Ann Virginia Brown, a freedwoman living in Fairfax County, Virginia, in 1865, “was not going to work.”1 After her family was freed at the close of the American Civil War, she drew rations from the Freedmen’s Bureau, a relief agency of the Department of War, to help feed and clothe her family. When Captain Georges Armes, the Freedmen’s Bureau’s assistant superintendent of Fairfax County, realized that Ann Brown took rations as an unemployed mother, he urged her to find employment. She rejected his suggestion, stating that “when she was a slave, she did not have to do anything but take care of children.”2 Now that she was free, she believed she could make her own decisions about her family and her labor. After Georges Armes proposed that Brown work for Mrs. Spear, a white woman who lived

1Letter from Georges A. Armes to John F. Marsh, September 6, 1865, NARA microfilm publication M1913 College Park, Maryland: National Archives and Records Administration, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters sent, Aug 1865–Oct 1868, image 31 of 146. The National Archives contains the Freedmen’s Bureau records. Copies of these documents are available through familysearch.org. The documents that I have cited in this paper can be found under FamilySearch’s collection labeled “Virginia, Freedmen’s Bureau Office Records, 1865–1872.” FamilySearch organizes Virginia’s records by the Freedmen’s Bureau office or subordinate field locations. All of my documents are categorized under Fairfax Courthouse (Fairfax County, assistant subassistant commissioner).

about a mile away from her home, again “she stated she would not go anyhow.” She refused to leave her children at home to work for a white woman’s children. Frustrated with her rejection of his orders, Armes “sent a guard without arms with instructions to work or she would have to be punished.”

This paper employs Fairfax County, the northern Virginia county in which Ann Brown lived, as a case study for analyzing the relationships between the black experience of labor, gender, and family during Reconstruction. I explore the interactions of freedwomen, like Ann Brown, with Freedmen’s Bureau agents, freedmen, and white southern men, focusing on how ideologies of gender and race shaped each group’s beliefs about and behavior towards freedwomen. Even though she was free, Ann Virginia Brown quickly recognized that the free labor system encouraged by the Freedmen’s Bureau agents prohibited her choice to not work for other people. She believed that freedom meant she could choose how to use her labor, so she disregarded the bureau agent’s recommendations and insisted that she would not work. By forcing her to work for a white woman in the area, Armes demonstrated the bureau’s commitment to decreasing freed people’s dependency on the government, and more significantly, his decisions revealed the tension that existed between freed people and bureau agents in post-emancipation Virginia.

The history of black families and their labor has been profoundly affected by historians’ politics, as many scholars have interpreted history to justify or criticize contemporary American society. The accounts of Reconstruction in the early twentieth century by William Dunning, John W. Burgess, and their students, for example, defended the exclusions of Jim Crow by insisting that white people needed to control the childish behavior and brutish labor of African Americans. They characterized Freedmen’s Bureau agents as incompetent and as extreme abolitionists who intruded upon southern society. Dunning and his followers believed that “it was not strange” that the southern governments created black codes to protect people

---


from the “pressing dangers” of black freedom.\(^5\)

By rejecting the Dunning School, W. E. B. Du Bois established himself as one of the first revisionist historians and a lone voice advocating for more focus on and nuance in black history. His interpretation of Reconstruction was a direct contrast to the Dunning School, as he emphasized the agency of African Americans and believed that “the Freedmen’s Bureau was the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted.” He argued in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) that white elites enforced racial hierarchy because racism was integral to capitalism, stunting the ideals of Reconstruction and resulting “in subordination of colored labor to white profits.”\(^6\)

Historians of Reconstruction in the second half of the twentieth century followed Du Bois’s lead by treating black people seriously as agents, reflecting the modern civil rights movement by confronting traditional interpretations of history that were based upon and also supported society’s beliefs in inherent racial inferiority. The pioneering work of Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976), challenged Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist serving as Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson, who claimed that black families were destroyed by slavery and a pervasive matriarchy deprived black children of complete family life. Gutman asserted the strength of slave marriages, despite their lack of legal standing and frequent forced separations caused by slaveowners.\(^7\) His extensive study on the black family from the plantation era

---


\(^{7}\) Moynihan’s analysis was inspired by Edward Franklin Frazier, who questioned the prevailing view that the social position of African Americans was genetically determined as intellectually and morally inferior by arguing that African culture had been erased due to slavery. Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action* (n.p.: US Department of Labor, 1965).
to emancipation emphasized resiliency among African Americans and demonstrated the prevalence of two-parent households. Following Gutman’s lead, historians supported him by stressing the strength of Civil War-era relationships and families.⁸

Although Reconstruction failed to live up to its ideals, contemporary historians recognize that the period did change southern society. Most historians would agree that the end of the Civil War allowed more opportunities for freed people to self-define their relationships. However, they disagree on the specific aspirations of postwar black communities and the degree of success in achieving those goals. Eric Foner’s analysis of Reconstruction, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (1988), places the African American experience at the forefront, observing the progress of Reconstruction while noting the failures to enact substantial change and liberation. He analyzes the meaning of freedom and the ideology of free labor, discussing the accomplishments of Reconstruction, including “autonomous black family and a network of religious and social institutions.”⁹

In the last few decades, historians have studied the lives of black women and children, stressing that the term *freed people*, which historians had been using to describe the black experience, only illustrated black men’s experiences. These historians studied the experiences of black women and children, emphasizing their differing struggles and interactions with white southern people and bureau agents. Karin Zipf argues in *Labor of Innocents: Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina, 1715–1919* (2003) that involuntary apprenticeships disproportionately affected children from free black families in North Carolina. During Reconstruction, even though African American parents and relatives could speak out against white oppression, black mothers continued

---


to struggle to retain custody of their own children from white elites who desired their cheap labor. In “Ties that Bind” (2010), Catherine Jones explores how kinship ties could be used to reunite families and provide labor for the family. Children acted as supporters as well as dependents of the household. Mary Farmer Kaiser studied gendered assumptions by northern bureau agents and the agency of black women “who demanded that their particular gendered needs be recognized by these policy makers of Reconstruction.”

