

The Island News

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New app makes Beaufort history come alive

Published on June 16, 2021 — in News — by newsbyte

From staff reports

A launch party Thursday, June 17 in Naval Heritage Park will celebrate the release of a new interactive app called “Free & Equal,” which makes Beaufort’s past come alive in a walking and driving tour that uncovers personal stories at historic sites.

The audio and augmented reality tour lets locals and visitors experience the Lowcountry’s Reconstruction Era history through the perspective of formerly enslaved people.

The “Free & Equal” launch event is a partnership between the University of South Carolina Beaufort’s Institute for the Study of the Reconstruction Era and San Francisco–based media company Walking Cinema. The National Endowment for the Humanities funded the project.

“The Free & Equal app is a state of the art, interactive, and tremendously engaging way for anyone with a smartphone to learn about Beaufort’s rich and storied history. The eyes of the world were on Beaufort 150 years ago and post–Civil War ideas and events still resonate,” USC Beaufort Institute for the Study of the Reconstruction Era Executive Director J. Brent Morris said. “We are proud to be associated with this project and the talented developers at Walking Cinema.”

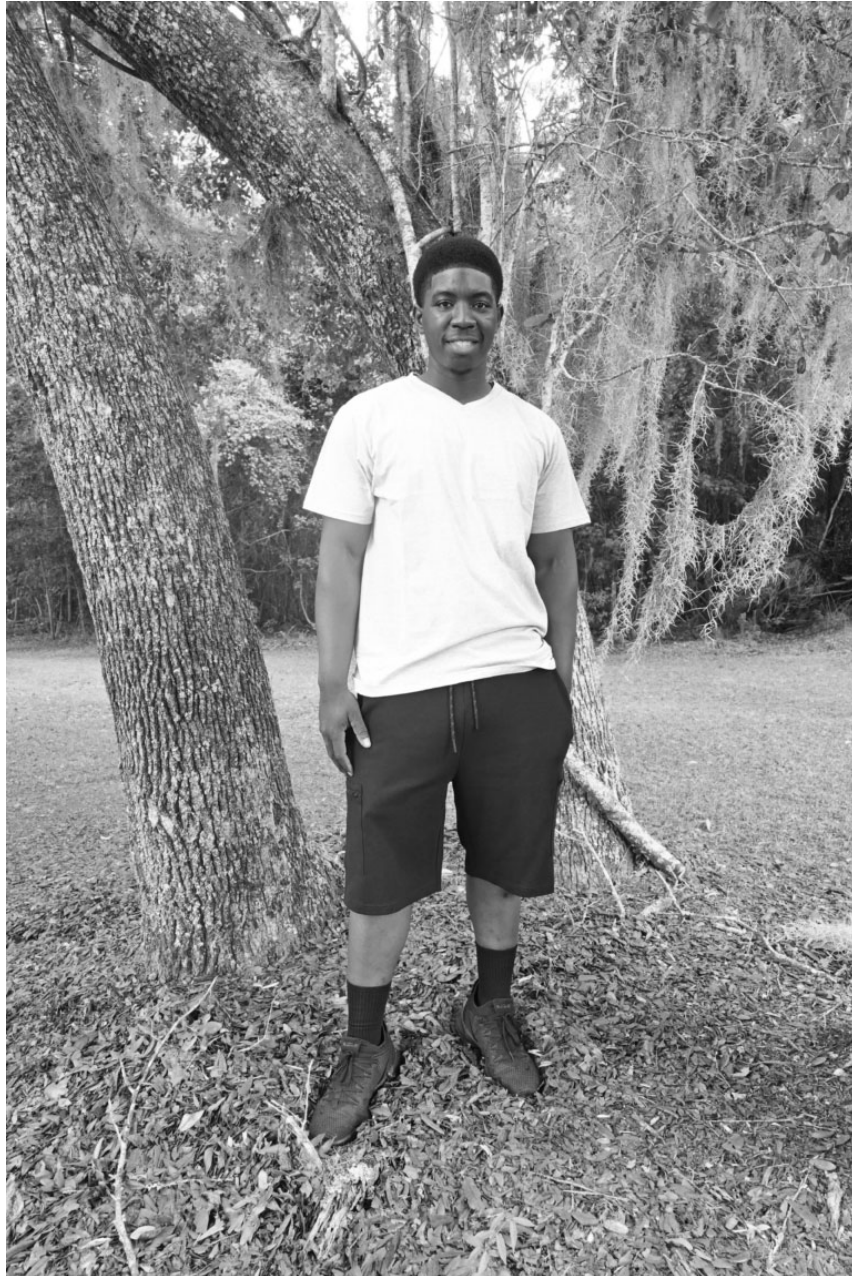
USC Beaufort students from one of Professor Robert Landrum’s public history courses also helped create the tour.

The experience begins with sites in the Reconstruction Era National Historic Park, then visits the home of a future Harriet Tubman monument at the Tabernacle Baptist Church, and continues on to the Brick Baptist Church on St. Helena Island.

“Free & Equal” makes history personal and modern by featuring Darius Brown, a young genealogist from Grays Hill, as one of the main characters. He is a descendent of Isaiah Brown, a sergeant in the United States Colored Troops who likely attended Port Royal’s Emancipation Day celebration in 1883— depicted in the app in 360-degree augmented reality.

“I heard about Isaiah from my great-grandfather. Isaiah died when he was a little boy. What this app does is tell the story of Reconstruction from the point of view of a Black man who was enslaved, then became a free land owner and enlisted in the Union army,” Brown said.

Brown got involved in “Free & Equal” when Michael Epstein, writer and director at Walking Cinema, reached out to the soon-to-open International African American Museum in Charleston in search of a living connection to the Lowcountry’s Reconstruction Era history. Brown, who is scheduled to start work in August as a research assistant at the museum, was the link Epstein and his crew chose to feature in their production.



Darius Brown, 22, of Gray's Hill is a main character in the new "Free & Equal" app. He is a descendent of Isaiah Brown, who was enslaved, then became a free land owner and enlisted in the Union army. The augmented reality driving tour app is a free download at the Google Play and Apple App stores. Submitted photo.

Other scenes that come alive in the app include the 1861 Civil War battle where Union forces overtook Beaufort, and a time at the Historic Beaufort Arsenal when white officials tried to force free Black soldiers to give up their munitions.

Tour participants experience layers of history at local settings including the Carnegie Library, the building that now houses

the Beaufort Chamber of Commerce. In the Civil War, it was used as City Hall and the Office for Freedmen.

Walking Cinema has partnered with local businesses allow audiences to find artifacts that add to the tour narrative. On Bay Street, where retail shops Monkey's Uncle and Emporium now stand, the Freedman's Bank opened in 1865 as a place for Black Union troops to deposit their paychecks.

A few doors down, Walking Cinemas hung aged and framed replicas of Freedman's Bank cards at the Rhett Gallery for tour participants to discover.

Download the free app "Free & Equal" (starting June 17) at Google Play and Apple App Store.

Pictured at top: USC Beaufort interns Andre Ragsdale and Amy Maier test new history app "Free & Equal" at the Fort Frederick Heritage Preserve in Port Royal, which is one of the stops on the augmented reality (AR) driving and walking tour. Submitted photo.

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