

# Carpetbagger On The Brazos: The Texas Freedmen's Bureau In Robertson County

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If anything, his trip from Galveston to Sterling was an omen of things to come for Joshua L. Randall. Flush with his new assignment as agent for the Texas Freedmen's Bureau in Robertson County, Randall left to assume his new duties as quickly as possible by catching the first passenger train north. But en route, another train had problems on the tracks "and detained the passenger train some thirty hours," leaving Randall stranded for more than a day until he arrived late at night at the end of the rail lines in Millican. The next morning he tried to get on the stagecoach to Robertson County but found every seat already sold. Randall then attempted to make his way north by foot, but seeing that the roads were in "such deplorable condition," he resigned to wait two days for the next stage.<sup>1</sup>

Reaching Sterling on the morning of April 10, 1867, Randall finally arrived at the office he would be taking over, only to find it abandoned and without the local Bureau papers needed for his work. The agent temporarily in charge, whom Randall was to relieve, was off conducting business "in a distant part of the county" and thus Randall would have to wait until he returned before beginning work in the county himself. So Randall simply sat down and—in the only act he *could* perform—dutifully wrote headquarters that he had arrived at his post and would begin his job as soon as the temporary agent returned.<sup>2</sup>

Created by Congress at the close of the war, the Freedmen's Bureau was a government agency whose primary responsibilities were the protection of ex-slaves in their transition to freedom and the enforcement of their new rights as United States citizens. Charged with such an important task, the Bureau wielded a great deal of power over events in the South and had a massive impact upon the development of Reconstruction in the Southern states. Bureau agents were present in most counties across the South, and were the primary arbiters of disputes between the ex-slaves and planters in the early years following the Civil War. Yet most scholarship on Reconstruction has largely ignored the Freedmen's Bureau, with historians rarely attempting to assess the impact local Bureau agents had on the direction of grassroots Reconstruction.

Recent examinations of the Bureau in Texas, however, have attempted to fill that void by investigating the actions of local-level Bureau agents in an effort to evaluate the importance of the Bureau and its effectiveness. This work has largely disseminated into two polarized camps centered on the interpretations of Barry Crouch and William Richter. Crouch's work has presented a view of Bureau agents as effective public servants who were making important social progress for the freedmen when the Bureau expired far too soon in 1868. Richter, however, has argued the opposite, claiming that the Bureau agents' personal faults—combined with the enormity of their task—doomed them to failure. Richter's arguments have presented the Bureau agents as vindictive

bureaucrats, and the Bureau as an institution with little hope or promise of accomplishing any of its goals. For Crouch the Bureau was the freedmen's best hope; for Richter the Bureau was simply hopeless.<sup>3</sup>

Neither interpretation has been examined in the detail needed for proper assessment, and further study is therefore necessary before any useful conclusions can be drawn. Intimately involved with the Bureau from the beginning of Reconstruction, Robertson County provides an excellent opportunity for just such an examination and testing of the Crouch-Richter controversy. The county was served by several Bureau agents of varying abilities who faced innumerable difficulties—not the least of which was a wealthy and powerful planter class—and provides an opportunity to assess the Bureau's aggregate impact on the course of local Reconstruction. This study is intended as just such an in-depth examination of the local agents of Robertson County. In examining the roles and efforts of each of the agents who served there, this paper examines Robertson County as a testing ground to help resolve the Crouch-Richter dispute, and begin a process of demonstrating which paradigm of the Bureau's activities is therefore more accurate.

Joshua Randall's delayed and disappointing arrival marked an appropriate beginning to his frustrating experience as Sub-Assistant Commissioner for the Texas Freedmen's Bureau in Robertson County. Tucked into the heartland of Texas and bordered on the west by the Brazos River, Robertson was a county boasting some of the wealthiest cotton planters in the state, whose large plantations straddled the Brazos and Little Brazos Rivers. Here were found "some of the richest and first men of the state," whose post-Rebellion interests did not include placating either blacks or the Bureau. In laying down their arms, most ex-Confederates had not lain down their convictions, and the former slaveholders of the county had no intention of idly accepting the changes that Randall represented. Any hopes the newly freed slaves of Robertson County held for their future depended directly upon the Bureau, and now fell heavily on Randall's shoulders.<sup>4</sup>

Since emancipation reached Texas in June of 1865, these wealthy planters had managed to largely stunt the Bureau's efforts in the county and control its actions. Indeed, the first agent in the county had been a man of their own choosing. Ranger & Company, a firm which controlled a large number of plantations in the area and held important contacts in Galveston, in collusion with several planters, had successfully pressured the Bureau to appoint a local man named Champ Carter, Jr. Assigned as a civilian agent in March 1866 and receiving no pay, Carter quickly proved to be little more than a tool of the local planting interest. Reports of Carter's brutality toward the freedmen and favorable disposition toward the planters soon found their way to Bureau headquarters, prompting demands that he explain his behavior, particularly his cruel habit of punishing freedmen by stringing them up by their thumbs.<sup>5</sup>