Historians have conducted relatively little research on black experiences during Reconstruction in Fairfax County. Donald Sweig has researched slavery in Fairfax County and developed demographic and statistical information on the county during the Civil War era. Charles V. Mauro offers a basic history of Fairfax County during the Civil War in The Civil War in Fairfax County. Debbie Robison, a historic preservation consultant, has created a website that compiles information on the education of African Americans living in Fairfax County during Reconstruction. No one has interpreted or studied freedwomen’s experiences in the county.

This paper will use some of the data unearthed by these historians to fill in the interpretive holes about freedwomen during post–Civil War society in Fairfax County. I analyze Freedmen’s Bureau records—which include letters, teacher reports, and superintendent reports—that provide detailed accounts of daily problems and activities to illustrate the Fairfax County black community’s desires for social and economic autonomy. Newspapers like the Friends’ Intelligencer, Alexandria Gazette, and Daily Republican provide information about white

---


11 Donald Mitchell Sweig, “Northern Virginia Slavery: A Statistical and Demographic Investigation” (PhD diss., College of William and Mary, 1982).

12 Charles V. Mauro, The Civil War in Fairfax County: Civilians and Soldiers (Charleston: The History Press, 2006).

communities’ attitudes towards freed people and offer examples of black individuals who experienced this first generation of emancipation in Fairfax County. Although it is difficult to find freedwomen’s voices in newspapers and the records of the Fairfax County Freedmen’s Bureau, their refusal to follow orders, requests for help, and demands for justice are well-documented in bureau reports, which illustrate their expectations for freedom.

Fairfax County in northern Virginia appears distinctive from other Virginia counties because in 1860 most counties east of the Appalachian Mountains enslaved almost half or over half of their populations, while Fairfax County enslaved just 27.9 percent of the population. However, in 1810 47.5 percent of the population was enslaved in Fairfax. This change corresponded to the county’s agricultural depression, which developed due to excessive farming. In the absence of a major agricultural staple, people relied on marketing and fishing.

The county, which bordered the District of Columbia, also appears unique because of an influx of northerners, consisting primarily of Quakers from Pennsylvania and New York, who immigrated to the area prior to the war. In the 1840s northern farmers took advantage of cheap land in northern Virginia by buying abandoned farms in Fairfax and Loudon Counties. Captain Orrin E. Hine, the Assistant Superin-

---

14 In the 1860s, the Barnes family owned Hope Park plantation, where they enslaved twelve people in 1860. Twenty to thirty estates in Fairfax County compared or surpassed the value of the Hope Park plantation. Over two hundred county residents owned an equal or greater number of people. Martin Petersilia and Russel Wright, Hope Park and the Hope Park Mill (Fairfax, VA: Fairfax County Office of Comprehensive Planning, 1978); population estimates taken from a map published in 1861 using the 1860 consensus records. Compiled by Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. Edwin Hergesheimer, Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States (Washington, DC: Henry S. Graham, 1861), https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3861e.cw0013200/.

15 United States Decennial Census, 1810; Nan Netherton and Daniel Sweig, Fairfax County, Virginia: A History (Fairfax, VA: Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, 1978), 154.

16 The land in Fairfax sold for five dollars to fifteen dollars per acre compared to farms of similar intrinsic value in the north selling for forty dollars to seventy dollars an acre. These farmers brought with them new agricultural practices and a free-labor ideology. They quickly developed a secondary objective of demonstrating that farms could operate profitably with free rather than enslaved labor. By 1847 about two hundred northern families, amounting to over one thousand people, had moved to Fairfax County. Netherton and Sweig, Fairfax County, Virginia, 255–56, 239.
tendent of Fairfax County in 1866, noted in a letter to Superintendent Samuel P. Lee of the Sixth Educational District in Virginia that “notwithstanding a large number of northern people live in this county, the general sentiment is bitterly rebel, and consequently antagonistic to the education and prosperity of the freedmen—and the proximity to Washington is all that prevents more frequent and often outrages than now occurs.” In contrast with other Virginia counties, Fairfax allows us to study the actions of a mixed northern and southern society that also relied less on enslaved labor. One could assume that these qualities would correlate with enhanced abolitionist support and sympathy for African American neighbors, but I will demonstrate that new northerners, proximity to the District of Columbia, and a more moderate reliance on slavery did not diminish Fairfax’s heritage as a county of the Old South.

