

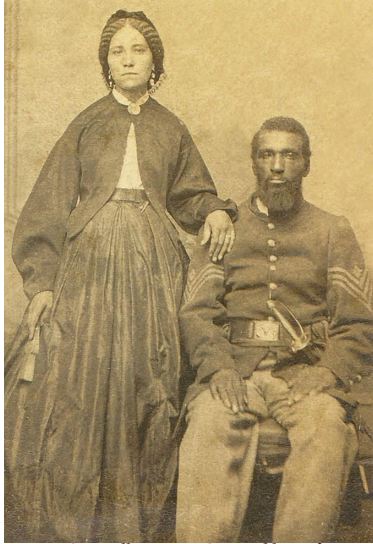
THE 55TH REGIMENT

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 the 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 allowed to aid the troops in the field and was lovingly known as “mother of the regiment.”

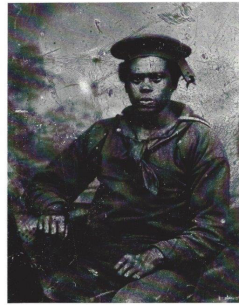


1st Sgt. William H.W. Gray and his wife
Martha Bush Gray



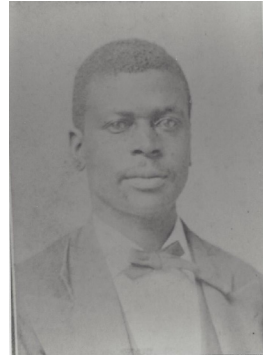
UNITED STATES NAVY

Because of its large whaling fleet, New Bedford was a prime source for 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



Aaron C. Joseph

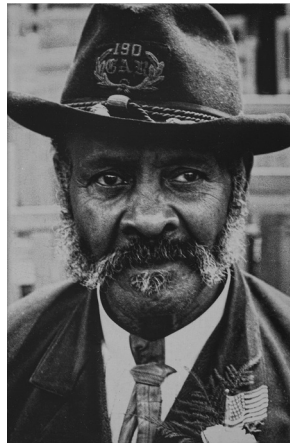
Abram C. Coombs were among several pairs of brothers from New Bedford who joined the Union cause by enlisting in the United States Navy. Aaron C. Joseph enlisted in the United States Navy on two occasions: first in 1861 and later in 1863 as a landsman. After the war he served for several years as commander 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.



John Handy

THE 5TH CAVALRY REGIMENT

The 5th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry 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 during the advance on Petersburg. They were 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 Galloup's Island, in Boston Harbor, in November 1865. Sergeant Miles Carter Jr. and Private Isaiah King were among the fourteen recruits from New Bedford.



Private Isaiah King

THE 54TH REGIMENT MEMORIAL PLAZA



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:

Emilio, Luis F. A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865, Boston: Boston Book Company. 1891, second edition, 1894

Record of the Service of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Two volumes. Cambridge, Mass.: John Wilson & Sons, 1868

Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Adjutant General's Office. Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors and Marines in the Civil War. Eight volumes. Norwood, Massachusetts, Norwood Press. 1931-1935

Gooding, James Henry, On the Altar of Freedom: a Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front, Edited by Virginia M. Adams, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 1991

Shaw, Robert Gould, Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Edited by Russell Duncan. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.

Tell it with Pride: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and the Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial, Sarah Greenough and Nancy K. Anderson. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Yale University Press, 2013

Photograph Credits:

Tobey and Coggeshall Building, courtesy of the ODHS-New Bedford Whaling Museum

Henry A. Moore and Alexander H. Johnson, courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society

John T. Handy and 1st Sgt. William H.W. Gray with wife, courtesy of John Hayden, New Bedford Historical Society Collection

Aaron C. Joseph, courtesy of Annette Morton

Sgt. William H. Carney, holding flag saved at Ft. Wagner, courtesy of the Carl Cruz collection, New Bedford Historical Society

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THE 54TH REGIMENT



MEN OF COLOR TO ARMS Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Plaza New Bedford, Massachusetts

NEW BEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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THE 54TH REGIMENT: MEN OF COLOR TO ARMS

THE 54TH REGIMENT

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 in the Tobey & Coggeshall building on William Street, just west of the U.S. Customs House. The recruiting effort was promoted by local black ministers, by local abolitionist James Bunker Congdon and also by speeches of Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists of national prominence who visited New Bedford.

