

# Freedpeople and the Federal Government's First Public Housing in Washington, DC

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Campbell Army Hospital, ca. 1861–1865

## Introduction

In 1938 Langston Terrace Apartments opened in Northeast Washington, DC. The federal government built the complex as one of 58 Public Works Administration (PWA) projects erected nationwide between 1935 and 1938 with the two stated goals of slum clearance and providing housing for low-income residents—both vital for a city in which most African Americans lived in low-quality, yet high-cost rentals. Langston Terrace was the first of three such buildings to open in the capitol, and the third to be completed in the nation. Residents paid an average of \$5.58 per room per month, plus \$1.81 for utilities, for one of the 274 units. Like most public housing projects, Langston Terrace was racially segregated. Designed for African Americans, the apartments were located in a predominantly black neighborhood in Anacostia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Langston Dwellings Now Listed In Register of Historic Places,” *Washington informer*, Nov. 25, 1987, 1; “Langston Terrace Rents Announced,” *Washington Post*, July 7, 1936.

Scholars have long regarded the PWA housing units as the country's first federal housing program.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as this article demonstrates, Langston Terrace was not the earliest such project in the District of Columbia, nor was the PWA the first federal housing program. The federal government first constructed public housing buildings in the District's Capitol Hill neighborhood as part of a larger housing program for formerly enslaved African Americans after the Civil War that included camps, government farms, Arlington Village, and Barry Farm.<sup>3</sup>

In response to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of formerly enslaved African Americans seeking refuge, the federal government created housing for several hundred families in the Washington, DC, area. As with public housing in the 20th century, this program proved to be controversial. Administrators instituted strict regulations on who and how many could live in a unit; required that tenants be employed; and enforced both sanitary and behavioral standards, including compulsory marriages for partners wishing to rent a space. More focused on returning formerly enslaved individuals to the workforce, and facing continuous opposition from critics who advocated a limited role for the state, the government closed the tenement buildings in 1872 as part of the end of the Freedmen's Bureau programs. It would take an even longer-lasting calamity in the form of the Great Depression for the federal government to become involved in public housing again.

This work focuses on the five public housing buildings that the government used for freedpeople in the District. Four were converted military barracks, and a fifth was a tenement building that the Freedman's Bureau constructed explicitly for

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel S. Keith, *Politics and the Housing Crisis since 1930* (New York: Universe Books, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Superintendent Danforth B. Nichols created Arlington Village—later known as Freedman's Village—on Robert E. Lee's former property in May 1863. It operated as a government farm and workshop, with formerly enslaved African Americans laboring in exchange for housing and clothing; the government sold the crops for a substantial profit. The site also contained a school and hospital for the infirmed. Over 2,200 people resided at Freedman's Village by 1864. The Freedman's Bureau took over assumed operations in May 1865 and began to rent out the 400 acres of farmland in one- to two-acre plots and buildings as housing. See Joseph P. Reidy, "Coming from the Shadow of the Past: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom at Freedmen's Village, 1863–1869," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 95, No. 4 (October 1987); Roberta Schildt, "Freedman's Village: Arlington Virginia, 1863–1900," *Arlington Historical Magazine* 7, No. 4 (1984), 11–21. In 1867 Freedman's Bureau Commissioner Oliver O. Howard purchased 375 acres east of the Anacostia River and subdivided the land into one- to two-acre lots. The bureau sold the property to freedmen, who built their own homes, schools, and churches. By 1869, over 500 families resided in Barry Farm. The community grew throughout the late 19th century, and is currently part of the Anacostia neighborhood. See Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *The Anacostia Story, 1608–1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1977).

housing freedpeople. This investigation addresses the following questions: Why did the government create the housing units? Why did they end? What can we learn from studying them? This article argues that the program, while relatively short-lived, represented a significant and unprecedented step toward a limited welfare state, and foreshadowed many of the same issues and debates that surrounded public housing in the 20th century.

