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Writing Process

My work began by reading Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction*. This allowed me to pinpoint a topic of interest for this historiography. Once I chose the Freedmen's Bureau, I developed a topic proposal and list of potential sources. Upon my professor's feedback, I condensed this list of sources and created an annotated bibliography. This bibliography was the backbone of my essay; it allowed me to identify and organize interpretive categories which formed my argument. As I began to shift my draft into a final version, I weaved a thesis into my topic proposal, which became my introduction. I then added claims, evidence and warrants into my body paragraphs and included in-text citations as well. Lastly, I wrote a conclusion which elaborates on the category I deemed the most effective. Of course, I would not have been as successful as I was in this undertaking without the guidance, feedback and support from my professor.

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The Effectiveness of the Freedmen's Bureau in the Post-Civil War Era

Michalene M. McQuide

This historiography examines the Freedmen's Bureau and its impact on the lives of freedmen and refugees during the Reconstruction. After the Civil War, there was a need to reconstruct society around the freed slave population, and the Freedmen's Bureau served to regulate this transition. President Andrew Johnson appointed General Oliver O. Howard as commissioner of the Bureau. Despite well-intentioned efforts to renew hope for emancipated slaves, the implementation of these steps toward advancement was faced with conflict and resistance. It is important to study this Bureau and historians' interpretations of it over time to gain knowledge regarding its successes and shortcomings along with how it worked to define freedom. My passion for helping others stirred curiosity within me to understand the measures taken amidst the turbulent war to support those in need. Within this historiography, there are various interpretations regarding how the Freedmen's Bureau contributed to the everlasting battle for justice both in positive and negative ways. In this essay, I examine a range of historical interpretations between 1954-2014, arguing how the Freedmen's Bureau grapples with race and socioeconomic status in attempts to establish equality. This topic is especially interesting as race and status remain significant today. The three categories, each evaluating the Bureau's level of prosperity, serve to draw connections and paint a full picture of the Bureau and its implications on individuals and society. Of these categories, the most comprehensive, accurate and equitable category is that which considers both the successes and the failures of the Freedmen's Bureau due to its ability to resist counterarguments and appeal to the broadest audience.

Sources Promoting the Successes of the Bureau

This first category contains sources which interpret the Bureau as successful in achieving its goals and progressing toward the implementation of freedmen in society. For example, one of the earliest historians to argue about the Bureau's

effectiveness, Marjorie H. Parker, writes primarily about how educational advancements contributed to the success of the Bureau.¹ In her article, Parker explains how, as the possibility for land ownership began to fade, the main goal of the Bureau was educating the freedmen. It worked closely with the government to create a system of free schools. Educational activities boomed after the second Freedmen's Bureau Bill, and there was great interest in supporting the ex-slaves, according to Parker. Of the countless associations that the Bureau partnered with, the American Missionary Association was prominent. Even after the Bureau ended, it continued to support schools such as Howard University. With its focus on higher education, the Bureau gave financial aid to various institutions, and thus, Parker explains that the beginnings of many colleges in America are linked to the Bureau. Along with a general education, freedmen were taught the duties and privileges of freedom as they gained social standing and economic security. Parker points out that the Freedmen's Bureau also allowed certain ideals and ideas, such as the rise of humanitarianism, to thrive. Despite beliefs that Northern teachers widened the racial gap, many teachers spent time outside of the classroom visiting families, teaching in Sunday Schools, and serving as counselors. Parker writes that education was the definition of freedom; however, her argument is not fully accurate since it brushes over the shortcomings of the Bureau. Though it is not the most effective source presented in this essay, it does offer a substantial depiction of how education played a role in the steps toward equality.

The next source in this category, written by LaWanda Cox, defines the Bureau's success through independent land ownership.² Cox writes about the progress toward the final version of the Bureau and how it went from issuing ambiguous land provisions to defining the ways freedmen would and could acquire land. Initially, there was fear that the controlling government would prevent the actualization of freedom, but in moving from the House to the Senate, the Bureau's bill was adjusted several times. Cox outlines the transition from freedmen only being able to work under an agreed upon contract at first, to having access to land, and finally owning it freely. The primary focus of the Bureau was the future status of freedmen. Land ownership was encouraged as it proved one's manhood and could ensure their freedom. Wartime experiences and criticism affected the Bureau's legislation, but the framers of the Bureau continued to push for the freedmen to be free from control and abuse. The Bureau's proposed solution was to allow the freedmen to rent and possibly purchase forty acres of

¹ Marjorie H. Parker, "Some Educational Activities of the Freedmen's Bureau," *The Journal of Negro Education* 23, no. 1 (1954), 9–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2293242>.

