

# Assaulting Fort Wagner

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Frederick Douglass National Historic Site



## Fighting for Freedom

At the start of the Civil War African Americans were not allowed to serve in the U.S. Army. By the end of the war more than 180,000 had enlisted (about ten percent of all Union troops). Through their service these “United States Colored Troops” [USCT] changed minds and helped ignite the first American civil rights movement.



**1st United States Colored Infantry Regiment**

Mathew Brady c. 1864

The 1st Regiment USCT was organized in Washington, D.C. during the early summer of 1863. The regiment went on to serve in Virginia and the Carolinas, seeing action at (amongst others) Petersburg and Fort Fisher. (Library of Congress LC-USZC2-6431)



**Unidentified Soldier and Family**

A USCT soldier, likely from Maryland. Many soldiers fought to make a better life for themselves and a better world for their children. (Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-36454)

*“Dear Wife... I would like to know if you are still in slavery... I am a soldier now and I shall use my utmost endeavor to strike at the rebellion and the heart of this system that so long has kept us in chains.”*

*- Samuel Cabel, 1863*

The USCT had a hard job. Battle was dangerous and capture often meant enslavement or death. Service wasn't easy in their own army either. They frequently got the worst equipment, the lowest pay, and no chance of promotion as an officer. Despite this they persevered, helping to end slavery and change who was seen as an American, a citizen, and a human.



**Hubbard Pryor before and after enlistment**

October 10, 1864

At age twenty two Hubbard Pryor escaped from slavery in Georgia. He fled to Tennessee where he joined the 44th USCT Regiment in 1864 and posed for these pictures. As a soldier, he returned to his home state a part of General Sherman's army. He was captured in the fight for Atlanta and forced into hard labor. He survived this second enslavement and lived until 1890. (National Archives)

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## Changing Minds

The USCT were slaveholder's worst nightmare. For 300 years the "masters" had dreaded just this moment. Armed and organized men fighting to free themselves.

The USCT was a problem for the North too. Many were hesitant about arming African Americans and wanted to control the process. In the end neither the North nor South was able to fight the war as they wished and the USCT had their say. The capture of Richmond (the Confederate capitol) by USCT troops was seen as proof of how much the world had changed.

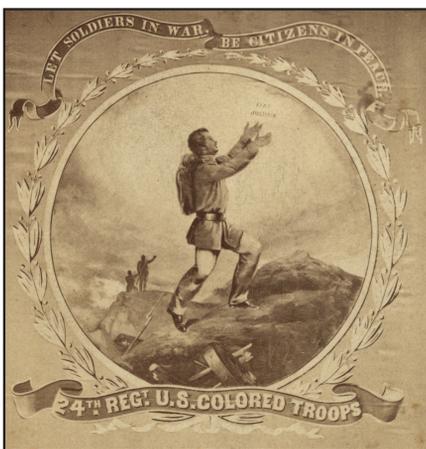


**USCT near Dutch Gap, Virginia**

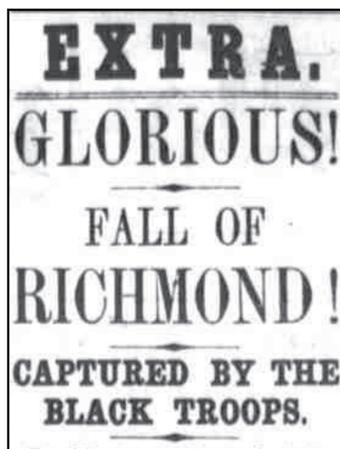
Soldiers pose for a picture aiming off into the distance. Before the Civil War there were few images of African American men in such powerful poses. Visual arguments, like this one, could be as convincing as the actions performed on battlefields. (Library of Congress LC-B811- 2553)

*"We are fighting for the Union, we are fighting for the law  
We can hit a rebel further than a white man ever saw  
As we go marching on. Glory, glory, hallelujah."*

*- Marching song of the First  
Arkansas Infantry Regiment*



**Let Soldiers In War Be Citizens In Peace**  
Flag of the 24th USCT.  
(Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-11274)



**The Fall of Richmond**  
African American troops were the first to enter the Confederate capitol after its fall.  
(Library of Congress Daily National Republican, D.C. 4/3/1865)

### SONG OF THE FIRST OF ARKANSAS.

The following song was written by Captain Lindley Miller, of the First Arkansas Colored Regiment. Captain Miller says the "boys" sing the song on dress parade with an effect which can hardly be described, and he adds that "while it is not very conservative, it will do to fight with." Captain Miller is a son of the late ex-Senator Miller, of New Jersey.

