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# The Power of the Press in the South's Battle against the Freedmen's Bureau

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## **Introduction**

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, or The Freedmen's Bureau, was created following the end of the Civil War. The goal of the Bureau was to help the newly freed slaves of the South begin their new lives as free men. Entering a bitter and hostile South, some historians argue that the Freedmen's Bureau was doomed from its conception.

Helping newly freed slaves was not the Freedmen's Bureau only responsibility. It was also created to serve white refugees who were stranded after the war, deal with confiscated lands, help create schools, provide fairness in court, create licenses for those who had none, and more. The responsibilities of the bureau were not small. The difficulties of the tasks alone were tremendous, but the attitudes and emotions that the Freedmen's Bureau faced from the southerners made their mission impossible.

The Freedmen's Bureau, having issues from its origins in Washington, got off to a rocky start in Georgia. The opposition that the Bureau met in Georgia was only inflamed by the boisterous stories and accusations printed in the local newspapers. When the very reason of the Bureau's existence was put into question, all actions of the Bureau that follow were put into the spotlight and highly criticized.

## Literature Review

James Oakes took the same critical view of the Freedmen's Bureau in "A Failure of Vision: The Collapse of the Freedmen's Bureau Courts." There was no denying that the Freedmen's Bureau was a complete failure during Reconstruction. Oakes made this point clearly, beginning with "Nothing more clearly demonstrates the tragic failure of the Freedmen's Bureau than its ultimately futile efforts to establish equal justice in the South."<sup>1</sup> Oakes argued that the tragic flaws of the Freedmen's Bureau can be found in its frameworks. From the very beginning, he argued, the organization was doomed.

Oakes acknowledged that the Freedmen's Bureau had many obstacles set before it. He also acknowledged that many of the challenges the Freedmen's Bureau met had the potential to be overcome and were brought on by the Bureau itself. Oakes provided examples of court cases and settlements where the Bureau agent did not meet the needs of his client and, the newly freed man he was working for, ended up in undesirable conditions.

Oakes also noted how the Freedmen's Bureau suffered because of its strained relationship with the southern whites. Although the job of the Bureau was to meet the needs of the freedmen, the Bureau had to also deal with the attitudes of the whites that were adjusting to a post-war world. When it came to legal dealings, the civil courts of the South were unfair towards the freedmen. Met with harsher punishments, larger fines, and unfair trials, the freedmen struggled to be treated fairly. As a result, the Freedmen's

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<sup>1</sup> Oakes, James. "A Failure Of Vision: The Collapse Of The Freedmen's Bureau Courts." *Civil War History* 25.1 (1979): 66-76. *America: History and Life with Full Text*. Web.

Bureau had to step in for these cases and protect the freedmen from the unjust system. This created resistance among the southern whites. Oakes used this example, and many others involving the court system, to point out the flaws in the Freedmen's Bureau.

The strained relations between the southern whites and the Freedmen's Bureau will be a recurring point made in this paper. Surrounded by a hostile environment, the chances of the Freedmen's Bureau surviving and being of any use were small. Oakes discussed that the Freedmen's Bureau was met with resistance from the southern whites. Oakes stated that this tense relationship, along with the troubles met in the court system, were some of the many flaws in the Freedmen's Bureau. Many historians disagree with this statement and believe that the tense relationship between southern whites and the Freedmen's Bureau was not a flaw of the bureau, but rather another negative factor in the environment that led to the ultimate failure of the bureau.

Another work on Reconstruction and the Freedmen's Bureau was by Fleischman, Tyson, and Oldroyd, titled "The U.S. Freedmen's Bureau in Post-Civil War Reconstruction." This work, compared to Oakes, had a much more positive view on the Freedmen's Bureau. The work never referred to the Freedmen's Bureau as a "failure" like Oakes did. Instead, it stated the good things that the Bureau did and all of the problems that it faced that may have led to its short lifespan.

Starting with facts on the Bureau, like when, where, and how it was formed, the article seemed to have a very neutral stance on the Freedmen's Bureau.

It was within this racially charged environment that the fledgling FB was thrust. Its representatives attempted to build a structure fair to both laborers and landowners within the ridiculously unfair and disproportional context of a particular state's Black Code (p. 84).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fleischman, Richard, Thomas Tyson, and David Oldroyd. 2014. "The U.S. Freedmen's Bureau

The authors approach the failure of the Freedmen's Bureau as being a result of the environment that it operated in. Oakes, on the other hand, puts the failure of the Bureau on the Bureau itself. While both sources recognize the terrible conditions for freedmen following the war, the two sources seem to have different opinions on who was to blame for the fall of the Freedmen's Bureau.

While these two sources have disagreements on the process of the Freedmen's Bureau, they also disagree about the results of the Freedmen's Bureau. Oakes talked about how the agents of the Freedmen's Bureau often tried to appeal to the southern whites and, in turn, created a contract for the freedmen that was less than desirable. Fleischman et al. lean towards the opinion that the Freedmen's Bureau was always trying to create fair agreements between everyone, but they were shut down by the southern whites. While the results of the freedmen having unfair contracts was the same, the blame was passed back and forth between the two authors. Oakes placed the blame on the Freedmen's Bureau and the agents while Fleischman et al. credit the failure to the southern whites, stating that the Freedmen's Bureau had no option.

