THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU: CATALYST FOR FREEDOM?

A Unit of Study for Grades 8–12

by

Rita G. Koman

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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, abolishing slavery, freed four million slaves, but did nothing to insure their status as citizens. The Civil War and the South's defeat had economic and social leveling effects upon the entire southern population. Following battlefield victories, Union armies occupied vast regions of southern terrain. Upon the Appomattox surrender, Confederate and state political control collapsed for the most part, leaving the Union military commanders in charge. What was to become of the newly freed slaves was the question forming in the minds of many northerners and Washington politicians.

By studying the nature of political, economic, and social developments immediately after the Civil War, students can gain an understanding of contemporary life. While the Fourteenth Amendment assured citizenship and the Fifteenth Amendment insured voting privileges for the freedmen in the 1870s, African Americans were relegated to second-class citizenship by the turn of the twentieth century through infamous Jim Crow legislation. Rebuilding the South provided many economic opportunities for northerners while most southerners continued laboring at tilling the soil. Inclusion of citizens' rights into the law did not guarantee them for freed slaves.

How involved should the federal government become in laying the groundwork for the transition from slavery to freedom for four million African Americans? Was there a federal moral obligation to help African Americans? The debate over the depth of government involvement in the lives of freed persons existed throughout most of the war, heating up after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Within a month prior to the Appomattox surrender, congressional Republicans created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, later shortened to simply Freedmen's Bureau. These politicians obviously felt that the federal government should shoulder a broad responsibility to remodel southern society and instigate a new racial order. Implicit in the full title of the Freedmen's Bureau was a promise that abandoned lands would be rented or sold cheaply for settlement of refugees.

This paternalistic role assumed by the first federal welfare agency generally gets a page or less in most textbooks. Rarely, if ever, are the voices of freed persons heard; nor is the Bureau fully examined within the context of the Congressional Radical Reconstruction laws. The use of primary source material can illuminate the impact and significance of the Bureau within the broader context of Reconstruction and American history by helping students to understand the attitudes of diverse people in the postbellum South.

II. Unit Context

These lessons, while largely focusing on Virginia, provide insight into the political, economic and social development throughout the postbellum South. Through an analysis of these documents, students should be able to empathize with the personal experiences resulting from Reconstruction legislation, thereby allowing them a greater understanding of later crucial developments. This unit should be used after a study of the Civil War.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

The Freedmen's Bureau: Catalyst for Freedom? offers teachers opportunities to use primary sources in examining political, economic, and social aspects of Reconstruction. The unit provides teaching materials that specifically address Standard 3 of Era 5, Civil War and Reconstruction, *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Students investigate federal policies regarding abandoned lands, the conflict between the executive and legislative branches, varying activities of the Freedmen's Bureau, and conclude with an evaluation of the goals and accomplishments of the agency.

The unit requires students to engage in historical thinking; to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers; to go beyond the facts presented in textbooks and examine the historical record for themselves. Students analyze cause-and-effect relationships, interrogate historical data by uncovering the social and political context in which it was created, and compare and contrast different sets of ideas and values. The documents presented in this unit help students to better appreciate historical perspectives by describing the past on its own terms through the eyes and experiences of those who were there. The unit challenges students to compare competing historical narratives and to hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to change as new information is uncovered and new voices heard.

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To identify the essential points of the law which created the Freedmen's Bureau.

2. To analyze documents in order to identify conflicting viewpoints about limited government, the sanctity of private property, white supremacy, and the expectation of self-help for freed persons.

3. To explain changes in attitude among former slaveholders, slaves, and military personnel.

4. To examine the changing role of the military in command of the Freedmen's Bureau in carrying out the laws of Presidential and Congressional Reconstruction.

5. To compare and contrast realities with ideals through the study of different types of documents.

6. To evaluate the effectiveness and success of the Freedmen's Bureau in transforming postbellum southern society.

V. Lesson Plans

1. Establishing the Freedmen's Bureau

2. From Slavery to Free Labor

3. Education for All

4. Evaluating the Bureau

Lesson Three: Education for All

A. Objectives

1. To identify the problems encountered in establishing free public education during Reconstruction.

2. To examine the desire of freed men and women to have educational opportunities.

3. To evaluate the work of "freedom schools."

4. To assess the Freedmen's Bureau long-term policy establishing public education.

B. Lesson Activities (These activities will take approximately 1 day)

Form small groups of 3 to 5 students and provide each with one of the following documents:

