

Blacks in blue

African-American families discover proud heritage of Civil War soldiers

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As audience members handled replicas of Civil War rifles, bayonets and haversacks at a commemorative event for black soldiers, Louisville history buff Walter Hutchins entered, wearing a blue Union Army cap with a bugle insignia.



Alonzo Brown re-creates a corporal in heavy artillery.
PHOTO BY ARZA BARNETT

"It's a reproduction. A 150-year-old cap wouldn't look this good."

Brown, a Jefferson County schoolteacher, checked the lining, saying, "Somewhere in the inside would

"You think it's authentic?" he asked, handing the cap to Civil War re-enactors dressed in uniforms of the 12th Regiment U.S. Colored Troops Heavy Artillery — Michael Jones, Robert Bell and Alonzo Brown.

"This would have designated infantry," said Bell, a quality manager at DuPont Dow, pointing to the bugle insignia. "Like we have crossed cannons for artillery, the bugle always represents infantry."

Told that the cap was bought at a military fair, Jones, who is museum curator of the Kentucky History Center in Frankfort, inspected it carefully and concluded,



A soldier's items could include a wooden comb, toothbrush and sewing kit.

PHOTO BY ARZA BARNETT



"The Vicksburg Campaign," a sculpture in Mississippi, honors U. S. Colored Troops once stationed there.



Dozens of black Civil War veterans are buried in the National Cemetery section of Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, with headstones bearing the "U.S.C.T." lettering.



This replica of a cartridge case from the era is among the items on display at the Western Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library.

have been information about the company the Army had contracted to make it."

Earlier in the program, at Louisville's Western Branch Library, the re-enactors addressed a dozen listeners about military units at Camp Nelson in Jessamine County.

Bud Dorsey, the Louisville Defender photographer who organized the event, said, "I knew they had Civil War re-enactments in Gettysburg, Chickamauga, wherever, and I just decided to highlight and try and show that there were black troops in a lot of those engagements. The history books hardly mention it at all."

The program included a slide presentation and a screening of the movie "Glory."

The event reflected growing interest in the Civil War's African-American servicemen, as public monuments are being erected and descendants learn of a proud family heritage.

Louisville resident Emmalee Covington, 76, went to Mississippi on Feb. 14 for the unveiling of "The Vicksburg Campaign," a sculpture honoring U.S. Colored Troops once stationed there, who included Washington Herron, a great-grandfather she learned about as a child.

"We would call it 'story time,' and we'd sit on the porch at night, and the old people talked about ancestors long ago," Covington said.

"They said that after the Civil War, people were going in all directions looking for relatives that were lost. Well, my great-grandfather had joined the Union Army in Louisiana, was discharged in Vicksburg, but must have been illiterate because he couldn't find his way home. So my great-grandmother, Letha Herron, went to Warren County, Miss., looking for him.

"It was years later that her son, Wilson, came to Louisville and found him, which was a big thing that everybody talked about. He was an old man by then, had married again and had a houseful of children."

Audrey Hinton, 56 and a federal housing specialist in Washington, D.C., not only documented that her great-grandfather, Frank Hinton, served in Camp Nelson's 12th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, but also met descendants of his former slave owner, Thomas Henton of Versailles, Ky.

Resources

- Camp Nelson Heritage Park, www.campnelson.org.
- National Archives, www.archives.gov (search "USCT").
- Sons & Daughters United States Colored Troops, Washington, D.C., members.aol.com/sdusct/sdusct-0.htm.
- Filson Club Historical Society, Louisville, (502) 635-5083; www.filsonhistorical.org.

"The military papers gave the name of his owner," said Hinton, who works for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "I did a Yahoo search, and up popped the names Hampton and Ivey Henton.

"I wrote them about the possibility of them being descendants of the people who owned my great-grandfather — and lo and behold, they said yes.

"We've all become fast friends. I have visited them on three occasions. They live in the same house from the 1800s and farm the same land where my ancestors were slaves. The black family members have hosted a family reunion there."