² LaWanda Cox, "The Promise of Land for the Freedmen," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45, no. 3 (1958), 413–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1889319>.

land. Sherman's Field Order No. 15 and the Homesteads Act were two ways in which freedmen could access land, and in response, they produced cheaper cotton. White refugees were added in the final version of the Bureau to draw Democratic support and eventually push it into action. Similar to Parker's writing, Cox demonstrates the drive of the Bureau to succeed, and the ways in which it benefited the freedmen. While this source does explain the development and progress of the Bureau, Cox falls short in her detailing of how the Bureau's original goals were never reached.

As in the other sources in this category, Herman Belz recognizes the positive steps leading to the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, which Belz writes had a goal of attaining land and civil rights for blacks.³ The bill "No Discrimination According to Color" was essential for progressing toward this goal. In 1864, the Senate and the House of Representatives passed similar bills, both guaranteeing basic rights to freedmen. However, debates quickly ensued regarding civilian versus military regulation of the freedmen, and questions arose regarding the status of white refugees. Belz writes that the American Union Commission was a primary source of care for these refugees, and their principle of no discrimination aided in the Freedmen's Bureau evolution. Regarding the freed slaves, Frederick Douglass advocated that nothing be done with them, as they are now free. With this in mind, a second committee conference proposed to establish a bureau of refugees, freedmen, and abandoned lands within the War department where freedmen were independent farmers and property owners under their own supervision. Robert Schenck, chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs, also influenced the creation of the Bureau. He planned to create in the War Department a bureau of refugees and freedmen where white refugees were valued. Shifting from an exclusive concern for blacks attracted much greater support. The Bureau was finally created two years after the first proposal. This source connects to Cox's interpretation of land ownership as the main focal point, and it supports the category of one that promotes the successes of the Bureau as it acknowledges the many factors contributing to the Bureau's success.

Sources Addressing the Failures of the Bureau

While some historians agree that the Freedmen's Bureau was a success, others view it as a detrimental failure, as demonstrated in these next three sources. The first article, written by Donald G. Nieman, fits into this interpretative category as

³ Herman Belz, "The Freedmen's Bureau Act of 1865 and the Principle of No Discrimination According to Color," *Civil War History* 21, no. 3 (1975), 197-217, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwh.1975.0075>.

it presents the issue of legal protection for freedmen.⁴ Bureau officials attempted to stop discriminatory law and prejudice, but this conflicted with Johnson's Reconstruction policy involving restoration of the South's civil government. Freedmen were continuously denied justice, especially in testimony, and President Andrew Johnson limited the Bureau's authority and hindered the progress of freedmen. Howard attempted to find ways to align his and Johnson's ideals so blacks could improve their legal status and obtain justice in court, but racial violence persisted, and freedmen were deprived of justice through inaction, unfair rulings, and prejudiced verdicts. Nieman expresses Howard's hopes that Congress would extend the life of the Bureau and establish "Freedmen's United States courts" to aid in court justice for freedmen. In addition, Nieman writes that Trumbell, who helped draft civil rights legislation, drafted the Freedmen's Bureau Act of 1866 and the Civil Rights Act with a goal of granting blacks impartial administration of justice as well as equal rights. Despite this, Johnson's opposition to federal protection of civil rights made Howard's goals insurmountable, and after a year, Bureau officials had made no concrete steps to legal protection for the freedmen. This article, in its mentioning of Johnson and the ways in which he hindered the Bureau's success, can be better understood in this category when compared to articles such as Cox and Belz, which do not mention Johnson, and therefore view the Bureau as a success rather than a failure.