Document M: "Education in the South" (Carl Schurz)
Document N: "The Freedmen's Bureau and Education" (O. O. Howard)
Document O: "Freedom Schools in South Carolina" (Charlotte Forten)
Document P: "Appeal for a School for Black Soldiers" (Sergeant John Sweeny)
Document Q: Miscellaneous Records of the Superintendent of Education for Virginia
Document R: "Report on the Status of Schools in Virginia" (R. M. Manly)

Have each set of students list the major points of their particular document and report this information to the entire class. Hold a general discussion focusing on these questions:

1. What methods were used to halt or hinder public education in the post-war South?
2. What was the role of benevolent societies in the education of freed persons?
3. How did Black soldiers, adults, and the children of freed persons respond to the Bureau's education initiative?
4. Did the Bureau appropriate adequate funds for the establishment and continuation of public schools? Explain.
5. Why was there a clash of interests between black educational initiatives and planter opposition to a state supported system of universal education?
6. How might a strong public school system for all citizens hasten the state's economic recovery?

Have students write an evaluative essay or debate the proposition that a system of public education was the Bureau's greatest achievement.

EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH
SCHURZ'S REPORT ON THE CONDITION OF THE SOUTH
December 1865

General Carl Schurz painted a bleak picture of educational opportunities for freed persons in his Report on the Condition of the South.

> . . . Some planters thought of establishing schools on their estates, and others would have been glad to see measures taken to that effect by the people of the neighborhoods in which they lived. But whenever I asked the question whether it might be hoped that the legislatures of their States or their county authorities would make provisions for negro education, I never received an affirmative, and only in two or three instances feebly encouraging answers. . . . Hundreds of times I heard the old assertion repeated, that "learning will spoil the n— for work," and that "negro education will be the ruin of the south." Another most singular nation still holds a potent sway over the minds of the masses—it is, that the elevation of the blacks will be the degradation of the whites.
>
> The consequence of the prejudice prevailing in the southern States is that colored schools can be established and carried on with safety only under the protection of our military forces. . . . There may be a few locations forming exceptions, but their number is certainly very small. . . .
>
> In the letter of General Kirby Smith occurs the following statement referring to the condition of things in Mobile, Alabama: "Threats were made to destroy all school-houses in which colored children were taught, and in two instances they were fired. The same threats were made against all churches in which colored people assembled to worship, and one of them burned. Continued threats of assassination were made against the colored preachers, and one of them is now under special guard by order of Major General Woods."

Schurz Report on Condition of the South, 39th Congress, 1st Sess., Senate Executive Document No. 2 (Dec. 19, 1865).

Document N

The Freedmen's Bureau and Education
General Oliver Otis Howard

In his autobiography General Howard wrote of the establishment of schools through the efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau and noted the accomplishments the Bureau achieved in education. The following excerpt for Howard's autobiography includes a quotation from a circular he issued on May 19, 1865 regarding the education of freed persons.

> The many benevolent organizations of the country . . . gave themselves vigorously to the teaching of children and youth and the planting of schools. . . .
>
> . . . [T]he first important circular issued from headquarters May 19, 1865 . . . announced well-defined principles of action. . . . "I invite . . . the continuance and cooperation of such societies [benevolent and religious organizations]. I trust they will be generously supported by the people, and I request them to send me their names, list of their principal officers, and a brief statement of their present work. . . . The education and moral condition of these (the freed) people will not be forgotten. The utmost facility will be afforded to benevolent and religious organizations and State authorities in the maintenance of good schools for refugees and freedmen until a system of free schools can be supported by the recognized local government. . . ."
>
> Let me repeat, that in all this work it is not my purpose to supersede the benevolent agencies already engaged in it, but to systematize and facilitate them.-
>
> The next step after public announcement was to introduce in the field some practical systematic arrangement. So much overlapping and interference one with another were found among the workers that I hastened to appoint a school superintendent for each State. He was generally a commissioned officer detailed from the army and placed under the direct authority of the State assistant commissioner of the Bureau. The majority of the schools throughout the South were elementary. They were more flourishing in those localities which had been for six months or more within the lines of our armies. After peace many Government schools were added to those of the benevolent societies, being brought into existence by Bureau officials. These were self-supporting from the start. The educational work was in every way helped by the extraordinary ardor of the pupils and the enthusiasm of the teachers, fed by the societies behind them who at this time voiced the generous devotion of benevolent people every where. Yet the ruling classes among the Southern whites were deeply offended. They said at first: "If the Yankees are allowed to educate the negroes as they are now doing, the next thing will be to let them vote." No one can describe the odium that awaited the excellent,

