

The Freedmen's Bureau

Congress created the Freedmen's Bureau to economically and politically empower freed people after the Civil War.

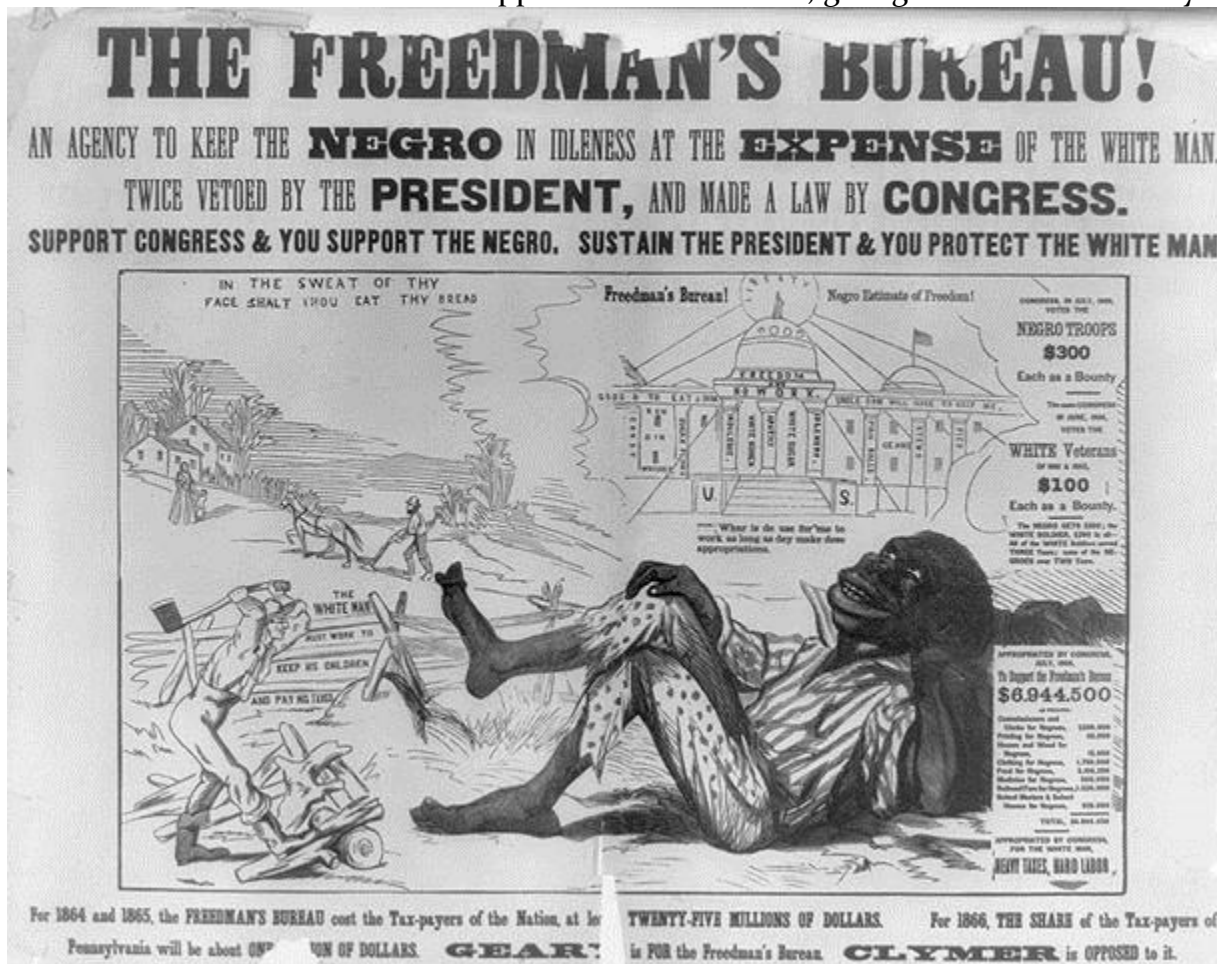
Overview

- The Freedmen's Bureau was established in March of 1865 to help freed people achieve economic stability and secure political freedoms.
- Many white Southerners, as well as President Andrew Johnson, challenged the Bureau's legitimacy, sparking racial violence in the South and the ultimate failure of the Bureau.
- The Bureau presented questions about the role of the federal government in establishing and maintaining racial and economic equality in the United States.

The promising goals of the Freedmen's Bureau

As the Civil War wound to a close in 1865, African Americans in the South celebrated the end of slavery. They immediately began to take steps to improve their own condition by seeking what had long been denied to them: land, financial security, education, and the ability to participate in the political process.

However, they faced the wrath of defeated white Southerners who were determined to keep blacks an impoverished and despised underclass. Recognizing the widespread devastation in the South, Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in March 1865, popularly known as the **Freedmen's Bureau**. Lincoln approved of the Bureau, giving it a charter for one year.



Cartoon ridiculing the Freedmen's Bureau.

A political poster depicting the tension regarding the Freedmen's Bureau. [Photo](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The Freedmen's Bureau was intended to act as a primitive welfare agency, aiming to ease the transition from slavery to freedom. While some Bureau agents were corrupt or incompetent, others worked hard to secure significant freedoms for blacks. Under control of Union war hero Oliver O. Howard, the Bureau delivered food to freedmen and poor whites in the South, and it helped freed people gain labor contracts.

The Bureau also took up the fight for **African American education**, establishing scores of public schools where freed people and poor whites could receive both elementary and higher education. Respected institutions such as Fisk University, Hampton University, and Dillard University are part of the legacy of the Freedmen's Bureau. General Howard later opened and became president of the historically black college, Howard University. In this endeavor, the Freedmen's Bureau received support from Christian organizations that had long advocated for abolition, such as the **American Missionary Association (AMA)**.



Photo of Oliver O. Howard.

General Oliver O. Howard. [Photo](#) courtesy of Wikimedia commons.

Prolonging racial tensions post-Civil War

The schools that the Freedmen's Bureau and the AMA established inspired resentment among the white population in the South. Indeed, the Freedmen's Bureau's programs and its very existence were sources of controversy. Those who resisted this type of federal government activism denounced it as a foolish effort and a waste of federal money.

Congress renewed the Bureau's charter in 1866, but President Johnson, who steadfastly believed that the work of restoring the Union had been completed, vetoed the re-chartering on the grounds that it interfered with states' rights. Congress, in turn, overrode the president's veto.

Johnson pardoned many former Confederates and restored their land, as well as removed Bureau employees he thought were too sympathetic to African Americans. Radical Republicans continued to support the Bureau, igniting a contest between Congress and the president that intensified during the next several years.

This dispute involved conflicting visions of the proper role of the federal government. Radical Republicans believed in the constructive power of the federal government to ensure a better day for freed people. Others, including Johnson, denied that the government had any such role to play. Due to pressure from white Southerners, Congress dismantled the Freedmen's Bureau in 1872. The Bureau failed to make a real stride towards racial equality mostly due to the fight between Congress and the President, as well as subpar funding.

What do you think?

Did the Freedmen's Bureau succeed or fail? Why?

How did the Freedmen's Bureau expand the reach of the federal government?

How did the Freedmen's Bureau compare to later federal programs for education and public welfare, like the New Deal or the Civil Rights Act?