Oh! we're de bully soldiers of de "First of Arkansas."  
We are fightin' for de Union, we are fightin' for de law;  
We can hit a rebel furdur dan a white man eber saw,  
As we go marching on.  
Glory, glory, hallelujah, &c.

See dar! above de centre, where de flag is wavin' bright;  
We are goin' out of slavery; we are bound for freedom's light;  
We mean to show Jeff. Davis how the Africans can fight,  
As we go marching on.

We hab done wid hoein' cotton, we hab done with hoein' corn,  
We are colored Yankee soldiers now, as sure as you are born;  
When de Masses hear us yellin' dey'll tink its Gabriel's horn,  
As we go marching on.

Dey will hab to pay us wages, de wages ob their sin,  
Dey will hab to bow their foreheads to their colored kith and kin,  
Dey will hab to gib us house-room, or de roof shall tumble in,  
As we go marching on.

We heard de proclamation, massa hush it as he will;  
De bird he sing it to us, hoppin on de cotton hill,  
And de possum up de gum tree he couldn't keep it still,  
As he went climbing on.

Dey said, "Now colored bredren, you shall be forever free,  
From the first of January, eighteen hundred and sixty-three;  
We heard it in de riber goin' rushin' to de sea,  
As it went sounding on,"

Father Abraham has spoken, and de message has been sent,  
De prison doors he opened, and out de pris'ners went,  
To join de sable army of de "African descent,"  
As we go marching on.

Den fall in colored bredren, you'd better do it soon,  
Don't you hear de drum a beatin' de Yankee Doodle tune?  
We are wid you now dis mornin', we'll be far away at noon,  
As we go marching on.

Published by the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments

**Marching Song of the 1st Arkansas USCT**  
This song, to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", clearly stated the USCT's mind set.  
(Library of Congress Civil War Song Sheets, Series 1, Volume 3)

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## The Douglass Sons at War



Charles Douglass was 19 when he enlisted with the 54th Massachusetts. He became ill and was granted a rare transfer to the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry. He served in the campaigns around Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia in the spring of 1864. While on guard duty near Petersburg one night he personally captured a Confederate soldier. He survived the war.

### Charles Douglass

Charles Douglass posing in his 5th Massachusetts cavalry uniform.  
(Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University)

### Lewis Douglass

Lewis Douglass posing in his 54th uniform.  
(Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University)

*“I hope I fall with my face to the foe.”*  
- Lewis Douglass  
July 20, 1863

Lewis Douglass, 22, joined the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in April of 1863. Eventually he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant Major. Lewis fought in the bloody Battle of Fort Wagner. He survived the battle and the war, but not unscathed. A disease he contracted lingered for the rest of his life.



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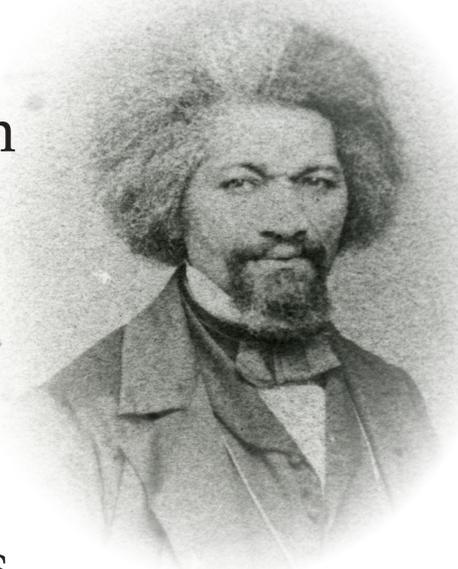
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## Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass saw the Civil War as America's chance to end slavery. Douglass pushed African Americans to join the USCT, seeing their service as the key to victory both on the battlefield and at home.

