

### Abstract

Historians have often depicted the relationship between freed African Americans and Freedmen's Bureau Agents as being a relationship where African Americans often depended on bureau agents for protection, guidance in understanding politics and labor, etc. This paper argues that bureau agents and freedpeople had a more complex and interdependent relationship in which bureau agents also depended on African Americans. Black civilians served as informants to bureau agents providing them with important local knowledge to better understand the physical spaces in which they operated. This paper will rely primarily on the assistant state commissioner's Freedmen's Bureau Records for Texas and the Texas Field Office Records to support these claims. Bureau agents used this information to request assets from the state commissioners in the form of military manpower, supplies, and other things to help implement Reconstruction policies in Texas in an effort to extend liberties associated with citizenship to newly freed African Americans.

### Freedmen's Bureau Agents and Black Civilian Informants in Texas, 1866-1868

In April 1868 in Freestone County, Texas, a group of white men dragged two African American men, Mark Walker and James Haynes, out of their homes with the intent of murdering them. Haynes and Walker managed to escape their assailants and later learned that the attackers targeted them for reporting the incineration of a black schoolhouse in the county and identifying the culprits responsible for the act to a federal agent. Walker and Haynes fled Freestone County and traveled to the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) offices in Waco and Austin; they later returned to Freestone County with a group of United States troops to arrest their assailants. Walker and Haynes provided information identifying three Union League leaders targeted for murder in Freestone County; they also reported three other murders that had already occurred in two other counties.<sup>1</sup>

Walker and Haynes exercised a considerable degree of latitude that resulted in the deployment of limited federal manpower based largely on information they provided. This story indicates that the relationship between federal officials and black civilians was more complex than its conventional historiographic depiction in Reconstruction literature. While agencies like the army and the Freedmen's Bureau were the only federal institutions available to protect

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Walker, Affidavit June 18, 1868. National Archives and Records Administration Record Group 105, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) M821 Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1869, Reel 32; James Eaton Haynes Affidavit June 19, 1868, National Archives and Records Administration Record Group 105, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) M821 Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1869, Reel 32; cited hereafter as BRFAL Texas Assistant State Commissioner Records.

freedpeople's rights in the South, dependence was not the only characteristic of black civilians' relationships with officials from these institutions. Due to limitations in manpower and the vast physical space these institutions assumed jurisdiction over, army officers' and Freedmen's Bureau agents' ultimate weapon in Texas was information. Black civilians and federal officials established an interdependent relationship where African Americans provided information about social conditions, violence against freedmen, the status of schools, and other local matters to assist the army and Freedmen's Bureau agents in better understanding the new physical and social spaces they occupied in these complex communities with which they were unfamiliar. Armed with this information, these officials could then request and deploy assets to quell violence in Texas as well as intervene directly in local affairs on behalf of the freedpeople. Information from freedpeople also provided officials with a useful metric for measuring the effectiveness of Reconstruction policies at the local level highlighting for historians the importance of regional specificity in evaluating success during Reconstruction.

Today there is a general historiographic consensus related to Reconstruction's results. While most historians view Reconstruction as an ultimate failure, they also generally acknowledge that Reconstruction policies achieved intermittent successes in different regions of the South. The United States Army and the Freedmen's Bureau, which fell under the War Department's administrative control and drew a significant portion of its manpower from army personnel, were essential parts of these smaller success stories. As James E. Sefton argues in *The United States Army and Reconstruction, 1865-1877*, the Freedmen's Bureau, and especially the army, were the only institutions with the manpower and administrative capacity equipped to handle the herculean task of rebuilding the South and maintaining law and order within the

region.<sup>2</sup> Army officers and bureau agents adapted their policies and methods for dealing with Reconstruction based on the conditions they faced in their assigned districts.

Gregory P. Downs and William L. Richter expand on Sefton's work by illustrating the importance of the army in dictating the terms of Reconstruction and determining how the process occurred in the South. They both highlight the manpower limitations of the Freedmen's Bureau, and both authors, especially Downs, closely examine the relationship between space and the army's presence in specific areas of the South to analyze the effects of Reconstruction policies. For Downs, "the army remained the crucial instrument of emancipation [and] the end of slavery demanded the expansion of its reach into the countryside."<sup>3</sup> In Texas, Richter argued, "military power was the only way to counteract [the] attitude" of white Texans who resisted federal authorities charged with restructuring social relations between blacks and whites.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the army and the Freedmen's Bureau established numerous posts and deployed personnel to distant regions to establish control over these contested spaces. Both Downs and Richter highlight the movement of newly freed African Americans in the immediate postwar period. Former slaves understood that soldiers and bureau agents wielded the necessary authority to provide protection against violent white southerners seeking to preserve the antebellum racial hierarchy; therefore, they moved to areas in closer proximity to these posts and Freedmen's Bureau offices.<sup>5</sup> This representation of black civilians suggests that they depended heavily on these institutions to secure their civil liberties and protect them from white southerners.<sup>6</sup> While this argument may be

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<sup>2</sup> James E. Sefton, *The United States Army and Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1967), 252–254.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 47.

<sup>4</sup> William L. Richter, *The Army in Texas during Reconstruction, 1865-1870*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Downs, *After Appomattox*, 46–51; Richter, *The Army in Texas during Reconstruction, 1865-1870*, 32–39.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 148–155; Sefton, *The United States Army and Reconstruction, 1865-1877*, 41–49, 252–254; Gregory P. Downs,

true, it underestimates black southerners' agency and depicts them as victims rather than individuals who exerted a more direct role in shaping the results of Reconstruction and contributing to Reconstruction's intermittent successes.

A prevailing theme that resonates throughout the Reconstruction historiography claims that a spirit of confusion constantly hindered the implementation of Reconstruction policies in the South at every level. Sefton, Downs, and Richter all repeatedly emphasize that the Reconstruction era was the U.S. Army's first real exercise in occupation and military government; there were very few prior military occupation experiences on which army commanders and politicians could rely as precedent. Therefore, confusion as a result of constantly shifting and disjointed policies often confounded the army's efforts to reestablish order in the South. As Downs demonstrates in *After Appomattox*, army officials and Freedmen's Bureau agents adapted these policies according to conditions they faced in areas under their local control.<sup>7</sup> However, in order to establish these policies, an army officer or Bureau agent first had to understand the physical and social landscape of the environment for which he was responsible. In areas like the black-belt region of eastern Texas, information from black civilians was crucial in helping these institutional officials understand these environments.

