

The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment

Finding glory amid turmoil

1863 – 1865

Committed

Heroic

Patriotic

Honorable



Revolutionary War

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Army was racially integrated. Free and enslaved black men fought as both patriots and loyalists in the conflict.

This image depicts Peter Salem at Bunker Hill. Peter Salem was an African-American from Massachusetts who served as a U.S. soldier in the American Revolutionary War. Born into slavery in Framingham, he was later freed by his master.



The Militia Acts of 1792

After the Revolutionary War, the new nation of the United States needed to provide for the organization of state militias for the sake of its own defense. The Militia Acts of 1792 were reluctantly adopted by the Second Congress as urged by George Washington.

These acts provided authority to the President to call upon militias in circumstances such as invasion or rebellion and limited military service to “free able-bodied white male” citizens. Despite this official exclusion of non-whites from the military, black sailors served in both the American and British Navy during the War of 1812.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

An ACT to provide for calling forth the MILITIA to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions.

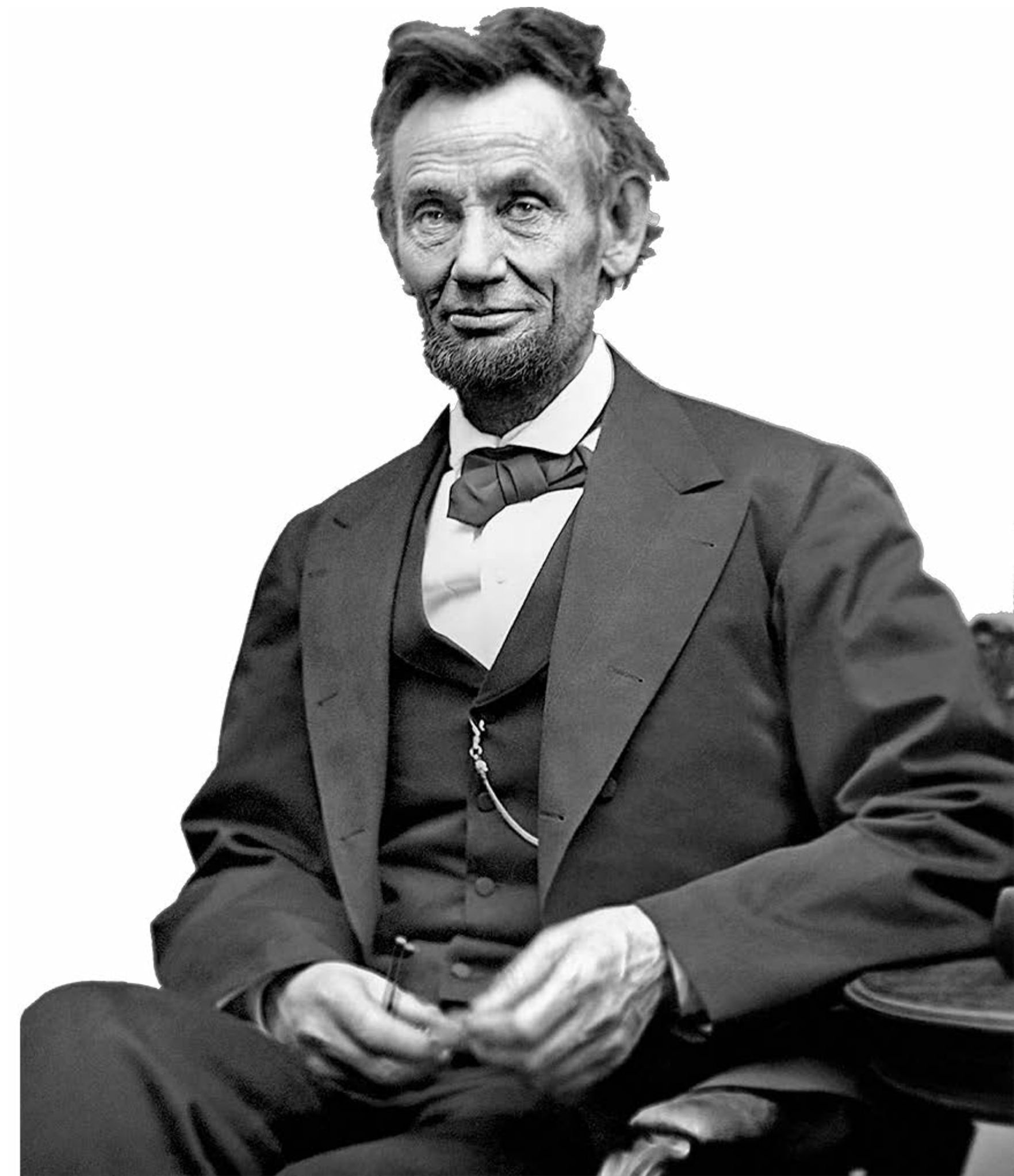
CHAPTER XXXIII.

An ACT more effectually to provide for the National Defence by establishing an Uniform Militia throughout the United States.

Civil War

But in the Civil War, African-Americans were formally recruited into the U.S. Army.

President Abraham Lincoln's September 22, 1862 Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves held in the rebel states and permitted black men to fight in the Union's armed forces.



President Abraham Lincoln as photographed by Alexander Gardner.

Massachusetts Recruits Men of African Descent

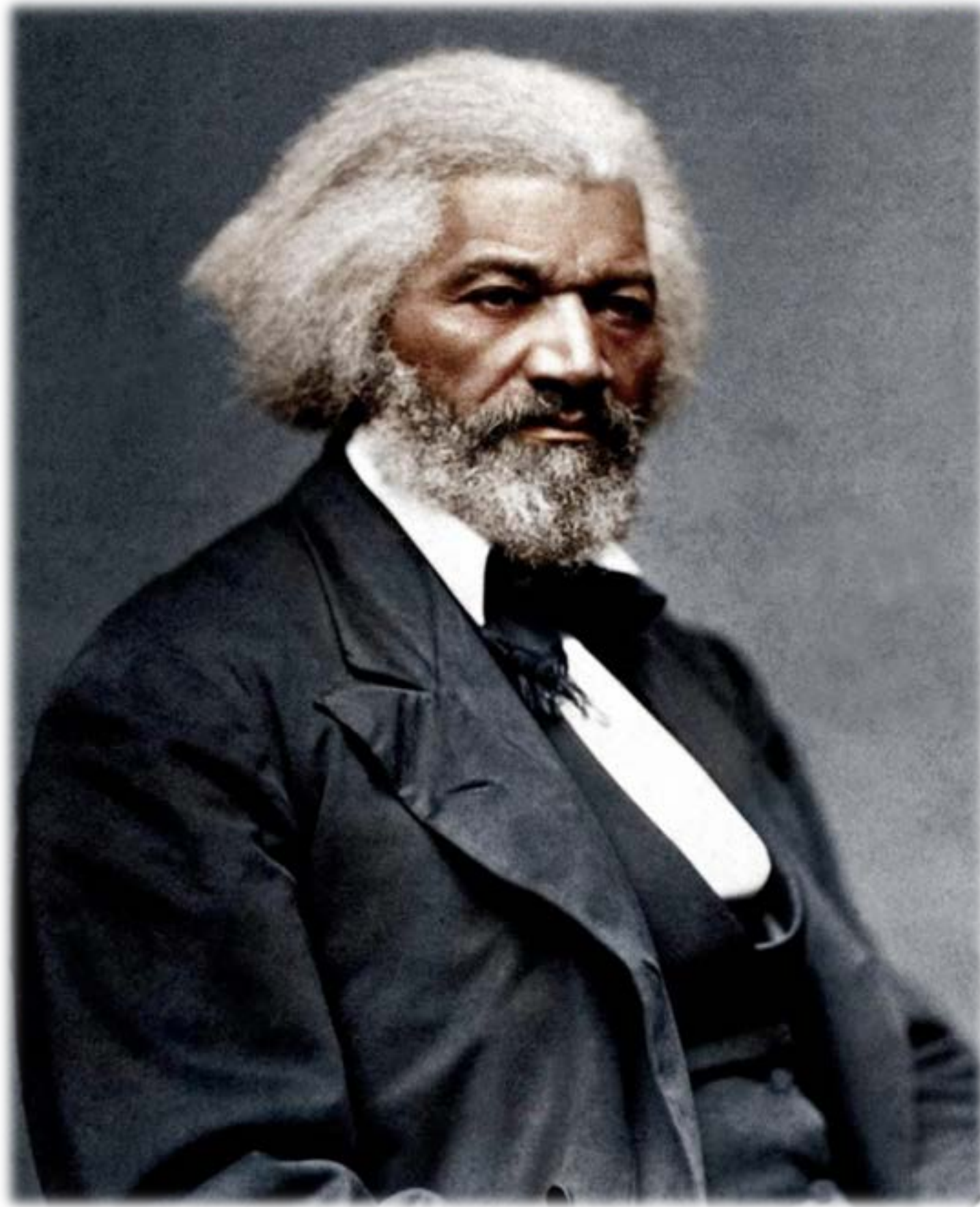
John A. Andrew, governor of Massachusetts and committed abolitionist, announced the recruitment of African-Americans as soon as the Proclamation took effect in 1863.