Throughout, he was the nation's conscience, arguing that the war was about more than union and state's rights. It was, he said, about a new birth of freedom. A great step towards the nation promised in the Declaration of Independence. He visited Abraham Lincoln at the White House to argue this. Douglass' influence was crucial to Lincoln's evolution as a thinker. Listen to Lincoln's Second Inaugural speech or his Gettysburg Address and you will hear Douglass's deep voice, rumbling in the background.

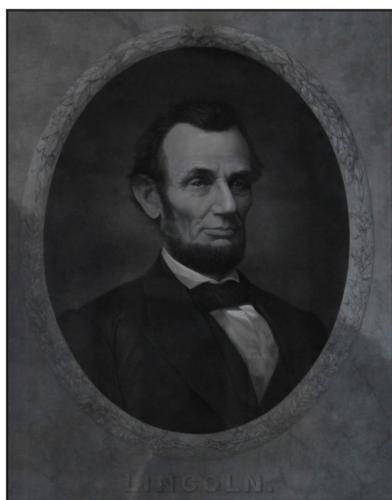


### Frederick Douglass

Douglass saw the Civil War as the moment the country would stand up to slavery.  
(Frederick Douglass National Historic Site FRDO-3928)

*"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 pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States."*

*-Frederick Douglass*



### Abraham Lincoln

John H. Littlefield

Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass met three times. Douglass pushed Lincoln to pay African American troops equal to white soldiers. He also asked Lincoln to retaliate for USCT prisoners killed or sold into slavery. Lincoln did not always move fast enough for Douglass or do all that he wished. In the end though Douglass was pleased with Lincoln. Years later he wrote, "...we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln."

(Frederick Douglass National Historic Site FRDO-181)

### Men of Color to Arms!

A recruiting poster signed by Frederick Douglass. The poster calls on African American men to disprove racist views with their actions on the field.  
(Library of Congress lprbcsdm scsm0556)

### MEN OF COLOR, TO ARMS! NOW OR NEVER!

This is our Golden Moment. The Government of the United States calls for every Able-Bodied Colored Man to enter the Army for the THREE YEARS' SERVICE, and join in fighting the Battles of Liberty and the Union. A new era is open to us. For generations we have suffered under the horrors of slavery, outrage and wrong; our manhood has been denied, our citizenship blotted out, our souls seared and burned, our spirits cowed and crushed, and the hopes of the future of our race involved in doubts and darkness. But now the whole aspect of our relations to the white race is changed. Now therefore is our most precious moment. Let us Rush to Arms! **Fail Now and Our Race is Doomed** on this the soil of our birth. We must now awake, arise, or be forever fallen. If we value Liberty, if we wish to be free in this land, if we love our country, if we love our families, our children, our homes, we must strike NOW while the Country calls; must rise up in the dignity of our manhood, and show by our own right arms that we are worthy to be freemen. Our enemies have made the country believe that we are craven cowards, without soul, without manhood, without the spirit of soldiers. Shall we die with this stigma resting on our graves? Shall we leave this inheritance of shame to our children? No! A thousand times No! **We WILL Rise!** The alternative is upon us; let us rather die freemen than live to be slaves. What is life without liberty? We say that we have manhood—now is the time to prove it. A nation or a people that cannot fight may be pitied, but cannot be respected. If we would be regarded *Men*, if we would forever **SILENCE THE TONGUE OF CALUMNY**, of prejudice and hate; let us rise NOW and fly to arms! We have seen what **Valor and Heroism** our brothers displayed at **PORT HUDSON** and at **MILLIKEN'S BEND**; though they are just from the galling, poisoning grasp of slavery, they have startled the world by the most exalted heroism. If they have proved themselves heroes, can not we prove ourselves men? **ARE FREEMEN LESS BRAVE THAN SLAVES?** More than a Million White Men have left Comfortable Homes and joined the Armies of the Union to save their Country; cannot we leave ours, and swell the hosts of the Union, to save our liberties, vindicate our manhood, and deserve well of our Country?

**MEN OF COLOR!** All Races of Men—the Englishman, the Irishman, the Frenchman, the German, the American, have been called to assert their claim to freedom and a manly character, by an appeal to the sword. The day that has seen an enslaved race in arms, has, in all history, seen their last trial. We can now see that **OUR LAST OPPORTUNITY HAS COME!** If we are not lower in the scale of humanity than Englishmen, Irishmen, white Americans and other races, we can show it now.

**MEN OF COLOR! BROTHERS and FATHERS! WE APPEAL TO YOU!** By all your concern for yourselves and your liberties, by all your regard for God and Humanity, by all your desire for Citizenship and Equality before the law, by all your love for the Country, to stop at no subtleties, listen to nothing that shall deter you from rallying for the Army. Come forward, and at once Enroll your Names for the **Three Years' Service**. **STRIKE NOW**, and you are henceforth and forever **FREEMEN!**

E. D. Bassett, Wm. D. Forten, Frederick Douglass, Wm. Whipper, D. D. Turner, Jas. McCrummell, A. S. Cassey, A. M. Green, J. W. Page, L. R. Seymour, Rev. J. Underdue,	John W. Price, Augustus Dorsey, Rev. Stephen Smith, N. W. Depee, Dr. J. H. Wilson, J. W. Cassey, P. J. Armstrong, J. W. Simpson, Rev. J. B. Trusty, S. Morgan Smith, Wm. E. Gibson,	Rev. J. Boulden, Rev. J. Asher, Rev. J. C. Gibbs, Daniel George, Robert M. Adger, Henry M. Cropper, Rev. J. B. Reeves, Rev. J. A. Williams, Rev. A. L. Stanford, Thomas J. Bowers, Elijah J. Davis,	John P. Burr, Robert Jones, O. V. Catto, Thos. J. Dorsey, I. D. Cuff, Jacob C. White, Morris Hall, James Needham, Rev. Elisha Weaver, Ebenzer Black, Rev. Wm. T. Catto,	Jas. R. Gordon, Samuel Stewart, David B. Bowers, Henry Minton, Daniel Colley, J. C. White, Jr., Rev. J. P. Campbell, Rev. W. J. Alston, J. P. Johnson, Franklin Turner, Jesse E. Glasgow.
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## The Charleston Campaign

Since the Civil War's start in April 1861, the city of Charleston, South Carolina had been the symbolic heart of the rebellion in the eyes of Northerners and Southerners alike. Additionally, its bustling port and railroad network provided much needed supplies to the South. Union capture of Charleston would be a significant victory.



### Defenses of Charleston, SC

Steven Stanley, Civil War Trust

Charleston was heavily defended with numerous forts and batteries during the Civil War (even the first successful military submarine, the CSS Hunley). Capture of Battery Wagner was the first step to cracking these defenses. Capturing Wagner could lead to the fall of Battery Gregg. In turn Gregg could shell Fort Sumter (where the first shots of the war were fired), opening the harbor to Union attack.

(Civil War Trust)

Intent on taking the city, Northern troops under General Quincy Gillmore landed on nearby Morris Island in the summer of 1863. Union forces attacked Fort Wagner on July 11 but were repulsed. A second, larger attack occurred the following week with the 54th Massachusetts leading the assault.

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## The Attack

On the evening of July 18, 1863, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts lead an assault on Fort Wagner. They landed and led 5,000 federal troops up a narrow beach toward the sand and log fort. When the 54th was 200 yards from the fort the Confederates unleashed a barrage of cannon and musket fire on them. The 54th pressed forward under the withering fire, ascended the parapet of the fort and engaged in hand to hand combat with the defenders.



**Fort Wagner**  
c. 1865  
A view of Fort Wagner from the south. The 54th marched up the beach and attacked from this direction. (Library of Congress LC-DIG-cwppb-03207)

*“How I got out of that fight alive I cannot tell . . .”*  
— Lewis Douglass, July 20, 1863

Col. Shaw was killed on the parapet, and the 54th fell back, having lost more than 40% of its men, killed, wounded, and captured. Nine other Federal regiments followed the 54th, each being bloodily repulsed. The Confederates won the battle, but eventually evacuated the fort in August of 1863.