James Oakes's article, "A Failure of Vision: The Collapse of the Freedmen's Bureau," is quite like Nieman's, both mentioning the issue of justice for freedmen. Nieman's writing was published in 1978, and Oakes just one year after in 1979, and their focus on the reasons for the eventual collapse of the Freedmen's Bureau allow for their parallel categorization. Oakes specifically writes that this failure was a result of the limited ideological framework of those working to rebuild the postwar South, which happens to be unsuited for equality.⁵ Howard's commissioners were stereotypical Northern middle-class men motivated solely by middle-class ideology. They held too much faith in American liberal democracy and human nature, blinding them to social realities. While they created the goal of equal justice for freedmen, they were not sure how to protect the freedmen who were unable to make testimonies or bring suits against whites. This was Howard's fuel to action, but there was little change. The Black Codes contributed to the Bureau's failure as control was handed to the courts which ignored black testimony. The Bureau attempted to reestablish its judicial

⁴ 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), 399-420, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208049>.

⁵ James Oakes, "A Failure of Vision: The Collapse of the Freedmen's Bureau," *Civil War History* 25, no. 1 (1979), 66-76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwh.1979.0001>.

authority, but commissioners couldn't deal with the failure of the civil courts and Johnson was in opposition. Aside from its setbacks, the Bureau enhanced the confidence of freedmen and somewhat protected the freedmen's voice in court. According to Oakes, it set civil rights legislation in motion, but it lost judicial responsibility with the First Reconstruction Act and couldn't prevent violence. Howard's vision was out of reach. This article, while not the most effective, adds to Nieman's argument by further commenting on where the Bureau went wrong, specifically regarding the legal side of freedom.

While Nieman and Oakes share a focus, Ira C. Colby describes the unsuccessful Bureau as one that was overlooked and could not overcome challenges. It worked to protect the status of freedmen through federally mandated social welfare programs, but eventually ended due to a lack of support and direction.⁶ According to Colby, the Bureau also enhanced segregation. At the onset of the Bureau, commissioner General Howard created three focus areas: supervising abandoned lands, creating a system of wages, and forming educational programs. It ultimately implemented rations distribution, health care, educational programs, and a judicial system, but these programs did not flourish. There was little support from Congress and Johnson argued that it was unnecessary and unbeneficial, causing the Bureau to slowly lose autonomy and control over the nation. Despite this, Colby notes that Howard continued to fight, emphasizing the Bureau's role to provide relief for the poor. It served as a primary support system for the black community for some time, but white refugees didn't need its services. The segregated society only worsened as the Bureau did not work to integrate existing programs and services, and social equality was clearly not a priority. Colby acknowledges the efforts of the Bureau, but ultimately rests in its inability to reach its goals. This interpretation, written six years after Oakes, aligns with the other two sources in this category, all of which agree that Johnson was a huge contributor to its downfall and that the freedmen continued to be treated as inferior beings.

Sources Considering Both the Success and Failures of the Bureau

The following sources take into consideration all that the preceding sources had to offer, acknowledging both the achievements and the setbacks of the Freedmen's Bureau. To begin, Martin Abbott writes about the successes and the failures of the Bureau in accordance with its goal to offer a shortcut to

⁶ Ira C. Colby, "The Freedmen's Bureau: From Social Welfare to Segregation," *Phylon* (1960-) 46, no. 3 (1985), 219–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274830>.

civilization.⁷ Commissioner General Howard hoped to guide the freedmen and enrich their sense of liberty. President Johnson, however, made things difficult as he desired that the abandoned lands be restored to white owners. Abbott explains that this prevented ex-slaves from fulfilling their dreams of owning land, which symbolized the heart of freedom. They longed to be free and in control of their future to rid their minds of the reality of their past. Assistant commissioner Robert Scott resolved Howard and Johnson's arguments through two regulations, but the freedmen were still far from their ideal state of living, as mentioned by Abbott. Howard aided in establishing just, supervised, labor agreements, but various struggles prevented the Bureau's success. Some struggles included a lack of Bureau officials, insufficient operational funds, minimal acceptance of the new order, poorly enforced contracts, and crop failure. Although many questioned the Bureau's effectiveness, it demonstrated the strength and desire of workers to feel free to work wherever and for whomever they please. Abbott's essay offers a valuable interpretation, and in connection with the other sources of this category, balances its argument between the ways in which the Bureau was successful and factors which kept it from its goals.

