

Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau

Dale Kretz

California Nurses Association, kretzdr@gmail.com

Jeffery Hardin Hobson

jhobso8@lsu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Kretz, Dale and Hobson, Jeffery Hardin (2023) "Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.1.04

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss1/4>

Interview

Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau

Kretz, Dale

Winter 2023

Interview by Jeffery Hardin Hobson

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Hello fellow Civil War enthusiasts! The *Civil War Book Review* is pleased to be joined by Dr. Dale Kretz, author of *Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau*, published by UNC Press in 2022. Dr. Kretz, thank you for joining us today!

Dale Kretz (DK): Thank you for having me.

CWBR: I'd like to start off by asking you broadly, or generally, how did you come to study this topic?

DK: I came to this topic with a general interest in African American history and in particular the Civil War era. And my initial approach was to try and understand the ways in which enslaved and then formerly enslaved men and women managed their own healthcare from slavery to freedom, with the Civil War in between, of course. And so, I had completed my work on the antebellum portion of my study, this was my dissertation. And then I was looking for documents which would better illuminate the conditions of war and freedom.

And so, I came upon the pension files of US Colored Troops (USCT) hoping that they would tell me more about those health conditions, particularly in the days of slavery. And I noticed in case after case that formerly enslaved men applying for a disability pension didn't talk much about their experiences of health deprivation in slavery. They spoke a great deal about it in the war and its aftermath, but not in the days of slavery itself. And so, I found that to be curious,

and I wanted to know why I saw this approach to these depositions and affidavits in their pension applications time and again. And so that really led me to investigating more closely the pension process itself.

And so, from there, I sort of reoriented my study to focus on that very relationship between formerly enslaved people and the federal government—particularly the administrative state, via the Pension Bureau, and later the Freedmen’s Bureau and another agency that I came across in my research, the Freedmen’s Branch. So, from those origins, and sort of like a health-centered study, it transformed into a project that really examines a relationship, which people regard as citizenship—how individual citizens relate to the federal government and what that political process looks like.

CWBR: It’s a very interesting book, I think a very important one, and it’s a very dense book, and I mean that in a very good way—every paragraph feels important, and every paragraph enlightens this subject in some way—so it was, it was a lot of fun to read. Well written and, like I said, I think important.

You touched on some of the most important themes in the book that I’d like to tighten up on. It seems to me that this is a book that focuses, like you said, on concepts of citizenship, rights, how the American people, but especially African Americans, contributed to the growth of the federal administrative and welfare state. It’s kind of part of a historiography that’s growing on that relationship from this idea of the growth of the federal government from the bottom up instead of from the top down and inside out. But you also talk about racist and reactionary elements against movements to grow the welfare state, especially when it comes to African Americans’ attempts to do so. And you cover a broad swath of time you go from the Civil War years into the Populist era, and you even touch on the New Deal in your conclusion.

I want to ask you first about how African Americans developed their concepts of citizenship in relationship to the state and their status as both, as formerly enslaved people, but also as veterans or descendants or veterans’ relatives—how do they develop these ideas of citizenship, and what did their concept of citizenship look like?

DK: Those are very important questions. They developed their concepts of citizenship not only when the federal soldiers intervened in the South during the Civil War. I mean, they were

thinking about what freedom would look like, what a post-slavery republic would feel like since the earliest days of slavery. Their conceptions of citizenship really got a jumpstart, though, during the Civil War when there was an actual flesh-and-blood federal presence in the South. So they began to through their interactions with the US Army and its ancillary agencies, they began to develop a conception of administrative politics and citizenship that time and again, has several key components. So many of these formerly enslaved men and women alike believed that the federal government ought to be protective of them, it should be responsive to their needs, it shouldn't unduly burden them in their quests for economic security or the general improvement of their lives, and it should allow them to express collective demands, right. So rather than as individuals operating on a sort of one-to-one relationship with powerful state actors, they had group claims to levers, they had group wrongs to redress. And so all of these were very integral components of citizenship.

