

# The Freedmen's Bureau and Fisk University

In March 1865, President Lincoln and Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau to assist formerly enslaved people as well as white Southerners who had been displaced by fighting. The Freedmen's Bureau carried out a number of functions in the South. The agency provided food, clothing, shelter and medical care for those in need. It also protected freed people from exploitation from their former enslavers. Agents investigated claims of abuse by formerly enslaved people and helped set employment contracts. One of the agency's most important functions was to establish schools.<sup>1</sup> In Nashville, Clinton B. Fisk, leader of the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee, gave a former army barracks to establish a school for Blacks in 1865. The school, which was known as Fisk School in his honor, opened in January of 1866 to students of all ages who wanted to learn. One year later, the school was incorporated as Fisk University and was open to students of all races. The school quickly fell on hard times and was nearly bankrupt by 1871. In a last ditch effort to raise money for the school, a group of Fisk students began to tour the nation singing spirituals.<sup>2</sup> The Fisk Jubilee Singers were an immediate sensation. In 1873, they performed for President Grant at the White House and for Queen Victoria. Fisk University continued to prosper in the early 20th century. Students from Fisk including W.E.B. DuBois, Diane Nash and John Lewis played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Appleby et al., *The American Journey*. (Columbus, Ohio: Glencoe McGraw Hill, 2003), 502.

<sup>2</sup> "Fisk University History." Fisk University. 2018. <https://www.fisk.edu/about/history> Accessed 12 July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> "Today in History- January 9." Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/january-09/> Accessed 12 July, 2018.

# Student Activity

Directions: Read the excerpts from the Memphis Colored Orphan Asylum found on the following pages. The Orphan Asylum operated with assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau. Complete the chart below and sentence stems below.

Challenges faced by Black citizens after the Civil War

Successes of Black citizens after the Civil War

The Freedmen's Bureau assisted Black citizens by \_\_\_\_\_

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After the Civil War, Black citizens in Tennessee continued to face many challenges including

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