

“The Proceeds of My Own Labor”

Black Working Women in the District of Columbia during the Civil War

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As the home of the “first freed,” the nearly 3,000 enslaved men, women, and children liberated by Congress April 1862 in the District of Columbia represented a unique site for women struggling for emancipation during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Eight and a half months before the Emancipation Proclamation, the District of Columbia Emancipation Act freed Black women in the District of Columbia and paid compensation to the White men and women who claimed them as property. As the Civil War progressed, these women were quickly outnumbered by run-away enslaved men and women entering the city and the Union camps that formed a protective barrier around the capital. This influx forced the Union Army, and later the Freedmen’s Bureau, to determine how to define dependency when it came to Black women and for a time transformed the city into a “laboratory of social policy.”¹ Although willing to utilize the benefits and programs provided by the government when it helped them, Black women in the District of Columbia understood that they could also look to the city’s existing free community of color for guidance. Like other southern cities, the urban economy in Washington had long offered opportunities to women. Freedwomen, both those who gained their freedom in the city and those who arrived during and after the war, turned to existing resources in the form of strategies long practiced by free women of color as well as asserting their right to the new resources of the Union Army and Freedmen’s Bureau as they made their transition to freedom.

Black women’s experiences in the District of Columbia suggest the need to take a more expansive view of the struggle for freedom that also includes the free community of color. The recognition that freedpeople’s

ambitions were founded in their experiences of enslavement has led scholars to look back implicitly and explicitly in their work to connect slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. As Steven Hahn suggests, it seems “increasingly apparent that slavery was not mere background or prologue; it was formative and foundational.” Scholarship on the rural South has shown how the reconstruction of free labor in rural areas built on the customary practices and privileges of slavery that were sometimes called the “internal economy” as former slaves, plantation owners and government representatives negotiated the transition from enslaved to free labor. Yet, in urban areas, free men and women of color’s experiences and strategies were also foundational to freedpeople’s ambitions and their abilities to achieve them, as historians Letitia Woods Brown and Elizabeth Clark Lewis have demonstrated in their studies of the District of Columbia.²

During the antebellum period, free women of color left rural Maryland and Virginia in pursuit of a more meaningful freedom in the District of Columbia, seeking to reunite their families, work independently for themselves, and to find security and community within thriving Black institutions.³ As a result, women were overrepresented in the Black populations of Upper South cities like Washington and Baltimore. In the District of Columbia, there were seven women to every five men by 1840, and this discrepancy was most pronounced among young working-age adults. Unlike in cities in the lower South, where the higher numbers of free women of color in the population were often caused by their greater manumission rates, in Upper South cities like the District of Columbia, the sexual difference in the free population was caused by women’s higher migration rate in response to economic opportunities in the city.⁴

The limited employment opportunities for Black men in a city with little industry meant that women’s labor was often critical to family survival and success, but free people of color’s household economies in the 1850s and 1860s suggest that Black households tried to control the extent of women’s participation in wage labor.⁵ While few free women of color could afford to avoid work altogether, many families tried to limit women’s work outside the household.⁶ By far the most popular occupation for women was washing and taking in laundry, which could be performed in their own homes rather than entering White households as full-time servants. For example, Cassandra Adams and her sister-in-law Martha Adams were both listed as washerwomen in the 1860 census, and as they lived next door to one another, they may have pooled their resources to get the washing done or received help from Martha’s

fifteen-year-old daughter Sarah. Both women had young children in their households, so they likely valued washing work they could perform from their own homes.⁷

In addition to washing, free women of color demonstrated their preference for other employment forms that prevented direct White supervision and allowed them to remain in their own home, such as sewing as seamstresses or marketing food, produce, or other goods at the District's weekend markets. Elizabeth Keckley, the city's most famous Black resident, earned her freedom as a seamstress before becoming Mary Todd Lincoln's personal dressmaker and close confidant.⁸ Free women of color also took in boarders to their homes to provide additional income without resorting to outside employment. In households headed by a married couple, boarders, either related or unrelated, were more likely to be present when the wife did not work outside the home, suggesting that Black families preferred this financial strategy to outside employment for women.⁹ Families created a domestic economy that adapted to allow women to take advantage of the demand for their labor but under their own terms. Whenever possible, women sought to work from within their own households; both protecting them from direct White supervision and its attendant consequences and enabling them to care for their children. Freedwomen's ambitions after emancipation drew on these precedents and strategies.

