

## Soldiers' Story

Historical sites and monuments had been a subject of **William Earle Williams's** photography off and on since 1971, seven years before he began teaching photography at Haverford College, near Philadelphia. So it was not unusual for him to scout them out, as he did in 1986 after reading in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that the monuments at the Gettysburg battlefield in Pennsylvania were in disrepair and due to be restored in time for the battle's 125th anniversary in 1988.

Williams wanted to capture the landscape and its neglected statuary with the past still clearly imprinted on them. "I also wanted to see the place where Lincoln repurposed the direction and meaning of the Civil War," Williams says. But, as he soon discovered, the monuments weren't the only Civil War relics that had faded over time.

During his visit to Gettysburg, Williams found that the achievements of the black soldiers who had taken up arms for the Union had been all but erased from contemporary recitations of Civil War history. Compelled to tell their story—"No one had or has done it in this way," he says—the photographer began traveling throughout the United States and the Caribbean, shooting empty battlefields where blacks had fought and other locations where traces of their presence might still linger: slave cabins, plantation houses, burial grounds, and sites associated with the Underground Railroad.

"The more I learned about these places, the more I wanted to make photographs of these places and landscapes that were visual metaphors for the uniquely American

experience of living, remembering, forgetting, and then remembering," says Williams.

Now, after appearing in group shows at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (where two of Williams's black-and-white photographs are on view through January 20 in "Tell It with Pride: the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial"), the whole series can be seen together for the first time in "A Stirring

Song Sung Heroic." The exhibition, which originated at Haverford College and opens January 22 at the Lehigh University Art Galleries in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, covers territory that's vastly different from Williams's other photographic subjects, such as parties in Philadelphia and portraits of transgendered people.

**Deborah Willis**, professor and chair of the department of photography and imaging at New York University, remembers seeing Williams's

Civil War photographs for the first time in 1997. "I thought at that time the project was of extreme importance and timely," she says. "Professor Williams resituated the experience of the black soldier in the Civil War and introduced a new way of seeing heroism, patriotism, and the concept of self-emancipation."

Says Williams, "The subject has been so little photographed that it begged for close attention."

—*Edith Newhall*



**William Earle Williams, Tennessee Monument, Gettysburg National Military Park, 1994.**