54TH MASSACHUSETTS VOLUNTEER INFANTRY REGIMENT TRAIL

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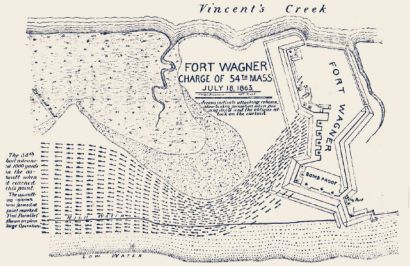
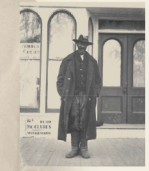
honors the men from Berkshire and Litchfield counties who served in the "Glory" Regiment by directing visitors to places they lived, went to church, are remembered, and are buried.

One of the most celebrated military units in American history, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment became widely known through the 1989 movie *Glory*. The regiment and its first commander, Col. Robert Gould Shaw, are famous in American history, yet few of the individual men are. Most are totally forgotten. When they returned home, they were honored as veterans and celebrated on monuments, in cemeteries, and at public events. Even so, Black-white relations had not changed, and racism and discrimination kept Black men from employment in skilled jobs, from political power, and from owning much property. Despite the barriers they faced, the men supported their families, and some found independence by helping to establish Black churches and communities in the Berkshires and by joining the integrated Grand Army of the Republic, the politically powerful Civil War veterans' organization.





The 54th's significance in American history is that the discipline and bravery displayed by the 54th soldiers in battle convinced President Abraham Lincoln and Union generals that Black men would make able soldiers. Lincoln then opened military service in the Civil War to Black men. Although the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 opened the door for Black men to serve in the Union Army, the men—and Lincoln—faced strong resistance to their service from many politicians and generals. Some believed that the war was about the union and not slavery. They and others argued that Black men would not make good soldiers, and they feared that Black men across the lines would further enrage the Confederates.

When Congress refused to fund the formation of Black units, John A. Andrew, the abolitionist governor of Massachusetts, sought and received permission from the War Department to form the 54th as a state unit. His goal was to use the 54th as a model regiment to prove to the doubters that Black men would fight ably and bravely. Between February 1863 and September 1865, over 1,300 men served in the 54th. The Upper Housatonic Valley contributed 82 men—one white and 81 Black. The total number of Black men from Berkshire and Litchfield counties who served in the Civil War was actually considerably more than these 81. Others served in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry, the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, and the 29th Connecticut Infantry. In all, about 75% of eligible Black men from the region fought in the war. At first, all of the 54th's officers were white.

THE 54TH IN ACTION

The 54th was organized and trained at Readville, Mass., from February to May 1863. Training was careful and rigorous, and Gov. Andrew and Col. Shaw made sure that the men were especially well provisioned and equipped. The 54th deployed to the South on May 28, arriving at Hilton Head, S.C., on June 3. Over the next two years they saw action at Darien, Ga.; James Island, Ft. Wagner, Honey Hill, and Boykin's Mill, S.C.; and Olustee, Fla.

What earned the soldiers of the 54th fame was their having led the charge against Ft. Wagner, a heavily protected Confederate fortification on Morris Island at the outer edge of Charleston Harbor. The Union force was defeated, and many of the 54th men who participated were killed (including Col. Shaw), wounded, or taken prisoner. Their bravery impressed Lincoln and silenced his critics. Lincoln then authorized the recruitment of Black troops:

When victory is won, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue and clenched teeth, and steady eye and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation. I fear, however, that there will also be some white ones, unable to forget that with malignant heart and deceitful speech, they strove to hinder it.

In all, about 180,000 Black men served in the Union Army in the Civil War, in 166 different units. The 54th's reputation for bravery stayed with them over the course of the war.

The "54th Mass." was discharged at Boston on Sept. 2, 1865. Of the men from the Berkshires, 28% were killed or died of disease and another 16% were discharged because of wounds or illness. Most of the men who survived returned home and lived out their lives in the Berkshires and northwest Connecticut. A few chose to make their lives elsewhere.

Reverend Samuel Harrison in 1849.

THE FIGHT FOR EQUAL PAY

In addition to having to fight the Confederates on the battlefield, the men of the 54th had to fight the government for equal pay. The men were promised $13 a month—the same pay as white soldiers. Yet when they lined up at the pay table, they were given only $10 a month. Col. Shaw encouraged the men to protest, and he was supported by Gov. Andrew and the regiment's chaplain, Rev. Samuel Harrison of Pittsfield. The men boycotted the pay table and wrote letters to Lincoln and newspapers. Congress finally granted their appeal for justice and in September 1864 ordered that they be paid in full from the time of their enlistments. The back pay came to $170,000, of which $100,000 was sent home to wives or parents.