The Civil War brought considerable change and challenge to the District of Columbia, the capital of the Union and the headquarters of the Union Army. During the war, 3,000 slaves in the District were emancipated by Congress and tens of thousands of fugitive slaves fled to the safety of the city and the surrounding army camps. As a result of this migration, Black men outnumbered Black women for the first time in the city. Women navigated this early rehearsal for Reconstruction in ways that drew on established strategies by free communities of color in the city as well as taking advantage of new resources created by the war. The mass migration of Black women to the District of Columbia pushed the government to provide for women even as the Union Army resisted defining them as dependents worthy of support.

Formerly enslaved women freed through the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia sought to emulate strategies established by free women of color and remove themselves from White households as much as possible. Abolition in the District represented a compromise between the Republican Party's radical and conservative wings, as while it made a statement by ending slavery in the one territory unequivocally controlled

by Congress, it also included provisions for compensating slave owners and encouraging the colonization of the freed population. Slave owners' compensation petitions cross-referenced with records from the United States Census offer clues to how women made decisions about their future.¹⁰ Some women chose to remain with the family who had owned them as slave property and had even been compensated for the loss of their labor. For example, Martha Ann Blaxton had been born the property of James Riordan and remained with him after emancipation. Riordan claimed in his petition for compensation that Blaxton "does not associate with people of her own color ... accompanies her mistress to the communion table, loves my children, and is entrusted with the keys to my desk." At twenty-eight, Blaxton was not too old to consider starting afresh, but she instead chose to continue as a domestic servant living in the Riordan household. After her enslaver's death, perhaps Blaxton was persuaded to remain and help the family, and as a concession, a young girl was hired to aid her in her duties.¹¹ Those women who remained with their previous enslavers often negotiated for recognition of their skills or for specific duties within the household. Lucy Lancaster remained in Noble Young's household, although her children who had also been enslaved chose to leave and find new employment. Young listed Lancaster in his petition in 1862 as a domestic slave, but by the 1870 census her occupation was listed as a cook.¹² After emancipation, Black women who had been general domestic servants negotiated to take on specific responsibilities and jealously guarded their new positions, often threatening or exercising their new right to quit if they were required to perform other duties.¹³

For many former slaves, the ability to change employers was one of their most precious new rights, and domestic servants exercised this right as they sought the best employment terms and the most agreeable employers. Young single women particularly demonstrated the most mobility. Yet, women who changed employers almost all remained as domestic servants for White families, demonstrating that while freedom brought some opportunities for change to Black women the employment opportunities open to them remained circumscribed. For example, Elsie Curtis had worked as a domestic while enslaved to Ann Bisco of Washington, and as a free woman she continued to work as a domestic servant for George S. Bright, a sailor in the US Navy.¹⁴ The limited employment opportunities available to women and the increasing cost of living in Washington during the war contributed to the involvement of Black women in the sex and leisure economy.¹⁵ After emancipation,

some women who left their former enslavers did not seek employment, if they had husbands or children who could help to support their households. Women tried above all to control their own labor, and by withdrawing from the workforce they could avoid the supervision of a jealous wife or predatory husband. This option, however, was only available to those who could rely on other kinds of household income. Mary Lee had worked as a lady's maid to a White Washington family, but after emancipation she remained at home in the new household she formed with her husband John Lee and their children. Caroline Gray did not have a husband present in her household after emancipation, but her children's labor might have allowed her to stay at home after a lifetime spent caring for Joseph Fearson's family.¹⁶

Despite the symbolic significance of slavery's abolition in the District of Columbia in 1862, the path to freedom of most women who made their way to the city was less dramatic and less clear cut. Once General Butler established the policy at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, in May 1861, of accepting Black male laborers as "contraband of war" the numbers of fugitives fleeing to the capital increased dramatically, drawn by the promise of freedom. However, as military policy focused on offering Black men freedom in exchange for their service, the position of women and children remained uncertain and contingent throughout the war. Enslaved women who fled to the city faced an uncertain situation throughout the war and their path to freedom was often dependent on their marital status. The First Confiscation Act did not provide any protection for women, and the 1862 Militia Act only offered freedom to the female dependents of Black men who served the Union. Women whose enslavers claimed loyalty to the Union were not covered by this policy, which would have excluded many women from nearby Maryland. These women could not claim freedom until February 1865, when the Enlistment Act freed the wives of Union soldiers from loyal states, although Maryland had abolished slavery by this time.¹⁷

