

"Rally 'round the flag of freedom: Berkshires men of the 54th Massachusetts

Recruitment

Immediately following Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, recruitment efforts for the 54th Massachusetts Regiment got underway in February 1863. Recruitment posters and newspaper advertisements throughout the state encouraged Black men to enlist, and Black leaders in Boston rallied crowds and publically extolled military service as a way by which Black men could be treated as equals and achieve full citizenship.



Although many Black men throughout Massachusetts responded promptly, it became clear that an even wider pool of soldiers was needed. Recruiters began looking beyond state borders for eligible men. Recruiting offices were established in cities such as St. Louis, Philadelphia, Detroit, Buffalo and even as far north as Canada.

As an incentive to enlistment, Massachusetts, like other Northern states, offered a financial payment – called a bounty – to potential soldiers. White enlisted soldiers were paid their entire bounty as a lump sum up front, but the bounties for Black soldiers were paid in two installments and were often late. Despite these disparities, the bounties – as high as \$325 – promised to an enlisted Black soldier, combined with a monthly salary of \$13 per month, would provide a good income.

The Berkshire Recruits

Here in the Berkshires, newspapers like *The Berkshire County Eagle*, *The Lee Valley Gleaner* and *The Berkshire Courier* ardently supported abolition and military service by Black men. As *The Berkshire Courier* stated "The fact is, there is no valid reason against letting the negroes fight on our side, if they will. If they fight at all they must fight well, and to the bitter end..."

Throughout Berkshire County, town selectmen, with the aid of prominent citizens with abolitionist leanings, became lead recruiters. The first Black recruiter in Pittsfield was blacksmith Henry S. Jackson, who was widely admired for his success in signing on large numbers of able men.

Recruiting for the 54th (colored) regiment goes on briskly in Berkshire. Thirty men have now been accepted, and more await examination of the surgeons. We shall next week print a list of the recruits. The services of Mr. Jackson have thus far been of the utmost value. We fancy that those who have hitherto undervalued the courage of the colored man will by and by consider themselves [mistaken].

Berkshire Courier, Feb. 26, 1863.

The Reverend Samuel Harrison, pastor of the city's Second Congregational Church and an outspoken critic of slavery and inequality, charismatically spoke about Black military service to Pittsfield audiences and others throughout the region.

From the Upper Housatonic Valley of western Massachusetts and northwest Connecticut alone, there were 81 Black men who served in the 54th Regiment. Most were born and grew up in the Berkshires or northern Litchfield County, and overall they were young – 71% were under 30 when they went to war. Approximately half were married and 23% had children. Many who lived at home with their families prior to the war had been substantial contributors to their families' incomes, and their departures had a measurable financial impact on those they left behind. 40% were farm laborers, and another 40% were skilled laborers, with the remaining 20% working as waiters, blacksmiths, stonecutters, masons or were employed in other trades.

Historians David Levinson and Emilie Piper's recent book *On the Other Side of Glory, The Berkshire Men of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment* (2011) has brought to light names and stories of many of the men from Berkshire County who served.

For example, the first Black man to join and serve his entire term from Berkshire County was Milo Freeland, a Black resident of Sheffield. He enlisted on February 16, 1863 and served as a private in Company A of the Massachusetts 54th until he was discharged on August 20, 1865.