Randy Finley's book, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom: The Freedmen's Bureau in Arkansas, 1865-1869*, serves as another source which details a variety of ways in which the Bureau both helped and hindered freedom for the newly freed.⁸ Specifically, it highlights economic freedom as the key component in understanding one's identity as a freedman. Although flawed and critiqued, the Bureau offered a sense of hope and eagerness for freedmen to seek a better future and new identity. According to Finley, many suggest that the Bureau was too conservative. To others, it aided freedmen in their struggle to maintain and embrace their new identity, which was influenced by economic success or failure. During this struggle, the Bureau offered a positive understanding of blackness, kept white hostility in check, encouraged blacks to work, and supported land acquisition and migration to better their economic standing. However, the Bureau was not the most reliable, so many freedmen took new responsibilities and opportunities into their own hands, fighting injustices and refusing to let their struggles define them. Finley recognizes many barriers to this economic independence, one major barrier being the damaging effects of war. Each person experienced these effects differently, and the Bureau helped some more than others. Finley's work expands on Abbott's mentioning of the spirit of the

⁷ Martin Abbott, "Free Land, Free Labor, and the Freedmen's Bureau," *Agricultural History* 30, no. 4 (1956), 150-56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740455>.

⁸ Randy Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom: The Freedmen's Bureau in Arkansas, 1865-1869* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996).

freedmen and how they demonstrated immense perseverance through hardships, making it a highly effective source.

In “The U.S. Freedmen’s Bureau in Post-Civil War Reconstruction,” Richard Fleischman, Thomas Tyson and David Oldroyd discusses the challenges stemming from the Black Codes while also appreciating the educational advantages that came from the Bureau.⁹ The confederacy in the post-Civil War American South was left in ruins in terms of their economy and infrastructure, and former slaves were left impoverished. The introduction of Black Codes only worsened the situation, keeping blacks in a slave-like state lacking the rights to vote, move freely, attain employment, and acquire property. Fleishman acknowledges that the Bureau may have fallen short regarding the bettering of labor, familial, and race relations, but its focus on education cannot be ignored. Education was viewed as essential to true freedom and the most valuable aspect of the Bureau. There were obstacles, including underfunding, few quality teachers, and the Black Codes of course, but it managed to provide more school buildings, better teachers and instructional methods, and more advanced curricular offerings than before. This article expands on both Parker’s view of education and Oakes’ mentioning of the Black Codes. It fits into this category as it highlights educational progress without ignoring the aspects of freedom that the Bureau struggled with, such as land ownership and equal justice. Fleischman, Tyson and Oldroyd balance the many joys of education with the reality of the Black Codes and those resulting consequences as well.

In researching the Freedmen’s Bureau, historians have proposed several conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the Bureau. Some believe the Bureau was a success, as demonstrated through three sources, each highlighting one key part of the Bureau’s multifaceted nature. Other historians understand the Bureau as an overall failure. The three sources in this category focus on the barriers to legal protection and integration mainly stemming from the lack of Congressional support and Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction policies. Therefore, in taking a holistic view, this final category, which is arguably the most effective, is a combination of the preceding two categories. These sources admit that the Bureau had its flaws, but also emphasize its accomplishments, offering a more complete and more accurate picture for readers.

By sufficiently weighing the positive and negative aspects of the Bureau, these authors refrain from swaying toward one interpretation. For example, Finley

⁹ Richard Fleischman, Thomas Tyson and David Oldroyd, “The U.S. Freedmen’s Bureau in Post-Civil War Reconstruction,” *The Accounting Historians Journal* 41, no. 2 (2014), 75–109, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43487011>.

writes that “In reality, a flawless agency did not exist, at least not in Arkansas, where the assumptions, ambitions, fears, and prejudices of local bureau personnel largely determined the action or inaction of the bureau in crucial areas.”¹⁰ He acknowledges disappointments of the bureau, for example that “it was not, as blacks had dreamed, the Day of Jubilee,” but he embraces that “it was a beginning of freedom and an end of slavery.”¹¹ Abbott, too, recognizes that “The Bureau had gathered together only some of the elements of a solution to a complex problem.”¹² It may not have been a complete success, but it was far from a colossal failure. The more balanced an argument, the better, as it can engage with and connect to the most people while continuing to offer new points of thinking. Sources such as Belz’s are not the most effective as they ignore the side of the Bureau which struggled, and sources like Colby’s ignore its accomplishments. It is easy to hold onto one interpretation of a story as “fact,” but this limits one’s knowledge and brings about misinterpretations and counterarguments. It is important to open one’s mind to the Reconstruction Era and topics such as the Freedmen’s Bureau to notice and learn from what worked and what did not work to reunite America.

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¹⁰ Finley, xvii.

¹¹ Finley, 170.

¹² Abbott, 8.

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