



AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE CIVIL WAR

When the Civil War began in 1861, African Americans wanted to join the Northern army to help end the rebellion. Their offers to become soldiers were refused. There was an old law that said Black men could not serve in the United States army.

During the second year of the war, conditions changed. The army needed more men to serve as soldiers, so states began recruiting Black soldiers to fight. Some northern states moved quickly to organize African American regiments. One of these was Massachusetts. After men left Michigan to join regiments in Massachusetts, Henry Barns, editor of a newspaper in Detroit, suggested Michigan needed to raise a regiment of Black soldiers. In August 1862, Governor Austin Blair received permission to organize a regiment of Black soldiers.

All African American regiments during the Civil War, including the First Michigan Colored Infantry, had white officers. Black soldiers made less money than white soldiers. Besides receiving unequal pay, Black soldiers were often treated unfairly. When stationed at Fort Ward in Detroit, First Michigan soldiers reported that “the barracks were unfit for human habitation and there is not a barn or pig-sty in the whole city of Detroit that is not better fitted for human habitation than Fort Ward.”

Near the end of 1863, the First Michigan toured cities in the southern Lower Peninsula. It stopped in Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Marshall, Cassopolis, and Niles. In these cities, people received the First and its regimental band won praises.

On March 28, 1864, the First left Detroit for Maryland. By late April, the 895 officers and men of the First Michigan were stationed in South Carolina. Since the State of Michigan transferred the regiment to the control of the federal government, the name of the First Michigan changed to the 102nd U.S. Colored Infantry. The 102nd served in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

The Civil War ended in April 1865. In October, the 102nd arrived back in Detroit and disbanded. The regiment’s total enrollment included 1,673 men. The 102nd U.S. Colored Infantry played a significant role in winning the Civil War for the North.

The Courage to Fight and Die

The 54th Massachusetts Infantry was one of the first African American regiments formed during the Civil War. The Black men who joined the regiment came from other states, including Michigan. The experienced white officers who commanded the 5th had “firm anti-slavery principles.” The regiment’s colonel, Robert G Shaw, came from one of Boston’s leading abolitionist families.

Organized in early 1863, the 54th trained in the Boston area for months. By the summer of 1863, the regiment was stationed with other Union forces in South Carolina.

On July 18, 1863, the 54th led an attack against Fort Wagner, a rebel fort that protected the City of Charleston. At dusk, 630 men of the 54th marched along the beach toward the fort. Once the men of the 54th reached a narrow pocket between the beach and a swamp, the rebels opened fire with rifles and cannon. According to one survivor, “Not a man flinched though it was a trying time.”

When the 54th reached the fort’s walls, it had suffered many casualties. Colonel Shaw, who led the charge, was killed as he urged his men forward. Those soldiers of the 54th who got into the fort were outnumbered. They were either killed or captured. The rest of the 54th retreated when reinforcements failed to arrive.

Although the attack on Fort Wagner failed, it showed that African American soldiers had courage to fight and die. After this, more African Americans joined the army to help their country.