Because the state had relatively few black residents, the first wave of recruits came from all over the Union, including New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana – even Canada and Bermuda. While most volunteers had been born free in the North, a significant minority of recruits were themselves escaped slaves.

In this recruitment poster a bounty of \$100 was offered along with the lure of a salary, food, clothing, and aid for the soldier's families.



Frederick Douglass



To help recruit black volunteers to serve in the Union Army, prominent abolitionist George Luther Stearns organized the “Black Committee,” made up of black and white anti-slavery activists.

A key figure in this committee was the great abolitionist orator and writer **Frederick Douglass**, who proved instrumental in helping to recruit black Americans to fight, arguing that men “who would be free themselves must strike the first blow.”

Douglass traveled the country encouraging black men to enlist.

Frederick Douglass

Douglass saw African-American troops as crucial to defeating the South, but also as a path to postwar equality: *“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S.; 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 the earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States.”*





Frederick Douglass & Sons

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Two of Douglass’s sons, Charles and Lewis, who lived with their father in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, D.C., travelled to Boston in 1863 and enlisted in the 54th.

Sergeant Major Lewis Henry Douglass



Colonel Robert Gould Shaw



Col. Robert Gould Shaw

Colonel Robert Gould Shaw was born into wealth, privilege, and comfort, but clearly had a restless disposition. His parents were prominent figures in Boston and New York society, members of the Unitarian church, and principled abolitionists.

Robert was raised among intellectuals and toured Europe with his family as a youth, studying in Switzerland and Germany but often getting into trouble. In the years before the Civil War, Shaw was a student at Harvard but dropped out before earning his degree.

When war broke out, Shaw seemed to find his calling, enlisting in the 7th New York Militia. He fought with distinction at the Battle of Antietam, the single deadliest day of the war, and was promoted to captain in August 1862.



Colonel Robert Gould Shaw

In early 1863, at age 25, Shaw was asked by Governor Andrew to lead Massachusetts's newly formed "colored" regiment, the 54th. At first, Shaw refused, still ambivalent about his parents' strict abolitionist values.

But after pressure from his mother and other disappointed family members, Shaw agreed, accepting his position as Colonel of the 54th. Colonel Shaw supervised the training of volunteers at Camp Meigs, enforcing strict discipline on his troops.

A mural in the Recorder of Deeds building in Washington, DC, shows the 54th Massachusetts regiment and the death of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw during the attack on Fort Wagner in 1863.



Sergeant William Harvey Carney



William Harvey Carney was unusual among soldiers in the 54th for two reasons: he had experienced slavery first-hand and he actually lived in Massachusetts. Born enslaved in Norfolk, Virginia, he escaped to freedom in New Bedford, MA on the Underground Railroad and joined his father, who had earlier escaped the same way. They eventually bought the rest of their family's freedom.

William Harvey Carney volunteered for the 54th as soon as recruitment began in March 1863, fighting with the infantry for all its early battles, including the charge on Fort Wagner.

The Hallowell Brothers

Norwood “Pen” Penrose and Edward “Ned” Needles Hallowell were born into an affluent Philadelphia Quaker family and, like Shaw and most of the other white officers of the 54th, came from a family of committed abolitionists. Their family’s home in Philadelphia had been a stop on the Underground Railroad.



Ned



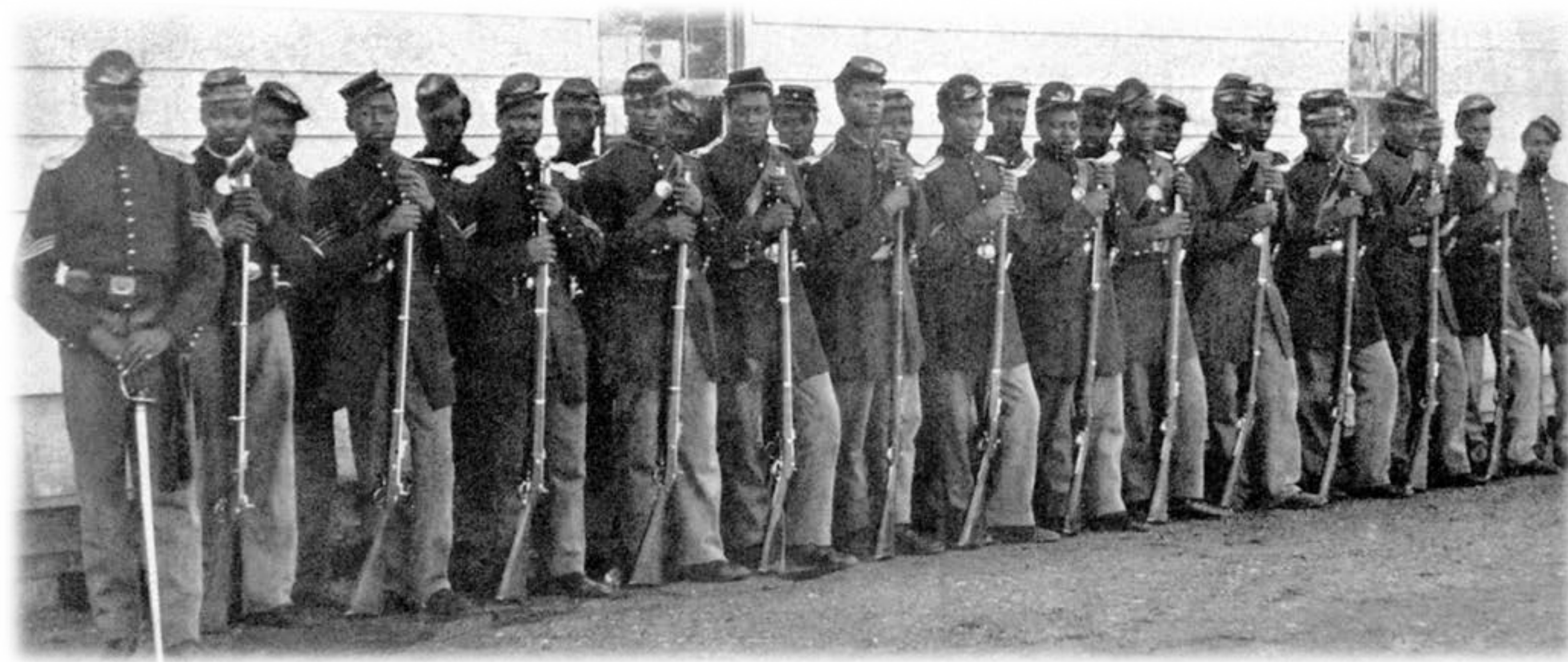
Pen

Trained to be Soldiers

By May 1863, there were over 1,000 soldiers in what was to become known as the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment – “the 54th.” They trained at Camp Meigs in Boston with 37 white officers, including Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and Lieutenant Colonel Norwood Penrose Hallowell, both veterans of the Battle of Antietam.