By the summer of 1866, the planters were enjoying Carter's work, and grew bolder in their use of him. Ranger & Co. sent him to Bureau headquarters in Galveston to bring back "1 to 14 soldiers to be stationed at Sterling for a few months," apparently hoping that Carter would use these new troops to keep the freedmen in line during the summer crop work. Returning with a calvary unit, Carter did not disappoint the planters and continued to abuse his power with the freedmen. While the summer passed, the

already tenuous relationship between Carter and the Bureau deteriorated further as he increasingly asked for greater power and to be paid for his actions as agent. Meanwhile, stories of his cruelty and collusion with the planters became impossible to ignore, and by September of 1866 the Bureau had become disillusioned with Carter. Finally dismissing him, the Bureau reassigned the county to Second Lieutenant Lemuel K. Morton.<sup>6</sup>

Morton arrived in Sterling on September 24, 1866, and quickly recognized the difficulties before him. While Carter had been a willing pawn of the planters, Morton had no intention of following suit. Writing to headquarters of his arrival in the county, Morton declared he would not “pursue the same course that the my predecessor done,” and predicted of the planters that: “as I can not approve of their mode of doing business I fear their friendship will be of short duration.” Unlike Carter, Morton was a professional soldier paid directly by the Bureau. More importantly, he held no personal connection to the local planters and Morton clearly saw himself as a defender of the freed slaves. He was the first real hope that the local freedmen had of federal protection.<sup>7</sup>

Yet while Lt. Morton obviously intended to protect the freedmen of Robertson County, he quickly became overwhelmed by the situation in which he found himself. Carter had left the county in an appalling condition where “planters have been allowed to tie up the Freedmen, by the thumbs for the most trivial or emagiouary offince.” Moreover, Carter had apparently used the troops given him by the Bureau to disarm the freedmen, and had appointed people to act as agents of the Bureau even though he had power to do so. Several of these false agents continued to operate even after Carter was dismissed and Morton reported hearing of one man named “Shaffer” repeatedly “tying up Freedmen.” Carter’s example had set a wretched precedent of Bureau actions, and left the wealthy planters clearly in control of the county and of the freedmen.<sup>8</sup>

In visiting the local plantations, Morton became further discouraged and upset by the planters’ “strange ideas of justice for the Freedmen.” The planters wanted “Military Law for the Freedmen but civil law for themselves,” and were dismayed at Morton’s interest in the ex-slaves. Carter had done so little to advance the rights of freedmen in the county that Morton could only conclude that “[t]he feelings of the whites towards the Blacks, is not what it should be[,] they seem to think they are still the master[s] and the freedmen, the Slaves.”<sup>9</sup>

Morton spent the next three months visiting the local plantations and complaining to headquarters about the planters. He was particularly upset by the widespread practice of cheating freedmen out of their wages, but took little action and grew increasingly overwhelmed by the task before him. Morton also reported the lack of field hands in the area, presumably because violence forced many blacks to flee the county out of fear for their lives. In the meantime, several outbreaks of cholera on the plantations caused additional freedmen to desert the county, leaving Morton to lament, “I am afraid [they] can not be indused to return.” He simply did not know what to do, and as the violence continued freedmen began to abandon the county. By late December a frustrated Morton gave up on Robertson County after only three and a half months and in January resigned his position as the local agent.<sup>10</sup>

Thus by early 1867, the Freedmen’s Bureau had been able to effect few changes in the county. The planters had done an effective job of controlling Bureau operations in

the area through Carter, and in retaining complete power. By Morton's account, the freedmen had clearly been subject to a long series of "regular frauds and Swindles," and he himself had given up out of pure frustration. If the freedmen were to have any hope of justice or semblance of peace, they were going to need a Bureau agent who could stand up to both the powerful planters of the county and the enormity of the task before him.<sup>11</sup>

Assigning a traveling agent of the Bureau to watch the county, the Bureau searched for a suitable replacement. In the meantime, race relations in Robertson County continued to deteriorate. Local whites attacked and killed several freedmen on the Cessna plantation and burned the plantation's buildings, apparently as retaliation against the freedmen for planting crops without white supervision. Chaos was overtaking Robertson County, and a permanent agent would have to be established before any semblance of order and reconstruction could occur on any level in the county.<sup>12</sup>

Thrown into such a whirlwind of civil unrest and racial injustice, Sub-Assistant Commissioner Randall had an enormous—if not impossible—task before him, as did all the agents of the Bureau. The power of the planters was far from broken and indeed seemed as strong as before emancipation, making Randall's situation particularly daunting. Moreover, the local freedmen had yet to even see the presence of Bureau agents as a positive influence. Carter had used his authority as agent to promote the planters, and Morton failed to use his almost at all. Randall was now in a position where he had to prove himself, not only to the Bureau that hired him and to the planters who opposed him, but to the very freedmen he sought to protect.