### The Urgent Need for Housing

Prior to the Civil War the federal government had no established precedents for providing for war refugees and practically no institutional programs resembling those of the modern welfare state. The young republic continued the English tradition that philanthropic organizations should provide for those in need. Almost no public assistance programs existed at the federal level. The administrative state, fearful of setting a precedent for aid, remained relatively small and weak. It was guided by a strong belief in federalism, which left the relief of citizens to the states and private organizations.<sup>4</sup> Nineteenth-century Americans held a firm conviction that housing in general was best left to the market or private charities.<sup>5</sup> For example, the first government-sponsored public housing at the state level did not occur until 1923.<sup>6</sup>



An African American family crosses the Union lines in Virginia, 1861

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> R. Allen Hays, *The Federal Government & Urban Housing* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 2012), 8.

<sup>6</sup> John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylyan, eds. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000).

The issue of housing arose early in the Civil War as enslaved men, women, and children fled to Union lines; over 400,000 individuals crossed over by 1864.<sup>7</sup> This influx forced the federal government to respond, but neither Congress nor the president established a guiding policy. Instead, government and military leaders cobbled together a piecemeal approach. Initially, the Army maintained a policy of enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which stipulated that escaped slaves be returned to their masters. However, some commanders ignored the return policy. In May 1861, Secretary of War Simon Cameron approved Gen. Benjamin Butler's "contraband" policy, which allowed him and other commanders to keep runaway slaves as "contrabands of war."<sup>8</sup> The use of ex-slaves as unpaid laborers aided the Union Army and simultaneously hindered the Confederate war effort. For several months after, the decision to keep or return escaping slaves was left to local commanders.<sup>9</sup>

After direct lobbying by supporting senators, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the first Confiscation Act on August 6, 1861. The bill allowed Army officials to confiscate slaves from Confederate owners, although it did not explicitly state that slaves would be free. Instead, the legislation classified enslaved African Americans as property.<sup>10</sup> Other Union commanders continued to return slaves to their owners or to the Confederate Army. Addressing the issue, Congress passed the Act Prohibiting the Return of Slaves in March 1862, which forbid the practice. In October 1861, Cameron directed the Army to pay contrabands for their labor. Congress passed a second Confiscation Act in 1862, although it remained unclear if escaping slaves were to be treated as free or were still considered to be property. The Lincoln administration refused to clarify the issue, and enforcement of the provisions of the Confiscation Act was minimal.<sup>11</sup>

Enslaved African Americans defied the law's ambiguity and pressed for their freedom by fleeing to Union lines, forcing the military to react. Following the model established at Fort Monroe, in Virginia, the army created refugee camps as it traveled, both in the

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 167.

<sup>8</sup> General Butler to Secretary of War Simon Cameron, July 30, 1861. United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Wash., DC: Government Printing Office, 1901).

<sup>9</sup> Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 314.

<sup>11</sup> Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 167.

East and the West. The camps in the east became more permanent fixtures of the eastern front, while the camps in the west often existed only briefly as the military changed locations. This movement made life in the western camps that much more difficult for the refugee population, forced to live a transient lifestyle during the war. The constant moving also meant that housing was quickly constructed and of poor quality, as were food sources and sanitation. Thousands died of disease—smallpox in particular—and hunger.<sup>12</sup> These problems afflicted the eastern sites as well, although African American residents in these spaces erected log cabins and other buildings, such as schools, for their community. Despite the harsh conditions, over 400,000 black refugees lived in refugee camps in Corinth, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee; New Bern, North Carolina; and elsewhere. They provided invaluable services for the army as soldiers, teamsters, nurses, and seamstresses, and creating new lives in freedom.<sup>13</sup>

The experience for formerly enslaved African Americans in the District of Columbia reflected the ambiguity of the “contraband” policy. Thousands sought refuge in Washington, but police arrested many and returned them to their former owners in Maryland in order to placate that state’s slave owners. The Lincoln administration carried out this early enforcement as part of a larger strategy to keep slaveholding Maryland from joining the Confederacy, recognizing the significant power of slaveholders in the state’s decisions.<sup>14</sup>

The federal government did little at first to help the escaped slaves in the District. Instead, similar to situations of natural disaster, nongovernmental groups supplied assistance. Overall, 21 organizations like the National Freedmen’s Relief Association and American Tract Society, in addition to soup houses, churches, and individuals, provided aid.<sup>15</sup> However, these proved unable to deal with the burgeoning refugee population, particularly after the District passed an emancipation act in April 1862. Over 40,000 slaves fled to Washington by the war’s end, causing a major humanitarian crisis for a city of only 75,000 people, and one continually beset by financial

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<sup>12</sup> Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 95.

