

The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment

Finding glory amid turmoil

1863 – 1865

Committed

Heroic

Patriotic

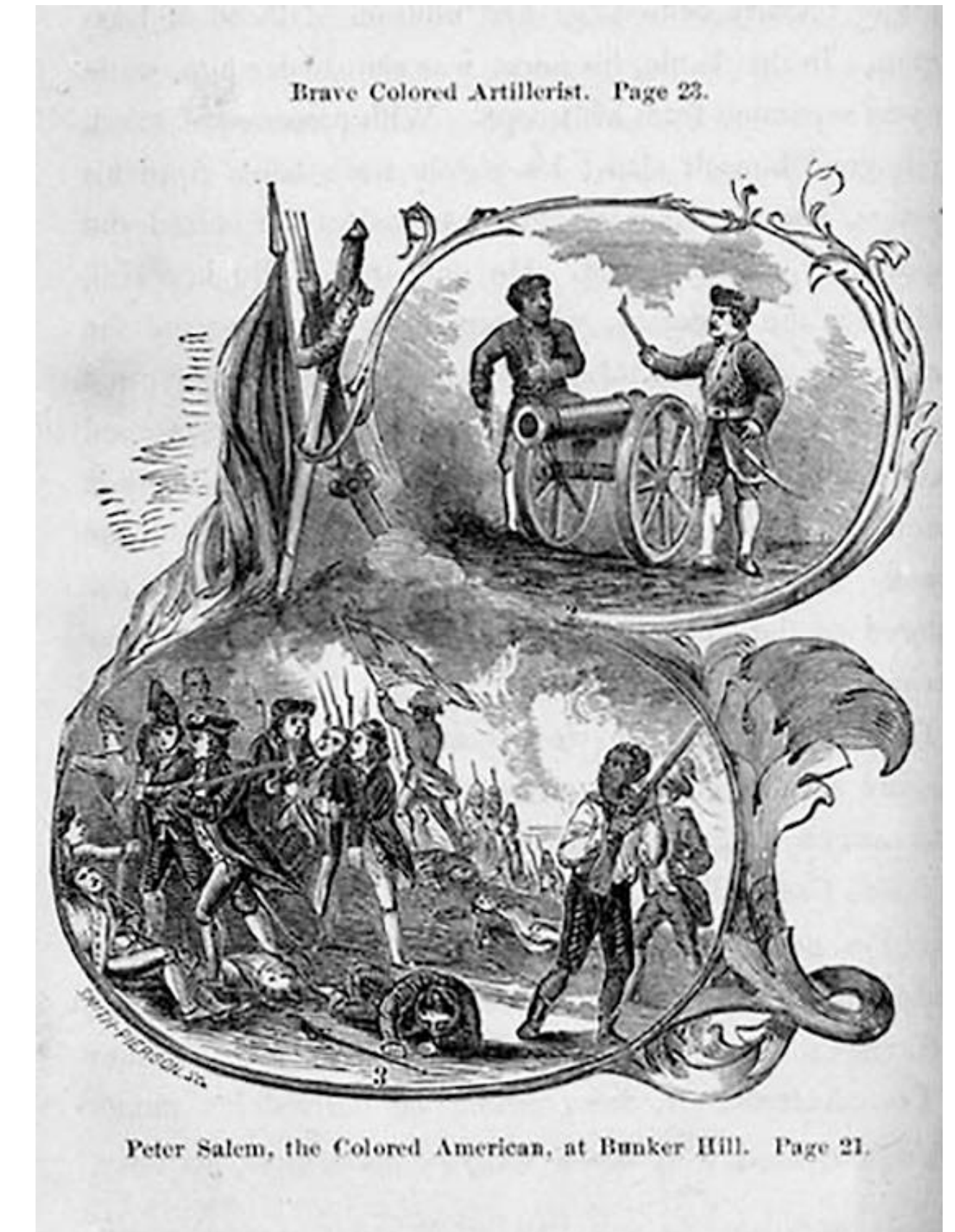
Honorable



Revolutionary War

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Army was racially integrated. Free and enslaved Black men fought as both patriots (those who wanted America to be an independent country) and loyalists (those who wanted to remain a colony of England) in the conflict.

Did you know that England promised to free enslaved Blacks who fought for the loyalist cause? Why do you think some enslaved blacks still fought with the patriots?

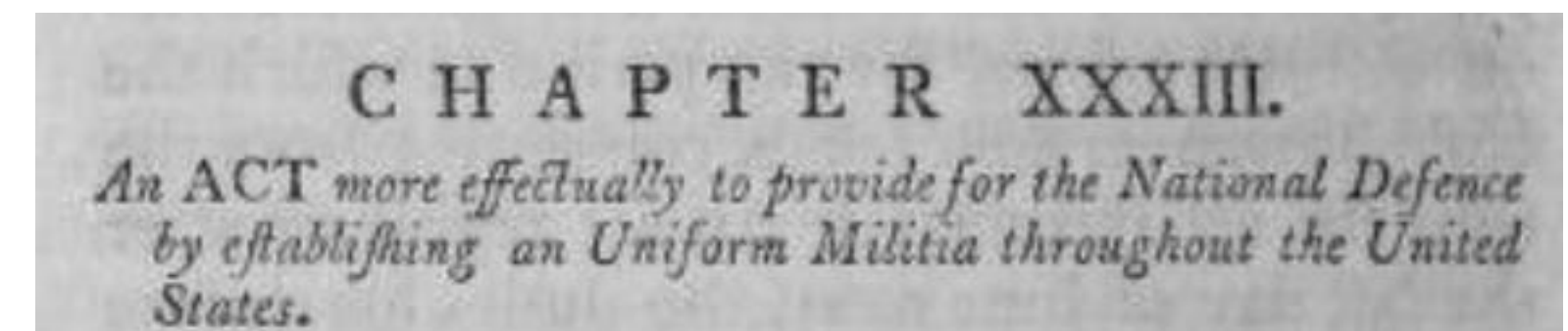
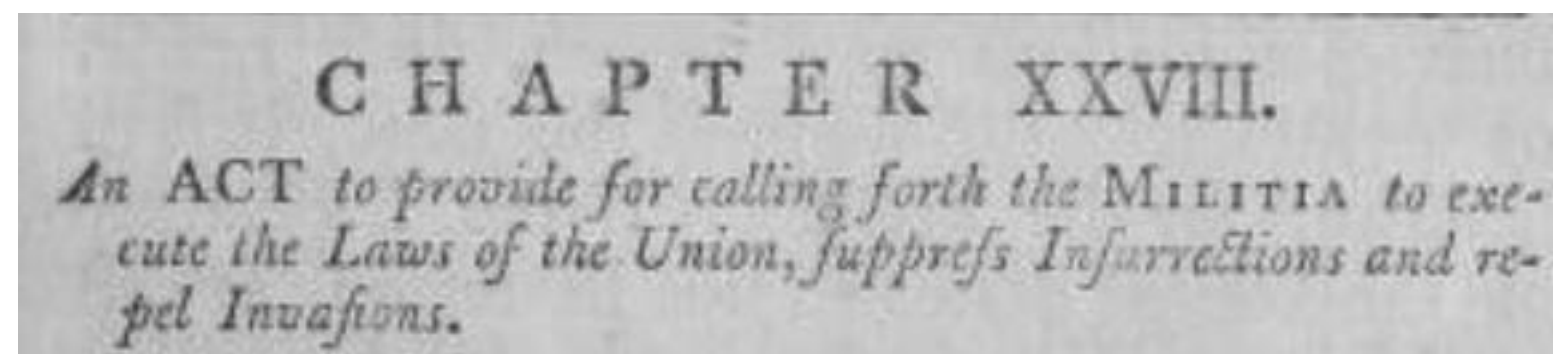


