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Foundations for a Future

Civil War and Reconstruction African American Populations and Homelessness

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I. Introduction

Shelter is and always has been a privilege. For formerly enslaved African Americans in the Southern United States, the search for shelter during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods was arduous. Efforts to secure housing regularly brought them into contact with White Americans that sought to re-enslave them or otherwise keep them in a state of subservience. African Americans would turn informal shelters into a home, and racially violent circumstances, such as attacks from White supremacists could turn that housing back into informal shelter or destroy it entirely. Furthermore, losing their employment or actively searching for employment would put their housing status in jeopardy, as would sickness, incarceration, and fighting for self-emancipation.

During the Civil War era, between 1861 and 1865, free and formerly enslaved African Americans were categorized as refugees from enslavement or contraband of war. Upon fleeing the plantations where they were enslaved, be it because they sought their own freedom or the plantations were destroyed in Union military assaults, they would need to search for shelter to survive. This would manifest typically in large cities occupied by the Union army or Union army camps, which was not a permanent solution approved by the federal government.[1] Many times, able-bodied African American men living in the camps would be conscripted, and other individuals would be tasked with building their own shelters in the most desolate areas of the camps, which were quite prone to flooding. The military was tasked with organizing a slew of refugees. They did this with relative reluctance, and it was apparent in the sordid conditions the refugees were kept in. However, as this paper will explore, these informal settlements became a hub for African American community building.

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[1] Amy Murrell Taylor. 2018. *Embattled Freedom : Journeys Through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps*. The University of North Carolina Press, 60.

During the American Reconstruction period post-Civil War, there was little continuum of care for the people who were still considered refugees, or effectively homeless. As the Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project (CWRGM) collection letters map out, legislators and governors adopted a new language to refer to newly freed homeless population. The formerly enslaved people who loitered, peddled, and sought housing without employment were referred to as vagrants.[2] Of course, this term existed during and before the Civil War, but Reconstruction housing and labor crises in the South engendered vagrancy laws to fine, imprison, and re-enslave them in convict leasing or prison labor programs.[3] Later in Reconstruction, instances of mass racial violence (MRV) and threats of White nationalist domestic terrorism, especially after the Mississippi state election of 1875, would jeopardize any homes that African Americans would find and build for themselves.

The volume of letters to Mississippi governors about seeking aid and protection for African American vagrants and refugees/contraband provides a timeline of language that is crucial to this paper. Studying how homelessness and the Reconstruction housing crisis evolved gives historians a clearer idea of how African Americans used every resource available to attempt to integrate in a White America, which was not built with their existence in mind. Furthermore, the collection of letters provides insight into the difficulties urban enslaved people faced after emancipation, and how the Mississippi and federal governments neglected to meet African Americans' basic needs.

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[2] Michael J. Z. Mannheimer. 2023. *The Fourth Amendment : Original Understandings and Modern Policing*. University of Michigan Press, 123.
[3] *Ibid.*

Problem Statement

There are distinct differences between how African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods were categorized as vagrants and refugees/contraband. Historians have seldom categorized vagrants and refugees/contrabands under the umbrella of homeless and unhoused individuals. Yet, even implicitly, the idea of a vagrant or a refugee/contraband of war is assumed to imply homelessness. The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project (CWRGM) letters, alongside primary documents like legislature and secondary documents like sociological or urban surveys, these issues can at least begin to be elucidated, hopefully serving as a catalyst for further in-depth research in the field.

Studying vagrants and refugees/contraband as homeless or unhoused gives interested parties context about how African Americans built shelter under duress. Furthermore, using the "modern" label of homeless or unhoused while still preserving the vital history of what vagrant and refugee/vagrant implies returns humanity and consideration to the African American families that were subjugated by these conditions.

Research Question

RQ1. To what extent and why were the homeless or unhoused African American population in Mississippi between 1862 and 1876 labelled as vagrants or refugees or contraband because of the existing social infrastructure and the existing laws?

> RQ1.1. What language did they use to petition for assistance from governors of Mississippi to ameliorate their homeless status depending on the era, i.e., Civil War or Reconstruction?

RQ1.2. Is there a region or county where the homeless, refugees/contraband, and vagrants are more prevalent because of a high population of enslaved people or formerly enslaved people?

Definitions

Homeless or unhoused persons

The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project (CWRGM) and the Cambridge Dictionary define "homeless or unhoused" as someone who does not have a home because of various scarcities: income, support, and family, among other factors. CWRGM also makes the distinction that more men tend to become homeless than women, and more African Americans of all genders/sexes tend to become homeless than White people of all genders/sexes. Race and sex disparities lead some people to develop racist and sexist stereotypes against homeless or unhoused people at large. CWRGM primarily aims to use the "homeless or unhoused person" subject tag "to emphasize one's personhood and not their social or class status."[4]

Vagrant

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[4] "Homeless or Unhoused Persons." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project.