<sup>13</sup> Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2016), 67.

<sup>14</sup> Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, Steven Miller, and Leslie S. Rowland, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South, Vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 245.

<sup>15</sup> “Distress Among the Contrabands,” *Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 16, 1862; Lois Elaine Horton, “The Development of Federal Social Policy for Blacks in Washington, D.C., After Emancipation,” (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1977), 70.

difficulties. The “influx of negroes” into Washington, reported *The Baltimore Sun* in May 1862, led to “increasing pauperism and filling up the city almshouses”; “want or dependence on the government,” the newspaper opined, “is sure their fate.”<sup>16</sup>



The Old Capitol Prison, Washington, DC, ca. 1861–1865

Despite this pressing issue, Congress passed no laws on how to address housing for the former slaves. Unable to rely on the traditional remedy of private relief; finding little aid from the municipal government, which opposed emancipation; and with little direction from higher authorities, the military governor of the District, Gen. James Wadsworth, directed the formerly enslaved to be held in the Old Capitol Prison. It was described by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* as “the black hole of Washington, D.C.”<sup>17</sup> Seeking freedom, the runaways found themselves instead treated as inmates.

This earliest housing also marked the beginning of the efforts to make the former slaves self-supporting. The prison's superintendent, William Wood, attempted to find employers in the city to hire freedpeople.<sup>18</sup> This practice continued when Wadsworth transferred the group to the adjoining tenement buildings known as Duff Green's Row in March 1862.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “Influx of Negroes,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 4, 1862; “Continued Influx of Negroes,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 19, 1862.

<sup>17</sup> *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, Dec. 28 1861.

<sup>18</sup> Berlin, et al., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 245.

<sup>19</sup> “The Contrabands are not a Burden on the Government,” *National Republican*, Oct. 31, 1862.

The focus on hiring out freedpeople diverted attention from concerns for their health. Over 600 freedpeople lived at Duff Green's Row by June 1862, and sanitary conditions deteriorated quickly, leading to many deaths from disease. Officials closed it after a July outbreak of smallpox at the building led to fears of the disease spreading throughout the city.<sup>20</sup>

The closure of Duff Green's Row marked the beginning of efforts to push the former slaves to the periphery of the city. The federal government transferred the residents of the tenements to the abandoned military barracks Camp Barker, located on the outskirts of the District, in summer 1862. Over 11,000 resided at Camp Barker during its 17-month existence.<sup>21</sup>

Superintendent Danforth Nichols intended the camps to serve as temporary housing, but also as a foundation upon which to instill the lessons and values of self-support and the ability to find employment. Nichols required many of the male camp residents to work for the government as teamsters for military camps, hospital aides, or laborers on public works projects in exchange for salary and rations. He pushed others to find employment by not only continuing the practice of encouraging city residents to come to the camp to find servants and laborers but also advertising in newspapers throughout the country on the availability of workers.

Nichols's focus on self-reliance reflected two main government concerns. First, officials desired to place the former slaves into the free labor market. Second, the officials feared that freedpeople would become dependent on the government, both increasing costs in the short-term and creating a continued expectation of support in the long term. In an October 1862 letter published in the *National Republican*, Nichols answered allegations from a former member of Congress that over 40,000 refugees "subsisted and [were] clothed at government expense." Nichols argued that the claim was spurious. Only 650 resided at the camp at the time, he countered, as hundreds of others had found employment, and presumably alternative housing. Only those too sick or elderly to work were exempt from working in the district for the government, a private employer, or as a laborer for the camp, and the government had not provided any of the contrabands with clothing or even blankets. Finally, Nichols attempted to assuage the fear that "the

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<sup>20</sup> Berlin, et al., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 246.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Harrison, *Washington during Civil War and Reconstruction: Race and Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 41.

