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African-American Ancestral Records Electronically Unearthed Online Tool Is Making Records of Former Slaves Free at Last

January 15, 2007 - Richmond, VA. The Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia ("the Museum") today announced that it is calling for volunteers to help it create a free searchable online index linked to the digital images of the original Virginia Freedmen's Bureau records from 1865-1872. The records contain a wealth of information never before available to the general public on emancipated African Americans in the post Civil War period.

Governor Timothy M. Kaine formally announced the project on October 26, 2006, at a press conference where he compared the Bureau records to Ellis Island records for those pursuing African-American genealogy. The project is part of a collaboration between the Black History Museum and three powerful organizations in the field of African-American history and family history: The National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), which microfilmed the actual records; Howard University, which will place the broader collection of extracted and indexed records on the Internet for access to genealogists and historians; and FamilySearch/Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU), which digitized the filmed records and developed indexing software tailored to this project.

"This means that African Americans, especially those with ancestors in Virginia, can more easily trace their family history online," said Stacy Burrs, Board Chairman of the Museum. "The general public will be able to go online and actually see the historically important Freedmen records that before had been relatively inaccessible."

"This is exactly the type of collaboration we like to see," said Jim Hastings, Director of Access Program Division of the NARA in Washington, D.C. "This combination of academic and private institutions working to make NARA's rich resources more widely available to the general public helps us achieve the mission of our historic institution."

"This project has special meaning to Howard University," said Dr. Joseph P. Reidy, Associate Provost. "Our institution was established as part of the Reconstruction movement to provide educational opportunity to black Americans being freed from slavery. By working with the Freedmen's Bureau records, we are reconstructing their histories and legacies and making them more freely available to their posterity."

Based on the experience gained from the Virginia Project, GSU will organize projects for extracting and indexing Freedmen records from other southern states. Ultimately, Howard University will place the broader collection of extracted and indexed records on the Internet for access to genealogists and historians.

Using the digital images converted from roughly 200 rolls of microfilm by FamilySearch/GSU and its proprietary software, the Museum is now earnestly looking for volunteers with Internet access to begin the process of capturing the rich genealogy-related information from the original documents online. The museum plans to recruit and train as many as 500 volunteers to begin the exciting task of creating an online index to the Freedmen's Bureau Virginia records.

The FamilySearch Indexing software makes the volunteer's job fairly simple. All volunteers need to participate are basic computer skills, access to the Internet (preferably high speed), and an inherent interest in African-American history and genealogy.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for the public to become involved in a project that is truly monumental to the African-American community and to the entire nation," said Wayne Metcalfe, Vice President of Acquisitions for FamilySearch/GSU. "Those referenced in the Freedmen's Bureau records to be indexed in this initiative were builders of our nation. We are deeply honored to participate in this important and historic endeavor."

Persons interested in participating in the indexing project should contact the Museum Project Director by email at VAFreedmenIndexingProject@comcast.net or by calling the Museum at (804) 780-9097. Upon receiving basic information from individual volunteers, the Project Director will generate names and passwords along with detailed information explaining what each needs to know in order to get started.

For more information on the Virginia Freedmen Extraction and Indexing Project, please visit the Black History Museum, at <http://blackhistorymuseum.org/>. Also, please feel free to download an informative **Frequently Asked Questions PDF** document (about 1.8 megabytes in size) that provides details on the project: http://blackhistorymuseum.org/bureau/FAQ_VAFreedmen.pdf.

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