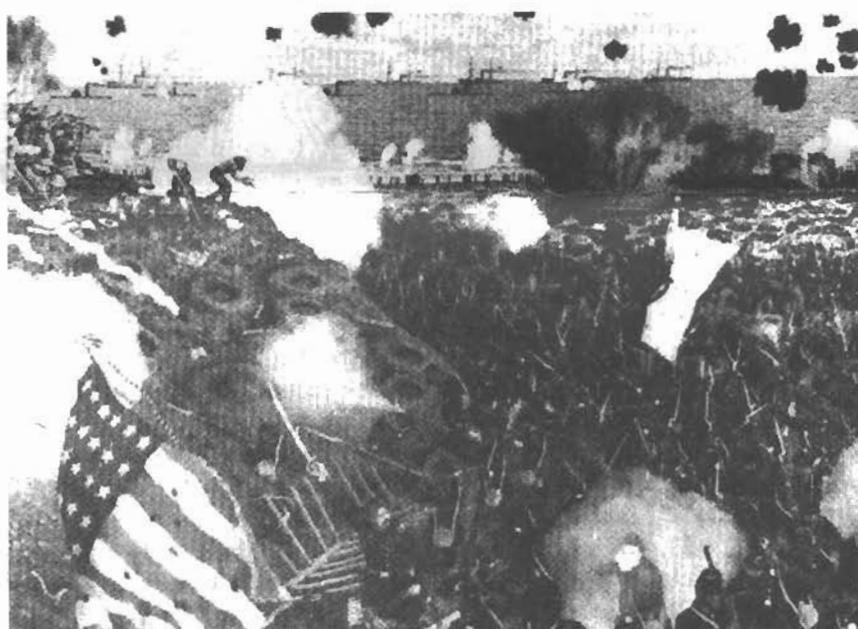


Battery Wagner

Fort Sumter National Monument
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

**"I HAVE HEARD THE
PREACHERS TALK
ABOUT HELL....
BUT GENTLEMEN,
HELL CAN'T BE
WORSE THAN
BATTERY WAGNER."**

*John Harleston
Charleston Light Dragoons*



Courtesy of The Archaic Images Company

ATTACK ON BATTERY WAGNER

As the "Cradle of Secession" Charleston was a primary target of the Northern high command. After an effort to capture the city by a land approach over James Island failed at the Battle of Secessionville, June 16, 1862, Union commanders decided upon a combined land and naval attack against the harbor defenses. There were two possible lines of approach: Sullivan's Island, which was defended by batteries of the most formidable character, or Morris Island, which was lightly guarded.

The key to Morris Island's defense was Battery Wagner, which was constructed shortly

after the Union defeat at Secessionville. Armed with more than a dozen cannon, Wagner presented an imposing obstacle. Union forces landed on Morris Island on July 10, 1863, and attacked without success the next day. One week later they tried again. At dawn, on July 18th, in an effort to weaken the resistance of defenders, the Union Army and Navy began a ten hour artillery bombardment. Wagner's thick sand walls easily withstood the cannonade, and its defenders were ready to meet the expected Union charge.

At dusk, the Union infantry advanced up the beach toward Wagner. Spearheading the

attack was the 54th Massachusetts, a regiment of free blacks from the North, led by Colonel Robert G. Shaw.

The Union soldiers engaged the Confederates in a bloody hand-to-hand struggle over the parapet, but could not dislodge them. After dark the Federals fell back, leaving their dead and wounded behind.

Of the 1500 Union casualties incurred in the battle, 272 were men of the 54th Massachusetts. Colonel Shaw and other fallen white officers of the 54th were buried in a common grave with their soldiers on Morris Island.

