

Providing Digital Access to the Freedmen's Bureau

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Abstract

The National Museum of African American History and Culture's Freedmen's Bureau Project is a comprehensive initiative that has provided digital access to the Freedmen's Bureau records. Previously, this important collection could only be accessed in person through the National Archives and Records Administration, with no way to search for specific people or topics. Smithsonian staff have worked with the public to index and transcribe the records to provide free full-text access to these invaluable records. To date over 600,000 pages of Freedmen's Bureau records have been collaboratively transcribed by more than 60,000 individual volunteers. This data has been made available to the public for research in the Freedmen's Bureau Search Portal. This groundbreaking search application is the result of more than a decade of data creation, processing, and cleaning; transcription; community engagement; and historical and genealogical research. The work of Smithsonian staff is ongoing and emerging technologies present exciting opportunities to expand access and continue to enable meaningful discoveries.

Project Introduction

In October 1865, newly freed Jacob and Monemia McCoy visited a Freedmen's Bureau office in Charlotte, North Carolina, seeking custody of their fourteen-year-old daughters. Millie and Christine McCoy were conjoined twins who had been exhibited in museums and sideshows in the United States and Europe by enslavers since their infancy. The McCoy's demands for the return of their daughters set off a two-month-long investigation and trial documented in the Freedmen's Bureau records (see Fig. 1). The McCoy's story is one of thousands of formerly enslaved families that used the Freedmen's Bureau to make their way from slavery to freedom.

Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands on March 3, 1865, to aid newly freed African Americans' transition from enslavement and to reconstruct the South after the end of the American Civil War. The Freedmen's Bureau, as it was known, was headquartered in Washington, DC and operated in the fifteen Southern and Border States.

Through its work, the Freedmen's Bureau documented the sociopolitical conditions of the South, the records of which provide a unique window into the lives of newly freed African Americans. The Bureau provided food and clothing rations not just to newly freed people but also to white Southerners who were displaced during the war. Bureau agents negotiated labor contracts, processed claims for military service, provided legal services, and established hospitals. The Bureau also played a major role in Black education across the South.

By communicating their needs, the newly freed came to shape the role the Bureau played in reconstructing the South. African Americans used the Bureau to reunite with loved ones sold away during slavery, legalize their marriages, report racial violence and discrimination, demand justice, and assert their rights. By the time the Bureau ceased operations in 1872, it had generated thousands of records that contain the names and information of hundreds of

thousands of formerly enslaved African Americans and Southern white refugees.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture's multifaceted Freedmen's Bureau Project gives unprecedented access to this invaluable set of records.

Launched in 2022, the Freedmen's Bureau Search Portal enables users to search for specific names, places, dates, topics, subjects, institutions, and any other words and phrases in the Freedmen's Bureau records. This first-of-its-kind search application is the result of more than a decade of data creation, processing, and cleaning; transcription; community engagement; and historical and genealogical research. The work of Smithsonian staff is ongoing and emerging technologies present exciting opportunities to expand access and continue to enable meaningful discoveries.

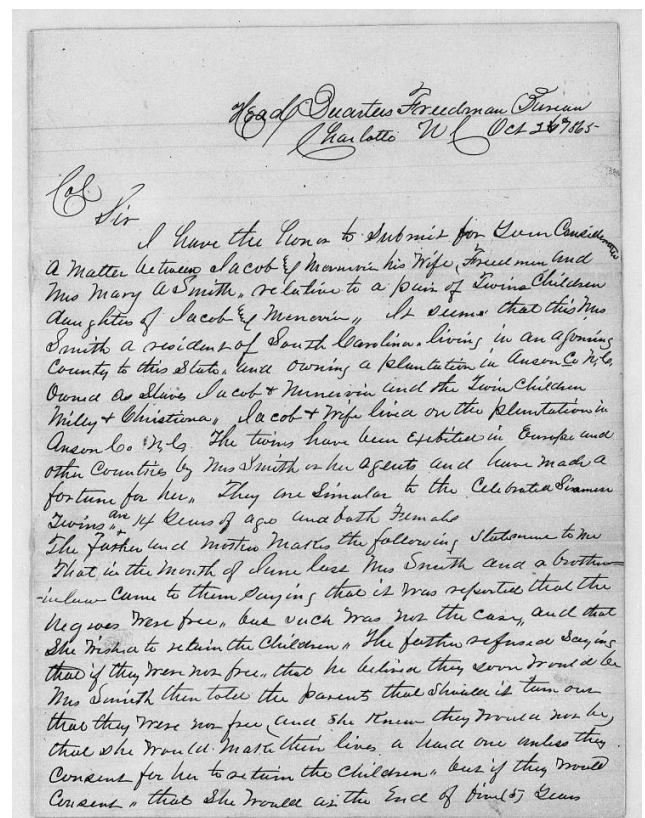


Figure 1. Letter detailing the McCoy family's claim, October 26, 1865. Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of North Carolina Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870, Letters Received, Entered in Register 1, A–I.

