



TELL IT WITH PRIDE



THE 54TH MASSACHUSETTS REGIMENT AND
AUGUSTUS SAINT-GAUDENS' SHAW MEMORIAL



National Gallery of Art, Washington
September 15, 2013 – January 20, 2014



AUGUSTUS SAINT-GAUDENS' magisterial Shaw Memorial (1883–1900) honors Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, one of the first regiments of African American soldiers formed during the Civil War (cover detail and fig. 1). The monument commemorates the July 18, 1863, storming of Fort Wagner in South Carolina, the regiment's defining encounter. Although the 54th was defeated and almost a third of the troop was killed or wounded, including Shaw himself, the battle was considered by many to be a turning point in the war: it proved that African Americans' bravery and dedication to country equaled that of the nation's most celebrated heroes.

When Saint-Gaudens created the memorial, he based his depiction of Shaw on photographs of the colonel, but he hired African American models, not members of the 54th, to pose for the other soldiers. *Tell It with Pride: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial* seeks to make real the African American soldiers of the 54th represented anonymously in this monument. It brings together vintage photographic portraits of the 54th as well as pictures of the men and women who recruited, nursed, taught, and guided them. It also features

important documents related to the regiment, along with works that show how the 54th, its famous assault, and the Shaw Memorial have continued to inspire artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Recruiting the 54th Massachusetts

Although many African Americans offered to fight for the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, it was not until President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, that they were legally allowed to enlist. Almost as soon as the declaration was signed, Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew set about forming the first African American regiment in the North, the 54th Massachusetts. On January 30 of that year, he wrote a letter to the noted abolitionist Francis G. Shaw offering command of the regiment to Shaw's son, Robert, then a captain in the Union army (fig. 2). "This I cannot but regard as perhaps the most important corps to be organized during the whole war," the governor explained. He went on to express his desire to commission as officers of the 54th young men "of firm Anti Slavery principles" who shared his "deep conviction in the importance of this undertaking."¹ Though initially hesitant, Robert Gould Shaw accepted Andrew's offer and was appointed colonel of the regiment.

With its leadership established, Governor Andrew solicited help from another renowned abolitionist, George Luther Stearns,

Cover detail and fig. 1
Augustus Saint-Gaudens,
Shaw Memorial, 1900, patinated plaster. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire, on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington

Fig. 2 John Adams Whipple, *Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*, 1863, albumen print. Boston Athenaeum

Fig. 3 Samuel J. Miller, *Fredrick Douglass*, 1847–1852, daguerreotype. Art Institute of Chicago, Major Acquisitions Centennial Endowment

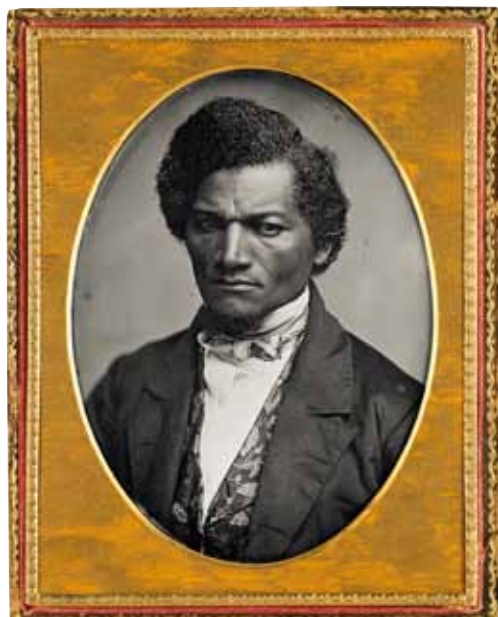


Fig. 4 J. E. Farwell and Co.,
To Colored Men. 54th Regiment! Massachusetts Volunteers, of African Descent,
1863, ink on paper. Courtesy
of the Massachusetts Historical Society



and formed “the Black Committee” of prominent citizens, both black and white — including Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips. Together with other leaders of the African American cause, they canvassed the country, and even Canada, seeking soldiers for the 54th.