Accessed 15 July 2025. Homeless or Unhoused Persons · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

CWRGM defines vagrancy, a crime in Mississippi at this time, as "a condition associated with homelessness, in which a person usually lives in poverty, without employment, and is accused of loitering or begging in public places. Historically, vagrancy was often treated as a crime in Europe and the United States, punishable with imprisonment, military service, or forced labor." In the 1860s, during and after the Civil War, Southern states including Mississippi passed legislature aimed at curtailing vagrancy by criminalizing it, which was "aimed at African Americans recently freed from slavery. The laws were in part due to White supremacist concerns that freed Blacks would become a burden on society in the wake of emancipation, and in part spurred by conservative White state leaders who wished to restrict Black social and political activities and use convictions of petty crimes as a means to reinstitute forced labor of African Americans."[5]

Refugee

CWRGM and the Cambridge Dictionary define a refugee as, "A person who leaves [their] home or country to find safety, especially during a war or for political or religious reasons." During the Civil War, refugees could be categorized as African American refugees from enslavement, Union soldiers, and various groups of Confederates. As will be heavily discussed in the paper, "the Union Army established camps, known as "contraband camps" because of the Union stance that enslaved persons were technically contrabands of war, where African American refugees lived and labored for the Union Army, albeit in often unsanitary, unsafe, and inadequate living

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[5] "Crimes (alleged)--Vagrancy." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project. Accessed 15 July 2025. Crimes (alleged)--Vagrancy · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

conditions." These refugees will also be classified as homeless or unhoused, but not all as vagrants depending on the year and the situation.[6]

Contraband

CWRGM describes contraband of war as "thousands of enslaved African Americans behind Confederate lines [who] fled to Union Armies and forced military and political leaders to adopt a policy toward them." In terms of their own autonomy, "The contraband system ultimately highlights the efforts of the enslaved at self-emancipation, as enslaved African Americans' escapes to Union lines early in the war forced the nation to reckon with the question of slavery and the war's aims, and only by freeing themselves did enslaved people reach Union forces and push the nation toward emancipation."[7]

Mass racial violence (MRV)

CWRGM explains that "mass racial violence is when one group of people stigmatizes another group based on racialized myths and then weaponizes this stigmatization to inflict violence to intimidate and control those groups of people." Mass racial violence (which this paper will abbreviate as MRV) "has taken many forms, including lynchings, massacres, riots, and police brutality." The MRV instance in this paper includes the New Orleans race riots of 1866 and the Mississippi election of 1875.[8]

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[6] "Refugees." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project. Accessed 15 July 2025. Refugees · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

[7] "African Americans--Enslaved People. Contraband of War." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project. Accessed 15 July 2025. African Americans--Enslaved People. Contraband of War · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

[8] "Mass Racial Violence." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project. Accessed 15 July 2025. Mass Racial Violence · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

Limitations of the Study

1. Only letters from CWRGM that were available are used in this paper.

2. Only 60 letters from the CWRGM collection are used in this paper.

3. Only letters written in the English language are used in this paper.

4. Only letters sent to and from the Governors of Mississippi are used in this paper.

5. Many letters used in this paper have not received a response.

6. Only letters written by the literate population of a certain group, i.e., African American men, are used in this paper.

7. Many unhoused or homeless people are not properly recorded in Census records.

Assumptions

1. It is assumed that all instances of "homeless or unhoused persons" are tagged in the CWRGM collection letters are used.

2. It is assumed that all instances of "refugees" are tagged in the CWRGM collection letters are used.

3. It is assumed that all instances of "vagrants" are tagged in the CWRGM collection letters are used.

4. It is assumed that all "rations received" letters or tables are accurate and that those rations were in fact received by the recipients.

Importance of the Study

This study elucidates the issues that urban slaves and newly freed experienced in their journey to survival. This project will also use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to digitally map all instances of homelessness (vagrancy and refugee/contraband camps/communities) mentioned in the CWRGM collection of letters used. By visualizing the "data," which, and it cannot be stressed enough, were the lives of real African Americans, we can even begin to hypothesize where there may be more homeless and why—environmental factors? Geographic factors? Lacking infrastructure? Reasons for a high homeless population do not simply end in the era. Historical narratives of homelessness during the Civil War and Reconstruction could be impactful or important in local policy decisions.

II. Literature Review

Contextual Overview

Historians typically choose to discuss specific backdrops or language used during that time rather than refer to specific aspects of African American's lives as housing insecure. This happens through a few vehicles: referring to them as vagrants, refugees, and contraband, which is accurate; describing their situations without referring to it as a state of homelessness; or describing their situations through the lens of the government officials who tried to mitigate rampant homelessness and unemployment.

