

“The Recruitment, Deployment, and First Engagement of the
Civil War’s Glory Regiment, the Massachusetts 54th”

By

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Come back with me in time.

It's summer vacation 1959.

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The place: the outskirts of Olustee, Florida.

A 15-year-old is standing with his father on the edge of an open field. There, some 96 years earlier February 20th, 1864, men of the Massachusetts 54th struggled mightily with the enemy. They, along with other Union Troops, suffered a 34% casualty rate, 203 killed, 1,552 wounded, 506 missing.

Following the battle, the survivors of the 54th towed a disabled hospital train by rope for more than five miles.

The father visibly moved tells his son: "Never forget the sacrifice those men made that day."

For more than 50 years that pledge has been honored.

Just like you the version of history taught in my early education in text and in film didn't include the accurate story of everyone who played a part in the Civil War.

In high school text books and popular film, we were taught African Americans were the only group to have never played an active role in securing their own freedom.

In film, we were military marauders or feckless field hands.

But thanks to a wise sire and Alfred Tsacle a Greek American classmate, who's goading can still be heard; "The Greeks did this the Greeks did that. What did the Negroes ever do?"

This then-young man got busy.

That challenge was mentioned in passing to, Aurelius Walker, my barber, now pastor of ????? Baptist Church.

Mr. Walker, was at the time was working on his Divinity Degree.

He suggested:" Mr. Griffin give me part of your weekly allowance and I'll buy you some history books. You can learn your story."

There was embarked upon a lifelong quest, the results of which in part are shared with you this afternoon.

Who was the 54th and what was so significant about their role in helping to shape today's America.

Where did they come from? Who were their champions? Why were they necessary?

First lets' set the background.

George Ticknor professor of modern languages at Harvard, before Longfellow took his seat in 1835 is depicted in James McPherson's series of essays entitled Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution.

"Ticknor was born in 1791 in the 3rd year of George Washington's presidency. By the time he died in 1871, Ticknor reflects on what he calls the "great gulf between what happened before in our century and what has happened since, or what is likely to happen hereafter. It does

not seem to me that I am living in the country to which I was born.”

Indeed, his chronological years spanned the 1792 invention of the cotton gin that resuscitated a dying, agricultural and, textile industry.

The invention soon crowned Cotton, King.

Ticknor witnessed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 which maintained a sectional balance between slave and free states. Maine entered the Union free Missouri slave: a 12/ 12 numerical tie, banning slavery above the 36-30 parallel.

He no doubt read about the daring Nat Turner 1831 slave rebellion in Virginia. He may very well have read about it in William Lloyd Garrison Liberator Newspaper, first published that same year.

The former Harvard Professor no doubt had strong opinions about our war with Mexico fulfilling our manifest destiny,

resulting in the United States acquiring more land than in the Louisiana Purchase.

Ticknor lived through the Compromise of 1850 allowing California in as a free state with the proviso of a fugitive slave law.

And indeed, it was the decade of the 1850's which hurled America headlong into the abyss of unresolved darkness out of which only freedom's light could illumine the way.

Published in Boston March of 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe incinerated the literary community, penning Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Stowe said at the time: "I hope it makes enough for me to buy new silk dress." 5,000 copies sold the first week. Prior to the end of June, Stowe's royalties topped \$10,000. Her work kept "Eight printing presses going day and night, unable to quench the thirst for the best seller. 300,000 copies sold the first year. It was translated into French, German and scores of other languages. "

Although “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was not- banned in Boston, it was certainly barred in the South.

On everyone’s tongue in 1854 was passage of the Kansas Nebraska Act. It all but overturned the Missouri Compromise, allowing slavery to be subject to popular sovereignty. Its passage prompted an obscure one term Illinois Congressman to re-enter political life and help form the fledging Republican Party.

By 1856 the pro and anti-slavery forces poured into Kansas hoping to push a plebiscite their way. Blood was spilled. For the first time, the name John Brown gained national notoriety.