I argue that freedwomen actively struggled against freedmen, white southern men, and the Freedmen’s Bureau, asserting their new free status by refusing to submit to desires that would require outsourcing control of their children or surrendering their humanity and womanhood. Although men used gender roles to subjugate women, freedwomen often used men’s expectations of male and female household roles to resist the aspects of men’s visions of black emancipation that curtailed freedwomen’s vision of freedom. Black women from Fairfax who experienced emancipation wanted justice provided by the Freedmen’s Bureau, financial support from their male partners, and independence from white southerners. They wanted control of their bodies, their children, and the freedom to choose their labor. To do so, they resisted and attempted to manipulate the three major groups of men in Fairfax by adopting the image of the helpless woman, dutiful wife, and devoted mother in order to claim control of their bodies, labor, and children.

However, as demonstrated through the three sections of my paper (which focus on freedwomen’s interactions with white southern men, with freedmen, and with the Freedmen’s Bureau), women struggled to realize their vision of freedom due to opposing opinions about what black labor and family should look like. A willing but ineffective

---

Freedmen’s Bureau based its decisions on the government’s priority of reducing freed people’s dependency on the government. The Freedmen’s Bureau united families and encouraged marriages so that women and children relied on a male breadwinner instead of the bureau. Women also struggled to assert their families’ financial independence when their partners, who envisioned controlling their own labor and families in emancipation, abused or abandoned them. Maintaining custody of their children was also difficult when white elites, who wanted to preserve their command and control of black labor, manipulated and kidnapped black children for cheap labor.

White Southern Men

White southern men in Fairfax County resented emancipation, as black freedom challenged their notions of white masculinity rooted in paternalistic behavior towards and mastery over black people. In order to maintain their masculinity through social and economic superiority, white men kidnapped children, manipulated children, refused to pay their employees, and attempted to control black men’s politics. Even though black men sometimes made complaints about white men abusing their family members, black women were more likely to seek the bureau’s help in resisting white attempts to control their family and their labor in Fairfax County. Black women frequently complained to bureau agents about white men who kidnapped or refused to return children to their families. Nancy Bercaw argues that more often black women, not men, laid claim to wages withheld from them and prosecuted assaults from employers.

Women in Fairfax absolutely followed this model, as most complaints about white abuse came from them. For example, Donah Keys asked the bureau to help her regain her daughter Celia from Robert Guy, who took the child on his boat at Alexandria and “carried her away.” The bureau agent went to Guy’s house and “left a note directing him

---

to send the child."\textsuperscript{21} Another unnamed woman enlisted the bureau’s help in regaining “two of her children [who] are with a Mr. Hite . . . who refuses to give them up.”\textsuperscript{22} Men like Robert Guy and Mr. Hite acted as both a master and parent, believing that they deserved to provide for black children and profit from their labor. These men attempted to force vulnerable freed children into apprenticeships to extend the life of slavery in emancipation.\textsuperscript{23} However, some women used their free status, and particularly their status as free women, to enlist the help of the bureau in regaining their children. For example, Mrs. Ages complained to the bureau that Alfred Leigh, “a notorious rascal,” took her daughter (Ellen) and “is ransoming the child for $30.”\textsuperscript{24} The agent asserted that “Mrs. Ages is a very fine appearing lady has always lived here, is of very good character.”\textsuperscript{25} Mrs. Ages resisted white attempts to control her child by using her “fine appearance” and “very good character” not only as a free woman but as a free lady in the eyes of this commissioner to persuade him to help and side with her.\textsuperscript{26} White southern men often ridiculed black women who emulated white women by wearing clothes that white women wore. Through mockery, they differentiated white women from black women and justified treating them differently, such as by forcefully taking their children. So it is remarkable that Mrs. Ages and other women in Fairfax succeeded in convincing the white agents of their identities as dutiful wives and devoted mothers, which white southern men did not believe.

Married black mothers were more likely to achieve the sympathy of the Freedmen’s Bureau than single mothers, exemplified by white

\textsuperscript{22} Letter from Nancy Williams, September 27, 1868, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 85 of 86.
\textsuperscript{23} Zipf, Labor of Innocents, 41–47.
\textsuperscript{24} Letter from Sidney Smith to J. W. Bushong, November 6, 1865, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 30 of 86.
\textsuperscript{25} Letter from Sidney Smith to J. W. Bushong, November 6, 1865, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 30 of 86.
\textsuperscript{26} Letter from Sidney Smith to J. W. Bushong, November 6, 1865, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 30 of 86.
families who successfully manipulated children and the bureau by claiming that they could better provide for black children who were being raised by single African American mothers. Eliza Chinn, a single mother, wanted her children to live with her instead of the white family with which they lived. According to the bureau agent, “both children are well satisfied with their present position.” In order to discredit the single mother, the agent claimed that Chinn “is very intemperate and has a notorious bad character.” In another letter, Daniel Dulaney wrote “on behalf [of the] little colored girl” and described her mother as “a miserable and unthrifty creature,” in contrast with the white married woman who “has long since expressed to me her intention of giving her [the child] a part of her estate.” He believed that the little girl was “most anxious to remain where she is” and “better cared for than most of the whites in the U.S.” Although the bureau tended to side with the married black women of Fairfax, single women often did not gain the support that married women received. Kaiser suggests that the bureau promoted “a Victorian gender ideology that valued the dutiful wife,” which allowed agents to support some women while rejecting others. White families that recognized the bureau agents’ bias took advantage of it.