Relying on information from civilians about local environments continued a tradition employed by Union army officers during the Civil War. As the U.S. Army moved deeper into southern territory during the Civil War, black civilians often served as spies, scouts, and guides who provided reliable information to the U.S. Army about travel routes for armies and escaped prisoners, information about towns, and details on the movements and dispositions of the

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*Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Downs, *After Appomattox*, 51–55.

Confederate Army.<sup>8</sup> During Reconstruction the Freedmen's Bureau and the army continued expanding their sphere of influence as they expanded their occupation of the South, and local knowledge about these new territories was very important. Knowledge from local residents, especially black civilians and sympathetic white civilians, proved valuable for army officers and bureau agents understanding conditions in these new environments.

In *A Nation Under Our Feet*, Steven Hahn argues that “circuits of communication” were important foundations for African Americans as they built their political structures and organized themselves during and after slavery. Hahn argues that slaves created complex communication networks based largely on rumors circulated throughout the South during the antebellum period. These networks proliferated throughout the Civil War and into the Reconstruction era. The movement of former slaves during and after the Civil War created large urban and rural African American communities. In these urban and rural communities freedmen circulated information about the prospects and meanings of freedom as well as opportunities for landownership, citizenship, and political participation.<sup>9</sup> Hahn chronicles efforts by the U.S. Army and the Freedmen's Bureau to spread official information to blacks in the countryside about their new freedom; these institutions also sought to quell lofty rumors and expectations about privileges associated with their new statuses. However, an important aspect of this subject remains largely unexplored. Bureau agents and army officers were able to leverage these networks to make assessments about conditions in the diverse array of communities they encountered in the South.

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, 1953); Gordon L. Olson, *The Notorious Isaac Earl and His Scouts: Union Soldiers, Prisoners, Spies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 40, 270–271; John C. Insoe, "Moving Through Deserter Country:" Fugitive Accounts of the Inner Civil War in Southern Appalachia" in Kenneth W. Noe and Shannon H. Wilson eds, *The Civil War in Appalachia: Collected Essay* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 158–186; Rose, P.K., “Black Dispatches: Black American Contributions to Union Intelligence During the Civil War — Central Intelligence Agency,” accessed April 11, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/black-dispatches/>.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 131.

More recent trends in the historiography of the Freedmen's Bureau devote more attention to the agency at the local level. Historians have begun devoting more attention to the variety of physical and social conditions under which the bureau operated as well as the differences the agency made in the lives of freedpeople.<sup>10</sup> However, even after analyzing the bureau agents' activities and the relationships they developed with black civilians at the local level, we still know more about what the bureau and army accomplished for freedpeople rather than how African Americans supported those agencies. With the exception of some coastal locations on the Gulf of Mexico, most of Texas remained completely unaffected by the Civil War, and Reconstruction in the war's aftermath marked many of the first encounters between Texas communities and the U.S. Army. Army and Freedmen's Bureau agents had to navigate complex and diverse communities with which most of them were unfamiliar to fundamentally alter a society based on slavery that remained relatively intact and unaffected by the Civil War.

Freestone County, located approximately 60 miles east of Waco in eastern Texas, was one of those remote regions that remained outside of the Freedmen's Bureau's sphere of influence until Lieutenant Alfred P. Manning assumed command of a sub-district encompassing this county in April 1867.<sup>11</sup> In October 1866, a white resident of Freestone County, J. L. A. Carter, clandestinely sent a letter to the Freedmen's Bureau expressing his sentiments about conditions in the county,

I address you for information in regard to certain rights that I think Freedmen have which I think they are unlikely to get in this county. . . As I feel an interest in some freedmen

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<sup>10</sup> Barry A. Crouch, *The Dance of Freedom: Texas African Americans during Reconstruction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Barry A. Crouch, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans*, First edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007); Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation*, First edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); William L. Richter, *Overreached on All Sides: The Freedmen's Bureau Administrators in Texas, 1865-1868*, First edition (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Roster of Officers and Civilians on Duty at Freedmen's Bureau and List of Personnel by Sub-District, April 1, 1867, BRFAL Texas Assistant State Commissioner Records Reel 19.

around me I desire to honor-to tell you the truth and what my honest opinion is the Freedman will not get their rights in many instances those who have owned slaves seem to think that if they do impose on them that it is all right.<sup>12</sup>

Carter based this assessment on the fact that white residents in Freestone County refused to have blacks' labor contracts approved by bureau agents and failed to provide African Americans with a fair share of corn/cotton crops and farm supplies to cultivate their own land.<sup>13</sup> In addition to his personal observations, part of Carter's information that he provided to the bureau was probably from African American residents within Freestone County. His involvement with labor contracts suggests that he had some interaction with freedpeople in negotiating the contracts. If freed people perceived Carter as fairly negotiating contracts, they could have potentially seized the opportunity to entrust him with information about other white employers in Freestone County who were not fairly dealing with black laborers. Carter knew that his sentiments were unpopular in Freestone County and asked General Joseph Kiddoo, the assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas at the time, "not to expose [him]."<sup>14</sup>

Most important, Carter concluded his letter by providing local knowledge about the limits of the bureau's influence in terms of space and assets.