The War between the States was then almost two years old and had dragged on longer than anticipated. The Union needed some decisive victories to discourage England or France from entering the war on the Confederate side, or from brokering a peace settlement that would split the United States permanently. In the North, a political pressure group called the Copperheads agitated for a negotiated end to hostilities with the South. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 had declared all slaves in Confederate territory to be free and instantly changed the nature of the war. Many Northern soldiers resented the change from a war for the union into a war against slavery.

Black men previously had been barred from enlisting in the Army, although the Navy had many black sailors in its ranks. Frederick Douglass compared the North's refusal to use black Army recruits to a man who was trying to fight with one hand tied behind his back. In 1862 a few black units had been organized among former slaves in Louisiana, South Carolina and Kansas, but were not officially recognized by the Union government until late in the war.

The Massachusetts 54th Regiment was the first black army unit to be raised in the northern states. Governor John A. Andrew was a fervent abolitionist who had long advocated enlisting black soldiers to serve



Unknown New Bedford Soldier and His Family

in state regiments. Upon receiving authorization in January 1863 he wasted no time in recruiting twenty-six year old Robert Gould Shaw, an officer with two years' war experience and a strong anti-slavery background, to serve as colonel in command of the new regiment.

The recruits from New Bedford eventually numbered forty-six men and were assigned to Company C. Colonel Shaw at one point noted "...the company from New Bedford are a 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 youngest 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.



Alexander H. Johnson

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.



Henry A. Monroe



Rev. William Jackson

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?" ... we have done a Soldier's Duty. Why Can't we have a Soldier's pay?" Because of their stand for equal rights the soldiers received no pay for eighteen months. Finally in September 1864 the federal government honored the terms promised when the men enlisted and paid the approximately \$170,000 that was owed to them.

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.



Private Joseph T. Wilson

COLORED MEN. ATTENTION!
YOUR COUNTRY CALLS!
One Hundred Colored Men Wanted.
To be attached to
Gov. Andrew's New Regiment,
THE MASSACHUSETTS FIFTY-FOURTH.
The Pay and Rations to be the same as
those of any other Massachusetts Regiment.
The families of the Colored men enlisting to re-
ceive the same as that furnished white men in other
Regiments.
Head-Quarters for enlisting at the first building
west of the Post Office, William street.
N. B.—Colored men from any other town, city, or
State, wishing to enlist, will be received the same as
though they were from this city.
Feb 12 J. W. GRACE, Recruiting Officer,

Leading the attack on Fort Wagner, near Charleston, South Carolina, on July 18, 1863, the men of the 54th Regiment showed themselves worthy of the hopes of their supporters. During the battle Sergeant William H. Carney of New Bedford took the United States flag from the fallen standard-bearer and carried it under intense fire to the Confederate parapet.

Although he had been wounded several times, he returned the colors safely to the Union lines; handing them over with the words: "The old flag never touched the ground, boys."

Sergeant Carney became the first black man to earn the Medal of Honor. He also received the Gilmore medal shortly after the attack.

A comrade of Sergeant Carney in Company C was Corporal James Henry Gooding, a former whaleman from New Bedford. Gooding's dispatches to the New Bedford Mercury kept local people apprised of the 54th Regiment and helped the recruitment effort. He was captured in Florida at the Battle of Olustee in February 1864, and died later that year in Georgia's infamous Andersonville Prison.

Private Joseph T. Wilson, a former whaleman, also enlisted in Company C of the 54th Regiment. He was severely injured 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.

In 1888, he published, in Hartford, Connecticut, *The Black Phalanx: a History of the Negro Soldiers of the U.S. in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-'65*.

The 54th Regiment also took part in the Battle of Boykin's Mills, South Carolina, on April 18, 1865 at Mount Pleasant near Charleston, South Carolina. The regiment returned to Massachusetts and on September 2, 1865 was disbanded after passing in review on the Boston Common.



Sergeant William H. Carney