However, married women in Fairfax also struggled to control their children when white families expressed interest in the “well-being” of the black child. Mrs. Stott tried to regain her children after she bound them to two different white men. The bureau agent noted the white families’ care of the children, learning that they “were sent to school

29 Letter from Daniel F. Dulaney, September 1, 1866, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 52 & 53 of 86.
31 Kaiser, Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau, 10.
32 Children in families too poor to care for them were often apprenticed, or “bound out,” to a trade. The “master” or professional was expected to feed, clothe, and house the child in exchange for their labor.
all last winter.”33 When he told the children that they would have to return to their parents, “they said they would not leave their present homes, and burst into tears.”34 Although these children were “treated with the tenderest care” and were sent to school by the white families, they were still bound to the families as laborers. The children were expected to work, and the white families benefited from the black children’s labor. The white family assumed paternalistic behavior by treating the children well, effectively manipulating them into believing that their current situation was better than living with family. Mrs. Stott did not regain custody of her children because the bureau agent recommended that the children stay in their present situations. White families effectively manipulated the children and the agent into believing that they could provide for the children better than their mother. Whether or not the white families truly cared for the children, they used the child by benefiting from his or her labor.

Not only did white men steal and manipulate children, but when they created lawful contracts, they often refused to pay their employees. Jacqueline Jones claims that reports of abuse and inadequate pay were “exceptional only in that they were reported to northern officials.”35 In Fairfax, women frequently reported white men who refused to pay them and other members of their family. For example, Jenny Hunter complained that “she was not paid for six months of work,” and Harriet Gaddis claimed, “William Cartwright has not paid her daughter.”36 The fact that women in Fairfax frequently reached out to bureau officials suggests that they felt comfortable working with bureau officials and believed in their ability to enforce justice. When black women accused white men of taking advantage of them and their children, white men fought against the bureau and claimed their innocence. Enoch

Lowe, a Fairfax native about whom black women had complained at least two other times, did not pay Lucy Whitely’s daughter enough and treated her poorly.\(^{37}\) Lowe said he would “make oath to the statement” that “he never hired her” and charged the mother “for boarding the child.”\(^{38}\) Although the bureau agent believed the freedwoman, as a white man, Enoch Lowe won when he fought her claim in court.

Black women also lost cases when they reported abuse committed by white men. In January of 1867 two white men assaulted Harriet Brown (Follin), a freedwoman, when she refused to cede her home to another man, George M. Cannon. Joseph Follin (presumably her former enslaver) and James Strother went to her house and demanded that she move out. When Harriet Brown refused, “Strother who was inside of the house took her forcibly from the door” and “struck her with a stick, knocking her down onto the bed near which she was then standing.”\(^{39}\) They then removed her furniture from her house and moved Cannon into her former home. The Assistant Superintendent, Orrin E. Hine, ensured that the case was tried in court. According to him, “This grand jury refused to find a true bill against said Follin and Strother notwithstanding there was positive testimony that such crime was committed. In a precisely similar case but in which the offence was committed by colored men upon a white man, this same grand jury reported a true bill. It is impossible to obtain justice or punish crime before such tribunals when the victims are freedmen.”\(^{40}\)

Although black women could resist white men and enlist the bureau agents’ support, most of their trials ended in favor of the white men, who refused to acknowledge the fault of their actions. White juries sided with white defendants.

---

\(^{37}\) Another case of abuse by Enoch Lowe was revealed in a disallowed case of the Southern Claims Commission. Lowe whipped and kidnapped John Jackson, a free man who lived in Broad Run, Fairfax County, before the war because Jackson claimed, “I would like to have my children go to school.” John Jackson (Jackson, no. 19,263), National Archives Record Group 233, Barred and Disallowed Case Files of the Southern Claims Commission, 1871–1880 (Microfiche Publication M1407), https://www.fold3.com/image/27/2219398.

\(^{38}\) Letter from Enoch Lowe, April 26, 1867, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 49 of 86.


White men also tried to maintain control of black labor and families through political coercion. An agent noted that “there seems to be a determination among the whites to make the Freedmen bend to their will in regard to exercising the elective franchise.” White men “discouraged colored hands from voting” in the election of 1867, the first election in which black men’s votes were counted. White southerners not only verbally threatened black men but also created franchise clauses that forced the men “to do as the employer directs in regard to voting.” An agent remarked that “if this should be carried into effect there would be a small portion of land in this county cultivated this next season.” Considering most black women also worked in the fields, this remark demonstrates that the agent believed women who worked alongside men would also refuse to work. In 1867 an agent reported that families were “turned out of houses for voting the Union ticket.” If Fairfax southerners denied black men the freedom to vote independently, agents believed Fairfax black women would resist white southerners in support of the men in their community. Families risked these severe consequences, like eviction, demonstrating both men and women’s eagerness to protect the elective franchise despite white opposition.

**Freedmen**

Freedmen in Fairfax County shared similar aspirations to other freedmen in Virginia. They wanted to escape white supervision and to control their labor and families. They did so by defining their own type of labor, continuing to look for separated family members, and attempting to control their wives and children. Through each of these actions, they declared their masculine role as breadwinner, head of household,

---

42 Letter from O. Brown, November 2, 1867, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 61 of 86.
and authority figure of the family. However, black women adamantly opposed their desires for control when it resulted in their abuse or neglect or their children’s harm.