I have had several contracts and agreements approved by Capt. [Fred Reinhard] at Centerville and it is my own opinion that you if possible should send an agent to Freestone County as he as much as he can do in Leon County. I saw the report you made to Genl Howard and I fully concur in your opinion that it is necessary to have more soldiers sent to enforce your orders as in some parts of the state now they do not respect them & I say god send the day when you will make all white men deal fairly with the freedmen.<sup>15</sup>

Centerville is located over thirty-five miles away from the city of Fairfield from which Carter sent his letter. If Captain Reinhard was indeed the closest bureau agent to Fairfield, it gives a

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<sup>12</sup> Letter from JLA Carter to General Joseph Kiddo, October 10, 1866, BRFAL Texas Assistant State Commissioner Records Reel 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



strong indicator of the vast physical spaces and communities that these officials assumed responsibility for. Based on Carter's evaluation, Reinhard's responsibilities in Leon County were overwhelming enough without the addition of similar duties in another county thirty miles away. Furthermore, Carter provided a local appraisal of social conditions in Freestone County and the necessity of deploying more manpower to enforce the laws in spaces that remained beyond the reach of the federal government.

When General Charles Griffin assumed command as the assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas in January 1867, one of his first actions was to expand the agency's operations in the state. At the time of Griffin's appointment as state commissioner, all bureau personnel served in the southern part of the state; the bureau agent stationed the farthest from the organization's state headquarters in Galveston was only 180 miles away.<sup>16</sup> This was not far enough to reach the more distant parts of Texas. To expand the reach of the agency, Griffin ordered all army post commanders in Texas to assume Freedmen's Bureau duties if there was no bureau agent present in their respective districts.<sup>17</sup> There is little doubt that local reports from remote regions of Texas like J. A. L. Carter's reports of violence and mistreatment of freedpeople drove Griffin's decision to extend the bureau's operations.

Over the course of a week in May 1867, unforeseen events resulted in the incapacitation of two bureau agents; an unknown assailant seriously wounded Alfred P. Manning in Freestone County, forcing him to resign his post for medical treatment, and John Williamson died from injuries sustained after his horse fell on top of him in Navarro County.<sup>18</sup> These disastrous circumstances augmented the task that Charles E. Culver, Manning's replacement, had before

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<sup>16</sup> Crouch, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Alfred P. Manning to Assistant State commissioner's office, May 30, 1867, BRFAL Texas Assistant Commissioner Records Reel 7; Letter from John L. Miller to BRFAL Texas Assistant State Commissioner May 29, 1867, Reel 7.

him. His jurisdiction for the Freedmen's Bureau now encompassed three counties (Freestone, Limestone, and Navarro); an area that he would later report consisted of 2,800 square miles.<sup>19</sup> Not only was this a vast physical landscape, but the absence of preceding bureau officials meant that the communities and social environments within these spaces would be completely unfamiliar to Culver. Although Manning and Williamson had only managed their districts for two months, whatever knowledge and information they acquired during their tenures related to the hostile population, reliable informants, the status of black schools, and other matters would have been useful to Culver as a preliminary metric for assessing his district.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Culver assumed his duties in this district with little to no background knowledge about the counties he was responsible for. These circumstances forced Culver to evaluate conditions in these spaces based on information he received from the civilian population.

In June 1867, as Culver journeyed north to Freestone County to assume his new position as sub-assistant commissioner, he made some sobering observations about social conditions as he entered different parts of Texas. He wrote,

After leaving Houston all semblance of loyalty is laid aside and bitter invective saluted my ears from the time I left Houston until I arrived in Navasota. From Navasota through to Fairfield the country looks bad and the people here have a dogged determination to improve this country by remaining themselves a don't care feeling prevails that is evinced in their forms, their talk, their looks.<sup>21</sup>

As Culver traveled farther into the Texas interior and farther away from the presence of U.S. troops and bureau agents, he recognized the limits of the federal government's power in a large geographic region, like Texas. The reference to a disloyal population committed to "remaining

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman September 1, 1867, Records of the Field Offices for the State of Texas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870: NARA, RG 105, Roll 19, cited hereafter as BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>20</sup> Rosters of Bureau Personnel and Assigned Districts for April, May, and June 1867, BRFAL Texas Assistant Commissioner Records Reel 19,.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Charles C. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman June 13, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

themselves” is probably based on his observation of white civilians who remained hostile to the encroachment of the federal government that sought to permanently alter social relations between African Americans and whites.

1870 Census								
Statistics	Freestone County, Texas		Limestone County, Texas		Navarro County, Texas		TOTAL (All Selected Counties)	
Race								
Total Population:	8,139		8,591		8,879		25,609	
White	4,771	58.6%	6,662	77.6%	6,634	74.7%	18,067	70.6%
Colored	3,368	41.4%	1,919	22.3%	2,245	25.3%	7,532	29.4%
Chinese	0	0.0%	10	0.1%	0	0.0%	10	0.0%
Indian	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

The 1870 census reveals important demographic information about the counties comprising this sub-district. All three counties had a fairly large African American population, but the black population in Freestone County constituted over forty-one percent in 1870. According to the 1860 census, African Americans actually outnumbered whites in Freestone County. With the new political and social opportunities available to freedpeople as a result of the Civil War, this group had the ability to mobilize as a strong political force, align with whites who shared their political sentiments, and potentially seize control of the local government. A sizeable and organized population of African Americans was a strong threat to white supremacy. Therefore, whites who remained committed to maintaining the antebellum racial status quo had a strong interest in limiting political, social, and economic opportunities for African Americans.

This was the situation Charles Culver would consistently confront throughout his time as sub-assistant commissioner.<sup>22</sup>

Culver's observations about the character of civilians as he entered new spaces during his trip to his new post, along with the fact that someone had attempted to murder his predecessor, profoundly impacted how Culver evaluated conditions within his district. The first step in gathering information about his new district to execute his duties was to determine which information was actually reliable. During his first week in Freestone County, Culver expressed his distrust of the politicians in Fairfield (the county seat): "there the politicians are as thick as bees round a cask and many exulting word was passed at the prospect of [illegible] reward as they judging from my looks took me for something easily played upon."<sup>23</sup> Culver requested that several loyal union men he had identified be appointed as court officials, stating that "it would be the greatest assistance could be rendered me as it is the colored people and whites also will be and are very much dissatisfied as in obedience to your orders." Immediately, civilians, both black and loyal whites with their complaints about the lack of law and order in Fairfield, helped Culver in making his initial assessment about conditions in his Freestone County and the limits of available assets to resolve their complaints. According to Culver, who probably learned this information from local informants, the nearest justices of the peace were twelve miles away from Fairfield. With this knowledge, Culver began understanding the size of the physical space for which he was responsible with limited manpower.

