

African american contributions to american history



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Many blacks contributed to the success of our country in every war that we as a people have ever fought. In order to properly thank them for their heroic effort, I as a Hispanic Caucasian must give credit where credit is due. In order to properly do so, I must begin with the contributions of " Black America" beginning with the American Revolution and continue up until the World War II. Make no mistake blacks made contributions well past World War II, but in the interest of time and accuracy I must stay within the confines of our earlier history. One main aspect that should be analyzed is the fact that no matter how hard the struggle, blacks have always overcome adversity no matter what the cost. Of course, contributions made by blacks are not limited to war alone, but include a wide spectrum of achievements that have advanced civilization as a whole.

My personal respect and thanks go to all people who have served and continue to serve this country at any capacity. But we must never forget the contributions made by our black brothers and sisters who gave their lives fighting for a cause that so greatly affected their lives as well as our well being. Charles Dickens said it best in his book *A Tale of Two Cities*, " It was the best of times it was the worst of times". The American Revolution was a time of great struggle for people of all races. But, Blacks in particular understood the literal meaning of patriot rhetoric, eagerly took up the cause of American freedom, fighting bravely in the early confrontations with the British.

Though the revolution freed some blacks and set the country on a course toward the abolition of slavery, political accommodation to plantation owners forestalled emancipation for many blacks in the south for 90 more years. A

black man was one of the first martyrs of the patriot cause. Crispus Attucks, apparently a slave who had run away from his owner 20 years before, died in the Boston Massacre in 1770. Though facts were disputed at trials then as now, witnesses said Attucks hit a British officer with a large piece of firewood, grabbed a bayonet and urged the crowd to attack just before the British fired. Attucks and two others were killed while eight were wounded, two mortally. Blacks served at the battles of Lexington and Concord.

Peter Salem, a freed slave, stood on the green at Lexington facing the British when the first battle broke out with the shot that was heard around the world. One of the last men wounded in the battle as the British escaped to Boston was Prince Estabrook, a black man from West Lexington. At least 20 blacks, including Peter Salem, were in the ranks two months later when the British attacked an American position outside Boston in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Salem has been honored for firing the shot that killed Major John Pitcairn, the British officer who led the Redcoats when they had attacked his small unit at Lexington. Unable to venture outside Boston and then threatened with cannon surrounding the city, the British left Boston for New York. As the war changed from a Massachusetts endeavor to a broader conflict throughout the colonies, the politics of race changed dramatically.

Blacks had been welcomed in the New England militia, but Congress initially decided against having them in the Continental army. Congress needed support from the South if all the colonies were to win their independence from England. Since southern plantation owners wanted to keep their slaves, they were afraid to give guns to blacks. Congress ordered all blacks removed from the army, but black veterans appealed directly to George Washington, <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-contributions-to-american-history/>

who took up their cause with John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress.

Blacks serving in the army were allowed to stay, but new enlistments were forbidden. Though the Declaration of Independence declared that “ all men were created equal,” many blacks soon saw more opportunity on the British side. The British governor of Virginia promised immediate freedom and wages to any slave who would join the Kings army. Hundreds flocked to the standard of the governor, Lord Dunmore, but he was denied a base on the land by the American forces and many of the blacks who joined him died of smallpox on overcrowded ships. The loyalty of blacks was a serious issue for the American leaders because blacks made up one-fifth of the two million people in the colonies. With the British soldiers already outnumbering the American troops, and recruitment difficult for the patriots, the northern colonies soon again began to enlist blacks.

Rhode Island made up a regiment almost entirely of blacks. As the war continued, colonies as far south as Maryland and Virginia were recruiting free blacks for the American cause. As the war spread into the South, Congress found it needed to recruit slaves. It offered to pay South Carolina slave owners \$1, 000 for able-bodied male slaves.

The slaves would receive no pay, but would be given \$50 and their freedom at the end of the war if they served “ well and faithfully. ” The South Carolina Assembly threatened to leave the war, dooming the plan in the southernmost colonies. Recruitment of blacks to the American cause continued further north, but the patriots had less success than the British.

The offer of immediate freedom extended by Virginia's unfortunate loyalist governor was eventually made by the British throughout the colonies.

Slaves joined the British by the tens of thousands. The fate of the loyalist blacks varied considerably. Some were captured by Americans and either returned to their masters or treated as war loot and sold back into slavery. Approximately 20, 000 were with the British at the end of the war, taken to Canada or the Caribbean.