Some women who came to the city and nearby army camps as fugitive slaves were able to find employment as cooks and laundresses serving the troops. Once White women nurses claimed the treatment of the sick as their proper purview, Black women began to be employed at army hospitals doing washing for the surgeons and the wounded soldiers. Even though enslaved women had performed field labor alongside men, the army maintained its traditional gender distinction, only employing men as laborers and women at traditionally female and lower-paid occupations such as cooking and cleaning.¹⁸ The flood of Black men who came to the

city to supply the intense demand for labor pushed the Union Army and the Republican government to ensure their freedom in exchange for their service. Yet, it was the Black women who migrated to the city following their husbands or in search of their own freedom who put tremendous strain on the resources of the army, benevolent societies, and government officials charged with their care. The initially reluctant military government soon assumed unprecedented responsibility for Black women in the District of Columbia.¹⁹

Many of these women made their transition to freedom, at least temporarily, in the contraband camps established by the army and staffed by philanthropic organizations like the American Missionary Association. Although Black women did not experience the same intense demand for their labor from the army as did Black men, many single women found a ready market for their labor as domestic servants in the city, particularly after the abolition of slavery in the District. Single women were more likely to be offered live-in positions, and because few employers wanted to feed and clothe children many married women remained at the contraband camps indefinitely. Others were trapped at the camps waiting for wages that had been promised to husbands serving in the military or as laborers for the quartermaster's department.²⁰ For most women who had fled to the city, domestic service represented a major change in labor for former field hands from rural counties in Maryland and Virginia, but some women were able to benefit from skills learned in slavery as they adapted to the urban employment market. As a teacher at the contraband camps commented, many women knew "more about sewing than anything else having been obliged to sew their own clothes while in slavery."

Despite wartime privations, demand in the District of Columbia for domestic servants remained high throughout the war. When slaves from the city left their former enslavers, White residents rushed to the employment offices established within the camps in search of new servants. Former slave and prominent abolitionist Harriet Jacobs visited the contraband camps at Duff Green's Row and observed that the office of the superintendent "was thronged by the day by persons who came to hire the poor creatures." Those without children were most able to take advantage of the demand for their labor and find work in the city as servants, washerwomen, and cooks. Jacobs commented on how "single women hire at four dollars a month, a woman with one child two and a half or three dollars a month."²¹ Despite the continued demand, the oversupply of potential servants from the migrant population clearly suppressed wages for Black women during this period. Before the war, slave

owners reported hiring out their female property as domestic servants at wages almost double those during the war, at eight to ten dollars a month.²² This made subsisting in the city particularly difficult for women with children, who depended on the rations and assistance available at the camps even when employed.

The operation of employment offices to find work for women living in the contraband camps in the city reveals the contradictions inherent in the military government and army's policies towards Black women in the District of Columbia. At first, the demand for male labor led army officers to welcome Black soldiers and army workers' dependents to the city and offer them freedom and protection, including food and shelter at the hastily established contraband camps. By 1862, however, the rising number of Black women, children, and the elderly in the District of Columbia spurred the government to introduce a new policy that taxed the wages of Black men working for the army to fund the contraband camps. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ordered that

in view of the fact that the Government is supporting several hundred women and children of the same class, who are unable to find employment, and also furnish medical care, support, and attendance to the sick and helpless; the Secretary directs that you cause five dollars per month to be deducted from the pay of the said colored teamsters and laborers in the quartermaster department.²³

The government aimed to ensure that all Black women and children would be provided for through Black men's wages, regardless of their relationship. Although army officials argued that "these are rid of such a responsibility very cheaply, at a cost of only one fifth or less of their monthly pay, and few white laborers are so favorably circumstanced," they did not acknowledge that White laborers were only responsible for their own relatives' support.²⁴