By making decisions about their own labor, black men attempted to separate themselves from white control. George Moore worked for Robert Ferguson, a white man in Alexandria, for a month and a half in 1866, when he was discharged without wages. Resisting this exploitation, he immediately went to the bureau to complain. The office of the superintendent paid him as a laborer in September 1866.\textsuperscript{46} By November of 1866, he was living in a Freedmen’s Bureau barracks with his wife and two children. While living there in January of 1867,\textsuperscript{47} he applied for a messenger position in Fairfax. In April of 1867, Newton Whitten (Assistant Superintendent of the Bureau in Alexandria) allowed William Shields of Fairfax Courthouse to hire Moore at a rate of twenty dollars per month.\textsuperscript{48} He was a messenger for the assistant commissioner at Falls Church starting in April of 1867.\textsuperscript{49} He was discharged from service of the bureau at the end of August 1867.\textsuperscript{50} Moore’s tumultuous experience with changes in employers illustrates his desire to resist white exploitation and continue reaching for more fruitful labor.


\textsuperscript{49} Reports of persons and articles employed and hired in Tenth Subdistrict VA, June 1867, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 36, reports of persons and articles hired, Apr 1867–Sep 1868, image 188 of 930.

\textsuperscript{50} Newton Whitten, August 31, 1867, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 59 of 86.
Working as a messenger for the bureau presented him with an alternate option for labor that paid fairly well. Although technically he was not free from white supervision, he was not working for his former enslaver or another white southerner like Robert Ferguson, who had more of a capability and desire to exploit his labor.

More common forms of self-defined labor came in the form of black men who wanted to work and own their own land. Eric Foner insists that economic autonomy depended on ownership of land because without it, “their labor could continue to be subject to exploitation by their former owners.” In Fairfax County, freedmen’s aspirations for escaping white control in the form of land ownership were no different. Requests for help from the Freedmen’s Bureau in obtaining land occurred fairly often, and black communities who worked for themselves developed quickly. Although there were many requests for land by black men, few of these requests were realized.

Only a few months after the restored Senate of Virginia voted to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, freedmen in Fairfax petitioned for ownership of their own land. In August of 1865, Stephen Parker, John Grey Thomas, and Albert Parker went to the bureau because they wanted “to lease a place for five years with the privilege of buying it.” George Armes, the Freedmen’s Bureau superintendent at the time, insisted that Justice J. B. Bowman grant a hundred acres and “sell them lumber on credit until they realize enough from their crops to pay you.” These men did not want to farm just for subsistence but to farm for the market. With one hundred acres of land, they did not plan to just survive but to make enough money to enjoy “the material amenities of freedom.” By attempting to buy land and produce crops, these men sought to enforce their role as breadwinners for their families. They believed that with this role came the benefit of escaping white supervision and control of their labor. Although they did not end up owning any land, there were a few communities in Fairfax that developed from freedmen who bought land during these immediate years of Reconstruction.

Foner, *Unfinished Reconstruction*, 104.


Located at present-day Chesterbrook, Lincoln Village was just such a community. Hiram Kinner, Robert Parker, Phelan Robinson, and Milton Edmonds founded this black community in 1866 after they were forced to leave a former contraband camp in Falls Church located on the farm of a man called “Mister Nutt.” The four men gained permission to take the contraband camp log house that the government had constructed for them during the war to Lincoln Village. Y. M. Downey, the man who leased the farm from Nutt, asked the Freedmen’s Bureau in April of 1866 to provide a team of men to haul the log buildings for the freedmen since they did not have a means of moving the buildings themselves. However, the next day he found that “the colored men were hauling away the cabins” and “they all have gotten teams to haul them away.” After spending years in slavery, these four men gathered sympathetic men who were free and enslaved before the war to help them move the cabins that were made for and owned by them. They broke white expectations of their capabilities, refusing to wait for the Freedmen’s Bureau to give them an answer. This leadership and support from the community emphasized strong aspirations for self-determination and ownership. The four men secured lots (outside Lewinsville) sold to them in April of 1866 by James H. Crocker and Union general John S. Crocker, migrants from New York who regularly subdivided farms and sold lots to former slaves. Buying land was essential to acquiring independence from white southerners, and women absolutely supported men who sought economic independence through this approach.

West Ford, freed around 1806 by the terms of the will of George Washington’s sister-in-law, founded the Gum Springs community (near Mount Vernon). A skilled carpenter, Ford worked for three generations of people who descended from Washington at Mount Vernon. Bushrod Washington bequeathed him a tract of land, which Ford sold to purchase 214 acres near a stand of gum trees adjacent to the Mount Vernon property. In 1857 Ford divided that land among his four children. Two of them stayed and formed the nucleus of a community,

---

55 Letter from Y. M. Downy to S. P. Lee, April 4, 1866, NARA 1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 47, unregistered letters sent and received 1863–1866, image 917–918 of 987.
56 Letter from Y. M. Downy to S. P. Lee, April 4, 1866, NARA 1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 47, unregistered letters sent and received 1863–1866, image 917–918 of 987.
establishing Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1863 and a public school five years later.\(^{58}\) Freedmen’s Bureau funds and teachers from the Philadelphia Friends supported education in Gum Springs between 1867 and 1869.\(^{59}\)

Assuming their roles as heads of household, freedmen also searched for lost family members. They attempted to create autonomous families by submitting newspaper advertisements in search of separated family members. In 1866 John Humphrey searched for his mother and sisters by submitting an advertisement to the *Christian Recorder*. At this time, he was living in Michigan and noted that he “left them at Fairfax County Courthouse, Va., in 1851.”\(^{60}\) Umphry Brown, who lived in Mississippi when he published his ad in 1866, searched for his thirteen-person family separated by the slave trade.\(^{61}\) These advertisements demonstrate freedmen’s resistance to forced separation by white people. Humphrey and others actively used their freedom to purchase newspaper ads in the hopes of a reunification. These ads were not unique to Fairfax, as men and women all over the south wrote and published articles to find lost family members.