These works shift the reason for the bureau's failure between the setting and the bureau itself. It is important to note that both points are valid and can differ based on what primary documents you look at. In this paper, a document from the Freedmen's Bureau, accounts of the freedmen from others, and documents written by the freedmen themselves will be put up next to articles from newspapers across Georgia that raises a completely different point of view. These opposing sources can be used to gather information on the state of the South during Reconstruction.

Robert Harrison offered a critique on previous writings on the Freedmen's Bureau and offered a new look in his work "New Representations of a 'Misrepresented Bureau': Reflections on Recent Scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau." Harrison noted how early pieces of literature on the subject of Reconstruction and the Freedmen's Bureau had a tendency to lean towards being sympathetic with the southern population. Towards the 1950's and 1960's, there was a change in literature on the Freedmen's Bureau. The literature of this time sought to redeem the qualities of the Freedmen's Bureau that had been slandered since the creation of the Bureau itself. Harrison stated that the purpose of these works were to correct the misconceptions that had been created about the "misrepresented bureau".

The works of literature by Oakes and Fleischman et al. seem to both fit into the different categories that Harrison described. While Oakes has a more critical view on the failure of the Freedmen's Bureau, Fleischman et al. sets out to redeem the Bureau. Fleischman et al. placed the failure of the Bureau on the state of the south. The work claimed that the Freedmen's Bureau did everything to the best of their abilities, but was met with ultimate failure because of the troubles they faced in the south. Oakes, however, took a more negative view of the Bureau, regardless of the situation. Oakes stated how the Bureau was a failure from its conception and would not have succeeded regardless of how the south reacted towards it.

Harrison's work provided views on both the Freedmen's Bureau and the literature on the subject of the Freedmen's Bureau. Harrison took older works from the second half of the twentieth century and exposed the negative views on the Freedmen's Bureau and the evidence found to enforce those views.

Worst of all, the so-called post-revisionist historians, writing for the most part between the late 1960s and the 1980s, found evidence of Bureau officers cooperating with employers to force freedpeople back onto the land and to ensure that they provided the pliant and dependable workforce that was necessary for the rehabilitation of plantation agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

With evidence like this, the Freedmen's Bureau was painted as a failure and enemy to the freedmen that they were trying to serve.

Harrison also presented a view that seemed to be the opposite of the "post-revisionist historians" he previously discussed. More recent historians, who wrote in the 1990's and 2000's, have a more positive view on the Freedmen's Bureau. Harrison quoted Cimbala, a historian who has contributed to the literature on the Freedmen's Bureau.

They have attempted, says Cimbala, 'to understand the Bureau's methods and goals within the context of nineteenth century America,' rather than 'trying to measure its agents and officials against the social and political yardsticks of the post-civil rights era of the present century.'<sup>4</sup>

This presents a different approach to the research method of the more modern historians. Instead of just being biased towards the Freedmen's Bureau, they present the method in which they viewed their research which led to the result of the Freedmen's Bureau being viewed as the "misrepresented bureau".

Harrison does the best job out of Oakes and Fleischman et al. to present multiple views of the topic of the Freedmen's Bureau. Harrison looked into the research of other historians and went deeper into their reasonings behind their research and the methods behind their views. After a summary of other historians' works on the Freedmen's Bureau, Harrison provided his own research. While maintaining a neutral standpoint,

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<sup>3</sup> Harrison, Robert. 2007. "New Representations of a 'Misrepresented Bureau': Reflections on Recent Scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau." *American Nineteenth Century History* 8 (2): 205.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison, Robert. 2007. "New Representations of a 'Misrepresented Bureau': Reflections on Recent Scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau." *American Nineteenth Century History* 8 (2): 205.

Harrison presented evidence showing both sides of the bias that lies around the Freedmen's Bureau. Records and evidence are shown that put the agents of the Freedmen's Bureau into a bad light. Other records and conditions showed that the Freedmen's Bureau was a positive organization that accomplished many of its goals in the short lifespan it had in the south.

It is important to review literature with different standpoints on if and why the Freedmen's Bureau failed in the South. While most of the works agree that the Freedmen's Bureau was not successful, the source of their failures are different from source to source. Different levels of criticism create a narrative of the bureau that open its failures and flaws to interpretation. In this paper, I will be exploring the newspapers in Georgia as a source of failure for the Freedmen's Bureau.



## Body

Since the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, people have been using the power of the press to enforce their political opinion. Newspapers function as an outlet for “negotiation among contending interests.”<sup>5</sup> When the Freedmen’s Bureau entered the South following the end of the Civil War, it was met with much opposition by the white Georgians. One of the ways of voicing opposition of the Bureau was through the newspapers. With a majority of the readers being whites and a select few literate freedmen, the newspapers began their attacks on the Bureau using methods that would appeal to the audience and create a sense of tension between the locals and the Bureau agents.

The Freedmen’s Bureau had many tasks in the Reconstruction South, including the creation of schools for the freedmen. These schools were staffed with teachers from the North who came to teach the freedmen basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. There were official reports on the success of these schools and the number of pupils that are learning in them. There were also local newspapers that discussed the Bureau’s schools. While some newspapers were critical of the school and questioned the validity of it, other newspapers shared the statistics of the school reports that seemed impressive and beneficial for the freedmen.