Indexing the Records

Prior to 2015, researchers could only access Freedmen's Bureau records by viewing the over 1,900 microfilm rolls of Bureau

records in person at a National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) location. This changed when FamilySearch International, a nonprofit organization and website offering genealogical records, education, and software operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, digitized the microfilm, creating over 1.7 million digital image files. In 2011, FamilySearch signed a Memorandum of Agreement to share those images exclusively with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).

In 2015, the two organizations, joined by the California African American Museum and the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, agreed to mutually support an initiative to index the digitized records through FamilySearch's online indexing platform. In return, the NMAAHC obtained both a copy of the indexed data (once completed) and a copy of the images. For their indexing project, FamilySearch created twelve indexing templates based on a grouping of records—court documents, marriage records, labor contracts, ration records, hospital records, etc. While names, dates, and locations were indexed for selected records, some of the groupings contained additional indexed content. For example, the records pertaining to persons or articles hired listed the person's occupation, while the ration records listed a person's race but not their occupation. In just over a year, 18,940 volunteers completed the indexing project, making many of the names, dates, locations, and sometimes other information pulled from the records, into twelve different sets of data available for online searching on the FamilySearch platform for the first time.

While this was a huge step forward in making the Freedmen's Bureau records more easily searchable, the NMAAHC team knew that there was even more information in the Bureau records still to be uncovered. Although the name index to the Freedmen's Bureau records is a vital resource for family historians and genealogists, simply pulling the names out of the records only tells part of the story—it does not provide for more nuanced searches around specific topics and removes much of the historical and personal context around the names.

Preparing for Transcription

At the same time the indexing project was taking place, the NMAAHC began working with the Smithsonian Transcription Center (STC) to crowdsource transcriptions of objects in the Museum's collection. Seeing the success of volunteers transcribing documents, diaries, letters, and other materials, the team realized that STC would be the perfect platform to create full-text transcriptions of the Bureau records. In August 2016, the Museum launched the Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project with records from the Bureau's North Carolina Assistant Commissioner's Office. Although the initial transcriptions were slow, the pilot proved that the project was viable, and the Museum committed to processing and preparing all 1.7 million image files received from FamilySearch for full-text transcription.

To assist with this work, the NMAAHC brought in an external vendor to provide a gap analysis of the images received from FamilySearch. Due to the large number of images received (1.7 million files in 1,918 folders), manual review of all files was impractical. The inventory spreadsheet provided by FamilySearch allowed the team to summarize the information and validate each group of images against the NARA source files. The vendor also outlined a plan for preparing the images to be imported into STC for transcription.

With that information in hand, a second phase with the vendor to create online finding aids, process the images, and link everything

together in preparation for transcription was initiated. The images, with no metadata, arrived in folders for each of the 1,918 microfilm rolls that were digitized by FamilySearch. Rather than presenting the images by their microfilm roll, the team, based on the plan provided from the external vendor, processed the images in a way that allowed them to be connected to the original archival organization of the collection. To do this, a finding aid based on each of the forty-four NARA collections of Bureau records needed to be created in the Smithsonian's archival management system, ArchivesSpace. In ArchivesSpace, as each line in the finding aid was created, a unique Ref ID was assigned, allowing us to connect the images to the finding aid after everything was processed. Once the finding aids were created, the vendor organized the images into folders named according to the Ref ID and the hierarchical structure of the finding aid. Metadata was then added to the images at both the roll level and project level—such as the title and date of the series and subseries—to more easily search and connect the files to the online finding aids.