self-denying teachers of freedmen in those days. Our first official summary of these schools declared that: "doubtless the treatment to which they, the teachers, have been subjected is due in part to the feelings engendered by war, but it is mostly attributable to prejudice against educating the blacks, and the belief that the teachers are fostering social equality." Even then, however, there were notable exceptions to this opinion and conduct in the South. Some prominent Southern men earnestly advocated the introduction of schools, and several Southern churches established them in connection with their own organizations. The entire number of pupils in the schools for freedmen at the close of 1865 in the States that had been in insurrection, adding Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and the District of Columbia, amount to 90,589; teachers 1,314, and schools 740. . . . The Bureau gave transportation to teachers from their homes to the field and back during the necessary vacations. It also carried all their books and furniture, and to a considerable extent while the abandoned property remained available, provided buildings for the dwelling places of teachers and for the schools themselves. I early came to the conclusion that our school work was best promoted by placing one dollar of public money by the side of one of voluntary contribution. The Bureau gave to any benevolent society in that proportion. The society which undertook the most in that manner received most.

President Johnson's restoration of estates, however, which we have already noticed, soon caused schoolhoues, churches, and many private residences to be severed from our use. One inspector wrote that our admirable system of education well inaugurated must fail unless permanent real estate for the freedmen and the schools could in some way be secured. The benevolent societies were ready to erect their own buildings if we could furnish them lots on which to build. This disposition helped us finally to great results.

Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General, United States Army, Vol. 2* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1907), pp. 268-71.

Document O

Freedom Schools in South Carolina

Soon after Union forces captured the Sea Islands off the South Carolina coast in 1861, Charlotte Forten, a free African American woman from Philadelphia, arrived at Port Royal and helped to establish schools throughout the Sea Islands. Writing in the May and June 1864 issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Forten described her experiences as a teacher.

> . . .The school was opened in September. Many of the children had, however, received instruction during the summer. It was evident that they had made very rapid improvement, and we noticed with pleasure how bright and eager to learn many of them seemed. . . .
>
> . . . The first day at school was rather trying. Most of my children were very small, and consequently restless. Some were too young to learn the alphabet. These little ones were brought to school because the older children—in whose care their parents leave them while at work—could not come without them. We were therefore willing to have them come, although they seemed to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion, and tried one's patience sadly. But after some days of positive, though not severe treatment, order was brought out of chaos, and I found but little difficulty in managing and quieting the tiniest and most restless spirits. I never before saw children so eager to learn, although I had had several years' experience in New England schools. Coming to school is a constant delight and recreation to them. They come here as other children go to play. The older ones, during the summer, work in the fields from early morning until eleven or twelve o'clock, and then come into school, after their hard toil in the hot sun, as bright and as anxious to learn as ever.
>
> Of course there are some stupid ones, but these are the minority. The majority learn with wonderful rapidity. Many of the grown people are desirous of learning to read. It is wonderful how a people who have been so long crushed to the earth, so imbrued as these have been, —and have so great a desire for knowledge, and such a capability for attaining it. One cannot believe that the haughty Anglo-Saxon race, after centuries of such an experience as these people have had, would be very much superior to them. And one's indignation increases against those who, North as well as South, taunt the colored race with inferiority while them themselves use every means in their power to crush and degrade them, denying them every right and privilege, closing against hem every avenue of elevation and improvement. Were they, under such circumstances, intellectual and refined, they would certainly be vastly superior to any other race that ever existed.

Document O

After the lessons, we used to talk freely to the children, often giving them slight sketches of some of the great and good men. Before teaching them the "John Brown" song, which they learned to sing with great spirit, Miss T. told them the story of the brave old man who had died for them. I told them about Toussaint, thinking it well they should know what one of their own color had done for his race. They listened attentively, and seemed to understand. We found it rather hard to keep their attention in school. It is not strange, as they have been so entirely unused to intellectual concentration. It is necessary to interest them every moment, in order to keep their thoughts from wandering. Teaching here is consequently far more fatiguing than at the North. In the church, we had of course but one room in which to hear all the children; and to make one's self heard, when there were often as many as a hundred and forty reciting at once, it was necessary to tax the lungs very severely. . . .

Charlotte Forten, "Life on the Sea Islands," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 13, No. 79 (May 1864), pp. 589, 591-2.

Document O

. . . Christmas night, the children came in and had several grand shouts. They were too happy to keep still.

"Oh, Miss, all I want to do is to sing and shout!" said one little pet, Amaretta. And sing and shout she did, to her heart's content.

