

The Freedmen's Bureau

BECAUSE MANY northern politicians felt that newly-freed slaves would need help adjusting to freedom, in March 1865 the Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, or as it was usually called, the Freedmen's Bureau. The Bureau's primary mission was to feed, educate, treat, shelter, and house the four million freedpersons of the South. In addition, the Bureau was responsible for legalizing slave marriages and preventing the illegal apprenticeship of ex-slaves' children. With a total staff of only 900 agents, the Bureau was never able to effectively carry out its enormous mission. However, it did have some success in education, working closely with hundreds of charitable northern "freedmen aid societies" to recruit volunteer teachers to work in freedmen schools. When the war ended, few slaves could read. By 1877, when Reconstruction ended, the literacy rate among blacks was 20 percent. By 1910, it had climbed to 70 percent.

Freedmen's Bureau

HOSPITALS:

Built and/or Financed—1865-1872 163

Freedmen Served 563,353

All Persons Served 589,296

FOOD RATIONS:

Rations Issued 15,406,464

(To Freedpersons)—1865-1869

(To All persons) 20,135,930

SCHOOLS:

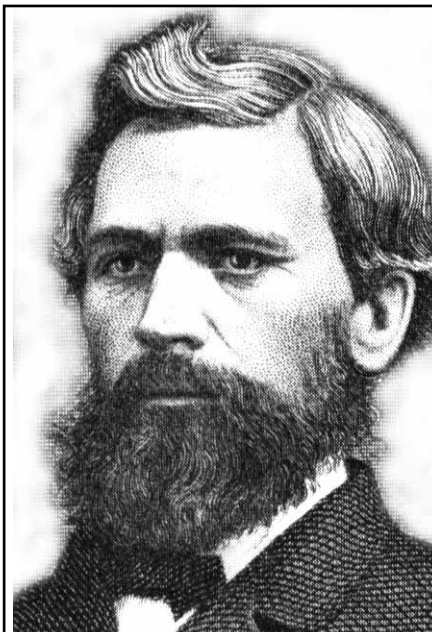
Pupils (1865-1870) approx. 250,000

Teachers 4,329

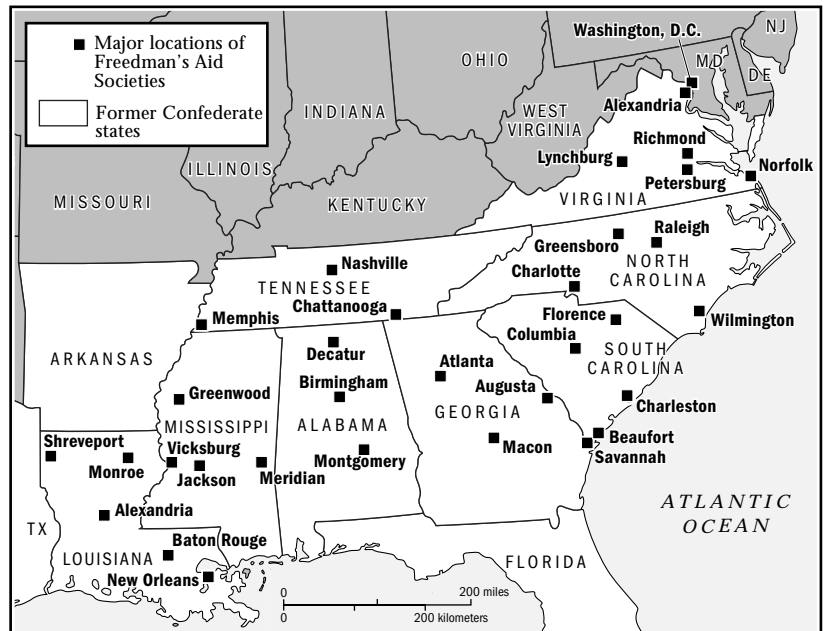
Schools Operated 2,411



The Freedmen's Bureau often helped resolve disputes between whites and blacks because freedmen could rarely get a fair trial in southern courts. Here, a Bureau agent in Memphis, TN, takes testimony from freedmen.



General O. O. Howard served as commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau. Howard University, founded with Freedmen's Bureau assistance, was named after the general, who served as its first president.



The Freedmen's Bureau was often assisted by private charitable organizations known as freedmen's aid societies, which had offices in most major cities in the South. Among the most active were the American Missionary Society, the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, and the New York National Freedmen's Aid Society.