North will be crowded with negroes, and that the poor whites will have to suffer the consequences”; despite employment offers, less than one in a hundred, in his estimation, wanted to go North or West.<sup>22</sup>

Nichols instituted policies to make the camp self-sustaining and inexpensive. The *National Republican* reported that the camp required women not employed elsewhere to wash linen for soldiers and hospitals in order to “defray their own expenses.”<sup>23</sup> Nichols also partnered with local and national organizations to provide aid like schooling and clothing at no cost to the government.

As at the Old Capital Prison and Duff Green’s Row, the emphasis on teaching self-support diverted attention from poor living conditions. The effort to push residents out of the camp by finding them employment elsewhere did not counterbalance the steady influx of former slaves. As many as 80 people lived in each of the 50 wooden cabins, which quickly deteriorated. The efforts to keep down costs by relying on private aid also proved insufficient, and camp residents were forced to sew their own clothes and buy their own stoves to heat the cold wooden cabins and cook their food.<sup>24</sup> Only one contaminated well provided water for the residents, and one in seven inhabitants died from disease.<sup>25</sup>

The military’s next housing venture involved increased efforts to make the former slaves self-reliant. Not only did the superintendents find employment and educate the residents about the virtues of labor, they now trained freedpeople as farmers on government-operated farms in Maryland and Virginia starting in summer 1863. In addition, these farms further reduced the government’s costs and placed more African Americans outside of the city. The farms followed the model of using confiscated Confederate plantations, as most notably in the Port Royal Experiment in South Carolina.<sup>26</sup> Superintendents required passes for leaving the farms; punished adultery; utilized an overseer of laborers; incentivized productivity by distributing extra clothing as a reward; and implemented a credit debt system. Male laborers earned \$10 a month, and women \$6, but they had to repay the government at the end of the month for the costs of clothing, and housing, and other goods—a system

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<sup>22</sup> “The Contrabands are not a Burden on the Government.”

<sup>23</sup> “Liberal Donations for the Contrabands,” *National Republican*, Aug. 1, 1862.

<sup>24</sup> “Camp Barker,” *Evening Star*, Oct. 24, 1862.

<sup>25</sup> Alcione M. Amos, “‘Contrabands’: Camps and Lives,” D.C. Historical Studies Conference, Nov. 14–17, 2013; Downs, *Sick from Freedom*, 46–48.

<sup>26</sup> Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964).



that foreshadowed later sharecropping practices.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, the government made large profits by selling the agricultural produce from the farms.

The waning months of the Civil War witnessed a transition and struggle over the government's housing policy for freedpeople. In March 1865, Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau. Oliver O. Howard, an evangelical abolitionist and brigadier general, served as the agency's commissioner. Congress designed the bureau to be temporary, authorizing it to serve until a year after the war ended. The establishing legislation also contained a clause that allowed the commissioner, "under the direction of the president," to distribute up to 40 acres of confiscated land to each freedman. The clause built upon the previously mentioned Confiscation Acts that the military had used to create government farms throughout the South, and Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15, which allowed freedmen to receive up to 40 acres of land along a stretch of territory from Jacksonville, Florida, to Charleston, South Carolina. Over 40,000 freedmen claimed 400,000 acres of such land by June 1865.<sup>28</sup>

Bureau Commissioner Howard favored the redistribution plan, but the legislation required the president's consent before doling out confiscated property, and President Andrew Johnson opposed the idea of African Americans becoming homeowners. On May 29, Johnson issued a "Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction," which allowed Southerners, with exceptions for leaders of the Confederacy, to apply for pardons and have their land restored.<sup>29</sup>

Recognizing Johnson's abandonment of the redistribution program for freedmen, Howard issued Freedmen's Bureau Circular No. 13 on August 1, 1865. Howard ordered his subordinates to set aside land for immediate rental and sale to freedmen; Johnson negated this directive two weeks later. Howard continued to struggle against Johnson's policy by urging his subordinates to delay return of land and urging Congress to introduce legislation to protect freedmen's land. Howard's efforts, though, proved unsuccessful, and the Freedmen's Bureau returned nearly all the property it controlled, including the government farms in Maryland and Virginia, by 1868.<sup>30</sup> Many African Americans who farmed the land ended up in the exploitative share-cropping arrangements similar to those that would characterize the South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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<sup>27</sup> "The Freedmen in Maryland," *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, Oct. 2, 1865.