A young man, Joshua Randall had spent the majority of the war in his native Maine working as a law student in the city of Augusta. His first attempt to gain a position with the Bureau came almost immediately after the war, though he was not appointed until gaining his assignment in Robertson County in April of 1867. His experience in law would prove valuable in executing the duties of his new office, where he often served as judge and jury in his attempt to ease the freedmen's difficult walk from slavery to freedom. As a New Englander, he lacked many of the racist assumptions that plagued other Bureau agents. Obviously, he was an excellent choice and well suited to the task; yet Randall would find a difficult road before him.<sup>13</sup>

Randall immediately bought a horse and began visiting the local plantations to get a feel for the county. Although most people initially treated him with "courtesy and consideration," it soon became clear to Randall that he was dealing with a class of planters who held "no love for the government of the United States." Reporting that most planters were "active participators in the late rebellion," Randall's travels convinced him that "it would be next to impossible to find a score of reliable white men in my Sub-district." The county's condition disgusted Randall and the attitudes of the planters disturbed him even more. Despite emancipation, and disregarding the law, these were men who had abused and controlled the freedmen with impunity, and simply saw no need for change. Unlike Morton, however, Randall maintained confidence in his ability to perform his duties, and declared: "the fact that the Bureau has an eye upon them will have a salutary influence."<sup>14</sup>

Freedmen approached Randall during his early visits to the plantations and were quick to voice their complaints. Often describing the vicious treatment meted out by the

planters and Carter, the freedmen were greatly concerned with recovering back-pay denied them by many planters for the previous season. Responsible for their own food and clothing, the freedmen now depended upon their wages for basic subsistence. The planters had felt free to cheat the freedmen under Carter's watch, and Morton failed to challenge them. In establishing the freedmen's rights, Randall would have to end this practice, and a compelling number of these complaints named Eliza H. Mitchell as the worst offender in the county.<sup>15</sup>

Back at his office, Randall inquired about Mrs. Mitchell and was informed that she owned a large plantation six miles down the Brazos River from Sterling. Randall was warned against challenging her, as he would certainly "get more than [he] bargained for." Undaunted, Randall sent Mrs. Mitchell a note requesting that she come to his office to settle one of the complaints of non-payment of wages. Mrs. Mitchell and her husband subsequently appeared in Randall's office and presented their account books as proof of payment. Lacking any strong case to disprove Mrs. Mitchell or her account book, and hoping to "avoid any difficulty with a woman of Mrs. Mitchell's antecedents and character," Randall decided he had no choice but to dismiss the case.<sup>16</sup>

But over the next several weeks, freedmen continued to pour into Randall's office, all stating that Mrs. Mitchell had cheated them of their rightful wages for the past year, until Randall believed "that Mrs. Mitchell must be more or less in debt to all of the one hundred or more Freedmen employed by her last year." Randall had no intention of allowing Mrs. Mitchell to cheat the freedmen, but after his first encounter with her, and knowing Mrs. Mitchell to be a woman who "would carry her points at all hazards," Randall determined to wait a month more in gathering freedmen's statements as evidence so that when confronting Mrs. Mitchell again he wouldn't be forced to dismiss the cases for simple lack of evidence.<sup>17</sup>

Randall, however, changed his mind when freedman Charley Brandon came to his office one evening near dusk. Brandon explained that he and his wife had not been fully paid for their work on Mrs. Mitchell's plantation the past year and that he needed the money to work land he was currently sharecropping in Falls County. With a wife and child to feed, Brandon pleaded that he couldn't afford to lose the wages Mrs. Mitchell rightfully owed him. Randall assured Brandon that they would ride to Mrs. Mitchell's place in the morning and see if Randall could settle the account for Brandon without a trial.<sup>18</sup>

Leaving early the next morning, Randall and Brandon arrived at the Mitchell plantation around ten o'clock where Mrs. Mitchell "cordially" greeted them. Wasting no time, Randall explained the reason for their visit, and Mrs. Mitchell declared that she would be more than willing to settle fairly with Brandon and went off to find the account books. Randall took a seat on the veranda of the plantation house while Mrs. Mitchell searched and called for servants to help. Soon, Mrs. Mitchell returned without the books and asked Dr. Mitchell to help her look. The hunt continued for the next hour, all the while Dr. Mitchell stayed "quietly engaged at something in the south room." Brandon, upset and suspicious, whispered to Randall, "I know them, they are making up an account against me."<sup>19</sup>