Despite this tax, officials and civilians at the contraband camps still stressed the necessity of formerly enslaved women, whether married or single, finding work in the city to support themselves. Even though Black men were responsible for supporting all destitute formerly enslaved migrants in the city, Black women were considered unworthy to be dependent on the government. Weekly reports from Camp Barker listed the number of "able-bodied females over 14 fit for duty," and these women and girls were encouraged to find employment with local residents or the army. Women with children, whose husbands were away with the army, missing, or dead, found it much more difficult to find enough work to support their families and more frequently had to remain in the

camps and become dependent on government relief. When freedmen's aid societies sought to find shelter for the soldiers' wives, army officials replied that they would take responsibility for destitute children, but that women should be self-supporting. While very young children deserved charity, officials made it clear that Black women without other support would be expected to work. If necessary, they could place their children in the camp's orphanage to take employment.²⁵ By insisting that Black women should continue to work if they were able, army officials revealed the contradictions in free labor ideology regarding race and gender that would continue to be evident in the freedwomen's relationship with their successor in the city, the Freedmen's Bureau.

After the end of the Civil War and the mustering out of Union Army troops, the demand for labor in the city quickly returned to its prewar status. Black women were soon outnumbered two to one by men at the Freedmen's Bureau employment offices once the demand for male soldiers and laborers concluded. In part, this reflected the greater employment opportunities available to women without children as domestic servants. However, it could also have reflected married women's attempts to avoid waged labor and use the opportunities afforded by the city to devote their energies to their own households wherever possible. Tracing the households established by a sample of former slaves from the District of Columbia and those who migrated there during the war reveals that a high number of freedwomen listed no occupation in the 1870 United States Census. Yet, in the District of Columbia, there is little evidence of a panic about women withdrawing from the labor force. Even before the war, residents in Washington regularly lamented the difficulty in getting good help due to servants' efforts to control their own labor by "doing just what they please and going away just when they please."²⁶ In rural areas, similar behavior by freedwomen led planter employers to complain that Black women were trying to "play the lady." In fact, women were attempting to reduce the hours they spent laboring for White employers in favor of directing their labor towards their own families, taking care of children and garden plots. In urban areas, where labor relationships had always been more fluid and White employers were accustomed to making temporary arrangements with free people of color and hired slaves, permanent contracts were less common and if the Bureau ever attempted to enforce them, they appear to have quickly given up and instead focused on the employment offices.²⁷ Black women's struggles to support themselves and their families demonstrated the continuities of household strategies.

In 1870, nearly 70 percent of married women sampled who lived in two-parent households in the District of Columbia listed their occupation as “keeping house.” Even in female-headed households, 44 percent remained out of the workforce, usually reflecting families with an older mother and adult working children. While this might have been striking in rural areas of the South, in 1860, 58 percent of married free women of color in Washington sampled had also declared themselves to have no occupation.²⁸ Freedwomen tried to support their family through their own domestic labor whenever possible, rather than working for another family for wages. Just as free women of color had attempted to separate themselves from slavery by avoiding live-in domestic service, after emancipation women who had already experienced domestic service while enslaved in the District of Columbia sought to avoid the drudgery of service and White supervision and intrusion into their lives. Those who had been separated from their husbands and their children’s fathers during slavery sought to establish themselves as in control of their own households rather than another woman’s servant. While enslaved, Mary Lee had served as a lady’s maid to Margaret Loughborough, but upon her emancipation she reunited with her husband, John Lee, to create a household for their six children in Georgetown. By 1870, John Lee appeared to be supporting the family with his earnings as a laborer, allowing Mary to stay at home with their children.²⁹

On the surface, these statistics suggest that Black married women were choosing to stay at home with their children, rather than take waged work in the city. However, just under half of the households in which married women were listed as “keeping house” contained boarders. In the urban economy, by taking in paying occupants of their houses Black women could engage in the same unseen and unwaged form of labor commonly practiced by free households during the antebellum period. Taking in boarders was not just a strategy to help support the household, but allowed many women avoid wage labor outside of their own household. Taking care of the house and perhaps making food for boarders or extended family members represented productive labor for urban women, yet this work was not recognized by the census takers or the Freedmen’s Bureau. Gilbert Rich and his wife Hester, migrants from Stafford County, Virginia, shared their home with four boarders, none of whom were obviously related to the couple. They owned nine hundred dollars in real estate, so they may have used the house they owned to make additional household income that enabled the couple to support themselves on Gilbert’s wages as a laborer.³⁰

