

African American history ‘graphically and powerfully’ shown at one-of-a-kind CT museum



Jeffrey Fletcher at the Ruby & Calvin Fletcher African American History Museum in Stratford, the first and only African American history museum in Connecticut.



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Grim pieces of America’s history are on display [at the Ruby & Calvin Fletcher African American History Museum in Stratford](#), the first and only African American history museum in Connecticut.

Among the items to be seen in 10 main displays throughout a 4,700-square-foot historic home are [symbols of slavery](#) such as shackles, neck harnesses, notifications of young black children sold into slavery and even the pained sounds of enslaved people in a ship hull.

Then there are the ugly, discriminatory statues and mechanical objects of the [Jim Crow South](#) depicting the Sambo character and other offensive images, including signs that impose segregation. One sign in a mock movie theater setting reads: “Coloreds in the balcony.”

Also highlighted in the grassroots museum are positive pieces of history: a display on the [Tuskegee Airmen](#), with artifacts and also a rotating display to celebrate people in Connecticut of all races and religions who have contributed positively.

The intimate museum is called, “small but mighty” in one of numerous favorable Google reviews. Others have called the museum, “a hidden gem.”

Honoring a couple who grew up in segregation

The museum was founded and is operated by retired New Haven police officer Jeffrey Fletcher. He opened the museum in October 2021 in honor of his late mother, who had a lifelong collection of slavery and Jim Crow era objects, and late father, Calvin. The couple raised their family in Colchester.



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Items displayed at the Ruby & Calvin Fletcher African American History Museum in Stratford, the first and only African American history museum in Connecticut.

Ruby Fletcher, born in South Carolina in the 1930s, started collecting items of the segregation/Jim Crow era as a child, such as salt and pepper shakers, napkins and signage.

To escape segregation and oppression, she came north to Colchester at age 16 and continued to collect items through adulthood at events such as tag sales.

Later, Jeffrey Fletcher built his collection and has merged them for the museum.

U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said he's been to the museum a few times and said it "deserves" a bigger audience.

"Mostly, it's a really powerful exhibit," he said. "I'm just amazed at the amount of history there and how graphically and powerfully it's shown."

Blumenthal said the museum covers a breadth of history, but not with just documents, it's more "personal."

"I think for young people it could be very eloquent and impactful on their view of civil rights and history."

Exhibits in various rooms include: Africa; a Slave Hull Ship; The Plantation; Bias, Stereotype, Folklore; The Pullman Porter; The Segregated Movie Theater.

Items displayed at the Ruby & Calvin Fletcher African American History Museum in Stratford, the first and only African American history museum in Connecticut. Fletcher started by knocking on doors and telling people about the collection.

"I was so passionate..." Fletcher said. "This history is important. I wanted to be part of telling the story."

After 20 years as a police officer he's found his life's "passion," he said, in managing the collection and giving tours at the grassroots museum in a historic home at 952 E Broadway.

The museum is currently located to the childhood home of [John W. Sterling](#), an abolitionist for whom the Yale [Sterling Memorial Library](#) is named.

Stratford leaders consider museum a treasure

Plans are in the works for the museum to move to a larger space in Stratford of 9,000-square-feet.

Fletcher said he thought after 20 years as a police officer he would have had a "foot in the door" to open a brick and mortar location in New Haven, but "politics" kept that from happening, he said.

Fletcher said he tried other cities – to no avail.

It was Stratford that courted him to come there after he was complimented for a presentation in town.

He commends the town's Mayor Laura Hoydick, a Republican, for her dedication to the cause, calling her "progressive."

Hoydick said Stratford is "truly blessed" to be home to the museum and she thanks Fletcher for the "opportunity" and the City Council for their "vision."

"I think the experience is transformative," she said of visiting the museum, noting the pieces are "beautifully" displayed.

She said as the town develops, it's important to stay "cognizant" of Stratford's origins. The town, established in 1639, was part of the underground railroad and [there were enslaved people living here](#).

Senate Republican Leader Kevin Kelly, whose district includes Stratford, called the museum a "fabulous resource" in the community.

"Anyone who visits this museum will leave enriched and with a deeper understanding of African American history in our country... The museum tells a story of our nation's past, that adds more voices and perspectives to the collective conversation," Kelly said. "We must endeavor and honor the experiences and contributions of African Americans to our country's history. The museum brings needed and important viewpoints to the fabric of our town."

7-day a week passion

The museum's regular open hours are Monday, Wednesday, Thursday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., but Fletcher said he's usually there seven days a week so folks can always try knocking for a tour.

"This is a passion for me. It does not seem like work," said Fletcher, who lives in Branford.

One never knows who will walk through the doors of the museum

As word spreads of the museum people from all over the state and New York and New Jersey are visiting, he said, noting people from as far away as Hawaii have visited while on a trip here.

The museum entry fee is a suggested donation of \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$5 for children, but is free if the person can't pay.

Fletcher said he knows many people can't make it to [The Smithsonian Institution](#) and other large museums like it out of state.

"I wanted it to be available to those families to see history up close and personal," Fletcher said.

He's brought school and adult groups through, politicians, dignitaries, celebrities, NBA players. Recently, state Department of Children and Families Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and New Haven City Councilwoman Jeanette Morrison visited.

"You never know whose going to be coming through the door," Fletcher said.

Fletcher said his mom "loved everyone" and advocated for anyone she could in the community. At her funeral services some 1,000 people came through, including Black people, white people, professionals, people experiencing homelessness and people of all religions.

"She was just an advocate for everyone," he said.

Fletcher said of his parents that despite living through segregation and Jim Crow, "they never projected their experiences on us." But mom did educate them on civil rights, he said.

There are 9,800 objects in the collection, but not enough space for it all currently, he said. He has Ku Klux Klan uniforms and celebrity clothing among the collection.

Items on display at the Ruby & Calvin Fletcher African American History Museum in Stratford, the first and only African American history museum in Connecticut. Fletcher said it's interesting to observe the reaction of school children who come through.

"They're quiet. They're very observant and didn't realize all this happened," he said. "They can't believe what they're seeing in this museum. They're shocked."

He said it's important to have a positive component such as the rotating display to honor a figure of today.

"We want to reach out to people to say, 'You're important,'" Fletcher said. "Mom used to say, 'I'd rather have my flowers now as opposed to when I'm gone.'"