May 22nd, 1856 Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner delivers a searing speech on the floor of the United States Senate “The Crime Against Kansas”. In it he eviscerates South Carolina Senator Butler. Butler along with Steven Douglas was co-sponsor of the Kansas Nebraska Act. In retaliation two days later Preston Brooks, Butler’s nephew and member of the House of Representatives, canes Sumner senseless on the Senate floor necessitating the Massachusetts Senator’s two-year recovery and absence from that deliberative body.

Many count Sumner's thrashing as the first symbolic blows of the Civil War.

In March of 1857 Supreme Court Justice Roger B. Taney issues a delayed opinion in the Dred Scott case further inflaming sectional rivalries by denying black United States citizenship or the possibilities thereof.

The opinion, known to presidential candidate James Buchanan prior to its release, was delayed until after his election so as not to sway the outcome. It was thought by both men at the time to put a judicial end to the: "Negro Question" once and for all.

The stage is now set for the seminal event which is the ultimate precursor of the war inevitable. John Brown's 1859 electrifying raid on the United States Arsenal at Harper's Ferry.

Out west, the prior year in Illinois, a contest takes place which will have ultimate significance in the years to come. Steven Douglass and Abe Lincoln lock horns in a closely followed Senate race in which the shrewd Lincoln forces Douglas in Freeport to enunciate a sovereignty doctrine.

That eliminates him from the ballot in the South two years hence and any hope of its support to become Chief Executive in that 1860 presidential level rematch.

Lincoln prevails, the South secedes and war is upon us.

Black folks like all other loyal Americans offer to sign up. From the beginning of the Republic, they had served in arms. Witness the flag on display of the fighting black bucks 5,000 of which fought in the Revolution, why not now?

April 23rd, 1861, McPherson in work, "The Negro's Civil War" recounts a Washingtonian James Dobson sends a note to the Secretary of War: "Sir, this is to inform you that I know of some 300 of reliable colored free citizens of this City who desire to enter the service...."

Likewise, in Pittsburg, the Hannibal Guards, a black organization communicate to General James Negley, militia commander of Western Pennsylvania: 'We wish the government to be sustained against slavery and are willing to assist in any honorable way ...we therefore tender to the state the service of the Hannibal Guards.'

The quote: “Colored citizens of Cleveland tendered their readiness to fight as well, citing participation in the Revolution and War of 1812.”

Patriotic fervor for black enlistment could be heard in from Cincinnati to New York.

One by one the petitions to serve were spurned by inaction or specific rejection: “This is a white man’s war” was the universal response.

The war was entered into to preserve the Union not dissolve Slavery.

That all ended when in 1862 when it became clear; this battle was to be no short skirmish.

Manpower shortage threatened to cripple the Army of the Potomac.

On any given day, the North was losing 60,000 men to sickness. The death and disease rates a year were costing the army 27 regiments.

At the end of 1862, 65,000 men were due to muster out.

Meanwhile back at the White House Lincoln's strategy all along had been to accommodate the border states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland and Missouri.

In retrospect, he obtained satisfactory results in Maryland, mixed results in Kentucky and poor results in Missouri. The rationale at the time was there were 2,600,000 whites in the border states, half again the population of the seceded states.

Lincoln is reported to have said at the time: "I would like to have God on my side, I must have Kentucky."

In July of 1862, he gives representatives of the aforementioned states one last chance at gradual, compensated, emancipation coupled deportation. They vote him down 20 to 9. He determined that night to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

To Cabinet Secretaries Seward and Welles, Lincoln reveals his plan. Seward counsels caution.” Wait until a Union victory is at hand lest the government be seen as acting from weakness.”

The next month September 17th the slim victory at Antietam is achieved giving Lincoln the strength he feels he needs to move.

Lincoln meets with his Cabinet on the 22nd announcing his plan. He gives the States in Rebellion to January 1 to mend their ways.

On that first day of the New Year, 1863 Lincoln keeps his word.

I want to give the Proclamation its contextual due.

