

# THE BATTLE TO HONOR BATTLES

Statue commemorating a Black Civil War hero with Moorhead ties nears the finish line

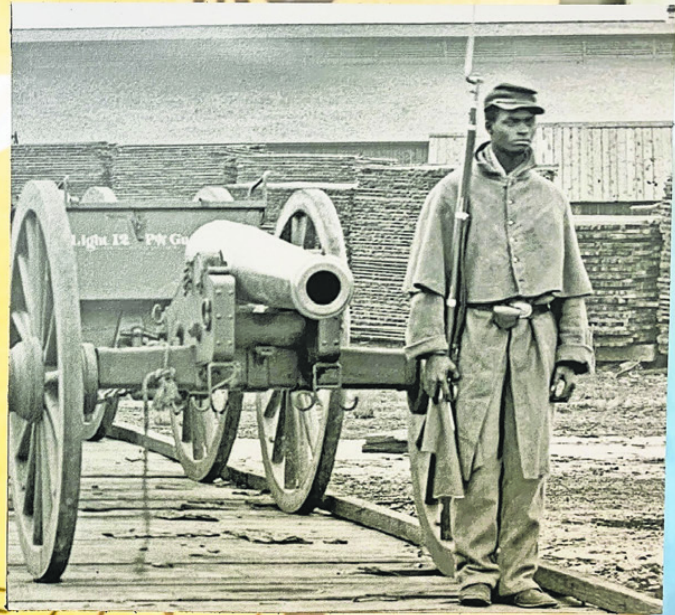


Photos by Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor

Iterations of a statue honoring Civil War soldier Felix Battles are displayed Wednesday, July 1, in the Hjemkomst Center in Moorhead.

## Evolution of the Statue

- 1) **The Image:** No known photographs exist of Felix Battles, so Markus Krueger used a photograph of an unidentified African American Union Soldier as a model. The image was made into a stencil and spray-painted onto this piece of wood.
- 2) **The Metal Demos:** Moorhead Sculptor Lyle Landstrom digitally converted the scrap-wood stencil design to be cut into steel by a laser cutter. The figure was scaled to be 5'8" tall, the height of Felix according to military documents. A small-scale statue and a full-scale portion of the statue were made to show people what it would look like and to identify design problems. For structural and aesthetic reasons, the "outline" version of the statue was abandoned in favor of a "cut-out" of a steel sheet.
- 3) **The Wooden Demo:** To see how it would look full scale, Markus painted the cutout full-sized on wood.
- 4) **The Prototype:** This is a prototype of the final design but not the final product. The final statue will be of much thicker steel. An interpretive panel will accompany the piece telling Felix's life story.



A photograph of an unidentified Civil War soldier was used to design a statue honoring Civil War soldier Felix Battles as seen Wednesday, July 1, in the Hjemkomst Center in Moorhead.

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## Moorhead

Over two years ago, Markus Krueger embarked on an effort to commemorate the life of Felix Battles, then a little-known Civil War soldier who lived his adult life in Moorhead.

Battles became a respected business leader in Moorhead as "The Pioneer Barber of the Red River Valley," but his actions before settling in Moorhead in the 1870s — shortly after the city was founded — cemented his status as a national hero.

Battles, who Krueger and others at the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County have studied for 30 years, was born a slave near Memphis, Tenn. As a teen, he escaped slavery before joining the Union Army as a member of the United States Colored Troops. In doing so, Battles took a huge risk to his personal safety, according to Krueger.

"He was free, but he risked it all again to join the Union Army," said Krueger, the HCSCC's programming director. "He returned to the South knowing that the Confederacy often did not allow African American soldiers to surrender. They were



often killed when trying to surrender, or their bodies were sometimes mutilated and put on display.”

Having survived the Civil War, Battles moved to Moorhead and became a barber, an occupation which holds historic significance for Black Americans. He remained in Moorhead until he died in 1907.

“The potential of African Americans was not allowed to be realized in most places because of racism,” Krueger said. “Being a barber was one of the few vocations that African American businessmen could go into and own their own business, be middle class and be community leaders.”

Prince Honeycutt, a barber who ran for mayor in Fergus Falls, is believed to be the first Black man to do so in Minnesota. In the 1890s, another Black barber, Frank Gordon, ran for Fargo City Council.

The project to commemorate Battles may finally be nearing the finish line, Krueger believes. “I’m confident we’re nearing the final push,” he said.

The project began on May 7, 2018, at Junkyard Brewing Company in Moorhead.

Krueger gave a presentation on his desire to commemorate Battles, hoping to rally private funds and gain community support.

The goal was to raise \$1,000.

“Before I could get on stage at the fundraiser, we had already raised the money,”

Krueger said.

Krueger and the HCSCC sought and secured another \$2,000 to fund an interpretive panel on Battles’ life.

Volunteers have also lined up to help install the statue.

With funding in place, the process to honor Battles has been challenging.

“This is the first public sculpture I’ve ever done. It turns out it’s not as easy as just digging a hole and putting a statue up,” Krueger said jokingly, noting the task has consisted of writing proposals and working with the city of Moorhead as well as private entities to secure a location and tweak the design.

Choosing a location is now the largest hurdle facing the project, though Krueger is hopeful that will be selected this summer or fall.

“We had a couple different spots that we picked out that we thought would be significant to Felix’s life,”

Krueger said. “But in all cases, something fell through.”

Krueger is in talks with the city and businesses to discuss how a monument to Battles could figure into downtown Moorhead's redevelopment plans.

"The problem with that is downtown Moorhead is going to be flipped upside down in the next few years," Krueger said. "I don't want to put him in the ground and dig him up the next year."

Location will also dictate the manner in which the statue is constructed, he said.

"Wherever the statue ends up, that'll determine the design," Krueger said.

The final design will depend on the soil as well as whether or not it is mounted to a wall.

An exhibit at the Hjemkomst Center in Moorhead, "Boys in Blue," displays the evolution of the design as well as the current prototype, which Krueger noted is not the final product.

As the nation increasingly debates monuments and public landmarks, Krueger is hopeful that his project can be part of the conversation.

"One of the injustices of the Civil War is that after the Civil War, the contributions of the United States Colored Troops were really written out of the history books," he said. "Later generations of Southern historians did not want African American people to have heroes."

Black soldiers made up 10% of the Union Army, and other African American spies aided the Union. Without them, Krueger said, "we would've been two countries."

The site of Battles' old residence is two blocks from Krueger's house.

"Every time I walk by it, I think of Felix," he said. "The idea that people in Felix's town are talking about him again over 100 years after he died is gratifying."

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