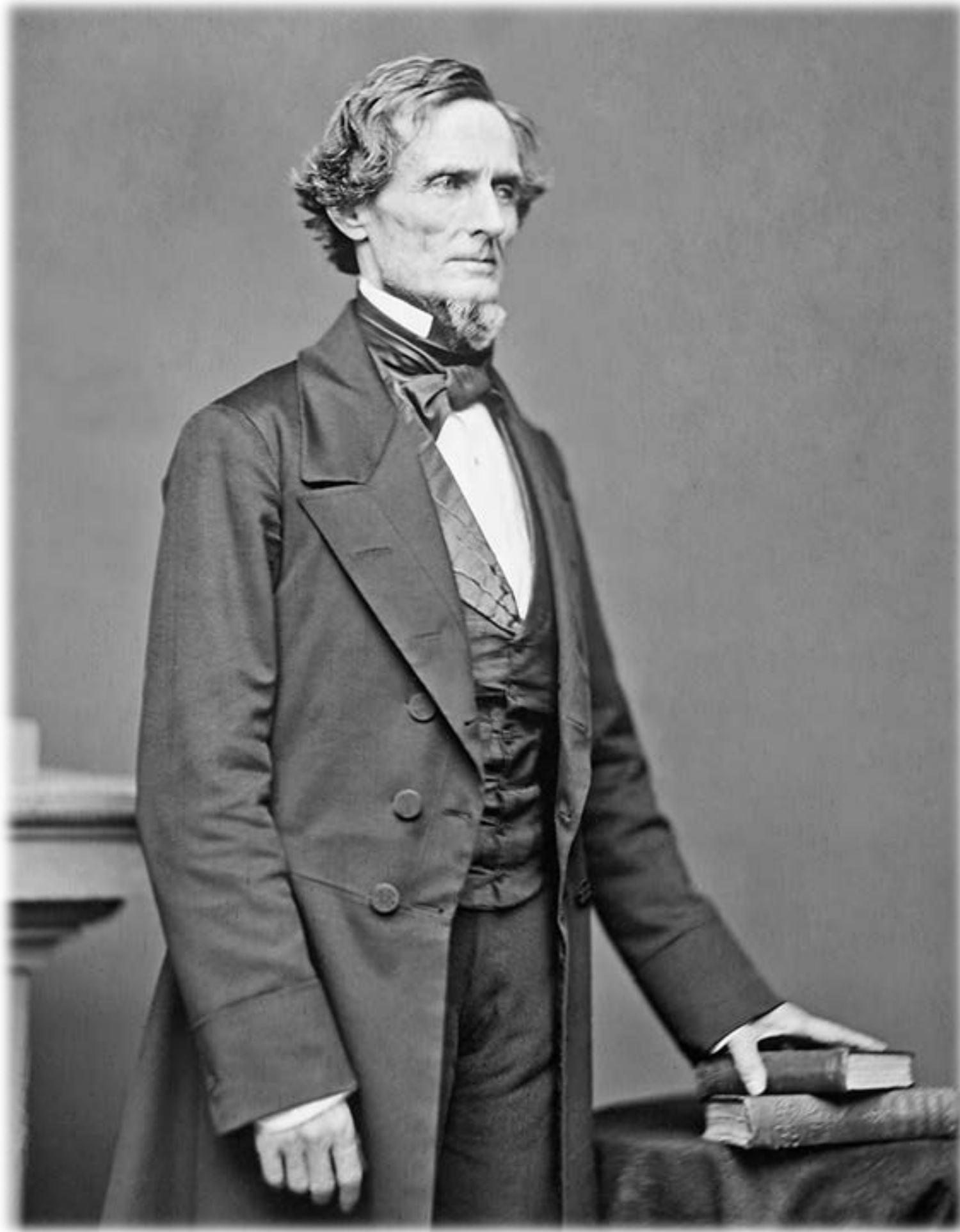
On May 28, the 54th was given a jubilant send-off parade by a crowd of supporters, including prominent abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Governor Andrew.

That night, the regiment boarded a ship for Charleston, South Carolina.



The 54th regiment was one of the first official black units in the United States during the Civil War.

The Enemy



By the time the 54th set out for the battlefield, the Confederate government had denounced the use of black infantry by the Union.

In what later historians have called the “Anti-Emancipation Proclamation,” Confederate States of America (CSA) President Jefferson Davis accused black Northern troops and their white officers of inciting a slave insurrection, and therefore they were not ordinary soldiers but “robbers and criminals deserving death.”

The men of the 54th went into battle knowing that, if defeated, they would either be enslaved or executed.

Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, as photographed by Matthew Brady.

Burning of Darien, Georgia

The first military action the 54th saw was less than heroic: the burning of Darien, Georgia, a small coastal town with no Confederate military presence. The 54th was accompanying another recently-formed “colored” regiment under the command of white officers, the 2nd South Carolina.

The 2nd consisted largely of freed slaves, organized in Union-held areas of South Carolina like Hilton Head and Beaufort. It practiced guerilla warfare throughout the South, led by Col. James Montgomery. As senior officer, Montgomery ordered the troops to ransack the surrounding homes, populated only by women and a few old men. When the plundering was finished, **Montgomery ordered that Darien be razed.**



Darien: On the Georgia Tidewater Loading Sea Island Cotton c. 1862, a painting by John Stobart.



