



Emancipation Day is celebrated on May 20 in Tallahassee. This year's event will be mostly virtual. PROVIDED

'Stories are so near and dear'

Living history frames emotional Emancipation Day for new Riley Museum director

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

In the early 2000s, the Riley Museum and the Knott House Museum came together to create a community-wide celebration for Florida's Emancipation Day – the day in Tallahassee when enslaved people in Southern states were declared freed. ● The annual commemoration takes place on May 20 each year and includes a grave decorating ceremony in honor of John G. Riley's reverent walks to the cemetery to honor United States Colored Troops soldiers. ● Although much of this year's event will remain virtual, the John G. Riley Center/Museum of African American History and Culture's new Executive Director, Aron Myers, connects its message back to the museum's mission.



Myers

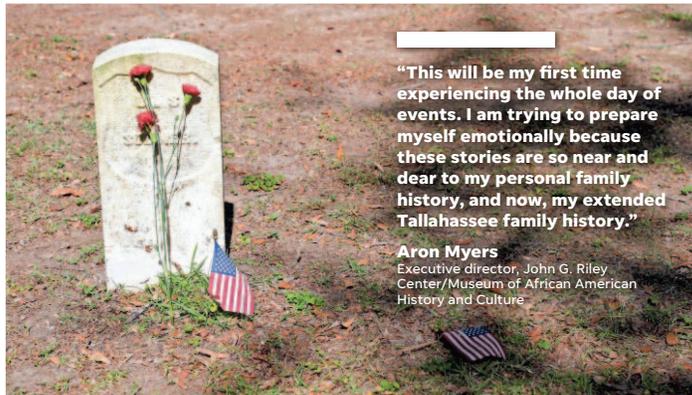
"Through this event, the Riley Museum is able to educate the community of our heritage in a way that can reach people of any generation," says Myers. "This will be my first time experiencing the whole day of events. I am trying to prepare myself emotionally because these stories are so near and dear to my personal family history, and now, my extended Tallahassee family history."

Myers is grateful to former director and renowned historian Althemese Barnes for the opportunity to continue giving back to a museum that has been a part of his life for more than 10 years. Myers has been a long-time volunteer, stepping in to help with everything from designing the organization's current logo to creating printed materials for past Emancipation events.

From Zora Neale Hurston to Riley Museum

Myers earned his bachelor's in communications from the University of Florida and his doctorate in English and literature from Florida State University. He worked at FSU as a brand strategist and taught at Tallahassee Community College.

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Aron Myers
Executive director, John G. Riley Center/Museum of African American History and Culture

Students from Riley Elementary School and Bethel Christian Academy decorated the graves of 31 unidentified members of the United States Colored Troops buried in Old City Cemetery during a Civil War commemorative grave decorating ceremony at Old City Cemetery to celebrate Emancipation Day Monday, May 20, 2019. TORI SCHNEIDER/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

If you go

What: Virtual 20th of May–Emancipation in Florida Celebration

When: 11:30 a.m. Thursday, May 20

Where: Online

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, visit www.20thofMay.com. Also: Created Equal: Stretching Towards Freedom, A Conversation about Florida Emancipation Day. For more information, visit <https://tlh.villagesquare.us/event/emancipation-day/>.



This year's Emancipation Day celebrations in Tallahassee will be virtual.
TALLAHASSEE



Sgt. Major Jarvis Rosier poses in his uniform as a member of the 2nd Infantry Regiment United States Colored Troops, a group that he started in Tallahassee, after the group gave a 21-gun salute and played taps during a commemorative grave decorating ceremony in honor of Emancipation Day at Old City Cemetery on May 20, 2019. TORI SCHNEIDER/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Emancipation

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Most notably in his career, Myers has produced award-winning programs for NPR and PBS. His "Historic Florida!" series documented the state's diverse cultural and artistic heritage and his "The Life and Times of Zora Neale Hurston" series was hosted by actress Vanessa Williams and syndicated for over 26 million public radio listeners.

"I've long researched and had an interest in African American history and culture," says Myers. "I saw all the work they were doing at the Riley House exploring local and regional African American history and culture, discovering lost stories and reviving legacies, and that really spoke to me. This role completely aligns with my goals and passions."

Myers' first introduction to history was through his sister. Growing up in small town Wewahitchka, he looked forward to his sister's visits. She would take him on road trips all across the south to see all varieties of museums. One memorable trip involved Myers being photographed in his pajamas during a late-night visit to Atlanta's Martin Luther King Jr. exhibit.

"I grew up going to all these museums, but never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be a director of a museum," admits Myers.

Expanding on museum mission

At the top of Myers' list during his tenure is expanding on the Riley House's commitment to community engagement. He wants to continue brainstorming ways that exhibits, outreach and programming can have a digital footprint with virtual tours.

Walking the grounds during his first tour as director, he was swept up by another idea—to create a comprehensive history of African Americans in Leon County that contributes to the museum's already notable documentation from pre-civil war times to the Civil Rights Movement.

For Myers, these kind of historical undertakings and storytelling all begin with that first, burning idea. It sparks his

imagination and gives him forward momentum in the research phase where he uncovers artifacts and resources.

Myers says it's important to not only frame these stories in the environment and historical periods when they occurred but decide which bits and pieces to share so the community will be enticed to engage with the whole story.

In this current undertaking, Myers is continuously moved by the strength of enslaved African Americans' stories.

Reconstructing Tallahassee family stories

"We've had to track down family members and weave our way back in history to figure out where these folks were and reconstruct these stories piece by piece as if putting a puzzle together," says Myers.

"Sometimes you're feeling your way in the dark to figure out how these pieces come together. I'm in awe of the resilience of those folks who had all of history working against them and somehow, they not only managed to live, they were able to thrive and lay the foundation for the society and lives that we live today."

Myers believes these universal stories speak to the human condition. It's part of a greater lesson that his pursuits and research in history have taught him over the years. Myers is honored to be part of an organization that continues to educate and engage future generations and hopes that programming like Emancipation Day will continue its reach beyond the Tallahassee community.

"History has always left me asking more questions which are essential for us to continue growing," says Myers. "Every time I learn one thing, I have more questions which makes me want to learn more. The more we learn, the more we expand ourselves, the more we become better versions of ourselves because we're able to grow and we have history to thank for that. It keeps us curious."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).