

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

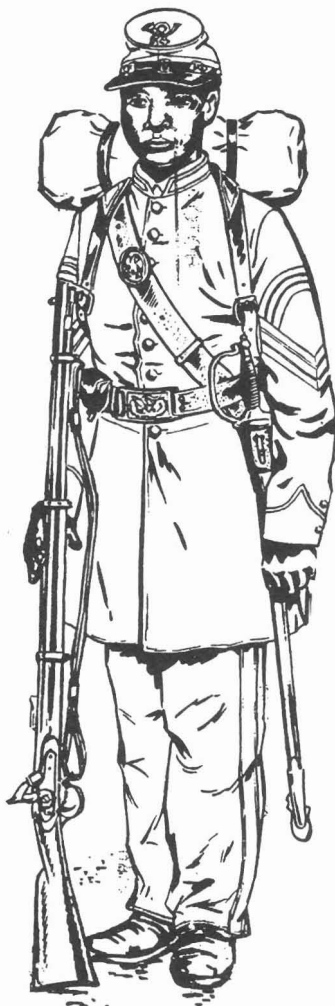
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THEIR SHARE OF THE GLORY

Rutland Blacks in the Civil War



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Enlisted Man, 54th Massachusetts Regiment
1863-1865

Rutland Blacks in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment Their Share of the Glory

by Don Wickman

On the night of 12 April 1861 Confederate cannon opened fire on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. After a brave defense Major Richard Anderson lowered the fort's flag in surrender and the Confederates took control of the brick bastion. The Civil War had begun and would continue over the next four years with relentless fury.

The news of Sumter's fall ignited a fire across the northern states. Men flocked to volunteer for military duty, eager to battle the Confederates. Vermonters were also included in this intense war fever. By early May the 1st Vermont Regiment had departed the state for the south and the call to arms was issued to raise additional regiments. The call was answered and ranks filled with men both young and old, and rich and poor, from all trades and professions. But these soldiers who were enlisting in a war where a prime issue was slavery were all white. Northern blacks could not enlist. Not until after 1 January 1863 was it possible for blacks to serve as regular soldiers, and serve they did. Vermont sent 120 black soldiers off to war, 71 of whom served in the 54th Massachusetts (Colored) Volunteer Regiment. Over 25% of those men enlisted from Rutland. This is the account of their "glory".

Rutland in 1861

In 1861 Rutland was a growing town with developing industry. It was not just Rutland City, but encompassed all the land of present day Proctor, West Rutland, Rutland Town, and Rutland City. The railroad bisected the town and a major rail yard was growing. As rail activity increased the commercial center of Rutland shifted from Main Street to Merchants Row and Center Street.

The census of 1860 recorded over 7500 residents in Rutland. This was a 100% increase in the population since the census of 1850. Rutland was a successful, flourishing community.

Of those 7500 people listed in the 1860 census 92 blacks were among the population. This number represented nearly 10% of the total black population in all of Vermont. One common misconception is these blacks were products of the underground railroad which ran through Vermont. Census records show the heads of households and spouses were primarily born in Vermont. Black heritage in Vermont was not new, only forgotten.

Within the community was Cato Williams and family, including sons, John and Cyrus; young farmer John Langley and his new wife, Caroline; teamster Nathan Hayes dwelling in Center Rutland with his wife and daughters; William Scott, his wife and five children, among whom was his son, George; and many others. Some like Langley farmed, others were laborers; another segment served as servants, cooks, or domestics. They were a part of Vermont's population,

but when Fort Sumter fell they could be only bystanders to America's bloodiest conflict.

Emancipation!

Why had blacks not been permitted to join the ranks? After all, those free blacks had rights of other U.S. citizens. Why exclude this segment of the population? The reasons were both political and stereotypical. Lincoln was counseled early in the war that should he permit the enlistment of black soldiers, citizens in the already shaky border states and some northern states would withdraw their support for the war. Some state governments were not ardent abolitionists, but saw the Civil War necessary for preservation of the union. The raising of black troops would alter priorities and support for the war could erode.

There was also the basic stereotype of the black man in the 1860s. Though there were blacks who were respected and well-educated, many people believed blacks were lazy, ill-disciplined, and did not possess the courage or spirit to fight. The job of common laborer was their best profession and as one white Ohioan shouted early in the war, "This is a white man's war!"¹

Meanwhile, the war for the union was not proceeding well. Lincoln realized the abolition of slavery was essential to the winning of the war and drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, planning it to go into effect January 1863. However, Lincoln chose not to announce the proclamation until a significant Union victory had been won.

