



April 17, 2026

Incarcerated Youths Among Competitors and Winners in Mississippi History Day

PEARL – Incarcerated youths in state prison were among the competitors and winners at Mississippi History Day, part of the National History Day program, demonstrating their ability to compete with traditional students.

This marks the third year students from the Youthful Offender Unit (YOU) have participated in the program. Thirteen students created original history research projects based on the theme “Revolution, Reaction, Reform,” competing in the senior division, individual exhibit category.

At the state competition, YOU School students received three awards, including two special recognitions for projects in Gulf South History and Mississippi History, and a third-place finish in the senior individual exhibit category.

“When students started the program, some believed there was no way they could compete against traditional students,” Education Director Shaniece Mabry said. “After some encouragement, the students lifted their heads and committed to putting forth their best effort.”

Each student developed an exhibit using primary and secondary sources, drawing from materials provided through the Teaching with Primary Sources program, printed online archives, and academic partnerships. Topics ranged from Reconstruction in Mississippi through the life of John R. Lynch to the long-term effects of the Brown v. Board of Education decision in Grenada, Mississippi. Students also researched individuals such as Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and Bettie Mae Fikes.

For many students, this was their first time participating in a competition of this level and presenting formal historical research. Students began the course in October 2025. Research

started in February, and project development took place throughout March. The class met weekly, with daily sessions during the final week leading up to competition.

Instructors reported changes in student engagement and behavior throughout the program, including increased participation, improved communication, and stronger accountability. “Students demonstrated changes in confidence, behavior, and academic engagement,”

Instructor Christina Thomas said. “They began thinking before they reacted and expressed a desire to remain in the program.”

Students also described the personal impact of participating in the program.

“Competing in National History Day made me do things that I thought I couldn’t,” one student said. “I realized I could achieve anything if I put my mind to it and worked for it. I have heard and learned about history, but I got a deeper understanding when I created history.”

Another student said the class helped improve his presentation and communication skills. The student won a state-level award. “Being able to tell my mother I won Best Project in Gulf South History at the state level is something I will never forget. I’ve never heard my mom sound so proud. For the first time, I can brag on myself in a positive way.”

A third student participating for the first time said, “This program helped keep me out of trouble. I couldn’t participate last year because I kept getting in trouble. I was happy to do something to change my reputation.”

Program leaders emphasized the significance of participation in the competition.

“When students are given the opportunity to engage in this level of academic work, they are participating alongside students from across the state,” Mabry said. “Our students stood shoulder to shoulder with their peers and proved that excellence has no boundaries.”

Support for the program was provided by the Mississippi Humanities Council and funded through the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Southern Region at Middle Tennessee State University. Additional support came from staff, volunteers, and partner organizations, including Jackson State University, the Two Mississippi Museums, and the Movement History Initiative.