Former slaves’ attachment to family persisted for years after separation. Jefferson Philips searched for his parents in 1893. At the time he lived in Missouri as a preacher. He attempted to reach a larger audience of people who might know his family members by eliciting the location of their former master’s home: “The man who claimed them as slaves lived at Fairfax Courthouse.”\(^{62}\) By calling his former enslaver a man who claimed his family as slaves, Philips actively resisted using the title of “master.” No man could own his family nor himself.

Leaders within the black community encouraged women to submit to their husbands’ authority.\(^{63}\) Assuming this role of the ultimate author-


\(^{60}\) “Information Wanted,” May 19, 1866, *Christian Recorder*.

\(^{61}\) “Mr. Editor,” May 13, 1866, *Southwestern Christian Advocate*.


ity figure in the family, freedmen in Fairfax sometimes resorted to violence against others to emphasize their control over their wives. In 1867, when Frank Johnson killed Horace Cross, William Shields, the subassistant commissioner, recounted the circumstances to the commissioner. According to Shields, “Frank Johnson (Freedman) had on several occasions accused Cross of having conjured his (Johnson’s) wife and each time, threatened in the presence of others to kill him.” Even though “superstition seems to be at the bottom of the whole affair,” Johnson’s violent backlash shows his refusal to allow another man to control his wife. In the same year, Thomas Garner attacked James Mathews with a knife because he suspected Mathews “has been in the habit of visiting Garners wife.” Garner’s fear of his wife’s unfaithfulness and lack of submission to him probably made him feel like he had no control over his family, which led him to attack Mathews in order to reassert his authority.

In claiming their role as the authority figure in the family, freedmen not only reacted violently towards other men but also occasionally attacked their wives. As Faust explains, “Just as ‘paternalism’ and ‘mastery’ were rooted in the concepts of masculinity, so violence was similarly gendered as male within the ideology of the Old South.” Women frequently reported their abusive husbands. The Alexandria Gazette reported on a Fairfax freedman “notorious in police circles,” Frank Turner, who escaped from prison and beat his wife on two separate occasions. Turner’s wife made a complaint at the station house when it was safe for her to do so. Susan Dillard complained to the Fairfax County Freedmen’s Bureau about her husband, “who is in the habit of ill-treating her, and has driven her away from home, refusing to support her or her child.”

67 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 63.
68 “Colored Desperado at Large,” Alexandria Gazette, July 30, 1868.
Just as black women did not tolerate abuse and violence from their husbands, they also resisted their husbands’ claims that they were the ultimate decision-makers for the family. They did so especially when their husbands’ actions resulted in neglecting the family, as Susan Dillard demonstrated, or removal of the children from the women’s care. Although we do not know why Dillard’s husband separated himself from his family, a common dilemma for freedmen was the existence of more than one family. Since slaveholders sold spouses and children hundreds of miles apart, separating families, freedmen sometimes had more than one wife. Since emancipation meant freedmen could define their own labor, they also believed they could define their own families. However, Susan Dillard resisted her husband’s claim to define his own family (by abandoning wife and child) and held him accountable to his obligations as the father of her family. In a countervailing example, in 1861 Reed George was taken to Texas, leaving a wife and five children behind. His wife remarried in his absence. In 1868 he asked the Freedmen’s Bureau to help him reclaim his children. However, the bureau decided that “the children are well clothed and provided for by the mother” and that “the children come to school better clothed than most.” He also noted that “the mother has a fine reputation as a hard worker,” so he recommended that the children stay with the mother. The mother had convinced the bureau not to send the children, using the bureau’s gendered notions of the dutiful mother trope to resist her former husband’s claim as the ultimate decision-maker for the family.

Freedmen’s Bureau

The main goal for Freedmen’s Bureau agents was to reduce freed people’s dependency on the government, and this objective was no different for the bureau in Fairfax County. Its vision of the black family and labor included “notions of independent manhood, dependent womanhood, and the ‘proper’ family structure,” as Mary Farmer Kaiser suggests. But in Fairfax County, Victorian gender ideology was sec-

70 Williams, *Help Me to Find my People*, 165.
71 Letter from George Reed, May 29, 1868, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 74 of 86.
72 Letter from George Reed, May 29, 1868, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 74 of 86.
ondary to agents’ insistence on freedwomen’s lack of dependency on the government. In order to create productive familial households, agents intensely encouraged women to find employment, promoted marriages, and united families. Women resisted the bureau agents’ goals when they clashed with women’s freedom of choice in labor and partners, but Fairfax bureau agents generally sided with women when they complained about freedmen and white southern men.

