

Time to take another look at Boston's Civil War Monument?



As Boston basked in the August successful march and rally protesting racism and white supremacists, it is perhaps time to take a closer look at the city's premier Civil War monument—the 1897 Augustus Saint-Gaudens *Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth Regiment* located on the Boston Commons across from the Massachusetts State House. While Bostonians should rightfully be proud of this monument dedicated to the just cause of abolishing slavery, a minor modification of the Latin inscription on the bronze relief might make it a more inclusive commemoration.

The planning for a memorial to Col. Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment—the famous unit of African-American soldiers commemorated in the 1989 film, *Glory*—began as soon as the Civil War ended in 1865. In his “History of the Shaw Monument” prepared for the 1897 unveiling of the sculpture, the Treasurer of the Fund, Edward Atkinson, notes that a group convened by the Governor and other government leaders met in 1865 in the State House to create a “monument . . . intended not only to mark the public gratitude to the fallen hero, . . . but also to commemorate that great event, wherein he was a leader, by which the title of colored men as citizen-soldiers was fixed beyond recall.”

It was not, however, until 1897 that this plan was realized, fourteen years after the most notable American sculptor of the period, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, had been given the commission to create the memorial. The late 19th century was the period when many of the now controversial monuments celebrating the leaders of Confederacy were beginning to be erected, reflecting a time that saw the re-imposition of official segregation across the South with the enactment of Jim Crow laws and the rise of the KKK. The Bostonian Shaw Memorial represented a stark contrast to the growing racism of the South. In his oration presented at the 1897 unveiling, William James claims “The war for our Union . . .[had] but one meaning in the eye of history. It freed the country from the social plague which until then had made political development impossible in the United States. More and more, as the years pass on, does that meaning stand forth as the sole meaning. And nowhere was that meaning better symbolized and embodied than in the constitution of this first Northern negro regiment. . . . Look at that monument and read the story—see the mingling of elements which the sculptor’s genius has brought so vividly to the eye. There on foot go the dark outcasts, so true to nature that one can almost hear them breathing as they march. . . . There they march, warm-blooded champions of a better day for man.”

Saint-Gaudens rejected the traditional equestrian statue type as being too grandiose for this memorial, instead capturing in low relief a mounted Shaw leading his men out of Boston during the celebratory parade in May 1863, when all of the city had turned out to cheer the new regiment. Above the carefully molded portraits of the men flies a winged figure, next to which is a Latin inscription *OMNIA RELINQVIT / SERVARE REMPVBLICAM* (“He gives up everything to serve his nation”)—the motto of the Society of the Cincinnati that Shaw’s father had requested be placed on his son’s memorial. The architectural exedra enclosing the Saint-Gaudens relief was designed by the well-known architect Charles Follen McKim; at the base of this exedra is a motto recording the fact that Shaw had been killed while leading his men on an assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, on July 8, 1863. Below this are inscribed a few verses from “Memoriae Positum” by the Bostonian poet James Russell Lowell, and on the reverse of the exedra is a dedication written by the

President of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot Norton:

TO THE FIFTY FOURTH REGIMENT OF MASSACHUSETTS REGIMENT
THE WHITE OFFICERS
TAKING LIFE AND HONOR IN THEIR HANDS CAST IN THEIR LOT
WITH MEN OF DESPISED RACE UNPROVED IN WAR AND
RISKED DEATH AS INCITERS OF SERVILE INSURRECTION
IF TAKEN PRISONERS BESIDES ENCOUNTERING ALL THE
COMMON PERILS OF CAMP MARCH AND BATTLE.
THE BLACK RANK AND FILE
VOLUNTEERED WHEN DISASTER CLOUDED THE UNION CAUSE
SERVED WITHOUT PAY FOR EIGHTEEN MONTHS TILL GIVEN
THAT OF WHITE TROOPS FACED THREATENED ENSLAVE-
MENT IF CAPTURED WERE BRAVE IN ACTION PATIENT
UNDER HEAVY AND DANGEROUS LABORS AND CHEERFUL
AMONG HARDSHIPS AND PRIVATIONS.
TOGETHER
THEY GAVE TO THE NATION AND THE WORLD UNDYING PROOF
THAT AMERICANS OF AFRICAN DESCENT POSSESS THE
PRIDE COURAGE AND DEVOTION OF THE PATRIOT SOLDIER.
ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY THOUSAND SUCH AMERICANS
ENLISTED UNDER THE UNION FLAG IN
MDCCCLXIII MDCCCLXV.
CHARLES W. ELIOT.

Below the Eliot dedication is a message from the Governor, John A. Andrew:

I KNOW NOT MR. COMMANDER WHERE IN ALL HUMAN HISTORY
TO ANY GIVEN THOUSAND MEN IN ARMS THERE HAS
BEEN COMMITTED A WORK AT ONCE SO PROUD SO PRECIOUS
SO FULL OF HOPE AND GLORY AS THE WORK COMMITTED
TO YOU.
JOHN A. ANDREW, GOVERNOR.

In his oration presented at the May 1897 celebrations, William James noted that the 1863 Battle of Fort Wagner, where Shaw and sixty-two soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment died, was a Union defeat. But James compares this loss to the noble defeats at Thermopylae and Bunker Hill.



From its very inception to its eventual erection thirty-two years later, the Shaw Memorial was always conceived by city fathers of Boston as not only a monument to the white officer who led to 54th Massachusetts Regiment, but also to the brave African-American soldiers who died under his command. Yet, the racist idea that African Americans would naturally have had to be led by a white man prevailed, as is reflected in Shaw's prominent position on horseback and by that singular term in the inscription *relinquit* ("he gives up"). The Great Man theory, which sees human history as primarily being directed by gifted men, is of course a long one, reflected here in the choice of the motto of the Society of Cincinnatus—which was founded in the early 19th century to draw a parallel between George Washington and the early Roman hero Cincinnatus, who reputedly left retirement to lead the Roman army for a year, after which he gave up his dictatorship and returned to his farm.

The poet Robert Lowell—a descendent of James Russell Lowell—recognized this issue in his 1964 poem, "For the Union Dead," which unfavorably contrasts the racism and commercialism of mid-20th century Boston with the more noble 19th-cause of ending slavery. Tellingly, Robert Lowell begins "For the Union Dead" with

an epigram that is a variation of the Shaw Memorial inscription: *Relinquant Omnia Servare Rem Publicam* ("They give up everything . . .").

In 1980, the Shaw Memorial became part of the Boston African-American National History Site, and as part of its 1982 – 1984 restoration a new plaque was erected, on which are listed the names of the sixty-two men who died with Col. Shaw at Fort Wagner. While this 1984 addition to the memorial was certainly an important step, perhaps it is now time to make a further modification. There is plenty of room on the Saint-Augustus relief where the inscription is set to take up the suggestion that Robert Lowell made over fifty years ago and replace that *relinquit* with a more inclusive, and more accurate, *relinquunt*.