And, most generally, I think that it is about an actual relationship with a person, whether it be a Federal soldier or an official of the Freedmen's Bureau—an actual person on the ground rather than a sort of impersonal distant and literally faceless agency hundreds of miles away in Washington DC. They had a much more direct and forthright understanding of citizenship and power. And, again, understanding the experiences that they had in slavery leads us to appreciate that they understood power in personal terms: *'Who is actually there to enforce my rights, to make my rights feel meaningful, to hold up their end of this reciprocal bargain?'* Other historians, Chandra Manning especially, have defined freedpeoples' conceptions of citizenship as a mutually beneficial alliance with federal officials, and that's really a key component of my argument as well, and I expand on that in this book by focusing on these claims they made in the earliest days in the war and how those claims and the processes by which they lodge these claims really transforms from 1865 to the late 1890s, or even the 1930s—how that changes and how their conception of the federal government and their place in the emerging liberal order transforms.

CWBR: And one of the things you point out is this intimate relationship that they try and foster with the federal government. This is made all the more difficult by kind of the vicissitudes of bureaucracy, the continued limitation or shrinkage of the government's relationship with them. But one of the things I found interesting that you show is their attempts to maintain that

relationship despite the government's barriers that they put in place before them and to maintain kind of that personal aspect that you're talking about—they make personal appeals based on their own experiences, they try and get to know people, they and work with people within the government or to insert people that their familiar with within different bureaucracies, especially later on. How did that changing government approach to freedpeople and their descendants, how did that change over the course of the late-nineteenth century from the Civil War through the Populist era. And then, specifically, you kind of hinted at this, but did they treat freedpeople as a class or was it much more of an individualistic approach?

DK: That process of transformation was incredibly vital to the story, but for the freedpeople themselves, it was devastating. So we see this transformation most initially with the demobilization of the US Army and the closing of the Freedmen's Bureau. Both of which didn't just happen in 1872, it was forecasted as early as 1867. And freedpeople saw the writing on the wall, they saw that their agents that they had built these close intimate relationships with for months, sometimes years, they learned that they would be going away, that there would be fewer outposts of the Freedmen's Bureau. They would have to travel a farther distance, sometimes an impossible distance in order to find somebody that could help them with their issues or help facilitate their claims. And, so, the demobilization, the shrinkage of the Freedmen's Bureau really set this process in motion.

And the agency that the US government created after the closing of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1872, had an even smaller footprint, and even less of a flesh-and-blood presence in the South. And I'm talking about the Freedmen's Branch which existed from 1872 to 1879 and was solely created to help facilitate the bounty claims of formerly enslaved soldiers and their heirs. So, there wasn't a kind of presence in the post-slave South that even the Freedmen's Bureau had—understaffed as it was, it was still much greater in magnitude than the Freedmen's Branch. There were only at any point, about thirteen different outposts, maybe thirty individuals across the South that staffed the Freedmen's Branch. So, freedpeople had to learn how to improvise, they had to learn how to solicit private claims agents, attorneys—often times Black attorneys who were often more sensitive and sympathetic to their issues—to help facilitate their claims for federal military benefits. And, so, this is also another key feature of the liberal state, which we have today as well, that is the growth of, like, a renter class, like a third-party apparatus which

exists to basically do functions that the federal government could do to itself. It used to have agents that would actually help process these claims. After the closing of the Freedmen's Bureau for the claims of USCT and their heirs, this fell largely upon the claimants themselves. And it essentially functioned as a sort of bureaucratic literacy test in an age of developing restrictions on voting.

And, so, again, they had to work, not just individually, but collectively to find the proper claims agents to be able to lodge their claims. And this is also true of the Pension Bureau which functioned similarly to the Freedmen's Branch, in that there weren't pension agents employed by the federal government that would go around and help people with their claims. Freedpeople had to figure it out on their own. And they didn't do so individually. They worked with each other, they worked with former comrades, they worked with families who were receiving claims, they worked with entire neighborhoods. And this is another key component of Black administrative politics during this period. Even individual claims were thought of and processed and lodged in collective ways despite the sort of atomizing impulse and structure of these claims processes themselves.

CWBR: You point out that they worked collectively to guarantee, or at least assure in some way, the rights they believed were due them from the federal government. And part of that was kind of this accretive knowledge that they gained over the process and shared with each other—you talk about this, “strategic postures,” is the way that you phrase it. What are some of those methods that they used to petition for their rights?

