

¹⁰ See NPS Director Conrad With's memorandum to Regional Director, Region One, 14 August 1961, Bureau Historian's files, History Division, National Park Service, Washington, DC. for the inaugural policy statement on re-enacting within national parks. At present the National Park Service permits living history presentations of camp life or military evolutions (i.e., maneuvers) within the confines of its properties; the agency forbids re-enactments that include simulations of casualties being taken or weapons being fired at opposing lines (i.e., at human beings). James D. Bigley, "Living History and Battle Reenactment: The Dilemma of Selective Interpretation," *History News*, November/December 1991, 16; and Edwin C. Bearss, telephone conversation with author, 14 March 1991.

¹¹ Civil War Centennial Commission, Report to Congress, 44-45.

¹² "Gettysburg: 'The Task Remaining,'" *Newsweek*, 15 July 1963, 18.

¹³ "Newsletter" of North Carolina Confederate Centennial Commission, 1962-1965, Records of the Civil War Centennial Commission, box 85, [RG 79, National Archives]; quoted in Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 224.

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Hope and Glory

The Centennial Celebration of the Monument to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment

In May 1997, Boston celebrated the centennial of the installation of the Augustus Saint-Gaudens Monument to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, located on the Boston Common. It proved to be a highly successful and stirring public history program.

Background of the 54th Massachusetts

Shortly after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the abolitionist Massachusetts Governor John Andrew received permission to organize the first regular army unit of free blacks in the North. Because his own state's African-American population was too small to fill the regiment, Andrew gained the cooperation of scores of black recruiters, most notably Frederick Douglass, to enlist volunteers from virtually every northern state. Supporters of the project faced blistering racism and scornful opposition to the idea of placing blacks in uniform.

The heroism of the first Union regiments of former slaves, such as those in Louisiana or the First South Carolina Volunteers, commanded by the Massachusetts abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, began to break down prejudice against the idea of using black troops. Yet it remained the task of the 54th Massachusetts, as it was called,

led by Boston's Shaw, to prove conclusively the wisdom of black recruitment. The success of the state's most important black regiment, especially its valor at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, on July 18, 1863, where many, including Shaw, died in a heroic but failed attempt to take the fort, paved the way for the enlistment of the 179,000 blacks who wore Union blue and helped win the Civil War.

Saint-Gaudens Monument

In 1865, some black veterans and citizens of South Carolina attempted to create a monument to Shaw near Fort Wagner itself. Though the plan failed, a group of Bostonians, including Governor Andrew, Senator Charles Sumner, Colonel Henry Lee, and Joshua B. Smith (a former fugitive slave who once worked with the Shaw family), began raising funds for a monument in Boston. It took several years before Saint-Gaudens was commissioned to do the work and several more years for the work to be completed and installed on May 31, 1897.

The Monument is an extraordinary piece of public art, one of the most important and powerful in the United States. The bronze sculpture portrays Shaw and 23 black infantry volunteers. The three-dimensional figures of Shaw and his horse emerge from a bas-relief background of marching men.

The Shaw Monument was the first in the nation to show African-American soldiers in full uniform. Initial planning and the artist's first design called for a traditional equestrian statue. However, a series of developments, in particular, the Shaw family's insistence that the troops be represented, led to the abandonment of Shaw alone for the creation of a relief panel, which led to a unique war memorial, still unmatched today.

Booker T. Washington, one of the principal speakers at the 1897 unveiling, reminded those in attendance that the "full measure of the fruit of Fort Wagner" would not be realized until full opportunity was available to everyone, regardless of race.

Centennial Celebration

In 1897 the Monument was dedicated to Shaw. In the early 1980s the Monument was restored and the names of the black soldiers who died at Fort Wagner were added to the back. In 1997 the "re-dedication" fully transformed the Monument. In the centennial the entire frame of reference was the Monument to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. We demonstrated clearly that blacks were not passive slaves freed by President Lincoln but rather a vital force in the Union victory. The sculpture evokes the reality and possibilities of racial cooperation. Our centennial involved a rededication to the

ideals that the Monument represents—a struggle for social justice and unity between blacks and whites to advance common ideals.

