Abraham Lincoln was killed before the official end of the Civil War. He had a plan to rebuild the South. Congress was against the president because they thought his plan was too easy on the South. One of the last things they agreed on was to start a relief agency. This agency was known as the Freedmen's Bureau.

The bureau was started to help blacks and poor whites. It was the first federal relief agency in United States history. It did not have strong support in Congress. By 1869, the agency was largely taken apart. It did what it could in the short time it was in action. One of its main impacts was in the area of education.

More than four thousand grade schools for blacks were built with the help of this agency. Both young and old were ready for the chance to go to school. Grandparents would sit next to their children and grandchildren. Everyone wanted the chance to learn to read and write.

Most of the teachers in the schools were volunteers. Most of them came from the North. They were impressed at how badly their students wanted to learn.

The bureau also helped to start colleges. Many of the graduates of these schools would go on to become teachers. As blacks graduated from college, they became teachers. There were black teachers in many grade schools in the South by the 1870s.

The agency also tried to help families find lost relatives. Many families had been torn apart during slavery. Parents hadn't seen their children for years. Husbands and wives had been sold to different owners. The agency tried to bring families back together.

The agency did little to help blacks become landowners. At first, the bureau gave abandoned Southern land to blacks. They could then start their own farms and begin to support themselves.

In the late 1860s, President Johnson gave the land back to the original owners. Any land that blacks thought they owned was lost. They were forced to start all over again. Few people would sell land to black families which made it hard to find more land.

The agency spent over seventeen million dollars. Some of this money went to medical care for over one million people, both black and white. Many of these people had never seen a doctor.

The bureau did little things, too. Many people needed day to day help. They didn't have enough food or enough clothes to wear. The agency tried to help with these worries, too.

It tried to help blacks understand contracts when they were asked to sign them. Even with all the schools, many people who used to be slaves couldn't read or write. The agency would help with contracts and with getting fair pay.

The agency also held its own court of law. It was often illegal for blacks to testify in court in the South. The agency's court helped blacks fight for equal rights.

Even though the Freedmen's Bureau didn't exist very long, it did help former slaves. Many of them learned to read and write because of the schools that were started. They also got the chance to go to college. Blacks were beginning to make a place for themselves in this country.
Freedmen's Bureau

Questions

1. How many grade schools for blacks were built with the help of the bureau?
   A. More than four thousand
   B. Less than four thousand
   C. None

2. The Freedmen's Bureau was the first what in United States history?

3. At first, where did most of the teachers for the schools come from?
   A. South
   B. West
   C. North

4. Who took advantage of the new schools?
   A. Only children
   B. No one used the schools
   C. Blacks of any age went to the schools

5. What happened to the land that was given to blacks?

6. Why did blacks have trouble understanding contracts?

Do you think the Freedmen's Bureau really made a difference?
Was it right for President Johnson to give Southern land back to the original owner? Explain your answer.