Quoting Frederick Douglass at the time: “I believe in the millennium—the final perfection of the race, and hail this Proclamation, though wrung out under the goading lash of a stern military necessity, the one reason for hope that is in me. Men may see it as only a military necessity. To me, it has a higher significance. It is a moral necessity.”

(Show Proclamation Slide)

Up until consideration of the Proclamation and Congressional Acts preceding it, Federal law barred blacks from fighting in the state militia and there were none in the United States Army.

Dobson, referred to earlier who wrote a letter of Colored troop support was met with the reply from the Secretary of State that: “the government at this time has no intention to call to its service of any black troops.” The militia commander in Cleveland cited the federal ban on such enlistment.

Robert Morris Lawyer in Boston at a mass meeting at the 12th Street Baptist Church declared: “If the government would only take away this disability there is not a man who wouldn’t leap for his knapsack and his musket and make it intolerably hot for Old Virginia.”

Numbers of Afro-Americans formed drill companies in Boston while simultaneously petitioning the legislature to serve.

The battle raged in the national black press as to the wisdom of enlisting at all. The Anglo-African New York City weekly

advocated northern support lest the South win and subjugate all.

Letters to the editor differed. One asked: “why fight leaving black bodies to rot in the Southern sun to perpetuate human bondage.”

Another writer from Philadelphia took issue with non-involvement, arguing it would be foolish for us to still be nursing our past grievances to our own detriment, when we should be as: one man grasping the sword.... God will help no one who refuses to help himself.”

Even the president prior to manpower crisis, had his doubts. On August 4th, 1862 upon the tender of two Indiana regiments of blacks, Lincoln rejected the offer stating: “To arm the negroes, would turn 50,000 bayonets from the loyal border states against us which were for us.” Further elaborating on his views, a month and a half later Lincoln told another delegation he feared that if negroes were to be armed, “in a few weeks the arms would wind up in the hands of the rebels.”

Individual Union Generals Hunter and Lane, in the Sea Islands and Kansas, and Fremont in Missouri, defied prejudice and in direct contravention of official policy (acting without War Department sanction) either raised their own black regiments or, like Fremont and Hunter, went so far as to free all slaves under his command -- to which Lincoln, unconsulted with, countermanded.

The most successful in shifting public opinion was Massachusetts General Ben Butler who pioneered the concept contraband of war by seizing human assets of the enemy and employing them for the benefit of the federal government.

Butler's swift conversion may have been aided by the necessity of recruiting what were formerly black confederate volunteers in the face of a threatened Rebel attack near Crescent City, Louisiana, in August of 1862.

The Congress took official steps to change its policy in July of 1862 passing the Confiscation Act empowering the President to "employ as many persons of African Descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of the rebellion."

The second was the Militia Act repealing the provisions of the 1792 law barring black men, and authorizing the employment of free Negroes and freedmen as soldiers.”

In the fall of 1862, Military General of South Carolina Sea Islands Rufus Saxton was authorized to form five regiments of black soldiers.

The aforementioned Proclamation, coupled with the manpower shortage spurred Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton to sincerely act with all deliberate speed.

Massachusetts Abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson was commissioned a Colonel and put together the First South Carolina Volunteers.

The men fought exceedingly well on St. Mary’s River which formed the border between Florida and Georgia.

A second regiment of black troops under Colonel James Montgomery was formed, conducting successful raids into the interior of Georgia and Florida eventually capturing and occupying Jacksonville in March of 1863.

Troops were assembled and enjoyed success in Louisiana and battles in Mississippi.

In January of 1863, Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts was authorized to raise the first Northern Regiment of African American soldiers.

With the financial assistance of wealthy abolitionist George Stearns, men like Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnett, Charles Redmond, John Mercer Langston and Martin Delany were hired to scour the North and Canada to fill the roles of the fledgling regiment.

Recruitment at first was inconsistent. Numbers of Negroes in Boston were insufficient to amass full regiment strength. The war itself had made many would be recruits comfortable bringing about full employment in war related but home front industries far from battlefield dangers and privations. This dulled the initial ardor with which many burned at the war's outset.

Nonetheless the forceful oratory of Governor Andrew, Douglass, Garnett and Delany whose rhetorical powers could

persuade even the most reticent, chipped away at any residual reluctance.

“Every race has fought for liberty and its own progress”, Governor Andrew exhorted Massachusetts men of Color: “If Southern slavery should fall by the crushing of the Rebellion and Colored men should have no hand or play no conspicuous part in the task, the result would leave the Colored man a mere helot.”

Speaking to a potential group of New York City volunteers, George Stearns said: “This is the time God has given you and your race to conquer its freedom from Northern prejudice and Southern greed and avarice. You must fight or be slaves.”

Douglass stirring broadside: “Men of Color to Arms” he reasons: “Liberty won by white men would lack half its luster. Who would be free themselves must strike the first blow.”

Before long, men rallied to the cause filling two regiments the first recruits of which were Douglass’ own sons, Lewis and Charles.

Andrew faced the task of finding leadership for the men. 19th Century military commissions were political as they were based upon merit.

Often appointments to high officerial ranks during the Civil War were made with little or no account for military experience, background, credentials or other qualifications.

However, in the case of the 54th every effort was made to ensure the officers were of impeccable abolitionist credentials, military skill and as specified by the Governor “superior to a vulgar contempt for color and having faith in the capacity of colored men for military service.”

Governor Andrew turned to the noted Abolitionist Shaw family who tendered the offer to lead the 54th to their only son Robert.

Having dropped out of Harvard, young Shaw enlisted in the Massachusetts 2nd Regiment, seeing action at Cedar Mountain and Antietam.

Ironically, it was the Union victory at Antietam, in which he participated which provided Lincoln the rationale he needed to issue the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation clearing the way for black troops and Shaw's own martyrdom.

Initially turning down the offer to lead, Shaw reconsidered and ultimately accepted, knowing it would subject him to ridicule, scorn and possible failure.

The young Colonel was joined by the Hallowell brothers, Francis Higginson, Cabot J. Russel and John W. Appelton, all belonging to distinguished abolitionist families. In sum total, there was amassed 1,000 black troops and 29 white officers.

The regiment was formed in uneven streams building to a steady and increasing flow of volunteers. They had to overcome unpopular majority opposition in towns and cities where in many instances the African American had to have whites buy their train tickets and surreptitiously board at night lest ruffians and hoodlums physically disrupt their mission.

According to historian a Clinton Cox: “The recruits came from 22 states, the District of Columbia, Nova Scotia and the West Indies. Sixty-eight men came from Philadelphia, 47 from Boston, 11 from New York City, 20 from Chicago, and one each from over a hundred villages no one ever heard of.”

The men gathered at Camp Meigs in Readville, outside of Boston. One third of the volunteers were rejected. The remainder formed what Massachusetts Surgeon General William Dale said was the most robust, healthy set of men ever mustered into the United States [Army].

19 Century Military drill was a complicated affair but the men mastered it. Crowds of Bostonians flocked to the camp on weekends to witness dress parade prompting the scheduling of special trains.

Over 3,000 spectators arrived Sunday May 18th to witness their receiving their Enfield rifles and regimental colors from the Governor and the Womens’ Colored Aid Society. Men like formerly enslaved, abolitionist, editor and renowned orator Frederick Douglass. Liberator publisher William Lloyd Garrison once dragged through the streets of Boston with a rope around

his neck, Wendell Phillips, the Boston Brahmin who gave up a life of ease to bring about this day witnessed the spectacle.

On that solemn occasion, Governor John Andrew to Shaw declared: "I know not, Mr. Commander, when in all human history, to any thousand men in arms, there has been committed a work at once, so proud, so precious, so full of hope and glory as the work committed to you."

May 28th 6:30 am the men boarded trains for Boston arriving 2 and ½ hours later. The men marched triumphantly through the crowds at the Common, down Beacon Street through the welcoming throngs of well-wishers many waving handkerchiefs from windows and cheering loudly.

From the balconies lining the streets on-looked William Lloyd Garrison hand on a bust of John Brown, and notable Henry Wadsworth Longfellow viewed the sendoff. Even John Greenleaf Whittier temporarily abandoned his pacifist sentiments that day in admiration of the armed black army anomaly.

(Poets slide and my poem)

At Boston's Long Wharf the men boarded the ship De Molay and set sail for Hilton Head on the coast of South Carolina.

The contrast of the sentiment from whence they came and to where they were heading could not have been greater.

Jefferson Davis had declared essentially a death sentence for any captured black troops in arms and similarly for any of the officers leading them as inciters of servile insurrection. Other black troops could be sold into slavery. This remained in effect until Lincoln decreed for every black troop so shot a confederate prisoner would be executed and for every black soldier enslave a rebel would be sentenced to hard labor.

Shaw upon landing met with fellow Bostonian and Colonel of First Colored South Carolina Volunteers Thomas Wentworth Higginson. They spoke in part about mutual challenges and battle strategy.

Shaw also spent time with Charlotte Forten, granddaughter of a noted black abolitionist of means.

Forten was in the Palmetto state, along with other likeminded Northern women educating formerly enslaved children.

Under the command of James Montgomery, stationed at St. Simons Island 80 miles south, the initial assignment handed Shaw's men was to sack and burn the town of Darien, Georgia.

Although this was a direct order, Shaw objected and only reluctantly complied making certain his men acted with discretion leaving the more dastardly work to other divisions.

Shaw was also mindful of the tendency to use black troops for pillaging, foraging and hard labor –fatigue duty, digging trenches and building fortifications, not for direct fighting which could prove detrimental to their aim and mission to show themselves and their race as fighting men.

Montgomery, the officer responsible for the misuse of troops eventually was relieved of command.

Equal pay soon became an issue. The men had been promised the same compensation as regular Union troops: \$13 per month with a \$3 clothing allowance. They were disappointed to

learn they were to be offered \$10 per month with \$3 charged for clothing the same as common laborers.

Some leaders of the men were shot for refusing pay.

Nonetheless, for 18 months the regiment scorned the unequal tender. When Massachusetts offered to make up the difference, they declined stating: "It is not the Bay State's place to wipe off the mud slung on us by the Federal Government. "

Some families back home starved undergoing horrendous hardships. The 54th fought for 18 months without any pay at all rather than to be degraded by the Federal Government valuing their lives as worth less than any others.

The men shipped off to James Island where a surprise Confederate attack found them steadfastly holding their position allowing the 10th Connecticut to escape, demonstrating the 54th's coolness, courage under fire. Said one of the Sergeants that day: "Our men fought like tigers."

It has been written of the 54th of the day's encounter: "For the first time they were bloodied. For the first time, its ranks had

been depleted by battle. For the first time, it knew the sorrow of burying friends and comrades.”

The 54th helped secure the Island for the Blue. The next assignment was Morris Island and then Battery Wagner. The men shipped off and landed after being anchored off shore.

To get to their assigned destination Lewis Douglass’ wrote to his father: “We took, according to one of our officers, one of the hardest marches on record, through woods and marshes.”

To worsen matters there was little food save for crackers and scarcely drinkable water.

They slugged through stagnant swamp water, trudged up hot sandy beaches, repelled summer squalls and withstood scorching South Carolina sun.

Folly Island stood before them which ran almost all the way to Morris Island.

What the men didn’t know during their mid-July march occurred an outbreak of deadly rioting in the North over instituting the draft. New York City suffered the worst rioting in

recorded American history to that point. Predominantly Irish immigrants fearful of conscription and loss of jobs with emancipation flooding the North with the recently freedmen murdered more than 110 mostly African Americans. They burned a Colored Children's Asylum to the ground. Some families of men of the 54th were impacted and troops fresh from Gettysburg were redeployed to quell the disturbance.

Rumor had it while Shaw was leading his men, bands of rioters were on the way to Shaw's father's home in Staten Island. Sending off his wife and daughters while, he and his son-in-law remained to keep guard for the assault which never materialized.

