



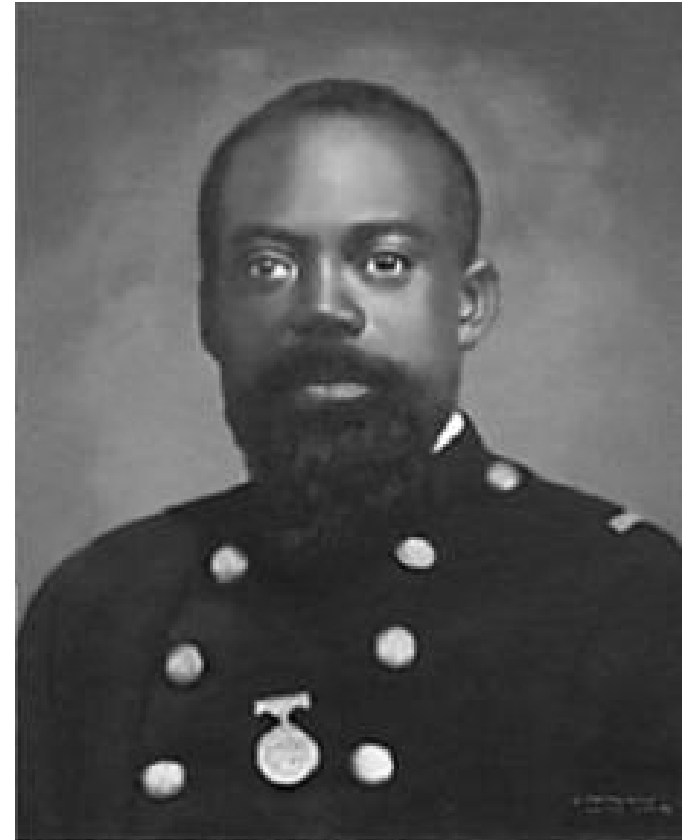
**Sergeant William H. Carney, C.M.H**  
**Civil War Hero - 1840-1908**

William Carney was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was a member of Company C, 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry. On July 18, 1863, during the Battle of Fort Wagner, South Carolina, nearly 37 years after the Civil War, he was cited for military valor. During the engagement by the all-Black 54th and 55th Massachu-

setts Colored Regiments, Commander Robert G. Shaw was shot down. A few feet from where he fell laid Sergeant Carney. Summoning all of his strength, Carney held aloft the colors and continued the charge. Having been shot several times, he kept the colors flying high, and miraculously retreated his regiments. Although he made of his comrades did not. For in the deadly battle, over 1,500 Black troops died. On this day in 1900, Sergeant William H. Carney was issued the Congressional Medal of Honor, making him the first Black to ever win the coveted award. It should be noted that sixteen other Black soldiers and four Black sailors eventually received the Congressional Medal of Honor for their heroics during the tragic epic in American history.

William Harvey Carney, famed for the words "The Old Flag never touched the ground!" and hero of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in the Civil War, was born in Norfolk, Virginia, and attended a private school that was conducted secretly by a minister. His home, which is now officially called the "Sergeant Carney memorial House," has become a shrine. Carney himself is depicted in the Saint-Gaudens monument which immortalizes Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his intrepid colored troops. Carney's features are represented on the face of one of the soldiers following his commander. The flag rescued by Carney is enshrined in Memorial Hall.

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**54th Massachusetts Regiment**  
**Assult on Fort Wagner**  
**July 1863**

On July 16, 1863, the 54th Regiment fought alongside White soldiers of the 10th Connecticut Infantry in a skirmish on James Island, SC. This battle redeemed the Black soldiers' fighting ability in the eyes of White skeptics, including General Strong, who commanded the 54th Regiment to lead the assault on Fort Wagner, scheduled for July 18. Strategically, a successful attack on Fort Wagner would allow Union forces to seize control of Charleston Harbor. Located on Morris Island, Fort Wagner protected Battery Gregg overlooking Fort Sumter. Thus, seizure of Fort Wagner was valuable because



it enabled the Union to shell Sumter and close the harbor to confederate blockade runners, thereby paving the way for further Union attack on Charleston. Fort Wagner was located at the northern tip of Morris Island, was controlled by 1700 troops and 17 artillery guns, and was surrounded by water, marsh, and moats that were up to 3 feet deep. The 54th Regiment arrived on Morris Island after marching for two days from James Island. Depleted to just over 600 men by the skirmish two days previous, the men of the 54th Regiment were ordered to lead the assault on Fort Wagner with the backing of regiments from New York, Connecticut, Maine, and Pennsylvania. Before the charge commenced, Colonel Shaw ordered the regiment to "prove you as men." Within 200 feet of the Fort, the confederates began to attack as the brave men of the 54th Regiment struggled through darkness, four-foot deep water, and marshland.

Colonel Shaw, accompanied by dwindling numbers of dying men, managed to reach the top of the parapet where a bitter hand-to-hand combat ensued, the Black Union soldiers with bayonets against the White Confederate soldiers with handspikes and gun rammers.



Colonel Shaw was mortally wounded with a pierce through the heart, along with a dozen of his men. Meanwhile, members of the 54th Regiment - some wounded, some dying - began to retreat; those who refused to back down were taken prisoner. As the smoke cleared, evidence of Confederate victory was immediately apparent, with 174 Rebel casualties and 1515 Union soldiers dead or wounded. Of the eleven regiments who participated in the Union assault, the fifty-fourth Regiment accrued the most casualties, with 256 of their 600 men dead or wounded.

Despite the heavy losses, the assault on Fort Wagner proved to the nation and the world the valor of Black soldiers in general and the men of the 54th Regiment in particular. From the ranks of the fifty-fourth came stories of unflinching patriotism and undying glory. The most famous of these stories, and the one with the most significant legacy, was that of Sergeant William H. Carney. Born a slave in Norfolk, VA in 1840, Carney moved with his family to New Bedford, MA in 1856 after being emancipated by his owner. In 1863, hearing the call for Black men to bear arms for the Union army, Carney enlisted in the 54th Regiment where he became Sergeant, the highest rank achievable by Black soldiers at that time.



As Colonel Shaw was pierced through the heart, climbing the parapet at Fort Wagner, Carney managed to rescue the Union flag from the hands of the slain color bearer. With wounds in his legs, breast, and right arm, Sgt. Carney continued to crawl on one knee over the bleeding bodies of his fallen comrades; as he placed the Union flag in the Confederate parapet, he was cheered by his fellow soldiers. As he was carried aboard a stretcher to the Union hospital, Carney uttered the famous words, "The old girl never touched the ground, boys." As a result of his bravery, Sgt. William H. Carney became the first Black man in history to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1900.