One newspaper, *The Weekly Georgia Telegraph* from Macon, was making a complaint on the opinion that freedmen seemed to be engaging in activities and work in the evening and nighttime instead of the day time. The newspaper suggested that this was

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<sup>5</sup> Maurer, Peter, and Florian Arendt. "A Blessing Or A Double-Edged Sword? Politicians' Perceptions Of Newspapers' Impact On The Functioning Of Democracy." *Communications: The European Journal Of Communication Research* 41.1 (2016): 1-20. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*.

a trait from the days when they were slaves and all of their social needs had to be met during the nighttime as to not interfere with their work in the day. The newspaper wondered why this habit remained the same once they were free and could spend their days as they wished. The newspaper somehow draws the Freedmen's Bureau schools into their complaint, stating that "Cannot the Freedmen's Bureau and the 'school'-marms, by their moral influence and example, eradicate this barbarous habit of turning night into day."<sup>6</sup> The newspaper took an issue, which was not a legitimate issue, and somehow placed the blame on the Bureau schools, claiming that they had no influence over the freedmen.

On the other end of the spectrum, the same newspaper printed an update on the Freedmen's Bureau schools two years later. In an article titled "Freedmen's Affairs", the newspaper gave information on the Freedmen's Bureau schools that seemed to be flattering. The information seemed to come from a Freedmen's Bureau report and offered the statistics of the schools and their pupils. The newspaper discussed the work that was done during the war in an attempt to educate the freedmen. It later discussed the origins of the Freedmen's Bureau, stating that

The work had been so developed at the close of the war as to seem to require the more direct patronage of the Government—not to supersede the private works of benevolence, but rather to systematize and cover the whole field—hence the Freedmen's Bureau was created by act of Congress in March, 1865, and Major Gen. O. O. Howard was placed in charge of the same.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, Macon, Georgia. September 24, 1866.

<sup>7</sup> *Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, Macon, Georgia. June 26, 1868.

In contrast to other newspapers of the time that devalued the Freedmen's Bureau in any way possible, this newspaper article showed a more straightforward approach as to why the Freedmen's Bureau was in the South.

The Freedmen's Bureau helped support freedmen in the creation of schools. A report for Georgia stated that

By the end of 1866, freedmen owned 57 schoolhouses and provided support for 96 of the 127 schools in the state. By the spring of 1867, freedmen contributions sustained some 104 schools and teachers and more than 3,000 students. During the same period, the Bureau maintained some 44 schools and 50 teachers and close to 3,100 pupils.<sup>8</sup>

Schools for freedmen were not just created and maintained by the Freedmen's Bureau.

The freedmen took the responsibility to themselves to own and support more than half of the schools in the state. "By the time the Bureau withdrew from Georgia in 1870, the agency had contributed funds for the building of some 50 schools in the state."<sup>9</sup>

The source of suffering for the freedmen was not the lack of freedom, but the lack of independence, according to the newspapers. These freedmen, who were being told who to work for, who to sign contracts with, and how to conduct their business were not truly free because they were not independent. As a result, the papers said the Bureau inhibited the growth of the freedmen in the South because they were not allowing them to be independent. This cry for independence coming from the newspaper was encouraging, not only to the white readers to get rid of the Bureau, but to the freedmen who may have related to this feeling of lack of independence.

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<sup>8</sup> Records of the field offices for the state of Georgia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872. Microfilm, United States Congress and National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Work contracts created by the Freedmen's Bureau on behalf of the freed person trying to obtain work was physical and official evidence of the work the Freedmen's Bureau did to help those who were building their lives after being freed from slavery. Although these people were legally free, they were still treated as slaves by those who had so recently been slave holders. The shift from owning someone to do free labor to paying that same person for their labor was a switch that so many white people in the South seemed to have an issue with. It might be "easy" in their minds to revert to the antebellum days and assume the same roles. The work contracts created by the Freedmen's Bureau protected the freed people from falling into a trap of unpaid work.

The work contracts that the Freedmen's Bureau produced could be very short and simple. One work contract was for a freedman named Truss B. Hall. The contract stated that Robert McKenzie had agreed to pay Hall \$4.00 a month for the remainder of the year in exchange for his work. Although this seemed to be a beneficial thing to Mr. Hall, the wording of the document created a sense that this agreement was both a step forward and a step back regarding the independence and freedom of Mr. Hall.

This instrument witnesseth that Robert McKenzie of Robeson Co agrees to pay Truss B. Hall \$4.00 per month until 25th day of December next for and in sideration of the said Truss B. Hall rendering the Robert McKenzie true and faithful service and obey all lawful commands as he use to when a slave.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Freedmen's Bureau had provided a work contract for this newly freed man, they were still holding him to the standards of a slave. This could allow for manipulation of the system by previous slave holders who declared that their workers were not acting

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<sup>10</sup> War Department. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. Office of the Assistant Commissioner for North Carolina. 1865-1869. Agreement of Labor for Truss B. Hall. 1865-08-28. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <http://catalog.archives.gov/id/595055>.

as good “slaves”. The step forward for freed people was that they were getting these working contracts and they had protections and rights. The step back was that they were being told to act as a slave would and obey and serve whoever they worked with.

Despite the poor choice of words and phrases in the work contract that was previously mentioned, the work contracts were effective. There are other examples of work contracts that are much longer and more appropriately worded regarding both parties that signed the contract. A contract may have provided up to 15 or more points that have benefits and regulations for all parties involved. These may have included conditions under which the worker may or may not work, what holidays were given to the worker, what the contractor would provide for the worker, and what both parties expected out of this exchange.