DK: So, I mean, there's a lot of tactics that they developed on the ground. And you can see it sort of ebb and flow if you look at the pension claims of certain companies of men who show up in each other's pension applications as witnesses or as individuals who fill out depositions or affidavits on behalf of the actual claimant. So there's a whole, like, latticework that you can see of former comrades and their heirs who tend to adopt the same kind of, as I say, strategic posture, in order to make their claims successful. Because they had to make sure that their applications, and hence their injuries and ailments and illnesses, fit within the proper pensionable strictures that were set up, and they had to learn this over time. So one of the most important ones which was in effect from 1862 to 1890 and beyond, but really the first pension system that was set up was called a General Law Pension system. It only pensioned ailments that

were incurred in the service; you had to have a service origin for your disability. And most Black soldiers experienced far more camp-related diseases than combat related injuries, so less bullet wounds and more rheumatism. In fact, rheumatism was the most commonly cited ailment of any Union soldier, but particularly among Black soldiers. And so how do you pinpoint an exact service-related origin for your rheumatism, your arthritis? You had to talk about exposure to the elements. You had to talk about hard working conditions. And these were things that freedpeople undoubtedly had experienced, not just during the war, but as enslaved people. So, drawing that strict line between the experiences of slavery and the experiences of war was crucial for many of these claimants. Many of them learned to either silence or downplay their stories of suffering during slavery in order to amplify their wartime hardships. And so we see them learning from each other to be able to make these claims. And it wasn't without its problems. They had to toe a very dangerous line that was being developed culturally at the time of slavery as a beneficent institution, and the abolition war as a terrible mistake. In these claims, freedpeople had to, more or less, adopt that very racist narrative in order to lodge their claims, in order to make them heard by the federal government, to gain legitimacy and state recognition, and for compensation for their suffering. Without actually admitting it, they had to play the game, and they were successful at doing so.

CWBR: That's a really perverse element of this story, is how they had to downplay the hardships that they experienced in slavery in order to gain some kind of just compensation from the government over a war to end slavery. And like you say, this kind of plays into this late-nineteenth century concept of, well, the Lost Cause, but also '*Was this a worthy war?*' And then, '*How do we compensate people, both as fighters but also as people who suffered from the institution of slavery?*' But then they ignore the hardships of slavery when it comes to compensating them.

One of the elements that I found most interesting, or at least important, was just that they never gave up. , they flooded these offices with petitions they were very persistent in their claims. And you argue that just by the sheer amount of claims that they made was one of the factors behind the growth of the welfare or administrative state. How did politicians and bureaucrats—because the bureaucrats were as important in making these rules and regulations as politicians were, if not more so—how did they respond to freedpeoples' petitions? I'm thinking

specifically of their accusations of fraud within the system. How did that play into the dynamic and did white people face the same suspicions of fraud that freedpeople did?

DK: One of the things that this book really tries to do, as you pointed out, was tie together two major bodies of historical literature on the subject. So, emancipation, one huge literature in and of itself, and state building, which was an older, but also more interdisciplinary sort of focus on how the Yankee leviathan came to be, and how it shaped the growth of the American nation-state after the Civil War. What this project does, is it shows that these two things are intimately related, that the formerly enslaved in the post-slave South were critical actors in the building of the federal administrative state. Acknowledging this requires also acknowledging the federal government, even when it demobilized *en masse* from the South, it was not entirely gone, that there was still an administrative apparatus that we might have forgotten about, but freedpeople certainly did not. They engaged it for many years, and their engagement signals not only their acknowledgement that it's an important avenue to lodge their claims, but also it was one of the few remaining avenues to power during Reconstruction. The age of disenfranchisement and dispossession, so it really heightened the stakes of their engagement with the federal administrative state.

Administrators in the South and administrators in the North all acknowledged that the claims arising from the former slave states were by far the most difficult. So formerly enslaved men and women, as I argue in this book, were by and large undocumented when they came into freedom—they were undocumented citizens. And to my knowledge, no one has really appreciated them as such. But understanding them as being undocumented is incredibly important to understanding how they tried to engage the federal state in order to gain their citizenship rights. We see them being undocumented, and we can better appreciate that citizenship rights on paper were made inaccessible to them because they had to prove their identities in a very literal way. They didn't have records outside of what their enslavers decided to write down in the big family Bibles. So, how could they identify themselves? How could they create a documentary identity? These are all things they really had to grapple with. And they're hallmarks of a modern administrative state that's able to actually have and maintain a relationship—to know its citizens on a very intimate basis, and a very standardized way.

So, of course issues of documentation among the undocumented evokes issues of fraud. And fraud is all over this story. It's the primary fear among most congresspeople when it comes to bounties and pensions for the formerly enslaved. Now, sometimes they would say that they're worried about the Black claimants being frauded by sharpers, or white agents in the South who basically want to steal their claims, steal their money, rob them of their hard-earned pennies, was a common phrase.

