The 55th Regiment

The 55th Regiment left Camp Meigs, July 21, 1863, and served at Folly Island and Morris Island near Charleston, South Carolina. They played a supporting role at the Battle of Olustee, Florida, on February 20, 1864, and later built fortifications on Saint John River in that state. They engaged the enemy at James Island, near Charleston, on July 2, 1864, and at the Battle of Honey Hill, November 30, 1864. The 55th Regiment was mustered out on August 29th, 1865 at Mount Pleasant near Charleston. On September 25, 1865, after a parade on the Boston Common, the regiment disbanded.

Chaplain Jackson and three other recruits were enlisted in the 55th Regiment from New Bedford. On March 10, 1864 Martha Bush Gray of New Bedford, the wife of 1st Sergeant William H. W. Gray of Company C of the 54th Regiment, received permission from the Adjutant General of the United States to visit the state of South Carolina to aid in the relief of the sick and wounded men of the 54th and 55th Regiments. She was one of the few African-American women to assist wounded men of the 54th Regiment in the field and was lovingly known as the “mother of the regiment.”

Because of its large whaling fleet, New Bedford was a prime source of experienced seamen to serve in the United States Navy and a recruiting station was set up here which enlisted over three hundred men of color, including men from the West Indies, the Cape Verde Islands and other Atlantic Islands. African-American whaling brothers, Joshua J. Handy and John T. Handy and Native-Americans William Coombs and Abram C. Coombs were among several pairs of brothers from New Bedford who joined the Union cause by enlisting in the United States Navy. Aaron C. Joseph enlisted in the United States Navy on two occasions: first in 1861 and later in 1863 as a landsman. After the war he served for several years as commander of New Bedford’s Robert Gould Shaw Post #146 of the Grand Army of the Republic, an African-American post that was chartered in 1871.

The 55th Regiment

The 55th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, left Camp Meigs in May 1864 for service in defense of Washington, D.C. They proceeded to the James River and later to the lower Appomattox River, in Virginia, where they engaged the enemy at Baylor’s Farm. They then assigned to guard Confederate prisoners at Point Lookout, Maryland. At the end of the war in April 1865 they were at Petersburg, Virginia. In June the 5th Cavalry was sent to Texas in anticipation of trouble with Mexico. They were mustered out of the service at Clarksville, Texas, on October 31, 1865, and were discharged on Gullipolls Island, in Boston Harbor, in November 1865. Sergeant Miles Carter Jr. and Private Isaiah King were among the fourteen recruits from New Bedford.

The 54th Regiment

The Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Plaza at Custom House Square was dedicated by the New Bedford Historical Society and the City of New Bedford on February 12, 1999. The plaza serves as a memorial to the Civil War’s 54th and 55th Regiments, the 5th Cavalry and the Navy men of color from New Bedford, located at the Custom House Square in the vicinity where the men were recruited. The plaza is the first stop on the Black Heritage Trail.

Further Reading:

- Robert Gould Shaw Post #146 of the Grand Army of the Republic, an African-American post that was chartered in 1871.

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- Tabor and Cogdell Hall, courtesy of the GSB-New Bedford Whaling Museum
- Henry A. Moore and Alexander H. Johnson, courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society
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Printed by:
- Blue Eagle Printing

This pamphlet was funded partly by the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism.
On February 12th, 1863 Lieutenant James W. Grace opened a recruiting office in New Bedford to enlist black men for the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. The office was located on the street corner of straight streets near the black community of Carolina and Kansas, but were not officially recognized by the northern states. Governor John A. Andrew wasted no time in recruiting twenty-six men and assigned to Company C. Colonel Shaw at one point noted “...the company from New Bedford are very fine body of men, and out of forty, only two cannot read and write. Their barracks are in better order, and more cleanly, than the quarters of any volunteer regiment I have seen in this country.” The most important members of the regiment were two drummer boys from New Bedford, Henry A. Monroe, age 14 and Alexander H. Johnson, age 16.

The recruits mustered and trained at Camp Meigs in Readville, in the Hyde Park section of Boston. By May 1863 the 54th Regiment was up to full strength and new recruits were mustered into the 55th Regiment under Colonel Norwood P. Hallowell. In the fall of 1863 the 5th Cavalry Regiment under Colonel Henry S. Russell, mustered at Camp Meigs. Rev. William Jackson of New Bedford, was appointed post chaplain for these regiments and thus became the first black chaplain and the first black officer in the Army, commissioned on July 10, 1863.

Even in the North, many believed that black men would not have the discipline or the bravery to become good soldiers. The men of these regiments would play a pivotal role in determining the public attitude towards black soldiers and racial equality. In addition to the hardships shared by all Civil War soldiers, the men of these regiments faced the prospect of enslavement or execution if captured by Confederate troops. The white officers were liable to be executed under Southern laws against inciting slave insurrections. The soldiers also had to be very concerned about the safety of their families at home because anti-draft riots could easily become attacks on black neighborhoods, as occurred in New York in July 1863.

Despite all these added demands on their loyalty and bravery, the recruits soon discovered that the federal government was not willing to pay them at the same rate as white troops, even though they had been promised equal pay in the recruiting advertisements. Although it was a great hardship for their families, the soldiers of these regiments refused to settle for less than equal pay from the federal government, even when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts offered to make up the difference. During September 1863 Corporal James Henry Gooding of the 54th Regiment wrote a letter to President Lincoln asking, “Are we soldiers or are we Laborers?” The recruits eventually numbered forty-six men for their families, the soldiers of these regiments refused to settle for less than equal pay from the federal government, even when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts offered to make up the difference. During September 1863 Corporal James Henry Gooding of the 54th Regiment wrote a letter to President Lincoln asking, “Are we soldiers or are we Laborers?”

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The 54th Regiment also took part in the Battle of Olustee. Private Joseph T. Wilson, a former whaleman, also enlisted in Company C of the 54th Regiment. He was severely wounded at the Battle of Olustee and discharged on disability. After the war Wilson became the first African-American member of the Grand Army of the Republic.


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