She read nicely, and was very fond of books. The tiniest children are delighted to get a book in their hands. Many of them already know their letters. The parents are eager to have them learn. They sometimes said to me,— "Do, Miss, let de chil'en learn eberyting dey can. We nebber had no chance to learn nuttin', but we wants de chil'en to learn."

They are willing to make many sacrifices that their children may attend school. One old woman, who had a large family of children and grandchildren, came regularly to school in the winter, and took her seat among the little ones. She was at least sixty years old. another woman . . . came daily, and brought her baby in her arms. It happened to be one of the best babies in the world, a perfect little "model of deportment," and allowed its mother to pursue her studies without interruption.

. . . Daily the long-oppressed people of these islands are demonstrating their capacity for improvement in learning and labor. What they have accomplished in one short year exceeds our utmost expectations. Still they sky is dark; but through the darkness we can discern a brighter future. We cannot but feel that the day of final and entire deliverance, so long and often so hopelessly prayed for, had at length begun to dawn upon this much-enduring race. . . .

While writing these pages I am once more nearing Port Royal. The Fortunate Isles of Freedom are before me. I shall again tread the flower-skirted woodpaths of St. Helena, and the sombre pines and bearded oaks shall whisper in the sea-wind their grave welcome. I shall dwell again among "mine own people." I shall gather my scholars about me, and see smiles of greeting break over their dusk faces. My heart sings a song of thanksgiving, at the thought that even I am permitted to do something for a long abused race, and aid in promoting a higher, holier, and happier life on the Sea Islands.

Charlotte Forten, "Life on the Sea Islands," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 13, No. 80 (June 1864), pp. 667, 676.

Appeal for a School for Black Soldiers

John Sweeny, a Black sergeant from Kentucky, wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau requesting that a school be established for soldiers in the ranks. The Bureau acknowledged the letter, replying "Will send Teacher as soon as possible."

Nashville Tenn October 8th 1865

Sir:

I have the honor to call your attention to the necessity of having a school for the benefit of our regiment. We have never had an institution of that sort and we stand deeply in need of instruction, the majority of us having been slaves. We wish to have some benefit of education to make of ourselves capable of business in the future. We have established a literary association which flourished previous to our march to Nashville. We wish to become a people capable of self support as we are capable of being soldiers. My home is in Kentucky where prejudice reigns like the mountain oak and I do lack that cultivation of mind that would have a tendency to cast a cloud over my future life after have been in the United States service. I had a leave of absence a few weeks a go on a furlough and it made my heart ache to see my race of people there neglected and ill treated on the account of the lack of education being incapable of putting their complaints or applications in writing for the want of education [and] totally ignorant of the great good workings of the government in our behalf. We as soldiers have our officers who are our protection to teach us how to act and to do. But Sir what we want is a general system of education in our regiment for our moral and literary elevation. These being our motives, we have the honor of calling [for] your very high consideration.

Respectfully Submitted as your Most humble servt

John Sweeny

Spelling and punctuation have been changed to conform with conventional standards.

Ira Berlin, ed., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861–1867: Series II, The Black Military Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 615.

Document Q

SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION FOR VIRGINIA
MISCELLANEOUS RECORDS

The following records of the Virginia Superintendent of Education provide a glimpse of the pressing matters pertaining to schools and are typical of those of other southern states. These documents give an insight into the building, financing, and inspection of schools.

July 26, 1865

Capt. S. P. Lee
Sub. Asst. Com.

Dear Sir:

In reference to the application for aid in building a school house at Manassas, Gen. Brown directs me to address you directly to say that in the absence of any evidence that a school will be maintained at any point he cannot make appropriations for school houses. So far as I have any evidence it is very uncertain at what points (with the exception of a few teaching policies) schools will be supported next year.

I suggest that the Bureau officers and the local parties interested make direct application of the New England Branch F.U. Com. to know if they will send a teacher. When that ass'n or any other pledges a teacher an appropriation will be made.

Very Respectfully
R. M. Manly
Supt. of Education

Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Virginia, 1865–1870, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, Reel 1, National Archives.

Undated Letter, probably Sept. 7, 1869

R. M. Manly, State Superintendent of Education, Virginia
to R. H. Dennis

> . . . The law creating the Bureau contemplates that it will act in connection with the charitable associations & says expressly that it shall "cooperate with them" & does not provide for any other method of operation. Monthly rent of $10 [from schools] goes directly to associations.

In a letter to raise funds, dated November 4, 1869, Superintendent Manly wrote:

> . . . I am positively forbidden, by the order under which I act, to build school houses until it appears that a school will be supported. [He further noted that the people of the community were expected to board their teachers.]