Many recruiters understood the power of prints and photographs to inform public opinion and had portraits made of themselves to insert their images and — by extension — their ideas into the national dialogue. Frederick Douglass championed not only African American civil liberty but also photography as a tool for social change (fig. 3). He had several portraits taken to help circulate his image and broadcast his convictions. The former slave, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth drew on the public fascination with the *carte de visite* (a small albumen print that was about the size of a calling card and could be easily sent through the mail) to sell her image to a wide audience, earning money for her causes and bringing attention to her efforts to recruit soldiers for the Union army and the 54th. Others within the tight-knit antislavery community also had themselves photographed — including the abolitionists Lewis Hayden and George Luther Stearns, the journalist and

proponent of black nationalism Martin Robison Delany, and the physician and attorney John S. Rock — making their efforts to rally support for the 54th Massachusetts all the more successful.

Officers of the regiment, required to be white by military regulations, also helped solicit recruits. Then-lieutenant John W. M. Appleton circulated posters and newspaper advertisements that promised a “\$100 bounty at the expiration of the term of service, pay, \$13 a month, and state aid to families” (fig. 4). When the soldiers were due their first pay, however, they were instead offered just \$10 per month — less than their white counterparts of equal rank. They refused this amount, and soon a bitter dispute between the 54th Massachusetts and the federal government ensued, prompting Corporal James Henry Gooding to write to President Lincoln in September 1863 and demand, as so many others would do in the years to come, equal pay for equal service.

The 54th Massachusetts at Fort Wagner

From March through early May 1863, African American recruits streamed into Camp Meigs, on the outskirts of Boston. Most were freemen working as farmers or laborers; some were runaway slaves. Early enlistees included James Caldwell, a native of Michigan and grandson of Sojourner Truth; William H. Carney, an escaped slave from Virginia; Toussaint L'Ouverture Delany, son of Martin Robison Delany; Charles and Lewis Douglass (fig. 5), two of Frederick Douglass' sons; and Alexander H. Johnson, a sixteen-year-old sailor from New Bedford, Massachusetts, who played the drums (fig. 6). By May 1863, the regiment comprised more than 1,000 soldiers. Proud to bear their rifles and wear the Union blue, soldiers like Sergeant Henry F. Steward (fig. 7) were ready to fight, as Corporal Gooding wrote, “for honor, duty, and liberty.”²

With their arrival on the South Carolina coast in June 1863, Shaw grew increasingly eager for his men to “prove their claim to the rights of citizenship, by doing a citizen's noblest duty.”³ The opportunity came on July 18, 1863, when they were ordered to assist Major Quincy A. Gillmore in his attack on Fort Wagner on Morris Island. A formidable parapet, Fort Wagner, along with Fort Sumter and several other strongholds, guarded Charleston, South Carolina, bastion of the Southern cause and birthplace of the rebellion.

Following a grueling battle on James Island in which the regiment suffered heavy losses, the 54th Massachusetts was nevertheless primed to attack Fort Wagner as darkness fell on July 18.

Fig. 5 Case & Getchell, *Sergeant Major Lewis H. Douglass*, 1863, albumen print. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

Fig. 6 H.C. Foster (?), *Private Alexander H. Johnson, Musician*, 1864, tintype. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society

Fig. 7 Unknown photographer, *Sergeant Henry F. Steward*, 1863, ambrotype. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society



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Fig. 8 Currier & Ives (publishers), *The Gallant Charge of the 54th Massachusetts (colored) Regiment*, 1863, hand-colored lithograph. Boston Athenaeum, Gift of Raymond Wilkins, 1944

With Shaw leading the charge, the 54th rushed into the fray as gunfire and explosions lit up the night sky (fig. 8).

Amid the chaos, the twenty-three-year-old African American sergeant William H. Carney saw the color bearer drop the national flag. “As quick as a thought,” he recalled years later, “I threw away my gun, seized the colors and made my way to the head of the column.” As Shaw and Carney reached the top of the parapet, one with his sword and the other with the flag, Shaw waved his weapon, shouted “Forward 54th!” and fell dead. Carney, wounded in the fight, limped back to his comrades and proclaimed: “Boys, I did but my duty; the dear old flag never touched the ground.”⁴ Of the 600 men who participated in the assault on Fort Wagner, more than 280 were killed, captured, missing and presumed dead, or wounded, with the exact fate of many never determined. Although defeated in combat, the 54th forever distinguished itself that night. “Wagner was the battle-ground, not of regiments,” wrote one reporter, “but of centuries and civilizations, and the black man there won his place among the freemen of the age and wiped out the stain of servitude.”