This image depicts Peter Salem at Bunker Hill. Peter Salem was an African-American from Massachusetts who served as a U.S. soldier in the American Revolutionary War. Born into slavery in Framingham, he was later freed by his master.

The Militia Acts of 1792

After the Revolutionary War, the new nation of the United States needed to make sure it could defend itself. The nation did not have a fully functioning Army, so they depended on state militias. The Militia Acts of 1792 allowed the President to call upon militias if there was an invasion or rebellion.

However, the acts 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.



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, which took effect on New Year's Day 1863, freed slaves held in the rebel states and officially permitted Black men to fight in the Union's military.

*President Abraham Lincoln as
photographed by Alexander Gardner.*



Massachusetts Recruits Men of African Descent

As soon as the Proclamation took effect in 1863, John A. Andrew, governor of Massachusetts and committed abolitionist, announced the recruitment of African Americans to form the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, known as "the 54th."

The 54th would become the first regiment of African Americans from the North to fight in the Civil War.

Because the state did not have a large number of 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. Most volunteers had been born free in the North, others had escaped from slavery.



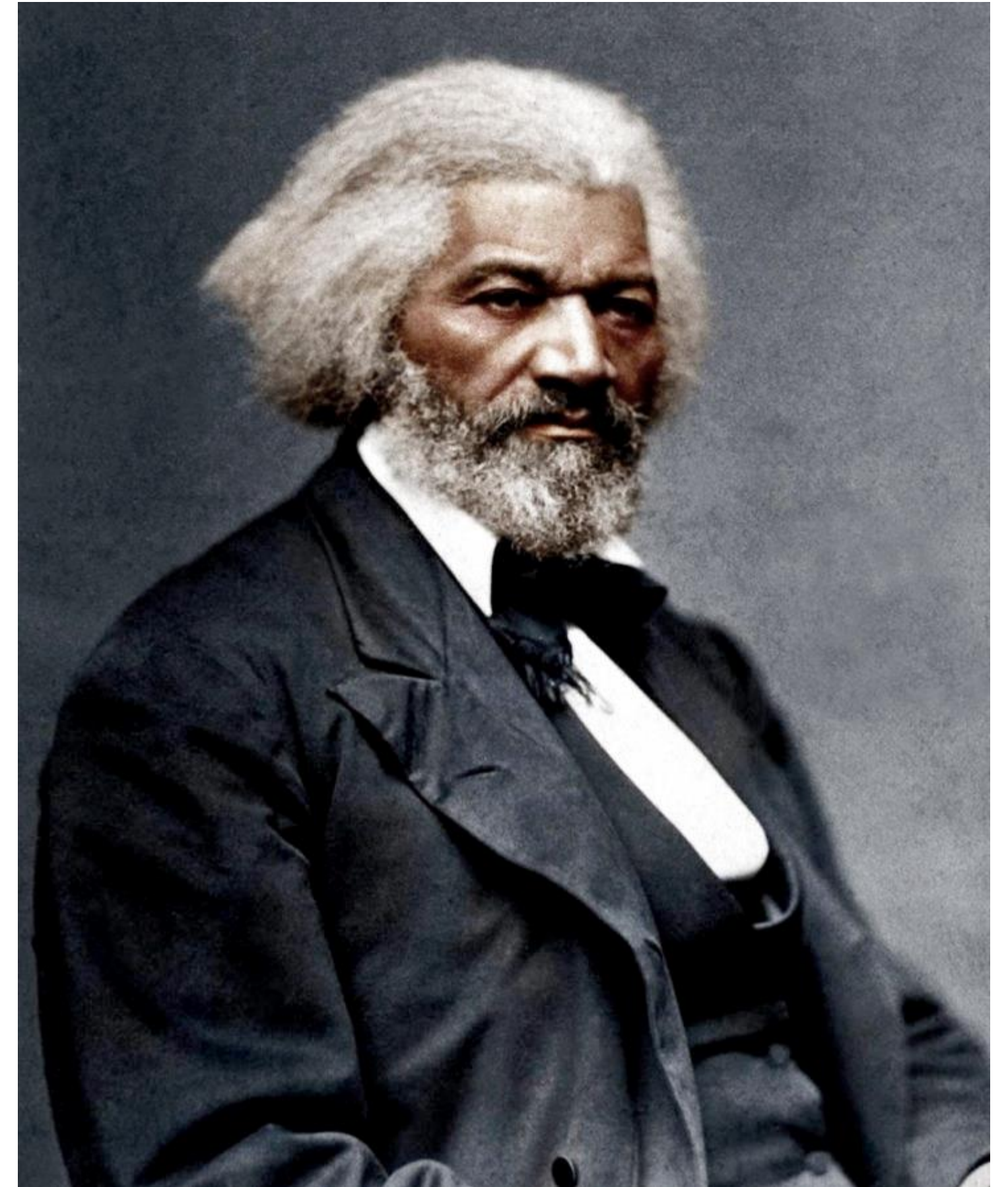
In this recruitment poster a bounty of \$100 was offered along with the lure of a salary, food, clothing, and aid for the soldier's families.