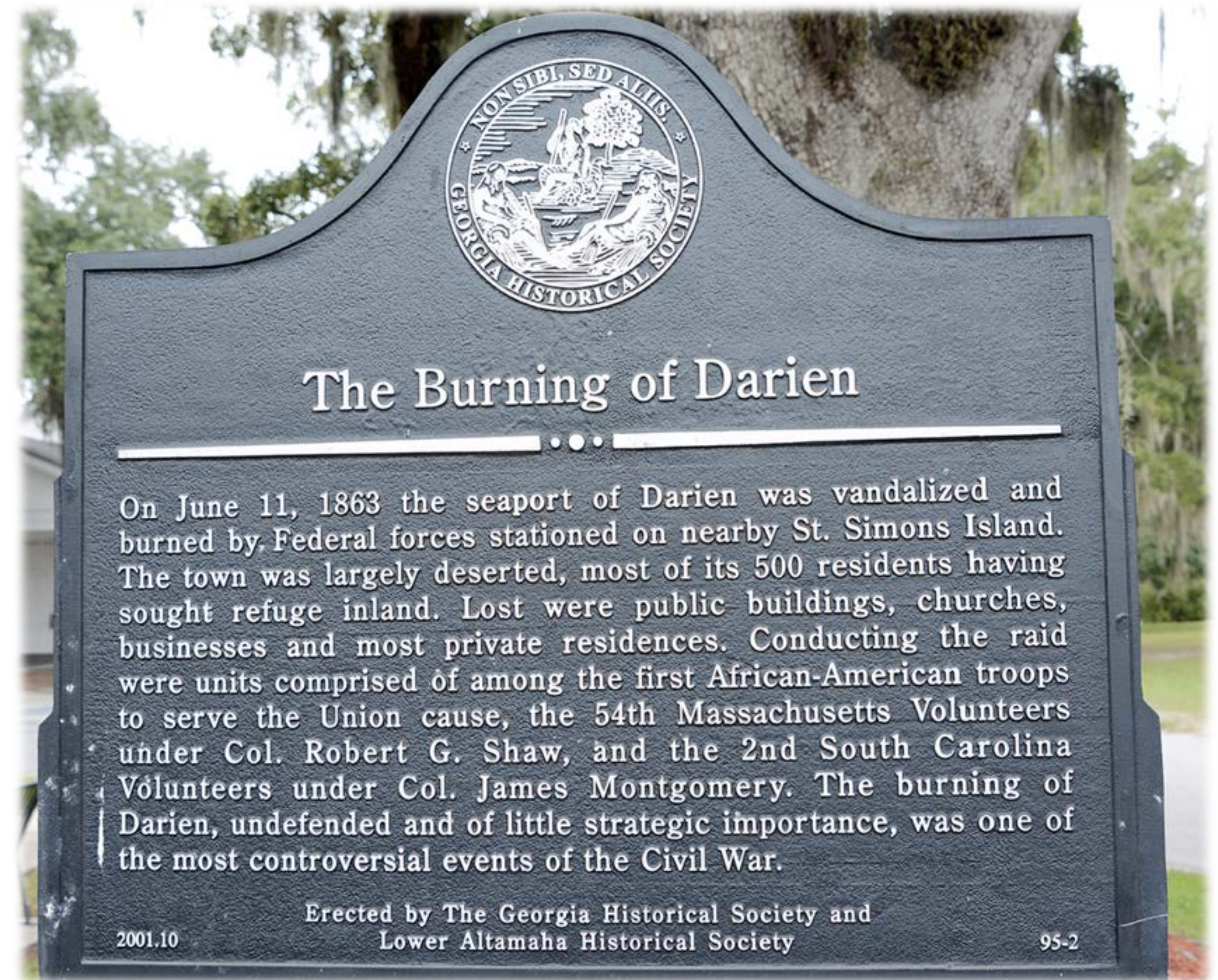
The historic Adam Strain Building, built of tabby, circa 1815 in beautiful Darien. It was one of only two structures to survive the 1863 burning of Darien by Union troops.

Burning of Darien, Georgia

Col. Shaw was horrified and protested under threat of court martial, but eventually relented. The 54th assisted in burning Darien to the ground. Shaw worried, with good reason, that the incident would seriously damage the image of his men at the start of their service.

“The burning of Darien, undefended and of little strategic importance, was one of the most controversial events of the Civil War.” →

Many historians suggest that Shaw later volunteered the 54th to lead a daring assault on Fort Wagner, a key Confederate beachhead, in order to redeem his men—and himself.



Colonel James Montgomery



Col. Montgomery, commander of the Union majority-black 2nd South Carolina volunteers, was a complex and deeply controversial figure.

Montgomery was a devout Christian who forbid cursing and drinking among his volunteers, but also showed no compunction about committing what contemporaries and some later historians considered war crimes.

But Montgomery had already been at war with slavery a decade before the Civil War officially began; a veteran of “Bleeding Kansas” as part of the antislavery “jayhawker” militias, he had fought alongside the abolitionist zealot and martyr John Brown.



“Jayhawker”

“Jawhawking” is a term applied to bands of robbers. They could be heroes or villains, depending on one’s perspective.

Jayhawkers became a generic term for vigilante units who became part of the Union Army. Many were sincere abolitionists, while others were thieves taking advantage of the chaos of war.

INDEPENDENT KANSAS Jay-Hawkers.

Volunteers are wanted for the 1st Regiment of Kansas Volunteer Cavalry to serve our country

During the War.

Horses will be furnished by the Government. Good horses will be purchased of the owner who volunteers. Each man will be mounted, and armed with a Sharp's Rifle, a Navy Revolver, and a Sabre. The pay will be that of the regular volunteer.

Volunteers from Northern Kansas will rendezvous at ~~the~~ Leavenworth^{city}. Those from Southern Kansas will rendezvous at Mound City. Volunteers singly, parts of companies and full companies will be mustered into the United States service as soon as they report themselves to the local recruiting officer at either of the above places. Upon arriving at Mound City volunteers will report themselves to John T. Snoddy, Acting Adjutant. Those who rendezvous at Leavenworth will report themselves to D. R. Anthony, Esq. of that place.

C. R. JENNISON,

Col. 1st Regiment Kansas Vol. Cavalry.

MOUND CITY, Aug. 24, 1861.

Colonel James Montgomery and Harriet Tubman

Only a few days before the razing of Darien, Montgomery led his troops to liberate more than 700 slaves in the Combahee Ferry Raid – assisted by none other than **Harriet Tubman**, famous for her role in the Underground Railroad.

For Montgomery, the Civil War was a battle to destroy slaveholding society, which justified the destruction of otherwise undefended towns like Darien. He told Col. Shaw that Southerners “must be made to feel that this is a real war.” After all, the Confederate government had declared black Union troops to be outlaws, not real soldiers but rebel slaves. So why should his band of rebels obey the conventional rules of war?

Col. Shaw, while outraged by the burning of Darien, was nonetheless drawn to Montgomery’s fierce convictions. Shaw admitted in a letter to his mother that he admired Montgomery and enjoyed the tales of his bloody jayhawking days.



Harriet Tubman

Battle of Fort Wagner: July 18, 1863

The most famous battle the 54th fought was the attempt to take Fort Wagner.

The vital port city of Charleston, South Carolina, was defended by two major Confederate batteries: the famous Fort Sumter, site of the first Civil War battle, to the north, and Fort Wagner to the south. The assault on Fort Wagner was part of the larger siege of Charleston, with Union forces hoping to break the blockade and seize a key Southern city. The 54th had seen their first fighting in a minor skirmish on James Island only days before, and Col. Shaw leapt at the chance to lead the charge on Fort Wagner.

The 54th advanced under heavy artillery fire around 7:45 PM. Union guns had been firing on the fort for hours, but the barrage failed to inflict serious damage on the fort's defenses. Out-numbered, the 54th was pinned down by gunfire from Confederate soldiers along the fort's walls. Finally, the 54th charged up to the parapets with fixed bayonets, ready for hand-to-hand combat. After intense fighting, the regiment fell back to provide cover fire for other Union troops. By 10 PM, the assault was called off, and all Union forces retreated.



Battle of Fort Wagner

Northern reporters who witnessed the battle lauded the 54th's bravery and their willingness to fight and die for freedom, and stories of their heroism galvanized the Union cause and encouraged more African-Americans to enlist in the army. The 54th had also proved to be effective fighters: most of the Southern casualties were inflicted by their initial assault. One newspaper wrote: *"Wagner was the battle-ground, not of regiments, but of centuries and civilizations, and the black man there won his place among the freemen of the age and wiped out the stain of servitude."*



Casualties of Fort Wagner

Colonel Shaw was killed leading his men in the charge on Fort Wagner. Over 250 soldiers of the 600 deployed from the 54th were killed in the failed attack. The regiment had only left Boston a little over a month earlier.

Confederate forces returned the bodies of fallen white Union officers commanding white troops for burial, but Col. Shaw was stripped and buried in a mass grave with his men.