<sup>28</sup> Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 442–55.

<sup>29</sup> John Syrett, *The Civil War Confiscation Acts: Failing to Reconstruct the South* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 144.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

The government had largely abandoned land redistribution by 1867, but favored use of the Freedman's Bank, created in 1865 as a quasi-government agency with branches throughout the South. The bank represented a new policy: rather than redistributing the land for free, the government encouraged emancipated slaves to save their wages in the bank and use the money to buy land.<sup>31</sup>

### Tenements

The return of the farmland did not signal the end of the housing program. On the contrary, the years 1866–68 saw the expansion of the government's involvement in housing in ways not matched until the 1930s. The closing of the contraband camps and government farms left thousands of freedpeople in need of housing. The Freedmen's Bureau focused primarily on finding employment for freedpeople, especially outside of the city, in part so they would no longer require government support. The bureau utilized employment agents to help freedpeople find work, formed relationships with various employers nationwide, placed advertisements in newspapers throughout the country to inform businesses and individuals that freedmen were available for work, and provided transportation for workers. The bureau's employment and transportation programs ultimately only pushed several thousand freedpeople out of the District of Columbia; Howard noted in his January 1867 report to Congress that the bureau had transported about 5,000 to that point.<sup>32</sup>

Tens of thousands of others remained in the Washington, DC, area and faced a difficult housing market. The soaring white and black population in the city drove up the demand for housing, pricing many options beyond the limited financial means of most freedpeople. These market factors, combined with almost no help from the city government and the opposition of many white neighborhoods to black renters or homeowners, left freedpeople almost no option but to live in slum housing, quickly and shoddily constructed to take advantage of the freedpeople's plight and costing \$10 or more a month in rent. Conditions for most former slaves remained precarious. The *Boston Herald's* Washington correspondent wrote in June 1865 that the "wretched outcasts under the shadows of the National Capitol" are "suffering here terribly," and "many were actually dying of starvation."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Ira Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 104. The poorly administered bank went bankrupt in 1874.

<sup>32</sup> "Laws In Relation to Freedmen," S. Doc. No. 6, 39th Cong., 2nd Sess., Ser. vol. 1276, p. 1867.

<sup>33</sup> "Our Washington Correspondence," *Boston Herald*, Jan. 23, 1865.



An alley with substandard housing in Washington, DC, 1935, much as it was in the decades after the Civil War

Howard attempted to improve this situation by converting former military barracks into tenements: four in Washington—Campbell Army Hospital, Kendall Green Barracks, Wisewell Barracks, and the East Capitol Street Barracks—and five in Alexandria. By 1867, the tenements held 350 families in Washington and 111 families in Alexandria. Howard ordered the monthly rent to be capped at no more than \$3 per room, significantly lower rent than even the cheapest slum dwellings.<sup>34</sup>

The bureau again attempted to limit eligibility for housing. Howard directed the superintendents of the tenement buildings to “discriminate carefully between all applicants and give preference to those most worthy and who are least able to pay high rents.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, eligibility for the benefit of housing differed from criteria used for previous forms of relief. Rather than target those unable to work due to age or incapacitation, the agency selected as “most worthy” those working individuals who earned the lowest wages and were most susceptible to the exploitive housing market. The government used this same criterion for determining who would live in the PWA tenements in the 1930s.

<sup>34</sup> “Laws In Relation to Freedmen,” p. 1867.

<sup>35</sup> S. N. Clark to J. Brown, May 14, 1866. Records for the Field Offices for the District of Columbia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1870 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1902), roll 1, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group (RG) 105. Hereinafter DCBRFAL.

Bureau officials expected tenants to keep up with rent payments and ordered that boarders be evicted immediately if they did not pay rent.<sup>36</sup> However, this eviction policy was not strictly enforced. An October 1867 letter from the assistant commissioner to the superintendents of Wisewell and East Capitol Barracks directed the transfer of nonpaying tenants and “those that pay very irregularly” to Kendall Green Barracks, and the replacement with “deserving” boarders who would pay regularly.<sup>37</sup> During the brief existence of the tenements, the concept of “deserving” became increasingly attached to the ability to pay rent.

