
III. History and Culture

How Their Noëtic Principle Ended Slavery The Shaw Memorial of Massachusetts' 54th

by Steven Carr

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It has been said that the Shaw Memorial by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907) was America's first monument that celebrated the defeat of slavery, and the first American work of art to depict African-Americans

as heroes. However, the monument is a bittersweet image, and Saint-Gaudens did not sugarcoat the terrible battlefield losses suffered by this all black, all-volunteer Massachusetts 54th Regiment in the U.S. Civil War.

On July 18, 1863, its units endured casualty rates of over 50% in just the first few minutes of battle. They lost their commander, Col. Robert Shaw, but continued



Augustus Saint-Gaudens, sculptor

The Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, America's first monument celebrating the defeat of slavery, and the first American work of art to depict African-Americans as heroes. This large bronze relief sculpture measures 14 by 11 feet.

to charge into direct cannon and canister fire from the enemy, in the near-suicidal frontal assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. They planted an American flag on the top of the enemy parapets, but at the end of the day, the fort remained in enemy hands.

President Lincoln saw the reaction, which helped to galvanize the North, and commented that the bravery and determination of these troops changed the civilian population, which made victory much more likely in the future.

Saint-Gaudens captures these proud troops not engaging the enemy, but rather engaging us, the American public.

Across the North, and especially in his native New England, Colonel Shaw was viewed as a martyr. In 1865, an African-American businessman in Boston (and former runaway slave), Joshua Smith, proposed a traditional equestrian statue as a memorial to Shaw, and soon other local businessmen joined the effort. They consulted several sculptors including Saint-Gaudens, but Shaw's father insisted that none of them had the right idea. Shaw's father, an Abolitionist, had a long discussion with Saint-Gaudens, saying that his son would demand that the black troops share a position of equal importance in the monument, and if the artists did not understand the significance of this idea, then they could never understand why his son went off to fight.

The elder Shaw insisted that it was critical that the black troops not only appear in the monument, but also each one had to be portrayed as a distinct individual. He did not want a focus on bulging muscles or battlefield bravado, but rather the quiet power of these humble troops to grab us, the viewer, and force us to rethink our role in directing the country.

Models from the Renaissance

Saint-Gaudens, who lost money on this venture, was consumed with this labor of love, whose outcome would not be unveiled for 32 years. He hired 40 African-American men, some young, some old, to pose for the sculpture, making clay models of their heads (considered among his finest portraits of his career). Saint-Gaudens studied the sculptures of ancient Greece and Rome, but his favorite sculptors were the Florentines, including Lorenzo Ghiberti and Donatello. He used Renaissance sculptures of war horses to depict Shaw's mount, and used Renaissance techniques for the frieze of the soldiers on foot. Some believe that he used elements from the painting by Velázquez, "Surrender at Breda" (1634–35).

Saint-Gaudens wanted his work to stand the test of time. To make up for his financial losses and to keep his studio operating during these long years, he accepted many smaller, more lucrative commissions (for works often of inferior quality). Saint-Gaudens helped to choose the location for the monument, which added significance and power to its message of the struggle for liberty. It was situated on historic Boston Common, between the State House and the site of the 1770 Boston Massacre.

At the request of Shaw's father, Saint-Gaudens added

the Latin inscription in the upper right corner, which translates as, "He forsook all to preserve the public weal," the motto of the Society of the Cincinnati. This inscription links these citizen-soldiers with the efforts of past patriots to improve the nation.

Frederick Douglass directed the recruiting for the 54th Regiment, and brought in black soldiers from 24 states, Canadian provinces, and some Caribbean islands. No one could say that these were just local heroes,



John Ritchie

Sgt. William H. Carney, of the Massachusetts 54th Volunteer Infantry Regiment, ca. 1864. For his participation in the charge on Fort Wagner, and advancing the American flag although wounded, he received the Medal of Honor.

and today Saint-Gaudens might tell us that his work represents a cross-section of America—blacks, whites, and immigrants, fighting for a more just country.

