

ROADMAP FOR SOLDIERS' DESCENDANTS

IN SEARCH OF BLACK CIVIL WAR VETERANS



Denyce Peyton, a professional researcher, and Dan Gediman, a radio producer, stand in front of a portrait of Charles Mudd, who enlisted in the 108th U.S. Colored Infantry in June 1864 in Louisville. Peyton and Gediman are behind The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldiers Project. MATT STONE/COURIER JOURNAL



James Sanders' great-grandson Russ Bowlds at Sanders' gravesite. DAN GEDIMAN

Research project seeks to unlock previously hidden information about enslaved people from Kentucky

Genesis Malone | Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Russ Bowlds has always been searching — for his heritage, for answers to his mysterious health condition.

For his family.

He hoped finding them would help answer questions about multiple myeloma, the blood cancer that attacks his bones, causing the vertebrae in the back to collapse or fracture.

Was the illness hereditary? Did anyone else in his family suffer from this untreated illness?

For years, he searched for his family with little luck. He had virtually nothing to go on. As a Black man, he knew he was possibly the descendant of a formerly enslaved person, but records kept during slavery weren't always accurate.

“My dad always told me that one of his great-grandfathers was buried up at the veterans’ [Marion National] cemetery,” Bowlds said. “I had gone out there and looked, and I was looking for the last name ‘Sanders,’ and I couldn’t find it.”

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Veterans

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For many like Bowlds, finding Civil War ancestors is a search that often runs cold. Record-keeping wasn't always accurate and often, enslaved persons weren't recorded under their given names. Many were given or took the last name of their enslaver, leading many searching for their ancestors to a dead end.

It's a dead-end that radio producer and writer Dan Gediman and genealogy researcher and author Denyce Peyton hope to address head-on — and change — with The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldier Project, which seeks to unlock previously hidden information about enslaved people from Kentucky.

The eventual 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.

"If that is so, this project has the potential to benefit [millions of] African Americans nationwide," Gediman told The Courier Journal. "It illustrates perfectly the power of this project in connecting people to their enslaved ancestors that would otherwise be inaccessible to them."

And it all started with Bowlds' search for his grandfather, former Union soldier James Sanders Dixon.

'If you look closer, another story emerges'

Bowlds was a guest on season one of Gediman's podcast The Reckoning, which focuses on tracing the history and lasting impact of slavery in America by looking at how the institution unfolded in Kentucky. The podcast is part of the nonprofit The Reckoning, which examines the legacy of slavery in America and create ways for communities to engage with this information through research projects, media productions, educational curricula, online content and more.

Gediman was inspired to start the podcast after police shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014.

"This is insane. I know we lived in a messed up world, but this is insane. Something tripped in me, I said, 'I want to know more,'" he said.

He was also affected by reading the story of Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, among other things.

Gediman, a Kentucky resident, knew he had to do something.

In the episode featuring Bowlds, titled "The Civil War," Gediman describes the Civil War burial ground at Cave Hill National Cemetery in Louisville's Highlands neighborhood.

"If you walk down one side of the hill, you see the headstones of the Union dead, and on the other side, the Confederates. But if you look closer, another story emerges, when you realize that many of the same last names show up on both sides of the hill," Gediman said.

While searching under the name Sanders for his great-grandfather, Bowlds was unaware Sanders served as a soldier under the name Dixon, the name of his enslaver — Archibald Dixon, a former U.S. senator and lieutenant governor of Kentucky.

Bowlds soon learned that his ancestor, Dixon, was a corporal in the Civil War in the 118th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment and was accidentally shot in the hand while loading his rifle. This injury led to his honorable discharge and rheumatism diagnosis, a painful condition that affects the joints and other connective tissues, most commonly in the back.

Dixon's health deteriorated in the early 20th century, causing him to move into a home for disabled soldiers in Marion, Indiana, where he later died and was buried nearby in Marion National Cemetery.

While researching for that episode of The Reckoning, Gediman uncovered a set of "ledger books" containing classified and summarized information, often used for accounting and bookkeeping, at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Dixon's pension documents were among those found in the National Archives. It was there that Bowlds discovered Dixon had numerous health issues that caused him to be honorably discharged from the Union Army, issues similar to his own.

"That is the illness that I'm suffering from. I tend to think it's hereditary, and for a long time, the illness went untreated because they didn't know what it



Denyce Peyton, a professional researcher, speaks about The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldiers Project at First Gethsemane Baptist Church as part of the Juneteenth celebration. PHOTOS BY MATT STONE/COURIER JOURNAL



People in the audience take pictures of Elijah P. Marrs during a presentation of The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldiers Project recently at First Gethsemane Baptist Church.