But more often than not, bureaucrats and politicians alike were concerned that Black [missing]. They're robbing the federal treasury, they were exploiting the situation, and their own undocumented-ness to their own material ends. So they were presented unworthy claims, they were impersonating each other, they were doing all sorts of fraudulent activities in order to gain an \$8-a-month pension, or a one-time bounty payment of \$150. So fraud is really weaponized during this period, especially when it comes to the claims of Black soldiers and widows in the South. Now, it's not to say that white onlookers, especially Democrats, even in the North, portrayed the Pension Bureau as a massive engine of graft and corruption. It was a 'Republican institution' that funded a 'Republican war.' And very few white southerners were able to claim these rights comparatively few Democrats in the North were able to claim it. It was a holdout from the War of the Rebellion, that white Democratic politicians would rather abolish entirely, especially after the 1880s when the expansion of the Pension Bureau exceeds all expectations. So there is just a general sense that this massive and precocious experiment in social welfare, the Pension Bureau, had its roots in fraud, and it was perpetuating fraud, it was encouraging pauperism and breeding socialists. That was another primary accusation and criticism of the Pension Bureau. But, again, nowhere was this criticism more barbed and more ubiquitous than in the post-slave South among Black claimants. And the anti-fraud measures that the Pension Bureau adopts, I think, outlast the Pension Bureau itself and left a powerful imprint on the social welfare state—the limited welfare state that America has today. And that's a straight line between 1865 and 1960 and the present day I would argue.

CWBR: Right. And you point out that racism wasn't the only factor that played into this. But there was also Americans' obsession with individualism and anti-statism that played into this. And, like you said, that's the through-line from the Freedmen's Bureau to today.

Now, when Black people petitioned for their rights following the Civil War, they tried to do so as a class and they often succeeded in doing so. But at the same time, the Black population was made up of different social classes of its own. And different people within the Black population faced different obstacles when it came to petitioning the government. And during that process for all of them, slavery wasn't just in the background, it was actually in the foreground of a lot of that process. Concepts of dependency and slavery were really important. And concepts of the family and slavery were really important. So how did concepts of dependency, and the family unit, and those entities' relationships to the institution of slavery complicate the entire process?

DK: It complicated immeasurably. The issue of the legality of a slave marriage, which was functionally a social fact but legally a fiction. You now, enslaved people could not be married. So what becomes of the claims of widows whose formerly enslaved husbands died in service, and they never could officially marry each other or consummate the legality of their marriage, quote-unquote, 'Under the Flag'? What becomes of their offspring in the days of slavery? These were important questions which really threw a giant bucket of cold water on the claims of formerly enslaved men and women. It invited incredible scrutiny, and a sort of perverse public exploration of the sexual histories of enslaved people. And, you had very loud voices in the nation at the time complaining that these Black families weren't actually bona fide families, and we shouldn't be paying for the claims of widows who weren't actually widows, right, they're just friends or partners, or whatever. They couldn't actually receive the benefits that were properly accorded to white widows in the North who had legal certificates of marriage with their deceased spouses.

And so proving the legitimacy and forcing the state to acknowledge in the moment and retroactively the authenticity of Black marriage and the Black family itself became critical. It was in fact a major victory of thousands of formerly enslaved families. The federal government was not willing, on its own, to grant that kind of liberality to Black claimants. They fought for it themselves. And this was a fight that began as soon as federal officials stepped foot in the South—convincing US Army soldiers and officers of the legitimacy of their unions. And after the fact, Freedmen's Bureau officials, Freedmen's Branch officials, and Pension Bureau officials were all made to understand the history of slavery and what that does to intimate relationships. And it was always a challenge, always an uphill battle, but thousands-and-thousands of Black

women as widows, and as mothers, and as daughters were able to successfully claim these rights. But the scrutiny that was levelled at their claims was intense, and unique to their claims as a class.

CWBR: Right. And, kind of within that, I'm thinking also about how concepts of property ownership were affected by northerners' presuppositions of slavery as an institution. , when freedpeople petitioned for compensation for damaged or stolen property during the Civil War, they faced extra scrutiny because northerners didn't understand that freedpeople, or sorry, enslaved people could possess things, that they did have possessions, that they did have property, and that those property rights were, at least to some degree, acknowledged by people that enslaved them.

What's really interesting, and again—I've used the word perverse once, I'll use it again here because it seems appropriate—is how again, slavery is centered in this process in that they're often reliant on former enslavers to validate the claims that they make both in health, property, and marriage relationships. So could you talk a little bit about how former enslavers participated in this process?

DK: I do think that's one of the more perverse aspects of this story, and that's definitely the right word to use here. It goes back to the undocumented nature of the claims of freedpeople. It goes back to the fraud and the general suspicion arrayed against their claims. And how, in fact, do you properly verify that this Black claimant is who she says she is without the right preexisting documentation? Time and again, Freedmen's Bureau officials, Freedmen's Branch officials, and Pension Bureau officials would turn to their former enslavers. White men in the community of stature who had once enslaved these claimants, they could be the ones that could vouch for their identity and authenticity. And, so, this must have been a painful and insulting challenge for freedpeople, men and women alike, to only have their claims verified by bringing in their former captors to, indeed, testify that they were in fact married, that the Black soldier was not injured in the days of slavery, but only injured during the war itself, that their union and their children are in fact legitimate, that they were unofficially married by the enslaver on the enslavers' plantation, on such and such a date.

We really see former enslavers, former Rebels as well, midwife the claims of Black southerners for many decades after the war. And that was one of the major ironies here. So, the very individuals who rebelled against the federal government, just years later—not five years later—were sitting before federal officials explaining to them why their former enslaved people deserved benefits from the federal government. They had their own reasons for serving in this role. They could have one last opportunity to portray themselves as beneficent overlords or *pater familias*. They had an opportunity to relieve themselves of a financial burden if these former enslaved peoples were their current employees. They had all sorts of reasons, all of their own, for intervening in these claims.

And for the formerly enslaved claimants, they had reasons of their own for inviting, sometimes, these former enslavers to intervene on their behalf. But it must have been a very difficult decision. And one that is really all over the historical record. And like we've been saying, it's one of the more ironic and distasteful aspects of this, that their legitimacy could only be conferred by this very contemptible intermediary.

CWBR: Well, and, also, I mean, you said this, it would have to be a traumatic experience. I mean, you would be forced to relive those years of involuntary servitude and to again be dependent on this person that had kept you from enjoying the freedoms that you deserved, just so that you could have a successful life outside of the institution of slavery. Perversely ironic indeed.

Although some enslavers did help in this process, many white southerners and white people in general did push back against this. As we said earlier, part of their motivation was anti-statism, but obviously part of their motivation was racism. But there were also other motivations that white southerners had for challenging the Freedmen's Bureau and later institutions and bureaus to help freedpeople transition to freedom. What were some of those motivations that white people had to kind of prevent these bureaus from effectively doing their job?

DK: Yeah, so, I mean, the white southern and white American reaction to these federal welfare agencies was not monolithic. It was complicated and varied a great deal, not just by region but within regions, it varied by individuals. And a number of white actors emerged really important and even heroic figures at the time. One of my favorite figures is a colonel by the

name of Thomas Boles, who was a southerner, he was from Arkansas, and he actually fought for the Union during the Civil War—he led a cavalry regiment. And after the war, he became a congressman, but also a claims agent for Black southerners, primarily. And one of his hallmark actions during the term in congress that he enjoyed was to equalize bounty payments between formerly enslaved soldiers and every other Union soldier. So, before the equalization measure that was sponsored and promoted by Thomas Boles, enslaved people did not get the full bounty that were accorded to even their Black counterparts who were listed as free on their regimental rolls. So, Boles and other white onlookers who helped facilitate the claims of formerly enslaved men and women, they had motivations which were rooted in justice, rooted in abolitionist sensibilities, rooted in a sense of fairness, and equality. And they were dogged allies for freedpeople. And freedpeople recognized them as such. Bureaucrats, I mean there's a number of bureaucratic figures and leaders throughout the story as well, some of whom are better than others. But if we're talking about commissioners of the Pension Bureau, I mean the ones that acknowledged the plight of the Black claimants in the South, they generally received better recognition in the Black press. The ones who expanded the generosity of the Pension Bureau were also received very well.

Then again, there's a lot of figures probably much more figures, in this study who were trying to constrict in various ways the growth of the federal administrative state, of the capacity of its bureaucracies, especially the Pension Bureau, to actually do its job. And they did so in ways that were obvious, but also ways that were subtle. So again, fraud protection was one way that seemingly well-meaning bureaucrats who insisted on fairness and equality could actually work to stymie the claims of Black men and women applying for pensions or bounties. So, there was a cover that they were given, right. They were given cover by claims to liberality and statutory equality under the law believing that no class of citizen, even those who are so recently enslaved, should be entitled to special treatment. And this is one of the dark sides of equality during the Age of Emancipation, this refusal to acknowledge the history of slavery. And this insistence against all evidence that the formerly enslaved are now on equal footing and they should be left to fend for themselves in ways that white people are. That's a fiction that was increasingly popular, even among former allies in the second half of the nineteenth century.

CWBR: I think it's a concept that, unfortunately, persists to this day. I was also thinking about white southerners who wanted to keep Black people dependent on them. That they wanted to maintain an easily exploitable population, and therefore, they pushed back against the Freedmen's Bureau and its descendants. But Black people continued to push for their rights, including through the Populist era, like you show, to the point of calling for what today we think of as reparations, for an entire population of people. How did that transition happen over the course your narrative? How did they arrive at that point? I would say it's kind of a constant that's there, but it kind of reemerges in a more coalesced idea and theory by the 1890s. How did that happen?

DK: Yeah, so, I would argue that it is indeed, as you said, a constant. But it does change as well. So, immediately upon federal intervention in the South, the primary mode of redress that formerly enslaved people sought was land nationalization and redistribution. They didn't call it reparations necessarily, but that was their understanding of what a just repayment of their years of servitude would look like. Owning the land that they had worked sometimes for generations. And that sort of massive redistribution of land would ensure Black economic security via land ownership. So that was the primary push. We see it as well in this book.

But by the end of the nineteenth century, we see a different conception of reparations emerge, and one that's rooted in what is seen as being politically possible. And again, they didn't necessarily call it reparations, even in the late part of the nineteenth century, they called it pensions, right. They wanted pensions for the ex-slaves by virtue of their servitude. Now, there are plenty of formerly enslaved men and women who were already receiving pensions, but it was not explicitly by virtue of having been enslaved. In fact, it was in spite of them having been enslaved and by virtue of their service, or the service of their spouses in the war itself. And so, they were receiving pensions, but there were more and more voices throughout the latter-half of the nineteenth century, especially in the Populist era—1880s, 1890s. They're calling for a general program for pensions for formerly enslaved people. And it was modeled after the Pension Bureau itself, but the only factor was age. They weren't going to means test anyone's physical ability; it was simply based on their age. So you would get a certain lump sum payment at the beginning if you met a certain age threshold; I think the first threshold was fifty years, which every formerly enslaved person would have hit. You're given a lump sum payment, and

then monthly installment, monthly stipend pensions for the remainder of your life. That was the program that was popularized and promoted in earnest in the late 1880s and especially in the 1890s. It's a program that's part of the larger history of reparations.

Now, interestingly, there's less of a transition and more of like an overlap between the ex-slave pension and the military pension. And, a lot of Black southerners in the South were especially confused by this. Many who could have received military pensions didn't apply for one, and when they heard about ex-slave pensions, well, they thought that they would apply for one and finally get their pension money that they had heard so much about. And so, there was a real vernacular slippage between military pensions and ex-slave pensions. And a number of onlookers at the time pointed out that this is going to create confusion. And it was in fact, maybe, the primary target for officials of the Pension Bureau who spearheaded the federal effort to destroy the ex-slave reparations movement, arguing that they were impersonating federal officials claiming that everybody could get a pension, when, in fact, there's strict rules about who was in fact eligible for a pension. And these 'crooks' are going all around the South, exploiting 'gullible freedpeople,' thinking that they're going to get their pension money if they contribute 10¢ a month to this ex-slave pension club. And so, we really see here possibilities and dangers, and the importance and the salience of the Pension Bureau as an institution in the lives of Black Americans, as well as seeing it as a kind of launchpad for broader understandings of redistributive justice that were indeed quashed for the very reasons that the federal administrative state grew in the first place: to limit the boundaries of freedom and to, in the process, limit peoples' expectations of what the federal government owes them.

CWBR: So this same anti-statism that was there from the beginning continued throughout the entire narrative. Their movement for compensation, especially a broad class reparations or slave pension not only suffered from pushback from white people, it suffered from internal fracture as well. What contributed to that tension within the Black community?

DK: Yeah, also not monolithic. Like white America, Black America was diverse. And we could see increasing fissures growing after emancipation, particularly along lines of class, but also region. And so, we see the development of a small but still important Black professional class during the 1860s, 1870s, 1880s, of course before and after, but that time it was really

flowering and it had an impact on the pension politics of thousands of ordinary Black southerners.

So Black professionals they saw the Pension Bureau rather differently. So for them it was not so much an avenue to lodge their claims, they might not have had any claims, so they might have been freeborn in the North or not served in the war or whatever. But they saw the Pension Bureau as an avenue of advancement. They looked to the Pension Bureau for jobs, whether working as clerks, as Frederick Douglass's own son did, or sometimes even serving as medical examiners, a really important position that is essentially the gateway to the Pension Bureau. So, there is a number of different ways in which Black men and Black women could serve in a federal capacity in the federal bureaucracy at a time when that was really not an option anywhere else. In the age of *Plessy vs Ferguson*, the Pension Bureau was a conspicuously integrated federal agency. Even among claimants, there was no 'colored division' as it were. There was a southern division, but that wasn't racially exclusive, white Unionists in the South could apply to the southern division as well as USCT soldiers and heirs. So, it wasn't racially segregated and from my knowledge, they weren't even calling for racial segregation in order to advance their claims—Black claimants weren't, that is. But still, it was unable to deliver collective racial justice. And we need to ask why it wasn't able to give justice to formerly enslaved people, even when it was integrated when virtually no other federal agency was, not in any sort of meaningful way. And so, we do see fissures and just a more general, like, cultural fissure. There's a real divide in the Black community at the time over how to remember slavery. Some, such as Frederick Douglass argued that '*We should never forget slavery; this is an important aspect of our history, as was the War of the Rebellion and the role of Black Americans in it to destroy the slaveholders' regime. And that is going to be the sort of touchstone of our politics moving forward. There are important lessons that we learned in slavery that we can't forget.*' Other spokespeople argue that slave history is something to be more or less ashamed of, and it should be forgotten, and this is what they preached to their congregations and their audiences. And that had its own following and it had its own impact on the ways in which Black claimants lodged their claims. And so, all sorts of these divides and divisions, they ebbed, and they flowed over the course of the late-nineteenth century. And we really see it illustrated in a dramatic way in these claims with the federal administrative state.

CWBR: Well, I think your book goes a long way to answering those questions about why these movements weren't as successful as they hoped to be and how the federal government and why the federal government failed these people in various ways over a broad swath of time.

I'm gonna close by asking you real quickly, are you working on any new projects, or is there anything that you'd like to share about your current work in and out of academia?

DK: Yeah, I'm not working on anything currently. I've left the profession. I'm working as a labor representative for the California Nurses' Association. That's important work that I find endlessly meaningful. But I do hope that my contribution here in *Administering Freedom* will encourage other scholars to look at some of these areas that I have identified to adopt some of these approaches that I have to this time period of the Civil War era and thereafter. And to pick up on some of these threads that I've tried to unspool as best as I can in this book. And there're I think a number of avenues that are ripe for exploration. Just to name one, this is a literal first draft of the history of the Freedmen's Branch, and its records are a seemingly endless trove of important recollections of formerly enslaved men and women. Hundreds and hundreds of letters written by or on their behalf directly to federal officials. And it's just a really important window into their lives and understanding how they thought about the federal government. And I think that's one perspective that I really hope more and more scholars pay attention to and acknowledge. We know a great deal about what federal officials and what politicians thought about freedpeople, but we know a lot less about what freedpeople thought about the federal government. And any sort of insight into that perspective I think is incredibly invaluable to understanding the Black freedom struggle, and appreciating that it was far more multifarious, and diverse, and persistent than we've really given it credit for. And we need to start looking in areas where we haven't looked to see the profound struggle of the Black freedom struggle. And my book here, I think the federal administrative state is one very important and very underappreciated avenue of their engagement. So, I hope that more scholars and historians will pick up on these threads and take them in new and exciting directions.

CWBR: Well, Dr. Dale Kretz, thank you so much for. Your time, for joining us today. It's been a pleasure.

DK: Likewise. Thank you, Jeff.

CWBR: And listeners, thank you for joining us as I talked with Dr. Dale Kretz, author of *Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau* which was published by UNC Press in 2022. Happy reading! Thank you!