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<sup>22</sup> Digitally transcribed by Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Edited, verified by Michael Haines. Compiled, edited and verified by Social Explorer 1860 and 1870 Census data from [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com).

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Charles C. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman June 13, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

The problems associated with administrating such a large stretch of geography only compounded when Culver realized the extent to which freedpeople were dispersed throughout Freestone County:

There is no colored school in this country and being without means of conveyance embarrasses me greatly in forming any for them is a great track to pass over and the plantations lay miles apart and to tend to my business properly I should have appointed office days in each county section. . . it would enable the colored people to acquaint me with their troubles, would assist me in establishing schools and would no doubt have a good effect generally as I would be going through my section all the time. On the other hand parties will have to come from one to one hundred miles to transact business.<sup>24</sup>

This passage illustrates that the bureau agent understood the necessity of remaining in constant contact with the African American population of Freestone County to maintain accurate assessments of labor relations, education, levels of violence, and freedom to organize politically within this space. At the same time, knowledge about the physical distribution of the population throughout the county also helped Culver realize that space was a significant obstacle to remaining in dialogue with freedpeople. With this information, Culver modified his office hours, set a specific schedule in an attempt to solve the problem that space posed to his efforts, and requested the provision of a horse from the assistant commissioner to assist him with traveling.<sup>25</sup> Immediate information from African Americans, as well as the potential for more information from them, affected how federal agents conducted bureau affairs and requested assets to support operations according to conditions within those local environments.

Culver's initial appraisal of Freestone County also reveals some of the priorities of the freedpeople there. These priorities among freedpeople also provide a lens for analyzing their perceptions about the meaning of successful implementation of Reconstruction policies.

Clearly, freedpeople had a strong interest in their physical security from violence from hostile

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

whites, but education was also a strong priority. Culver would later write, “The [freedmen] are generally anxious for schools as soon as crops are gathered will go to work to erect 3 houses for school purposes.”<sup>26</sup> Alfred Manning, Culver’s predecessor, also discussed the need to establish schools in his initial reports about Freestone County to the Texas Freedmen’s Bureau headquarters during his short tenure. Manning wrote, “the freedmen are now at work [to] build a church which they propose to devote to school purposes.”<sup>27</sup> He estimated that construction would require two weeks and “promised them a teacher.”<sup>28</sup> According to the 1860 census, over 2,200 African-Americans 19 years of age or younger out of a total black population of 3,613 people (roughly sixty-one percent) lived in Freestone County.<sup>29</sup> With youths comprising such a substantial section of their population, African Americans in Freestone County had a strong interest in ensuring that their children had educational opportunities that had previously been nonexistent.

Throughout his tenure as sub-assistant commissioner of his district, lack of manpower continuously hindered Charles Culver’s maneuvers as a bureau agent. On June 30, 1867, he accounted for only eleven troops available for duty in his district.<sup>30</sup> July remained a critical time for Culver to gather information about conditions within the rest of his district. Because of the size of his district and his recent appointment as sub-assistant commissioner, Culver had not been able to visit all of the areas encompassing his district. In early July after frequent travel delays due to weather, Culver finally journeyed to Navarro County (Corsicana), the final county

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman August 1, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Alfred P. Manning to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman, May 15, 1867, BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Individuals under the age of 19 constitutes school aged population for me. Digitally transcribed by Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Edited, verified by Michael Haines. Compiled, edited and verified by Social Explorer 1860 Census data from [www.socialexplorer.com](http://www.socialexplorer.com)

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman June 30, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

in his sub-district.<sup>31</sup> His initial assessment of this county, based in large part on the information he received from freedpeople from that community, assisted Culver in understanding the limitations of his small force in being able to preserve law and order in Navarro County.

When Culver first arrived in the county he realized “that the late agent had done but little owing to his early death and to his being alone and at the mercy of as shamelessly a disloyal community as was ever placed upon this Earth.”<sup>32</sup> Culver confessed that he “found no books of Mr Williamson at Corsicana nothing but orders.”<sup>33</sup> As in Freestone County, Culver immediately established a strong distrust for the white population in Navarro County. He wrote “from all the indications I should judge that the late agt. had been made to play with the hands of that community.”<sup>34</sup> Culver began to understand the limitations of what a lone bureau agent could accomplish in a hostile environment. Furthermore, the agent’s untimely death meant that Culver had to rely heavily on civilians for information about Navarro County with which he was completely unfamiliar.

On the first day of his stay in Corsicana, around six hundred people gathered in Corsicana at a barbecue. Culver reported that when people among the group realized that he and his orderly were government employees, they labeled them as “damned [yankees]” and “bureau [men]” and grew hostile toward him.<sup>35</sup> Their hostility grew when some of them “heard [him] addressing the freedmen.”<sup>36</sup> At this particular point in his report, Culver did not provide details about his conversations with the freedpeople, but white civilians may have grown hostile because

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman July 13, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

they knew that African Americans could potentially provide valuable information about affairs in Navarro County that might result in overturning the racial hierarchy.

While Culver attempted to placate the white civilians at the event about his intentions to restore law and order, Culver later learned that some of the black civilians there had clandestinely passed important information about Navarro County to his orderly. According to Culver:

Some of the negroes found my orderly off by himself and told him they were afraid to be seen talking with me as the whites would kill them and it is a fact that a colored man who tried to start a school there was driven from the county. Mr. Leopard of Spring Hill is to make a speech to the [freedmen] . . . many of them are afraid to go as their lives were threatened by their masters in case they went.