[The freedmen and women] agree to conduct themselves honestly and civilly and to perform diligently and faithfully all such labor on said plantation, as may be connected with, and necessary for, the raising, harvesting, and protecting of the crop.<sup>11</sup>

The contract stated the expectations of the contractor for the workers, but it also created guidelines for the contractor to follow.

The said T B Ferguson [contractor] agrees to furnish each laborer and his family, if he have one, with comfortable quarters on the plantation also one acre of land to each and every house for use of the occupants thereof, and the privilege of getting firewood from some portion of the premises to be indicated by the [contractor]. And each laborer shall be permitted to raise such an amount of Poultry and hogs as he can keep upon the premises assigned to him, without injury or annoyance to others.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Heyward and Ferguson families, 1806-1923. 272. Agreement between Thomas B. Ferguson and Freedmen--February 20, 1866. 1866-02-20. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <http://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/lcdl/catalog/lcdl:38926>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The Freedmen's Bureau did not just create contracts and end it there, they would also follow up in cases where freed people were not being properly paid or treated. If the Freedmen's Bureau received a complaint that someone was not being paid, they would contact the employer and try to handle things in a civil manner.

Complaint has today been made at the headquarters by Sophia Dunford, a freedwoman, who states that she worked for you last year and that you have given her no money--to save further trouble, you respectfully requested to settle with her. Such hours are worth at least four dollars per month. If you can't settle with her, come to office on this day week Saturday next when the matter will be investigated.<sup>13</sup>

This letter showed that, not only did the Freedmen's Bureau work to make sure freed people were paid properly, but that the freed people who were experiencing troubles went to the Freedmen's Bureau for help. This disputes any newspaper articles stating the Freedmen's Bureau was useless and that no freed person needed their help. It also showed that the freed people did trust the bureau and its agents to protect them and their rights.

One of the points that the newspapers in Georgia made as to why the Freedmen's Bureau was unwanted and not needed was that the newly freed men and women could take care of themselves. If they could not, the newspapers said that the rest of the South would step up and help them. As mentioned in Milledgeville's newspaper, *Southern Recorder*, there were no racial fueled problems in the South and the presence of the Freedmen's Bureau was causing all of the problems. Almost all newspapers in Georgia at the time presented the idea that the Freedmen's Bureau was of no help to the freed

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<sup>13</sup>Letter from Freedmen's Bureau to Enos Harrell. 18660114. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/32474>.

people. Most went as far to say that the Freedmen's Bureau was detrimental to the wellbeing of the freed people.

The *Historical Augusta Chronicle* stated, "The worst sufferers of the war have been the negroes of the South. Terrible, indeed, has thus far been the effect of emancipation upon them."<sup>14</sup> The newspaper was suggesting that emancipation was the greatest challenge that the freedmen faced. They suggested that, despite the bitter and fatal effects of slavery, nothing compared to what the freedmen went through now that they had their freedom. The newspaper offered a disclaimer that this was not a call to revive slavery, but to call to actions for those who had it in their hearts to help this poor race. This idea, like a double-edged sword, both encouraged the white people of the South to help the freedmen and showed that the Bureau was doing absolutely nothing to help the plight of the freedmen. To get the Bureau out of the South, the southern whites needed to step up and help the freed people.

The *Historical Augusta Chronicle* stated, "The best thing that can be done for the African race now in the South, is to withdraw at once the Freedmen's Bureau, and leave to the people of the Southern States the duty of caring for and protecting the [black men]"<sup>15</sup>. According to the newspapers, as long as the Bureau was in the South, tensions between the races would only increase. Under the Bureau, the newspapers state that the southern whites felt that their help with support and protection for the newly freedmen and women was unwanted and unneeded. Newspapers insisted that the Bureau was making a negative impact on race relations in the south by providing little help for the freedmen and preventing help being given by the white Georgians.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Historical Augusta Chronicle*, Augusta, Georgia. May 27, 1866.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the numerous claims from Georgia newspapers that the Freedmen's Bureau was of more danger to the freedman than it was helping them, there were documented cases of freedmen reaching out to the bureau to request protection from their white neighbors. A countless number of murders took place that involved a black victim and white murderer. Most of the time, the murderer was not charged or even arrested in the first place, leaving a lack of justice for the freedmen that lost their lives. Yet, the Historical Augusta Chronicle said that the people of the South did not want to have "the duty of caring for and protecting the [black men]."<sup>16</sup> Southern whites wanted the Freedmen's Bureau out of the way so they could continue to persecute the freedmen of the South with as few obstacles as possible.

To further prove the claim that freed people were unsafe in the South was a request presented to the Freedmen's Bureau by a group of freed people in Columbus, Georgia to maintain the presence of federal troops.

We the undersigned Freedmen, having learned that the Federal Soldiers are soon to be withdrawn from Columbus, feel constrained most respectfully and request in the name of the Lord, to implore you not to leave us unprotected by Federal troops. We firmly believe that the Almighty has ordained our freedom; but at the same time, we wish to inform you that if the Federal Soldiers are withdrawn from us, we will be left in a most gloomy and helpless condition. A number of Freedmen have already been killed in this section of country; and from expressions uttered by prominent men in the community in civil life, we have every reason to fear that others will share a similar fate.<sup>17</sup>

This request was signed by more than 120 freedmen who all were concerned regarding the safety of their lives. If their fate rested in the hands of their white neighbors and the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Watkins et al., *Request of the Freedmen of Columbus, GA to Maj. Gen. Steadman not to withdraw the Federal Troops and leave them unprotected, November 5, 1865*. Letter. From the Freedmen's Bureau Online. *National Archives Publication M798 Roll 36*.  
<http://www.freedmensbureau.com/georgia/request.htm>



authorities of the town, the freedmen believed that they had good the reason to fear for their lives.

