

Reuniting families

Thomas P. Jackson to John A. McDonnell, July 3, 1867 (both letters), in the Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives and Records Administration.

As you read...

In addition to providing food, clothing, and legal assistance to former slaves, the Freedmen's Bureau tried to help African Americans find family members who had been scattered during slavery. Usually, parents and children only had a vague idea of where a loved one had been sold, and very often they did not know if their relative was still alive.

These letters reflect the attempts of African Americans and Bureau officers to locate and reunite families.

FREEDMEN'S NAMES

You may notice that many former slaves, needing a last name, took the last names of their former owners. Some freed people took the name "Freeman," while others named themselves after famous people such as U.S. Presidents.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What did these parents know about their children and their whereabouts?
2. What did the author of these letters note about the character of the formerly enslaved people he was helping?
3. How likely do you think it was that these parents found their children?
4. Without modern technology, can you think of an effective way to relocate and reunite families who had been separated for decades and scattered thousands of miles? How would you go about locating and reconnecting people?

Capt. John A. McDonnell
Sub Asst Comr
Winchester Staunton, Va. July 3, 1867

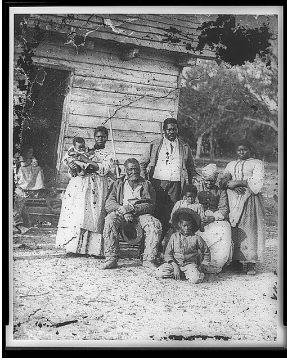


Figure 1. An African American family poses for a photograph outside their home.

Captain

Patience Spencer (c)¹ seeks her two children James Thomas (15 years) and Melissa Ann Maria Spencer (11 years) The children were taken from her at Samuel Spencer's 5 miles from Amherst C.H. Amherst Co. Va by John Mitchell a slave trader who then lived at Lynchburg and who sold them at Richmond, Va. in July 1861. Who bought them or where they were taken to she never could learn, but thinks perhaps John Mitchell or Landon Talieferro who lives at New Glasgow, Amherst Co. Va may know. The poor woman it appears hid herself in the woods with her children to escape the sale but hunger compelled her to let her children return to the house for food, when they were seized and carried off. Her information is I fear too indefinite for discovery but she she is so earnestly desirous of regaining them that I respectfully forward her request in the hope some clue may be obtained from Mitchell or Talieferro.

Yr obt servt
Thos P. Jackson
Agent

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Captain

Benjamin Frazier (c) living at Mt. Torrey Furnace asks search be made for his children. Benjamin was owned by Joseph W. [illegible] near Wilderness tavern, Spottsylvania Co. Va. on approach of U.S. army was sold to Lorenzo Shaw, with four (4) small children, Lucy (9) Nancy (7) Everett (5) and [illegible] (2) years, for whom he cannot provide on account of ill health. His grown children, from whom he asks help, are Benjamin who fell to William Stephen, Wilderness, Nathan who lives near Treague's, Pamelia who lives near Fredericksburg and Emily Williams who lives with Edward Stephens near Fredericksburg. Benjamin appears a deserving man but without help must soon become a charge upon the public.

Yr obt servt
Thos P. Jackson
Agent

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Notes

1. The (c) after names is an abbreviation for colored.

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Figure 1 (page 2)

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