Sergeant William H. Carney

Within months of the battle, the image of an African American soldier raising the American flag beneath Sergeant Carney’s declaration at Fort Wagner appeared on a banner calling on other African Americans to join the Union cause. By the war’s end, more than 180,000 men of African descent had enlisted, helping



Fig. 9 James E. Reed, *William H. Carney*, c. 1901–1908, gelatin silver print. Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University



Fig. 10 Unknown photographer, *Susie King Taylor*, 1902, halftone frontispiece from *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*. Chris Foard

the North to suppress the rebellion. “Had no black man ever gone to battle,” queried the liberal press, “who dares affirm that there would have been universal acquiescence in the abolition of Slavery?”

In addition to offering a rallying cry for African American recruits, Carney’s heroism at Fort Wagner earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor, making him the first African American to merit the nation’s highest award for bravery. Yet due to an administrative oversight, he did not receive it until May 1900. To commemorate his achievement, Carney had his photograph taken by James E. Reed (one of the few African American photographers at the time to operate his own photography studio in Massachusetts) while proudly wearing his Medal of Honor (fig. 9).

Supporting the 54th Massachusetts

Although many members of the 54th Massachusetts died on the battlefield, others survived the assault on Fort Wagner thanks to the steadfast support of doctors, nurses, and caregivers. “Under the guns of Wagner, in the hottest of fire,” wrote the assistant adjutant general of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the “trained corps picked up and carried off the wounded almost as fast as they fell...with an intrepidity and coolness worthy of all praise.”⁵

Like the recruiters for the 54th, those who cared for the regiment at Fort Wagner turned to photography to publicize their mission in South Carolina and to encourage others to support soldiers in need. Clara Barton, who helped establish field hospitals and distribute supplies at Fort Wagner, had several portraits of herself made during the Civil War. After the war, portraits of the nurse and teacher Susie King Taylor (fig. 10) as well as the escaped slave, abolitionist, and Union spy Harriet Tubman were published in books that recounted their wartime experiences and motivated others to join their ongoing crusades against discrimination.⁶

After the Battle

Union forces eventually captured Fort Wagner on September 7, 1863, but it was not until the end of the war that they managed to occupy Charleston. By the time Union general William T. Sherman toured the city's deserted streets in May 1865, however, years of fire and bombardment had reduced the city to rubble: "Anyone who is not satisfied with war should go and see Charleston, and he will pray louder and deeper than ever that the country may in the long future be spared any more war."⁷

From 1864 to 1866, with the support of General Sherman, photographer George N. Barnard documented the Union campaign from Tennessee to Georgia. His views of Charleston are among the most stirring photographs taken of the Civil War and

Fig. 11 George N. Barnard, *Ruins in Charleston, South Carolina*, 1865 or 1866, albumen print, from the album "Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign" (1866). Collection of the Sack Photographic Trust for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, fractional gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



its aftermath, offering moving accounts of the devastated Confederacy and poignant reflections on war, duty, and humanity (fig. 11).

The Legacy of the 54th Massachusetts

Even before the war's end in April 1865, the courage and sacrifice that the 54th Massachusetts demonstrated at Fort Wagner inspired artists to commemorate their bravery. Two African American artists working in Boston, Edward Bannister and Edmonia Lewis, were among the first to pay homage to the 54th in works they contributed to a fair organized by the "Colored Ladies of Massachusetts" in October 1864 that benefited African American soldiers. Yet it was not until the late nineteenth century that a monument of enormous emotional power and artistry solidified the 54th as an icon of the Civil War in the American consciousness: Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial.

Commissioned by a group of private citizens, Saint-Gaudens first conceived the memorial as a single equestrian statue of Colonel Shaw, following a long tradition of military monuments. Shaw's family, however, uncomfortable with the portrayal of their twenty-five-year-old son in a fashion typically reserved for generals, urged Saint-Gaudens to rework his design. The sculptor revised his sketch to honor both the regiment's famed hero and the soldiers he commanded — a revolutionary conception at the time. Saint-Gaudens worked on his memorial for fourteen years, producing a plaster and a bronze version. When the bronze was dedicated on Boston Common on Memorial Day 1897, Booker T. Washington declared that the monument stood "for effort, not victory complete."⁸ After inaugurating the Boston memorial, Saint-Gaudens continued to modify the plaster, reworking the horse, the faces of the soldiers, and the appearance of the angel above them. The success of his final version earned the artist the Grand Prize for sculpture when it was shown at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris. It was installed at the National Gallery of Art in 1997, on long-term loan from the U.S. Department of the Interior, the National Park Service, and the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, New Hampshire.

