

## Robert Shaw Memorial, 1884–1897

The *Robert Gould Shaw and the Fifty-fourth Regiment Memorial*, a monumental bronze relief sculpture standing at the edge of Boston Common, was begun twenty years after the end of the Civil War and not completed for another fourteen. It was an unusually complex project, but the sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, came to regard it as a labor of love. The memorial had been commissioned by a group of Bostonians to honor Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the privileged son of abolitionist parents, who had given his life fighting for the Union cause. Saint-Gaudens originally envisioned an equestrian statue—the traditional hero on horseback—but Shaw’s family objected to the format as pretentious. The revised design presents the officer riding beside a company of foot soldiers marching toward their destiny. When the monument was at last unveiled in 1897, the philosopher William James observed that it was the first American “soldier’s monument” dedicated to a group of citizens united in the interests of their country, rather than to a single military hero.

Robert Shaw commanded the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. It was the first regiment of African Americans recruited in the North for service in the Union Army. Many of the volunteers had enlisted at the urging of the black orator Frederick Douglass, who believed (mistakenly, as it turned out) that former slaves and others of African descent would never be denied the full privileges of citizenship if they fought for those rights alongside white Americans. But arming black soldiers in defense of the Republic proved to be controversial and the Fifty-fourth bore the additional burden of having to prove its value.

In the summer of 1863, Shaw’s regiment led an audacious assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. That fortress on

Morris Island guarded Charleston Harbor, the principal port of the Confederacy, and was built on earthen parapets that rose thirty feet above the beach. It had only one land-facing side, which was bordered with a water-filled ditch ten feet wide. Shaw’s battalions were already weakened and exhausted when they approached Fort Wagner on July 18, after a grueling two-day march through driving rain. And as their commanding officer would have known, the attack was doomed before it began, for the Union troops were overwhelmingly outnumbered by Confederates. Nevertheless, Shaw rode into battle flourishing his sword and shouting “Forward, Fifty-fourth!” As he crested the ramparts, three enemy bullets shot him down. His body was later stripped and thrown with those of his troops into a mass grave.

In the end, 281 soldiers and officers from the unit were lost at Fort Wagner—killed or never accounted for—and countless others were injured. Despite that dramatic defeat, the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth had successfully “established its reputation as a fighting regiment,” in the words of one of its surviving officers, Frederick Douglass’s son Lewis: “Not a man flinched.” Reports of their extraordinary courage rallied African Americans to the cause, and Abraham Lincoln later surmised that the additional manpower they supplied had made the critical difference to the outcome of the war.

Saint-Gaudens symbolized this paradoxical military episode in which defeat gives rise to victory with the winged figure that hovers in low relief above the soldiers; she carries poppies, traditional emblems of death and remembrance, and an olive branch for victory and peace. Apart from that concession to allegory, Saint-Gaudens worked in a realistic style. If the portrait of Shaw appears idealized, his rigid posture and resolute gaze nonetheless accord with contemporary accounts of his brave demeanor as he entered battle like a sacrificial lamb. More remarkable is the stoic procession of soldiers, portrayed not as cogs in the machinery of war but as individuals participating in a moral crusade. In a time when African Americans were usually depicted as generic types, Saint-Gaudens searched out models and produced some forty portrait-heads in clay, even though he used only sixteen in the sculpture itself. The ragged uniforms of the recruits are each disheveled in a different way—not to undermine the soldier’s gallantry, as some have argued, but to recall their long and dreary trudge to Charleston Harbor. “There they march,” said William James, “warm-blooded champions of a better day for man.”

In 1982, sixty-two names of African American soldiers who gave their lives at Fort Wagner were inscribed on the base of the *Shaw Memorial*.



10-A Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), *Robert Gould Shaw and the Fifty-fourth Regiment Memorial*, Beacon and Park streets, Boston, Massachusetts, 1884–1897. Bronze, 11 x 14 ft. (3.35 x 4.27 m.). Photograph by Carol M. Highsmith.

**DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE** **E | M**

Ask students to find a drum. *It is on the far right. Where are the flags? They are on the left, behind the rifles.*

**E | M | S**

Have students look closely at the individual faces. Which ones wear mustaches and beards?

**E | M | S**

How are the foot soldiers dressed?

*They wear caps, long-sleeve shirts, shoes, and long pants, and they carry canteens.*

What do they carry on their backs? *They shoulder bed rolls and packs.*

What else do they carry? *They carry rifles.*

Compare the foot soldiers' dress with Colonel Shaw's.

*Both wear caps with visors, but the foot soldiers' hats are more wrinkled. Shaw wears a long jacket and boots.*

What does Shaw hold? *He holds a sword in one hand and his horse's reins in the other.*

**E | M | S**

Have students discuss how artists can create rhythm in works of visual art. How did Saint-Gaudens create a sense of rhythm in this relief?

*He repeated the slant of leg and body lines and shapes at regular intervals across the sculpture. (Even the horse's legs match the slant of the marching soldiers' legs.) The repeated rifles create a steady rhythm in the top half of the sculpture. Only Shaw's upright form and his horse's neck interrupt the steady march across the sculpture.*

**E | M | S**

How did Saint-Gaudens create a sense of depth in this sculpture? How do you know that some soldiers are closer to viewers than others?

*Soldiers who are closer to us stand out farther from the background; they are in greater relief. The soldiers at the back are in low relief. The closer forms also overlap the more distant ones.*

Which figure is closest to the viewer (in highest relief)? *Robert Shaw is.*

**INTERPRET** **E | M | S**

Who is in command? *The man on the horse, Colonel Shaw, is.*

How do you know? *As the only mounted figure, he is above the other soldiers; he carries a sword, and his jacket has the fancy cuffs of an officer's uniform. Also, the title tells us that this honors Robert Shaw.*

**E | M | S**

This was commissioned to honor and remember Robert Shaw, but who else does it commemorate?

*It honors the foot soldiers of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry.*

**M | S**

Ask why students think this monument was made of bronze rather than marble or wood.

*Bronze lasts longer outside; it reflects light and is dark and solemn. It can be worked in minute detail, and thin forms like rifles and reins do not break easily.*

**S**

What does the winged figure in the sky hold? *She holds poppies and an olive branch.*

What do you think this figure in the sky represents? Why?

*She may represent an angel. The poppies usually symbolize death and remembrance, and the olive branch, peace and victory.*

Remind students that artificial poppies are worn on Veterans Day to remember America's war veterans.

**CONNECTIONS**

**Historical Connections:** Civil War; Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment; Abolitionists; Bloody Kansas; John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry; Underground Railroad

**Historical Figures:** Robert Gould Shaw; Frederick Douglass; John Brown; Harriet Tubman; Sojourner Truth; William Lloyd Garrison

**Geography:** James Island, S.C.; Morris Island, S.C. (the battle at Fort Wagner,

also called Battery Wagner); Charleston Harbor (principal port of the Confederate Army)

**Literary Connections and Primary Documents:** *Frederick Douglass: The Black Lion*, Patricia McKissack (elementary); *Walking the Road to Freedom: A Story about Sojourner Truth*, Jeri Ferris (elementary); *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe (middle, secondary); "Frederick Douglass" and

"Harriet Beecher Stowe," Paul Lawrence Dunbar (middle); "For the Union Dead," Robert Lowell (secondary); *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass (secondary); Booker T. Washington's speech at the unveiling of the *Shaw Memorial* (1897) (secondary)

**Arts:** relief sculpture; beaux-arts movement; American Renaissance