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CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS:

ELIJAH MARRS (SLAVE, SOLDIER, EDUCATOR, POLITICIAN)



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SHELBY COUNTY — Elijah Marris was born a slave in Shelby County. His father was a free man but, because his mother was a slave, Elijah also was a slave. In 1864, at the age of 24, Marris escaped slavery and joined the 12th United States Colored Artillery to fight for his freedom. He could read and write, but the overwhelming majority of enslaved Kentuckians lacked any schooling.

Both soldiers and their families took advantage of educational opportunities at the army

camp. After the war, Marris moved to the Louisville area. He wanted to help prepare fellow African Americans to succeed in their new lives and founded a school in 1866. He also became active in the Republican Party and, in 1869, became the first African American president of the Republican Club of Oldham County. Later, in 1883, Marris was a delegate to the National Convention of Colored Men in Louisville. Marris served out a long and distinguished career as an educator, politician and Baptist minister.

He once remarked: "In my course through life I have, in my humble way, 'did what I could.' Do then likewise, and all will be well with thee and thine." Marr's life exemplified the opportunities the Civil War and Reconstruction brought to Kentucky and the South.

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