For more than a century, the 54th Massachusetts has remained a compelling subject for artists. Renowned poets such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Robert Lowell praised the bravery of these soldiers in their work, as did composer Charles Ives. Lewis Hine, in a photograph of an African American family in their parlor with a reproduction of the Shaw Memorial above the fireplace (fig. 12), highlights the importance of the 54th as a symbol

Fig. 12 Lewis Hine, *Black Family by Fireplace*, from the series "Southern Negroes," c. 1920, gelatin silver print. Collection of George Eastman House



Fig. 13 Richard Benson, *Robert Gould Shaw Memorial*, 1973, pigmented inkjet print, 2008. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Susan and Peter MacGill



of racial pride and cultural self-expression for African Americans in the 1920s. Richard Benson photographed the Shaw Memorial in 1973 for a book, *Lay This Laurel*, that he and Lincoln Kirstein published to focus renewed attention on Saint-Gaudens' bronze and to call for its preservation (fig. 13). Carrie Mae Weems makes new use of Benson's Shaw Memorial photographs to highlight African Americans' quest for freedom and their long struggle to attain it. Photographer William Earle Williams probes the nature of historical memory in photographs that convey the resonance of places where the 54th and other African American soldiers trained, fought, and lost their lives. These artists' works illuminate the enduring legacy of the 54th Massachusetts in the American imagination and serve as a reminder, as Ralph Ellison wrote, "that war could, with art, be transformed into something deeper and more meaningful than its surface violence."⁹

NOTES

- 1 John A. Andrew Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
- 2 James Henry Gooding, letter dated April 18, 1863, in Virginia M. Adams, *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), epigraph.
- 3 "Col. Robert G. Shaw," *New York Tribune*, Friday, October 6, 1865, n.p. Two additional quotations from the press in this brochure are taken from this article.
- 4 "Letter from a Private in the Fifty-Fourth Regiment," *New Bedford Mercury*, August 16, 1863, in *Memorial: RGS, 1864, 96–97*.
- 5 Israel S. Sealy, Acting Assistant Adjutant General, *The United States Sanitary Commission: A Sketch of Its Purposes and Its Work, Compiled from Documents and Private Papers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1863), 217.
- 6 Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* (Boston, 1902), and Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W.J. Moses, 1869).
- 7 "Gen. Sherman; His Testimony Before the Committee on the Conduct of War," *The New York Times*, June 1, 1865, 9.
- 8 "Address of Booker T. Washington," in Gregory C. Schwarz, et al., *The Shaw Memorial: a Celebration of an American Masterpiece*. Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 1997; rev. ed. 2002), 119–121.
- 9 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1947; repr. 1981), xvii.

This brochure was written by Lindsay Harris, department of photographs, and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office.

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FILM PROGRAMS

East Building Auditorium

September 15, 4:00 pm

Glory

Washington premiere of the digital restoration

The landmark film, starring Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, and Cary Elwes, dramatizes the establishment of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and the storming of Fort Wagner. Introduction by director Ed Zwick. (1989. DCP, 122 minutes)

September 21, 2:30 pm

The Massachusetts 54th Colored Infantry

This PBS American Experience production about the formation of the 54th Massachusetts is introduced by WGBH-Boston's award-winning executive producer Mark Samels. Discussion follows the screening. (1991, HD-Cam, 120 minutes)

January 12, 6:30 pm

Ciné-Concert: *The General*

(Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton, 1926, 35 mm, silent with live accompaniment, 75 minutes)

National Gallery of Art Orchestra, with new score composed by Andrew Simpson

The feature will be preceded by two Civil War era shorts.

CONCERTS

November 3, 6:30 pm

West Garden Court

Maryland Sinfonietta, Michael Jacko, guest conductor; Charles Ives' *Three Places in New England* and music by other composers

November 6, 12:10 pm

East Building Auditorium

Rick Robinson and the Cut Time Sinfonica; Gospel and Civil War-related music

November 13, 12:10 pm

East Building Auditorium

Leah Gilmore, jazz vocalist; Gospel and Civil War-related music

PERFORMANCE

November 24, 2:00 pm

East Building Auditorium

DJ Spooky: A Civil War Symphony
Paul D. Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid), composer, multimedia artist, writer, and DJ; accompanied by violinist Danielle Cho and cellist Jennifer Kim

Originally performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this piece for string ensemble is presented by Paul D. Miller with live mixed electronic music and video, using images from the exhibition.