ The process of establishing local black leadership began when General Orlando Brown of Virginia, the assistant commissioner of the Bureau, commanded that officers in every district of Virginia send in the names of black individuals deemed to be the smartest and most capable of being a leader. Lowe importantly notes that these men had to be in good standing and approved by both whites and blacks in the area. He points out that men who were literate, of mixed race, and free before the Civil War were overrepresented in the group of black men chosen to be local leaders. Lowe also explains that the local black leaders of the Freedmen's Bureau did not coincide with the majority of black citizens' idea of a black leader, thus failing to fulfill the purpose of electing black leaders. The Bureau was highly unsuccessful because, according to Lowe, "to the delight of most white Virginians," "only 20 of the 621 men named by the Bureau were among the 350 or so black Virginians known to have held some type of public office during and after reconstruction."¹⁶ Lowe points out that only a very small fraction of the men chosen by Bureau agents to hold a leadership position actually held a position in public office, suggesting that this attempt to create black leadership was a failure.

Finley continues the discussion of the imperfection of the Freedmen's Bureau by focusing on ill intentions of the Bureau agents. In Chapter Two of the book *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom*, Finley looks at the Freedmen's Bureau agents specifically in Arkansas and the wide-ranging roles that they played in the development and operation of the organization.¹⁷ Finley explains in detail how the agents' personal beliefs and philosophies deeply impacted and shaped policies in their respective local areas. Agents generally viewed nonwhite people as lesser and encouraged the concept of natural hierarchies, self-reliance, and racism, which created a conflict between Bureau agents' and freedmen's understanding of freedom. Finley emphasizes how the Bureau's philosophies on freedom became the "Freedmen's burden," which caused freedmen to develop their own beliefs "which co-opted or countered agents' assumptions."¹⁸ Finley also discusses how agents were often sidetracked during their work and provides examples of several

¹⁵ Richard Lowe, "The Freedmen's Bureau and Local Black Leadership," *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 3 (1993), 989-990. America: History & Life.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 997.

¹⁷ Randy Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

agents who manipulated their positions for personal profit, for instance by charging unnecessary marriage fees. This source reveals how the failure of the Bureau began at its roots, with the ability of agents to heavily influence their work based on personal beliefs and motivations.

The group which I believe best illustrates informed research and an unbiased interpretation is the second group I examined, which recognizes both the success and failure of the Freedmen's Bureau. These sources were published in the mid-to late 1900s, and all note how the Bureau both provided effective aid to blacks and had areas of downfall. All of the historians in this group and time period analyze how outside factors, such as President Johnson, or internal factors, like insufficient funds or the logistics of the Bureau's programs, led to some degree of failure for the Freedmen's Bureau. This interpretation is the most convincing because it demonstrates well-rounded research by examining multiple possible outcomes of the work of the Freedmen's Bureau. Within this group of sources, there are variations in the historians' emphases. For instance, Abbott and Cohen explain that the Bureau was successful in providing assistance to freedmen through a free labor system and relocation services. However, Colby argues that the Freedmen's Bureau yielded long-term effects on the structure of society. He points out how certain programs the Bureau provided actually reinforced a separated society based on race. While some historians highlight more the negative impacts of the Bureau than others in this group, all of the interpretations provide a neutral look at the results of the Bureau's work.

The effectiveness of the Freedmen's Bureau has important implications for today as the African American population is still seeking equality. Although black Americans have gained several rights and are legally equal to whites, it is unquestionable that discrimination against blacks remains. It is important that we understand how personal beliefs and outside factors can impact an organization that was established with good intentions. The dominant beliefs of the Reconstruction period negatively impacted the success of the Freedmen's Bureau, and today we see that these beliefs are still present through white violence and discrimination toward blacks. Maybe, in the future, America can fully recognize the institutional racism that impacts individuals and effectively eliminate this practice as a whole.

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