

Boston African-American

National Historic Site

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

THE MASSACHUSETTS

54TH

VOLUNTEER INFANTRY REGIMENT

The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment was the first black Union regiment recruited from the North to fight in the Civil War (1861-1865). The unit was formed shortly after President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

In 1863 Massachusetts Governor John Andrew was authorized to recruit a regiment of "volunteers to be enlisted for three years [which] may include persons of African decent." However the officers ranks were restricted to white men only.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS



Photo courtesy of MA Historical Society

The recruitment of black troops was a result of pressure from black and white abolitionists. Frederick Douglass from the start of the war had campaigned relentlessly for the employment of black troops. "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S.," Douglass said, "Let him get an

The black soldiers were originally promised the usual army wage of \$13 per month. However the War Department only authorized \$10 per month, which was the wage of a common laborer. To protest this inequality the men of the 54th refused to except any pay until it was equalized in 1864.

eagle on his button and a musket on his shoulder. ... "there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States." Two of Douglass's sons enlisted in the 54th.

ROBERT GOULD SHAW



Photo courtesy of MA Historical Society

Robert Gould Shaw, a young white officer from a prominent Boston family was offered command of the 54th Massachusetts. Shaw at first turned down the position, believing it would be detrimental to his career. However Shaw's mother, a staunch abolitionist eventually convinced him to lead the regiment.

While training at Readville camp, Shaw soon realized that he had made the right decision to lead the regiment "My heels are growing very fast" he said, "for I am perfectly astonished at the general intelligence these men display."

TO COLORED MEN!

54th Regiment of Mass. Volunteers,
OF AFRICAN DESCENT,

COL. ROBERT G. SHAW.

\$100 BOUNTY at expiration of term of enlistment.
Pay \$13 per month and State aid to families; good Rations and Clothing. All requisite information can be obtained at the Office.

Corner of Cambridge and North Russell streets, Boston.

Feb 17 1m* Lieut. J. W. M. APPLETON,
Recruiting Officer.

Photo courtesy of MA Historical Society

GLORY IN BATTLE

In July of 1863 the regiment distinguished itself at Fort Wagner South Carolina. In a very hard fought battle Colonel Robert Gould Shaw was killed upon the parapet. However the brave men of the 54th did not waiver after their leader had fallen. the valiant soldiers charged over the parapet driving the Confederates from the wall of the fort.

The 54th held the wall for twelve hours, inflicting great losses on the Confederate garrison. Unfortunately due to lack of reinforcements the 54th was forced to withdraw.

SGT. WILLIAM CARNEY



Photo courtesy of MA Historical Society

While withdrawing from their painfully sought position, Sergeant William Carney of New Bedford saved the national colors from Confederate capture. Sgt. Carney witnessing the color bearer fall, seized the colors and crawled his way back to Union lines despite suffering wounds in in his head, arm, chest

and leg. Carney eventually entered a tent occupied by his comrades and some white officers, he proudly announced "The old flag never touched the ground boys." For his bravery Carney became the first African American to win the Congressional Medal of Honor, although he would have to wait until 1900 to receive recognition.

POLITICAL VICTORY

To many the assault on Fort Wagner was a military failure, but to African Americans it became a great political victory. The bravery of the 54th proved to the nation that blacks were always willing and able to fight for their freedom. This led to the recruitment of over

186,000 African American soldiers to fight for the Union in the Civil War. Subsequently, President Lincoln referred to black troops as, "Important if not indispensable.", and credited black troops in turning the tide of the war in favor of the Union.

THE SHAW MEMORIAL



BOAF site photo

The Robert Gould Shaw memorial is considered to be the masterpiece of American sculptor, Augustus Saint Gaudens. The monument was the result of fourteen years of detailed work. The memorial was commissioned in 1883, and finally rededicated in 1897. However the monument lacked the names of the black soldiers, who had been killed at Fort Wagner until 1982.