After the images were processed, the NMAAHC team worked with the Smithsonian Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)'s DAMS Team to ingest the files into our Digital Asset Management System (DAMS) through a Volume File Copy Utility (VFCU) service. The VFCU process scanned the subfolders for .md5 files, moved these files to a DAMS staging area prior to ingest, and validated checksums. It then loaded file details into specific tables, processed file batches for performance, and ensured successful file transfers by generating and verifying new checksums. As the files were ingested into the DAMS, the Ref ID from the folder name was added to the metadata through a CDIS metadata sync, automatically connecting the images to the online finding aids. The entire process took almost five years to complete, but by 2020 over 1.7 million images had been processed, ingested in the DAMS, and connected to the online finding aids ready for transcription.

Transcribing the Records

When the NMAAHC partnered with STC in 2016 to transcribe the records, STC had been providing the public platform, technical infrastructure, and community management support for crowdsourcing science and cultural heritage transcriptions at the Smithsonian for about three years.

STC's internal workflow allows archivists, collections managers, and librarians from across the Smithsonian to import their materials using a variety of data points, including the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) Ref ID, the method used for the Freedmen's Bureau records. Through this import process, each Ref ID is ingested into STC's Java Service as a "project," and its associated digital images as "pages" within the project. Transcription efforts are managed at the project level in the Drupal admin interface, including creation and editing of metadata specific to public engagement efforts, such as the public launch date, associated catalog record, and contextual information for volunteers.

Once a project goes live, it comprises a discrete group of transcribable images for volunteers to encounter and contribute to via the public website (transcription.si.edu). Here, STC provides a framework for crowd-sourced transcribing that facilitates entirely volunteer-led generation and quality control of full-text data. Each page is first transcribed by one or more volunteers, working consecutively to flesh out the transcription until it meets the criteria to be submitted for Review. Once submitted for Review, the page is made available to registered volunteers for a quality check, in which

the transcription is compared, line by line, to the original document. The Reviewer either sends it back to the Transcription stage for corrections or marks it Complete. Throughout this process, volunteers rely primarily on specialized instructions and other resources, such as Freedmen's Bureau staff lists, that are provided to orient them to the specific handwriting styles, writing conventions, terminology, people, and locales they are likely to encounter in these records and guide them in producing useful data for researchers, descendants, and the general public.

This Transcribe and Review workflow provides several benefits. From a community cultivation and engagement perspective, it democratizes the landscape by providing a very low barrier to entry and a low-pressure environment. The consecutive collaboration process allows each transcriber to contribute what they reasonably can, whether it's most of a page or just a few words, knowing it's part of a cumulative effort to capture the page's content. This ensures an approachable environment for transcribers who are learning to read and understand this challenging content, and creates space for volunteers of all skill levels, including students, to engage with primary source materials.

From a data quality perspective, the consecutive collaboration model encourages as many eyes as necessary on each page, prioritizing consensus and care over maximum speed and efficiency. STC's integration with the larger Smithsonian data infrastructure via the Enterprise Data Access Network (EDAN) ensures that the transcription for each page is available and full-text searchable within ten minutes of clearing the Review stage. EDAN and STC databases are automatically exported nightly and backed up to a remote location, and both are run on RAID systems to mitigate the impact of hardware failures. Projects continue to be hosted on STC after they're completed, where they display transcription data alongside the original image; provide one of many avenues for exploration, search, and discovery; and serve as an interface for further corrections in the future. Each time a completed transcription is updated with a correction, the previous version is replaced in EDAN and across systems using it (such as the Freedmen's Bureau Search Portal) within ten minutes as well. In this way, the accuracy and discoverability of the transcription data are complementary factors, creating a feedback loop of continuous refinement. As a completed transcription becomes searchable and is displayed across Smithsonian systems, there are more eyes and fresh perspectives on the data, which leads to corrections and improvements when necessary.

Continuously refining discoverability and accuracy in turn improves the utility of the data for historians and genealogists. For example, some of the Millie and Christine McCoy records were only indexed by location. Others reference the twins without naming them but contain detailed information about the McCoy family and the Bureau investigation into their former enslaver. Without full-text transcription, this information would not be easily discoverable. Thinking of the transcription data not as a final, fully packaged product but as an ever-evolving and improving work in progress, and building the technical workflows to support this, is a large part of what allows us to confidently invite volunteers of all backgrounds and skill levels to participate in the process. Even an imperfect transcription propels discoverability and historical research forward.