Contrabands and Contraband Camps

Amy Murrell Taylor's book *Embattled Freedom* (2018) serves as an in-depth timeline that maps the life of African American refugees or contrabands of war. Through photography, letters, and drawn maps, Taylor writes specifically on "contraband camps" in her chapter "Finding Shelter." These informal military settlements built in reaction to the Civil War housing crisis for the formerly enslaved were miniature cities. Despite their reluctance, occupying Union soldiers would create encampments for the impoverished and homeless African American refugee population who sought their bases as safe havens.[9] Many White administrators, however, were only concerned with the so-called war on dependency, or a fear of comfort in government aid.[10] Unionists themselves were fearful of too much welfare impeding on an African American's ability to live freely and without guardrails. This led to an expectation of self-sufficiency and independence from the refugees which in turn would "prepare" them for American life. These "preparations" were purely reactionary.[11]

This account of a system of contraband camps in the South is elucidated in Cam Walker's essay "Corinth: The Story of a Contraband Camp" published in the 1974 edition of the journal *Civil War History*. The author explains that the camp was able to thrive due to an underlying philosophy of paternalism—a misguided feeling that the formerly enslaved needed to be parented like children to survive as freed people.[12] The African American community in Corinth thrived with what they were given: they were self-sufficient, grew their own food, attended church, and, with the help of the American Missionary Association educated. An informal community like Corinth did not thrive again for the formerly enslaved—that is, under the guise

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[9] Murrell Taylor, 2018, 58.

[10] *Ibid*, 81.

[11] *Ibid*, 72.

[12] Walker, Cam. 1974. "Corinth: The Story of a Contraband Camp." *Civil War History* 20, no. 1: 5–22. doi:10.1353/cwh.1974.0006, 10.

of military assistance. Letters to and from military officials, alongside a collection of diaries from officials, rounded out this narrative. The disparity in publication year, which amounts to 44 years between these two texts on contraband camps, is not to be dismissed. Despite the abundance of scholarship on the American Civil War, few prominent historians have written on the specific subject of contraband camps in Mississippi. Neither of these works necessarily point toward a stagnation of information or style, but they do hint at the scarcity of attention paid to camps on the Delta and homelessness during this period.

Labor

However, a vital cause of housing insecurity during this period—unemployment—is a subject that historians have focused on. In the 1984 edition of *Civil War History*, William Cohen writes about how the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, colloquially known as the Freedmen's Bureau, oversaw the re-organization of African American labor in Mississippi and Louisiana. "Black Immobility and Free Labor: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Relocation of Black Labor, 1865-1868" describes how directly after the American Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau, even while being threatened and underfunded, created various social programs to transport African Americans to work. The "labor equilibrium" of Mississippi and Louisiana was disrupted by the war: sharecroppers and other agricultural workers were in high demand and in low capacity after refugees and contraband of war left their states of origin (typically where they were formerly enslaved).[13] These labor shortages are also complicated by the phasing out of contraband camps by 1864. As contraband camps disappeared, thousands upon thousands of African Americans were leased out to work in plantations across Mississippi. Many of these

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[13] Cohen, William. 1984. "Black Immobility and Free Labor: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Relocation of Black Labor, 1865-1868." *Civil War History* 30, no. 3: 221–34. doi:10.1353/cwh.1984.0032, 221.

African Americans were not from Mississippi but were from areas which suffered a decline in labor. Once again, the Freedmen's Bureau did not provide other necessary means of survival such as shelter and focused on using African Americans to jumpstart the Southern economy after the Civil War—which neither author discussed.

Vagrancy

Michael J. Z. Mannheimer argues that the impetus for the creation of Section One of the 14th Amendment includes the ironically race-neutral vagrancy laws that most Southern states had in place by the summer of 1866. "The Historical Backdrop of the Fourteenth Amendment" in *The Fourth Amendment,* like all these sources, correspondence and drafts of Mississippi state legislature corroborate these narratives. These vagrancy laws afforded liberal discretion to local racist officials who unjustly violated the civil and human rights of freed African Americans to re-enslave them or otherwise keep them subordinate to White citizens.[14] This overwhelming desire to re-enslave African Americans the Civil War and Reconstruction era is an undercurrent of vagrancy laws. Overt attempts by many White Americans to negate emancipation seems like a counter to the nuanced opportunity that contraband camps brough many African American refugees. Mannheimer concludes by acknowledging two key reasons for the implementation of the first section of the 14th Amendment: violence against African Americans and unjust vagrancy laws. Protection from state violence and race-neutral laws is key in the equal protection clause.

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[14] Mannheimer, 2023, 124.

Concluding Thoughts

The existing literature on African American vagrants and refugees/contraband and their housing insecurity succeeds in presenting a problem-and-solution paradigm. That paradigm, due to the wavering caprice of the Mississippi and federal government's aid, is often cyclical. The life cycle of the Mississippi contraband camps is also a fascinating lens through which to look at both African American community-building during this era and White American reluctance to implement long-lasting scaffolding for those communities. At the practical level, the newer sources are far more removed from the paternalistic mindset than the older sources, which is evident in their prose. Despite this, the arguments across the board point to the same source of the problem: a lacking social infrastructure in the South for African Americans that, after a certain number of years, can no longer be blamed on wartime disruption.