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 was very helpful in recruiting Black Americans to fight, arguing that men “who would be free themselves must strike the first blow.”

Douglass travelled the country encouraging Black men to enlist.



Do you agree that it was important for Blacks to fight for their own freedom? How does it feel when you take responsibility for improving your own situation?

Frederick Douglass

Douglass saw African American troops as not only important in the war effort, but also in gaining rights after the war:

“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

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

The first Commander of the 54th, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, was born into wealth, privilege, and comfort, but was restless as a young man. His parents were prominent figures in Boston and New York society, members of the Unitarian church, and principled abolitionists.

Shaw was raised among intellectuals and travelled through 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.



Col. Robert Gould Shaw

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, unsure of whether he truly shared 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.

Shaw's family passed on their anti-slavery views to him. What values or beliefs have you learned from your family or community?



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, Massachusetts, 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.

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.

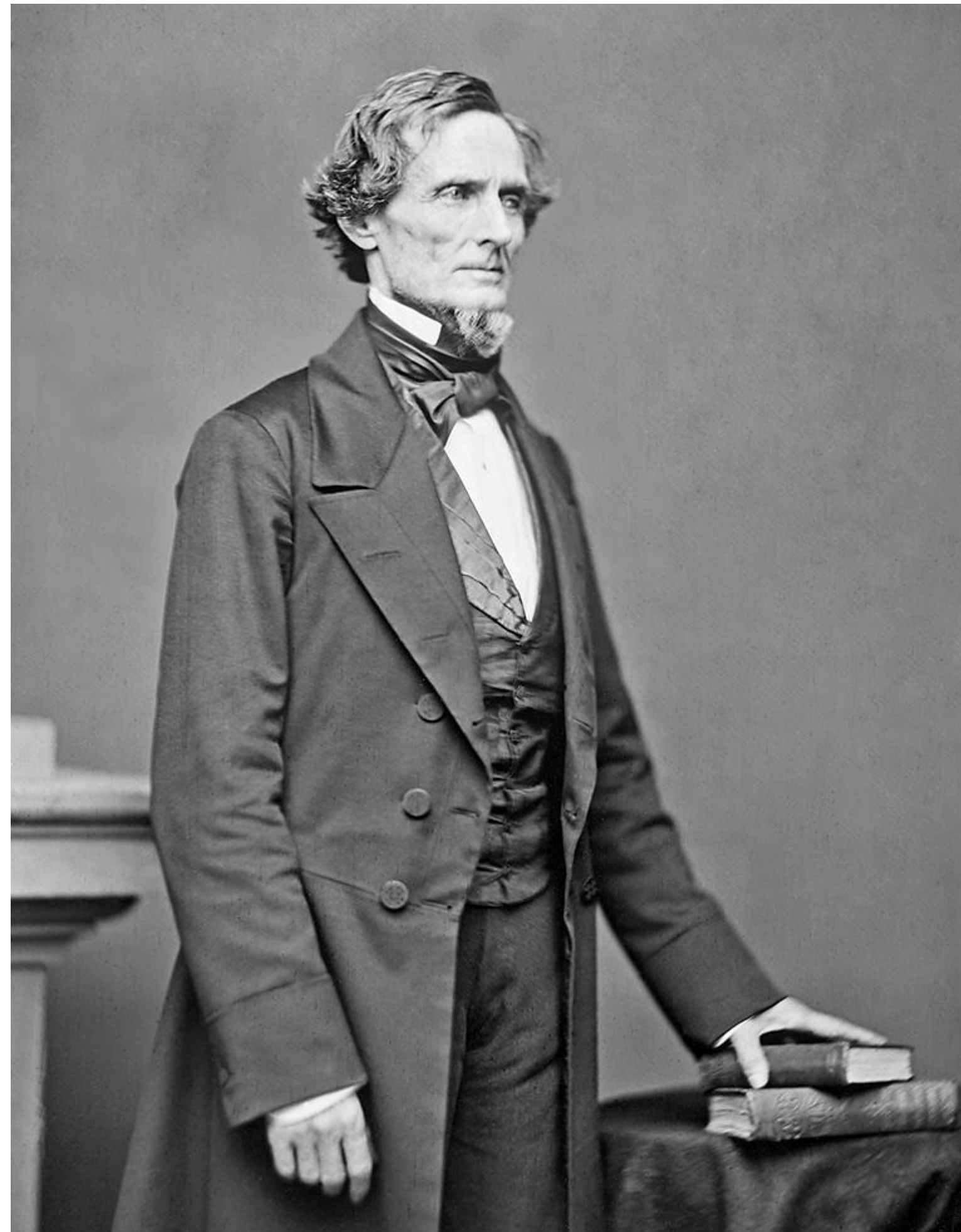
On May 28, the 54th was given a jubilant send-off parade by a crowd of supporters, including prominent abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Governor Andrew.

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



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

By the time the 54th set out for the battlefield, the Confederate government had publicly criticized 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.

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.



Battle of Fort Wagner: July 18, 1863

The 54th advanced under heavy artillery fire around 7:45 p.m. 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 help other Union troops. By 10 p.m., the assault was called off, and all Union forces retreated.



Battle of Fort Wagner: July 18, 1863

Northern reporters who witnessed the battle praised the 54th's bravery and their willingness to fight and die for freedom, and stories of their heroism encouraged more African Americans to enlist in the army. The 54th also had proved to be effective fighters: most of the Southern casualties were inflicted by their initial assault. One newspaper wrote: "Wagner was the battleground, 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."

Why do you think it was said that "the black man won his place among the freedmen?" Do you think people should have to earn freedom?