Finally Mrs. Mitchell returned and cheerfully presented her account book, which had miraculously surfaced. Randall turned to Brandon's account and immediately noticed that the ink on the page wasn't even dry. Beyond that, several pages had clearly been torn out and many entries entered between the original lines as corrections. Brandon immediately objected and began to argue with Mrs. Mitchell over the accuracy of the account as Randall examined it line by line. Mrs. Mitchell argued that Brandon had forfeited some of his pay by disobeying her, for which she had one of Carter's "agents" string Brandon up by his thumbs, and that Brandon's wife hadn't worked enough after giving birth to earn any pay.<sup>20</sup>

The servants announced lunch in the middle of the dispute and Randall was invited to dine with the Mitchells in their house, while Brandon ate with the freedmen. Following their meal, Randall told Mrs. Mitchell that besides Brandon's case there were a vast number of complaints against her for back-wages, and "if their statements were any where near correct, she would be in debt to the Freedmen some \$2,000 or \$3,000." Mrs. Mitchell passively denied the charges, but Randall said that he would be forced to pursue the cases to trial unless she properly settled with the freedmen herself.

Going back to Brandon's account, Randall informed Mrs. Mitchell that she had no right to string Brandon up by his thumbs, and certainly no right to cancel some of his pay for it. But beyond that, Randall pointed out that even by Mrs. Mitchell's own questionable records she still owed Brandon and his wife \$111.78 in back-wages, and showed her the figures. By this point it became clear to Mrs. Mitchell that Randall was serious in his insistence that the freedmen be paid, and Mrs. Mitchell angrily declared she would *never* pay them because "it would set a bad precedent." She would not pay Brandon, nor the hundred or so other complaints Randall warned her about, and was insulted that he asked.<sup>21</sup>

Shattering any myth of the southern belle, Mrs. Mitchell began to berate Randall as the tool of "some great abolition nigger-worshipper," accusing him of soliciting bribes and planning to split the money with Brandon. She then proceeded to scream for her servants to come testify before Randall that her accounts were correct. Randall interjected, stating that he had no intentions of trying the case in her house, although he was certain that Mrs. Mitchell "could prove by her servants the boots off [his] feet and the coat off [his] back." Incensed, Mrs. Mitchell began to shriek even more vehemently at Randall and demanded that he leave her house, which Randall did. Riding back to Sterling with Brandon, Randall set the trial for two weeks hence when Brandon would hopefully recover what was rightfully his.<sup>22</sup>

But Mrs. Mitchell had no intentions of waiting two weeks to settle the matter. Riding to Sterling herself the next day, she circulated a petition against Randall and fired off a letter to the head of the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas, General Charles Griffin. Knowing full well that Randall wasn't vulnerable to the local authorities, Mrs. Mitchell appealed to Griffin as the "only source of justice" at her disposal against Randall. She asked Griffin to "protect" her from Randall, claiming that Brandon had been "overpaid" and that Randall had used the opportunity to threaten and insult her. Hoping to damage Randall's credibility as much as possible, Mrs. Mitchell also included a notarized petition claiming Randall had publicly attempted to encourage a race riot the county.<sup>23</sup>

Her underhanded tactics worked, and Bureau headquarters sent Randall a letter ordering him to desist in the matter and explain his actions on Mrs. Mitchell's plantation. Randall wrote a detailed report defending himself and explaining the nature of the incident, but he was ultimately forced to forgo any trial of Mrs. Mitchell and thus abandon any hope of exposing her cheating and abuse of the freedmen.<sup>24</sup>

Angered but determined, Randall refocused on problems that were stirring elsewhere in the county. As the Texas summer heated up, so too did the racial tensions of Robertson County. Randall received reports that a few weeks earlier the owner of a small plantation named Peter Milstead had shot and nearly killed a freedman he encountered on the road. Leaving Owensville frustrated and drunk after a confrontation with a lawyer, Milstead noticed a freedman walking along the road and decided to vent his frustrations. Roaring, "There goes a goddamned nigger!" Milstead drunkenly began shooting and severely wounded the freedman's shoulder. Before he could kill the freedman, Milstead's friends wrestled him from his horse, allowing the severely injured freedman to escape.<sup>25</sup>

