

“Rally ‘round the flag of freedom: Berkshires men of the 54th Massachusetts

Introduction

When the Civil War began in April 1861, Black men were prohibited from military service. If any tried to enlist, they were summarily turned away. This policy was changed by President Lincoln with his Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863.

Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew quickly responded. In February, he authorized the organization of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, one of the first Union Army units organized with Black soldiers. Governor Andrew knew allowing Black men to fight would strengthen the Union’s cause and wholeheartedly believed that the unit, if given the opportunity, would fight well and courageously.

The Black communities across Massachusetts responded enthusiastically. Men volunteered to serve with the 54th for a variety of reasons. For many, the appeal to enlist stemmed from a desire to play a role in the fight to end slavery, as well as the hope that they would be treated as equals to white soldiers. By showing bravery and strength on the battlefield, abolitionists and Black community leaders ardently believed that the Black soldiers’ efforts would ultimately lead to equality in America.

Although Governor Andrew had support for the formation of a Black regiment, there were opponents who vigorously argued the idea. Many feared enlisting Black soldiers would make the Union’s task more difficult by enraging Confederates who would not want to fight against Black men. Some questioned whether white men from the North would serve alongside Black soldiers, and others felt Black men would not prove to be disciplined or brave on the battlefield.

White abolitionists and Black leaders lent their voices to the fight for Black regiments. As leading abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass declared at a Meeting for the Promotion of Colored Enlistments on July 6, 1863:

*Once let the black man get upon his person
the brass letters US, let him get an eagle on
his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and
bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on
earth which can deny that he has earned the
right of citizenship in the United States.*

In his effort to quell the controversy, Governor Andrew conceded that commissioning Blacks as officers was too controversial. Therefore, commissioned officers were white, and enlisted men Black. Black men did serve as non-commissioned officers (corporals and sergeants), gaining those ranks based on merit.

Col. Robert Gould Shaw, a young man from a well-known Boston family with strong ties to the abolitionist movement, was chosen to lead the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. On May 18, 1863, following several months training in Readville (now West Roxbury), Massachusetts, the unit – comprised of some 1,000 enlisted men – received their colors from Governor Andrew and were honored in a spirited parade through the streets of Boston. Then the men of the Massachusetts 54th boarded the *De Molay*, and set sail for active duty in South Carolina.

They would be at war for the next two years, valiantly fighting at Fort Wagner, as well as the Battle of Olustee, the Battle of Honey Hill and the Battle of Boykin’s Mill. The regiment returned to Boston in August 1865, where they were publicly lauded on the Common, served a festive meal and disbanded.

The unit was reactivated on November 21, 2008 to serve as the Massachusetts National Guard ceremonial unit to render military honors at funerals and state functions. The new unit is known as the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment.



Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, Boston.

Photo: National Park Service