The use of the word masters in the letter is extremely revealing of the relationship between freedpeople and whites in Navarro County. It suggests that African Americans remained in a state of slavery. Armed with this information Culver immediately calculated the level of physical danger to himself and the freedpeople as well as the extremely rigid racial hierarchy that remained undisturbed in Navarro County. The information from black civilians in Navarro County as well as his interaction with a large hostile white population helped him understand the limitations of his force. He reported, “It would be more than folly for me to undertake to enforce the laws without a sufficient number of bayonets to overawe the people for it is their boast that ‘they ain’t whipped and never can be.’”<sup>37</sup> Yet Culver promised to execute his duties in the face of such odds, by writing, “I will take the few men I have and will undertake to bring out order from this measurable confusion although I know that when my duty clashes with the interest of their leaders there will be blood spilled as they will hire an assassin to kill me.”<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the information from the black civilians also assisted the bureau agent in making an accurate

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



appraisal of shortfalls in Navarro County: there were no schools for black people, no teachers, and no opportunities to exercise political freedoms in attending a meeting.

The report also provides important insight into African Americans' priorities with Reconstruction policies. Culver reported that "the subscription papers in [Navarro] County among the freedmen schools are being rapidly filled up and I will be able in a short time to start at least three schools."<sup>39</sup> Like Freestone County, black civilians professed a strong interest in education and physical security, but their desire to attend meetings demonstrates that they also had a strong desire to actively participate in organized politics.

Furthermore, Culver was able to differentiate between conditions in counties' physical spaces: "The [white] people in Freestone and Limestone [Counties] are Lambs in comparison to them."<sup>40</sup> Determining which populations were the most hostile and thus most in need of federal intervention, was a valuable metric for assisting the bureau agent in deciding how to deploy limited assets. Culver wrote, "There is much wrong and oppression being done the [freedmen] in Navarro Co. I should like to be authorized to carry my men to that point for at least two months in that time I could eradicate most of the evil or be wiped out of existence."<sup>41</sup> Most importantly, Culver was able to provide an appraisal of how Reconstruction played out on the ground. The depth of white hostility in Navarro County highlights the importance of regional specificity even within sub-districts when measuring the success of Reconstruction policies.

With Culver's main office in his sub-district being located in Cotton Gin in Freestone County, local informants played an integral part in assisting Culver in remaining aware of affairs in Navarro County. In July of 1867, Culver received a letter from the chief of the Board of Registration for voting in Navarro County stating that the board had a dispute with local citizens,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

had stopped registrations as a result, and demanded immediate protection from the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>42</sup> Culver requested troops from Centerville to travel with him to Navarro County in the event of a physical confrontation. By the time these reinforcements arrived and Culver marched the 31 miles with them from Cotton Gin to Corsicana, the Board of Registration had already peacefully resolved the issue.<sup>43</sup> Again, this illustrates the influence that local civilians could exert on federal officials in terms of deploying assets to quell disputes and enforce laws. Furthermore, it is also an example showing the willingness of white civilians to leverage the power of the Freedmen's Bureau.

Yet, this event also reminded Culver of his limited ability to enforce the laws in Navarro County due to the substantial amount of physical space for which he was responsible. Assembling a group of men from the surrounding sub-districts required a great deal of time; in fact, a section of troops tasked with assisting Culver with the Registration Board issue in Navarro County failed to arrive until a few days after he already returned from Navarro County.<sup>44</sup> This incident, coupled with the information he received from black civilians in Navarro County during his previous visit, prompted him to request more assets to overcome the obstacles of physical space and limited manpower. Near the end of this letter he wrote, "I would also respectfully request that permission be granted to send to Tyler for a squad of men under the command of a sergeant who has good sense to place in Corsicana and run affairs there under my direction as I can't be there as often as I might. . . the negros will never have confidence in their freedom until a force is permanently stationed there."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman July 31, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Throughout his tenure as sub-assistant commissioner, Culver displayed a constant effort to engage with the freedpeople in Freestone County, and African Americans demonstrated trust in the bureau agent by continuing to flood his office with complaints. An African American named Jake Ross reported that a man named Overstreet had “assaulted him with intent to kill. . . Overstreet has a witness who is reported the most notorious liar in the county.”<sup>46</sup> Another freedman, Josiah Leonard, reported that James Burleson and a gang severely beat him in December 1865; Culver also added that the Burlesons were “notorious for hunting Union men.”<sup>47</sup> Culver’s cryptic language in his reports implies that local civilians were instrumental in keeping him abreast of affairs in the county. He wrote, “The feelings of the whites toward [freedmen] are vindictive and many reports of murderous assaults (which I am going to find out as to their trouble) have reached my ears.”<sup>48</sup> Culver probably used this coded language to protect the identity of his informants in the event hostile parties intercepted his communications with the state Freedmen’s Bureau headquarters. In one instance of attempting to protect informants, Culver requested to secretly send an African-American material witness in a murder case named Aaron Harris to another county for his protection. Union men and freedpeople in his district were “intimidated by the disaffected portion of the population.”<sup>49</sup> Additionally, this coded language shows that the spirit of rumor about specific hostile civilians circulated not only among freedpeople, but also among federal officials.

It is simple to explain freedpeople’s interactions with Culver with their numerous complaints as an indicator of black civilians’ reliance on federal officials to intervene on their

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<sup>46</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman August 1, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman August 8, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to [unknown addressee] August 1, 1867 BRFAL Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 4.

behalf in situations that restricted their political and social freedoms. However, dependence was not the only characteristic of this relationship, and black civilians' complaints also had broader meanings. From the beginning of his appointment as sub-assistant commissioner, Culver displayed a constant need for information to understand the large environment under his supervision. Complaints served as a metric that aided Culver in evaluating the state of affairs in specific spaces. Culver and his small force could accomplish, measure, and physically monitor little without black civilians first having the courage to consult federal officials with the various issues they faced. Although blacks' reports of physical abuse, labor contract violations, murders, and other matters were not necessarily signs of the successful and smooth implementation of Reconstruction policies, these reports were expressions of confidence in the federal government and constituted the first step to stabilizing these volatile communities. However, an absence of complaints was definitely not a certain sign gesturing toward political and social stability in specific spaces. In fact, lack of complaints from freedpeople to federal officers was often more problematic than actually receiving them.