Looking at CWRGM letters to map out the changing legislature as it relates to housing gives these "19th century issues" a far more modern impact. This study will be as comprehensive as the limited studies and the number of letters let it be. A plethora of questions, such as, "How did the state of Mississippi keep track of the homeless or unhoused population considering the diversity of terms used to refer to them? Did they do so at all? How did aid distributions occur at a local level? Did infrastructure exist to support that?" are still present after my research.

This study posits that using the terms homeless or unhoused is fitting, while also considering the ethics of the terms "vagrant and refugee/contraband" as necessary for this historical study. Taylor and Walker both offer a substantive study on contraband camps in the South, the communities that were formed by African Americans as refugees, and how these communities were a precursor to neighborhoods and homes they would soon build for themselves. Their focus

on shelter or lack thereof is a clear example of how and why the term homeless could be necessary for current studies on the history of homelessness. Cohen helps readers map the transition between Civil War and then Reconstruction language and legislature referring to homeless African Americans. Unemployment among African Americans during Reconstruction went together with homelessness, and Mississippi lawmakers sought to exploit this fault in welfare to re-enslave them. Finally, Mannheimer's text on vagrancy laws offers much-needed context for how the said further inhibited progress for many homeless African American families, and how this led to the creation of Section One of the 14th amendment.

III. Methodology

Primary sources, particularly letters written to and from Mississippi governors between the years 1862 and 1876, are key in this study. These letters are hosted in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), but were harvested from the Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project (CWRGM), which transcribed, wrote the metadata for, and reviewed the letters, by the Mapping Freedom REU program leads for the student researchers to select from. This research, done during the Mapping Freedom REU, was conducted between May 27th and July 17th of 2025. For the "homeless or unhoused people" subject tag, there were thirteen letters to choose from. For the "refugees" tag, there were twenty-nine letters to choose from. For the "African Americans--Enslaved People. Contraband of War" tag, there were ten documents. For the "Crimes (alleged)-Vagrancy" and "Legislature--Mississippi. An Act to amend the Vagrant Laws of the State (1866)" had seven letters combined.

To begin, the contraband of war tag did not contain any relevant documents—relevancy was determined by how the document could answer the research question posed by this study, and it

does not refer to their overall historical importance which could not be denied. The letters referring to contraband of war were about high-ranking army officials requesting aid for their troops, with a brief mention of enslaved African Americans they may have encountered. Eight refugee documents were used. The excluded documents were instances where a refugee was also a deserter, or a soldier who left their post. If it did refer to an African American, it was too brief of a mention with no name to do further research on. Similarly, four vagrant-tagged documents were used. The excluded documents were either too brief or did not pertain to housing status or employment. Finally, ten documents relating to the homeless were tagged. Like the other excluded documents, they did not pertain to African American housing status or were too brief of a mention. It is necessary to point out that sixty letters were used in the mapping process for the sake of data mapping, while the reduced numbers were used for the purpose of specificity in this paper.

Secondary research was done on the University of Mississippi's library catalogue and finding aid, alongside one search in Google Scholar and the EBSCO-hosted database *American History and Life with Full Text*. Keywords that were used were "contraband camps," "homelessness in Mississippi," "refugees Civil War," "African Americans," "vagrancy laws," "vagrants in Mississippi," "Mississippi election of 1875", "African American homelessness Mississippi", "Corinth contraband camps", and variations of all terms combined. Two primary sources, which included both the investigations done into the racial violence following the Mississippi election of 1875 and the original documentation of Mississippi's 1866 vagrancy law, were found using these keywords. These secondary sources pulled from were written social histories, and the sources themselves included letters by military officials and maps and photographs e.g., of contraband camps.

Ultimately, this study will use the CWRGM letters, two other primary sources, and reinforcing secondary sources to map the most prevalent instances of homelessness between 1862 and 1876 in Mississippi with the goal of looking for potential patterns—the instances named in these letters are still significant to the parts of this study aiming to track the changing language of homelessness during these years even if no pattern in prevalent instances is found. This mapping will be done on the Quantum Geographic Information System (QGIS) and presented alongside this paper's conclusions.

IV. Results

Characteristics of the language

Using data extracted from CWRGM letters and Census records (including the African American enslaved population by 1860, the free African American population by 1870, contraband camps in the United States, and 1870 United States county boundaries) the following results were procured.

African Americans who were formerly enslaved and sought shelter were considered refugees or contraband. The lack of housing, the labor shortage, and the inability for the Union government in the occupied South to allocate enough resources for the newly freed population was the faulty social infrastructure that also characterized these terms. One letter from one James R. Challere to Mississippi Governor William L. Sharkey written in July of 1865 provides context for this scenario. Challere asks Gov. Sharkey about the dangers of formerly enslaved African Americans returning to where they used to live before the beginning of the Civil War. He refers to them as

"refugees" and "fugitives from slavery."[15] He uses these terms because they are effectively homeless due to their status as being formerly enslaved, the Civil War, and the mass racial violence that they may encounter from "guerillas"—the Ku Klux Klan and other White supremacist actors—upon returning home.[16] Contraband or refugee camps themselves are proven to be hubs for African American life, but were not sustainable or permanent solutions for housing, community, and survival—this will be expounded upon in the discussion.