The victory Lincoln sought came on the banks of Antietam Creek in Maryland on 17 September 1862 where McClellan's Army of the Potomac fought Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia to a draw. Though not a clearcut victory, it did serve to blunt Lee's advance northward, and with victories in the east difficult to come by, it had to suffice. The Emancipation Proclamation was made public. Hundreds of Union troops chose to desert rather than serve side by side with blacks, but now there was the opportunity for blacks to enlist and fight.

The 54th Massachusetts Regiment

With emancipation declared, the door opened for blacks to serve in the Union army. In South Carolina ex-slaves were formed into the first black regiment; other units soon followed in Louisiana and Kansas. The officers of these regiments were all white.

In January 1863 Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew decided to raise a colored regiment. The Federal War Department agreed to the strongly abolitionist state raising the regiment and recruiting began feverishly. A general misconception about the 54th Massachusetts (Colored) Regiment is that the soldiers were primarily runaway slaves. Though true for those regiments raised in the south, it was not the case of the 54th. These volunteers were free men and often literate, well-educated, and from worthy professions. The 54th had the distinction of being the first black regiment raised in the north and recruits came to

Massachusetts from every northern state and Canada to support the venture. Twenty-six year old Robert Gould Shaw, son of a Boston abolitionist and already a veteran of several battles, was appointed regimental colonel. All other officers selected for duty in the regiment were white.

After intense drill at Readville Camp outside of Boston, the 54th was mustered into the Union army and left Boston to a resounding sendoff. Governor Andrew envisioned the 54th not only as a fighting regiment, but also a “nest egg of a brigade” of black regiments. Andrew believed the arrival of the 54th in the Carolinas would be a rallying point for blacks in the region and a start for further enlistments of blacks into the army, thus increasing troop strength. He was also adamant in his letters that the 54th was, “raised and officered for active not fatigue duty . . . and allowed a place in onward and honorable movements of active war.”²

In early June 1863 the regiment arrived in South Carolina as part of the force besieging Charleston. Active duty initially was limited to manual labor around the camp. However, on 16 July part of the regiment made a successful defense on James Island where it was responsible for saving the white 10th Connecticut Regiment from capture and destruction. The 54th was now a veteran unit and earned the respect of fellow soldiers.

Charleston, South Carolina, was a city ringed with fortifications. One of these, Fort Wagner on Morris Island, required capture as it commanded ground essential for Union advancement. A work composed of high sand walls, a moat, and protected by water and cannon, it was nearly impregnable. Once already it had defied Union onslaught, but the generals elected to try again rather than lay a siege. The 54th, with young Shaw at the head of the regiment, would lead the attack.

On the night of 18 July 1863 the 54th advanced, followed by two brigades of white troops. Charging through vicious fire the 54th gained the parapet only to have Shaw killed and his body fall into the fort. Fire thinned the officer ranks, but for an hour the troops maintained their position. The supporting regiments gallantly charged, but were also defeated and all that remained at sunrise were mounds of dead and wounded.

Of the 600 men led by Shaw that July evening 50 percent were either killed, wounded, or captured. The result of such terrible losses proved to the north that black troops were not cowardly, but capable of fighting and dying valiantly for a cause.

The siege of Charleston continued.

The Military Draft Comes to Rutland

While the 54th Massachusetts was being recruited, the war was still not proceeding well for the north. Battles at Fredericksburg and Stones River created enormous casualty lists which affected cities and towns alike. The initial excitement

of war diminished and enlistments dropped considerably. Men were needed to fill the dwindling ranks and Congress passed legislation establishing the first military draft. All able-bodied men, whether black or white, between the ages of 25 and 45 were eligible. The draft would go into effect on 1 July 1863.

Several weeks later the selection process began in Rutland. It was a lottery where names were drawn and a ranking created. Men were exempted if they failed the physical examination, fulfilled other criteria for exemption, or procured a substitute to serve in their place. A substitute was paid \$300 and although it was a common practice in the northern states, it was not popular in Vermont.

