

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

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Recommended Citation

Colby, Robert (2023) "Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.1.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss1/13>

Review

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Winter 2023

Kretz, Dale. *Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau.* University of North Carolina Press, 2022. PAPERBACK. \$39.95 ISBN 9781469671024 pp. 412.

In 1874, a formerly enslaved Union veteran named Solomon Daugherty wrote to the United States secretary of war seeking bounties he believed the government retroactively owed him for his military service during the Civil War. “It would be a great help to me,” Daugherty pleaded, “if I would get my right dues from the U.S. government”—money he considered his and his family’s “just rights” given his sacrifices for the country (97-98). If successful in his appeal, filed less than ten years after Appomattox, Daugherty would have received the benefits of his service through the government office known as the Freedmen’s Branch; in doing so, he would have activated one of the diminishing points of contact between the government and formerly enslaved people. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—a pathbreaking government agency that offered wide-ranging relief to those emerging from bondage—had been shuttered two years earlier after half a decade of decline. But, as Dale Kretz shows in *Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau*, the efforts of men like Daugherty and those of their families ensured that the U.S. could not cut formerly enslaved people entirely adrift. Through first the Freedmen’s Branch and then the Pension Bureau, African Americans in the postbellum South continually pressed for their dues. In doing so, they maintained a persistent if tenuous relationship with the American administrative state, one that simultaneously allowed them to pursue some of the rights and privileges of citizenship while also severely constricting the terrain available for them to contest.

Administering Freedom commences at a moment often seen as one of declension: the twilight of Reconstruction, particularly as exemplified by the waning power of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Born of wartime necessity and bitterly contested by civil and military authorities, the Freedmen’s Bureau offered the formerly enslaved direct access to government support: food, medical care, education, the halls of justice, and more. Its revolutionary potential—particularly

as a vehicle for enslaved peoples' expansive definitions of freedom—should not be understated. The Bureau, however, persistently suffered from both practical limitations (within five years of the war's end it had just over 150 officials in the entire South) and from the ideological blinders of a society committed to independence and free labor (26). By the end of the 1860s, all that remained of the Bureau were its educational efforts and the Claims Division, established to handle the tens of thousands of tangled obligations the government owed U.S.C.T. veterans, including the enlistment bounties owed to many Black soldiers alongside back pay retroactively made equal to that white soldiers had received.

For all that the Claims Division (also known as the Freedmen's Branch) represented a rump version of the Freedmen's Bureau's capacious project, it nevertheless facilitated tens of thousands of interactions between freedpeople and the U.S. government. The claims they filed through it lie at the heart of *Administering Freedom*, serving as they did as a critical lifeline to that government's authority and as the primary means through which it would discharge what it owed them. Formerly enslaved people sought to imbue these interactions with the broader context they considered freedom to mean. They understood their claims in communal terms, as obligations the government owed not only individual Black veterans but also their families and communities. Black communities in the South thus pursued them collectively, with family units and wider networks seeking recompense for a father's or brother's service and with neighborhoods testifying to the work a member had undertaken in the late war.

Their pursuit drew them into surprisingly intimate but often Kafkaesque encounters with the government as they navigated what Kretz calls “the long, frustrating, and at times painful process by which millions of stateless people became documented citizens” (2). Prior to the Civil War, enslaved people lacked both citizenship and basic documentation of their lives; even after attaining the former, the lack of the latter dramatically hindered their ability to pursue its benefits. As a result, even those able to overcome the significant hurdles imposed by distance and legal restrictions on Black mobility in the postbellum South to initiate contact with the government came under intense scrutiny. Government officials first demanded written or testimonial proof of freedpeoples' identities and military service. Then, as pensions replaced bounty claims as the primary benefit Black veterans demanded, Pension Bureau examiners and an array of physicians probed African Americans' lives and bodies to determine the sources of

qualifying disabilities as well as the intimate relationships that allowed dependents to successfully claim a pension.

The resulting interactions produced mountains of documentation and some of the richest sources for exploring Black life in the nineteenth century. But Kretz provides a powerful warning against seeing African American testimony purely as an expression of “agency,” as a chance for freedpeople to correct existing narratives. Rather, he points out, these were desperate encounters, “high-stakes interrogations with a year’s worth of income on the line” (85). And petitioners faced a deck stacked against them. Not only did Black applicants have to overcome the obstacles posed by distance and their lack of documentation, but they confronted widespread opposition to their collecting bounties or pensions. Local whites feared these might offer African American laborers unprecedented independence. Meanwhile, medical examinations conducted by often hostile local physicians and a reliance on evidence provided by former enslavers dovetailed with pervasive white concern over pension fraud and institutional skepticism regarding African Americans’ veracity and moral probity to defeat many of those seeking their due. In the process, Black applicants often inadvertently reaffirmed government officials’ racial assumptions; proving that they had incurred their disabilities in the service of the United States, for example, presumed that freedmen who had enlisted had been hale and healthy under slavery, thus bolstering rosy ideas of the plantation South.

More soberingly, Kretz argues, the widespread availability of pensions and their function as a de facto welfare system in much of the country ironically limited the scope of governmental relief in the late nineteenth century. Formerly enslaved people had understood themselves to deserve expansive relief from the government in recompense for their long years of servitude in the United States (which, they argued, had done much to enrich the country). Claims and pensions offered a taste of this but also severely constricted the reach of the government, funneling its interactions into individual relationships contingent on specific services rendered to the government. “In the ever-lengthening shadow of more ambitious equitable, and humane visions of land and wealth redistribution,” he suggests, “federal pensions to highly scrutinized individuals were but proverbial crumbs, a sop to more radical promises” (143). In pursuing claims, Kretz thus concludes, African Americans forged ongoing relationships with the American administrative state while simultaneously reaffirming the tenets of nineteenth century liberalism that mitigated against broader relief and reform.

Administering Freedom is an essential read for exploring Black politics and life in the postbellum U.S. It supplements works like Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under their Feet*, demonstrating that beyond electoral politics and communal organizing, African Americans also pursued what Kretz calls "administrative politics" (the word "pension," for example, does not appear in Hahn's depiction of the period) (101). It also offers an administrative history that melds well with Brandi C. Brimmer's *Claiming Union Widowhood*, which offers a textured description of African-American women's strategies of engagement with the state. Finally, it offers a useful context for reading works like Mary Frances Berry's study of Callie House and the ex-slave pensions movement.

Taken as a whole, *Administering Freedom* is deeply researched, eminently readable, and offers a novel perspective on Black encounters with the American administrative state. It explores a wildly underutilized set of records (I have never, to my knowledge, seen a scholar make more than token use of the wealth of information contained in Freedmen's Branch materials) and depicts the contested origins of another: the pension materials compiled by African Americans. Kretz offers an unrelenting picture of how these archival records reflected Black Americans' fraught relationship with the state, of how their production, presentation, and reception both forged a clear relationship between formerly enslaved people and the government and funneled that relationship into a severely constrained channel. It will prove thought-provoking for all readers, including even the most immersed students of the Civil War era.

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