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

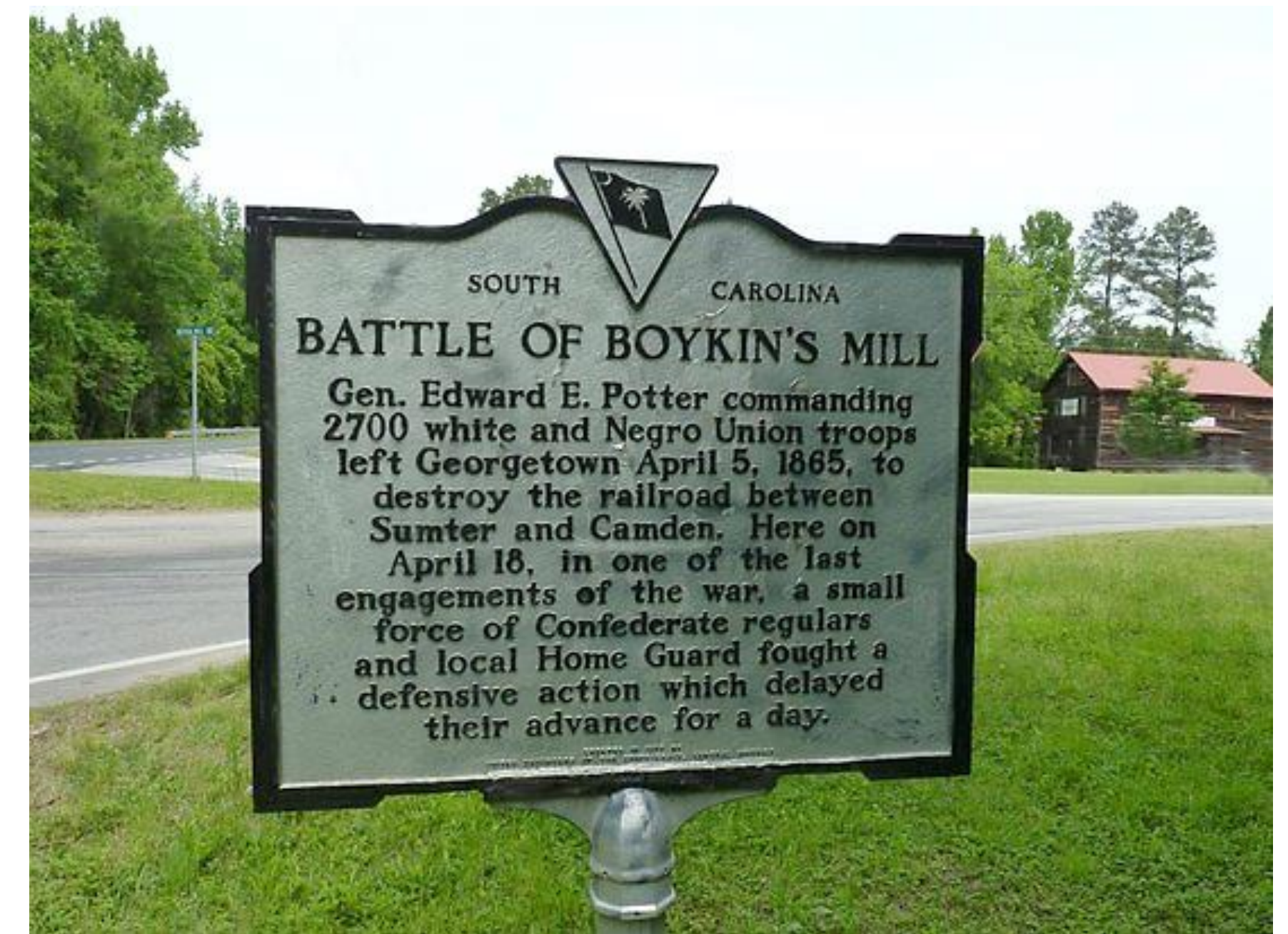


Later Battles

The 54th, led by Col. Ned Hallowell, after the death of Col. Shaw, 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 killed the wounded and surrendering men of the 54th rather than taking them captive.

The regiment also fought at the Battle of Honey Hill, in support of General William Tecumseh Sherman's "March to the Sea," 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.

