

Port Hudson, 1863

# FOUNDATIONS OF FREEDOM

How Tonja Myles Draws Inspiration from the Louisiana Native Guard's Sacrifice

BY LAUREN POPE & JEN GENNARO

Living in the shadow of Port Hudson Battlefield means something different for all of us—runners, birders, American history enthusiasts. For Tonja Myles, it means remembering and honoring the brave men of the all-Black Louisiana Native Guard who fought and died on this very land to bring freedom to the country. Myles, a military veteran and African American leader in the community, is the founder of Set Free Addiction Recovery Services, an outspoken advocate and peer counselor in addiction recovery.

Her house sits on a hill overlooking 12 acres in Ransom Bottom, where Confederate soldiers held a Senator's wife hostage during the Civil War. The Battlefield site is where the 1st and 3rd Louisiana Native Guards, an official New Orleans militia comprised of educated and relatively prosperous free Black men who had promised President Lincoln they would fight for freedom, were sent into battle against a well-fortified Confederate army.

The battlefield was treacherous and impassable. The infantry, led by Creole man Captain André Cailloux, had no choice but to cross a shallow gorge that exposed them to the enemy. It was one of the first engagements Black soldiers participated in during the Civil War, and more than 600 of them perished that day.

"They fought here at Port Hudson knowing that they were being sent out to die, but they did it anyway because they knew they were fighting for freedom," Myles says.



*Tonja Myles in her favorite spot. "I wanted to be able to see a fireplace, a flag, and a pond, all sitting on my front porch."*

*Background image courtesy State Library of Louisiana*

FRONT OF THE FIRST BATTLEFIELD "NATIVE GUARD" CAPTION THE NEW ORLEANS, "REPUBLICAN AND GREAT WESTERN" PUBLICATIONS IN A HOUSE BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST.



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Ultimately, the Union took Port Hudson and won the war. President Lincoln referenced the bravery and heroism of the Louisiana Native Guard when issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. Captain Cailloux's body was eventually recovered, identifiable by his ring, and his funeral is considered the precursor to the modern Jazz Funeral.

Today, Tonja looks out at what was once a bloody gully and now sees water birds swimming in her pond. She looks down the hill from her front porch and sees the American flag blowing gently in the breeze. The men of the Louisiana Native Guard fought and died so that their descendents could sit freely in this space, and Tonja honors them daily with her presence on her land and the work that she does to fight for the next generation of Americans.

They struggled and fought,  
with courage fraught,  
With love for the cause of the Nation;  
They knew in the strife for the Union's life  
They must buy Emancipation

*George Washington Williams*

**Sketch of the funeral of Captain Andre Cailloux,  
a precursor to the modern jazz funeral.**