The urban economy also afforded Black women in the District of Columbia the opportunity to work for wages within their own households, by taking in laundry and ironing. The large numbers of government workers who lived in boarding houses or whose families lived in the city during the congressional session created a significant demand for washing workers. When married women had to work for wages, they appeared to prefer working as a laundress to domestic service outside the home. Laundresses and washerwomen most commonly did not live in with the families they served but collected clothing they washed and ironed in their homes or communities. This allowed them to keep an eye on their children and grandchildren and to take care of their own household needs at the same time as they earned money to contribute to those households. Crucially, it also enabled women to avoid the White mistresses' close supervision or White masters' unwanted advances.³¹ Women who had worked as domestic servants while enslaved in the District of Columbia often possessed laundry and ironing skills from their former occupations that they were able to use as free laborers. For example, Lydia Sampson had been considered a valuable house servant by her mistress Sally T. Matthews, who was granted \$350.40 in compensation for the loss of her services in 1862. Sampson, who went by her married name, Elizabeth Middleton, in the 1870 census, worked as a laundress, possibly while she cared for her two youngest daughters. Samuel, her husband, who was not listed as a member of the Matthews household, now worked as a laborer in the city.³²

Demonstrating the reciprocity in gender relations created by the urban economy, women's ability to withdraw from domestic service positions was closely related to the ability of their husbands and families to find stable employment. Married women who worked as domestic servants were most likely to have husbands who were laborers or day laborers, the least skilled and least stable employment form in the city. Most single women without any male support had to find work in the waged economy, although those with older children were sometimes able to send their children to work instead. Salina Williams had been born into slavery in the District of Columbia and had borne into slavery six children and two grandchildren by the time she was emancipated at the age of fifty-one in 1862. Her family was valued at over \$2,500 by the Commissioners of the Board of Emancipation of the District of Columbia, although Williams never saw any of the compensation paid to their former enslaver. By 1870, her family had established their own household in the Third Ward where Salina kept the house and cared for her grandchildren, while her sons and

daughters worked in the city. Her daughter Lydia worked as a washer-woman, so Salina may have helped with this waged labor, but after her long years of bondage Salina was able to devote her labor predominately to her own family for the first time.³³ The majority of women who listed their occupation as live-in domestic servants appeared to be single, as none had children who lived with them in the White households. As in the antebellum period, it appeared that domestic service was younger women's preferred employment before they established a household of their own.

Freedwomen in the District of Columbia thus drew on established strategies as they reconstructed the relationships between gender and labor in their households. As in rural areas, they attempted wherever possible to control their own labor conditions and to focus their efforts on their own families rather than those of White employers. The urban economy, however, offered them greater opportunities and flexibility to conduct waged work from within their households, including washing or taking in boarders, such that married women's significant withdrawal from domestic service did not create a panic among White observers and the Freedmen's Bureau. Negotiating from a position of comparative strength, freedwomen nevertheless demonstrated their willingness to use government resources to ensure their support and survival in the city. While most freedwomen came to the city to find work and support their families in an environment free from White supervision, Bureau accounts reveal that they increasingly began to see government assistance as their right and part of their new privileges. Agents complained that "some person or persons have indirectly given the colored people to understand that the Government is obliged to support them, and ... relieve all their wants, real or imaginary." This "someone" may indeed have been philanthropic agent Josephine Griffing, a former abolitionist and suffragist, whose sympathies led her to believe that the freedpeople were entitled to government assistance in return for their years of unpaid service in bondage.³⁴ Although the Freedmen's Aid agents' opinions undoubtedly influenced the freedpeople to approach the Freedmen's Bureau for assistance, many former slaves arrived in the capital with expectations of assistance from the government. Superintendent John Vandenburg indignantly reported the case of Lucy Hill, who despite having a husband and two daughters at work earning good wages, applied for relief as she "thought she could as well have her share as not." Freedwomen demonstrated that they believed that Bureau programs were supposed to operate for their benefit and that they would happily use Bureau assistance through programs such as food and clothing rations and subsidized housing to supplement their own earnings.³⁵