As in previous housing programs, the bureau sought to control many aspects of the freedpeople’s lives at the tenement buildings as part of a holistic, and paternalistic, training program for a group they considered childlike and in need of guidance. These efforts extended beyond advocating employment to encompass the regulation of behavior. As at the government farms, the agency actively promoted marriage for unmarried couples.<sup>38</sup> Couples had to present “proof of a lawful marriage” to live together in one of the tenement rooms. The superintendents of the buildings also served as the assistant superintendents of marriages. The bureau charged him with carrying out the provisions of marriage so as to prevent the “existing evils and vices arising from a disregard of the sacredness of the marriage relation.”<sup>39</sup> In the view of agency officials, marriages helped promote stability and better prepared freedpeople for their new lives.

The bureau also placed great emphasis on sanitation as part of the freedpeople’s training in order to prevent the spread of disease. The commissioner’s office ordered numerous inspections of the tenements, noting repeatedly the “filthy conditions,” and requiring residents to scrub their floors twice a week; one inspector grouched that “only the pretense of cleaning is made.”<sup>40</sup>

Yet, as in the earlier camps and farms, the tenement dwellers bristled at these regulations, seeing them not as guidance but as intrusions. The residents asserted their rights as tenants, and wrote letters to the commissioner’s office complaining about the poor conditions of the buildings, high rents in Alexandria, mistreatment by bureau officials, and eviction when temporarily unable to pay due to illness or

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<sup>36</sup> C. H. Howard to J. L. Roberts, Feb. 20, 1866, roll 18, DCBRFAL.

<sup>37</sup> C. H. Howard to Local Superintendents. Oct. 11, 1867, roll 19, DCBRFAL.

<sup>38</sup> Annual Reports of the Assistant Commissioners, District of Columbia, Oct. 10, 1867, roll 1, DCBRFAL

<sup>39</sup> C. H. Howard to J. L. Roberts. Mar. 27, 1866, roll 1. DCBRFAL.

<sup>40</sup> J. L. Roberts to C. H. Howard, Oct. 6, 1866, roll 1, DCBRFAL.

unemployment.<sup>41</sup> Responding to the grievances, an inspector for the office found the majority of rooms at Campbell to be “dirty, black with smoke,” and “unhealthy for freedmen,” and the Kendall Green Barracks to be “in imminent danger of fire.”<sup>42</sup> This fear of fire, as much as the worry of disease, guided sanitation efforts. Residents also exercised as much freedom as possible to build their lives in the tenements. Inhabitants successfully petitioned the bureau to allow them to have meetings of the Third Ward Republicans at Wisewell Barracks.<sup>43</sup> Some residents at Kendall Green grew and sold crops on the grounds.<sup>44</sup> Others collected items like rags, bones, and oysters, which they stored in their rooms before attempting to sell.<sup>45</sup>

Residents of the tenements faced opposition from white neighbors. Located in the mixed Seventh Street neighborhood, the Wisewell Barracks, in particular, bore animosity. Throughout the summer of 1866, whites repeatedly attacked blacks in the neighborhood, with no interference from police, culminating in a “battle” in which hundreds attacked the barracks with stones and other weapons, and were only held back by armed guards. The police, one bureau official noted, “urged them [white attackers] on.”<sup>46</sup> This incident was one of hundreds of acts of violence the Freedmen’s Bureau documented each year in its “Miscellaneous Reports and Lists Relating to Murders and Outrages,” which supervisors compiled for each state. In Louisiana the bureau documented the murder of at least 80 freedpeople at the hands of white residents from July 1865 through March 1867, in addition to 210 freedpeople shot, stabbed, or otherwise assaulted.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps ironic in light of white opposition to the black tenants, Wisewell Barracks served as the site of one of the most radical of the housing experiments. In December 1866, DC Assistant Commissioner Charles Howard ordered the superintendent to rent rooms at the tenement to poor whites displaced by the war, labeled “refugees” to differentiate them from freedmen, with apartments of white and black residents “kept separate.” Records do not indicate how long white resi-

<sup>41</sup> Berlin, et al., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 251; J. L. Roberts to Maj. Vandenburg, May 21, 1867, roll 1, DCBRFAL.