After the draft concluded, three Rutland black men were off to war. John N. Langley, the twenty-five year old farmer was one, and brothers William H. and James J. Brooks were also selected. Rutland contributed \$100 compensation towards each man who had a family, to ease the suffering at home.

Since Vermont did not have any black units, the three men were mustered in and ordered to join the 54th Massachusetts on the South Carolina coast. In the company of other black draftees the men arrived at Morris Island on 29 November 1863 and were immediately placed in the ranks.

Another Call for Volunteers

The draft helped to fill the ranks, but more men were needed. A second draft was ordered for the beginning of 1864, but volunteers would be initially accepted. Towns were informed they needed to fill a certain quota of volunteers by 5 January 1864. If the number was not met by the deadline, the draft would be instituted to make up the difference, plus an additional number of men would be drafted. Towns scrambled for methods to secure volunteers so a draft could be avoided.

Since the hunt for glory was no longer a lure for men to enlist, the next solution was money. Already the federal government was offering a \$302 bounty per enlistment and the state added \$125 more. Even with this large sum of money volunteers were not forthcoming.

The towns desperately wanted to reach their quotas. As enlistments were proceeding slowly, Rutland held a town meeting to examine its options. After debate it was voted to offer a \$500 town bounty for each man enlisting above and beyond the federal and state bounties. A new recruit could earn \$927 for signing enlistment papers. A special town tax was also passed to help defray the \$65,000 expense of all the bounties.

Non-residents could also enlist and help fulfill the town quota. The additional \$500 was an attraction. As "bounty jumping" was becoming prevalent, the town in passing the bounty stated non-residents would only receive \$300 at the time of enlistment, the remaining \$200 balance six months later. According to the local paper, "The object of this modification, . . . was to guard against desertions, and to secure *bona fide* soldiers."³

With such a grand bounty being offered, volunteers came forward quickly. Both black and white men signed up. By 14 December, the *Rutland Herald* wrote, "Ten colored volunteers have enlisted in Rutland."⁴ These recruits were: George Hart, Nathan Hayes, Henry Jackson, Loudon Langley, Andrew Mero, James Quow, George William Scott, and Cyrus and John Williams.

On 28 December the *Herald* would write, "No draft here," as the town quota was met a week before the federal deadline.⁵ Seven more blacks had enlisted over those two weeks. They were: Francis Anthony, Royal Briggs, John Freeman, William Jackson, Charles Mero, George Storms, and John Weeks. Seventeen black volunteers prepared to set off for war.

Many of these seventeen were related. There were two sets of brothers: John and Cyrus Williams and Andrew and Charles Mero. William and George Scott were father and son. James Quow was a brother-in-law to John Williams. Loudon Langley had two other brothers enlist concurrently from Ferrisburgh, and Royal Briggs had a younger brother already in the 54th, a draftee from Castleton. At least five of the men were married and the average age was twenty-seven.

The new volunteers immediately set off to the Brattleboro rendezvous to join other new recruits. At the camp they were viewed by one of Vermont's United States Senators, Jacob Callomer. He said of the colored volunteers, "I would mention one thing as showing the character of the men: every man among them wrote his name to his articles of enlistment; not one made his mark. There was no man among them but could have commanded his two dollars a day at home."⁶ The men left Brattleboro for Boston, but were forced temporarily to leave behind Cyrus Williams, who had contracted typhoid fever. At Boston the recruits boarded a steamer which arrived at Folly Island, South Carolina, on 20 January 1864. The men were now part of the 54th Massachusetts and began to be integrated into the companies.

Olustee

The Rutland men arrived just in time to be part of an expedition to Florida. The strategy was to capture a coastal port, cut off enemy supply routes, and "try" to restore Florida to the Union. The regiment set out in early February with the new recruits. The exception was John Freeman. Freeman was in the Hilton Head Hospital where he died of disease on 15 February.

The Union force landed at Jacksonville and advanced across the state toward Tallahassee. Colonel Edward Hallowell commanded the 54th. The Confederates had set up their defensive line at Olustee, a small train stop along the cross-state railroad. The land was filled with pine barrens and swamps. Union General Seymour advanced holding the 54th in reserve. The Union forces attacked the Confederate lines, but then began to break under a fierce counterattack. The 54th was ordered to advance and stabilize the left flank. The regiment arrived in time to blunt the assault and then stood alone under intense fire as the Union line crumbled in disorder. Finally, orders arrived to fall back

