Dawn of Freedom: The Freedmen's Town of Mitchelville is available in 12-week venues beginning April 2015.

Available Dates:

- April - June 2016
- July - September 2016
- October - December 2016
- January - March 2017
- April - June 2017

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a nationally traveling exhibition
On November 7, 1861, Union forces attacked two Confederate forts on the Sea Islands of South Carolina near Port Royal. This attack—the Battle of Port Royal—later drove Confederate forces to retreat to the mainland. One island, Hilton Head Island, immediately became the headquarters for the Union Army. But it also soon became the setting for one of the first self-governing towns of freed Africans in the country.

For many African slaves in the area, the battle signaled the end of their bondage and marked the dawn of freedom. Seizing upon both the changes brought about by the war and the needs of the Union Army, men, women, and children escaped plantations in the area after the battle and headed for opportunities that lay behind Union lines. These self-liberated African refugees bravely improvised and negotiated an array of new practical roles for themselves amidst the army camps, but received no immediate guarantees of their freedom.

In need of labor, the Union Army hired African refugees as blacksmiths, carpenters, launderers, coopers, clerks, and cooks, and established a cotton campaign to continue the production of valuable Sea Island cotton. In return, a new town was proposed in 1862 to provide space for the thousands of self-liberated Africans who crowded the army’s camps. Freed Africans built the town and formed a community, calling it Mitchelville. As residents of the town, men could vote on their own laws and elect their own town officials. The town also had its own legal system, as well as the state’s first mandatory schooling law.

Dawn of Freedom: The Freedmen’s Town of Mitchelville explores the transition from slavery to freedom for those who escaped to Hilton Head island during the Civil War, and helped create this unique space. It draws on historic documents, photographs and artifacts that piece together this seldom told story in American history.