As for more general language referring to refugees, General O. O. Howard of the Freedmen's Bureau writes, in a printed letter dated one day after the letter mentioned above, "As a government of the people, from the people, and for the people, and the whole people, it relieves the desolations that have raged, by making a special provision for the two great classes of the people, the Refugees and those so lately slaves."[17] This duty refers to the Bureau's capacity to assist in the welfare and health of the formerly enslaved refugees. Speaking on behalf of the Bureau, Howard, and other government officials at both the federal and local levels had ambitious ideas for how to use this newfound labor force (formerly enslaved African Americans, that is) even before securing housing for them.

References to vagrancy were more so the result of Mississippi's 1866 vagrancy law and the 1868 revision of said law. A letter written by Lieutenant Samuel Thomas of the Freedmen's Bureau

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[15] Challere, James R., "Letter from James R. Challere to Mississippi Governor William L. Sharkey; July 13, 1865," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Sharkey Series 771: Box 955, Folder 3 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 15, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_771-955-03-33, 1.

[16] Challere to Sharkey, 1865, 2.

[17] Howard, O. O. (Oliver Otis), 1830-1909, "Printed letter from General O. O. Howard; June 14, 1865," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Sharkey Series 771: Box 954, Folder 2 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 15, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_771-954-02-09.

described how White Americans who did not carry "labor licenses" which proved employment were not fined or even arrested.[18] Fines before conviction was both illegal and unfairly distributed amongst the population to discriminate against African Americans. For the law to be successful at all, he claims, White Americans need to be similarly approached for not having employment licenses. He also makes the key point that these discriminatory infractions were another way of re-enslaving the formerly enslaved.[19]

Thus, the existing social infrastructure and laws facilitated the use of "refugee" and "vagrant" to categorize and continue to condemn African Americans to oppression by the United States and Mississippi governments. By "effectively re-enslave," this result refers to the convict-leasing and prison labor programs of Mississippi. Convict-leasing programs, according to the CWRGM definition of the same subject tags, "[lease] imprisoned people to perform unfree labor for companies and individuals in exchange for a fee."[20] Prison labor programs more broadly forced incarcerated people to undergo heinous physical labor "with little shelter, sustenance, or medical care."[21] This follows the stipulations of the 13th Amendment, where enslavement, which this unpaid labor qualifies as, is permitted because it is punishment for a crime. Being profiled and arrested under the vagrancy law would subject many African Americans to these inhumane conditions.

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[18] Thomas, Samuel, 1840-1903, "Letter from Colonel Samuel Thomas to Major General Thomas J. Wood; March 12, 1866," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Gov. Humphreys Series 779: Box 962, March 2-12, 1866 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 15, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_779-962-14-04, 1-2.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] "Convict Labor. Mississippi. Leasing Program." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project. Accessed 15 July 2025. Convict Labor. Mississippi. Leasing Program · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

[21] "Convict Labor. Mississippi." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project. Accessed 15 July 2025. Convict Labor. Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

Volume of key words and phrases

It is important to recall a key limitation in this study: many of these letters were written on behalf of a general population: either all African Americans in a region, or all homeless in a region. Using Voyant Tools, the following words and key phrases were extracted from all the letters under the subject tags: "homelessness," "unemployment," "refugees," "contraband," and "vagrancy," indicating a higher volume of use. Beyond "page," "Miss," and "county," the most common phrases are as follows.

Phrases	Volume
"negroes"	33
"civil"	32
"war"	31
"colored"	31
"service"	29
"family"	28
"rations"	26
"freedmen"	25
"property"	20
"employment"	17
"refugees"	13
"vagrant"	12
"poor"	10

Fig. 1 A graph describing the volume of words and phrases used in all the letters in the data set

Relationship between the letters and the counties

A relationship between homelessness in certain counties is not necessarily causal because a high instance of homelessness in one area is only extrapolated from letters, location data for contraband camps, and census population data. This study proves this relationship, however, to be correlational.

The data set for the location of contraband camps was harvested from Professor Abigail Cooper at Brandeis University from her research on them. In the largest cities, like Jackson, there were more letters referring to unemployment and homelessness, more African Americans, and more discussions of specifically refugees and vagrants. The counties with the highest African American population are Lowndes (pop. 23,022), Hinds (pop. 20,659), and Warren (pop. 18,862). These counties are notable for this project, as Hinds and Warren are home to Jackson and Vicksburg, the most populous cities in Mississippi, and areas of high armed contention during Civil War battles. In Lowndes, there were many instances of mass racial violence (MRV) during the Mississippi Election of 1875.

Contraband camps were interspersed along the river, which coincides with the African American population, especially around Hinds County. The county with the most contraband camps was Warren, which had 9 camps, including the one in Vicksburg. This correlates to the African American population in that county, along with the number of letters referring to homelessness and unemployment.

During the race riots and general racial violence in the wake of the election, there was more homelessness in Lowndes County and Clinton, Mississippi, due to the high population of African American Republican voters. Homelessness was because of White American guerilla attacks against African American homes and communities.

In general, along the Mississippi River and northern Mississippi, there were more contraband camps and more African Americans. This data is illustrative and indicative of where more reports of homelessness came from between 1862 and 1876.

The maps below indicate the volume of each subject using darker shades of blue to indicate a higher volume. The point map (Figs. 4 and 5) indicates contraband camps in Mississippi during the Civil War. Both correlation maps visualize the correlation between the freed African American population by 1870 and the enslaved population in 1860 and the origin of CWRGM letters/counties mentioned in those letters relating to homelessness or unemployment, or both.
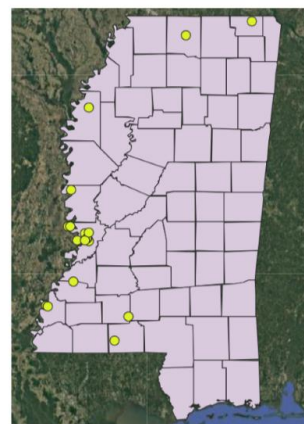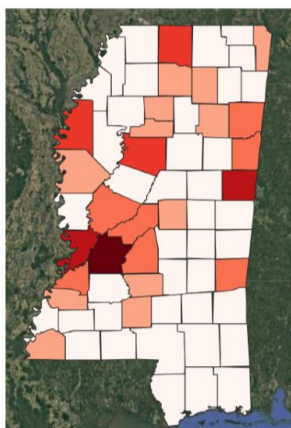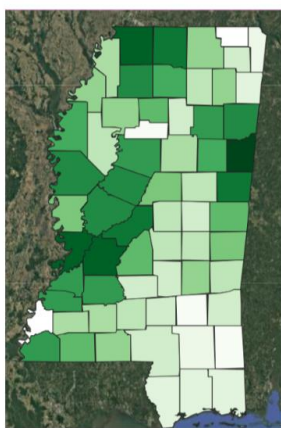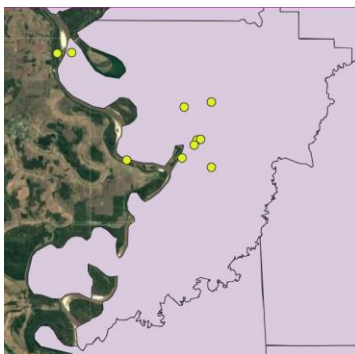
Fig. 2-5 Map of general African American freed population by 1870, by county; map of origin of CWRGM letters mentioning homelessness and unemployment; map of contraband camps in Mississippi; a close-up of Warren County to see overlapping points from the previous map.
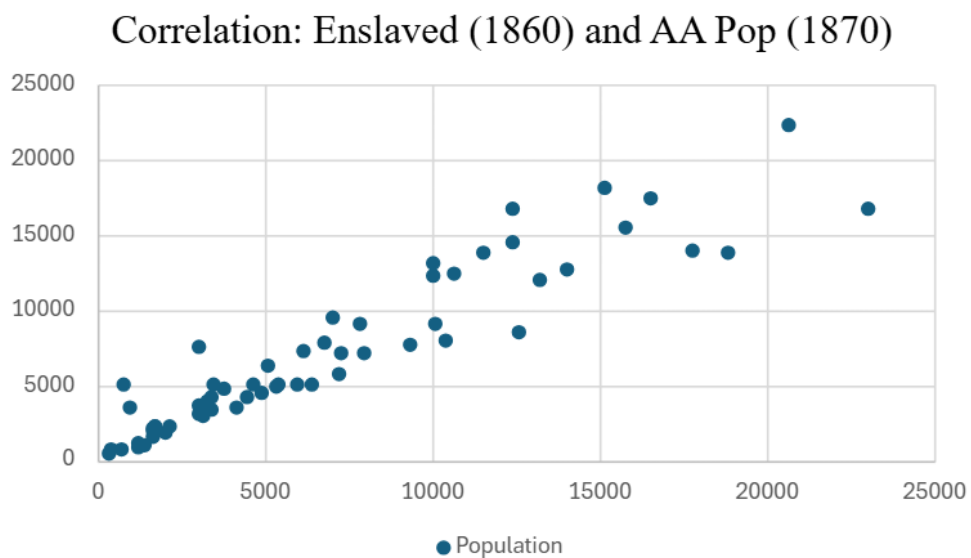

Fig. 6 Correlation map between enslaved African American population in 1860 and freed African American population in 1870
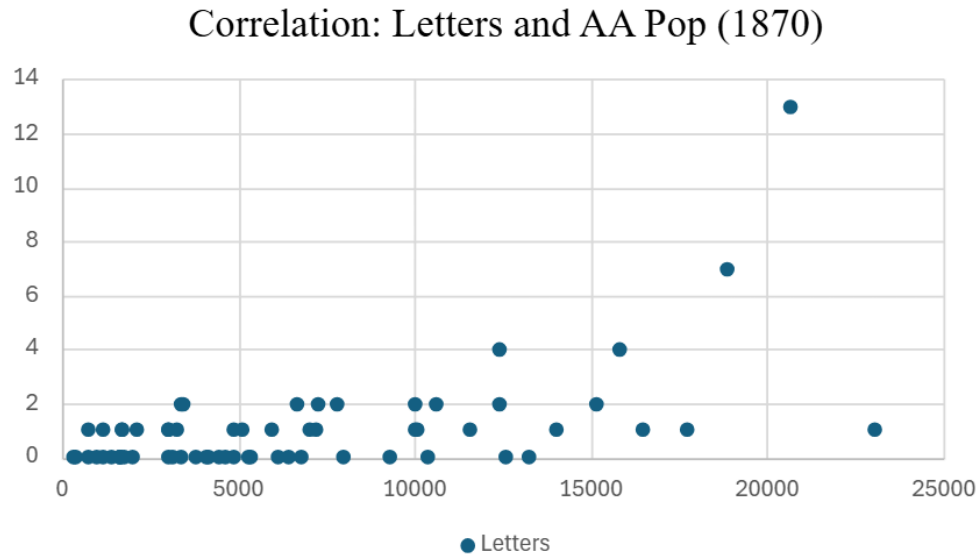
Fig. 7 Correlation map between 54 CWRGM collection letters referring to homelessness and the freed African American population in1870

V. Discussion

This section will expound on the results presented previously. To begin, the thematic results found regarding why and how language referring to the homeless are vital to this project. Naturally, the reason for these terms such as "refugees," "contrabands," "vagrants," and "homeless" is to keep African Americans as far away from agency as possible. If they were refugees and contraband, the latter of which is even more dehumanizing, they would be in a state of dependency and need. In her book *Embattled Freedom*, Murrell Taylor gives necessary context for what the government's reaction was to the housing crisis during the Civil War for African Americans. Even before African Americans could decide where to go, they needed to consider the politics of the state and of the White Americans living there, especially whether the state was occupied by the Union. According to Murrell Taylor, many of the contraband/refugee camps established in the South were in regions not included in the national Emancipation

Proclamation.[22] At the same time, due to the Second Confiscation Act of 1862, African Americans who were seized as property in a Union-occupied city were not forcibly expelled by the end of the Civil War. They were protected by this act, which made the people that White Confederates enslaved "forever free," a significant amount.[23] At the same time, this confiscation act and the first confiscation act treated African Americans as "rebel property," stripping them of their agency as they tried to survive.

The government's lackadaisical reactions to the housing crises of the Civil War in northern and central Mississippi is a precursor to the lack of social infrastructure during Reconstruction. The shift in language comes precisely from this caviler reaction to such a glaring issue. Referring to African Americans as vagrants now that they were not refugees or contraband allowed the freed African American population, again, to be oppressed by the law which sought to categorize them away, only "dealing with them" as their issues became too obvious to ignore. Furthermore, the priority of the American federal government, according to Cohen's analyses of labor relocation by the Freedmen's Bureau, was to push African Americans back into the workforce so that they could generate more capital.[24]

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[22] Murrell Taylor, 2018, 58.

[23] U.S. 1865. *Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 12, 589–92.

[24] Cohen, 1984, 222.

One specific subject not discussed in a subset of the causes of homelessness is mass racial violence (MRV). The language of this specific subset of letters between 1875 and 1876 (7 letters in total) is urgent and fearful. A lot of this violence in Mississippi came to a head during the oft-mentioned election of 1875, wherein African American Republican voters were driven out of their homes, threatened, assaulted, and murdered. One 1875 letter from an unknown author to Secretary Travis Rhodes outlines the grotesque violence in Chickasaw County. He writes that one African American woman was shot because her son "was President of a Re-publican club the result of this was that many of colored Republicans fled to the woods and were afraid to stop at Home until several days after the election In one instanc [*sic*] sixteen shots were fired into the house where a Republican family, [...] were residing."[25] This racial violence rendered families homeless and terrified, taking refuge in the woods where they could be harmed by other guerillas or White supremacist terrorists. The author also mentions that in the past, Democrats had refused to lease land to Republicans, a way of refusing African American autonomy and mobility through the means of building their own communities.[26]

When petitioning for aid or asking if it is safe for them to return home barring threats of violence,[27] or asking for rations,[28] African Americans do not explicitly state the pipeline from enslavement to destitution, etc. but those pipelines and parallels are obvious because that is why they are petitioning in the first place. In some cases, African American communities took their

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[25] Unknown, "Letter to Travis Rhodes; January 26, 1876," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Ames Series 803: Box 999, Folder 3 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 15, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_803-999-03-02, 2.

[26] *Ibid.,* 3.

[27] Challere to Sharkey, 1865.