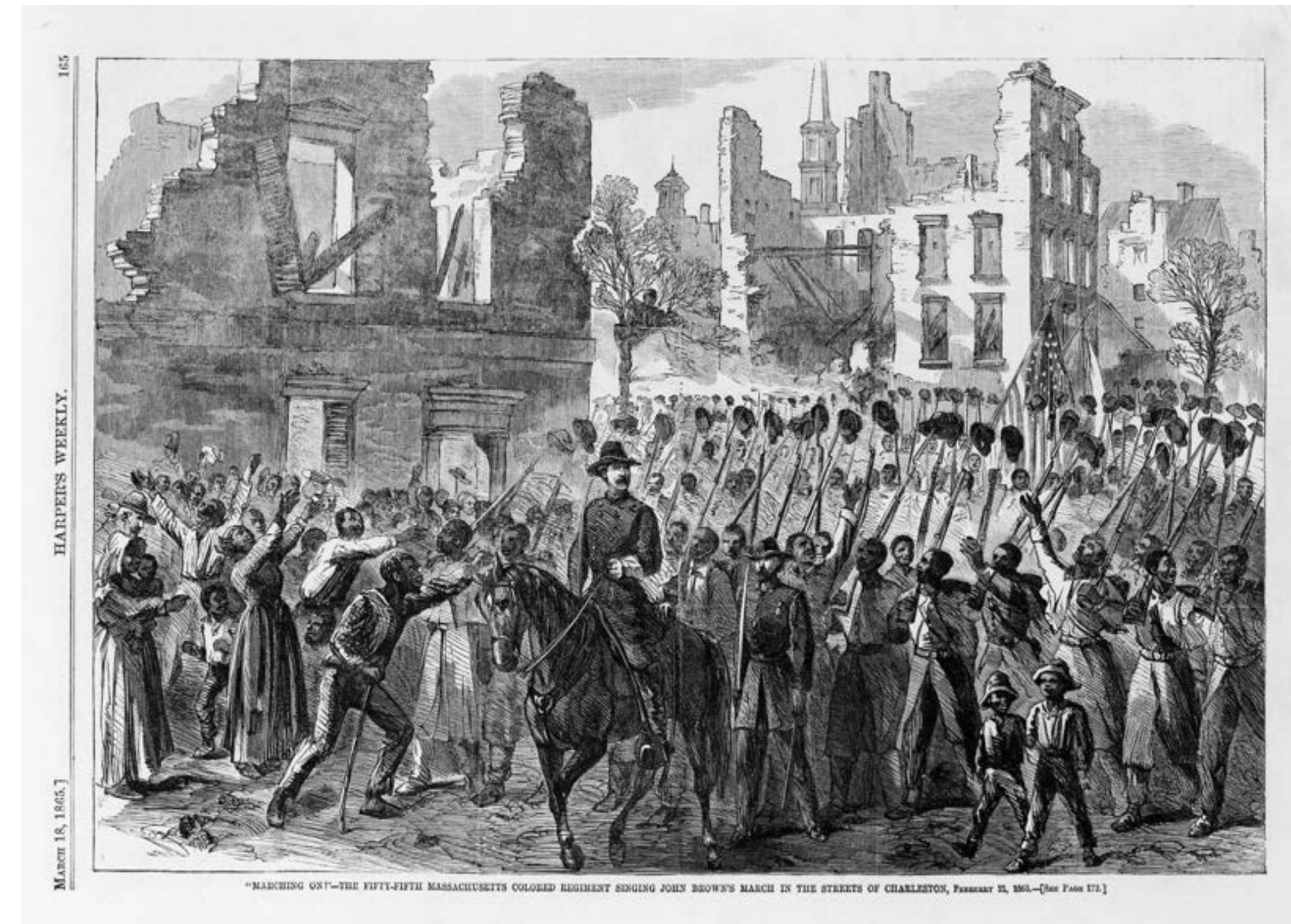
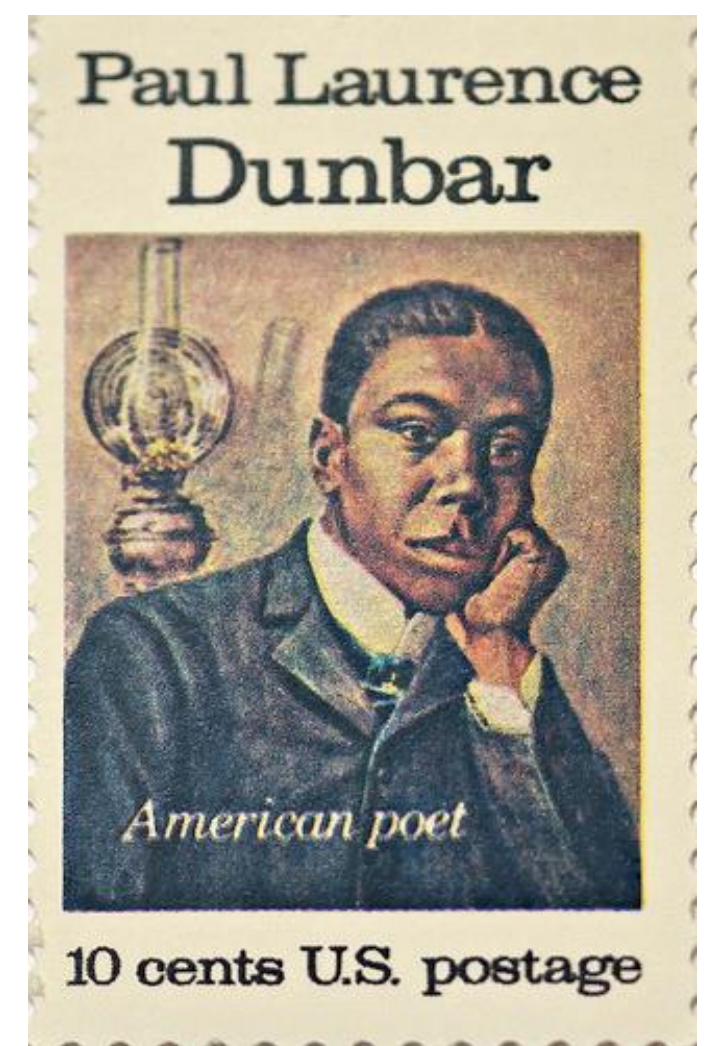


Illustration of the 55th Massachusetts from Harper's Weekly, 1865.