BATTERY WAGNER FALLS

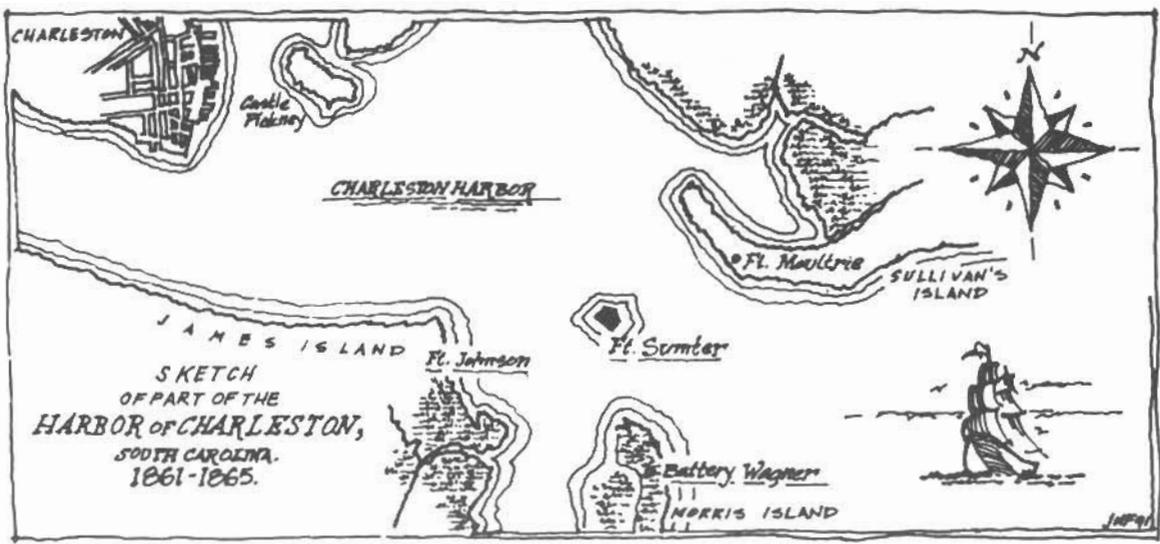
At a cost of more than 40% of its numbers, the regiment had proven to the world that black soldiers could and would fight. As a result of its performance, the Union Army began to enlist blacks in growing numbers. By 1865, a total of 178,895 black soldiers had enlisted in the army, constituting 12% of the

North's fighting force.

Battery Wagner was evacuated on September 6, 1863, after a two-month bombardment. For the next 17 months Union troops used Morris Island as a base from which to shell Charleston's harbor defenses. The Confederate Army finally abandoned the

city on February 17, 1865, ending the Civil War in this area.

Tides and time have long since removed all traces of Battery Wagner. Today, Morris Island stands uninhabited and desolate, a silent testament to the sacrifices made for freedom.



54TH MASS. REGIMENT

During the Civil War, the North raised 167 black units, embracing 178,895 men. Among the first and most famous of these was the 54th Massachusetts. The regiment left Massachusetts in May of 1863, and sailed south to participate in operations against Charleston. It saw its first action on July 16th when it lost 35 men in a skirmish on James Island, south of the city. Two days later the regiment was ordered to nearby Morris island, where it had the honor of leading the assault on

Battery Wagner. Although the attack failed, the 54th acquitted itself nobly, winning the praise of Northerners and Southerners alike.

When direct attacks failed to capture Battery Wagner, General Quincy Gillmore ordered it to be taken by siege operations. For the next ten weeks members of the 54th and other units dug a series of trenches enabling the Union army to bring heavy guns within a few hundred yards of the battery. The Confederates

abandoned Morris Island on September 6th.

The 54th continued to serve on the southeast coast for the remainder of the war. Although most of its service was in the Charleston area, it also participated in actions at Olustee, Florida, and at Honey Hill and Boykin's Mills, South Carolina. It mustered out of service in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, on August 20, 1865.

ROBERT G. SHAW

To ensure the success of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, Governor John A. Andrew appointed white officers "of military experience, of firm anti-slavery principles, ambitious, superior to vulgar contempt of color, and having faith in the capacity of colored men for military service." To command the regiment, he selected Robert G. Shaw, the twenty-five year-

old son of a prominent Boston abolitionist. It was not altogether an enviable assignment. The Confederate Government had declared officers of black regiments to be outside of the law and subject to death if captured.

On July 18, 1863, General George Strong offered Shaw the honor of leading the attack on

Battery Wagner. At dusk Shaw led his regiment up the exposed beach amid heavy fire and scaled the battery's sandy walls. Once on top, he turned to his men and with uplifted sword shouted, "Forward Fifty-fourth!" Hardly had the words left his lips than he toppled to the ground with a bullet through his heart.

SGT. WILLIAM CARNEY

Sergeant William Carney had no intention of becoming a soldier. The twenty-three-year-old former slave had set his sights on the ministry, but when Governor John A. Andrew called for black volunteers to fill the ranks of the newly authorized 54th Massachusetts, Carney stepped forward. As he later explained, "I felt I could best serve my God by serving my country and my oppressed brothers."

Carney was in the forefront of the 54th's attack on Battery Wagner. When the regimental color bearer fell in the moat, Carney seized the colors and carried them up to the parapet of the fort. A half hour later, when the regiment was compelled to fall back, he wrapped the bullet-torn banner around the flagstaff and carried it safely to the rear despite grievous wounds to the arm, leg and chest.

A New York soldier at one point offered to carry the flag for him, but a weak and bloodied Carney stubbornly refused, maintaining that "No one but a member of the 54th should carry the colors."

Thirty-seven years later the United States Government formally recognized Carney's heroism. In 1900, it awarded him the Medal of Honor for his role at Battery Wagner, making Carney the first black soldier to receive that honor.