

Worksheet #15
History of 54th and Shaw Memorial
54th Regiment

*Who would be free themselves must strike the first blow.
Better even to die free than to live slaves.
I urge you to fly to arms, and smite with death the power
that would bury the Government and your liberty
in the same hopeless grave.*

-Frederick Douglass

The inspiration of the Shaw Memorial comes from the uniting of black and white, rich and poor, the powerful and aggrieved against injustice. It is a reminder of sacrifices in a battle still unfinished. Yet, it is hopeful. The example of the 54th Regiment resulted in 180,000 black men enlisting in support of the Union. Though one percent of the nation was black, ten percent of the union's forces would be.

Many parts of society combined to create and support the 54th Regiment and its memory.

The Governor

Abolitionists knew that black citizens would never be considered truly equal if they did not personally take up arms in defense of the union. Governor John Andrew was elected on promises of abolition, and on behalf of black and white voters he pressed the issue of forming a state regiment of black soldiers to battle in the Civil War.



President Lincoln eventually gave his agreement, with the provision that the troops be led by experienced white officers. Governor Andrew recognized that the success or failure of this enterprise would be a referendum on the honor and capacity of black men to stand as equals with white soldiers. He set about recruiting "young men of military experience, of firm Anti-Slavery principles, ambitious.... and necessarily gentlemen of the highest tone and honor." Andrew convened a committee to raise funds for the unit from affluent abolitionists, and called on black leaders to take on the cause of recruiting soldiers.

Social Leaders

Both affluent white abolitionists and black civic leaders had a common goal, for which they would sacrifice their efforts, wealth, and their children. Not only did Frederick Douglass call black men to arms, but he sent his own sons Charles and Lewis. Not only did Francis Shaw raise funds and call for equality, but he himself carried the request from Governor Andrew to his son to serve as Colonel of the 54th.



Initially Robert Shaw declined the commission. He was already serving Massachusetts as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Second Regiment, where he had earned the respect

of fellow officers and fighting men. However, his decision to decline the commission weighted heavily on him and he quickly decided to take on the new duty.

The Men

Before facing the trials of war, the soldiers of the 54th faced discrimination from their own government. Governor Andrew had gained the agreement of the President that all men in the 54th Regiment would be given the same inducements, equipment, and rewards as any other unit. It was under those terms which officers and participants were recruited.



Yet once mustered, the Lincoln administration determined that black recruits had been recruited under the militia act, and were eligible for a flat rate of \$10 of pay monthly. Non-commissioned officers were not recognized, nor was any rank taken into account. Further, the troops were charged a uniform fee, depleting their salary to often less than half that of comparable white enlistees.

Accepting unequal pay while fighting for equality was an unpalatable contradiction. Sergeant George E. Stevens declared, "because I am black, they tamper with my rights." For eighteen months the men of the fifty-fourth unanimously accepted no pay, rather than the insult of unequal pay.

The unit's service at Fort Wagner, South Carolina was indisputably courageous. Robert Shaw died in battle with a great portion of his men. Sergeant William Carney saved the unit's battle flag, retrieving it after sustaining gunshot wounds to the head, chest, arm and leg. Governor Andrew and his supporters raised the funds to make up the difference of this inequality, yet the soldiers of the 54th could not bring themselves to accept unequal pay from their nation, even if someone else made up the difference.



President Lincoln contended that the unequal pay was a reasonable concession to the prejudice of white troops and that blacks should undertake the honor of service at any cost. Soon soldiers' protests turned toward mutiny. Court marshals for insubordination mounted. Private Wallace Baker's protest was silenced by a firing squad.

In the 54th men began to refuse orders. The very officers who had volunteered to lead black troops, who sympathized and supported their demands for equal pay, now they faced their insubordination and threatened battlefield executions to maintain order. As word of this condition began to spread, and as abolitionist congressmen began to weigh-in, Washington began half steps to equality.

The 54th Regiment received their pay in the fall of 1865. They had seen their brothers and commander die in battle, and questioned if their sacrifice would finally result in equality.

Congress eventually approved a law providing equal pay for all colored troops. As much as anything that could happen on the battlefield, this recognition of equality by their own command conferred on them a hard-won victory and honor.

The Artist

Among the preeminent sculptors of the 19th Century, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, grew up a young immigrant in the City of New York. He studied sculpture in Italy. A master of bas-relief, Saint-Gaudens designed coins for US Treasury. Considered his greatest work, this monument took fourteen years to complete. It was dedicated Memorial Day, 1897, and was an instant success.

The memorial to Shaw and the 54th Regiment is considered the first prominent work of art in which a white artist portrayed black persons in sympathetic and personal terms. St. Gaudens modeled more than forty heads based on human models for the sculpture, depicting the individuality as well as unity of the members it portrays.



Source:

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