The two-day symposium at Suffolk University was well-attended by a varied audience. The local public television station's black public affairs program produced a half-hour documentary and two other video productions are in process, all based on the centennial and the symposium. Tom Brown of the University of South Carolina, Donald Yacovone of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and I are co-editing a book of essays based on the symposium to be published by the University of Massachusetts Press.

The symposium featured historians, African-American Civil War re-enactors, public figures, and others in a lively two days of discussion. The one topic that every symposium session addressed, often with strongly divergent viewpoints, was the movie *Glory*. Released in 1989, the film has certainly accomplished a great deal in bringing to a broad public the story of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and the fact that African Americans played a significant role in the Union Army. *Glory*, starring Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, and Morgan Freeman, and directed by Ed Zwick, depicts Shaw and an ensemble of fictionalized black characters.

Robert Gould Shaw/54th Massachusetts Regiment Monument. Photo courtesy NPS.



Several symposium presenters—in particular, Ed Linenthal, author of *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* and other books—argued that the film had great value in that it brought this vital chapter in American history to a vast audience. Others, notably the distinguished historian Barbara Fields, featured in the Ken Burns public television series on the Civil War, were highly critical.

While acknowledging its value, there are indeed disturbing aspects to the film. The filmmakers could have drawn on historical evidence to portray actual historical black troops but chose not to do so. The only character based on such documentary evidence is the white commanding officer, Shaw. The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who actively recruited men to join the regiment and whose two sons served in the Union Army, is barely present in the movie, a historical and dramatic lost opportunity. There are several other problems as well.

Symposium presenters wrestled with these issues: What is the movie *Glory's* contribution to our understanding of the history of the regiment and of blacks fighting for freedom in the Civil War? How does the movie serve to advance public consciousness about this history, and how does it create harmful distortions? Is *Glory* good history? If not, how much should it matter to us? In a larger context, what does *Glory* have in common with other commercial movies that focus on significant moments in African-American history and how might *Glory* be different? What are the inherent limitations of the film industry, where the bottom line is always profit, in the portrayal of challenging social issues?

The movie *Glory* led directly to a movement of African-American Civil War re-enactors. This group remains tiny compared to the number of white re-enactors, who have been active in American culture since the 19th century. Still, the centennial brought together the largest gathering ever of Civil War re-enactors with dramatic impact. Pride was the dominant theme communicated by the African-American re-enactors—a pride in the men of the 54th who were historical agents, and also, pride in being an integral part of the United States.

General Colin Powell's keynote address should take its place in history alongside Booker T. Washington's 1897 speech at the original dedication:

I doubt if bronze has ever spoken more eloquently than in this celebrated work. What a powerful image we see before us, the

proud, young, fatalistic Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his Negro soldiers, heads high, rifles on their shoulders, resolution in their every step, marching southward with fortitude looking just as they did when they passed this very spot on May 28, 1863, on their way to hope, on their way to glory, and for many of them, on their way to death.

...A private soldier of the 54th infantry whose name is unknown wrote a marching song that summed up the spirit of his regiment. It was not written by a professional songwriter or poet, just an average private, and like so many other barrack ditties, it was ragged, it was cocky, it was irreverent, but it was heartfelt. Perhaps it was the song that the soldiers of the 54th sang on that fateful evening in July of 1863. And the little marching song ends like this,

*So rally boys rally, let us never mind
the past,
We had a hard road to travel, but
our day is coming at last,
For God is for the right, and we
have no need to fear,
The Union must be saved by the
Colored volunteer.*

That soldier believed in the Union. That soldier believed in America. The Union was saved by the Colored volunteer and by hundreds and thousands of their white brothers, all of whom believed in freedom, all of whom came together to preserve a dream of hope and a dream of glory. This is the enduring message that this memorial has for us today. Be as proud of America as that soldier was. Believe in America as that soldier did.

Look at them. Look at them one more time. Soldiers are looking to the front, marching solidly and straight ahead on a perpetual campaign for righteousness, led by their brave colonel. So let us too follow these heroes. Let us carry on the work to make this God-given beloved country of ours an even more perfect Union. A land of liberty and justice for all.

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