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Preserving the Past:

A Legislative History of the Freedmen's Bureau
Records Preservation Act of 2000

Compiled by William Sleeman



The Freedmen's Bureau Preservation Act of 2000, passed and signed in the waning days of the Clinton administration, would hardly qualify, at first glance, as a piece of landmark legislation, but that's exactly what it was. Its passage was monumental in that it was accomplished during a period of otherwise intense partisanship and represented a rare example of both sides of the political divide coming together to protect an important but long neglected piece of American heritage.

Preserving the Past documents the successful legislative effort to protect the records of what one historian has called our nation's first social service agency. It includes the key components of the legislative process that led to the bill's passage along with select background material and a brief bibliography.

The Freedmen's Bureau Preservation Act required the National Archives and Records Administration to turn its attention to these resources and to give them the same level of attention and care that had been provided other federal records. What accounted for this success? According to compiler William Sleeman, the incredible growth and interest in African American genealogy was one key factor in the bill's passage.

Genealogical research has become extremely important in the African American community, particularly as the descendants of slaves and freed people have sought to better understand their history. The records of the bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees—the Freedmen's Bureau—are an important piece of the genealogical puzzle. However, these resources, because of their physical condition and lack of intellectual access tools, have long been difficult if not impossible for many genealogists and historians to use.

California Democratic Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald was the initial sponsor of the legislation and extremely instrumental to its passage. "An educator and genealogist herself, Ms. Millender-McDonald recognized early the importance of these materials and was able to reach across the aisle and across chambers to partner with Republicans J. C. Watts of Oklahoma and Stephen Horn of California to organize support for the legislation's passage." —*William Sleeman, Introduction, p. v.*



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