<sup>42</sup> Wilbur Hamilton to S. N. Clark, Oct. 18, 1867, roll 19, DCBRFAL.

<sup>43</sup> “Meeting of Third Ward Republicans,” *Evening Star*, May 18, 1868.

<sup>44</sup> Wilbur Hamilton to Maj. Vanenburgh, Oct. 15, 1867, roll 19, DCBRFAL.

<sup>45</sup> J. L. Roberts to C. H. Howard, Oct. 6, 1866, roll 1, DCBRFAL.

<sup>46</sup> W. F. Surgin to W. W. Rogers, July 7, 1866, roll 1, DCBRFAL.

<sup>47</sup> “Miscellaneous Reports and Lists Relating to Murders and Outrages,” Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1869 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1027), roll 34, RG 105.



Freedman's Barracks, Alexandria, VA., ca. 1861–1865

dents stayed at the tenements—rent reports of tenants identified as “white” and “colored” exist through July 1867—and do not state if whites lived at other bureau buildings. The federal government did not have another integrated public housing project until after the 1964 Civil Rights Act.<sup>48</sup>

In 1868 the bureau began to shut down Kendall Green, Wisewell, and East Capitol Barracks for fear of fire and continued hostility from white neighbors. The bureau confronted other problems at the time, including the aforementioned declining political support and an overall decrease in funding. Despite these obstacles, the agency embarked upon the two most financially ambitious of its housing projects. The bureau began building the first, the Capitol Hill Tenements, in March 1868. The agency used materials from the other tenements, which the bureau tore down, and awarded contracts through a bidding process with suppliers throughout the city to build 100 multistory buildings as part of the complex, at a cost of over \$114,000 dollars—the equivalent of \$1.86 million dollars in 2017.<sup>49</sup> The agency completed construction of the complex in late summer 1868, with tenants moving in shortly after. To recoup some of the expenses, the bureau charged higher rates of \$4 to \$6 dollars per room per month—still lower than the average rent of \$10 dollars for the city’s cheapest slum dwellings. The bureau sought “renters of good character” and disqualified those who were “dishonest or habitually slow in the payment of their rents” at the previous tenements. However, the superintendent

<sup>48</sup> Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 268.

<sup>49</sup> Report of Agent C. W. Perkins, July 2, 1868, roll 1, DCBRFAL.

complained in September 1868 of the “inability” of some tenants to pay rent.<sup>50</sup> The units may have housed both black and white residents, as one official noted in April 1868 that the new tenements were for “refugees and freedmen.”<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

By 1870 the bureau’s power waned. Commissioner Howard noted that even the agency’s promoters regarded the bureau as a “temporary necessity” and “abnormal to our system of Government.”<sup>52</sup> The “constant and determined opposition” he later described also nearly brought down his career. In 1870 Congress held the “Howard Investigations” over allegations of agency wrongdoings.<sup>53</sup> The majority opinion ultimately cleared Howard, and he remained as the official head of the Freedmen’s Bureau until 1874, but was transferred to the West during the Indian Wars in 1872. That same year, Congress refused to pass renewal legislation for the agency, and the bureau in all effects ceased to operate.<sup>54</sup>

The housing project’s brief life provides insights into 19th-century welfare state programs. Numerous issues arose there that echoed in 20th-century public housing. These included white opposition to African American public housing in their neighborhoods;<sup>55</sup> racial segregation of public housing;<sup>56</sup> the strict regulation of rooms, policing of morality, a push toward employment complaints of low-quality units with little upkeep by officials;<sup>57</sup> spatial segregation justified by fear of spreading disease;<sup>58</sup> the efforts of residents to make rooms into homes and build community relationships;<sup>59</sup> the individual and collective resistance to perceived

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<sup>50</sup> J.V.W. Vandeburgh to D. G. Swain, Sept. 29, 1868, in Harrison, *Washington During Civil War and Reconstruction*, 74; Superintendent Fithian to Assistant Commissioner, Sept. 1868, roll 1, DCBRFAL.

<sup>51</sup> Acting Assistant Inspector General to Maj. J. M. Vandeburgh, Apr. 3, 1865, roll 1, DCBRFAL.

<sup>52</sup> Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1907), 423.

<sup>53</sup> “Charges Against General Howard,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 16, 1870.

