Congress created the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands in 1865. The agency was started to help former black slaves and poor whites in the South after the Civil War. About four million slaves gained their freedom after the war, but the Union victory also left many communities in ruins and destroyed the Southern economy, which depended on slave labor. The Freedmen's Bureau provided food, housing and medical care. It started schools and offered legal help. The agency also attempted to settle former slaves on Southern land that was seized or abandoned during the war. However, the Freedmen's Bureau wasn't fully successful, and under pressure from white Southerners, Congress closed the Bureau in 1872.

**Creation of the Freedmen's Bureau**

The Freedmen's Bureau was established by an act of Congress on March 3, 1865. Two months later, the Civil War ended with the surrender of the Confederate South. The Freedman's Bureau was intended to be a short-term agency, lasting just the length of the war and one year afterward.
Oliver Otis Howard, a Union general, was appointed commissioner of the Bureau in May 1865. Howard reportedly had been planning to become a minister when the Civil War broke out. Nicknamed the “Christian General,” he fought in major battles, including Antietam and Gettysburg, and lost an arm in 1862.

**Opposition to the Freedmen's Bureau**

Reconstruction, the period following the Civil War, was a turbulent time in America. The nation struggled with how to rebuild the South and help the 4 million former black slaves live as free men and women. Until that point, the government had never helped a huge refugee population. According to "The Freedman's Bureau and Reconstruction," the government lacked the tools to run such a large program. "Congress and the Army and the Freedmen's Bureau were groping in the dark," the book says.

From the start, the Bureau faced opposition from many people, including many white Southerners. Another leading opponent was President Andrew Johnson, who took office in April 1865 after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. When Congress introduced a bill in February 1866 to keep the Bureau open and give it new legal powers, Johnson vetoed it. He said it interfered with states’ rights, helped one group of citizens over another and was too expensive. In July of that same year, Congress passed a different version of the bill. In response, Johnson did what he could to weaken the Bureau. He gave many former Confederates back their land and removed Bureau employees he thought were too sympathetic to blacks.

**The Freedmen's Bureau's successes and failures**

The Freedmen's Bureau was organized into districts in the Southern states. The Bureau's achievements varied from one location to another and from one agent to the next. Over the course of its existence, the Bureau did not have enough money or staff, with just 900 agents at its peak. Bureau agents acted basically as social workers and were frequently the only federal representatives in Southern communities. They were subjected to ridicule and violence from whites, including terror organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. These groups felt the agents were interfering in local matters by trying to help blacks. Some agents were crooked or unskilled, but others were hardworking and brave and made significant contributions.

The Freedmen's Bureau fed millions of people. It built hospitals and provided medical care, negotiated labor contracts for former slaves and settled disputes between former slaves and their employers. It also helped former slaves legalize their marriages. During slavery, slaves got married but their marriages were not recognized by the government. The Bureau also located lost relatives and helped black veterans. It built thousands of schools for blacks, and helped to start black colleges like Howard University in Washington, D.C., Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia.
Additionally, the Bureau tried to give land to former slaves, but had little success. In the end, most of the seized or abandoned Confederate land was eventually given back to the original owners. As a result, blacks had little opportunity to own land.

**The Freedmen’s Bureau’s demise**

In the summer of 1872, Congress shut down the Freedmen’s Bureau. Since that time, historians have argued whether the agency was effective. Racial tensions and lack of money kept the Bureau from carrying out all of its plans. However, the Bureau was important in another way. It was the first time the federal government had become involved in matters of social welfare and labor relations. “The Bureau helped awaken Americans to the promise of freedom,” according to “The Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction.” For a time, the agency showed many citizens what equal rights and freedom really meant.
Quiz

1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?

1. The agency was started help former black slaves and poor whites in the South after the Civil War.
2. According to “The Freedman’s Bureau and Reconstruction,” the government lacked the tools to run such a large program.
3. From the start, the Bureau faced opposition from many people, including many white Southerners.
4. The Bureau’s achievements varied from one location to another and from one agent to the next.

(A) 1 and 2
(B) 1 and 3
(C) 2 and 4
(D) 3 and 4

2 Which sentence would be BEST to include in a summary of the article?

(A) The Freedmen’s Bureau often tried to give land that had been taken by the government to former slaves.
(B) There were many groups and individuals that opposed the help the Freedmen’s Bureau was giving to former slaves.
(C) President Andrew Johnson vetoed a bill that would have kept the Freedmen’s Bureau open and given it new legal powers.
(D) The Freedmen’s Bureau was often without enough employees to finish all the work it aimed to complete.

3 What purpose does the section “Opposition to the Freedmen’s Bureau’ serve?

(A) It compares the different viewpoints of the people affected by the Freedmen’s Bureau.
(B) It identifies the reasons for much of the opposition faced by the Freedmen’s Bureau.
(C) It establishes the challenges faced by the Freedmen’s Bureau.
(D) It explains the reasons for the failures of the Freedmen’s Bureau.
How does the introduction (paragraph 1) affect the overall structure of the article?

(A) It provides background information on a government agency that was intended to help many people.

(B) It gives details about how an important government agency was established after the Civil War.

(C) It explains why a government agency was unsuccessful in many of its efforts.

(D) It lists the reasons why many white Southerners were unhappy with the creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau.