

Foreword

“African Americans and the Civil War: Brave Standard Bearers”

by Alicia L. Moore and La Vonne I. Neal

*Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.*¹ – Frederick Douglass

As an abolitionist and former slave, Frederick Douglass understood that the path to freedom and full citizenship for African American men marched straight through the battlefields of the Civil War. Douglass reasoned that a government, which welcomed – and desperately *needed* – the enlistment of African American men to defend it could not then deny full citizenship to the same men who had helped preserve it. In May 1861, Douglass pressured President Lincoln to allow African American men to enlist, urging the government to “`[l]et the slaves and free colored people be called into service, and formed into a liberating army.’”² In 2011, we will commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Civil War which will include contributions of African Americans, brave standard bearers.

That call for justice was answered with the issuance of the final Emancipation Proclamation on New Year’s Day in 1863, which included a paragraph that, according to historian John David Smith, “signaled a major reversal in policy...cautiously, carefully, but consistently toward emancipation and the enlistment of African American soldiers.”³ Yet, it was not until August 10, 1863, that Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln would meet in person.⁴ Lincoln welcomed Douglass – an outspoken critic – to the White House, and there, within the confines of our nation’s capital, began a most auspicious relationship that would have tremendous implications for social justice in the United States. Perhaps, as suggested by historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., Lincoln was “Forced into Glory.”⁵

Spurred by the promise of freedom and his hope for social change, Douglass urged African American men to support the Civil War and break the bonds of slavery. Two of his sons, Lewis and Charles, were among the more than 100 African American men that Douglass recruited for the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, one of the nation’s first regiments of Black troops, while son Frederick Douglass, Jr., worked as a recruiter in Mississippi.⁶ Douglass’ older son, Lewis, was a first sergeant in the 54th, which included the likes of Sergeant William H. Carney, the first African

American to be awarded the Medal of Honor.⁷ Carney’s heroism was chronicled by poet Olivia Ward Bush Banks, who often wrote about the struggles faced by African Americans and the need for social change in the post-Reconstruction era. Like Frederick Douglass, Olivia Ward Bush-Banks has emerged as a recognized voice of social justice.

Born after the end of the Civil War in 1869, Bush-Banks, a mixture of Montauk Indian and African American heritage, readily identified with both sides of her ancestral tree and often expressed her ideas for social justice through poetry. In particular, in her poem “Carney the Brave Standard Bearer,” Bush-Banks recreates the heroic actions of Sergeant William H. Carney, an African American soldier of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, and draws the reader into the conflict:

*’Twas a time of fiercest conflict,
Enmity and awful woe,
’Twist the North, the friend of Freedom,
And the South, its bitter foe.*

*Day by day, the roar of battle
Sounded forth its deathlike knell,
Day by day the best and bravest
Died, amid the shot and shell.*⁸

Nearly 200,000 African American freedmen and runaway slaves are documented to have served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Notwithstanding Sherman’s invasion of Georgia, African American soldiers marched in every major campaign between 1864 and 1865.⁹ Although these African Americans made trustworthy soldiers, they suffered discrimination in pay, clothing allowances, and weaponry; furthermore, they suffered casualties that were 35%-50% greater than that of white soldiers, in spite of the fact that African Americans were not permitted to serve in the Army until 18 months after fighting had begun.¹⁰ In some cases casualty rates were much higher, such as in the Battle of Fort Pillow, Tennessee, in 1864, wherein only 62 of 292 Black Union troops survived.

Despite the discrimination and terrible loss of life, Bush-Banks describes how African American troops faithfully carried out their duties:

*Foremost in the ranks of warriors,
Our black heroes took their place,
With the lines of fearless courage,
Stamped upon each dusky face.¹¹*

Sergeant William H. Carney's unit, the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, fought one of the most infamous battles of the war in 1863. His unit led an assault against the heavily armed Confederate positions at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, on July 18th of that year, and many lives were lost during the brutal hand-to-hand combat that ensued:

When Carney saw that the color sergeant, the soldier who carried the flag, had been wounded, he rescued the flag, going through a volley of enemy bullets. Delivering it to a squad of his own regiment, he shouted, "The Old Flag never touched the ground!" Then Carney fell to the ground in a dead faint, weak from the wounds that he had received.¹²

Carney survived the war and, in May of 1900 – thirty-seven years after the brutal battle at Fort Wagner – he became the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor and – finally – the recognition that he deserved. As the highest military decoration awarded to members of the armed service, the Medal of Honor is reserved exclusively for those who perform acts of heroism so great that they are far more likely to die than to survive. In fact, it is a common occurrence for many Medals of Honor to be awarded posthumously. For their extreme acts of heroism during the Civil War, only 25 Medals of Honor were awarded to service members of color. Carney's heroic actions were later memorialized in Edward Zwick's 1989 film, *Glory*. -

*There the dauntless William Carney,
In the Union's sacred name,
Held aloft the flying colors,
Won a never-dying fame.*

*On his knees he bravely followed,
With one hand pressed to his side,
With the other, held the colors,
Borne with patriotic pride.¹³*

In this issue of the Black History Bulletin, we will examine some of the contributions that African American men and women made during the Civil War and to the cause of social justice and the struggle for equality during that period. Jennifer Herring discusses ways in which

teachers can utilize technology to show the contributions of well known African American women such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, as well as lesser known, but equally important women such as Charlotte Forten, Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Elizabeth Bowser, and Susan Baker King Taylor in her article "WebQuests: A Tool to Help Students Discover Contributions of African American Women During the Civil War." In addition to utilizing technology, author Benita R. Dillard discusses the importance of primary sources when researching the neglected stories of African American women during the important time in American history in her article, "African American Women's Voices: Using Primary Sources to Introduce Students to the Civil War."

Although the value of utilizing technology and primary sources in teaching about the Civil War is critical, some students respond better to visual lessons in the form of art that portrays significant people and events in detailing the contributions that African Americans made during the War Between the States. Authors Aretha Faye Marbley, Leon Rouson, Comfort Pratt, Emily Manigault, and Kathleen Phelan discuss the importance of introducing students to art that represent the sacrifices of our African American soldiers. Their use of oral narrative underscores this approach as "a valid means of preserving and transmitting history."¹⁴ In their article, "Ebony Eyes: Teaching About African American Civil War Heroes Through Art," they remind us that the African American experience of this time was one of innovation, dedication, and extreme sacrifice – a lesson in social justice that can be taught through art as well as history.

Each article references significant teaching sources that will be of importance to teachers at all levels and contain innovative ways to bring the African American experience and the call for social justice into focus for all students. Including the voices of those who, throughout our history have been virtually mute and invisible – African American women, former slaves, and soldiers who defended a union fraught with discrimination and injustice – enriches our understanding of the experiences of those who came before us and the depth of the sacrifices they were willing to make in the name of social justice. With culturally responsive lesson plans that provide a myriad of ways to approach the subjects, this issue is an especially rich source of material for engaging youth in understanding African Americans and the Civil War.

Another resource that should not be overlooked is the National Humanities Center’s Online Collection of Primary Resources. Of special note is their collection titled, “The Making of African American Identity, Volumes I - III.” In this online source, you will discover collections of primary resources, historical documents, literary texts, works of art and excerpts of personal letters from African American Civil War soldiers that can be utilized to expand your classroom lessons in a variety of ways.

In closing, we share an especially interesting observation on social justice from Sergeant William H. Carney. Although he was born into slavery in Virginia in 1840, members of the Underground Railroad had assisted in his escape to New Bedford, Massachusetts, his adopted hometown, where he had served as a minister until enlisting for military service in the Civil War. When asked what prompted him to give up this position of relative safety and enlist, Carney was quoted as saying, “Previous to the formation of colored troops, I had a strong inclination to prepare myself for the ministry; but when the country called for all persons, I could best serve my God by serving my country and my oppressed brothers.”¹⁵ Like Frederick Douglass and Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, Sergeant William H. Carney answered the call for social justice when it mattered most.



Notes

1. Frederick Douglass. (July 6, 1863/December 4, 2008). Should the Negro Enlist in the Union Army? Retrieved from <http://rcchonorshistory.wordpress.com/2008/12/04/frederick-douglass-should-the-negro-enlist-in-the-union-army-1863/> . 27 August 2010.
2. Smith, John David, Ed. *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
3. Ibid.
4. Oakes, James. *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007.
5. Bennett, Jr., Lerone. *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 2000.
6. Smith, John David, Ed. *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
7. Frederick Douglass American Abolitionist, accessed August 27, 2010, http://www.americancivilwar.com/colored/frederick_douglass.html.

8. Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward. "Carney, the Brave Standard Bearer" Driftwood. New York Public Library Schomburg Collection Online, accessed May 13, 2010, http://digilib.nypl.org:80/dynaweb/digs/www97246/@Generic_BookView.

9. National Park Service. History of African Americans in the Civil War, accessed May 13, 2010, http://itd.nps.gov/cwss/history/aa_history.htm.

10. Byrd, W. Michael and Linda A. Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma, Volume One: A Medial History of African Americans and the Problem of Race, Beginnings to 1900*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

11. Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward. "Carney, the Brave Standard Bearer" Driftwood. New York Public Library Schomburg Collection Online, accessed May 13, 2010, http://digilib.nypl.org:80/dynaweb/digs/www97246/@Generic_BookView.

12. Bridgewater State College, Office of Institutional Diversity, accessed May 13, 2010, <http://bridgew.edu/HOBA/carney.htm>.

13. Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward. "Carney, the Brave Standard Bearer" Driftwood. New York Public Library Schomburg Collection Online, accessed May 13, 2010, http://digilib.nypl.org:80/dynaweb/digs/www97246/@Generic_BookView.

14. Neal, La Vonne I. and Alicia L. Moore. "Their Cries Went Up Together: Brown Et Al.V. Board of Education Then and Now." *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 20 (2004): 9.

15. New York Council for Social Studies and the New York State Supervisors Association. William H. Carney's Letter to the Liberator, 1863, accessed May 13, 2010, <http://www.nyscss.org/pdfs/resources/nyandslavery/Chapter%20E/Documents/1863B.WIL.pdf>.

Teacher Resources

- Filmmaker Dante James and the Emmy winning four-part PBS series: "Slavery and the Making of America." <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery>
- African American Civil War Memorial and Museum, <http://www.afroamcivilwar.org>
- The Civil War Preservation Trust. Fort Wagner and the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Online at <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/batterywagner/battery-wagner-history-articles/fortwagnerpohanka.html>.
- Brugge, P., Fields, F. and Fields, P (Producers) & Zwick, Edward (Director). (1998, January 20). *Glory* [Motion Picture]. United States: Sony.
- Clinton, Catherine and Evans, Shane W. (2005). *Hold the Flag High*. China: Katherine Tegan Books. (For grades 3-6).

- Douglass, Frederick. (1855/2010). *My Bondage and My Freedom*. James McCune Smith (Ed.). Createspace.
- Encyclopedia of World Biography. Olivia Ward Bush-Banks: A Child of Two Cultures. Online at <http://www.notablebiographies.com/supp/Supplement-A-Bu-and-Obituaries/Bush-Banks-Olivia-Ward.html>
- History.net. William H. Carney: 54th Massachusetts Soldier and First Black U.S. Medal of Honor Recipient. Online at <http://www.historynet.com/william-h-carney-54th-massachusetts-soldier-and-first-black-us-medal-of-honor-recipient.htm>.
- National Humanities Center. "The Making of African American Identity, Volumes I, II, and III." Online at <http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/maailib.htm>.



Alicia L. Moore, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Education at Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas; email: moorea@southwestern.edu.



La Vonne I. Neal, Ph.D., is Dean of the College of Education & Professor of Special Education at Northern Illinois University; email: lneal1@niu.edu