The monument depicts not a far-off theater of war, but their parade in the familiar surroundings of Beacon Street in Boston on May 28, 1863. The troops had just finished several weeks of basic training at nearby Camp Meigs, and were about to head South for the war. Colonel Shaw said that these black troops were better than any white troops that he ever had under his command, and requested that the Governor allow them to parade in front of the Massachusetts State House before they left for the battlefield.

African-Americans had long served with distinction in the military and comprised about 20–25% of the nation’s armed forces from the American Revolution to the War of 1812, but the Federal government did not recruit blacks as the Civil War began. Clearly this was because of racism and the desire not to further antagonize border states, but also to protect Union forces from the stated policy of the Confederates to execute any black soldier wearing a blue uniform carrying a weapon, and to execute any white officer in command of black troops. Bostonians already realized the importance of the 54th Regiment and filled the streets to enthusiastically cheer their parade. (There were a few signs of protest along the route, mostly from owners of large mansions, where windows were closed and drapes were drawn as the troops passed so as not to upset their “genteel sensibilities.”)

The Regiment’s Commander

Robert Gould Shaw (1837–1863) was born into one of the wealthiest families in America. He left



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Col. Robert Gould Shaw, Massachusetts 54th Infantry Regiment.

Harvard University in his junior year for a 30-day enlistment with the New York 7th Militia—comprised exclusively of the sons of elite families. He later became a second lieutenant in the Massachusetts 2nd Infantry, where he saw combat at Antietam. A few weeks later Massachusetts Gov. John Andrew asked Shaw to leave the 2nd Infantry and take command of the soon-to-be-formed all black, all-volunteer Massachusetts 54th Regiment. The Governor knew that Shaw had battlefield experience, came from an Abolitionist family, and would take the challenge seriously.

Over and over again, Shaw had to fight on behalf of his black soldiers, as his own Union Army did not want to send them proper shoes, uniforms, or weapons. Shaw even helped to start a salary boycott when the Army broke its promise and paid the black soldiers only half of the pay whites received. When desperate letters began to arrive from the families of the black troops explaining that they were facing financial hardships because of the pay boycott, Shaw organized fellow Abolitionists to send money to help maintain these families so that the boycott could continue.

The Lincoln White House intervened on behalf of the troops to fulfill the promise of equal pay, plus full back pay. In many cases, the money was paid to the soldiers’ families, since by the time the funds arrived, the soldiers had already died in battle. None of the troops who died at Fort Wagner ever saw a single penny from the government.

The troops loved their commander. The survivors from the Fort Wagner battle—still unpaid—gathered money to erect a small memorial to mark the spot where Colonel Shaw died. They were met with local hostility, so the funds were instead used to build the first school



Augustus Saint-Gaudens, sculptor

“The Standing Lincoln.” This 1887 bronze sculpture in Chicago’s Lincoln Park is the image by which most Americans remembered Lincoln, until the Lincoln Memorial in Washington was opened in 1922.

for African-American children in Charleston, S.C. The school would be named after Shaw.

After the battle at Fort Wagner, Confederate troops were ordered to throw all bodies of the dead black Union soldiers into a mass grave. Then they took Colonel Shaw’s body, stripped it of its uniform, and threw his body on top of the others. Despite the years of bitter fighting, no other soldiers or officers on either side had ever been treated with such disrespect. There was a clamor in the North to exhume the body of their martyred colonel, and to give him a hero’s burial in his hometown of Boston. Shaw’s father stopped this effort, saying that his son would want to be with his men, and

that in the eyes of the family, “We can imagine no holier place than that in which he lies.”

