

The massachusetts 54th regiment history essay



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The Massachusetts 54th Regiment was a group of African-Americans who fought for and served the Union during the Civil War. The 54th Regiment was established in March of 1863, and authorized by the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, who gave John Andrew the authority to create the Regiment. The 54th Regiment was based in the Northern United States, specifically in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts 54th Regiment was important because African-Americans were allowed to fight in a war as free men, not as slaves who were forced to fight. The 54th Regiment proved that African-American men were just as capable as white men and deserving of equality.

The soldiers who formed the 54th Regiment were not experienced soldiers; they were ordinary African-American people - carpenters, painters, laborers, and medical people. The Regiment was to recruit African-Americans to help join together with the Union Army. Most of the men who fought for the 54th Regiment did not live in Massachusetts, so recruiting took place in the Northern states where there was less slavery.

Although inexperienced, the 54th Regiment proved that they were just as capable as their white comrades. An example of this was the Battle of Fort Wagner. The 54th Regiment led the way to Fort Wagner where the battle started on July 18, 1863. Fort Wagner was a structure made from sticks and sand that the Confederates used as a fort. The Union's 54th Regiment tried to overtake Fort Wagner in order to them take over Fort Sumter. It was so dark that the soldiers could not see in front of them. As they approached Fort Wagner, gunshots came from all directions, and often times soldiers would open fire, shooting shots back and forth not knowing who they were hitting. The 54th was forced to retreat; however, they did not give up. They

proceeded to the fort a second time, this time fighting back as hard as they could. They were under attack by cannons, and many soldiers died from stray gunshots. Throughout the mob-like attack, the 54th Regiment was still brave and strong, forward with the 54th! A white lieutenant had reported, "Valiantly did the heroic descendants of Africa move forward," (Reef 41).

During the battle, a twenty-three-year-old soldier named Sergeant William Carney saw a bullet hit the regiment's soldier who was carrying the American flag. He quickly ran to the bearer, grabbed the flag, and carried it to the front of the attack. He held the flag high for all to see and to give courage and strength to his fellow soldiers. As he did this, bullets hit him in the head. At last the soldiers were called to retreat, and Carney crawled back to base. The flag never touched the ground. For his extraordinary bravery, Carney was the first African-American soldier to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Although the Union did not win Fort Wagner, the 54th was acknowledged for its bravery and service. The men had once again shown their "willingness and ability to fight," (Reef 55). Even the white soldiers commended the 54th on their efforts. As the 54th marched by, white soldiers in camps called out with their praise, saying "Hurrah, boys! you saved the Tenth Connecticut!" (Cox 73).

Many soldiers went above and beyond the call of duty and were recognized for their bravery and dedication. A few that stood out were Frederick Douglass, Miles James, and "Big Jack" Johnson. Fredrick Douglas helped recruit African-American soldiers for the Union. His son, Lewis, was among

the first to enlist. " Liberty won by white men would lack half its luster. Who would be free themselves must strike the blow. Better even to die free than to live slaves" (Black 35). Miles James was a brave and strong soldier who was wounded in the war within enemy range, but still fought despite the fact that he only had one arm that was functional. He loaded and shot his shoulder weapon with one hand. He was soon killed but was able to kill a few more soldiers before death upon him. Another brave and tough soldier was " Big Jack" Jackson. He killed many Confederate soldiers and kept fighting even though he was bleeding from bayonet wounds. He too would not be a coward but a hero who still killed people even as wounded. He was a powerful soldier until he lost his life to a Confederate bullet. " I never saw a braver company of men in my life" (Reef 8) commented Captain Miller, Big Jack's captain. These are only some of the thousands who were counted as heroes and soldiers.

The 54th Regiment was a positive, historical movement in Civil War and US history. After the Civil War, as a result of the 54th Regiment, African-Americans earned a reputation as " valiant, trustworthy, and intelligent people" (Black 55).

The US Constitution was amended in 1869 giving black males the right to vote. " The men who had fought for their country would finally be given a share in the running of that country" (Black 56). The 54th of Massachusetts proved that African-Americans were worthy of citizenship. Frederick Douglass said " there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States" (Reef 36). A large stone

memorial located in Boston Common in Massachusetts, shows members of the 54th marching into battle with their guns lifted to their shoulders.

In September 1996, the men who fought and died as part of the 54th Regiment, along with all other African-Americans who fought for their country afterwards, were finally recognized for their dedication in serving the Union. A memorial was erected in Washington, D. C., listing the names of 185, 000 black soldiers and white officers.

The African-Americans were free to fight in the Civil War, but they had to be a free man. They could not be slaves or escaped slaves. The African-Americans won the victory of Fort Wagner, but lost nearly half of their regiment. There was a total of 36, 000 African-Americans who lost their lives, serving for the Union Army. That is why the 54th of Massachusetts was important.