Some became the founders of the British colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa. Even though the British offered slaves a better deal, many blacks served on the American side. They made up a sizeable share of the men in the Continental navy, state navies and the large force of American privateers. Blacks had long been in the labor force on ships and at seaports. On the water, then as now, skill counted for more than politics.

The precise role of blacks in the revolution is difficult to quantify. Blacks in those days generally did not write. The people who did write early histories of the revolution were whites and concentrated on the efforts of white men. Also, many participants in the revolution were not specifically identified by race in the documents of the time and historians now have no way of knowing whether they were black.

When blacks were allowed to serve in the American military, they often did work as laborers, sometimes in addition to regular soldier duties. Usually they were privates, though a few rose to command small groups of men. The words of the Declaration of Independence were taken literally by blacks and

some whites. In, 1780, Pennsylvania became the first colony to pass a law phasing out slavery.

Children born to slaves after that date were granted their freedom when they reached 28. Other northern states followed. The Superior Court of Massachusetts held in 1783 that slavery violated the state constitution, and New Hampshire also ended slavery by a court ruling. Vermont outlawed slavery and Connecticut and Rhode Island passed gradual emancipation laws.

New York outlawed slavery in 1799 and New Jersey followed in 1804. The international slave trade was outlawed in 1808. Progress then came to a stop. A boom in cotton production spread the slave economy into the lower Mississippi Valley.

Slave states were careful to control at least half the political power in the federal government, blocking any national movement against slavery until the Civil War. The 54th Massachusetts Regiment On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in the rebelling territories of the confederacy and authorizing Black enlistment in the Union Army. Since the beginning of the Civil War, free Black people in general, and Black Bostonians in particular, were ready to gather arms on behalf of the Union, yet they were prevented from doing so. Popular racial stereotypes and institutional discrimination against Blacks in the military contributed to the prevailing myth that Black men lacked the intelligence and bravery necessary to serve their country. By the fall of 1862,

however, the lack of White Union enlistment and confederate victories at Antietam forced the U.

S. government to reconsider its racist policy. As Congress met in October to address the issue of Black enlistment, various troops of Black volunteers had already been organized, including the First South Carolina and the Kansas Colored Troops. It wasn't until January 26, 1863; however, that secretary of war Edwin Stanton authorized the enlistment of Black troops. As a result, the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer infantry was founded, becoming the first all-Black Union regiment raised in the north.

Training began for Black volunteers at Camp Meigs in Reedville, MA on February 21, 1863. Although some members of the community voiced opposition to the prevention of Black men from achieving the rank of colonel or officer, most community activists urged Black men to seize the opportunity to serve in the Union forces. The fear many Black volunteers had about the potential racism of White officers and colonels was calmed when Massachusetts Governor John Andrew assured Bostonians that White officers assigned to the 54th Regiment would be “ young men of military experience, of firm anti-slavery principles, ambitious, superior to a vulgar contempt for color, and having faith in the capacity of colored men for military service. ” Andrew held to his word, appointing 25-year-old Robert Gould Shaw as colonel and George P. Hallowell as Lieutenant.

The son of wealthy abolitionists, Shaw had been educated in Europe and at Harvard before joining the seventh New York National Guard in 1861. In 1862, when Governor Andrew contacted Shaw's father about the prospect of

commissioning his son as colonel of the soon-to-be organized fifty-fourth, Shaw was an officer in the Second Massachusetts Infantry. Although reluctant to accept the commission, Shaw eventually became colonel. By the time training began at Camp Meigs, Shaw and his officers began work with the soldiers whose bravery would forever change public perception of Black military skill and valor.

Black community leaders across the country such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown served as recruiting agents for the Union army. As a result, over 1000 volunteers enlisted in the 54th Regiment, a response so overwhelming that Massachusetts organized a second Black regiment, the fifty-fifth. Men of the fifty-fourth represented twenty-four states, the District of Columbia, the West Indies, and Africa. Approximately 25% of them had been slaves, over 50% were literate, and, although as civilians they had worked in forty-six different occupations, the overwhelming majorities (55%) were common laborers.

Regardless of origin, occupation, or social class, the men of the 54th Regiment both inspired Boston's Black community and provided a symbol of pride for abolitionists across the country. Activists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass visited Camp Meigs to show their support. Although the organization of the 54th Regiment resolved the conflict over Black enlistment in the Union army, the struggle of Black soldiers to gain respect in the military was just beginning. Upon arrival in the south, the Black soldiers were often treated as common laborers and the potential for their valor on the battlefield was disregarded. Upon arriving in Georgia on June 11, they were ordered by Col.