Freedmen's Bureau projects have been continuously available on STC since 2016, with six to eight projects live at any time and new projects added as older ones are completed. This perennial presence on STC is itself a critical component of a strong engagement strategy, establishing the project as a reliable component of volunteers' routines, educators' classroom activities,

and community organizers' programming opportunities. Consistent availability and a patient approach also allow for improved knowledge, skill, and investment over time among individual volunteers and the community at-large. While the first set of 26,000 images from the North Carolina Assistant Commissioner's Records took approximately two-and-a-half years to be fully transcribed, the pace continued to build as the project progressed, and the next 26,000 pages took only fifteen months to be completed (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Howard University students participate in a transcribe-a-thon as part of Frederick Douglass day celebrations, February 14, 2018. Credit: Leah L. Jones/NMAAHC

Creating the Search Portal

As more and more records were transcribed, the team began to contemplate how to connect the full transcriptions created in STC and the indexed data from the earlier FamilySearch project into a single searchable platform on the NMAAHC's website. The indexed data from FamilySearch allows users to search by first and last names, location, and date. While this data is great for family historians and genealogists, it ignores other valuable information held in these records, such as the name of a school or hospital or a more targeted topic. The transcription data, on the other hand, allows users to search using a word or phrase. However, if users search for a name, the transcription data does not differentiate between first or last name or just a word that appears somewhere on the page. For example, searching the transcriptions for "Washington" would bring up results that include people named Washington, records sent or received from headquarters in Washington DC, as well as records from Washington County, North Carolina.

The Millie and Christine McCoy records highlight the limitations and advantages of both sets of data. In many of the records, Millie and/or Christine's names are spelled incorrectly. Millie is often spelled with a Y rather than an IE at the end, and Christine is sometimes spelled Christina with an A at the end. Searching for "Millie Christine" in the indexed data would not return any results because the names were indexed exactly how they appeared on the page. Searching "McCoy" would eventually bring up these records, but you would have to search through all McCoy's in North Carolina to find them. However, searching for the word "twins" in the transcribed data brings up these records immediately. While this works great for a specialized term such as "twins" or "conjoined," the transcribed data does not specifically call out names or locations, as all words in a transcription are treated equally. With this in mind, the team realized a need to develop an application

that allowed users to search both the indexed and transcribed data together, creating unprecedented research possibilities and access to this invaluable set of records.

The work of creating the Freedmen's Bureau Search Portal involved many individuals. To start, the same vendor who processed the images and created the finding aids was brought back to clean up the twelve spreadsheets of indexed data from FamilySearch. While the data was organized in a way that worked for the FamilySearch platform, the NMAAHC needed to standardize the column headings, clean up misspellings and typos, and remove unnecessary information that was only needed for the FamilySearch application. Once that was finished, the team collaborated with the Smithsonian's OCIO and their partners to help build an online search platform, using the Smithsonian's EDAN system, hosted on the Museum's Drupal website. The Search Portal combines data from four separate sources using the DAMS Unique Asset Name as a way to connect the information across the various data points. Once the static data from the indexing project was loaded into EDAN, the developers were able to create a search application that queries both the index data and the dynamic transcription data. Query results are presented on a search results page where users can preview a transcription or click into individual record pages. These record pages display the image from the DAMS and finding aid information from the EAD alongside the transcription and indexing data in an interface design that seamlessly fits into the rest of the Museum's website.

In November 2022, the NMAAHC released the Freedmen's Bureau Search Portal to the public (see Fig. 3). In 2024, almost 90,000 individuals used the portal, viewing 105,388 search results. While visitors to the NMAAHC website spend an average of one minute and twenty-eight seconds using the Museum's collection search function, visitors to the Freedmen's Bureau Search Portal spend an average of two minutes and thirty seconds on the page. Because the portal is constantly updated with new transcriptions, there is always something new for users to discover. This element of the project presents many opportunities to keep current participants engaged and cultivate new audiences.

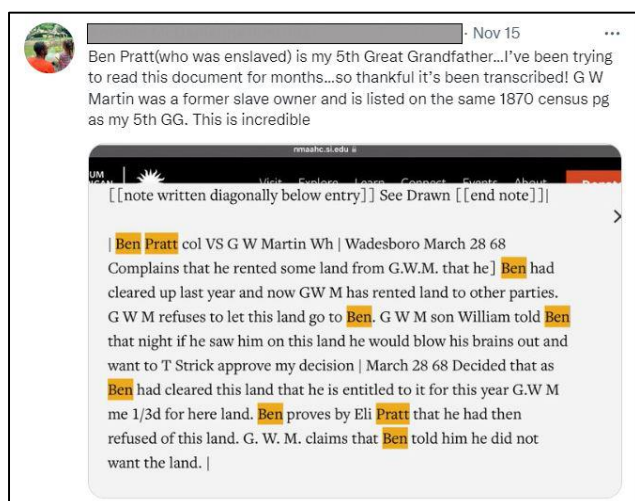


Figure 3. In this Tweet, a Search Portal user shares his experience locating his fifth-great-grandfather in transcribed records on the day the Search Portal launched, November 15, 2022.