Guided by the Noëtic Principle

Through the years, this monument has confronted every generation of viewers with the same question: Why? The Massachusetts 54th Regiment requested to lead the assault on Fort Wagner, the most dangerous position on the entire battlefield. They knew that they would face overwhelming odds. Why did they do it? Were they some type of thrill-seekers, concerned only with the here and now? Were they merely trying to settle a grudge from a past injustice? Or were they using the noëtic principle, a sense of shaping the future in order to create a more perfect union?

These volunteer soldiers show us the highest quality of free will. Their intense expression of determination makes it painfully clear to us that history is not made by random acts. Here the true history lesson is all about how to shape the future!

After the Civil War, much of American art centered around Lincoln and the Union cause, but Saint-Gaudens had a more personal connection to the President than many other artists of his generation, starting at age 11, when Saint-Gaudens attended the February 1860 Cooper Union speech in New York that brought Lincoln so much closer to the White House. He saw Union troops marching through the streets of Manhattan on their way South to the war. He remembered seeing his parents crying at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper reports of Lincoln’s assassination. When Lincoln’s body was brought to New York, Saint-Gaudens stood in line for hours to pay his respects to the fallen President, and as soon as he saw Lincoln, he ran to the back of the line in order to see him again. He knew the route of the funeral procession and positioned himself on a rooftop on Broome Street, where he saw all the men below removing their hats as the funeral car passed.

One of Saint-Gaudens’ greatest works was his bronze 1887 sculpture, “The Standing Lincoln” in Chicago’s Lincoln Park, in which he paid homage to Lincoln’s noble character, intellectual power, and oratorical skills. Until the 1922 opening of the Lincoln

Memorial in Washington, D.C., the image of that Chicago statue was how most Americans remembered Lincoln.

The Colored Soldiers

by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906)

If the muse were mine to tempt it
And my feeble voice were strong,
If my tongue were trained to measures,
I would sing a stirring song.
I would sing a song heroic
Of those noble sons of Ham,
Of the gallant colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam!

And with many a flip and flout
Said “These battles are the white man’s,
And the whites will fight them out.”
Up the hills you fought and faltered,
In the vales you strove and bled,
While your ears still heard the thunder
Of the foes’ advancing tread.

Then distress fell on the nation,
And the flag was drooping low;
Should the dust pollute your banner?
No! the nation shouted, No!
So when War, in savage triumph,
Spread abroad his funeral pall—
Then you called the colored soldiers,
And they answered to your call.

And like hounds unleashed and eager
For the life blood of the prey,
Sprung they forth and bore them bravely
In the thickest of the fray.
And where’er the fight was hottest,
Where the bullets fastest fell,
There they pressed unblanched and fearless
At the very mouth of hell.

Ah, they rallied to the standard
To uphold it by their might;
None were stronger in the labors,
None were braver in the fight.
From the blazing breach of Wagner
To the plains of Olustee,

They were foremost in the fight
Of the battles of the free.

And at Pillow! God have mercy
On the deeds committed there,
And the souls of those poor victims
Sent to Thee without a prayer.
Let the fulness of Thy pity
O’er the hot wrought spirits sway
Of the gallant colored soldiers
Who fell fighting on that day!

Yes, the Blacks enjoy their freedom,
And they won it dearly, too;
For the life blood of their thousands
Did the southern fields bedew.
In the darkness of their bondage,
In the depths of slavery’s night,
Their muskets flashed the dawning,
And they fought their way to light.

They were comrades then and brothers,
Are they more or less to-day?
They were good to stop a bullet
And to front the fearful fray.
They were citizens and soldiers,
When rebellion raised its head;
And the traits that made them worthy,—
Ah! those virtues are not dead.

They have shared your nightly vigils,
They have shared your daily toil;
And their blood with yours commingling
Has enriched the Southern soil.
They have slept and marched and suffered
’Neath the same dark skies as you,
They have met as fierce a foeman,
And have been as brave and true.

And their deeds shall find a record
In the registry of Fame;
For their blood has cleansed completely
Every blot of Slavery’s shame.
So all honor and all glory
To those noble sons of Ham—
The gallant colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam!