

Historian highlights roles of black Civil War vets

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TYLER, Texas (AP) — Blacks fought in the Civil War, surprisingly on the side of the Confederacy, many of them from Texas, Palestine historian Norris White Jr. said his research shows.

They are the "black forgotten Confederates," White said, who has extensively researched the role of blacks in the Confederate Army for a book he is writing that will be titled "Black Texans Who Served in the Confederate Army."

Much attention has been given in movies such as "Glory" and in books and articles written by prominent U.S. military and Civil War era historians to the exploits and heroics of black soldiers serving in the Union forces, White said, but he added that "very little observance, if any, has been given to their counterparts in the Confederate Army."

"Their voices have been omitted from the pages of history," White said.

Traditionally, the consensus has been that the Civil War was a battle among white men, White said.

"That's pretty accurate, but it's not complete, and I'm finding out that many different, diverse ethnic groups participated for the Union cause and the Southern cause," he said.

His research has uncovered that blacks, Latinos and Native Americans served in the Confederate Army.

"I approached this as a historical topic that needs great attention," White said. Since it's well

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documented that blacks fought for the Union forces, White said, he likes to take in his research the road that has been traveled.

He found that black Texans served in the Confederate Army in many diverse capacities, such as infantrymen on the battlefield, personal body servants, teamsters or laborers.

For the past 150 years, historians have documented just about every aspect of the Civil War, some topics more so than others, but this is one area that has been neglected by everyone, White said.

The topic caught White's attention while he was working on his thesis on the Buffalo soldiers, the first regular black soldiers in the U.S. military, as he pursues a master's degree in history from Stephen F. Austin State University.

White found that several Buffalo soldiers had prior service in the Confederate Army and said the thought occurred to him that they are a category that has not really been explored.

White expects to receive his degree next summer, and then he plans to begin composing his book about blacks in the Confederate Army.

"When I first began my research, I was somewhat ridiculed that I'm chasing a mystical category," White said.

"But three years later, I can show you evidence that indicates at least over 7,500 black Texans participated in the Confederate Army," he said.

That's the number of "forgotten Confederates" he said he has personally documented in his research, but White estimates the number of black Texans who participated in the Confederate Army in the War Between the States may have been as high as 50,000.

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"The goals of my research are to historically recognize and acknowledge black Texans who served in the Confederate Army," White said, a board member for the Museum for East Texas Culture in Palestine and a preservation fellow for the Texas Historical Commission.

Since this is a country that honors its veterans, it should acknowledge, recognize and honor all of its veterans, including blacks who fought for the South, White asserted.

"My issue is simply I'd like to recognize the service of veterans — in this case, they are black Texans who fought on behalf of the Confederacy," he said.

Many families are proud and honored when he shows them evidence that their ancestors are Confederate veterans, White said.

White is still in the investigation process, which he undertook three years ago.

He says several publishers have expressed interest in his book, which he hopes to publish in 2014.

"A lot of folks may wonder why blacks fought for the Confederacy or what may have motivated them" White said. "My work is not to answer that; my work is to validate that they did serve in some capacity. That's the basis of my research - just to acknowledge the fact they are Confederate veterans."

His research is based on what he calls "primary sources that indicate black Texans served in the Confederate Army."

Primary sources, White said, are "100 percent irrefutable evidence — letters, diaries, pension applications, photographs, newspaper accounts, county commission records and other

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evidence that give primary insight" that blacks were in the Confederate Army.

For example, White found a Texas historical marker in Wise County that states Randolph Vesey was a respected Negro citizen and homeowner who served during the Civil War as body servant and voluntary battle aid to General W.L. Cabel of the Confederate Army.

"If the Texas Historical Commission, the leading authority in preserving our history recognized the fact that there were black Texans who participated and served in the Confederate Army, then why can't we as a society?" White said.

White said he had traveled more than 30,000 miles crisscrossing the state searching for primary sources validating that blacks served in the Confederate Army.

"I've been all over the state of Texas and back again and I'm proud of what I've accomplished. I'm still looking for sources," White said.

"What I'm finding out is black Texans for a variety of reasons served in the Confederate Army, some as slaves, some as free men, some were conscripted and paid for their service, some as body servants ." White said. "There is no one category fits all."

It's both black history and Confederate history, White said, calling the two interconnected and entwined.

White said he is able to do the research because of the foundation he received from his mentors in the Texas Historical Commission and his studies at Stephen F. Austin State University and at The University of Texas at Tyler.