

# Missing: A Freedman Seeks His Family

by Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller and Leslie S. Rowland

As a symbol of the grim reality of slavery, no scene rivalled that of the auction block. Slave sales exposed the full extent of the slave-owners' power over their human property and laid bare the limits upon the slaves' ability to control their own lives. Whether private purchases between individual owners, sales to itinerant traders, auctions at urban slave marts or sheriffs' sales from the courthouse steps—all separated husbands from wives, parents from children, brothers from sisters, cousins from cousins and grandchildren from grandparents.

When at last it came, freedom offered former slaves an opportunity to try to reverse the outcome of the auction block. In the years after the end of the Civil War, freedmen and freedwomen in every corner of the South searched out loved ones from whom they had been separated. Thousands took to the roads, sometimes walking hundreds of miles to find former homes and long-lost kin. Others advertised in newly established black newspapers for relatives about whose fate they often knew little. Black churchgoers served as communication centers, reading aloud at their services the newspaper notices and other queries that arrived by mail or by word of mouth. And hundreds of former slaves sought assistance from agents of the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency established by Congress to oversee the transition from slavery to freedom.

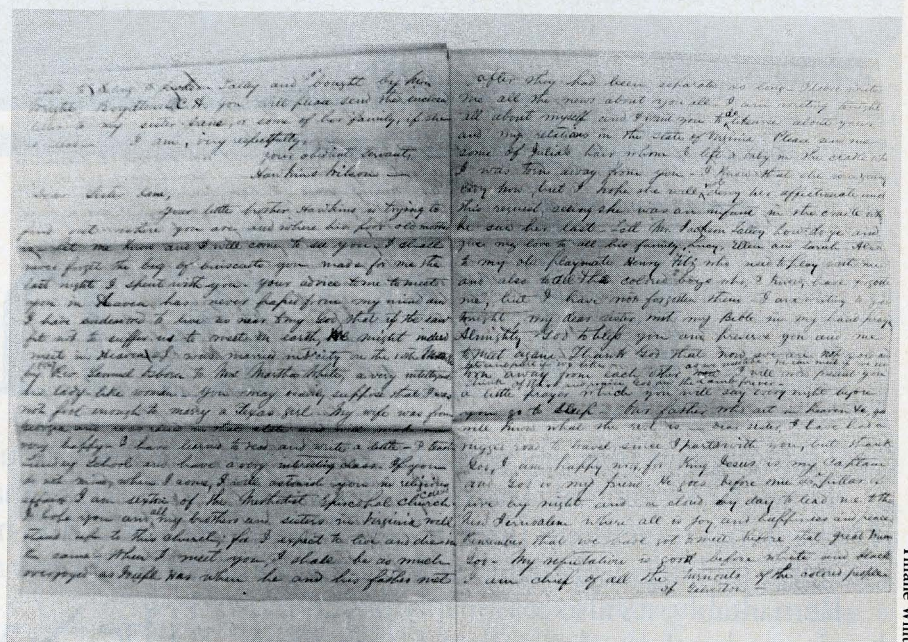
Today the records of that bureau are among the holdings of the National Archives of the United States, in Washington, D.C. Within their dusty volumes and boxes lie large numbers of letters and other documents from former slaves who were struggling to reunite fragmented families.

The Freedmen and Southern Society Project, located at the University of Maryland, is a collaborative effort to draw upon these and other remarkable records at the National Archives to write a documentary history of emancipation in the American South. For three years, starting in late 1976 (supported by the university and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and later by the NEH and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations), the editors of the project selected more than 40,000 documents—some two percent of the items they examined—from which they are writing *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, a multi-volume history combining interpretive essays and documents. Two volumes have reached print thus far, both published by Cambridge University Press: *The Destruction of Slavery* (1985) and *The Black Military Experience* (1982).

The document that follows—one of hundreds yet to be published—illustrates the efforts of former slaves to reconstruct their families. Its author, an ex-slave in Texas, had been sold away from Virginia as a teenager. Time and distance, however, had neither dimmed his memories of childhood family and friends nor diminished his emotional connection to them.

Twenty-four years after their forced separation, he wrote to his "dearest relatives" through the Freedmen's Bureau, introducing himself to them, not as the boy they had known, but as the man he had become. The text below is faithful to the original, except that dashes between sentences are replaced by periods and paragraph breaks are created, to make the document easier to read.

[Galveston, Texas] May 11th, 1867  
Chief of the Freedmen's Bureau, at Richmond



Tiffany White



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Dear Sir,

I am anxious to learn about my sisters, from whom I have been separated many years. I have never heard from them since I left Virginia twenty four years ago. I am in hopes that they are still living and I am anxious to hear how they are getting on. I have no other one to apply to but you and am persuaded that you will help one who stands in need of your services as I do. I shall be very grateful to you, if you oblige me in this matter.

One of my sisters belonged to Peter Coleman in Caroline County and her name was Jane. Her husband's name was Charles and he belonged to Buck Haskin and lived near John Wright's store in the same county. She had three children, Robert, Charles and Julia, when I left.

Sister Martha belonged to Dr Jefferson, who lived two miles above Wright's store. Sister Matilda belonged to Mrs. Botts, in the same county. My dear uncle Jim had a wife at Jack Langley's and his wife was named Adie and his oldest son was named Buck and they all belonged to Jack Langley.

These are all my own dearest relatives and I wish to correspond with them with a view to visit them as soon as I can hear from them. My name is Hawkins Wilson and I am their brother, who was sold at Sheriff's sale and used to belong to Jackson Talley and was bought by M. Wright, Boydtown C.H.

You will please send the enclosed letter to my sister Jane, or some of her family, if she is dead. I am, very respectfully,

Your obedient servant,  
Hawkins Wilson

Dear Sister Jane,

Your little brother Hawkins is trying to find out where you are and where his poor old mother is. Let me know and I will come to see you. I shall never forget the bag of biscuits you made for me the last night I spent with you. Your advice to me to meet you

in Heaven has never passed from my mind and I have endeavored to live as near to my God, that if He saw fit not to suffer us to meet on earth, we might indeed meet in Heaven.

I was married in this city on the 10th March 1867 by Rev. Samuel Osborn to Mrs. Martha White, a very intelligent and lady-like woman. You may readily suppose that I was not fool enough to marry a Texas girl. My wife was from Georgia and was raised in that state and will make me very happy.

I have learned to read, and write a little. I teach Sunday School and have a very interesting class. . . .

When I meet you, I shall be as much overjoyed as Joseph was when he and his father met after they had been separated so long. Please write me all the news about you all. I am writing tonight all about myself and I want you to do likewise about your and my relations in the state of Virginia. . . .

Tell Mr. Jackson Talley how-do-ye and give my love to all his family, Lucy, Ellen and Sarah. Also to my old playmate Henry Fitz who used to play with me and also to all the colored boys who, I know, have forgotten me, but I have not forgotten them. I am writing to you tonight, my dear sister, with my Bible in my hand praying Almighty God to bless you and preserve you and me to meet again.

Thank God that now we are not sold and torn away from each other as we used to be. we can meet if we see fit and part if we like. Think of this and praise God and the Lamb forever. . . .

Write as quickly as you can and direct to Hawkins Wilson care of Methodist Episcopal church, colored, Galveston, Texas. Give me your P. Office and I will write again. I shall drop in upon you some day like a thief in the night. . . .

Your loving and affectionate brother  
Hawkins Wilson ●

*The authors are co-editors of The Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland.*