<sup>54</sup> Many of the schools the bureau founded continued to operate as public schools for black children under the segregated Jim Crow system.

<sup>55</sup> Jeannine Bell, *Move-In Violence and the Persistence of Racial Segregation in American Housing* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Modibo Coulibaly, Rodney D. Green, and David M. Jones, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low-Income Housing in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Lisa Levenstein, “Tenants did not Invest in Public Housing,” in Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale, eds. *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015): 223–34.

<sup>58</sup> Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Levenstein, “Tenants did not Invest in Public Housing.”

mistreatment and high rents charged by government landlords;<sup>60</sup> and the continued pushing of African Americans to the urban periphery. These are also considered hallmark issues and criticisms of 20th-century public housing. Yet, as seen in the federal government's housing projects for freedpeople, these types of contentious issues, practices, and policies first arose in the 1860s.

Although the Civil War expanded the scope and size of the federal government, housing remained primarily an issue for the private sector, except for the spread of local building codes starting in the late 1890s and 1900s and scattered attempts at slum clearance in the same period. Philanthropic organizations first erected tenements in the 1870s, but it was not until 1923 that a municipal government—the city of Milwaukee—built the first government-sponsored public housing, the Garden Homes, which closed after only two years.<sup>61</sup>

The Great Depression created a new and urgent need for public housing, and federal housing reflected the changing ideas about the proper role of the federal government. Similar to the refugee crisis during the Civil War, the extensive social dislocation of the Great Depression caused severe problems that only the federal government could manage. One part of many projects carried out under the auspices of the Public Works Administration, the Roosevelt administration viewed the PWA's Housing Division units as both a way to provide housing for thousands of impoverished Americans and a means to jumpstart the flagging homebuilding industry.<sup>62</sup> Contractors built 22,000 units under PWA auspices from 1933 to 1938, and added an additional 160,000 units with support from federal subsidies provided with the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937.<sup>63</sup> Although it is unlikely that administrators looked to the public housing instituted in the 1860s for guidance, the same efforts at regulations, and the same types of problems arose, with many continuing to plague public housing to this day.

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<sup>60</sup> See Ronald Lawson and Mark Neslon, eds., *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904–1984* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>61</sup> John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylyvian, eds. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000), 24.

<sup>62</sup> Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 48.

<sup>63</sup> John F. McDonald, "Public Housing Construction and the Cities: 1937–1967," *Urban Studies Research*, vol. 2011, Article ID 985264, 1–12, 2011. doi:10.1155/2011/985264 (accessed 08/21/2017).



Into the 21st century, expensive row houses occupied the land where the Capitol Hill tenements once stood. The dearth of affordable housing persisted as a significant concern in the District of Columbia, and the local and federal governments struggled over how to address the problem. For a brief period in the late 1860s and early 1870s, the federal government instituted the first public housing unit in the country's history. Much like the residents being forced from the gentrified Capitol Hill neighborhood, the memory of this program is largely displaced.

Part of a larger overall expansion of the federal government in response to the Civil War and its aftermath, the housing program for refugees set a precedent for how the government could respond to national emergencies, an important development in the modern nation state. An analysis of the tenements and other housing projects provides a window into how the government handled social and racial issues in the period, and how little that has changed in subsequent decades. The paternalistic treatment of residents and other policies in these spaces adhered to popular conceptions of race and propagated segregation. The federal government continued these practices practically unchanged in the PWA housing of the 1930s, and public attitudes towards tenants—including fierce and often violent opposition to black housing units in white neighborhoods—persisted as well.

The federal government's Civil War refugees housing program represented a lost opportunity in many ways. By succumbing to pressure to end the project, the federal government failed to address the housing needs of thousands of African Americans, choosing instead to focus on finding employment for the recently emancipated. Through its practices of segregation and surveillance, the government fostered an adversarial relationship that remained in place during the PWA and later housing projects. These decisions made during the 1860s had lasting implications throughout the 20th century. Although the tenements were removed from the physical landscape, their impact reverberated for decades.

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*Photo Credits:* Campbell Army Hospital, crossing Union lines, Old Capitol Prison, DC alley, Freedman's Barracks, courtesy Library of Congress.

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