

SCENE



‘WE FOUGHT FOR OUR FREEDOM’

Louisville’s new Civil War photo exhibit shares stories of African American soldiers

Jason Gonzalez Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Nearly 24,000 African American troops from Kentucky fought in the American Civil War. Now a new photo exhibit in downtown Louisville is sharing some of their stories. ● Reckoning Inc., and Roots 101 African American Museum have paired up to honor these Civil War veterans in the photo exhibit titled “We Fought for Our Freedom: Kentucky’s African American Civil War Soldiers.” It will be on display at the museum, 124 N. First St., from now through the month of February in honor of Black History Month. ● Radio producer and writer Dan Gediman, who is the executive director of Reckoning, Inc., and genealogy researcher and author Denyce Peyton, started documenting the lives of those soldiers in The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldier Project, which seeks to unlock previously hidden information about enslaved people from Kentucky. ● The goal is to document the lives of all 23,700 Black soldiers who enlisted in the Union Army from Kentucky. According to researchers, each Black Civil War soldier who had children could have up to 1,700 direct descendants living today, unaware of what happened to their ancestors, the Courier Journal previously reported.

See SOLDIERS, Page 6C

From left, Abram Garvin, Wilson Weir and George Brown were soldiers who served in the Union Army’s 108th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment, which was mustered in Louisville in June 1864. PHOTOS COURTESY OF RECKONING INC.



The 108th US Colored Infantry Regiment PROVIDED BY DAN GEDIMAN/RECKONING INC.

Soldiers

Continued from Page 1C

"This project has the potential to benefit [millions of] African Americans nationwide," Gediman previously said. "It illustrates perfectly the power of this project in connecting people to their enslaved ancestors that would otherwise be inaccessible to them."

The new Roots 101 exhibit consists of photos of soldiers who served in the Union Army's 108th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment, which was mustered in Louisville in June 1864. According to a database at the University of Kentucky, Kentucky produced the most African American soldiers, with 13% of the U.S. Colored Troops serving in the Union Army. Serving provided the fastest track to freedom for enslaved men and their families.

"We should honor our African American Civil War soldiers in Kentucky," Gediman said. "Black men in Kentucky had to work harder and go through and address more challenges to join the U.S. Army."

Here's what to know about the "We Fought for Our Freedom: Kentucky's African American Civil War Soldiers" photo exhibit:

What is the 'We Fought for Our Freedom' photo exhibit?

"We Fought for Our Freedom: Kentucky's African American Civil War Soldiers," is a collection of images of ten formerly enslaved individuals, who served in the 108th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment of the Union Army. The troops joined the union, working as guards at a military prison at Rock Island, Illinois for Confederate prisoners of war, according to a news release announcing the exhibit.

Gediman said commanding officer Lt. Theodore F. Wright, a white man, brought at least 31 troops to have their pictures taken at a photography studio in Rock Island, Illinois.

"It's unclear why he did it," Gediman said. "I guess it was to document the soldiers. On the back of every photograph, he wrote down the name of the soldier and a couple of sentences of what he thought about that soldier. He then sent [the photos] to his mother [Sarah Wright], who then put them in photo albums. They somehow stayed in the family till the 20th century. And finally, one of his descendants sold those photos."

Gediman said a simple Google search gave rise to the photo exhibit. He discovered a photograph of a soldier who was born in Louisville.

"I wanted to find out where did that photograph come from," Gediman said. Eventually, "I found that it was an officer in the 108th Colored Infantry Regiment, which was a regiment founded in Louisville in June of 1864."

Where is the 'We Fought for Our Freedom' photo exhibit taking place?

The photo exhibit is at the Roots 101 African-American History Museum, 124 N. First St. in downtown Louisville. Roots is a place for visitors "to see themselves in history, to explore the African-American story entirely, and to curate a greater understanding of the achievements, cultural contributions, and the experiences of African-Americans," according to its website.

"Roots 101's role was to share the importance of sharing Black voices and consciousness by telling the narrative that Black people fought in every major war in this country," said Lamont Collins, founder and CEO of the Roots 101 Museum. "Even when we weren't free."

The museum is open Monday-Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and closed Sunday.

When can I see the 'We Fought for Our Freedom' photo exhibit?

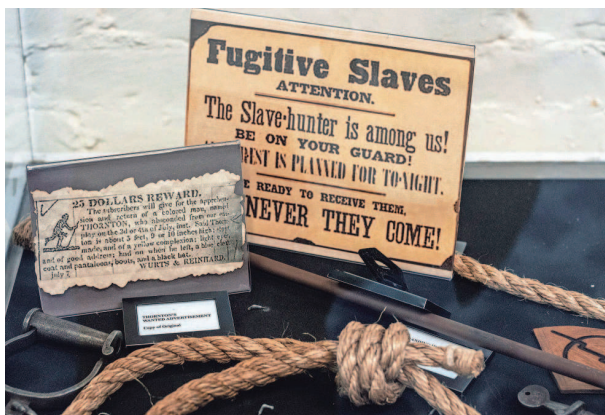
The exhibit runs now through February 2023 at the museum, which was awarded the 2021 Ford Foundation Grant. USA Today also named Roots 101 one of the Top 10 "Best New Attractions" that same year.

How much does it cost to attend the 'We Fought for Our Freedom' photo exhibit?

General admission to the Roots 101 Museum is \$10 with senior and military discounts available. The mu-



Alfred Jackson and Charles Mudd were Civil War soldiers from Kentucky. PROVIDED BY DAN GEDIMAN/COURTESY OF RECKONING INC.



Artifacts from the Civil War and Reconstruction Era South can be found on display at the Roots 101 African American Museum. MARTY PEARL/SPECIAL TO COURIER JOURNAL

seum will also have discounts and promotions during the month of February, as it expands its collaboration with The Reckoning Inc. for Black History Month.

What can I experience at the 'We Fought for Our Freedom' photo exhibit?

A QR code located beneath each image directs you to the soldier's family tree.

"The photos speak about a time when race meant so much in America and black and white photos weren't just symbolic images, they were the images of racism and segregation," Collins told the Courier Journal. "The photos being in black and white gave the reality of what we dealt with. It was about race and freedom, and it continues to be about race and freedom, even in 2022."

What inspired the 'We Fought for Our Freedom' photo exhibit?

Once the Civil War began, Kentucky was one of four slave states that remained in the Union. And yet when tens of thousands of enslaved Kentuckians joined the Union Army, both the soldiers and their family members were considered free, the Courier Journal previously reported.

"In many cases, they had to escape from their enslavers and make a long and potentially dangerous journey to the nearest enlistment place," Gediman said previously.

Gediman explained that Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware and Maryland were concerned that enlisting Black soldiers — free or enslaved — would spark a rebellion in those states, leading to their secession from the Union.

"I believe it was the George Mason that made sure the Second Amendment was added to the Constitution," he said. "The Second Amendment made sure that people could protect themselves against an armed rebellion. ... He held off as long as humanly possible to allow Black soldiers to enter (the army)."

How can I learn more about the Kentucky African American Civil War Soldiers Project?

For more information about the current photo exhibit at Roots 101, or any of the work done at The Reckoning project, visit roots-101.org, reckoningradio.org or kyusct.org.

Reach Culture & Diversity reporter Jason Gonzalez at jgonzalez2@gannett.com. Follow him on Twitter @JayGonz15NYC.