

## Edda Fields-Black, Pulitzer Prize winner and CMU professor, brings personal perspective to history of Harriet Tubman

By Alexis Papalia | May 6, 2025



Edda Fields-Black with her book "Combee."  
(Shaylah Brown | TribLive)

Edda Fields-Black is still processing the fact she was awarded a 2025 Pulitzer Prize on Monday.

"It's just beginning to set in. It's going to take some time for this new reality to set in. But it feels really good," she said in an interview Tuesday.

Fields-Black is a professor in the Department of History and director of the Dietrich College Humanities Center at Carnegie Mellon University. She joined CMU in

2001 after receiving her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.

Her 2024 book, "Combee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom During the Civil War," was named a Pulitzer Prize winner in history. It's described as "a richly-textured and revelatory account of a slave rebellion that brought 756 enslaved people to freedom in a single day, weaving military strategy and family history with the transition from bondage to freedom."

"Combee" uses new sources and methods to tell the story of Harriet Tubman's Civil War military service and, specifically, the Combahee River Raid, an 1863 Union Army operation in which Tubman led Union soldiers to free hundreds of former slaves from South Carolina.

Fields-Black's research concentration is specific, but her interests have deep roots.

"My specialty is the transnational history of rice, through West African

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rice farmers in the pre-colonial period of West Africa's Upper Guinea Coast and the Antebellum period of the Lowcountry — South Carolina and Georgia," she said.

Her own family is from the Lowcountry, going back to enslaved ancestors.

"My father was born in coastal South Carolina, actually just a few miles from where the raid took place," Fields-Black said. "I grew up visiting my grandparents and my great-grandmother and listening and just being very curious about their Gullah Geechee language."

Gullah Geechee is an African-American culture that evolved through enslaved people in the Lowcountry, retaining many of their cultural and language traditions in the isolated rice fields and coastal islands.

In studying her family's history, she found the history of the region and of West Africa.

"Rice was like the prism through which I chose to look at things," she said.

In the course of research about the Gullah Geechee people, she came across many primary sources about the Combahee River Raid.

"How I look at it is, I was in my rice fields in South Carolina — quite literally — and I encountered Harriet Tubman. I came to the Combahee Raid through rice because the raid took place on seven rice plantations."

Through Civil War pension files she found researching her family's history — specifically ancestor Hector Fields — she found the stories of formerly enslaved people.

"It got me emboldened into thinking that I could identify the people who were liberated in the raid, really reconstruct this Combahee community that was freed, and trace a handful of people's stories back into bondage and forward into freedom," she said.

Those pension files will be put to good use. Fields-Black is collaborating with colleagues at CMU to develop a portal that will make these Civil War pension files

more accessible to the public, using AI.

"These pension files are at the National Archives. They are being digitized, but how do you get them to the people? How do we make them accessible? How do we get people to know about them, and how do we know what's in them so that we — historians, genealogists, family members — can know this history?" she said.

There is also an exhibit based on "Combee" opening May 23 at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, S.C.

"I'm enjoying the moment," she said when asked about what's next for her.

Then she added, "I don't rest long."