The matter had been deliberately hidden from Randall, and local civil authorities dismissed the case because the freedman who Milstead had shot could not be found to testify against him. Randall was incensed and sent an order to Sheriff Logan of Owensville for the immediate arrest of Milstead. The Sheriff, however, was in no hurry to act, though he promised to arrest Milstead some time that weekend, or at least by Monday. A week later, Randall found Sheriff Logan in Sterling without Milstead and demanded an explanation, to which the Sheriff apologized and promised that he "would certainly do it in a day or two." Several days later, Randall was in Owensville on business when he saw Milstead freely walking about town with friends. Randall furiously marched to Logan's office and demanded the immediate arrest of Milstead. Slowly the Sheriff began to form a reluctant posse, but Milstead easily caught wind of Randall's plan and simply rode out of town, with no attempt by Logan to stop him.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, another report reached Randall's office of a shooting that occurred six miles down the river at Barton's Ferry. James Reagan, a local white man, had traded a pair of shoes for a freedman's boots. The shoes were split at the sides, and when the freedman dared complain about their condition, Reagan pulled out his revolver and shot the freedman through the bowels. As the freedman collapsed in agony, Reagan calmly stole a horse and rode away. Appalled, Randall again sent an order to Sheriff Logan demanding the arrest of Reagan in addition to Milstead, warning Logan not to fail this time "under a penalty of \$1,000.00," and then rushed to Barton's Ferry to see the dying freedman. Arriving the next morning, Randall found him in extreme agony under a tree with a white sheet covering his spilled bowels. A doctor had been summoned, and although he "exercised all his skill," the freedman died that evening near sundown. Leaving no family to mourn his loss, the local freedmen simply buried him nearby.<sup>27</sup>

Randall angrily returned to Owensville to see Sheriff Logan and take into custody both Milstead and Reagan. Upon arriving, Randall found that Reagan had actually been in Owensville when Randall's arrest order had arrived, but the Sheriff had not bothered to carry it out, and Reagan had simply been allowed to ride out of town. In addition, no further attempts had been made to arrest either Milstead or Reagan, and Sheriff Logan was simply ignoring Randall's authority by refusing to act, although he offered the Bureau agent "innumerable excuses."<sup>28</sup>

Randall could see the utter uselessness of relying on local authorities. Nothing in his three months as Bureau agent had given him reason to believe otherwise, and by now the initial friendly appearance of the planters had completely melted away. The planters were openly threatening him, and one planter even told Randall point-blank, "If a nigger insults me I will shoot him dead every time."<sup>29</sup> By mid-summer of 1867, Randall clearly feared for his own life and wrote Bureau headquarters:

I regret to inform you that lawlessness and violence reign in my Sub-District. There are but 3 or 4 loyal n[eg]roes here and they are in constant danger of their lives, and are about petitioning for martial law for personal protection. Within the past three weeks several of the most atrocious murders have been committed upon freedmen known in the annals of human crime. I can place no reliance upon the whites.<sup>30</sup>

Randall could see that the current violence directed against the freedmen would soon be directed against himself. As long as the lives of the freedmen were in constant danger, so was his.

The freedmen themselves had no delusions about receiving justice from the local civil authorities. They had clearly seen the limited power Randall had at his disposal to act on their behalf and the apathy of the courts to their plight. Disillusioned with their lack of protection, they met one night late in June after a church service to discuss how best to defend and protect themselves. A group of whites discovered the meeting, however, and violently broke it up, chasing the freedmen out of the church at gunpoint.<sup>31</sup>

One week later, a planter named Bennet Wood was traveling on the road just outside Sterling when he came upon a freedwoman by the name of Mary Skillin. He ordered her to go with him into the woods next to the road—for what purpose was not clear—and she refused. Wood then responded by severely beating the poor woman, leaving her bloody on the side of the road. Word quickly spread among the freedmen of the incident, and they decided not to allow this act of cruelty to pass unpunished.<sup>32</sup>

That same night at midnight, two freedmen climbed the railings of the house Randall was renting and slipped inside. Stepping silently, they approached the sleeping Randall, who awoke with a start and instinctively pulled the Derringer pistol he now slept with for protection. Frightened, Randall demanded to know their business and the two freedmen asked him to meet them outside to discuss Bennett Wood. Out in the yard, the black men told Randall that "the freedmen were being beat and whipped and shot, and that nobody was punished for it and the blacks would not stand it any longer." They informed Randall that a posse of freedmen were waiting in the woods, and that they were on their way to Wood's plantation to punish him themselves for beating Mary Skillin.<sup>33</sup>

Randall feared the outright race-war such a confrontation could produce and exhorted them not to go, warning that Wood would "take a rifle and shoot two or three of them before they could get away." The freedmen merely responded that they expected several of them to be killed, but they could no longer allow abuse of the freedmen to go unpunished. Randall then threatened to punish them himself if they went through with it, and warned them of the implications of their actions. The freedmen left, but apparently decided to heed Randall's warnings because there was no attack on Wood's plantation

that night, perhaps out of fear of losing the one white man who had thus far stood on their side.<sup>34</sup>

But Randall had an extremely delicate situation on his hands, and although the freedmen were obviously certain that Randall was on their side, they were far from certain that he was in a position to really help them. Bureau headquarters had tied his hands in his dealings with Mrs. Mitchell, and he certainly couldn't bring to trial people he could not arrest. Sheriff Logan had proven just how easy it was to thwart Randall's efforts by simply refusing to arrest anyone. Without any military strength to back up his orders, Randall did not have the power to accomplish anything.