While the Southern generals meant this as an insult, Shaw's family found it a fitting tribute, and made no attempts to reclaim his body.



Shaw commemorated at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MA.

Heroism in Action

William Harvey Carney's actions in the charge on Fort Wagner earned him a promotion to Sergeant. After the soldier carrying the regiment's colors was killed, Carney picked up the flag and carried it to the parapet, charging alongside Colonel Shaw in his last moments.

Carney held the flag aloft until reinforcements arrived and the 54th was able to retreat.



Storming Fort Wagner, a painting by Kurz & Allison, c. 1890, depicting the 54th Massachusetts Regiment's assault on the South Carolina fort on July 18, 1863.

“The old flag never touched the ground!”

Carney, wounded and badly bleeding, limped and crawled back from Fort Wagner to the field hospital, still holding up the flag until he was able to surrender the colors to an officer. The other survivors of the battle greeted him with cheers, but Carney was humble, saying: **“Boys, I only did my duty; the old flag never touched the ground!”**

This proclamation was central in later celebrations of his heroism, and his famous words and deeds were later celebrated in a popular song. An employee of the U.S. Postal Service, Sgt. Carney was a regular speaker at patriotic events later in life.

In 1900, Sergeant William Harvey Carney would become the first African-American awarded the Medal of Honor.



The Sons of Frederick Douglass

Charles and Lewis Douglass were promoted to officers in the 54th, and Lewis was injured in the battle of Fort Wagner.

After the battle, Lewis wrote home to his fiancée:

“We charged that terrible battery on Morris Island known as Fort Wagner ... It was terrible ... The regiment has established its reputation as a fighting regiment, not a man flinched, though it was a trying time ... I wish we had a hundred thousand colored troops—we would put an end to this war.”

Sergeant Major Lewis Henry Douglass



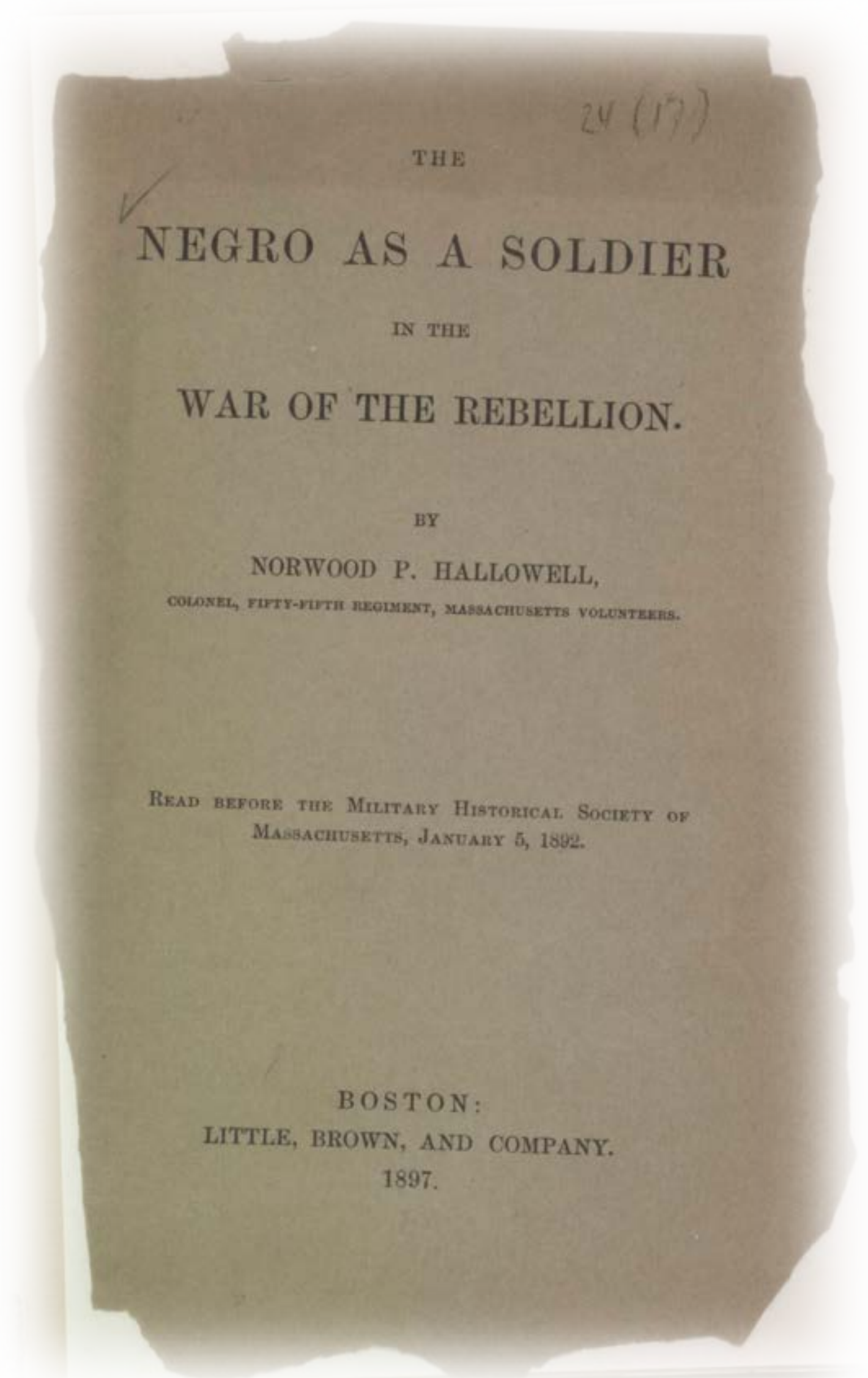


The Hallowell Brothers

Pen helped train the 54th under Col. Shaw and accepted a commission as Colonel of the Massachusetts 55th at the end of May 1863. Still suffering from wounds inflicted at the Battle of Antietam, Pen retired from combat after the capture of Fort Wagner in September 1863 but continued to advocate to Congress for the equal treatment of black soldiers and their importance to the war effort.

Ned replaced his brother as second in command of the 54th and was wounded in the battle of Fort Wagner, leading the charge after Col. Shaw was shot dead. After the battle, Ned was promoted to Colonel and took command of the 54th.

Decades after the war, Norwood Penrose Hallowell reminisced about his family's involvement in the Underground Railroad and praised the courage and skill of black troops he fought with in a speech to the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts.