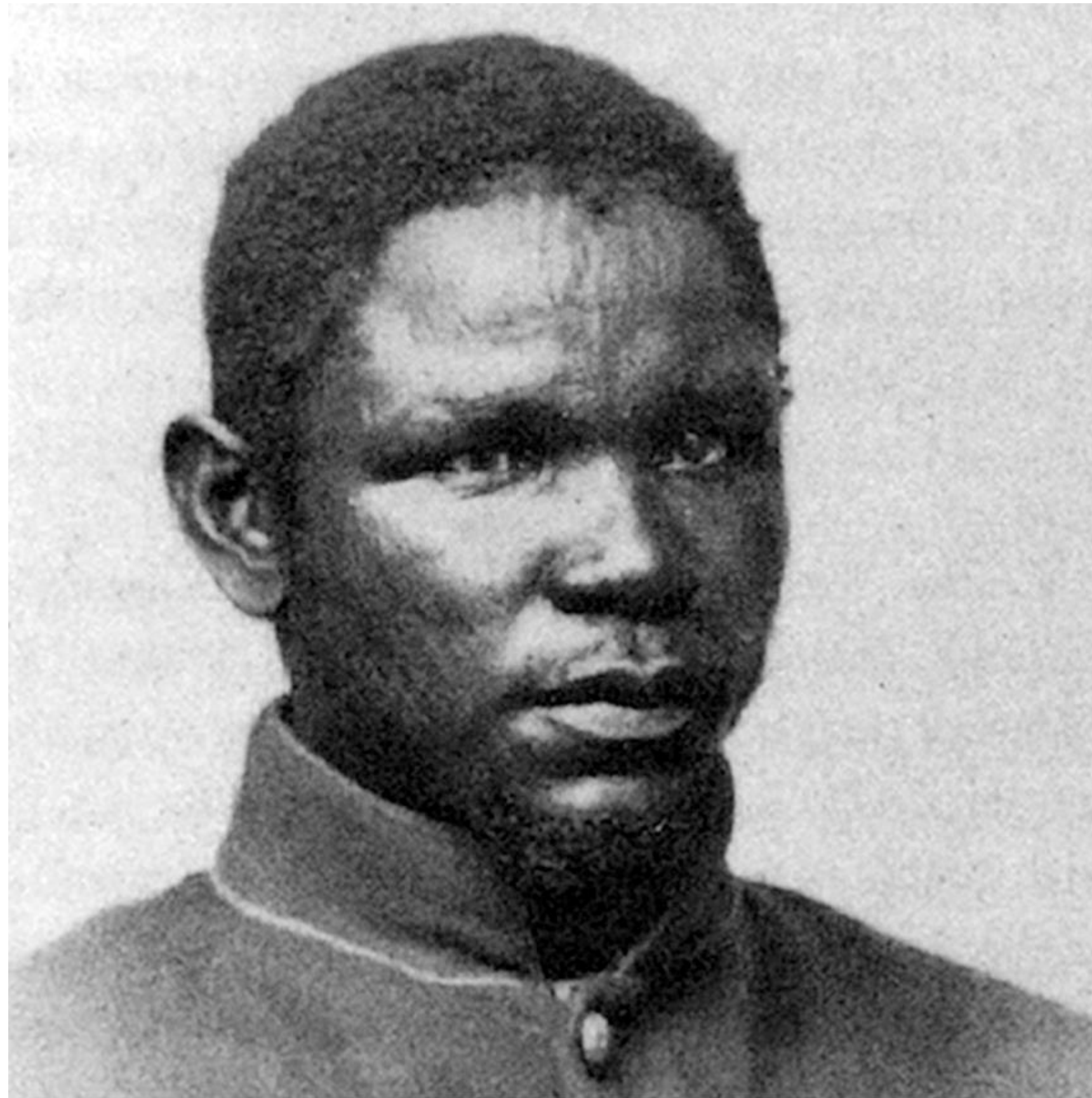
The 55th Massachusetts



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



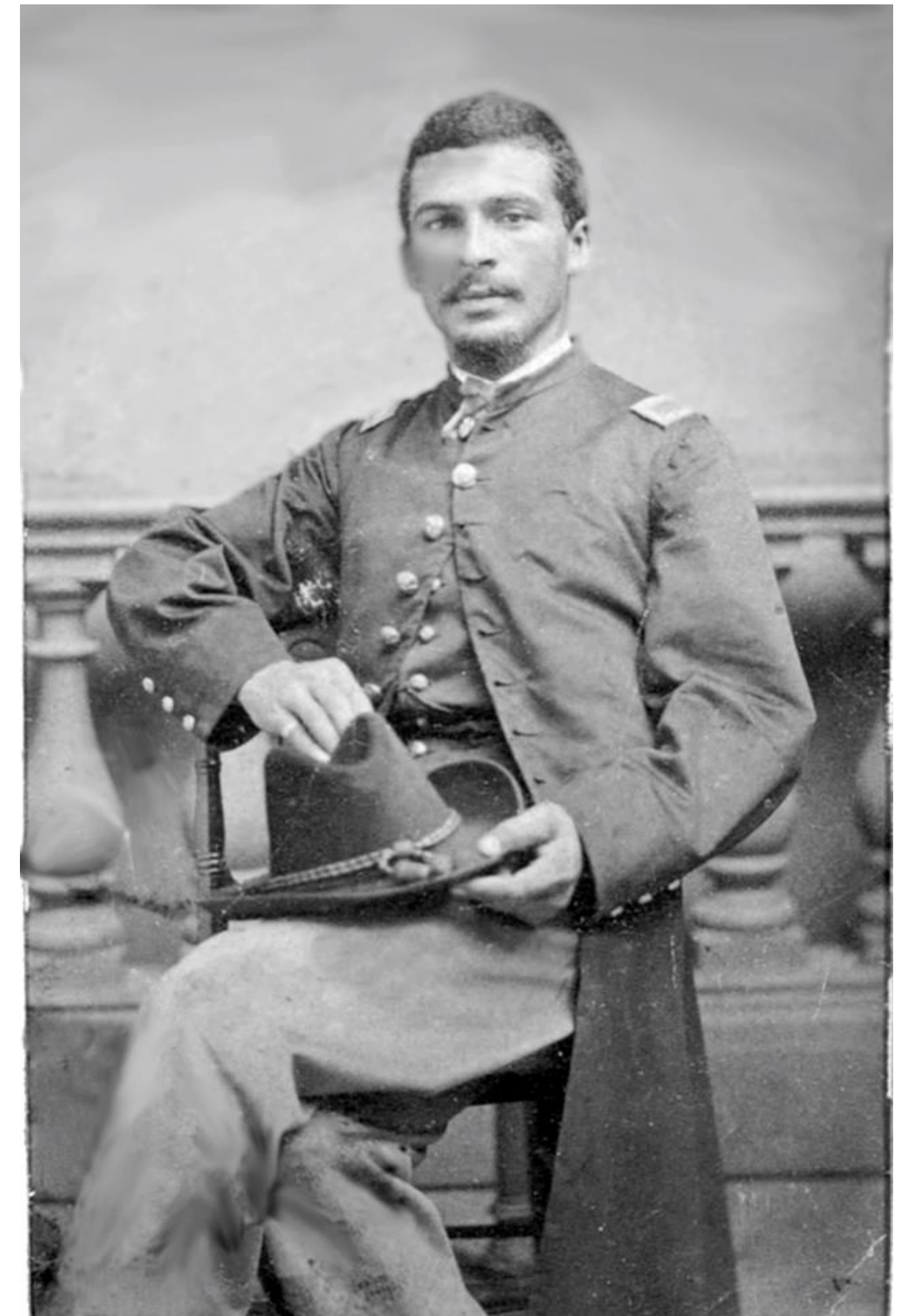
One of the most unexpected men to serve in the 55th was Nicholas Said. Born and raised in the Central African Bornu Empire, he was captured by slave traders and taken east, across the Sahara desert to the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Sold several times, he spoke not only his native language but Arabic and 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 learning many European languages. 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

Another notable veteran of the 55th, 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.

