

## Primary Source: Reuniting Families <sup>[1]</sup>

*In addition to providing food, clothing, and legal assistance to former slaves, the Freedmen's Bureau tried to help African Americans find family members who had been scattered during slavery. Usually, parents and children only had a vague idea of where a loved one had been sold, and very often they did not know if their relative was still alive.*

*These letters reflect the attempts of African Americans and Bureau officers to locate and reunite families.*

*You may notice that many former slaves, needing a last name, took the last names of their former owners. Some freed people took the name "Freeman," while others named themselves after famous people such as U.S. Presidents.*

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Capt. John A. McDonnell  
Sub Asst Comr  
Winchester Staunton, Va. July 3, 1867

Captain

Patience Spencer (c) seeks her two children James Thomas (15 years) and Melissa Ann Maria Spencer (11 years) The children were taken from her at Samuel Spencer's 5 miles from Amherst C.H. Amherst Co. Va by John Mitchell a slave trader who then lived at Lynchburg and who sold them at Richmond, Va. in July 1861. Who bought them or where they were taken to she never could learn, but thinks perhaps John Mitchell or Landon Talieffer who lives at New Glasgow, Amherst Co. Va may know. The poor woman it appears hid herself in the woods with her children to escape the sale but hunger compelled her to let her children return to the house for food, when they were seized and carried off. Her information is I fear too indefinite for discovery but she she is so earnestly <sup>[2]</sup> desirous of regaining them that I respectfully forward her request in the hope some clue may be obtained from Mitchell or Talieffer.

Yr obt servt

Thos P. Jackson  
Agent

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Capt. John A. McDonnell,  
Sub Asst. Comr.  
Winchester Staunton, Va. July 3 1867

Captain

Benjamin Frazier (c) living at Mt. Torrey Furnace asks search be made for his children. Benjamin was owned by Joseph W. [illegible] near Wilderness tavern, Spottsylvania Co. Va. on approach of U.S. army was sold to Lorenzo Shaw, with four (4) small children, Lucy (9) Nancy (7) Everett (5) and [illegible] (2) years, for whom he cannot provide on account of ill health. His grown children, from whom he asks help, are Benjamin who fell to William Stephen, Wilderness, Nathan who lives near Treague's, Pamela who lives near Fredericksburg and Emily Williams who lives with Edward Stephens near Fredericksburg. Benjamin appears a deserving man but without help must soon become a charge upon the public.

Yr obt servt

Thos P. Jackson  
Agent

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### Primary Source Citation:

Thomas P. Jackson to John A. McDonnell, July 3, 1867. In the Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

### User Tags:

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**Watch and Listen:**

Slave Marriages, Families Were Often Shattered By Auction Block<sup>[14]</sup>, Heard on Tell Me More on NPR.

**Related Topics:**

- Freedmen's Bureau <sup>[15]</sup>
- Making Marriages Legal <sup>[16]</sup>

**Primary Sources:**

<sup>[17]</sup>

The family featured in this 1862 photograph had five generations living on the same plantation. This was not the experience of most enslaved families, who struggled to maintain contact with their family members following forced break-ups and sales.

3 January 2018

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**Source URL:** <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/primary-source-reuniting>

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