In July of 1867, the Bureau finally sent Randall a detachment of seven soldiers in response to his repeated fears of "trouble at any moment when a reliable force may be needed for the protection of the blacks." Randall was pleased with their arrival, although he found himself somewhat suspicious of these white soldiers' willingness to enforce the rights of the local freedmen. Nevertheless, Randall was relieved to finally have some power behind his words and eager to demonstrate to the planters his new military strength.<sup>35</sup>

Soon after the arrival of troops, Randall received reports of another shooting. Apparently, a man named William Ryan and two accomplices rode onto a plantation, whereupon Ryan drew his revolver and with no provocation began shooting into a crowd of freedmen, severely wounding two men and one woman. Ryan had since ridden off and the civil authorities, in usual form, had made no attempt to apprehend him. Randall, for the first time, had the capacity to act and prepared to arrest Ryan. But he was also careful to involve the freedmen in their own protection before they took matters into their own hands out of frustration. Besides, Randall knew he could trust the freedmen, and he was not entirely sure that the new white soldiers would prove any better than the negligent local authorities.<sup>36</sup>

Randall quickly formed a posse of armed freedmen and two soldiers, and led a night raid which successfully surprised and captured Ryan on July 15, 1867. Because Randall had no faith in Sheriff Logan's jail in Owensville, he brought Ryan back to Sterling and placed him "under the strictest guard" to await trial. Randall was determined that Ryan would be brought to justice, and thus demonstrate to the planters of Robertson County that atrocities against freedmen would be dealt with soundly and swiftly. Yet even with federal troops, Randall feared that Ryan would "escape or be rescued" and took "every precaution possible" at his disposal. Ryan was far from a helpless man, and he even offered Randall three hundred dollars in gold to let him escape. Randall refused and immediately tried to find irons to place on Ryan to prevent him from purchasing freedom from someone else.<sup>37</sup>

But in spite of all Randall's precautions, Ryan did manage to escape. In the early morning hours of July 19, 1867, Ryan offered a similar deal to the white sentinel on duty that he had offered Randall, only this time the guard accepted and escaped with Ryan as dawn approached. Randall was alerted in the morning and was enraged to find both Ryan and the soldier gone. Dejected and frustrated as never before, Randall only commented: "if the soldiers had been true the prisoner could not have escaped."<sup>38</sup>

In the aftermath of Ryan's escape, Randall reached his lowest point as agent in Robertson County. Everything he had tried had failed, and though he was on the right side of the law he found that he spent most of his energy fighting merely to keep the freedmen from wholesale murder, much less to enforce their new political and social rights. An inspection agent of the Bureau visited the county during this time and reported the county to be in "a terrible state of affairs." Praising Randall as a man committed to his duty, the inspector also warned headquarters of persistent threats on Randall's life, citing that "[s]ince the escape of Ryan with the soldier the rebels have publically avowed their intention of shooting the 'Bureau' next, as they believe what few soldiers there are will desert." But an even more imminent threat presented itself when Randall was stricken with yellow fever, which could prove fatal. While he languished in his bed, the white people in the county demonstrated their true distaste for Randall by refusing him any medical help, and "though he sent repeatedly for the Doctor not one would come near him." Alone and deathly ill, Randall would spend the next several weeks in bed fighting for his life.<sup>39</sup>

But Randall did not die. Neither did he give up on Robertson County or abandon the freedmen he was sent to protect. Disappointing the planters, Randall slowly recovered, although he would suffer relapses for several months. Using the troops that had finally been assigned to him, Randall began to effectively assert the Bureau's interests in the county. No more would planters abuse the freedmen without Randall being able to bring them to trial. No more would freedmen be cheated of their rightful wages without recourse. By August of 1867, the planters were forced to recognize that Randall was a driven and determined man who would not abandon his purposes and duties to the freedmen of Robertson County.

Over the next four months things became much calmer in Robertson County. Violence did not fade from the countryside entirely, but as planters directed violence toward the freedmen, Randall was able to direct his troops toward the planters and bring them to trial. Occasionally, offenders chose to fight it out with Randall's troops rather than be brought to justice and were usually killed in the process. But as the months progressed and the worst offenders were tried in Randall's court, the county became increasingly calm and civil.<sup>40</sup>

The fall brought the cotton-picking season with it, and "[e]very man, woman and child capable of picking cotton [was] brought into the cotton fields to secure the present crop before it [was] blown from the stalks." Conflicts between the freedmen and planters began to center on conflicts over wages and cotton profits. More secure now in their person, the freedmen enjoyed a newly enhanced confidence in Randall and came to him in increasing numbers with civil complaints against the planters, which Randall pursued with vigor. Trying cases in his Sterling office, Randall listened as both sides presented their cases and then ruled as best he could, enforcing his decisions with the troops when necessary. By October, things had calmed so much that Randall reported to headquarters that his "section of the country [was] unusually quiet."<sup>41</sup>

