



Sandra Sellars/Richmond Free Press

Leroy Bullock of Richmond reviews a copy of the historical marker to be placed near the site of the former Freedmen's Bureau near Capitol Square.

Coming: Heritage information

By Bonnie V. Winston

Searching for ancestors can be difficult. But for African-Americans tracing their family roots, the search often dead ends somewhere during the centuries of slavery.

Now, thanks to special public-private partnerships, thousands of documents detailing information about black Virginians after the Civil War will be placed online, giving families a possible link to their past.

The Virginia Freedmen Project, which was announced last week by Gov. Tim Kaine, will index and digitize roughly 300,000 images collected between 1865 and 1872 by the Freedmen's Bureau in Richmond. The Richmond bureau was one of dozens of such federal offices established throughout the South to help former slaves adjust to life after slavery.

The records are the earliest major compilation of names, legalized marriages, educational pursuits, work contracts, bank forms and receipt of rations, health care, legal and other services by African-Americans.

"This is the equivalent for African-Americans of Ellis Island's records being put up," said Gov. Kaine, who was joined for the announcement by Mayor L. Douglas Wilder, the nation's first elected black governor and a grandson of slaves.

Records from Virginia should be ready to go online by the middle of next year.

The National Archives and Records Ad-

ministration of the United States recently completed microfilming Freedmen's Bureau records from all of the southern states. In turn, the data starting with Virginia's will be scanned into computers by the Genealogical Society of Utah, a nonprofit, educational institution funded by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Mormons' FamilySearch.org will provide online access to the genealogy-related data extracted from the records.

Ultimately, Howard University will place the larger collection of records on the Internet, while volunteers from the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia will extract and index information from the scanned records.

"This is what I consider the genesis records for more than 4 million African-Americans," said Dr. W. Darrell Walden, an associate professor of accounting at the University of Richmond, amateur historian and member of the Mormon church, who has worked with the project since its inception.

"This was the first opportunity to legitimize their existence" by registering themselves and their marriages with the Freedmen's Bureau.

Finding one's ancestors "encourages families and strengthens families," Dr. Walden said. So in that respect, the Freedmen's

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Project "is an opportunity to make a major contribution to the African-American community for years to come," he said.

The records, while extensive, are not exhaustive. Dr. Walden said some fragments are in local repositories and hopefully will be added to the overall collection in the future.

The Mormons have worked for more than 100 years at gathering and preserving genealogical records based on the church's beliefs that all families are meant to be both sacred and eternal.

While the Mormon church would not ordain black men to the lay priesthood, that position was changed in mid-1978. The church now repudiates "efforts to deny to any person his or her inalienable dignity and rights on the abhorrent and tragic theory of the superiority of one race or color over another."



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Dr. W. Darrell Walden, an originator of the Virginia Freedmen's Project, speaks during last week's announcement of the public-private initiative.

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"This partnership fits perfectly with our mission," said Stacy Burrs, board chairman of the Black History museum, located in Richmond's historic Jackson Ward. "Educating people about the experiences and contributions of African-Americans is at the very heart of what we do."

People interested in volunteering to help with the Virginia Freedmen Project can contact the Black History Museum at (804) 780-9097.

Gov. Kaine also unveiled a mock-up of a historic marker that will be placed in Downtown Richmond near the site where the Freedmen's Bureau operated in Richmond.

For more information, go to Dr. Walden's Web site www.richmond.edu/~dwalden/vafreedmen.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.