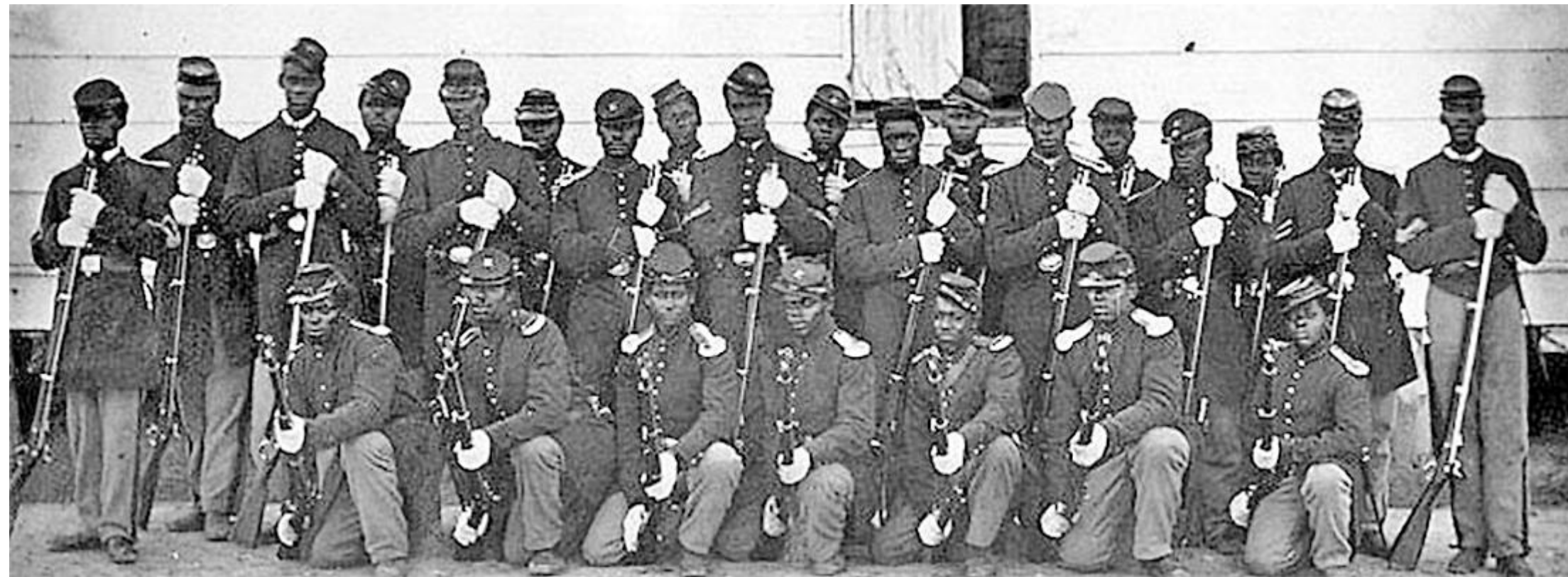
After the war, Trotter married Virginia Issacs, a descendant of Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson. In 1878, Trotter published *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, the first complete history of American music. He and Virginia's son William Monroe Trotter became a radical civil rights activist and 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.

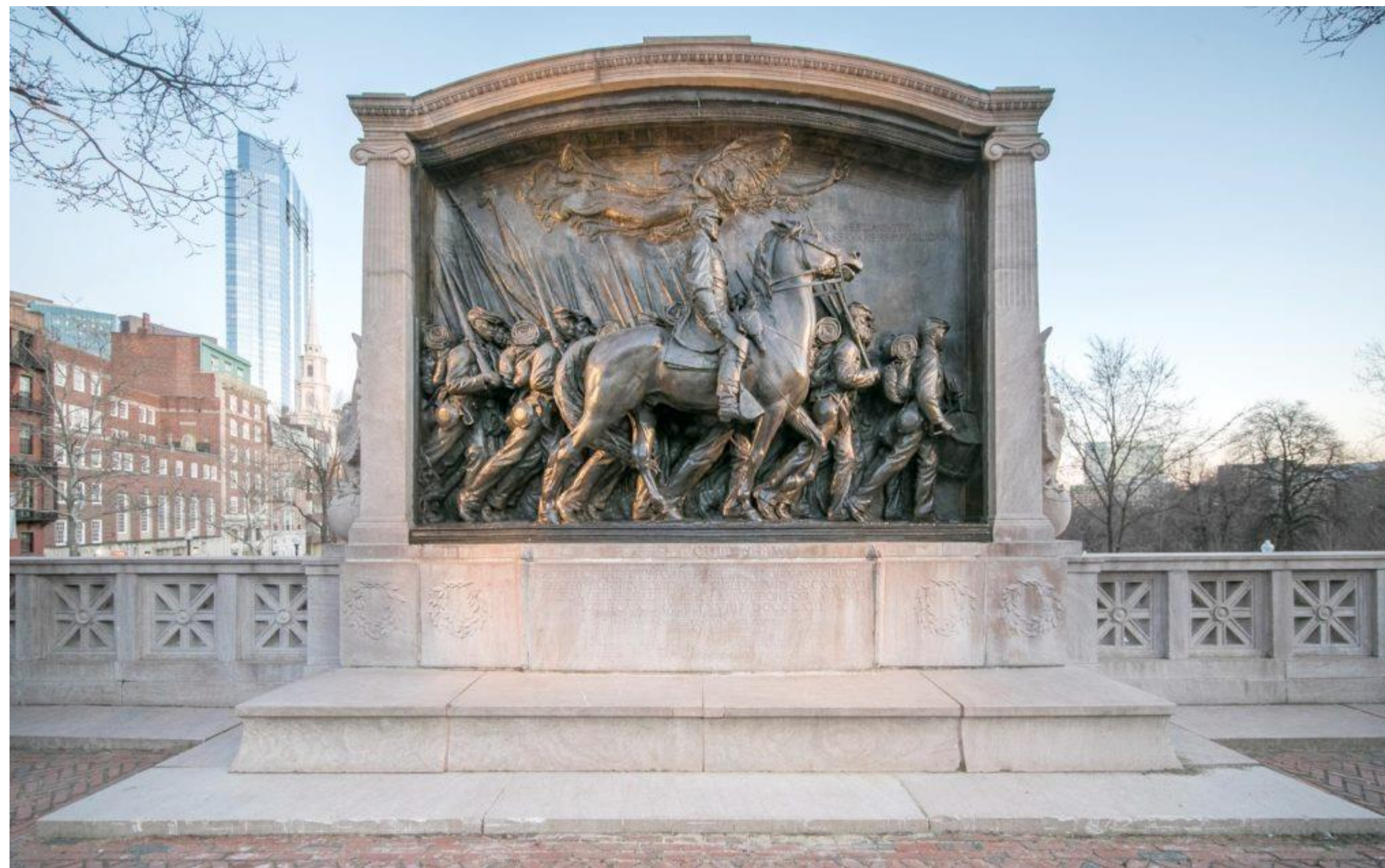
In protest, the 54th – both Black infantry and White officers – refused to accept their wages, nor would they accept Gov. Andrews's offer to make up the difference from Massachusetts state funds.