While the southern papers presented the idea that the South could take care of its own people and that there were no racial tensions present, there was overwhelming evidence to disprove it. Simpson Whitfield, Peter, Charles Smith, John Tellmar, McCullough, Isaac Beard, Primus Hatch, and John Platt are a small portion of an even larger group of black men and women who were murdered by their white neighbors<sup>18</sup>. The Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Georgia stated that these people were murdered. The name of the murderer was listed, as well as their race and the status of their conviction. Of the murderers, 8 out of 8 were white and 7 out of 8 were acquitted or had no action taken against them. The only example of a conviction in the murder list was one where the victim was a white man and the perpetrator was a black man. The convicted man was jailed. None of the white murderers were convicted or punished.

The numbers and convictions detailed above show that newly freed slaves were not safe in the South and that there were racial tensions. Other examples of violence abound. Even with the Freedmen's Bureau present, the violence against black men and women was so predominant that it was terrifying to think of what the South would have looked like for freed people had they been left to their own defenses. The claim that

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<sup>18</sup> Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Georgia, *Reports Relating to Murders and Outrages 1865-1868*. Manuscript. From the Freedmen's Bureau Online. *National Archives Microfilm Publication M798 Roll 32*. <http://www.freedmensbureau.com/georgia/outrages9.htm>

white Southerners could take care of their black neighbors was not supported by any numbers or incidents that took place during Reconstruction.

An article from *The Southern Banner* presented the idea that the Freedmen's Bureau was only confusing the freedmen, not helping them.

The Southern [black man] finds himself bewildered by an apparent conflict of laws. He sees military commanders interfering with the Freedmen's Bureau and agents of the Freedmen's Bureau interfering with his own late masters. Whether he belongs to himself, or to the Freedmen's Bureau, or to the military commanders, may well be a grave doubt in his untutored mind.<sup>19</sup>

This idea was beneficial in creating doubts in the minds of both southern whites and literate freedmen who read the newspaper. It put the military forces that were meant to help the Bureau in a bad light by saying that it interfered with the Freedman's Bureau while the agents of the Bureau were interfering with the relationship between ex-slave and ex-master. The newspaper suggested that the freedmen were not able to understand the conflict happening in the South between federal and local forces.

The Correspondent of the Cincinnati Commercial, whom the Augusta Chronicle chose as a qualified and unbiased witness, remarked that the cruelty and wrongdoings towards the freedmen were concentrated more in Washington DC than in the South as a whole. The men of the Freedmen's Bureau, and those who supported it, worked themselves up into an imaginary world where all of the blacks of the south were mistreated. The problem, the correspondent stated, was that the Freedmen's Bureau "wholly ignores the millions of instances in which the [black men] are happy and at work for fair wages"<sup>20</sup>. While the agents of the Freedmen's Bureau were open to their own

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<sup>19</sup> *The Southern Banner*, Athens, Georgia. December 6, 1865.

<sup>20</sup> *The Historical Augusta Chronicle*, Augusta, Georgia. March 28, 1866.

opinion and logic, the newspaper urged that “men of sense”<sup>21</sup> would know how to interpret it. This was the newspaper’s way of saying that only the intelligent man, the white Georgian who was the target audience of this newspaper, understood that the agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau were largely misguided in their beliefs that they were of any actual help to the freedman.

According to the newspapers, the Freedmen’s Bureau was creating the false idea that there was a war between races in the South. “Despite the recent troubles... we do not believe in a war of races in this country. The negro is pacific by nature and will not of his own accord get up an insurrection.”<sup>22</sup> The newspapers were blaming the Freedmen’s Bureau for any problems in race relations in the South. They suggested that the sooner the Bureau left, the sooner the South could take up a more peaceful demeanor in the relationship between races. This statement implied that any problems with racial relations were being caused by the presence of the Freedmen’s Bureau and, if left to their own devices, the relationship between the freedmen and the southern whites would be fine.

Despite the implication that race relations would be fine if the Freedmen’s Bureau left, the newspaper attributed it to the fact that the attitude of the freedmen would change rather than the attitude of the southern whites. The newspaper suggested that the Freedmen’s Bureau was disturbing the pacifistic nature of the freedmen. The newspaper article was not suggesting that racial tensions would resolve due to the work of southern whites treating the freedmen better, but rather the freedmen accepting their poor

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<sup>21</sup> *The Historical Augusta Chronicle*, Augusta, Georgia. May 27, 1866.

<sup>22</sup> *Southern Recorder*, Milledgeville, Georgia. June 19, 1866.

treatment and not putting up any sort of fight or dispute. According to the newspaper, the racial war was one sided and the only improvement could come from the freedmen.

