

Black soldiers honored, name by name, in Mississippi

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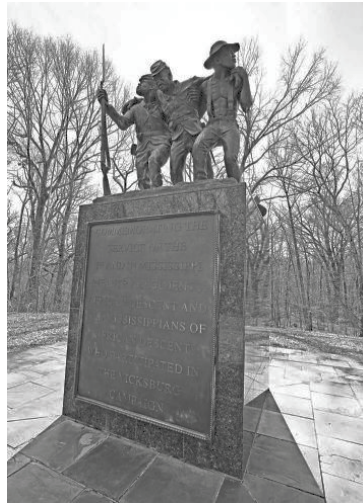
VICKSBURG, Miss. – Thelma Sims Dukes grew up during the 1940s and '50s in a segregated Mississippi town steeped in Civil War history.

As a small Black girl, she would walk to school through Vicksburg National Military Park – the hilly battlefield where Union and Confederate soldiers fought and died over whether the U.S. would continue allowing slavery in the South.

Union forces won a pivotal campaign to capture the town of Vicksburg and gain control of the Mississippi River in 1863, hastening the war's end. But during Dukes' childhood, Vicksburg venerated the Confederacy and ignored the history of Black soldiers who fought for the Union, including her great-great-grandfather, William "Bill" Sims.

"The superintendents and the museum curators – they said we didn't fight in the Civil War," Dukes said recently.

The Black soldiers' valor and service to the country is no longer ignored, thanks to the efforts of historians, park employees and citizens like Dukes. On a crisp morning in mid-February, Dukes, her niece Sara Sims and four park employees – two of them Black men wearing reproductions of U.S. Army uniforms from the Civil War – placed American flags on 13 graves where a group of recently identified Black soldiers are



The Mississippi African-American Monument, a bronze sculpture that rests on a pedestal of African black granite, features two Black Union soldiers and a common field hand at Vicksburg National Military Park.

ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP

buried in Vicksburg National Cemetery, which is part of the military park.

A historian working for the military park, Beth Kruse, identified the soldiers through research of military records, newspapers and other sources. Their

remains lie beneath white marble headstones carved with numbers rather than names, as are most veterans buried in the cemetery.

In recent years, the National Park Service has broadened how it presents history in parks nationwide. In the Vicksburg military park, which is dotted with more than 1,400 monuments, markers and tablets and is one of the largest tourist attractions in Mississippi, drawing visitors from around the globe, the visitor center now includes information about Black history, and a monument to Black soldiers was dedicated 20 years ago.

Sunlight dappled the graves under a towering magnolia tree during the flag-planting ceremony on Feb. 14. Dukes said the men and other Black Union soldiers were "freedom fighters," not only for themselves but for all Americans.

"They are not unknowns anymore," she said. "This is a start. This is good. Let's put history right."

The newly identified soldiers had enlisted in the Vicksburg-based 1st Mississippi Infantry (African Descent) as the town was under federal occupation. In early 1864, 18 soldiers and two white officers traveled by boat some 95 miles north along the Mississippi River to Chicot County, Arkansas, to forage for crops to feed people and horses.

On Feb. 14, 1864, at Ross Landing near the town of Lake Village, irregular Confederate troops from Missouri shot

the Union soldiers and officers, killing most and leaving some for dead. They used the Union soldiers' own bayonets to impale the dead and wounded, pinning them to the ground, according to research by Kruse.

Brendan Wilson, chief of interpretation, education and partnerships for Vicksburg National Military Park, said on the 160th anniversary of the gruesome day in Ross Landing that it's still not known which of the 13 Black soldiers from that massacre is in which specific grave. Records show where the group is buried.

"And now we have their names and can bring those names back to life," Wilson said.

Kruse is working in Vicksburg through the National Park Service's Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellows program. She said at least 11 soldiers of the 1st Mississippi Infantry (African Descent) were previously enslaved on Southern plantations.

"For these soldiers, it was not abstract ideology," she said. "They knew what it was to be unfree."

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