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 Shaw and the 54th.

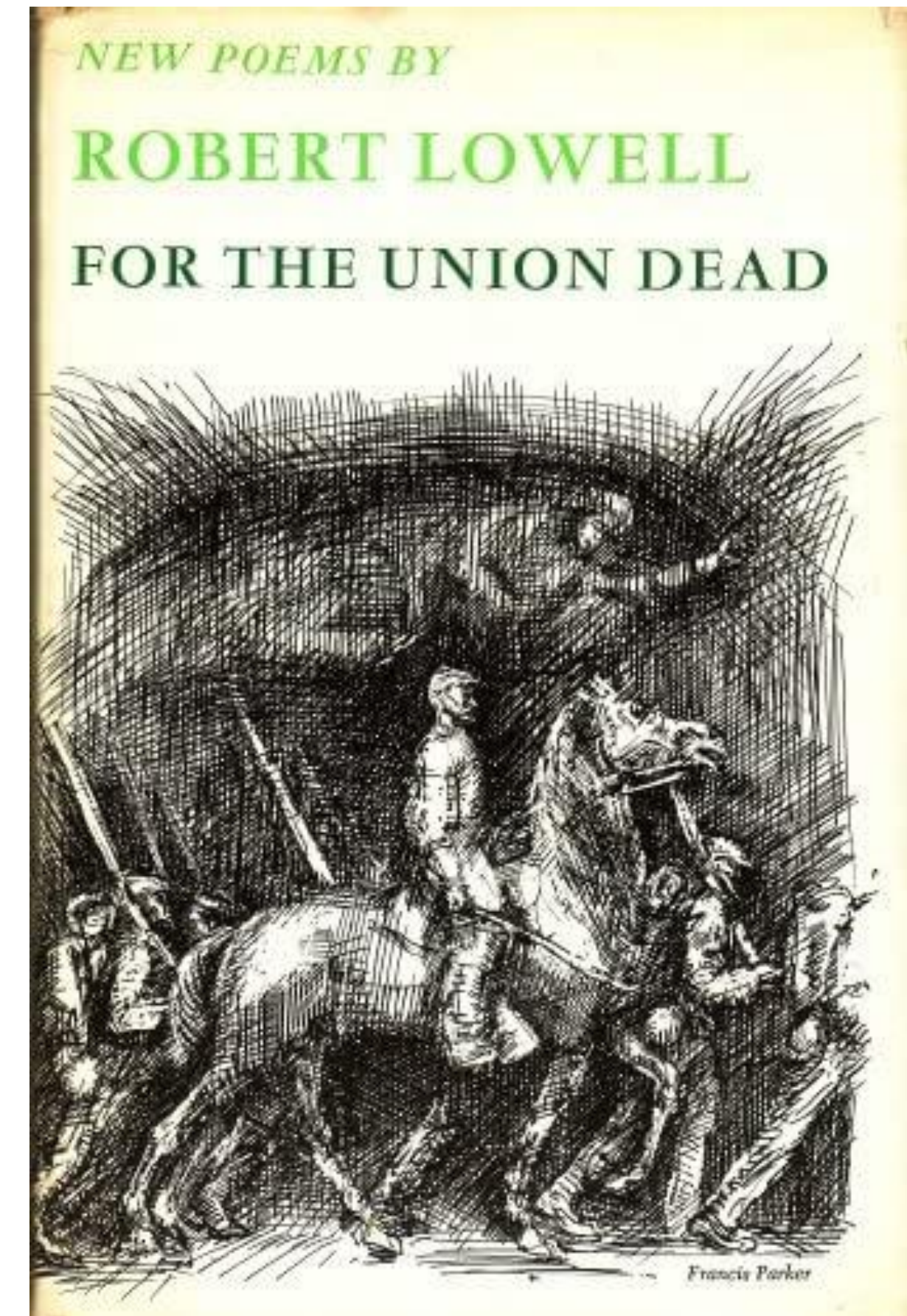


This committee awarded the commission to Saint-Gaudens, who worked 14 years to create the finished monument, which was finally unveiled in May 1897. It stands in Boston Commons, where crowds had cheered the 54th as it departed for the South in May 1863. Veterans of the 54th and 55th attended its unveiling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

The monument also did not include the names of Black soldiers killed in action until they were added in 1980s. During the civil unrest following the killing of George Floyd, the Shaw Memorial (which was undergoing restoration) was further damaged by anti-police graffiti. The Shaw Memorial has since been restored and access to a smartphone app with further information about the 54th has been added.

Are you familiar with any public monuments in your community? What kinds of things do you think need to be publicly and permanently celebrated?



“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 Andre Braugher.

Director Edward Zwick admitted that significant portions of the film, especially the 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.

Filmmakers often change some of the story or characters when making a movie about history. Do you think it is more important to tell an entertaining story or to be accurate?



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

Vocabulary

Integrated	Battery
Militia	Artillery
Abolitionist	Parapet
Orator	Bayonet
Intellectuals	Servitude
Regiment	Infamously
Inciting	Renowned
Insurrection	Valor
Siege	Memoirs
Skirmish	Mutiny
Barrage	Iconic