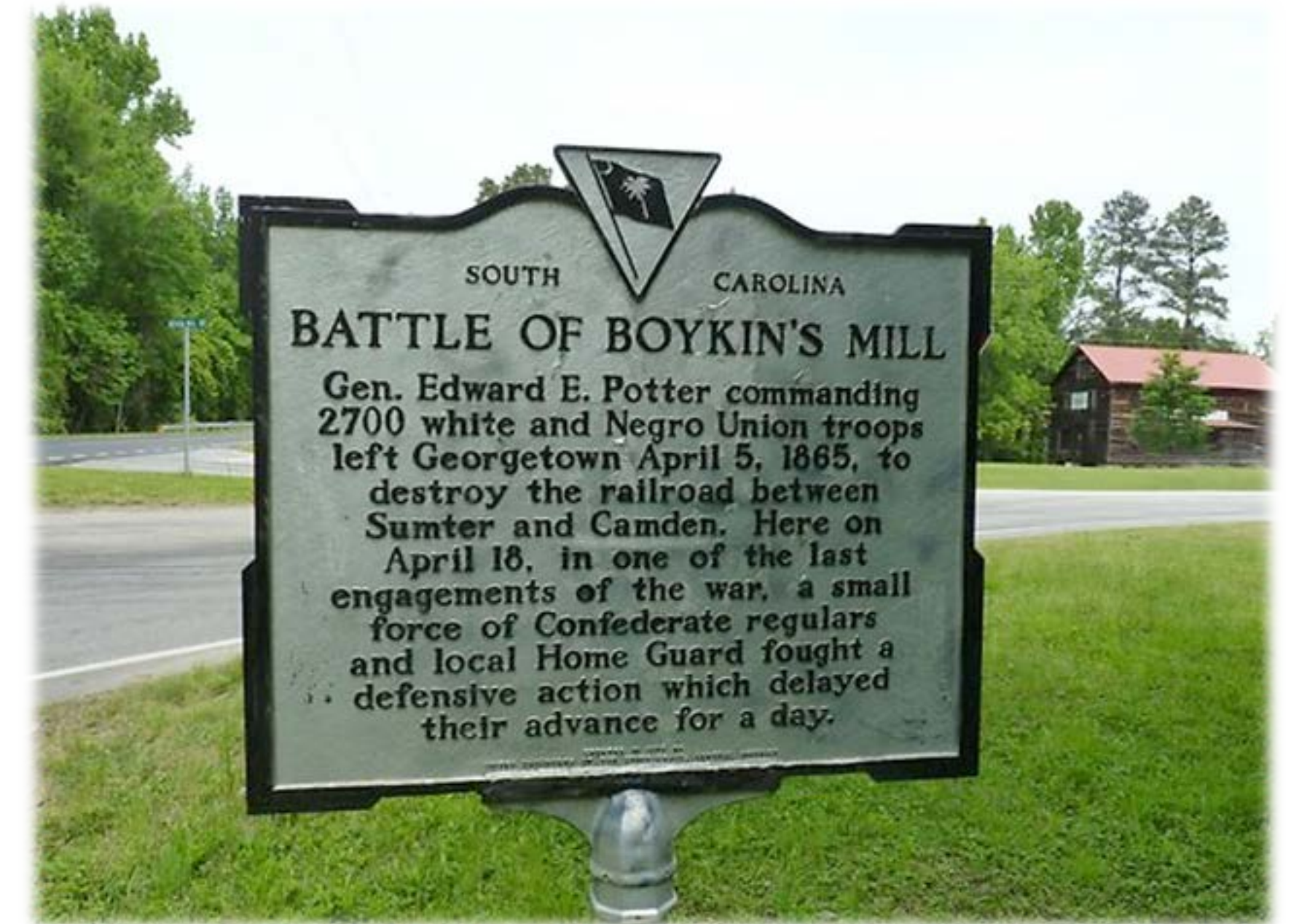


Later Battles

The 54th, now under the command of Col. Ned Hallowell, fought many significant battles throughout the Civil War, though none as well-remembered as Fort Wagner.

In the Battle of Olustee, Florida, the regiment defended a broken-down train carrying Union soldiers that was in danger of capture, eventually ensuring its safe escape. During this battle, Confederate troops infamously massacred wounded and surrendering men of the 54th rather than taking them captive.

The regiment also fought at the Battle of Honey Hill, which was meant to support General William Tecumseh Sherman's "March to the Sea" and taking of Savannah, Georgia; and at the Battle of Boykin's Mill, South Carolina – one of the final battles of the Civil War.



The 55th Massachusetts

As black volunteers began to pour into Massachusetts from all over the Union (and beyond) hoping to fight, Governor Andrew immediately authorized the creation of a sister regiment for the 54th, the 55th Massachusetts.

In a poetic coincidence, the 55th received their regimental colors on July 18, 1863, only hours before the 54th charged Fort Wagner. They would help lay siege to Charleston Harbor later that year, leading to the evacuation and Union seizure of Fort Wagner in September 1863, an important strategic victory.

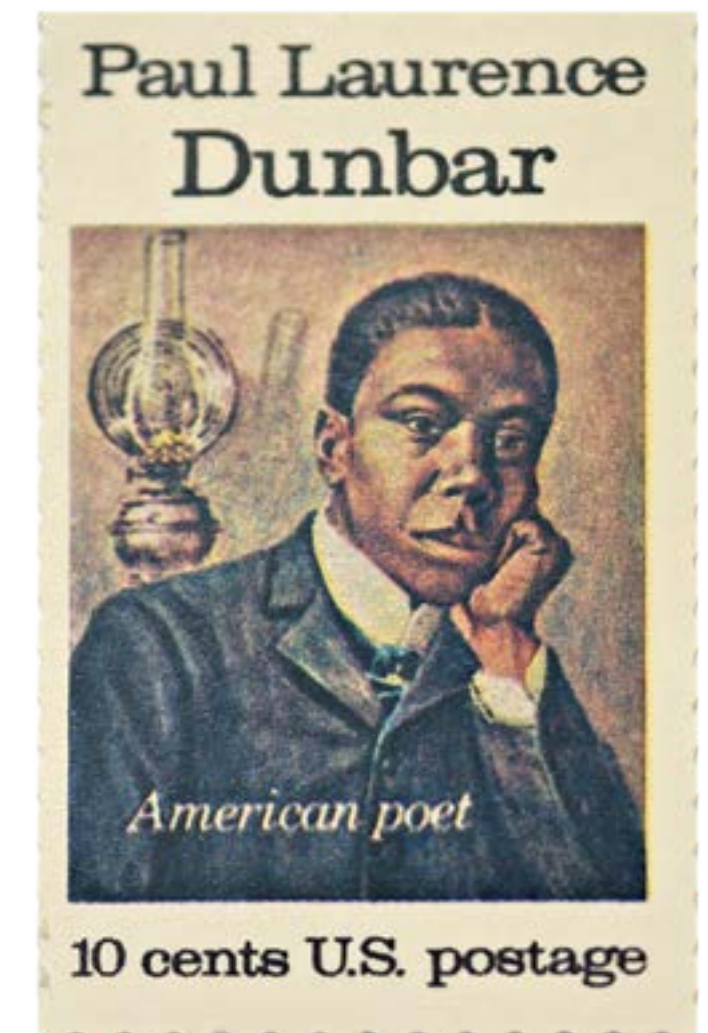


Illustration of the 55th Massachusetts from Harper's Weekly, 1865.