An account from the Reverend H.W. Pierson. D.D. showed that the grievances expressed by the freedmen in the bureau reports and denied by the newspapers were, in fact, true. Pierson spent his time in Georgia as a pastor and teacher for the freedmen both during and after the Civil War. Pierson wrote to Charles Sumner in Washington D.C. to let him know that the stories coming from the freedmen of their experiences and poor treatment in the South were not only true, but worse than they appeared. While working with the freedmen, Pierson stated that he

...saw and heard more of sufferings and horrible outrages inflicted upon the Freedmen than I saw and heard of as inflicted upon slaves in any five years of constant horseback travel in the South before the war, when I visited thousands of plantations<sup>23</sup>

This powerful statement claimed that of all the horrors experienced during slavery, these freedmen were facing worse times after the war was over and slavery was abolished.

Pierson backed up his view on the truth behind the outrages against freedmen with firsthand accounts of violent acts and cruel treatment against them.

As illustrations of the sufferings of these oppressed, outraged people, and of their utter helplessness and want of protection from the State or Federal courts, I give a few of the 'statements' that I wrote down from their own lips. I know these men, and have entire confidence in their 'statements',<sup>24</sup>

Pierson included the statements of Cane Cook, Floyd Snelson, George Smith, Richard Reese, Rev. Charles Ennis, and many more freedmen and women who suffered at the

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<sup>23</sup> Rev. Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with "Statements" of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of my Expulsion from Andersonville, GA., by the Ku-Klux Klan. Washington, 1870.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

hands of the southern whites. With each story, Pierson provided a brief introduction of the individual and how he heard of their story, the first-hand account of the story completely in their words, and a brief afterword to describe the condition that the individual was in due to the gruesome events they experienced.

The first account, that of Cane Cook, described the violence he experienced at the hand of a white man. In his words, Cook described what events led him to being near paralyzed and unable to work or care for himself. Cook worked for Robert Hodges and rented his land for which there was a pre-arranged agreement on the share of crops. One day, when going over the charges, there was an error in which Hodges charged Cook for a gallon of syrup. Cook pointed out the mistake and violence ensued.

Upon pointing out the error, Hodges became infuriated and claimed that his word was being disputed by Cook. Cook claimed that he did not want any problems and did not want to dispute Hodges' word.

He [Hodges] got up very angry, and took a large hickory stick and came towards me. I went backwards towards the door, and he followed me. He is a strong man and I did not want to have any trouble with him and I gave him no impudence... I went backwards to the door and to the edge of the porch, and he followed me. As I turned to go down the steps- there are four steps- he struck me a powerful blow on the back of my head, and I fell from the porch to the ground.<sup>25</sup>

Pierson described what followed as Cook was taken away from Hodges and cared for by a doctor and friends. After several days, he was returned home to his wife but he was unable to move any of his arms or legs and was left unable to care for himself at all.

Despite the violence that Cook experienced at the hands of Hodges, he could not find justice.

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<sup>25</sup> Rev. Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with "Statements" of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of my Expulsion from Andersonville, GA., by the Ku-Klux Klan. Washington, 1870.

I have not gone before any of the courts. I have no money to pay a lawyer, and I know it would do no good... I hope there will be some law sometime for us poor oppressed people. If we could only get land and have homes we could get along; but the won't sell us any land.<sup>26</sup>

Pierson went to say that, while Cook had his life ruined by this incident, Hodges continued to live his life as “one of the most prominent and respected citizens of Sumter county.”<sup>27</sup> Despite owning six thousand acres of land, Hodges refused to sell land to any freedmen and would not even sell the land for a school-house to be built. Cook not only experienced extreme violence by the hand of his white neighbor, but saw no justice come of it because of the corrupt and racist nature of the law system in Georgia.

Reverend Charles Ennis also experienced violence at the hands of one of his white neighbors. Ennis and his wife lived on the land of Mr. Robert Adams after leaving their home for fear of their lives. Ennis' wife was a midwife for the wife of Adams and was liked and respected by Adams. Adams seemed to treat Ennis and his wife fairly by loaning them land and paying them well, but one day Adams became irate and violent toward Ennis and his wife. He began cursing at the wife and, once Ennis stepped in, the matter turned physical. Adams grabbed Ennis by the hair and began to beat him over the head. The fight almost took a deadly turn when Adams pulled a knife on Ennis. Fortunately, there were two men standing by who held Adams back. Adams gave up the fight but told Ennis that if he were to report him, he would kill him.

Ennis, who was sixty-two years old, stated that he had never been so afraid for his life as he was during the Reconstruction of the South. “I was a slave until freed by the

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<sup>26</sup> Rev. Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with “Statements” of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of my Expulsion from Andersonville, GA., by the Ku-Klux Klan. Washington, 1870.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

war, but I never received such treatment during all my life as a slave.”<sup>28</sup> Ennis stated that the state of the South and the treatment of the freedmen had only declined since the end of slavery.

I know that the colored people are more brutally treated now than they were in slavery times. A great many more are beaten, wounded and killed now than then. I know a great many cases where they have been beaten to death with clubs, killed with knives and dirks, shot and hung. We have no protection at all from the laws of Georgia. We had rather die than go back into slavery, but we are worse treated than we ever were before.<sup>29</sup>

When these accounts in Pierson’s letter were released to the public, newspapers in Georgia were quick to deny and discredit the claims, calling them “stereotyped lies.”<sup>30</sup> Newspapers claimed that there were no problems with the treatment of freedmen and that all Georgia laws would protect the freedmen.