Engaging with Audiences

At the Smithsonian, our mission to increase and diffuse knowledge is always at the heart of our work, and our aim is to build strong relationships with our audiences and be a trusted source of information and learning opportunities for the public.

While the primary goal of this project has always been to create high-quality data for the Freedmen's Bureau records and make it more discoverable and usable for historians and genealogists, just as important are our efforts to engage with the public around this underrepresented piece of American history in a meaningful way. Public engagement within and around the transcription process has been a shared responsibility between the NMAAHC and STC staff from the beginning.

The NMAAHC and STC collaborate to host transcribe-a-thons for museum visitors, students, and community members. At these events, participants learn about the history of the Freedmen's Bureau and transcribe records with assistance from our team. Engagement progressed slowly in the early years of the project with online transcribers, as well as small in-person events at the Museum and with an enthusiastic group of students and professors at the University of Maryland College Park. Over time, engagement has grown to include other cultural heritage institutions, universities, corporate service groups, and community organizers around the country.

Seeking deeper local community engagement, the NMAAHC began working with the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission to plan a series of transcribe-a-thons across North Carolina for summer 2020. At these events, participants could transcribe Bureau records from their hometown or surrounding area. For example, participants living in and around Wilmington would be transcribing records from the North Carolina Field Office in Wilmington. However, the COVID-19 pandemic altered these plans. To ensure participant safety, the events were delayed until 2021 and eventually were modified to virtual-only programs. Although different from the initial intended format, these virtual events were extremely successful, and data has shown that participants continue transcribing records long after the NMAAHC-hosted virtual events. Some participants have even gone on to host their own transcription events in their communities.

With the success of this initial collaboration, the NMAAHC has sustained relationships with North Carolina universities, libraries, and Black heritage organizations around the state, and is eager to build similar collaborations with other states where the Bureau operated. Since the North Carolina initiative, virtual transcribe-a-thons continue to be the primary form of public programming and have proven to have unique benefits to supporting a communal transcription process. These virtual events range in size from twenty people for small community or classroom gatherings to as many as 900 people for international programs. No matter the size, feedback from transcribe-a-thon attendees consistently demonstrates that people find the act of transcribing the records surprisingly engrossing, and that interacting with the records promotes an interest in the Reconstruction era more broadly.

The pandemic also dramatically changed daily engagement on STC (see Fig. 4). By March 1, 2020, 3,176 volunteers had transcribed 51,029 pages of Freedmen's Bureau records in the four years since the project launched. Just six months later, those numbers more than doubled, with 11,406 volunteers having transcribed 108,006 total pages. Each month throughout the first two years of the pandemic (March 2020–February 2022), an average of 11,800 pages were transcribed and almost 1,400 new volunteers joined the project. In November 2023, the NMAAHC and STC

celebrated a half-million pages of Bureau records transcribed, and today, with over 600,000 pages complete, more than one-third of the entire collection has been transcribed and made available to researchers.