Circular No. 17

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands
Head-Qrs. Assistant Commissioner,
District of Virginia, Richmond, Va.
Dec. 20, 1867

Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioners and Agents of this Bureau will hereafter make a careful PERSONAL inspection of all Freedmen's Schools within their respective Divisions at least once in two months, and make a special report of the condition of each School. This inspection and report will not only cover the Schools supported by the benevolent societies of the North, but will include ALL private independent Schools for Freedmen, whether taught by Freedmen or white persons.

O. BROWN,
Bvt. Brig. Gen. Vols.
Assistant Commissioner

Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Virginia, 1865–1870, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, Reel 2, National Archives

Document Q

Letter requesting a Schoolhouse for the Freedmen

Bureau of R. F. & A. L.
Office of U.S.A. Comm. 2a D 10 S D Va
Manassas Va.
March 25 1868

Bvt. Lt. Col.
S. P. Lee USA
Sub Asst Comm. 10 S D Va

Colonel

I have the honor to request that the sum of $100.00 be appropriated for the purpose of assisting in the erection of a School house for the use of the Freedmen at Buckland in Prince William Co. This School will be self sustaining and will have about 40 scholars. The Union League promised $150.00 towards the building. Mrs. Maria Chappell will give the land for the purpose. I believe this one of the best locations for a School in this county and earnestly request that the above sum may be provided by the Bureau.

Despite the scattered instances of open violence & a general opposition to freedmen's schools & their teachers, the school program thrived & expanded. Opening in Oct.,1865 with 67 schools, 136 teachers, & 8,528 pupils, by March, 1866, there were 145 schools, 225 teachers & 17,589 pupils. A report in April reveals that the American Missionary Association was supporting 53 teachers, the New York Nat[iona]l Freedmen's Relief Association, 36; the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, 20; the Baptist Home Mission Society, 24; the True Friends Society of Philadelphia, 49; & the Episcopal Missionary Society, 5. 29 teachers & 1,057 pupils were in self-supporting schools.

Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Virginia, 1865–1870, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, Reel 7, National Archives.

Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Virginia, 1865-1870, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, Consolidated Report for Schools, April 1866 of Superintendent, Reel 5, National Archives

Report on the Status of Schools in Virginia

R. M. Manly, Virginia's State Superintendent of Schools, reported to the Bureau's General Superintendent, Henry Alvard, that between January and June, 1869, Virginia schools had the highest attendance with 181 white teachers and 173 African American teachers. Manly concluded his report:

> . . . The long delay in the political reconstruction of the State still leaves the schools dependent upon foreign aid. Probably there is not another southern State in which the ruling class have such a poor opinion, not only of public free schools, as a meaning of education, but of education itself.
>
> . . . The State has, however, taken one step forward. The new Constitution with its public free schools system which has been standing on the table of the sick man for 15 months— nausceous [sic] but wholesome drought—has just been swallowed, not willingly it is true, but angrily and ruefully. The patient's dislike for the medicine and hate for the doctor that compounded it, may retard and somewhat modify the effect of the dose, but cannot destroy it. Ample provision is made in that instrument for the gradual introduction & permanent support of a comprehensive system of public free schools. The wealthy & aristocratic will oppose & retard the movement, but it will certainly go forward until the free school shall be as common, as excellent and as honored, as before the war, it was scarce and contemptible.
>
> . . . The number of native white Virginians opening colored schools or seeking employment is considerable. These are generally women in reduced circumstances or broken down school masters—persons already sufficiently humbled to be willing to earn their necessary bread by teaching colored children. While such teachers are not the best, they are better than none for children who are as yet entirely untaught. As far as possible the superintendent will reach these schools and endeavor to improve them.
>
> . . . Not less than 50 thousand of the late slave population of this State have learned to read and write. More than three hundred are in Normal Schools—many who three or four years ago did not know the alphabet are acceptable teachers. Many are pursuing advanced studies at home and abroad. Youth is the instructor of age. I have seen a little colored girl of ten years, reading fluently and intelligently leading editorials of a city daily from the bulletin board to a group of eagerly listening gray haired men and women whose hearty and appropriate responses told that they appreciated the thought of the writer as well as the miracle the child was working by translating the unmeaning type matter to their comprehension.

Document R

. . . The schools have been the principal cause of the hopefulness and patience with which they [freed persons] endured the hunger, the nakedness and managed the wrongs of their transition state. Their churches have been great gainers in an increasing demand for minutes of better qualifications and a softening of the extravagances of their forms of worship. The schools have developed self respect and a desire for permanent homes and the comforts and decencies of life.

Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Virginia, 1865-1870, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, Reel 4, National Archives.