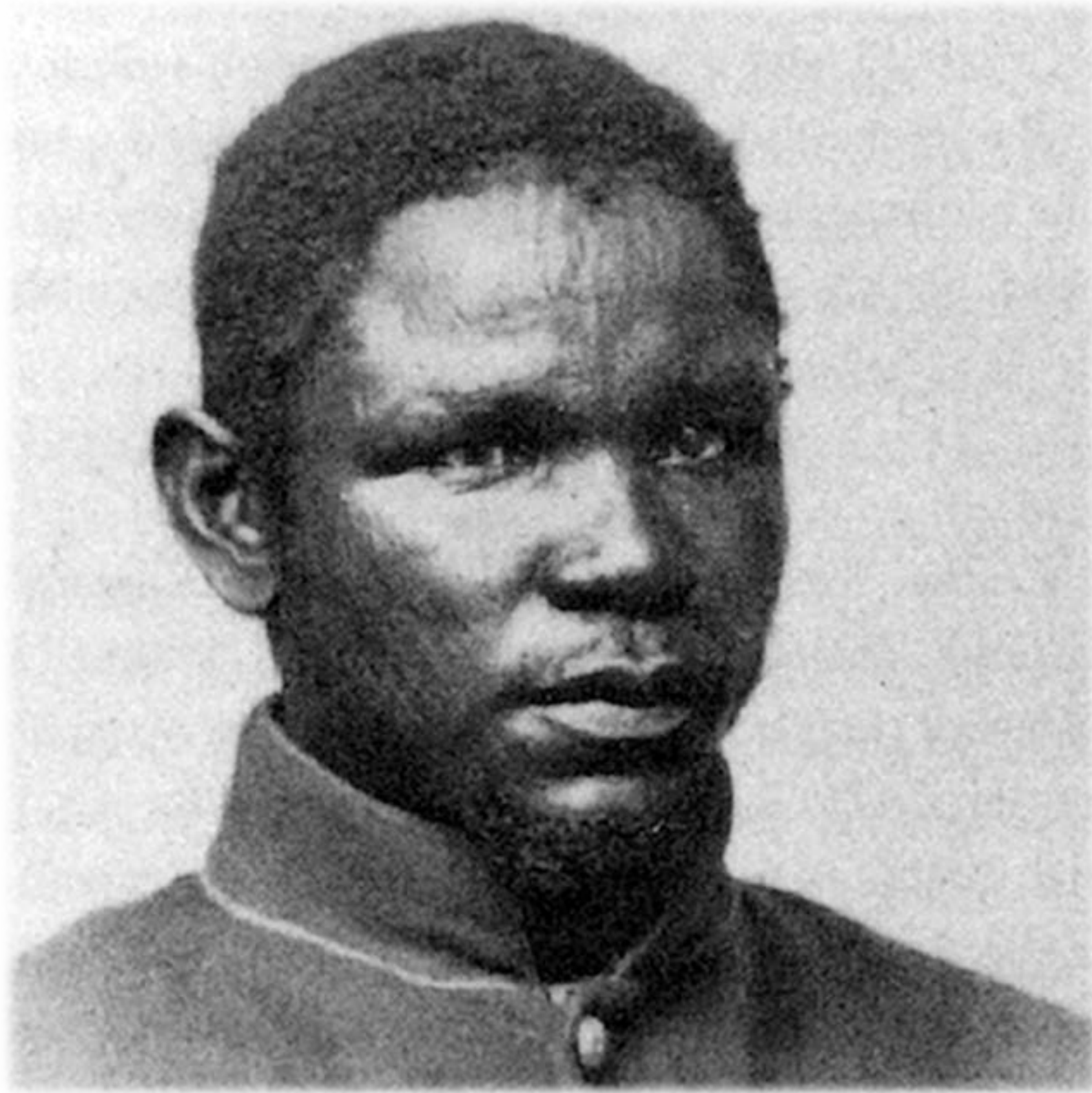
The 55th Massachusetts



One veteran of the 55th, Joshua Dunbar, was an escaped slave from Kentucky who had lived in Canada until the Emancipation Proclamation. In June 1863, Dunbar enlisted in the 55th. Decades later, his son, the renowned American poet **Paul Laurence Dunbar**, paid tribute to the valor of men like his father in the 1913 poem "*The Colored Soldier*," which features the lines: "And their deeds shall find a record / In the registry of Fame; / For their blood has cleansed completely / Every blot of Slavery's shame."



Sergeant Nicholas Said



One of the most unexpected men to serve in the 55th was Nicholas Said. Born and raised in the Central African Bornu Empire, he was captured by slave traders and taken east, across the Sahara desert to the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Sold several times, he spoke not only his native language but Arabic and Turkish by the time he was sold to Prince Nicholas Vassilievitch Troubetzkoy of Russia, who later freed him.

Nicholas Said travelled Europe as Prince Troubetzkoy's servant and interpreter, converting from Islam to Orthodox Christianity and adding many European languages to his repertoire. Once released from the prince's service, Said travelled to the West Indies, Canada, and finally Michigan, which led to his volunteering for the Massachusetts regiments in 1863. After the war, Said published his memoirs and worked as a teacher across the Reconstruction-era South.



Lieutenant James Monroe Trotter

James Monroe Trotter was born into slavery in Mississippi in 1842. A decade later, Trotter's enslaver (also his father) freed Trotter and his mother; they settled in Ohio, where Trotter studied music. Working as a teacher when the Civil War broke out, he enlisted in the 55th in June 1863 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in 1864.

After the war, Trotter married Virginia Issacs, a descendant of Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson. In 1878, Trotter published *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, the first complete history of American music. He and Virginia's son William Monroe Trotter became a radical civil rights activist and hostile critic of "moderate" black leaders like Booker T. Washington.



Protests for Equal Pay

The entire time the 54th trained and fought, the federal government policy was that black soldiers would receive only \$10 a month – though white soldiers earned \$13.

In protest, the 54th – both black infantry and white officers – refused to accept their wages, nor would they accept Gov. Andrews's offer to make up the difference from Massachusetts state funds.



The volunteers of the 54th wanted to make it clear that their insistence on equal pay was a question of principle, not money. As the war went on, these protests sometimes reached the brink of mutiny, with enlisted men attacking officers or refusing to fight. **Black soldiers of the 54th and 55th finally received equal wages in September 1864, paid in full for their 18 months of service.**

The Shaw Memorial

The Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, usually known simply as The Shaw Memorial, is one of America's most iconic public monuments. Designed by the great American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the statue was the result of efforts by African-American businessman and former employee of the Shaw family Joshua Benton Smith, who organized a committee of prominent Bostonians to create a memorial to Robert and the 54th.