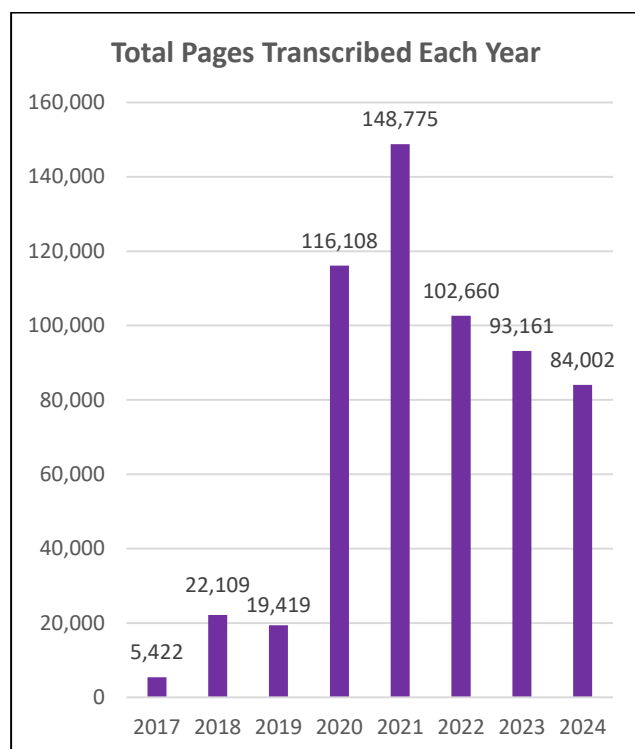


Figure 4. This chart demonstrates the sustained increase in number of pages transcribed annually since the start of the pandemic.

The normalization of video conferencing during the pandemic expanded the number of people reached in more ways than one. To meet the needs of a rapidly growing and productive volunteer community, STC began holding monthly Office Hours in 2021. These events take the form of casual virtual chats, open to any current or prospective volunteers as a space to connect with like-minded people, share challenges and discoveries from the transcription process, and get advice from the team and one another. As a community of regular attendees began to form, it became clear that many of them dedicated their time exclusively to the Freedmen’s Bureau records, leading to periodic sessions with the NMAAHC team focusing specifically on Bureau projects, the unique challenges of transcribing the records, and background on the history represented in them. This included a special Office Hours session for the Juneteenth holiday, spent discussing and exploring instances of emancipation celebrations discovered in recently transcribed records with this group of enthusiastic volunteers.

In 2020, STC began piloting its Editors Group, which has since grown to a small community of about twenty-five intensely dedicated digital volunteers who meet quarterly to discuss formats and topics within the records, provide feedback on trends within the transcription community, and perform additional quality control on completed transcriptions. The majority of this group is composed of Freedmen’s Bureau enthusiasts, once again demonstrating the power of these records to inspire commitment and foster a dedicated community.

This range of touchpoints with the project reflects engagement as deep as it is broad. Of the 60,000 volunteers who have contributed to the Freedmen’s Bureau transcriptions, approximately one tenth of them made only one contribution, and about a third have made five or fewer contributions. On the other end of the spectrum, less than one percent (representing hundreds of volunteers) are responsible for over half of the total contributions to the transcription and review process for these records. This distribution is a result of the project being designed to welcome casual participation, reaching as many people as possible to build awareness of Reconstruction history, while it also supports and encourages deeper, ongoing engagement, fostering new expertise in the content of the Bureau records.

Investing in volunteer engagement is not a secondary aspect of the project or a nice “bonus,” but a critical element of its success. As volunteers’ understanding of and connection to the records increases, their commitment to and insistence upon the highest quality transcription data also increases.

Evaluating Impact

Due to the Smithsonian’s commitment to human-centered projects, both quantitative and qualitative impacts are evaluated. From the outset of the project, staff immediately began tracking communications with volunteers, students, genealogists, and scholars who shared discoveries or made specific requests for research assistance. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have requested the release of specific groups of records to assist with their own projects, while genealogists and historians familiar with researching the microfilmed Freedmen’s Bureau records have reached out for assistance in locating digital versions of records in the Search Portal.

In early 2021, an undergraduate student in the Department of History at Columbia University contacted the Freedmen’s Bureau team for help in searching court records from North Carolina for her senior thesis. The team met with the student to discuss her project, offered tips and tricks for searching the records, and helped her with proper citations of the materials. Because many of the court and labor records from the North Carolina Field Offices had been transcribed, the student was able to more easily find and include first-person narratives and never-before-told stories of newly freed African Americans who used the Freedmen’s Bureau courts in North Carolina to resolve labor and contact disputes.

Additionally, the team takes seriously the responsibility to ensure the stories being uncovered within these records and the power of crowdsourcing methodologies are integrated into the training of the next generation of archivists and historians. In the summer of 2022, with support from the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative, STC and NMAAHC collaboratively supervised two remote paid internships for emerging public historians. Throughout the summer, the interns became integrated into the project team, learning about Reconstruction history, archival research, and community engagement strategies and writing for the public. Together they identified lesser-known women in the transcribed records and published their stories in a series of six blog posts. As a result, these women’s stories are now more discoverable, two young historians are carrying the lessons of the project forward in their careers, and, thanks to their insights and advice, the team’s understanding of the unique challenges for undergraduate student transcribers has evolved considerably.