Space continued to be an obstacle for Culver in both enforcing the laws and monitoring the enforcement of laws. In September 1867, the overwhelmed and exhausted agent again expressed his concerns about the amount of space for which he was responsible and the inadequate manpower under his command, "I am compelled to be moving around the country embracing 2,800 square miles having only nine men. I am unable to send them when their presence would have a good effect. In some parts of the country the freedmen, are afraid to tell me the injuries that have been and or are being inflicted upon them."<sup>50</sup> The action of not sharing information about their issues was still a means by which African Americans communicated

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<sup>50</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman September 1, 1867 BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

important details about certain spaces. If black civilians were afraid to communicate with bureau officials, this action still served as a metric for these officials to evaluate conditions within those communities. Fear meant that Reconstruction policies had failed or only minimally successful. During Culver's first visit to Corsicana, freedpeople expressed their fears about repercussions from hostile white civilians, if whites observed them publicly engaging a bureau agent.

Based on Culver's views, the presence of soldiers would give African Americans more confidence in the federal government's power and would enable the Freedmen's Bureau to obtain more information about conditions in those regions. African Americans' trepidations about sharing local knowledge due to white intimidation prevented bureau agents from ascertaining reliable information about the state of affairs in isolated environments outside of federal control. "There are nine men stationed here and the number is so small and insufficient that I have been compelled to ask for more as much as the county demands."<sup>51</sup> Clearly space was an obstacle for the bureau in this sub-district with such a small force, but Culver offered a potential solution for overcoming this shortfall, "If a non-commissioned officer having good sense and a little education could be stationed at Corsicana Navarro Co. with a squad of men and there to act under my supervision that that part of the country would be heretofore and I would be able to pay more attention to Limestone and Freestone Co."<sup>52</sup>

Throughout his tenure as sub-assistant commissioner, the oppression of distance continued to hamper Culver's efforts to provide adequate protection to freedpeople across Freestone, Limestone, and Navarro Counties. Despite his repeated request for more troops to preserve law and order in his sub-district, the monthly reports of personnel assignments for the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas show that between eleven and thirteen soldiers were available for

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

service in Culver's sub-district during his time as sub-assistant commissioner.<sup>53</sup> It would be folly to suggest that the Assistant State Commissioner ignored Culver's request for more troops. The army and bureau manpower shortages during Reconstruction have been well documented by historians and similar reports from other districts consistently engulfed the bureau.<sup>54</sup> The violence throughout Texas and the prioritization of deploying troops to the northern and western frontier depleted the army's manpower and probably prevented the bureau from allocating more troops to Culver's district.

Most revealing about Culver's experiences is the language in his reports on the statuses of the three counties encompassing his sub-district. Culver exhibited a level of confidence about the state of affairs in Freestone County that he simply did not exude in his reports about the other two counties, especially Navarro County. Culver's constant presence and engagement with freedpeople in Freestone County allowed him to obtain detailed knowledge about this space that he was unable to obtain in Navarro County. The bureau agent exhibited this confidence with the level of detail he provided in his lengthy reports about incidents and people in Freestone County. He often addressed African Americans, criminals, as well as hostile and loyal white civilians by their names. Specifically, Culver addressed issues with labor contract disputes, distribution of cotton for black sharecroppers, the status of schoolhouse construction for African Americans, unlawful imprisonment, and other matters. Knowledge about this plethora of issues, based largely on his engagement with black civilians provided him with a very specific and detailed metric for analyzing the successes and failures of implementing Reconstruction policies.

However, this confidence did not extend to Navarro County. His discussion of civilians in this space was always in the abstract using blanket terms like "disloyal community" and

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<sup>53</sup> BRFAL Texas Assistant Commissioner Records Reel 19 Roster of Bureau Personnel and Assigned Districts for June, July, August, September, October, and November 1867.

<sup>54</sup> Richter, *The Army in Texas during Reconstruction, 1865-1870*; Downs, *After Appomattox*.

"freedmen" which is evidence that he has was unable to leverage the same information and grow as familiar with the populace as he did in Freestone County. Reports on Navarro and Limestone County were extremely sparse compared to those on Freestone County. There were no specific details concerning specific names of criminals, hostile legal officials, freedpeople, information about schoolhouses, labor contracts, cotton, and other matters.

Culver proved to be extremely unpopular with the majority of the white population due to his relationships with and efforts on behalf of the African American community in his district; white civilians from Freestone County sent a request to the governor of Texas requesting his removal as sub-assistant commissioner.<sup>55</sup> Culver reported one instance where he met a white civilian in Freestone County who asked if Culver was a "military man" and "if [he] had come to relieve Captain Culver."<sup>56</sup> Culver lied about his identity, and the civilian informed Culver about how unpopular the bureau agent was in the district and that Culver had allegedly stolen five thousand dollars from the freedpeople in the county.<sup>57</sup> Charles Culver continued requesting additional support, "I have written several times to Head Quarters stating the awkward situation in which I am placed by having no Cavalry or means to transport men from point to point. The other day I traveled 50 miles to get a Desperado."<sup>58</sup> According to Culver, "At a meeting one day I am told by union men that a half dozen revolvers were pointed at me. If I can't have means to stop this, I will have to resign."<sup>59</sup> In his despair, the overwhelmed bureau agent requested permission to employ African Americans for martial purposes in Freestone County. He wrote,

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<sup>55</sup> Written appeal from citizens of Freestone County to remove Charles Culver as a Bureau Agent, November 19, 1867, Texas Governor James Webb Throckmorton records. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Box 2014-861-4, Folder 107.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver to Lieutenant J.S. Kirkman November 1, 1867, BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Cotton Gin.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Letter from Charles E. Culver [addressee's name is illegible] September 4, 1867 BRFAL Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 7.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

“The Negroes will stand by me in any thing but I don’t know how far you would back me in using them as a means of offense and defence.”<sup>60</sup> In this statement, the bureau agent expressed extreme confidence in his relationship with black civilians in Freestone who he had worked closely with during the previous months. The request to employ them black civilians for military purposes also represents a step beyond reliance upon them for strictly informational purposes.