Kentucky African American Civil War Soldiers Project

WHAT: Using historic documents, the goal of this project is to create a database record for each Black Civil War soldier and his family with links to primary source documents as well as a family tree.

HOW TO DONATE: If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation of any amount to support The Reckoning project, a non-profit organization based in Louisville that is the umbrella organization for the The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldier Project, you can do so in a couple of ways:

- To donate online: visit reckoningradio.org/donate/
- To send a check by mail: please make the gift payable to Reckoning, Inc. and mail to Reckoning, Inc., 3058 Bardstown Road #1076, Louisville, KY 40255
- To donate through the Community Foundation of Louisville: The Reckoning, Inc. is on the list of approved non-profit organizations
- To become a patron of The Reckoning project: visit the Patreon website at patreon.com/reckoningradio

was," Bowlds' says in the podcast. "I'm wondering if what his problems were is the same thing that you know, troubles me."

Constructing a roadmap for Civil War ancestors

Described as a kind of "Rosetta Stone" by Gediman, the ledger books his research team uncovered in the National Archives provide information about every man who was enslaved and enrolled in the U.S. Colored Troops, including first and last names, birth year and location, enlisting location, and name of the enslaver.

During the Civil War, these were created to keep track of the Black men who joined the U.S. Colored Troops from Kentucky. With roughly 11,000 soldiers listed in the ledgers, 9,000 of them had been enslaved at the time of service.

During the era of slavery, the names of enslaved persons were often recorded alongside other "property," such as tables, chairs and other household furniture. With many being listed under an enslaver's name, it can be almost impossible for descendants to track down their ancestors.

"All these records are hiding in plain sight, they're in courthouses, they're in libraries, they're online," Gediman said.

"What's lacking is a roadmap connecting them, and what we're trying to do is construct that roadmap and present it for free to contemporary African Americans."

With the ledger books and other documents such as slaves' schedules, estate settlements, church records and wills, The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldier Project strives to create a database record for each Black soldier and his family and link them to a primary sourced document and family tree.

Peyton, a resident of Ohio, has more than 25 years of experience in genealogy research, with over 15 years of experience as a professional researcher. Using these records and documents, Peyton creates family trees for the soldiers, researching the true last names, and provides a searchable database for modern-day descendants seeking answers.

Peyton and Gediman were in Louisville last week to present their findings and explain the project as part of the city's Juneteenth events.

"I had no idea until I got these papers that he went by Jim Sanders Dixon, and once I got this information, I went back out there and I was able to find his resting place," at Marion National Cemetery, a few miles away from where Bowlds lives, he said.

"It was a very emotional kind of thing," he said. "I feel proud to be one of his descendants, you know. He was in the war fighting for our freedom and seems like a great guy."

The Kentucky U.S. Colored Troops Project hopes to provide this opportunity for others. The first stage of the project includes research on the lives of approximately 750 soldiers in nine counties in Kentucky that surround Louisville. Records of more than 200 soldiers born in Jefferson County can currently be browsed on kyusct.org.

"Just for the 750 soldiers from the Louisville area that we will have researched by the end of next year, that could be [tens of thousands of] people from all over the country" that are impacted by this work, Gediman said.

Righting the wrongs of history

Once the Civil War began, Kentucky was one of the 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.

When Black men in Kentucky were able to join the Union Army in 1864, enslavers were entitled to collect a \$300 compensation for any man who enlisted, according to the ledgers.

"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.

Despite these hardships, Black soldiers served the Union well, making up 10% of the Union Army. An estimated one-third of the enlisted soldiers lost their lives in the Civil War.

For soldiers who died in the war, pension files were available for their widows. There are a total of 540 pension files of Black Civil War widows from Kentucky which have been found online by Reckoning Inc. These pension files are a gateway to finding information about one's ancestors, including medical records.

"The pension index card provides us with abstract information from the full pension application," Peyton said. "If you don't have the information listed on the card, you're stuck both ways because most of the documents list the enslaver's last name, leaving us with a brick wall."

That brick wall is what The Kentucky African American Civil War Soldier Project hopes to demolish. And Gediman and Peyton hope it won't stop with Kentucky.

"This project can be relatively easily replicated in other border states like Maryland, Delaware, D.C., West Virginia, and Missouri," Gediman said. "All places that remained in the Union but still kept slavery legal during the Civil War."

People can search for their Kentucky ancestors at kyusct.org/site-search and are encouraged to input their families' names if they're trying to find their ancestors.

"This information alone could be valuable information to African Americans who descend from these soldiers, not to mention future researchers," Peyton said.

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