James Montgomery of the Department of the South to raid the town of Darien. Reports of Black soldiers burning buildings and ravaging the homes of townspeople confirmed stereotypes of Black soldiers as un-trainable brutes. Col. Shaw found the raid on Darien barbarous and distasteful, and sent a letter to Brigadier General George C. Strong, requesting that the men be used in the planned attack on Fort Wagner, South Carolina.

On July 16, the 54th Regiment fought alongside White soldiers of the 10th Connecticut Infantry in a skirmish on James Island, SC. This battle redeemed the Black soldiers' fighting ability in the eyes of White skeptics, including General Strong, who commanded the 54th Regiment to lead the assault on Fort Wagner, scheduled for July 18. Strategically, a successful attack on Fort Wagner would allow Union forces to seize control of Charleston Harbor. Located on Morris Island, Fort Wagner protected Battery Gregg overlooking Fort Sumter.

Thus, seizure of Fort Wagner was valuable because it enabled the Union to shell Sumter and close the harbor to confederate blockade runners, thereby paving the way for further Union attack on Charleston. Fort Wagner was located at the northern tip of Morris Island, and was controlled by 1700 troops and 17 artillery guns. Depleted to just over 600 men by the skirmish two days previous, the men of the 54th Regiment were ordered to lead the assault on Fort Wagner with the backing of regiments from New York, Connecticut, Maine, and Pennsylvania. Before the charge commenced, Colonel Shaw ordered the regiment to "prove yourselves as men." Within 200 feet of the Fort, the confederates began to attack as the brave men of

the 54th Regiment struggled through darkness, four-foot deep water, and marshland.

Colonel Shaw, accompanied by dwindling numbers of dying men, managed to reach the top of the parapet where a bitter hand-to-hand combat ensued, the Black Union soldiers with bayonets against the White Confederate soldiers with handspikes and gun rammers. Colonel Shaw was mortally wounded with a pierce through the heart, along with a dozen of his men. Meanwhile, members of the 54th Regiment - some wounded, some dying - began to retreat; those who refused to back down were taken prisoner. As the smoke cleared, evidence of Confederate victory was immediately apparent, with 174 Rebel casualties and 1515 Union soldiers dead or wounded.

Of the eleven regiments who participated in the Union assault, the fifty-fourth Regiment accrued the most casualties, with 256 of their 600 men dead or wounded. Despite the heavy losses, the assault on Fort Wagner proved to the nation and the world the valor of Black soldiers in general and the men of the 54th Regiment in particular. From the ranks of the fifty-fourth came stories of unflinching patriotism and undying glory. The men of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, their White officers, colonel, and allies, not only struck a blow for American freedom and unity, they also proved to the nation and the world the valor, bravery, and devotion of African American soldiers.

In the sacrifice made by Col. Shaw and his soldiers, Americans witnessed, for the first time, the supremacy of equality over racism, discrimination, and

ignorance. Upon his death at Fort Wagner, the body of Col. Shaw was placed in a mass grave on Morris Island along with the bodies of his soldiers.

The lack of proper military burial for a man who had distinguished himself as a soldier and as a leader was intended to insult the honor of Shaw and his family, who were deemed as race traitors by Confederates and White unionists alike. However, upon learning that his son had been buried with his black soldiers, Francis Shaw stated, with dignity, that “ We hold that a soldier’s most appropriate burial place is on the field where he has fallen. ”

This statement and the honor displayed by the Shaw family and veterans of the fifty-fourth helped immortalize Shaw and his men as symbols of the Civil War battle for unity and equality. As a result of the 54th Regiment, over 180,000 Black men enlisted under the Union flag between 1863 and 1865.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MILITARY SERVICE from WWI through WWII During the global conflicts of the first half of the 20th century, U. S.

servicemen fought in Europe for the first time in the nation’s history. African Americans were among the troops committed to combat in World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII), even though they and other black Americans were denied the full blessings of the freedom for which the United States had pledged to fight. Traditional racist views about the use of black troops in combat initially excluded African Americans from the early recruiting efforts and much of the actual combat in both wars. Nonetheless, large numbers of African Americans still volunteered to fight for their country in 1917-18 and 1940-45.