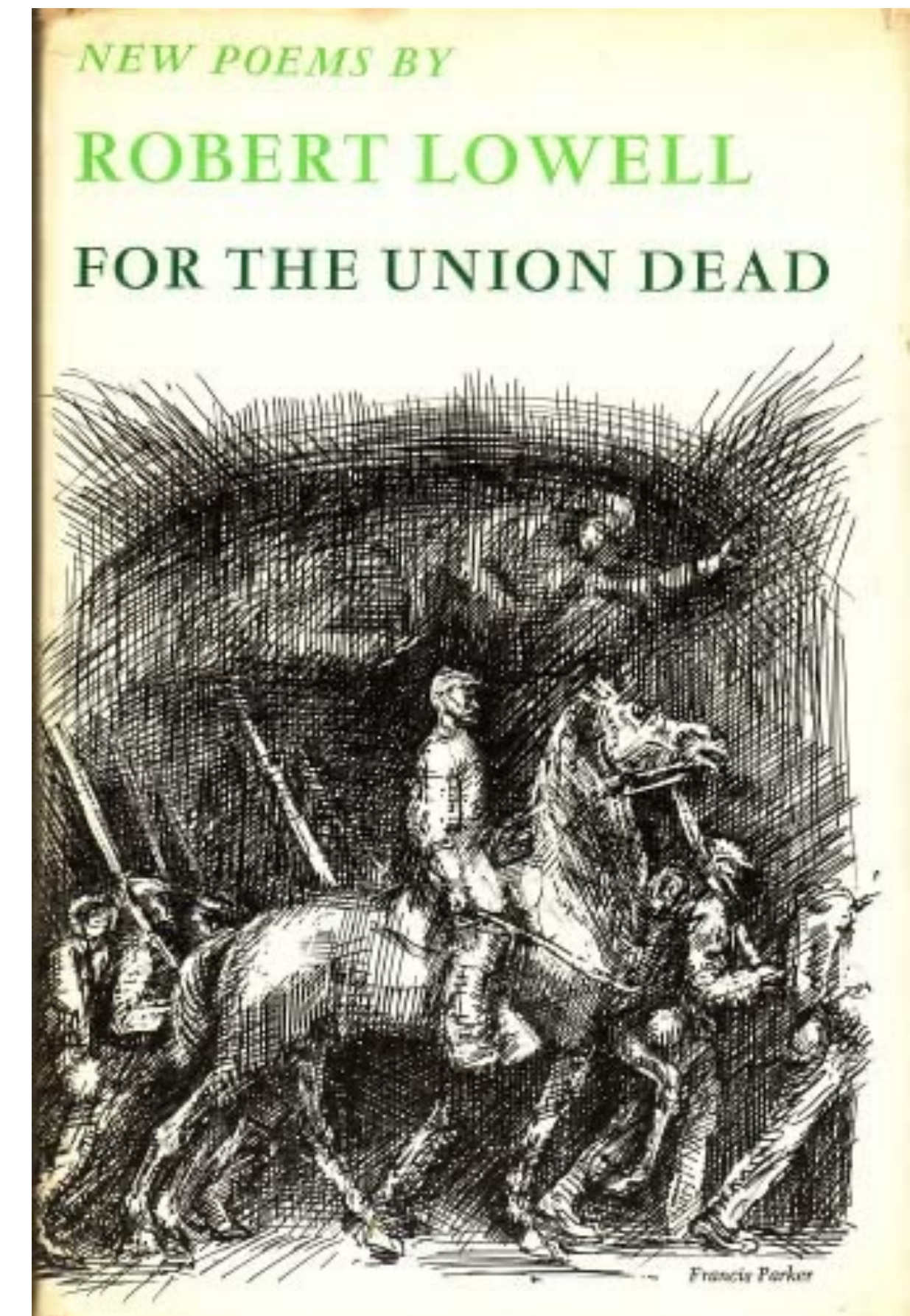


This committee awarded the commission to Saint-Gaudens, who worked 14 years to create the finished monument, which was finally unveiled in May 1897. It stands in Boston Commons, where crowds had cheered the 54th as it departed for the South in May 1863. Veterans of the 54th and 55th attended its unveiling ceremony, including Sgt. William H. Carney.

The Shaw Memorial

Neglected and ignored in the early twentieth century, the Shaw Memorial was the subject of “For the Union Dead” (1960) by the poet Robert Lowell, who, like Shaw, was himself part of an old, wealthy family of intellectual Bostonians.

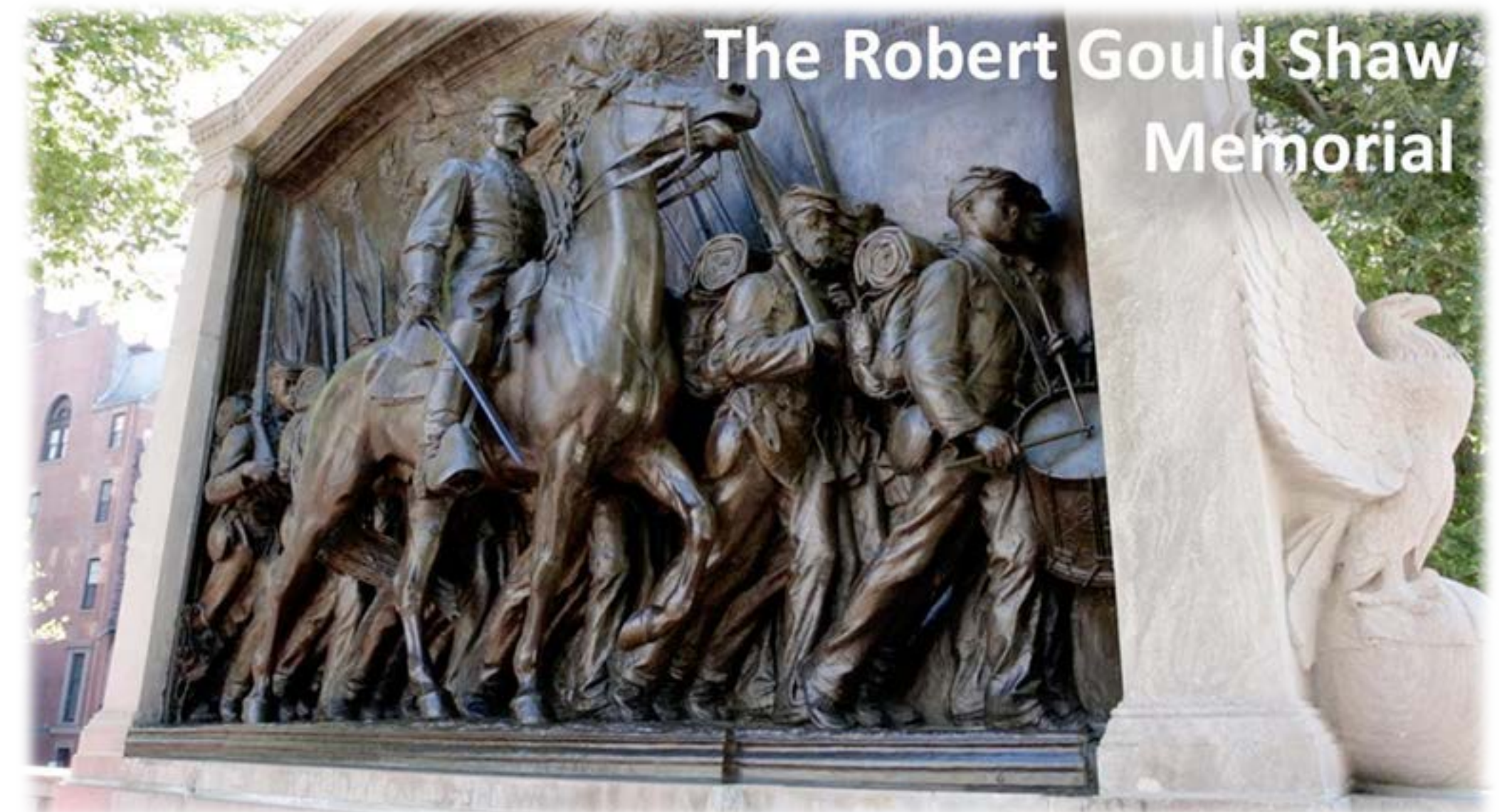
The poem is a melancholy reflection on the state of postwar America and what Lowell perceives as public contempt for the values the 54th embodied, especially in the resistance to early civil rights and integration efforts he saw in the media and on the streets of Boston itself.



The Shaw Memorial

The Shaw monument has not escaped criticism. Saint-Gaudens sculpted Colonel Shaw using actual photographs and portraits provided by his family, while the soldiers are based on a variety of black models – not the real faces of men who served in the 54th. In fact, the first version of the memorial was simply a traditional equestrian statue of Shaw, with no soldiers featured at all.

During the wave of civil unrest that followed the death of George Floyd in 2020, the Boston monument was vandalized with anti-police slogans, while left-wing political operatives questioned efforts to restore the work and called for its removal.





“Glory”

Much of the 54th's contemporary reputation has been shaped by the 1989 film *Glory*, starring Denzel Washington, Matthew Broderick, Morgan Freeman, Cary Elwes, and Andrew Braugher.

Director Edward Zwick admitted that significant portions of the film, especially the composite characters of the regiment's black soldiers, are fictionalized, but sees the film as a tribute to the decisive role of all African-American troops in the Civil War and in the spirit of Saint-Gaudens's memorial.

The image on the opening slide for this presentation was from an action scene in the movie GLORY.





Vocabulary

Integrated
Loyalist
Abolitionist
Regiment
Inciting
Insurrection
Battery
Ambivalent
Infantry
Parapet
Mutiny
Guerilla
Compunction

Contemporaries
Jayhawker
Vigilante
Siege
Barrage
Lauded
Galvanized
Infamously
Captive
Renowned
Valor
Iconic
Composite



WOODSONCENTER