Georgia has passed all necessary laws for the protection of the negro in his rights of person and property, placing him on exactly the same footing with her white citizens in this regard. If these laws be executed, there will be no use for a Bureau or other Federal authority to look after the welfare of the negro, and that they will be in the firm determination of her people.<sup>31</sup>

The Freedmen’s Bureau was in place to protect the freedmen and give them justice. This newspaper article was suggesting that there was no need for the Bureau because everything was taken care of but, as proven by other documents, things were not taken care of and freedmen suffered greatly in the South.

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<sup>28</sup> Rev. Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with “Statements” of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of my Expulsion from Andersonville, GA., by the Ku-Klux Klan. Washington, 1870.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *Georgia weekly telegraph and Georgia journal & messenger*, Macon, Georgia. April 12, 1870.

<sup>31</sup> *Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, Macon, Georgia. April 23, 1866.

Another account that Pierson discussed was that of Floyd Snelson. He was “foreman of the hands employed by the Government in the National Cemetery, Andersonville, Georgia.”<sup>32</sup> Snelson, and several other freedmen living and working at the national cemetery in Andersonville were told that they must leave their homes and their jobs after their work had been suspended. Mr. B.B. Dikes claimed the land that the national cemetery was on and told the freedmen that they had four days to leave their homes before he would get the Sheriff involved.

The freedmen were expected to abandon the houses that many of them had built with no compensation. Because of the difficulty many faced in finding new living arrangements, several freedmen offered to pay Dikes rent for their homes and offered part of their crop. Dikes refused this offer and, after the four days had passed, Dikes and a group of up to 30 white men came armed and ready to make sure the freedmen vacated the premises.

[The men] went to the houses of all these people, (except a very few who had vacated their premises,) and threw all their furniture, and provisions of every kind, out of doors. They then nailed up the doors of all their cabins, on the inside, and punched off a part of the roofs, and got out in this way. By about two p.m. all these people, with their furniture, bedding, provisions, and everything that they possessed, were turned out of doors<sup>33</sup>

The homes of the freedmen were destroyed, and their possessions were ruined. Many women and children had to sleep outdoors for up to a week until the men could find shelter. After all of these events, no man involved in the destruction of these homes was

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<sup>32</sup> Rev. Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with “Statements” of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of my Expulsion from Andersonville, GA., by the Ku-Klux Klan. Washington, 1870.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



arrested or punished and none of the freedmen received any form of compensation for the loss of their livelihoods.

Georgia newspapers had a deluded idea that the freedmen were taken care of and that they experienced the same justice and fairness as their white neighbors. The *Federal Union* stated, “Georgia has determined to do full and exact justice to the negro in all his legal rights.”<sup>34</sup> While this sounds good, the reality was that the freedmen were treated unfairly and could not turn to anyone in the state for justice besides the Freedmen’s Bureau. Actions speak louder than words and the actions against the freedmen in Georgia showed the falsity behind the claims that the newspapers made about justice.

The accounts of George Smith and Richard Reese exposed the terror and violence of the Ku Klux Klan. Smith, a Radical voting for Grant, described the Klan members riding their horses at night and going to the homes of men they knew supported Grant. No Radical was safe from the Ku Klux Klan as the election of Grant approached.

Nearly all the Radicals in the neighborhood lay in the woods every night for two weeks before election. The Kuklux would go to the houses of all that belonged to the Grant club, call them to the door, throw a blanket over them and carry them off and whip them.<sup>35</sup>

The violence that radicals experienced at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan prevented many of them from wanting to vote. Those who did go out to vote had to show their tickets and were turned away once it was discovered that they were voting for Grant.

Some of the newspapers in Georgia were openly run by members of the Ku Klux Klan. The La Grange Reporter proudly displayed its Klan roots in an article directed at an

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<sup>34</sup> *Federal union*, Milledgeville, Georgia. May 29, 1866.

<sup>35</sup> Rev. Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with “Statements” of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of my Expulsion from Andersonville, GA., by the Ku-Klux Klan. Washington, 1870.

Atlanta newspaper that disagreed with the Klan. “Now, we have this to say to the [Atlanta] *Era* that we are not ashamed of being a Ku-klux.”<sup>36</sup> The newspaper described the members of the Klan as “peaceable, law-abiding citizens, determined to defend their homes and firesides.”<sup>37</sup> This was a stark contrast to Smith’s description of the Ku Klux Klan in Pierson’s letter. According to Smith, and many others, the Ku Klux Klan was made up of violent individuals who terrorized those with opposing political views.

The La Grange Reporter made the Ku Klux Klan appear as an organization that strived for peace and order.

We would threaten no man; we would avert everything that would have a tendency to disturb the peace and good order: indeed, we would do all an honorable people could do to prevent trouble in our midst.<sup>38</sup>

The newspaper painted the Ku Klux Klan as a group of social heroes who did all in their power to keep Georgia the way that they wanted it to be. However, when the Klan insisted that they “prevent trouble,”<sup>39</sup> the trouble that they had in mind was that of an opposing opinion. Instead of preventing trouble against the lives of freedmen or the lives of Radicals, they prevented trouble against themselves by harassing those who had opposing views. The Ku Klux Klan did not bring peace to Georgia, they brought terror.

By gathering these accounts and sending them off to Washington D.C. where they would be printed and spread throughout the United States, Pierson showed what life was like for freedmen in the South. He gave a voice to freedmen who otherwise would have had no justice in the horrific crimes committed against them. With such a damning report

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<sup>36</sup> *The La Grange Reporter*, La Grange, Georgia. April 15, 1870.

