
New Hattiesburg museum salutes black military history

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HATTIESBURG — Hattiesburg is welcoming a new addition to its tourism market with the long-awaited grand opening Saturday of the historic USO Club and African-American Military History Museum.

The museum will help prove that what is old can be new again.

“One of the largest trends in tourism in the United States is heritage tourism,” said Rick Taylor, executive director of the Hattiesburg Convention and Tourism commissions. “This is a big step forward in Hattiesburg’s tourism product because we’ll be able to offer a greater tourism experience for our visitors.”

The facility has been the talk of the town since ground was broken on its renovation in February 2008.

The historic USO Club was constructed by volunteers in 1942 and became a place of refuge for local blacks and a home-away-from-home for thousands of black soldiers stationed at Camp Shelby, just south of Hattiesburg, during World War II.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the USO Club functioned as a community center and library for blacks.

It was in a state of disrepair and neglect when the city of Hattiesburg took over maintenance of the building in 1993.

Under the leadership of then-Hattiesburg Parks and Recreation Director Lola Williams, local military veterans began collecting artifacts that were put on display in the USO Club, giving birth to its new identity as the African-American Military History Museum.

Williams currently serves on the Hattiesburg Convention Commission, which now manages and operates the facility.

Taylor said the restoration project cost about \$1.4 million, with \$1.1 million spent for the building’s



restoration and \$400,000 for the exhibits.

“When they’re walking in the door, they’ll be walking into our largest artifact, and that’s the building,” Taylor said. “(And) it really is an ‘immersive’ exhibition. You really get to get mentally into the subject matter.”

The museum’s exhibits chronicle the lives and struggles of black soldiers beginning with the American Revolutionary War and up to the nation’s current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Local military heroes such as Jesse L. Brown, America’s first black naval aviator, and Ruth Bailey Earl, a representative of more than 500 black nurses in World War II, are given special tribute with life-size mannequin replicas and elaborate hand-painted exhibits.

The museum’s exhibits were designed and constructed by Southern Custom Exhibits in Anniston, Ala.

Other highlights include the most complete set of Spanish-American War medals and a Hattiesburg Hall of Honor, which features flashing pictures of local black military veterans and soldiers.

The museum’s set display exhibits are reminiscent of those found in the Mississippi Armed Forces Museum at Camp Shelby.

“I was just totally blown away,” said Sheila Varnado, president of the African-American Military History Committee. “To see it actually up and in that building, and to go around the curves and see how professionally it has been done. I think it’s just wonderful. I marvel every time I look at it again.”

The museum is more than just a historical jewel for the city.

Williams and Varnado described the USO Club’s reopening as the rebirth of the struggling Mobile-Bouie neighborhood that surrounds it.

A sentiment shared by Melvin Williams, president of the Mobile-Bouie Neighborhood Association.

“We feel like it’s one of the greatest centerpieces of our community,” Melvin Williams said. “We finally reached a point to showcase what we have in our community and to highlight untold history to people who come into our community.”