Once again, many black servicemen hoped their military contribution and sacrifice would prove to their white countrymen that African Americans desired and deserved a fully participatory role in U. S. society. Unfortunately, the deeply entrenched negative racial attitudes prevalent among much of the white American population, including many of the nation's top military and civilian leaders, made it very difficult for blacks to serve in the military establishment of this period. African-American servicemen suffered numerous indignities and received little respect from white troops and civilians alike.

The historic contributions by blacks to the defense of the United States were usually ignored or downplayed, while combat failures similar to those of whites and violent racial incidents often provoked by whites were exaggerated into a condemnation of all African Americans. In the " Jim Crow" world of pre-1945 America, black servicemen confronted not only the hostility of enemies abroad but that of enemies at home. African-American soldiers and sailors had two formidable obstacles to deal with: discrimination and segregation. Yet, black servicemen in both world wars repeatedly demonstrated their bravery, loyalty, and ability in combat or in support of frontline troops. Oftentimes, they accomplished these tasks without proper training or adequate equipment.

Poor communications and a lack of rapport with their white officers were two additional burdens hampering the effectiveness and efficiency of African Americans in the military. Too frequently, there was little or no recognition or gratitude for their accomplishments. One of the worst slights of both wars was the willingness of the white establishment to allow racism to influence

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the award of the prestigious Medal of Honor. Although several exceptionally heroic African Americans performed deeds worthy of this honor, not one received at the time the award that their bravery and self-sacrifice deserved.

It took over 70 years for the United States to rectify this error for WWI and over 50 years for WWII. Despite the hardships and second-class status, their participation in both wars helped to transform many African-American veterans as well as helped to eventually change the United States. Though still limited by discrimination and segregation at home, their sojourn in Europe during WWI and WWII made many black servicemen aware that the racial attitudes so common among white Americans did not prevail everywhere else. The knowledge that skin color did not preclude dignity and respect made many black veterans unwilling to submit quietly to continuing racial discrimination once they returned to the United States. In addition, the growing importance of black votes beginning in the 1930s and 1940s forced the nation's political and military leaders to pay more attention to African Americans' demands, particularly in regard to the military. Although it was a tedious and frustrating process, one too often marked by cosmetic changes rather than real reform, by the end of WWII, the U.

S. military establishment slowly began to make some headway against racial discrimination and segregation within its ranks. The stage was set for President Harry S Truman's landmark executive order of 26 July 1948. Another main contribution of note would be the trials and tribulations of the Tuskegee Airmen.

In the 1940's, it was still believed that Blacks were incapable of flying aircraft. This myth was dispelled with the help of the U. S. Congress.

On June 27, 1939 - THE CIVILIAN PILOT TRAINING ACT was passed. This solitary ACT helped to create a reserve of civilian pilots to be called in case of War. Young black pilots were given the opportunity to train with U. S. approved programs located at TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE. The SELECTIVE SERVICE ACT OF 1940 also increased the opportunity for a broader participation of Blacks in the military when it banned discrimination in the selection and training of all American citizens because of race and color.

The success of the CIVILIAN PILOT TRAINING ACT helped put the 99TH PURSUIT SQUADRON OF TUSKEGEE on the map. It was said that " the success of Negro youth in the Army Air Force would be predicated upon the success of the ' Tuskegee Experiment. "' HBO's docudrama, THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN, is a good depiction of this era of Black Americans seeking acceptance as military pilots. Because of the opportunity provided by the Civilian Pilot Training Act, the number of Blacks in the ARMY AIR FORCE jumped from 2, 250 in 1941 to over 145, 000 by 1944. The two major groups to see combat as AAF men were the 99TH PURSUIT SQUADRON and the 332ND FIGHTER GROUP.

Out of the 332nd Group came the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Squadrons under the command of Lieutenant Colonel BENJAMIN O. DAVIS, SR. , who became America's FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN GENERAL on October 25, 1940. By 1944, the 99th was added to the 332nd and participated in campaigns in Sicily, Rome, and Romania. The 99th and 332nd earned many

DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATIONS. These historical examples are but a small sample of the many great contributions and sacrifices made by black people in order to secure freedom and prosperity for this great nation.

We owe them a debt than can never be fully repaid. If anything these great contributions should curtail any negative or racial thoughts toward such a magnanimous people. You would think that with all that has transpired throughout history, that we as a people could live and coexist together with peace and harmony. My only hope is that with time people will come to realize that we are all not that different from one another and that we can thrive together for a better future for all of us.