For Woodson Museum, an artifact windfall

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

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, started a collection in 1979. Byrd said he has the collection in a climate-controlled warehouse and has already begun work on a catalog. He expects 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,” which featured Byrd’s works. He celebrated the process by which Woodson brought past achievement and history into mainstream thinking, publishing more than 30 books and contributing to a broad audience.

Byrd said he’d like to collaborate with a college with a collection for research purposes. He also didn’t plan on being there in person, but he was interested in the museum space. He said the surprise found in the collection “are things I want my children to see.”

Byrd said when they met, Montague said he was surprised to see Byrd because he’d heard that someone was working on the collection.

“He loved how many unique items he had, like a Tuskegee Airman’s sweater that he found on the street,” Byrd said. “They would give their sweaters something. It was a way to give their loved ones something to remember them by, I’d never heard of this.”

Associates of 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, it is now working with Byrd on their next collaborations. Next will be a display on folk artist and evangelist Gertrude Morgan (1900-1980), who achieved acclaim both for her folk art and her album “Let’s Make a Record.”

The exhibit will include the history of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the first Black American film production company, founded in 1917, and it produced five films that sought to eliminate the stereotypical black character roles Hollywood had reserved for Black actors at the time.

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