<sup>37</sup> Rev. Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with “Statements” of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of my Expulsion from Andersonville, GA., by the Ku-Klux Klan. Washington, 1870.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

on the state of Georgia, Pierson inevitably received threats from both the newspapers and the Ku Klux Klan.

Now we have this to say to the old fanatic, hired... to get up a sensation detrimental to this State and to the people thereof, that we do not accept his compliments any more than we would the compliments of any other subsidized clerical humbug, who has been roaming over the South for the purpose of slandering the people. We believe his accounts to be tissue of piously written Radical lies<sup>40</sup>

Pierson was also driven out of Andersonville, Georgia by the Ku Klux Klan due to his remarks in his letter.

Therefore all we have to say is, that the Ku-Klux-Klan, at Andersonville, failed to perform their duty in allowing such an old hypocritical devil to escape. They ought to have 'tarred and feathered' old Pierson; and sent him adrift 'a wiser and better man.' A few such examples would soon rid this section of the glorious Union of these political religionists, and then we should have peace and quiet.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *The Rome Weekly Courier*, Rome, Georgia. April 15, 1870.

<sup>41</sup> *The La Grange reporter*, La Grange, Georgia. April 08, 1870.

## Conclusion

The Freedmen's Bureau faced numerous challenges upon entering the South following the end of the Civil War. In a hostile environment, the bureau was expected to help freedmen while maintaining peace with the southern whites. Newspapers around Georgia quickly began to print stories on the Freedmen's Bureau and point out any failures or flaws the bureau had. The goal of the newspapers was to convince the people of the South that the Freedmen's Bureau was unneeded and unwanted.

In one of many attempts to run the Freedmen's Bureau out of the South, newspapers printed stories of how there were no problems existing for the bureau to fix. Georgia, according to the newspapers, already had laws in place to help and protect the freedmen and their rights. There was no need for the bureau when the people of Georgia were already taking care of the freedmen. Despite these claims by the newspapers, there was evidence pointing to the fact that the freedmen were not being protected or treated fairly in Georgia. In fact, according to several documents and statements by freedmen, the suffering that they experienced following the end of the war was tremendous.

The Freedmen's Bureau was in place to provide protection to the freedmen that they otherwise would not have received. This protection was both physical and political. Following the end of the Civil War, it was difficult for the freedmen to find work or land. Many southern whites refused to sale land to the freedmen or would try to trick them out of payments for their work. The bureau was in place to create labor contracts between the freedmen and their neighbors to ensure that the freedmen were able to fairly buy land or work at a reasonable wage. When the contracts were not being fulfilled by one end of the party, the bureau would step into action and try to solve the problem in a fair manner.

Georgia newspapers claimed that the Freedmen's Bureau was unneeded because the laws created in Georgia protected the freedmen when they would create labor contracts and buy land. Despite these laws being in place, there were still cases of the freedmen being treated unfairly by the local people. The freedmen were threatened by their white neighbors and felt they could not seek justice from the political system in Georgia. The Freedmen's Bureau was there as a middleman to make sure that the freedmen got the justice they deserved from the state.

The Freedmen's Bureau also served as a source of education for the freedmen. Many freedmen set up schools following the end of the Civil War and the bureau assisted them in providing funds and resources for existing schools and creating even more schools for the freedmen. These schools taught the freedmen reading, writing, and arithmetic. These tools were essential for the freedmen to learn in order for them to gain independence and be able to read contracts or add up their wages in order to ensure they were paid fairly. Although newspapers tried to belittle the accomplishments of these schools, the reality was that freedmen were gaining an education through these schools and improving their lives.

One of the most brutal challenges that the freedmen faced was the violence they experienced at the hands of their white neighbors. There was a war of races happening in the south that almost all newspapers in Georgia denied. They claimed that there were no tensions between races in Georgia and the only problems were caused by the Freedmen's Bureau. As can be seen in primary documents and testimonies by several freedmen, there was unspeakable violence against freedmen in the South. Official death and murder records alone show the massive number of freedmen that died at the hands of southern

whites. To make matters even worse, there were hardly any convictions that came out of these killings. Most of these murderers would be acquitted or not even arrested in the first place.

The Freedmen's Bureau could not physically step in to stop the violence, but they could be a source of just for the freedmen. If a local court did not listen to a complaint against the violence, the Freedmen's Bureau would step in and attempt to seek justice for the freedmen. There were also federal troops located throughout Georgia to protect the freedmen. While newspapers in Georgia said that these troops were more trouble than they were help, the freedmen understood that without the troops, their lives would be in serious danger.

Overall, the newspapers in Georgia, official bureau reports, and firsthand accounts from freedmen show a very different narrative of what life was like for the freedmen during Reconstruction. The goal of the newspapers was to rid the state of the Freedmen's Bureau and they did so by using their power of press to spread stories about the failures and flaws of the bureau. While some stories may have had some truth behind them, the newspapers did not highlight the good that was coming to the freedmen from the bureau. The newspapers also failed to bring to light the violence and horrors that the freedmen were facing at the hands of their neighbors. With the power of press comes the influence over the minds of its readers. If newspapers had a different perspective on the Freedmen's Bureau and the state of the South following the Civil War, events and feelings from the public may have looked a little different.

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