In addition to settling civil disputes, Randall began trying to establish schools to educate the freedmen's children. He made several attempts, but Randall found that it was nearly impossible to convince freedmen that their children's time would be better spent in school than picking cotton. Randall was frustrated, and although he tried his best, he

found it “very difficult to beat into them the necessity of educating their children.” Inevitably, Randall had to close the schools down “until after the cotton picking season” was over.<sup>42</sup>

Winter approached, the cotton season drew to a close, and things remained calm in Robertson County. Randall had feared problems during the Christmas season, but the holidays passed without incident and he watched the year end in peace.<sup>43</sup> The year 1868 dawned with a new hope that the freedmen could never have envisioned just a year before. The county was no longer a lawless and chaotic prison holding the freedmen in a veritable slavery of constant fear. Randall, with his troops, had finally delivered the freedom to the former slaves that had been promised them at the end of the Civil War.

But there was still a great deal to be accomplished, and over the course of the next year Randall threw himself into the task at hand. Halting rampant violence had only been a start; Randall still had an endless number of civil cases to settle between planters and freedmen. More importantly, schools would have to be permanently established to educate the “deplorably ignorant” freedmen, so they could have a real future. His task was still massive, but Randall had proven that he held both the determination and ability to overturn the obstacles that lay before him.<sup>44</sup>

Randall established two schools that spring and planned “the establishment of several more.” He was extremely pleased with the freedmen’s apparent increased “desire to have schools established,” but lamented that they were “some what tardy about giving the necessary assistance.” Randall worked tirelessly to procure teachers and to fund the fledgling schools, enjoying moderate success. But Randall often could not overcome the freedmen’s vexing reluctance to send their children to school rather than work. Schools remained open in various places over the course of the year, but came to an end with the Bureau’s close in December of 1868.<sup>45</sup>

Lawlessness never again reached the heights it did during the summer of 1867. The most violent offenders had been dealt with in the fall of 1867, and several like James Reagan had chosen to flee the county rather than face Randall’s troops. A dispute with another white man killed Peter Milstead in March of 1868, which must have brought Randall some satisfaction. The complaints that found their way into Randall’s office now were usually civil conflicts, and Randall spent most of 1868 settling small civil claims. There had been little violence during the year, and as the winter approached the tenure of the Bureau neared expiration. By December Randall had turned over all legal responsibilities to the local authorities and began to prepare for his trip back to Galveston.<sup>46</sup>

Grass-roots examination of Reconstruction in Robertson County has yielded a far different picture of Randall during those controversial years than Richter’s paradigm would suggest. Randall was not a “carpetbagger” interested in punishing the South or forcing retribution upon the planters; he merely struggled to provide the freedmen with justice and assert their new basic rights as United States citizens. But more than that, Randall proved that the Bureau was indeed capable of protecting and helping the freedmen. The planters controlled the county with violence until Randall arrived, and it took him nearly five months and federal troops to slow the bloodshed. Yet he had been successful, and by 1868 the freedmen of Robertson County were able to live their lives as

free citizens. Randall had not come to destroy the planters, he had come to preserve and protect the freedmen, and his success clearly points away from Richter's pejorative interpretations.

Across Texas, agents of the Bureau struggled with their nearly impossible task, and several were killed for their efforts. But what becomes clear in this examination of local-level Bureau operations in Texas is that agents were usually earnest in their efforts to establish freedom and equality for the ex-slaves, lending credence to Crouch's arguments. Richter was correct to point out that Bureau agents faced immense difficulties, but wrong to conclude that such problems meant failure for the agents. Randall clearly rose above the obstacles around him, and did so without the animosity that Richter suggests. Certainly Champ Carter fit Richter's mold of the cruel and corrupt Bureau agent; and Morton, despite his intentions, proved ineffective. Yet Carter's quick dismissal by the Bureau and Morton's extremely short tenure makes it impossible to view them as representative of the Bureau's attitudes as a whole. Carter and Morton were poor agents, but both were quickly replaced as the Bureau finally found in Randall an agent whose interests and hopes matched those of the Bureau. And as Randall discovered, and Crouch concluded, if anyone in Texas was oppressive and vindictive during Reconstruction it was the planters.

