

For Woodson Museum, an artifact windfall

The African American history museum now has access to the more than 8,000 pieces held by a collector.

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A benefactor with a huge collection of Black history artifacts has promised to make more than 8,000 pieces available for viewing over the next several years at St. Petersburg's Woodson African American Museum of Florida.

Clinton Byrd, a financial investor who lives in Tallahassee, started a sideline as a historian in 2012 after he obtained a collection amassed by Nathaniel "The Magnificent" Montague, a Black radio pioneer. Montague, now 94, dreamed of opening an African American history museum of his own in Los Angeles. He spent nearly 50 years collecting artifacts such as letters from Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass, recordings of opera singer Marian Anderson and books by the museum's namesake, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, considered the father of Black history.

Byrd said he has the collection in a climate-controlled warehouse and has already begun working with the Woodson on what he expects will be many special exhibits that can be curated from the large collection.

In February, during Black History Month, he worked with the museum for an exhibit called "Unforgettable" about Woodson's works. It celebrated the process by which Woodson brought past achievements and history into mainstream thinking, publishing more than 30 books and contributing to scores of others.

Byrd said he had at first focused on collaborating with a college that would use the collection for research purposes. When that didn't pan out, he searched for museum space. He said the surprises found in the collection "are things I want my children to see."

Byrd said when they met, Montague loved to surprise him by pulling out treasures at random.

"He loved how many unique items he had, like a Tuskegee Airman sweetheart pillow. When they went off to war, they would give their sweethearts something. It was a way to give their loved ones something to remember them by. I'd never heard of this."

And then he was shown a book of poems by Phyllis Wheatley, which was published in 1773. It was the first book by an enslaved person to be published in the Colonies and only the third book by an American woman to be published. Montague had a signed copy.

Terril Lipsey Scott, executive director of the Woodson Museum



Photos courtesy of the Montague Collection



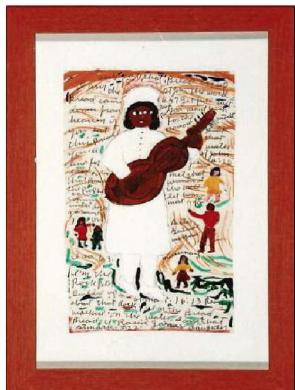
The Woodson African American Museum of Florida is at 22nd Street and Ninth Avenue S in St. Petersburg. LAUREN WHITE | Times



Carter G. Woodson, a founder of the Association for the Study of African American History, first came up with the idea of the celebration that became Black History Month.

since 2014, is now working with Byrd on their next collaborations. First will be a display on folk artist and evangelist Gertrude Morgan (1900-1990), who achieved acclaim both for her folk art and her album "Let's Make a Record," recorded at the revered Preservation Hall in New Orleans. Andy Warhol was enthralled by her work, and she has featured in many prominent folk art collections in museums.

After that will be an exhibit detailing the story of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the first Black American film production company. Founded by Black filmmakers in 1916, it produced five films that sought to eliminate the stereotypical slapstick comedy roles that Hollywood had reserved for Black actors at the time.



The life and works of folk artist Gertrude Morgan, shown above at a recent exhibit in Tallahassee and at left, will be shared with St. Petersburg's Woodson African American Museum of Florida in an upcoming exhibit.

They're part of Nathaniel "The Magnificent" Montague's collection, which was acquired by Clinton Byrd.

Dates for the upcoming exhibits have not yet been decided.

"He's been a wonderful partner and collaborator," Scott said of Byrd. "We are helping with his desire to ensure this remains in the state where his family lives."

Scott said she also hopes such a high-profile partnership will boost her campaign to raise \$30 million for a new state-of-the-art facility. Its current site, which opened in 2006, is a fairly small 4,000-square-foot building at 2240 Ninth Ave. S. Scott aims for a 30,000-square-foot museum and has so far amassed \$5 mil-

lion in a capital campaign toward the state's first dedicated African-American history museum.

Byrd sees a rich future with the Woodson Museum.

"Our mission is the same," Byrd said. "We look to preserve and present the untold story of this rich American story of African American contributions to America and to the world. They need content and we need a venue to create our exhibits."

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