Freedwomen saw no contradiction in using Bureau services that helped them, while rejecting Bureau programs or incentives that did not fit with their own goals for freedom. Although the Bureau in the District of Columbia made efforts to encourage freedwomen to leave the city for healthier country homes and employment, formerly enslaved women's general refusal to return to their former homes in Maryland and Virginia and their violent dislike of the government farms established around the city pushed Bureau agents to utilize their funds, and the freedmen's aid societies' resources to provide relief and social programs to women in the city. Seeking to break with their past labor in bondage, freedwomen told Bureau agents that "they would rather work for three dollars a month in Washington or Baltimore than to work for the traitors here for twelve."³⁶ Mindful of their mission to teach the former slaves the value of free labor and self-sufficiency, Bureau agents rapidly established employment agencies in the city. Freedpeople who had been used to obtaining work through the contraband camps established during the Civil War eagerly took advantage of the employment offices set up at various locations around the city. Although both men and women registered in large numbers, the resumption of prewar employment patterns offered fewer opportunities for Black men. Josephine Griffing reported in 1866 that "since the mustering out of colored troops, the dismantling of forts, and the closing up of warlike operations, the numbers of unemployed males, has exceeded that of females, and during the past six months, two thousand males and eight hundred females have applied for situations."³⁷

Freedwomen looked to the Freedmen's Bureau not only for assistance in finding a job, but in adapting to the potential employers' demands. They eagerly attended the industrial schools established by various freedmen's aid societies, where they could learn needlework and sew suitable clothing to dress themselves for their attempts at finding new employment. During the industrial schools' first year of operation, women who had been "field hands" cut and sewed 300 pairs of pants, which in addition to clothing the needy of the District, trained the women in domestic skills. One woman reported that the sewing she had learned enabled her to earn three dollars a week "with her needle." Women who had worked long days in the fields eagerly took up the occupations that would enable them to find work and support their families in the city. After learning needlework skills at one of the industrial schools, a freedwoman spoke enthusiastically to the head of the school about her new employment conditions, remarking that "she prefers it to the shovel."³⁸

As in their attempts to find employment, freedwomen could look to the Freedmen's Bureau in the District of Columbia for support as they tried to gather their families. However, freedwomen also resisted attempts by the Bureau to define family structure in a narrow way. Instead of the neat, nuclear families envisioned by the Freedmen's Bureau officials, Black households in the District of Columbia welcomed extended family, kin, and friends to provide mutual support and share labor and childcare burdens. Bureau agents' implicit assumption was that if Black families formed nuclear households headed by an able-bodied Black man, they would not become a charge on the government. Bureau officials saw the high rents that forced freedpeople to cram together in substandard housing as one of the greatest problems facing the city's Black population. One of the earliest acts of the Bureau was therefore the conversion of army barracks into tenement housing, at Duff's Green Row, Wisewell Barracks, and other locations across the city. The Bureau specifically sought to rent these rooms to Black nuclear families, stating that only one family would be allowed to occupy each room and that only couples who could prove their lawful marriage could become tenants. Despite this, as other agents working in the District realized, many households welcomed extended family and friends for personal as well as pragmatic reasons. Josephine Griffing commented that "the strong social nature of this Race, made doubly strong by the violations of domestic relations in slavery, offers great opposition to the separation of families and friends, reaching over three and four generations of those long separated in slavery, but now gathered together in freedom."³⁹

Freedwomen's determination to use the resources of the Freedmen's Bureau to pursue their own ambitions for freedom continued to challenge the free labor ideology held by the majority of the Bureau agents in the city, and to reveal, as Mary Farmer Kaiser has suggested, that "when it came to freedwomen, the bureau's rigid policies just never seemed to translate simply into practice."⁴⁰ Debates over the meaning and appropriate response to female dependency between Bureau agents and the largely female group of philanthropic society agents who served the city illustrated the distinct ways that race and gender influenced Bureau policy. While the demand for their labor meant that single women were able to find employment in the city to help support themselves, women with children continued to find self-sufficiency a challenge in the postwar period. Soon becoming the most infamous freedmen's relief worker in the District, Josephine Griffing particularly battled with the local Bureau agents over her sympathy for women with children in need of assistance.

Bureau agents' chief commitment was to instill the values of free labor into their charges, which held that those who worked hard would be rewarded by moral virtue, social mobility, and independence. Agents feared that charitable provision would encourage the former slaves towards dependency rather than industry. The mainly female agents employed by the freedmen's relief societies active in the city, in contrast, were seen as too sympathetic to the freedwomen's plight and unable to objectively judge their claims' worth.⁴¹ Captain Spurgin, the first Bureau Superintendent for Washington and Georgetown, complained that female agents "bend ear to their complaints, make no discrimination between those able to work and those unable and advise them to apply to the Bureau for assistance." Official Bureau policy dictated that those able to support themselves even if lacking the "conveniences of life" should be encouraged to work to supply their needs rather than apply for relief.⁴²

Despite the demand for female labor in the city, women with children who had lost their husbands due to the dislocations of slavery and war or through desertion or death often found themselves living on the border between poverty and destitution, where sickness or misfortune could force them onto government charity. In many Bureau agents' minds, these women were destitute only because they were unwilling to give up their children and work to support themselves. If there was nothing physically wrong with Black women, then there was no reason why they should not be able to find employment. Although the Bureau aided women in retrieving their children from the countryside to help reunite families, when caring for children prevented women from working, agents frequently denied their role as mothers. Echoing his predecessors in the Union Army, Bureau agent J. V. W. Vandenburg complained that if only "the women would send their children to homes where they could earn their own living and the smaller ones to the Orphans Home, the mothers could become self-supporting." Although he acknowledged that this did seem harsh, he believed that freedwomen in the city must be forced to see the reality of their situation, and "be governed by force of circumstances, as all poor people must do." Despite the suffering and family separations caused by slavery and illegal apprenticeships, Vandenburg argued that the Black poor must learn that their poverty entitled them to no special treatment and that if they could not afford to support their children, they must give them up or send them out to work.⁴³ Whenever possible, however, Black women rejected any attempts to give up their children, and instead claimed their new position as dependents to force the Bureau to aid them.

The urban labor market's realities meant that few Black men could support families on their wages alone, so that women also contributed to the household economy through outside labor and domestic production. They aided their husbands to bring in money for the family when times were hard, but women were also willing to use the Freedmen's Bureau's resources to go after absconding husbands who refused to support them or their children. As Mary Farmer Kaiser has suggested, "they sought bureau involvement in domestic affairs on their terms, accepted its support when it was to their benefit, and rejected it when the wishes of the federal government differed from their own." Bringing their private concerns into the public realm, freedwomen claimed their role as a dependent to draw the Bureau agents' sympathies, who wished to see Black men, rather than the government, take responsibility for Black women and children.⁴⁴

By asserting their position as dependents, Black women were able to use the Freedmen's Bureau's resources to achieve their independence in the city. For example, Catherine Stevenson asked the Bureau to compel her husband to support her and their children in Alexandria because he had left her and taken up with another woman in the city. In her letter to General C. H. Howard she did not ask the Bureau to make him return to her, only to provide for their family's needs. Rebecca Tolliver's husband traveled to Washington from Culpepper County, Virginia, in 1866, but when he failed to send her any money for their three children, she wrote to the Bureau asking that either her husband be sent back to help her raise the children or that he be made to "remit her funds for that purpose." In Sarah Ann Taylor's case, Bureau agents were unable to compel her husband to return to his family as he had legally married another woman during his four-year absence in Washington. Instead, they had him pay his wife thirty dollars to bring their children to the city, where he promised to "take them in charge" and provide for them. As they could not compel the man to support all his dependents, Superintendent Spurgin believed that "the arrangement for the Father to provide for the children was the best that could be affected."⁴⁵