Sadly, Culver did not resign his position soon enough to save his own life; Culver’s unpopularity with hostile white civilians ultimately led to his murder in November 1867.<sup>61</sup> The *Dallas Herald* expressed no sympathy for his death reporting, “The only wonder is that he was suffered to live so long.”<sup>62</sup> Ironically, Culver’s death may have been the impetus for the Freedmen’s Bureau finally responding to the beleaguered agent’s desperate pleas for more troops to police the volatile sub-district. In December 1867, Captain Robert P. Wilson assumed command of the district with an entire company of soldiers (approximately 50-100 men) who would remain there until March 1868.<sup>63</sup>

In March 1868, the Freedmen’s Bureau relieved Wilson from duty and more importantly, removed the company of troops from the district. Around this time, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock began shifting most of the troops in Texas from the interior to the western and northern Texas frontier for military campaigns against the Native Americans.<sup>64</sup> Robert Wilson’s company was probably a part of this group redeployed west. Clearly, the government began prioritizing the stability of frontier white settlements and the establishment of white supremacy over the Native Americans in the West than providing security for African Americans in the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> James Smallwood, “Charles E. Culver, A Reconstruction Agent in Texas: The Work of Local Freedmen’s Bureau Agents and the Black Community,” *Civil War History* 27, no. 4 (1981): 361.

<sup>62</sup> *Dallas Herald* November 30, 1867, p.2.

<sup>63</sup> BRFAL Texas Assistant Commissioner Records Reel 19 Roster of Bureau Personnel and Assigned Districts for December 1867, January, February 1868.

<sup>64</sup> Richter, *The Army in Texas during Reconstruction, 1865-1870*, 134–136.



interior of the state. Responsibility for Freestone County shifted to the bureau office under John K. Morrison in Anderson County (Palestine, Texas) which was over thirty miles away, and Charles Haughn assumed command of Limestone and Navarro counties from the bureau station in Waco (also over 30 miles away).<sup>65</sup> Consequently, the familiar foes of distance, unfamiliar territory, and shortages of manpower also plagued these agents, requiring them like Charles Culver to rely on local informants to keep them apprised of conditions in these spaces.

Yet, distance did not deter freedpeople from traveling through the dangerous Texas countryside to approach federal officials in distant stations to provide information about their respective communities and request assistance. In April of 1868 Charles Haughn reported from the Waco bureau office, “The freedmen of Limestone have called on me. . . to see what can be done by the bureau toward building a schoolhouse.”<sup>66</sup> The freedpeople came to Charles Haughn with a detailed plan related to the schoolhouse’s construction process in terms of allocating land for the building as well as estimate for the amount of days required to build it. Charles Haughn requested assistance with finding a mechanic to help them build it.<sup>67</sup> At the time, Haughn, based out of the Waco Office, was responsible for administering bureau affairs in ten counties (including Limestone and Navarro counties).<sup>68</sup> Haughn did not mention Limestone and Navarro counties often in his reports. He briefly referenced Freestone County in response to a letter from the state Freedmen’s Bureau Headquarters asking if it was safe to station a bureau agent in that county (no doubt considering Culver’s recent death). Haughn wrote in his reply, “I do not fear to go to Cotton Gin and discharge those duties though it is considered by almost everyone to be

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<sup>65</sup> Google maps to measure distance between counties; BRFAL Texas Assistant Commissioner Records Reel 19 Roster of Bureau Personnel and Assigned Districts for March-September 1868.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Charles Haughn to Captain C.S. Roberts, April 8, 1868. BRFAL Texas Field Office Records, Waco.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Roster of Bureau Personnel for the month of April, BRFAL, Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 19.

very unsafe.”<sup>69</sup> In this particular instance, the local knowledge circulating to Waco indicated that there was great notoriety surrounding Freestone County.

Meanwhile in Freestone County, hostile white civilians encouraged by the absence of troops and understanding the value of black and loyal white informants to the Freedmen’s Bureau, began targeting such people for murder. A group of men forcibly removed Mark Walker, a freedman, from his home in a murder attempt. One of the assailants pressed his revolver to Walker’s head and stated, “You can report to your friend Culver tomorrow about us. He is in hell and we going to send you there too.” After a brief struggle and despite a gunshot wound to his leg, Walker successfully escaped from his assailants and sought treatment from a local doctor. The doctor informed Walker that, “he had heard men talking about killing [Walker] for reporting to Captain Culver about the burning [of] the colored schoolhouse.” Walker also learned that the white residents of the county were angry with the black residents for joining the Union League and that they planned to take revenge on these residents because there were no longer any U.S. troops assigned to protect the black residents. Walker concluded his testimony by stating, “I had no quarrel with any of these men who assaulted me. They told me that it was because I reported the burning of the school house (colored) to Capt. Culver and because I was head of the league.” Walker then provided the names of three more individuals who his assailants had labeled as their next targets.<sup>70</sup> James Eaton Haynes, who accompanied Mark Walker on his escape from the same group of assailants to Waco and Austin, also confirmed the identity of the assailants. Haynes stated that “they had frequently threatened to kill the League

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<sup>69</sup>Letter from Charles Haughn to Charles A Vernon, April 14, 1868, BRFAL, Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 12.

<sup>70</sup>Mark Walker, Affidavit June 18, 1868. Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands Assistant Commissioner of the State of Texas Reel 32.

Men.” During his testimony, Haynes also reported the murders of three freedmen in Freestone, Limestone, and Navarro Counties that had occurred in the spring of 1868.<sup>71</sup>

Walker, with Haynes’ assistance, had supervised the construction of the African-American schoolhouse in Freestone County.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, Walker was a political leader in the local Union League. As a result, both freedmen, as leaders within the local black community probably had a very close relationship with Culver in keeping him apprised of conditions related to politics, crimes against freedpeople, and labor relations to accompany the information they provided about the status of the schoolhouse. With such a large African-American demographic in Freestone County, hostile white civilians with a significant stake in maintaining the traditional racial hierarchy began targeting these local black leaders who doubled as informants to federal officials. The absence of federal officials and assets to enforce the laws in this space allowed white civilians to take measures to silence local informants.