"We were kind of bowled over," said Ivey Henton. "We don't have a lot of family records from that time. We were unaware that the family had been slave owners, and we were sort of appalled. We know that it happened and wasn't unusual for this geographic area, and my husband did some digging around in the county courthouse.

"But not only did we get to meet Audrey, our families have a lot in common. Everybody's interested in genealogy. We visited Washington and met her father, went out to dinner. It was fascinating, just an amazing connection to make."

The U.S. Colored Troops, totaling about 200,000 soldiers, fought in 39 major battles, including Nashville, Tenn., and the sieges of Vicksburg, Miss., and Petersburg, Va.

Slave men joined the Union Army by the thousands when the federal government allowed their enlistment in 1862, prompting entire slave families to abandon the plantation in the quest for freedom. Civil War military letters published by the Government Printing Office included Gen. William Sherman's reports that his advance through Mississippi in 1863 included "a string of ox wagons, Negro women and children behind each brigade that equaled in length the brigade itself."

John Eaton, a military chaplain during the Civil War who wrote "Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen" (Negro Universities Press, 1907), reported slave women following troops through the Mississippi Valley "carrying all their possessions on their heads, great feather beds tied up in sheets and holding their few belongings."

Colored Troops captured by the Confederates were typically shot instead of taken prisoner, and 38,000 lost their lives, according to various historical sources, including the book "Black Soldiers in Blue."

After the war, none of the 166 Colored Troops units paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue in victory processions of the Union Army. "My whole purpose in re-enacting is to appreciate the service and dedication of units like the 12th," said Brown, the Jefferson County schoolteacher. "When this country was at its darkest hour, African Americans stepped up and volunteered by the thousands."

Their courage and heroism are finally being properly acknowledged. Brown, for instance, is a re-enactor connected with Camp Nelson Heritage Park, a 525-acre complex that has a resource center and this September will be host of a homecoming for descendants of its black Civil War troops.

The first national memorial to black Civil War veterans, "Spirit of Freedom" by Louisville native Ed Hamilton, was erected in 1998 in Washington, D.C.

In 2001, President Bill Clinton awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Andrew Jackson Smith, a slave who joined the Union Army in Smithland, Ky.

And unveiled Feb. 14 in Vicksburg National Military Park, "The Vicksburg Campaign" honors the 20,000 Mississippians who fought in various units of the U.S. Colored Troops. It's the first monument dedicated to black Civil War soldiers erected in a national park.

Also, dozens of black Civil War veterans are buried in the National Cemetery section of Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, with headstones bearing the distinctive "USCT" lettering.

Civil War military records are available in the National Archives, and private groups, such as the Washington, D.C.-based Sons & Daughters United States Colored Troops, help research military ancestors.

The Filson Club Historical Society in Louisville helped research Covington's great-grandfather Washington Herron's service in the 5th Regiment of the U.S. Colored Troops Heavy Artillery.

"We're just fortunate that we have the history that we do," she said.

And retired Chrysler worker Robert Landers, 72, located his great-grandfather, Anderson Lambert, a soldier in the 118th Regiment U.S. Colored Infantry, while restoring a neglected graveyard in Corydon, Ky.

"There are about 600 people buried there, and about 300-some grave markers," Landers said of the cemetery, started by a 19th-century African-American benevolent group, the United Brothers of Friendship. "But there is a Lambert there, with a unique tombstone, made like an old tree, 5 or 6 feet tall. The Lamberts have a little section."

Hinton discovered from her great-grandfather's military records that his last name was originally Garrett. But because of Army policy, he was enlisted under his slave owner's name (albeit misspelled), which he retained after the war, saying, according to the records, "I thought it best to keep the name I made for myself while a soldier."

"Finding all this really made me feel proud," Hinton said. "It's so wonderful learning that I had ancestors who fought in the Civil War, doing what they could to help end slavery."