Women clearly used the Bureau's power to go after their husbands, indicating that they fully understood the precarious position of single women with children to support in the urban economy. On the other hand, the city offered a far greater opportunity for Black women to provide for themselves than did the rural countryside, where planters were reluctant to provide room and board to women with children in return for whatever agricultural labor they could undertake. In the city, women

who had been deserted or whose husbands did not provide support could in many cases maintain their own households. Julia Jones found that she was able to take care of her own household because of the opportunities for women in the urban economy. When her husband, Henry Jones, sought to reunite with her after his desertion, she refused to return to him, stating that when they were married she had to support him, and further denigrated his masculine character by charging that “he is a lazy and abusive man.” Although Jones clearly had no desire to return to her abusive husband, she also refused to return to a situation where she had to support him through her labor. Having found stable employment as a washerwoman in Washington, making five dollars a week to provide for herself and her six-year-old child, Jones felt little need to return to her husband. Investigating the case, Superintendent Vandenburg concluded “she is undoubtedly self-supporting” so that from the Bureau’s perspective there was no need to induce her to return to her husband.⁴⁶

Women’s ability to provide for their families could also cause disputes within the household. When men could not find work or regular employment in the city, the household support burden often fell on Black women. Women’s ability to find domestic service positions in the city challenged the gender roles suggested by free labor ideology and prominent Black and White leaders. As the freedmen’s political, legal and civil rights were based on their responsibilities as household head, many Black leaders stressed a patriarchal definition of the family that emphasized men’s roles as providers and women’s responsibility for making the home “a place of peace and comfort.”⁴⁷ Men who struggled to fulfill their roles as household heads in the District had to learn to compromise and accept their wives’ and children’s earning potential or prepare to seek employment elsewhere either temporarily or permanently. For example, although the Lacy family moved to the District of Columbia in search of greater freedoms for their household, James Lacy soon found that the scarcity of skilled work or even regular employment for Black men frustrated his dreams of providing for his wife Mary and their young daughter Julia. In contrast, Mary appeared to flourish in the city. With her mother providing childcare for Julia, Mary was able to find work as a domestic servant for H. H. Hildreth. Her labor supplemented whatever James could earn and often provided the family’s entire support. When James, frustrated with his inability to sustain his family in the city, wanted to return to his old enslaver Samuel Ricksay in Culpepper County, Mary refused to accompany him, saying “that she did not intend to come among the old secesh any more.”⁴⁸

Although a discouraged James was willing to return to his old enslaver for the promise of fifteen dollars a month and a house for his family, Mary was unwilling to give up her dreams of freedom. When James Lacy took Julia from her grandmother's house and returned to Culpepper County, Mary reported him to the Freedmen's Bureau for stealing their child. In his testimony, James invoked his masculine duties to claim that he had little choice but to take her away as he was unable to provide for his family in the city, and his wife refused to come with him. He told the Bureau that "as I could not make sufficient to support her and child in Washington DC, I was obliged to leave there as before stated," but that he had always supported his family to the best of his ability up until the day he left Washington. Mary, however, painted a different picture, asserting that "my husband has done nothing to assist in supporting me for the past two years, nor has he assisted in providing for the child." She claimed her own ability to support the family through her employment as a domestic servant and that she had "supported the child from the proceeds of my own labor."⁴⁹ The urban labor market could therefore empower Black women to claim equal respect and responsibilities as household providers.

Black women were able to draw on a variety of resources unique to the District of Columbia as they navigated their transition to freedom after emancipation. The established Black community provided relief to those in need, church fellowship, and schools for their children. The city's White population offered employment opportunities to those seeking domestic positions, washing work, or other service occupations. Perhaps most importantly, freedwomen could draw on the experiences of generations of Black women who had come to the city in search of freedom, rehearsing their own transition from enslaved to free labor. In addition, newly emancipated Black women could look first to the Union Army and later to an active Freedmen's Bureau for help and support finding their way in the city and becoming self-supporting. Seeking out Bureau agents when they wanted assistance but resisting Bureau attempts to define the conditions of their freedom, Black women further radicalized the Freedmen's Bureau in the District of Columbia. Urban employment conditions meant that few Black women could afford to withdraw from employment altogether, thus freedwomen in the city rarely were accused of "playing the lady." However, drawing on the same strategies practiced by free women of color for many years, formerly enslaved women during the Civil War and Reconstruction tried to control their own labor conditions wherever

possible. By choosing work that could be done from their homes, such as washing or taking in boarders, many women in Washington were able to help support themselves and their families. Like Mary Lacy, they saw the Freedmen's Bureau as a potential ally in their struggle, but ultimately asserted their ability to define their freedom through "the proceeds of my own labor."