The strategy was evident to John K. Morrison during his trip to Freestone County in May 1868. Morrison, a bureau agent with over a year of experience administering the district in Anderson County visited Freestone County to assess conditions of the freedpeople. Despite his lengthy experience as a federal official in a hostile environment, his observations about Freestone County still shocked him. He began his report by stating, “I have never [seen] in my life as harsh feelings toward freedmen as I did on my trip through Freestone County.” He continued his somber report by stating, “The freed people are in perfect fear of being murdered.” According to Morrison, hostile white civilians had threatened to shoot any African American they witnessed speaking to him. Morrison also wrote, “I was notified not to speak to the freedmen on the subject of school or any other subject. I was further notified that my life was in

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<sup>71</sup> James Eaton Haynes Affidavit June 19, 1868, BRFAL Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 32.

<sup>72</sup> Letter from Charles Haughn to Charles A Vernon, April 17, 1868, BRFAL, Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 12.

danger and that no schools were needed in Freestone County. It is unsafe for me to visit Freestone County any time.”<sup>73</sup>

David S. Beath, another bureau agent, temporarily assigned to Freestone County made similar observations about this space in August 1868. “I shall endeavor to have a school house erected for the benefit of the [freedmen] as soon as practicable as the freedmen are very much in need of one at the present time.”<sup>74</sup> Beath added that “ill-disposed persons” had strongly discouraged the local freedpeople from participating in their “lodge meetings,” which was probably a political meeting for the Union League. Again, this is a reflection of African American priorities related to education and the freedom to organize politically. At the same time, unfriendly whites in the county recognized these priorities and the potential impact on white supremacy, if they allowed black civilians to engage federal officials.

Morrison’s report illustrates the significant costs to black civilians resulting from the absence of federal authorities during Reconstruction, but it also reveals a shift in tactics among white civilians who were hostile to black political and social mobilization. Their experience under Culver’s tenure as sub assistant commissioner had taught hostile white civilians that they needed to constantly intimidate freedpeople to prevent them from establishing relationships with federal officials and providing information to them. Because it was Morrison’s first visit to Freestone County, he needed to consult with local black civilians to ascertain the status of schools at the time to request any necessary assets such as teachers, funds, building materials, and other resources to assist the freedpeople. Again, the fact that one of the first things that hostile white civilians mentioned to Morrison was African American schools, shows how

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<sup>73</sup> Letter from John Morrison to Lieutenant J.D. Richardson May 18, 1868 BRFAL Assistant State Commissioner Records Reel 13.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from David S. Beath to Charles A. Vernon, August 19, 1868, BRFAL Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 10.

important schools were for the black community in Freestone County. Clearly, the schoolhouse remained a point of contention between whites and blacks in this community for over a year.

Two reports of crimes committed against freedpeople outside of the district encompassing Freestone, Navarro, and Limestone counties demonstrates that similar civilian informant structures between black civilians and federal officials potentially existed in other areas of Texas. In Fort Bend County on May 28, 1867, a white man named Henry Frost assaulted “with intent to kill” John Balass, a black man. According to his report of the incident, Balass was traveling to meet the local Freedmen’s Bureau agent and to report Frost for breach of contract or abuse. Frost intercepted Balass along the journey and wounded Balass after shooting him with his pistol. Ten days later a second incident occurred in the same county. Daniel G. Davis, another white man, murdered a black man named John Pickett as he passed Pickett on his horse. According to the report, Davis did not know and had never spoken with Pickett; Pickett was simply sitting on the steps of the bureau agent’s office.<sup>75</sup> These cases offer an alternative lens for viewing informants to federal officials. In the first case, Frost knew that Balass was close to sharing important information with the bureau agent and intervened directly to stop him. In the second incident, Davis was not acquainted with Pickett, but may have resented the fact that the Freedmen’s Bureau existed or viewed Pickett as a potential black informant whose knowledge could potentially influence the exertion of federal power against Davis’ benefit.

Another incident occurring in Waco also demonstrates the level of influence that local civilians’ knowledge had on federal officials’ actions. Women also functioned as local informants. In May 1868, a woman, identified in the records as Mrs. Dial, reported that her husband and brother as missing to Charles Haughn, the bureau agent in Waco. Haughn did not

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<sup>75</sup> Pamphlet of Criminal Offenses Committed in the State of Texas , Letters, Messages, Communications, and Proclamations, Elisha M. Pease Papers, Austin Public Library, Box 46, Folder 19.

explicitly address the Mrs. Dial's race, so it is unclear if she was African American or white. Mrs. Dial feared that her husband and brother had been murdered; during her search for her relatives, she discovered seven corpses which she recognized. Dial also stated that she knew the names of the murderers as well as the identities of witnesses who would testify against them. Dial requested the deployment of troops to Waco to capture the criminals and protect the witnesses. Additionally, she promised to act as a guide for the troops on their arrival because she knew "[the] time the [suspects] can be caught together, as they have frequent meetings."<sup>76</sup> Regardless of whether or not Dial was a freedwoman or white woman, it is another demonstration of the desire for physical security in the face of the perpetual violence in Texas during Reconstruction.

While it is often easy to categorize freedpeople's complaints to bureau agents and army officers as a sign of dependency on the federal government, this only tells half of the story. Freedpeople's complaints and information about affairs in specific were also very valuable for these federal officials. Persistent manpower shortages throughout Texas made monitoring all affairs and incidents occurring in these environments physically impossible. Therefore, African Americans and loyal whites had to seize the initiative and provide information about these affairs and incidents to these federal officials. These complaints and local knowledge were instrumental in assisting the Freedmen's Bureau and the U.S. Army in understanding and navigating new spaces as well as providing a useful metric for determining the effectiveness of Reconstruction policies. However, these complaints and local issues were also signs of African Americans' priorities in social, economic, and political advancements they hoped to obtain during Reconstruction. A climate of confusion driven by complex bureaucracies and the continued

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<sup>76</sup> Letter from Charles Haughn to Lieutenant J.S. Richardson, May 18, 1868, BRFAL, Assistant State Commissioner Records, Reel 12.

contest between federal, state, and local authority often confounded Reconstruction efforts; local civilian informants were often essential to bringing some semblance of order to that confusion.