**Attack on Fort Wagner**  
Steven Stanley, Civil War Trust  
The attack on Fort Wagner. (Civil War Trust)

**Inside Fort Wagner**  
c. 1865  
Inside Fort Wagner after its capture by Union troops. A large canon sits in the foreground. Trenches to protect riflemen run along the top of the wall. (Library of Congress LC-DIG-cwppb-03132)



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## After the War

Even though the Civil War ended slavery, the battle for civil rights was just beginning. USCT veterans became community leaders and used organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic to continue the fight for full equality in the postwar years. Both Lewis and Charles Douglass were active members of the GAR and served in a number of capacities. There was even a GAR post in Washington, DC named after their father, Frederick Douglass.



### Officers of the 54th Massachusetts

Captain Luis F. Emilio (center) was one of the original officers of the 54th Massachusetts. He briefly took command of the regiment after the attack on Fort Wagner when all the other ranking officers were killed or wounded. Following the war Emilio wrote a history of the 54th "A Brave Black Regiment." This book helped make sure the history of the regiment would last beyond the life time of its members.

(Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-11526)

### USCT Veterans and GAR Members

Two veterans proudly pose in their GAR uniforms.

(Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-11492, LC-DIG-ppmsca-11484)

*"There will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it."*

*- Abraham Lincoln, August 26, 1863*

The military experience of the USCT was often important as well. In the Jim Crow South veterans found themselves needing to take up arms to defend homes, friends and families. Their training was often the only protection communities had from terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.



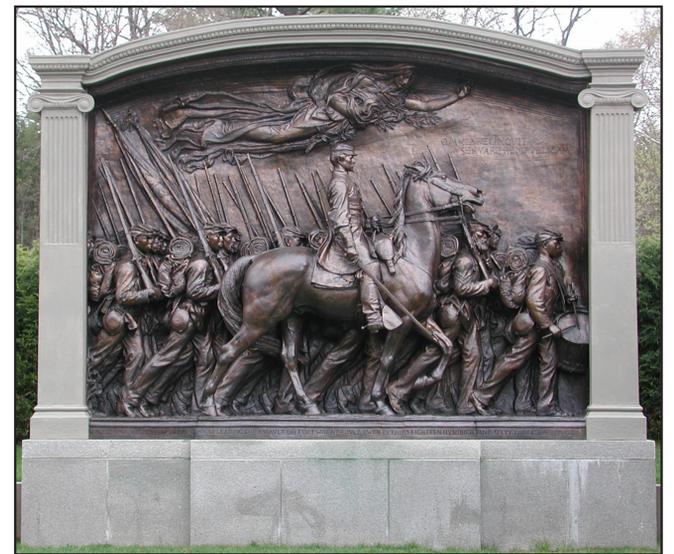
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## Lasting Memory

At the end of the Civil War a fierce debate over the memory and meaning of the war began. In many histories slavery was downplayed as a cause of the war, while the role of the USCT was often left out entirely. The image of heroic African Americans acting as men and citizens did not fit in segregated America. The USCT began to fade from the national memory with only a few memorials, such as the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts memorial in Boston, to remind the country of their service.



**54th Massachusetts and Robert Shaw Memorial**  
Augustus Saint-Gaudens, 1897  
The Robert Gould Shaw memorial on Boston Common is one of the most famous of Civil War monuments. New York sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens worked for fourteen years on the piece. During that time he modeled approximately forty different African American men to give the marching soldiers accurate and lifelike features.  
*(National Park Service, Augustus Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site)*

*“But the high soul burns on to light men’s feet where death for noble ends makes dying sweet”*

*– James Russell Lowell*

*verse on the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial*

Their legacy, however, proved too strong and never entirely faded. In 1989 the film *Glory* brought widespread recognition to the USCT and was a turning point for their memory. Public interest in the USCT soared, and numerous tributes and monuments, such as the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, DC, were created.



**African American Civil War Memorial**  
Ed Hamilton, 1997  
The African American Civil War Memorial was part of a modern resurgence of interest about the USCT.  
*(National Park Service, National Mall and Memorial Parks)*