The bureau in Fairfax often promoted marriages based on the bureau’s belief that black family life required legalization that would decrease government dependency and increase moral behavior. One way to ensure that women and children did not depend on the government was to promote marriages so that freedmen would assume responsibility for women and their children. The Freedmen’s Bureau recognized and registered marriages by the summer of 1865, but it was not until February 1866 that the Virginia House of Delegates passed a bill permitting cohabitating black people to register as husband and wife. In October of 1865, subassistant commissioner Sidney Smith reported, “I often find male and female living together as man and wife, who have never been married.” He believed that if education was expanded, “these evils and vices [will be] remedied.” The bureau’s notions of morality were sometimes at odds with those of freed people. Some freed people who cohabitated refused to marry, perhaps because they lived together out of necessity and did not want to marry someone they disliked. In January of 1866, a month before it was possible for freed people to legalize their marriages, Sidney Smith, the subassistant commissioner, complained “colored people who live together as man and wife who are not married . . . refuse to marry.” He asked for instructions on how to deal with this situation, specifically asking if “they need to be punished after being admonished.” How could freed people be punished if they had no legal right to marry? Smith’s question, which implies a desire for punishment, illustrates the often authoritarian and control-

73 Kaiser, Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau, 34.
76 Letter from Sidney Smith to J. S. Fullerton, January 24, 1866, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters sent, Aug 1865–Oct 1868, image 60 of 146.
ling behavior of agents who wanted to impose their moral values on the black community.

Not only was morality in question, but marriage forced men to financially support their children, which relieved the government’s responsibility for those children. In 1867 Captain O. E. Hine, the Assistant Superintendent for Fairfax, stressed “the necessity of compelling the fathers of illegitimate children to support them,” because “at least three fourths of the applications for assistance come from women with children but who have no husbands.” The added source of income from the father could help the women and their children get off of the government’s rations. He also noted that the neglect of fathers was a moral issue. Without bastardy laws “compelling them to support their children, the evil continues to exist.”

Just as promoting marriages was a priority for the bureau, uniting families was also important, as long as transportation was not too expensive and reunification would remove someone from rations and further government aid. However, bureau agents in Fairfax did not push women who complained about their husbands abandoning them to reconnect with their runaway husbands. Marry Harris went to the bureau to complain about her husband, who abused her, left her, and took her clothing and bed clothing. She wanted her clothes back but never mentioned anything about wanting her husband back. Harriet Wain’s husband also abandoned her, but she made no indication of wanting him back. Women complicated the bureau’s desires of decreasing dependency when they refused to remarry or move back in with men who abandoned or abused them. The bureau agents did not express a desire to reunite these women with the men who left them, which demonstrates their reluctance to place dependent women in danger, even if it meant they would acquire a renewed dependency on the government.

---

77 Letter from O. E. Hine to S. P. Lee, January 1, 1867, NARA M1913, letters sent, Aug 1865–Oct 1868, image 82 of roll 75.
78 Williams, Help Me to Find My People, 143–71.
80 Letter from Katie E. Hall, February 19, 1868, NARA M1913, viewed on FamilySearch: roll 75, letters received and register of letters received, Aug 1865–May 1866, Nov 1866–Dec 1868, image 78 of 86.
Freedmen’s Bureau agents in Fairfax County expected single and married black women, unlike Victorian upper-class white married women, to work. For the most part, from the point of view of the Freedmen’s Bureau agents, freedwomen embraced employment. However, as Ann Virginia Brown demonstrated, they decided their type of labor on their terms.

Black women desired education and employment in teaching as an alternative to field- or housework, and since teaching was an acceptable means of employment, as it removed black women from rations lists, Freedmen’s Bureau agents promoted women’s education. In 1867 subassistant commissioner William Shields noted that “one scholar, only six years old, and very black, reads so fluently that the family in which she lives white [illegible] take a weekly newspaper, which she reads to them in the morning.” This dichotomy of an illiterate older white couple and a literate young black girl is an unusual, but striking, illustration of white people using black labor in new ways after emancipation. Her education allowed her to perform duties that did not include house- or fieldwork, but this child still had to work for white people. Shields continued his letter, praising her abilities: “Her correctness and expression in reading would be wonderful in a much older child. I mention this as an instance of their wonderful capacity for acquiring knowledge.” He mentioned her ability as “an older child” to elicit more support in schools that would encourage alternative forms of employment and literacy for freed people.

Two black women taught at Freedmen’s Bureau schools in Fairfax, which reflected the frequency of black women teachers in Virginia. In the entire south, black teachers outnumbered northern white teachers four to three, and white teachers only outnumbered black teachers when southern whites were included. Harriet Jenkins, one of two African American teachers who sent school reports to the Freedmen’s Bureau, taught at the Mt. Pisgah School (Falls Church) and demonstrated the values that the northern society, Philadelphia Friends, 

---

wanted black students to learn in their schools. In her letter to the *Friends’ Intelligencer*, she thanked the “good people of Philadelphia for the reading matter sent me every week. I receive the *Friends’ Intelligencer* regularly, and have become much attached to it, on account of the true Christian principles it sets forth.” Themes of devotion to students, to family, and to God permeate the pages of *Friends’ Intelligencer*. As a northerner herself who enjoyed the newsletter and the lessons it advocated, she upheld and probably stressed a woman’s Christian “principles” or household roles in her classes.

