

The 54th Regiment of Massachusetts: African-American Soldiers of the Civil War

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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, , were ready to fight on behalf of the Union, yet they were prevented from doing so. Popular racial stereotypes and discrimination against Blacks in the military contributed to the prevailing myth that Black men did not have 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.(Emilio 1990)Training began for Black volunteers at Camp Meigs in Readville, 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." (Emilio 1990) 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 Mass..... middle of paperil 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. The story of the "Fighting Fifty-Forth" is a true testament of how when a country is in war or a time of despair they can ban together as one , regardless of race to achieve an objective. Although they were treated unfairly and discriminated against, the 54th regiment paved the way for equality of not only African-American soldiers but for all African-Americans. Bibliography Duncan, Russell, ed. Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992. Emilio, Luis F. A Brave Black Regiment: History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry 1863-1865 3rd Ed. Salem, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 1990. Glathaar, Joseph T. Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers. New York: The Free Press Inc., 1990. O'Connor, Thomas. Civil War Boston: Homefront and Battlefield. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997. Quarles, Benjamin. The Negro in the Civil War. New York: Da Capo Press, 1953.

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