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### The Shaw Monument and Buffalo

Mary Read

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**The Shaw Monument and Buffalo**  
By Buffalo Civil War Roundtable Member  
Mary A. Read

On May 28, 1863, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry, the first black regiment to be raised in the Northern states during the Civil War, left Boston for the Department of the South and active service. At the head of this regiment rode Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the twenty-five-year-old son of abolitionists Francis G. and Sarah Blake Shaw.

As the regiment marched past 44 Beacon Street, the home of the colonel's aunt, Shaw paused to salute the members of his family watching from the residence. Forty-three years later, it was remembered "members of the family recall today the young man's face as he passed where all were assembled in the home of a relative on Beacon Street when the Fifty-fourth passed in review before going to the front. They recall vividly the flash that came to everyone in the window that they never should see him again."

After its review on Boston Common by Governor John A. Andrew, the regiment made its way to Battery Wharf, and sailed for South Carolina on the steamer *De Molay*. Seven weeks later, on the evening of July 18, Robert Gould Shaw was killed leading the Fifty-fourth in the Union assault on Fort Wagner, one of the guardians of Charleston harbor.

In late 1865, Governor Andrew called a meeting at the State House to consider the raising of a memorial to Colonel Shaw. The minutes declare "the monument is intended not only to mark the public gratitude to the fallen hero, who at a critical moment assumed a perilous responsibility, but also to commemorate that great event, wherein he was a leader, by which the title of colored men as citizen-soldier was fixed beyond recall. In such a work all who honor the youthful dedication to a noble cause and who rejoice in the triumph of freedom should have an opportunity to contribute."

A committee was formed, and subscriptions were raised to finance the project, but it was not until 1884 that a contract was made with Augustus Saint-Gaudens to sculpt the bronze relief of Shaw and his soldiers. The noted architect, Charles F. McKim, served as advisor to Saint-Gaudens and was responsible for the architectural setting of the bronze tablet. For the next twelve years, Saint-Gaudens labored to create a memorial worthy of its subject.

Thirty-four years after the Fifty-fourth's triumphant departure, on a rainy Memorial Day in 1897, the monument to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw was unveiled on Boston Common. Despite the drizzle, thousands of spectators turned out to view the military parade, which included a battalion of veterans of Massachusetts black regiments – the Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Infantry Volunteers and the Fifth Cavalry – and the dedication ceremonies. After the unveiling, those with tickets attended ceremonies in Boston Music Hall with further tributes to Shaw and his men by speakers that included William James and Booker T. Washington.

William James, reflecting on the occasion, best captured the mood of Boston in a letter to his brother Henry. "The weather was cool and skies were weeping, but not enough to cause any serious discomfort. They simply formed a harmonious background to the pathetic sentiment that

reigned over the day. It was very peculiar, and people have been speaking about it ever since – the last wave of the war breaking over Boston, everything softened and made poetic and unreal by distance, poor Robert Shaw erected into a great symbol of deeper things than he ever realized himself, -- ‘the tender grace of a day that is dead’ – etc. We shall never have anything like it again. The monument is really superb, certainly one of the finest things of this century.”

As Boston celebrates the centennial of the Shaw monument this Memorial Day, it is interesting to note that there is a Buffalo connection to the monument. According to a 1912 article in the *Buffalo Evening News*, “possibly few people in Buffalo know that the Shaw Memorial in the Albright Art Gallery was the first work of art to find its way into the gallery and possibly fewer know that the wonderful piece of plaster is the original from which the famous Shaw Memorial was cast.”

The model of the Shaw Memorial was exhibited at the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo. This actually was the fourth and final version of the relief, made in 1900, and differs slightly from the Boston monument. John Joseph Albright acquired the model and moved it to the Albright Art Gallery before the building’s completion. It was bronzed and placed on the western wall of the west south wing salon.

The model’s relief depicts the youthful Shaw on horseback riding beside the ranks of his marching men. An angel flies above the figures, holding laurel and poppies, symbols of victory and final sleep. Shaw’s face contains a hint of sadness, but his resolute bearing and the stoic expressions of his men convey their determination. The features of the black soldiers have been modeled with great diversity. The *Buffalo Evening News* described the artistic unity of the work. “In this composition, it is not the earnest remarkable types that St. Gaudens assembled that strikes one most forcibly, but the perfected, harmonious action – not a line in discord, each and every one filling his own place in vibration and in full unison with others. Energy, purpose, determination, the giving of self – are all there expressed as a unit – a great purpose.”

The Shaw Memorial was on display until 1919, when a wall was constructed in front of it for the purpose of giving more space for special exhibitions. For some reason, it was felt that a false perspective of the relief resulted when viewed from the floor. A 1949 article in the *Buffalo Evenings News Magazine* elaborates “...it would have been necessary to build a platform and stairs to permit a direct study of the figures on their own level. For safety reasons, such a structure was thought inadvisable.”

Thirty years later, the Shaw was sent to the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site at Cornish, New Hampshire. Formerly the home and studio of the sculptor, it is now a museum housing many of his works, including a number of casts of Shaw and his men.

The Shaw measured 12’4” in height by 17’ 3 ½” in width and weighed 6,150 pounds. Local carver and artisan Joseph Balk supervised the dismantling of the frieze. He had worked on the Shaw before, when he helped put it up for the Pan American Exposition. By locating the joints of the twenty-one pieces that make up the sculpture Balk, and his assistants Carl Petry and Keith Maynard, were able to disassemble the Shaw, much like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

The removal from the Albright Art Gallery was begun on January 12, 1949 and completed on January 25. The model was transported by truck to the Cornish site, arriving on the twenty-ninth.

Although the Shaw has long been gone from Buffalo, a reminder of this brave regiment remains in the city. At Forest Lawn, in the Grand Army of the Republic section, are the headstones of two soldiers of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts. James Henry Wilson was a private in Company F. On February 10, 1865, he was blinded in both eyes and lost his left arm when a cannon he was helping load prematurely exploded. After recuperating in a post hospital on Morris Island, South Carolina, he was discharged from the army on August 19, 1865. After the war, Wilson resided in Oswego, New York, and lived on a government pension. By December 1892, he had moved to Buffalo where he resided with a guardian, his sister Josephine Wilson, on Michigan Street. James Henry Wilson dies in 1897.

The other soldier, John H. Dover, was one of sixteen Buffalo men who had enlisted in the Fifty-fourth. Dover served as a sergeant in Company D and, like Wilson, saw action at Fort Wagner and Olustee. He mustered out with the regiment on August 20, 1865. After the war, Dover returned to Buffalo where he worked as a messenger for the Bank of Commerce and as a janitor at the GAR Hall. He also collected a government pension. He was married three times and his two children predeceased him. At the time of his death in 1932, Dover lived on Vermont Street with his wife Hannah. Unlike the headstones of James Henry Wilson and other black Civil War veterans at Forest Lawn, Dover's epitaph states that he was a member of "Co D 54<sup>th</sup> Mass Vol Inf" without the designation "colored."