[28] Cooper, Samuel A., and Force, Franklin, "Ration return of Lieutenant Franklin Force; August 16, 1865," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Sharkey Series 773: Box 958, Folder 5 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 15, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_773-958-05-082, 1.

own autonomous action. The letter from Abraham B. Burris to Gov. Adelbert Ames is testimony to this action. Burris is an African American man living in Vicksburg during the violence of the election of 1875. He writes that one of his neighbors, a man named Davenport, was rendered a refugee because of this violence. This is an example of the language overlap, as this man was homeless and threatened, but also a former enslaved person.

Burris wrote, "But give us guns and we will show the scoundrels that the colored people will fight."[29] This striking letter to the governor requesting the formation of a militia to protect the African Americans who are being harassed and driven from their homes is an example of how African Americans lived a consciousness that comes from the trauma of enslavement and the desire to build up from extraordinarily little. Furthermore, this kind of community organizing arose from the organizing of contraband camps, where people would work together to instruct children, cultivate agriculture, and build homes from nothing. Language evolution amongst African American themselves was not engendered by oppressive laws, but from their efforts to rebuild and reset in the wake of continued attempts of re-enslavement and the trauma of the domestic trade of enslaved people.

The location of contraband camps, the total African American population according to the Census, and the origin of letters discussing homelessness contain correlative overlap when looking at the maps laid side by side. One city with a lot of overlaps is Vicksburg, in Warren County. Vicksburg also had nine total contraband camps, Warren County a population of

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[29] Burris, Abraham B., "Letter from Abraham B. Burris to Mississippi Governor Adelbert Ames; October 13, 1875," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Ames Series 803: Box 997, Folder 10 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 15, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_803-997-10-19., 1.

nineteen thousand African Americans, and was the origin of at least four letters discussing rampant vagrancy. Corinth, however, had one main contraband camp, and many of the residents of that camp traveled to the contraband camp in Memphis for relocation when the Corinth contraband camp dissolved in 1864.[30]

Finally, the two correlations maps (Figs. 6 and 7) are important in visualizing the positive trends between the African American population at the time many of the letters were written and the history of enslavement in those counties. The first figure shows the population versus the amount of enslaved people, and the second showcases the population versus the number of letters that originated from those counties. Of course, this study is small, and this does not immediately prove that there is overall positive causation. However, using this micro-set of data, we can at least note that more African Americans live in the counties where letters originate discussing homelessness in the African American population, be it due to refugee status, racial violence, or other circumstances.

VI. Conclusion

In summation, this short study fills a necessary gap in Civil War and Reconstruction studies, African American studies, and the study and history of homelessness at large. Legislation created to control the livelihood of formerly enslaved African Americans provided them with no foundation for a future permanent shelter, denied them basic survival necessities, and only sought to control and correct the housing crisis at a superfluous level.

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[30] Walker, 1974, 15.

People injured during the Civil War, people imprisoned, people who faced threats or racial violence, and other vulnerable populations were not supported in finding housing and employment. The letter written by R. M. Birch to an unknown recipient asking for aid for an African American family in Jackson who were being threatened and pushed out of the neighborhood[31] does not have a documented response—most if not all of these letters do not have a response, but some have documented action, like the ration breakdown from Lt. Franklin Force. According to the document metadata, "The return is approved by Captain Samuel A. Cooper of the 50th United States Colored Infantry, thus authorizing the Assistant Commissary of Subsistence to issue the requested rations."[32] Force made a point that the African Americans receiving the food were homeless and that they would starve if they did not receive said rations.[33] These reactionary responses to homelessness were not a scaffolding for stability for African Americans in Mississippi. Studying these faults through the lens of a "housing crisis" as a centuries-long struggle allows readers to see how the state and federal government has repeatedly failed to address homelessness in the African American population.

Perhaps a future endeavor relating to this research could be expanding the archival sources used to include other letters not in the CWRGM project; oral histories from descendants discussing how the lack of attention paid to homelessness during this time affected their families, if at all; more studies into diverse subject tags that can be hiding information; and a look into federal government records that oversaw funds for housing and housing development at the time. Surely,

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[31] Birch, R. M., "Letter from R. M. Birch to Unknown; November 29, 1865," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Humphreys Series 779: Box 962, Folder Nov28-Dec6-1865 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 15, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_779-962-07-21, 1.

[32] " Ration return of Lieutenant Franklin Force; August 16, 1865." The Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi Project. Accessed 15 July 2025. Ration return of Lieutenant Franklin Force; August 16, 1865 · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi · Civil War and Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi

[33] Force, 1865.

there are far more source bases to be looked at with more time, and the aim of this study is to provide a minor catalyst for more research.

Serving as a brief introduction, the importance of this study is not just hyperlocal. Police violence, predatory law-to-prison-labor pipelines, and homelessness continue to be rampant issues across the nation. While related studies may not directly inform local policy, it can provide necessary context for the legacy of enslavement in the 21st century and what can be done to improve legislature based on laws that have failed before.

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