

Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment Memorial

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Art Appreciation

Professor Farr

PREFACE

It was a rather unexpected find for me to come across The Shaw Memorial at the National Gallery of Art in downtown Washington, DC. As I was walking down the street towards Capitol Hill, I came across several large banners hanging outside of the National Gallery of Art building. They were advertising the current exhibitions inside, one of them being the Memorial relief sculpture dedicated to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment. Having seen a photograph of this monument in the closing credits of the film *Glory*, I was unaware that it was available to be seen locally. So, the serendipitous banners sparked an immediate interest and opportunity for me. As I have also said before, just about anything related to history, one of my favorite subjects grabs my attention from the start, especially if it is about something as significant as the 54th Regiment of the American Civil War.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank those who have helped me in my progress towards researching and writing this paper about the memorial. Firstly, both of my parents were very helpful in providing me with information about the 54th Regiment and dates during the Civil War period, as well as in assisting with the research process. I would also like to extend thanks and appreciation to those who work at the National Gallery of Art for their assistance in guiding me to the information needed about the monument and its historical significance throughout the decades.

INTRODUCTION

Initially, because I had seen the 1989 war film *Glory* by Edward Zwick, I had a general idea of who the men in the 54th Regiment were. Never before, though, had I looked further into the group. With the opportunity to see such a massive monument dedicated to those soldiers, I felt it to be a great chance to gain further knowledge about the regiment and their significance in the American Civil War, one of the most fascinating periods in American history.

The monument was created to commemorate the men who fought in the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, the fifth African-American troop to be organized in the North to fight in the American Civil War, led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. The regiment was first authorized in March of 1863, after President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. African-Americans were recruited from every corner of the northeastern region of the country to join the regiment, since the state of Massachusetts had a fairly small African-American population at the time. Some came all the way from Canada to join. Notably, Frederick Douglass' two sons, Charles and Lewis, signed on to be a part of the regiment. (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts)

It was on July 18, 1863 that the regiment gained recognition for their assault against the Confederates at Fort Wagner near Charleston, South Carolina. Although Colonel Shaw died in battle along with most of his men, the bravery of the regiment was widely heralded. One hundred eighty thousand African Americans would ultimately fight

in the Civil War and one-fourth of the Navy made up of black sailors. President Lincoln believed that the contribution of these troops helped the Union in their victory.



ANALYSIS/FINDINGS

In the aftermath of the fatal battle at Fort Wagner, the surviving soldiers of the regiment raised money for several years to commission a memorial on Morris Island, where Fort Wagner was located, but this never happened. Instead, in 1865, an African-American businessman and former employee of the Shaw family, Joshua B. Smith, led the first public movement to build a monument commemorating Colonel Shaw. However, after both Governor Andrew and Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, both political supporters in the effort to build the memorial, the project was once again

put aside until the 1880s. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who had garnered considerable praise for his recent work “Farragut Monument” and was considered by some to be the greatest American sculptor of the nineteenth century, was introduced to committee members. From then on, he began to produce drawings and models of the relief sculpture that would become the Shaw Memorial.

Although Saint-Gaudens at first planned the relief to portray only the colonel, Shaw’s parents expressed their belief that such a monument should be reserved for heroes of a higher military rank than their young son. (National Gallery of Art)

Eventually, Saint-Gaudens went on to complete other projects while the Shaw remained incomplete, and continued to evolve for twelve more years as the concept of including the men grew in importance. He started to create portraits of around forty heads of selected models of different ages and features, although he would only use sixteen in the final sculpture. When the monument was being prepared for installation, Saint-Gaudens was refining the design of the plaster version, which is the one that is now seen at the National Gallery of Art. The master sculpture was showcased around the world to much acclaim, especially in the United States where it was exhibited at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. (American Society for Nondestructive Testing)

In 1959 the sculpture was presented at the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, New Hampshire, where it was open to the general public for viewing. In order to provide a lasting version, a bronze cast of the plaster was made that was installed at Cornish. In 1997, the plaster version was sent to the National Gallery of Art on long-term loan from the National Park Service. After several decades of exposure to

dirt and weather conditions, however, it was taken in for a year-long process of conservation in Boston. To regain the original look that was intended by August Saint-Gaudens, the surface was painted and glazed, making the sculpture have the look as when it was first presented to the public at the turn of the century. (NGA)



One of my first impressions of the sculpture was the striking presence of the angelic-looking woman hovering over the soldiers as they march in to battle. This was something that I felt gave an emotional impact to the artwork, because it was as if the 'angel of death' was watching over these soldiers, knowing their fate would be coming upon them while defending Fort Wagner. Reading about the woman and her appearance in the sculpture revealed that Saint-Gaudens actually reworked her image several times. Originally he had her holding a traditional palm branch that stood for martyrdom, but instead changed it to an olive branch, a symbol of peace. (NGA) Upon

learning that, I found it to be a very moving way of showing some kind of remembrance for the 54th Regiment while promoting a message of peace for future generations.

Something else that I found myself marveling at as I viewed the memorial was the attention to detail that the artist gave his work. In person it is a large scale, even life-size memorial that is idealized to look at, partially because of the fact that it is rendered in such high relief, almost three-dimensional. The way in which the clothing, skin tones, and facial expressions as well as the detail to each of those things make it seem as if you are looking at Colonel Shaw and the actual members of the 54th Regiment. The expressions on each of the faces show the determination that the men had during the Civil War and that they each believed in the cause which most of them did not unfortunately live to see advance.

CONCLUSION

I had hoped to research Colonel Shaw and the 54th Regiment at some point in the future, but learning about them through the memorial made this history come alive and personally special. The historical significance of the memorial and the efforts that have been taken over the years to conserve the sculpture are a testament to how important it remains that these group of men be remembered and honored for their sacrifices, which were also further recognized over the years through the film *Glory*, as well as a bust of Colonel Shaw in Boston's African Meeting House. The sculpture remains an inspiring monument for all people going against the odds, yet having the determination and courage to do what they believe is right.

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