

Manassas National Battlefield Park

War For Freedom: African American Experiences in the Era of the Civil War



Resource #3: The Southern Claims Commission

The Southern Claims Commission was established by Congress in 1871 to compensate southerners who had been loyal to the Union during the Civil War for property taken or destroyed by the Union army. The claimants could be male or female and of any race. They included a significant number of people who had been slaves during the war, in addition to free people both white and black. All claimants had to prove, through their own testimony and the supporting testimony of witnesses, that:

- they had been loyal to the Union
- they owned the property they claimed
- the property had been taken or destroyed for military purposes, as opposed to being simply pillaged or stolen by soldiers acting without authorization

The federal government appointed commissioners who went to locations throughout the South and took testimony from claimants and their witnesses. They asked questions about the property that was taken or destroyed, the circumstances in which it occurred, and the claimant's loyalty to the Union. Knowing that claimants stood to gain by lying in support of their claim, the commissioners were skeptical about the claimants' answers and tried to verify them with testimony by witnesses. After evaluating the testimony, the commissioners decided whether to "allow" (accept) or reject the claim and, if it was allowed, how much the claimant should receive as compensation.

Source: Steve Miller