Maggie Lewis, a native of Fairfax, was a black teaching assistant for the Freedmen’s Bureau at Fairfax Courthouse. Mary McBride, the white northern teacher at Fairfax Courthouse, suffered from some type of illness associated with her eyes, which impaired her vision and occasionally prevented her from teaching. When she was sick for a couple of days, the students were taught by the assistant, Maggie Lewis, who was a former student of the same school. Two years after Maggie Lewis started assistant teaching at Fairfax Courthouse, she wrote the following letter to the *Friends’ Intelligencer*:

> I am very grateful to you for all that you have done for me; and I will try to do as well as I can to deserve it. My education is, as you know, very poor yet, but I will endeavor to do the best of my ability with the scholars which Miss Mary has placed under me to teach them. My own tasks I study as good as I can, but I do not always know them as well as I would like to. . . . My parents also desire to be remembered gratefully to you for your kindness to us.

Lewis used careful and self-deprecating language in order not to insult the white community that provided her with education and a job. Her language indicates a lack of confidence, but she illustrates a strong desire to continue learning and teaching. Whether or not she believed what she wrote for the white northern audience, she assumed the image of a freedwoman who depended upon the white northern community and devoted herself to her studies and students so that she could enlist and maintain their support.

---

84 *Friends’ Intelligencer*, vol. 25, 348.
87 *Friends Intelligencer*, July 27, 1867, 331–33.
Although there were cases of black women teachers and students, agents continued to encourage women to work in the fields in the immediate aftermath of emancipation. Most women did work in the fields, but others, like Ann Virginia Brown, refused. Their rejection of fieldwork for white southerners created tension between freedwomen and bureau agents. George Armes, the Assistant Superintendent who sent a guard to force Brown to work, reflected on his actions at the end of his letter, stating, “I suppose that I was justified in doing what I did.”

Ann Brown made him question his actions and objective of reducing freed people’s dependency on government rations. William Shields, the Assistant Superintendent two years later, in 1867, noted that women who worked on the crops displayed “a great energy and perseverance, seeming to feel a pride in their success, and very great ambition to own their little farms.” His observation could illustrate freedwomen’s determination for land ownership, their productive values, and support of their husbands’ agricultural endeavors. However, his remarks more accurately indicate how he wanted women to feel about their work.

The Civil War transformed the circumstances in which Fairfax County African American women lived. White southern men, freedmen, and the Freedmen’s Bureau agents in Fairfax County represent three groups of men that emerged in post–Civil War Fairfax County with opposing visions of what black labor and family should look like, based on their respective views of race and gender roles. Each group interacted differently with black women who resisted aspirations that curtailed their vision of a safe, economically secure, and independent freedom. Fairfax black women’s relationships with freedmen and white southern men were similar to other black women’s experiences throughout the south, but their relationship with Freedmen’s Bureau agents was more cooperative than in other areas of the south.

Black women resisted both white men and freedmen when those groups attempted to manipulate, abuse, or control them or their children. Both groups of men wanted power. White men from Fairfax,
like white southerners in other parts of the south, believed that they deserved to maintain control of black labor, so they desperately attempted to preserve their prewar notions of masculinity rooted in paternalism and mastery through abuse and manipulation. Women resisted their attempts to separate their families and exploit their family’s labor. Women also enlisted themselves in varying types of labor, resisting white southern men’s notions that black people were inherently lazy. Freedmen, on the other hand, desired to escape white supervision and control by establishing themselves as the authority figure of their households and attempting to establish independent incomes. Women did not surrender complete authority to their husbands but used new resources like the Freedmen’s Bureau and the courts to receive justice or compensation from neglectful or abusive partners.

The Freedmen’s Bureau agents and black women in Fairfax County often cooperated because they shared similar values and because unemployment and reliance on the government was minimal compared to other parts of the south. Bureau agents sided with married black women when they complained about abusive husbands or white men, as both women and agents wanted justice and economic independency. Women used the helpless woman and dutiful wife and mother tropes to enlist the bureau’s aid in resisting white men and freedmen who threatened their welfare and security. The bureau supported women’s pursuits in education, sided with women when they wanted men to support their children, and only united families when the women desired it. This independence led some women to refuse to marry or in some cases find employment, to the dismay of bureau agents.

In the midst of white opposition to emancipation, the agency of African Americans who lived in Fairfax County became more apparent during Reconstruction, when they could more visibly enact their own definitions of freedom based on autonomous families and choice of labor. Freedwomen demonstrated their resistance to white notions of black inferiority when they advocated for equal protection under the law through the Freedmen’s Bureau. Desire for control of their children and persistence of emotional attachment also demonstrate resistance to separation caused by white people and white desires for control over black bodies. Although emancipation did not eliminate inequality and white violence, African American women persisted
and asserted their free status by resisting white southerners’ threats to their economic independence and their autonomous families.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


“Mr. Editor.” May 13, 1866. Southwestern Christian Advocate.

Secondary Sources


About the Author:

Courtney Ebersohl, a senior from Fairfax, Virginia, graduated in the spring of 2019 with a dual degree in history and French, with a minor in art history. She intends to pursue a graduate degree in history, focusing on the intersections of race and gender during the American Civil War era. She is particularly interested in southern African American women’s experiences during Reconstruction. She hopes to be a lifelong learner, advocate, teacher, and researcher.