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Document-Based Activities on Reconstruction

Using Primary Sources and the Internet

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The Freedmen's Bureau Teacher Page

Overview:

At the close of the Civil War, Congress began to consider legislation to assist ex-slaves. The result was the Freedmen's Bureau, which established hospitals, schools, and institutions of higher education, as well as providing food not only for freedmen but also for poor Southern whites.

The Bureau was headed by Union General Oliver Otis Howard, who saw action in several major Civil War battles (including Gettysburg) and who later founded Howard University.

Objectives:

Students will:

- develop views about the purpose of the Freedmen's Bureau
- speculate as to the effectiveness of the Bureau

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

Students will use two accounts to answer questions about the Freedmen's Bureau. First is the text of the 1865 act which created the Freedmen's Bureau, located at <http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/fbact.htm>. This page is part of the University of Maryland Freedmen and Southern Society site, located at <http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/>.

The second source is a poem from the Staunton (Virginia) *Spectator* titled "The Lay of a Freedman"; it's located at <http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~ela/freedmen/local/9-19-65.html>. The poem is part of the University of Virginia's "Valley of the Shadow" site, located at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow/>.

Strategies:

Introduce the lesson with a discussion of how difficult it would have been for ex-slaves to establish themselves and take advantage of their newly granted freedoms. You may also wish to discuss the condition of poor whites in the period following the Civil War, and have the class debate whether the Union was obligated to assist whites in the South after the war.

Distribute the worksheets to students and allow sufficient time for students to complete the questions.

Student answers for each question will vary, but should average three to five sentences. The response for question 10 may range in length from one paragraph to a maximum of a page, depending on time available and the breadth of answer desired.

Wrap-Up:

After students have completed the worksheet, have a discussion focused on this issue:

Was the Freedmen's Bureau effective or ineffective in implementing the freedoms give in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments?

Extension Activity:

Using the resources provided in the lesson and/or other resources, have students write newspaper editorials either supporting the Freedmen's Bureau as an effective tool in restoring the Union after the Civil War, or claiming it hindered Reconstruction because of the controversy that arose around it.

The Freedmen's Bureau Student Worksheet

Introduction:

At the end of the Civil War, Congress sought to find ways to assist ex-slaves (as well as some poor Southern whites) in rebuilding their lives. The answer was the Freedmen's Bureau, which worked to provide food and education services.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

Directions:

The Freedmen's Bureau Act

<http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/fbact.htm>

Answer the following questions.

1. First, look at the Freedmen's Bureau legislation resource. How did Congress describe the purpose of the act?
2. In the legislation, what cabinet position was in charge of running the Bureau, appointing a director, and directing the issue of clothing, food, and fuel?
3. According to the act, ex-slaves were designated as "freedmen". How were Southern whites covered under the act designated? Speculate as to whether that term might have angered Southern whites.
4. According to the terms of the act, what was to be provided in Sec. 2 of the Freedmen's Bureau law?

5. What provision did the act make regarding land?

6. In your own words, speculate as to whether the Freedmen's Bureau bill was a genuine attempt to assist freedmen and Southern whites, or if it was simply an attempt to divide Southern loyalties in the last days of the Civil War.

“The Lay of a Freedman”: The *Staunton Spectator*

<http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~ela/freedmen/local/9-19-65.html>

7. Describe this source: What type of source is it? Where did it come from? When during the Reconstruction period was it published?

8. According to this source, is freedom a “blessing” or a “curse”? Cite examples from the source that back your view.

9. Throughout the source, the words “white man” are featured in italics. Speculate why the poem's author did this.

10. How do you feel the author of the *Staunton Spectator* source would have viewed the impact and importance of the Freedmen's Bureau legislation? In a paragraph, sum up how he might have viewed the law and Freedmen's Bureau if he had been asked to write a letter to the editor of the *Staunton Spectator*, or if he had been asked to testify before Congress as the government considered the Freedmen's Bureau bill.