Back in South Carolina on James Island on the 18th of July an 11-hour bombardment consisting of an estimated 9,000 shell and shot fusillade was unleashed against Battery Wagner on Morris Island.

Although Wagner's guns fell silent it was not due to submission, but to the opposing General Taliaferro's carefully prepared plan to thwart the anticipated assault.

Deliberately returning no fire for hours, he led the Union officers to believe: "the enemy had been driven from its shelter and the Armament of Wagner rendered helpless."

The Southerners, 1700 of them, took shelter in the bombproofs after burying the big guns in the sand, sandbagging the lighter artillery and exposing none but a few men to view by their enemy.

It is estimated that only: “8 of the 1700 had been killed. The rest awaited the assault.”

There was some feeling that a trap had been set. Colonel H.S. Putnam of New Hampshire protested the decision to storm the Fort predicting:” We are going in like a flock of sheep.”

The men of the 54rth given the offer to lead the charge, took it as an honor, a sacred duty.

Exhausted, hungry and weary, but not without courage and purpose, Shaw’s men accepted the mission.

(CNN)

There are many ways to describe to you what happened in that charge. None of them will be as dramatic or as accurately portrayed as what you are about to see.

Here is the poem I wrote to commemorate those men.

To the Massachusetts 54th

In Memoriam

By Noah Griffin

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When the drumbeat and the fife subside,

And the celebration's done.

And the memory of the men who died

Both North and South is one.

This regiment will still shine forth

In annals of the free:

The Massachusetts 54th

Who fought for liberty.

Abe Lincoln had refused to act.

Moreover, Stanton too.

The one to recognize the fact

Was the Governor John Andrew.

He fought to do what saved the war

Bring Blacks into the fray.

For up 'til then there'd been a bar

By both the Blue and Grey.

When Lincoln signed the document

Which brought Emancipation,

The administration did relent

Accompanying authorization.

From the Commonwealth

The call rang out:

"Come Colored men to arms."

Amidst the ridicule and doubt

The answered war's alarm.

They came from city and the farm,

Left sweetheart wives and mothers.

To wear that Union uniform

And free their shackled brothers.

From every state they filled the roll,
From Maryland to Maine.
The Governor more than reached his goal.
His mandate now was plain.

To show that these Black fighting men
Were equal to the task.
To never have to prove again,
To never have to ask.

They served for less than equal pay,
Accepting none 'til righted.
Enlisted they remained to stay,
Their honor yet unblighted.

Eli George Biddle, Edward Hines
And Sergeant William Carney.
The knowledge of whom redefines
The Northern Grand Old Army.

Then Andrew turned to Robert Shaw
To lead this regiment.
For in this bold Brahmin he saw

The strength of firm commitment.

Fort Wagner in South Caroline
Would prove their maiden test:
To see if courage would align
By bringing forth the best.

From Blacks who fought to free the slave
For Justice and the Right—
These soldiers who when called on gave
New meaning to the fight.

With neither map nor smooth terrain
They charged the mouth of hell.
Into the with'ring blast they came
Ignoring shot and shell.

Young Colonel Shaw while rallying forth
His sword clutched in his hand
Exhorted: "Onward 54th"
His ultimate command.

He died upon the parapet.'
He fell amidst his men.
All buried in a common pit

Returned to earth as kin.

The standard bearer breathed his last,
The flag was going down.
Thrice wounded Carney grabbed it fast.
“It never hit the ground.”

This soldier from New Bedford soil
Who hailed from Company “C”
Half-dead amidst the bloody toil
Dismissed his own safety.

The men fought valiantly that day
Though victory was denied.
Amidst the wreaths and laurels lay
A source of new found pride.

For courage neither black nor white
Resides within us all
When we surrender to our plight
And answer duty’s call.

When the drumbeat and the fife subside
And the celebration’s done.
And the memory of the men who died

Both North and South is one.

This regiment will still shine forth

In annals of the free.

The Massachusetts 54th.

They died for Liberty.