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Roots 101 Museum celebrates Veteran's Day with exhibition on African American Civil War soldiers

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Nearly 24,000 African American men from Kentucky fought in the American Civil War, and some of their stories are being told in a new exhibition in Downtown Louisville.

"We Fought for Our Freedom: Kentucky's African American Civil War Soldiers" is a partnership between Roots 101 African American Museum and the Reckoning Inc., a Louisville-based nonprofit dedicated to examining the legacy of slavery in America by looking at how the institution unfolded in Kentucky.

Lamont Collins, president and founder of Roots 101, and Dan Gediman, executive director of Reckoning Inc., announced the opening of the exhibition at a press conference at the museum on Thursday morning.

Gediman said the Roots 101 exhibition is part of the nonprofit's "Kentucky U.S. Colored Troops Project," a multi-year initiative that used military records to find archival documents which help identify members of the soldiers' family.

At Thursday's press conference, Gediman explained that the Civil War project grew out of research he was doing for another project.



MICHAEL L. JONES

Roots 101 will host "We Fought for Our Freedom," an exhibition about Black Civil War soldiers through January 2023.

"We interviewed descendants of the people who were enslaved at the Oxmoor plantation, which is right behind Oxmoor Mall on Shelbyville Road," Gediman remembered. "I interviewed one of those descendants of the people who were enslaved there, and we had a conversation about reparations. I asked what she would need for reparations for slavery in this country, and she said: 'Help me find my people.'"

"What she meant by that is that white people in white institutions, white families hold the paper trail for what happened to African Americans in this country. And so, for a lot of African Americans, they can't find out what happened to their ancestors without having access to the papers that are in the hands of white families and institutions."

Gediman is a longtime public radio producer whose work has appeared on national public radio shows like "All Things Considered", "Morning Edition", and "This American Life". He founded Reckoning in 2019 to produce radio and podcast series about the impact of slavery in America.

Gediman said Kentucky produced the second highest percentage of Black soldiers in the Union Army because it was the fastest path to freedom for enslaved men and their families during the Civil War.

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, only applied to enslaved people in the rebelling slave-holding states. Enslaved people in Kentucky were exempt from the order because the state did not join the Confederacy.

Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri were the only slave-holding states that remained in the Union during the war. Kentucky produced the most African American soldiers, the state provided 13% of the U.S. Colored Troops serving in the Union Army.

Forty-four percent of eligible Black men from Kentucky joined the Union Army," Gediman said. "There's a lot to be proud of, in terms of Kentucky Civil War veterans."

Most of the soldiers in the Roots 101 exhibition belonged to the Union Army's 108th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment, which was founded in Louisville. The regiment was assigned to a military prison in Rock Island, IL, guarding Confederate prisoners.

Denyce Peyton, a genealogist who worked on the Reckoning project, said military records are important to researchers because African Americans were not listed by name in the U.S. Census until 1870.

The U.S. Army kept track of African American troops, but they were usually listed under their enslavers name, because slaveholders were eligible for a \$300 reimbursement from the government in compensation for losing their property. However, Peyton said knowing the name of an enslaver can help researchers locate wills and other probate documents that might provide information that is relevant to Black families trying to identify ancestors who fought in the Civil War.

One of the soldiers highlighted in the Roots 101 exhibition is Harrison Mudd, a soldier who was enslaved to George and Mahala Hamilton of Marion County, Kentucky. At the age of 39, Mudd escaped from his enslavers and enlisted in the Union Army in Lebanon, Kentucky.

After the war, Mudd returned to Marion County, where he shows up working as a farmhand in the 1870 Census. One of his descendants was at Roots 101 on Thursday for the press conference. During his presentation Gediman also mentioned an African American soldier named James Montgomery Greathouse, who also served in a unit based in Louisville. Most people today know Greathouse's great grandson as the legendary boxer Muhammad Ali.

Collins said this exhibition on African American Civil War veterans is important because it gives visitors a different perspective on American history.

"We're bringing them home to Roots 101," Collins said. "Their stories are being told, and it's an important narrative about the service of Black soldiers in America."

"We Fought for Our Freedom: Kentucky's African American Civil War Soldiers" will be at the Roots 101: African American Museum through January 2023.



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