Impact is also measured by the types of discoveries made in the records as the result of transcription. The story of Millie and Christine McCoy was one of the first team discoveries. Known as the Two-Headed Nightingale, Millie and Christine were well known

performers and the NMAAHC has several images of the twins in its collection. Despite being heavily photographed and documented in the nineteenth century, little was known about the custody battle that plays out in the Freedmen's Bureau records. Ultimately the Freedmen's Bureau ruled against the McCoys, but this discovery revealed new information that became the foundation of an exhibition at the Museum. Their story highlights the broader issue of African American agency and parental rights and serves as an example of this project's power to deepen understanding of both prominent and lesser-known historical figures.

In another instance, the team supported a unique collaboration with journalists from the Center for Public Integrity in late 2021 to identify records documenting land promises to newly freed African Americans in the American Lowcountry. While targeted images were among records already scheduled for transcription, the Center recruited volunteers to assist with transcribing the records. Later, the team met with the journalists to help develop strategies for searching nontranscribed records. The Center applied machine vision to search for similar entries in nontranscribed records. This led to the discovery of more than 1,250 possessory land titles beyond the few dozen previously identified. *Mother Jones* published the findings in an investigative series in 2024 on the legacy of "40 acres and a mule," which was named a 2025 Pulitzer Prize finalist in Explanatory Reporting. This was a full-circle moment for the project, which was designed to facilitate this type of independent research.

Across all aspects of the Freedmen's Bureau Project, some of the most rewarding measures of success for the team include evidence of the profound emotional impact this project has had on people's lives. As the data becomes searchable, we've had the privilege time and again to witness the relief, wonder, and excitement of people who are discovering their ancestors in the records for the first time. Meanwhile, through the transcription process itself, we've heard from volunteers for whom transcribing the records has given them a sense of purpose and community, who have turned to transcription as a grounding act during times of difficulty or grief, and who have been deeply moved by the stories they encounter in the records, even changing the way they think about American history. The story of this project is the story of people connecting with the records, connecting with each other, and connecting with their ancestors.

Project Reflections

Over the course of the past ten years, the Freedmen's Bureau Project team has encountered many obstacles and problems to solve. However, support from Smithsonian leadership, volunteers, and community organizers has been key to our successes, while emails

and posts from transcribers sharing heart-warming stories in the records or from researchers discovering familial connections reminded the team why this work is so important and helped push the team forward.

Collaboration has been and continues to be key for every stage of this project. From working with the Smithsonian's OCIO to make the digitized records available for transcription and with members of the public to transcribe the records, to partnering with an external web developer to build a search platform on the NMAAHC's website that combines multiple sets of data into a single user interface, this project demonstrates how museums can use technology to transform our understanding of Reconstruction and post-emancipation African American life and allow African Americans to connect with their ancestors in ways never thought possible. We look forward to enhancing the functionality of our Search Portal, applying emerging technologies, and engaging communities to continue making important discoveries that transform our understanding of the American past and present.

Author Biographies

Hollis Gentry-Brown, an Information Specialist at the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, oversees genealogy research services and contributes to the Freedmen's Bureau Project. With 30+ years of experience, she is a leading expert in African American genealogy and is frequently featured in major media including The Washington Post, USA Today, and CNN.

Emily Cain specializes in building community around and connections to museum collections and information. As Smithsonian Transcription Center's Digital Communications Manager, she's responsible for engagement strategy and volunteer experience. Emily holds a BA in Anthropology from Marshall University, and an MA in Museum Studies from The George Washington University.

Douglas Remley is the Senior Editor/Publications Manager at the Smithsonian NMAAHC, where he oversees the creation and production of the Museum's print publications in addition to serving as co-lead of the Freedmen's Bureau Project. He holds an MA in Media and Public Affairs and a BA in Political Communication from The George Washington University.

Jill Roberts is a Program Manager in the Office of Digital Strategy and Engagement at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. With over seven years of involvement in the Freedmen's Bureau Project, she also leads the award-winning Searchable Museum platform. She holds a BA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Kamilah Stinnett specializes in digital initiatives at the National Museum of African American History and Culture where she contributes to the Searchable Museum and as co-lead of the Freedmen's Bureau Project. She holds an MA in Museum Studies from The George Washington University and a BA in History from Michigan State University.