The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was established in the spring of 1865 to help white and black Southerners make the transition from slavery to freedom, while securing the basic civil rights of the ex-slaves. It failed to accomplish what its creators had hoped, but its history tells us much about why Northerners and Southerners, whites and blacks, approached Reconstruction in the way that they did and why that failure occurred. The Freedmen's Bureau: Reconstructing the American South after the Civil War is a succinct summary of the agency's history accompanied by key documents that illustrate Northern ideology, black expectations, and white Southern resistance. Topics of the day, including labor, education, violence, politics, and justice place the federal agency within the larger context of post-Civil War history.

About the Author

Paul A. Cimbala is a professor of history at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York, where he teaches Civil War Era, Southern and African American history. He received his Ph.D. from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Prior to accepting a position at Fordham, he was an assistant editor with The Black Abolitionist Papers Project at Florida State University and an assistant professor of history at the University of South Carolina at Aiken. He is the author of Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1867, and has edited numerous essay collections including (with Randall M. Miller) The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations. He is presently completing a study of slave musicians titled Jester, Trickster, Priest: Black Musicians from Slavery to Freedom in the Rural American South and has begun research on a history of the Union Army's Veteran Reserve Corps.
“Cimbala presents a fast-paced, detail-oriented institutional history of the Freedmen’s Bureau... Readers will walk away from Cimbala’s account with a clear understanding of the ideological parameters of the agency, its multifarious and complex undertakings, and the changing attitudes and expectations of the bureau men who worked on a daily basis to implement Reconstruction policies... Well-chosen documents from the bureau field office records, now available on microfilm from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in particular, reveal the hopes of both former slaves and former masters as well as the constraints under which bureau men operated at the local level.”— H-Net Reviews

“...a balanced, succinct summary of the history of the Freedmen’s Bureau that assesses its successes and shortcomings within the larger context of post-Civil War history. To his credit, the author fully engages the many controversial issues that surrounded this short-lived federal agency...Readers will find much to like in The Freedmen’s Bureau.”—The South Carolina Historical Magazine

“Paul A. Cimbala is a recognized expert on the Freedmen’s Bureau. As the author of the best of a clutch of recent state-level studies of this important agency, he is well equipped to provide the concise synthesis, grounded in a close acquaintance with the primary sources and a mastery of the secondary literature, that the exercise demands...the documents offer a revealing sample of the kinds of primary evidence on which our understanding of the bureau’s history is based...provides an excellent summary of what historians are currently thinking about the bureau. With its well-chosen collection of documents, it constitutes an attractive package.”—Journal of Southern History