

Unfinished Work: The Freedmen's Bureau's Hard-Fought But Incomplete Accomplishments

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Review

UNFINISHED WORK

The Freedmen's Bureau's hard-fought but incomplete accomplishments

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Cimbala, Paul A. and Miller, Randall M. *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*. Fordham University Press, ISBN 823219348

From July to October 1865, Union Major General Carl Schurz toured the South from Charleston to New Orleans. He inspected a region defeated in war and living amidst appalling physical destruction. Everywhere, he observed a breakdown in law and order and a population close to chaos.

Amongst the newly freed, Schurz saw fear, want, and a people whose primary help had to come from the Union forces. Amongst the white population, he noted resentment of the Union army, distaste for the freed people, little loyalty to the United States, and a universal belief that the newly freed would work only under compulsion. While whites grudgingly agreed that the individual black people no longer belonged to individual white people, they believed that black people, in general, still belonged to white people, in general.

In this environment the Freedmen's Bureau was expected to educate the newly freed, find them land (and often, work), guarantee their suffrage, establish them in a secure civil status as free persons in a reconstructed society, and do all these things to the satisfaction of both races and both regions in five years.

Paul Cimbala and Randall Miller have collected 13 essays in a volume designed to reevaluate the activities of the Bureau, its relative success and failure, its role in Reconstruction, and the social and political context in which it worked. An afterword by James McPherson provides a general reflection upon the Freedmen's Bureau, serving as a counterpoint to essays dealing with more specific aspects of its work.

The articles range widely over political and social issues. Two of them deal with the role of President Johnson and General Grant in Bureau affairs, while another examines the role of the Freedmen's Bureau in education in post-emancipation Maryland, which was a Northern state for purposes of war and a Southern state for purposes of slavery. The rest of the contributions cover the South from Virginia to the western frontier of slavery in Texas and Arkansas. Based solidly upon archival research, the essays examine both the day-to-day work of the Bureau and the ideals that animated it. Collectively, they describe the Freedmen's Bureau as a local agency and a national institution, as both an arm of evangelical Protestant idealism and social casework in the trenches.

Generally the articles agree on the main problems the Freedmen's Bureau faced. Some were internal, particularly insufficient funding and an inadequate organizational framework. Other problems involved constant presidential hostility and the often-uncertain relationships with the army and civil authorities. Most, however, stemmed from the unrelenting hostility of Southern whites to the Bureau's efforts at education and free citizenship and the white population's equally persistent attempt to have the new system of free labor resemble, as closely as possible, the old system of slavery.

Common problems produced common responses by the Freedmen's Bureau, with due allowance for variations in local conditions throughout the South. Everywhere in the 11 defeated states the newly freed congregated around Union army garrisons or in towns, and they needed to be fed, clothed, and housed. The Johnson administration had no intention of becoming a welfare agency, so the Freedmen's Bureau was instructed to get the freed people off Union rations, out of town, and back to work on the plantations. President Johnson pardoned most Confederate leaders, which allowed them to retain or reclaim their pre-War land holdings, and thus little fertile land was available for apportionment to freed people under the legendary 40 acres and a mule program.

So the Freedmen's Bureau became primarily an agency of provision, of resettlement, and of policing labor contracts to prevent the imposition of virtual slavery upon the newly freed. Needs of the moment overcame longer range plans for education and full political citizenship. The Freedmen's Bureau, of necessity, functioned as a paternalistic agency, more involved in giving care than in preparing people to care for themselves, and operating as an advocate and mediator for the weak.

This is an excellent book, one that every historian interested in Reconstruction should consult. It is also an important book, not merely because it addresses an important topic, but because it deals with that topic in a thoughtful and judicious manner. Buttressed by substantial research, the contributors place the Freedmen's Bureau in its mixed context of great hope and promise amidst equally great destruction and resentment. They present a balanced assessment of ideals and results, concisely summed up by James McPherson in his afterword: "If the result fell short of entire success, the alternative might well have been total failure."

James D. Hardy, Jr., is associate dean of the Honors College at Louisiana State University and has published several books on history and literature.