Ultimately, the Texas Freedmen's Bureau began an important and hugely difficult task, but could only begin the process, leaving it unfinished when the Bureau expired in 1868. Bureau agents were trying to overturn centuries of Southern racial culture, and that was beyond anything the Bureau could hope to produce in just a few short years. The true failure of the Bureau is not to be found in its agents, but in the short duration of its existence. Randall did a magnificent job in Robertson County, certainly the best he could do. But as he packed up his office and mailed his files to Bureau headquarters in December 1868, Randall knew that he was leaving far too soon. The immense task had only begun and the crucial gains he and every agent in Texas had made for the freedmen of the state were now in a delicate jeopardy. Randall remembered all too well the violence of 1867, and wrote in his final report to headquarters that he feared for the "life and property of the freedmen, after the Bureau expires." Only two years after escaping slavery, the freedmen of Texas watched the Freedmen's Bureau close and now faced a future without their only protector; and it must have filled their hearts with terror.<sup>47</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joshua L. Randall to Joel T. Kirkman, April 10, 1867, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives, Microfilm 821, Roll #7. I would like to specifically thank Dr. Dale Baum; without his amazing faith, unwavering support, and excellent advice none of this would ever have been possible.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> For excellent examinations of local-level Reconstruction in Texas see: Barry Crouch, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, and Randolph B. Campbell, *Grass-Roots Reconstruction in Texas: 1865-1880*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. For an examination of the individual Bureau agents in Texas see: William Richter, *Overreached on All Sides: The Freedmen's Bureau Administrators in Texas, 1865-1868*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991. For an excellent national perspective on Reconstruction see: Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> C. C. Morse to William Sinclair, April 6, 1866, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7.

<sup>5</sup> William Richter, *Overreached on All Sides: The Freedmen's Bureau Administrators in Texas, 1865-1868*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991, p. 65; Special Order #53, March 17, 1866, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #19; Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Morris Ranger to Edgar Gregory, May 12, 1866, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7; Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 111; SO #113, September 19, 1866, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #19.

<sup>7</sup> Lemuel K. Morton to Joseph B. Kiddoo, September 30, 1866, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7. All quotations maintain the spelling and grammar of the original documents, except where corrections have been bracketed for clarity.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Morton to Kiddoo, November 1, 1866, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7; Morton to Kiddoo, November 30, 1866, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7; Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> Morton to Kiddoo, September 30, 1866, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

<sup>13</sup> William Libby to Texas Freedmen's Bureau, July 19, 1865, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7; Randall to Kirkman, April 10, 1867, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Randall to John Scott, May 11, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7; Randall to Kirkman, April 30, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #20.

<sup>15</sup> Randall to Kirkman, June 7, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>23</sup> Eliza H. Mitchell to Charles Griffin, May 28, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7.
- <sup>24</sup> Randall to Kirkman, June 7, 1867, *op. cit.*; Richter provides a brief account of Randall's encounter with Mrs. Mitchell (*Overreached*, pp. 256-257), but it is riddled with inaccuracy and improperly combines several facts, providing a slightly different account than what appears in the original records.
- <sup>25</sup> Randall to Kirkman, June 29, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Randall to Kirkman, July 15, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7.
- <sup>31</sup> Randall to Kirkman, June 29, 1867, *op. cit.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Randall's report which details the beating of Mary Skillin was dated June 29, 1867, but the beating occurred on June 30, 1867, and was presumably added to his report after June 29<sup>th</sup>.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Randall was correct in his assessment of the dangers of a racial riot. As Crouch has carefully pointed out in his book *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans*, one later occurred in Millican in Brazos County, just south of Robertson County, where several blacks were lynched and murdered in one of the worst race riots of Reconstruction.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> Randall to Kirkman, July 19, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> George T. Ruby to Kirkman, July 26, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #7. Ruby was one of the very few black Bureau agents, he came from the North to Texas after the war to educate ex-slaves and was granted a job with the Bureau. He was later deeply involved in politics in the state.
- <sup>40</sup> Randall to Kirkman, August 31, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #21.
- <sup>41</sup> Randall to J. P. Richards, October 31, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #22.
- <sup>42</sup> Randall to Charles Garretson, September 30, 1867, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #22.
- <sup>43</sup> Richter wrongly interpreted Randall's comment on November 30, 1867: "It is very necessary that a small available force should be on duty here, some fears are entertained that we may have some trouble about Christmas," as implying that Randall feared an uprising among the freedmen (*Overreached*, p. 257), when such an action has no basis in the records and would have been highly improbable. More likely, Randall feared general problems with the planters as the freedmen began to contract for the next year's cotton season.
- <sup>44</sup> Randall to Kirkman, August 31, 1867, *op. cit.*
- <sup>45</sup> Randall to J. P. Richardson, April 30, 1868, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #25; Randall to Charles A. Vernon, December 31, 1868, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #28.
- <sup>46</sup> Randall to Kirkman, August 31, 1867, *op. cit.*; Randall to J. P. Richardson, March 31, 1868, RG 105, BRFAL, NA M821, Roll #25; Randall to Vernon, December 31, 1868, *op. cit.*
- <sup>47</sup> Randall to Charles A. Vernon, December 31 1868, *op. cit.*