



THE CIVIL WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS

LESSON

Grade Level: 7-12

Subject: History,
American Studies,
African-American History

Estimated Time of
Required:
2 (50-60 minute) class
periods

THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

ROBERT GOULD SHAW AND THE 54TH MASSACHUSETTS

INTRODUCTION

Will the slave fight? If any man asks you, tell him "no"...

But, if anyone asks you, will a Negro fight? Tell him YES!

—Abolitionist Wendell Phillips

During the first part of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln insisted the war was a fight to restore the Union. Yet, many saw a higher purpose in the struggle, and that purpose was to not only save the Union, but abolish slavery as well. Many believed that if the abolition of slavery was a reason for the war, black troops should be allowed to fight. Many others disagreed, including General Sherman, who was reported as saying, "... can a Negro do our skirmishing and picket duty? Can they improvise bridges, sorties, flank movements, etc., like the white man? I say no."

In Massachusetts, with urging from Frederick Douglass, Governor John A. Andrew, and other abolitionists, the 54th Massachusetts Regiment was created in early 1863, consisting of black troops. Andrew offered the command of the regiment to 26 year-old Robert Gould Shaw, the son of wealthy abolitionists. Shaw led the 54th, whose contingent of troops included two of Frederick Douglass' sons through training as well into battle in South Carolina.

In July 1863, Shaw requested "the honor" of the 54th to lead the Union charge against Fort Wagner, in Charleston Harbor. There, Shaw and many of his men were killed in a failed attempt to capture the fort. During the attack, Sergeant William Carney seized the colors and returned back to his lines despite bullet wounds to his head, chest, right arm, and leg. He became the first of 23 black troops to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, although it took 37 years to receive it.

In this activity, students will read a letter by Shaw to his wife after the Union raid at Darien, Georgia; then will draw conclusions about it.

RELATED RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON

Episode 5 of *The Civil War* series, highly recommended but not required.

Colonel Shaw's letter to his wife, Annie, regarding the raid at Darien, can be found at http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/files/rgs_darien.html. The web page includes the text of the letter as well as a photo of Shaw.

by Michael Hutchison

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON

The letter is part of a larger series of pages on Shaw, located at <http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/rgs.html>. The pages include a biography of Shaw, as well as related pages on the 54th and contemporaries of Shaw.

<http://www.awod.com/gallery/probono/cwchas/wagner.html> contains information about the assault on “Battery Wagner”

<http://www.civilwarliterature.com/2Battles/TippooSaib/TheAttackOnFortWagner.htm> is an account of the attack on Fort Wagner from the Civil War Literature web site.

http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/files/rgs_memorial.html is a page on the Shaw Memorial (which is featured at the end of the film, *Glory*, and is on display in Boston, Massachusetts). The plaster cast of the bronze relief is on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

<http://www.exploredc.org/index.php?id=133> contains information on the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

RELEVANT STANDARDS

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>).

History

- *Understands the provisions and significance of the Emancipation Proclamation (e.g., reasons Abraham Lincoln issued it, public reactions to it in the North and the South)*
- *Understands the impact of the Civil War on social and gender issues (e.g., the roles of women on the home front and on the battlefield; the human and material costs of the war; the degree to which the war united the nation; how it changed the lives of women, men, and children)*
- *Understands how different groups of people shaped the Civil War (e.g., the motives and experiences of Confederate and white and African American Union soldiers, different perspectives on conscription, the effects of divided loyalties)*
- *Understands how the Civil War influenced both military personnel and civilians (e.g., the treatment of African American soldiers in the Union Army and Confederacy, how the war changed gender roles and traditional attitudes toward women in the work force)*

STRATEGY FOR THE LESSON

The teacher may open this lesson with some of the debate and concern about the Emancipation Proclamation as well as the possibility of allowing blacks to serve in the Union army. General Sherman’s quote noted in the Introduction might be a good springboard for discussion in regard to those opposed to allowing blacks to serve. On the other side of this issue, this quote from Abraham Lincoln might be a good discussion opener regarding enlisting African Americans:

You say you will not fight to free Negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you. [When victory is won] there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue and clenched teeth, and steady eye and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that with malignant heart and deceitful speech, they strove to hinder it.

The teacher may also wish to utilize segments of the feature film, *Glory*, which is a dramatic depiction of the 54th Massachusetts and Robert Gould Shaw. As with all feature films, not all the action may be historically accurate, however, certain scenes in the movie may be significant

THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS
LEE AND GRANT AT APPOMATTOX COURT HOUSE

enough for classroom viewing, including Governor Andrew and Frederick Douglass offering command of the regiment to Shaw, the Darien raid, and the assault on Fort Wagner. (Note: while *Glory* is a popular movie and includes many historically accurate segments, it also includes some obscene language and violence as well as racial epithets common in the mid-19th Century. Care should be taken to inform students of this before viewing the film.)

The teacher may also wish to have students read the biography of Shaw noted in the Supplemental Resources section above and view the segment in *The Civil War* series.

After class discussion or viewing of segments of *Glory*, the teacher should either direct students to the web page with Colonel Shaw's letter, or distribute photocopies to the students. Next, distribute the question sheet and have students answer the questions based on the letter. (Please note: two versions of the question sheet are posted. One with possible answers and one for student distribution.)

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

The teacher may wish to have students compare the situations and prejudices faced by the 54th Massachusetts with those faced by the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II. Students might also research the roles of blacks (and other minorities) in World War II, the types of duties they had compared to white soldiers, as well as their treatment in society in general during the 1940s. Dependent on the time and ability of students, the teacher may also wish to stage a mock trial of Colonel Shaw presuming he refused to follow orders as he suggests in the letter. Students may be assigned roles of Colonel Shaw, Colonel Montgomery, and other officers and soldiers. The teacher might open a morality question of honor versus obligation: Does a soldier's obligation to follow orders outweigh refusing to do something he believes morally wrong? (Other examples the teacher might draw on regarding this issue include whether Nazi concentration camp guards could be tried as war criminals if they were simply following orders, or the role of American soldiers involved in the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War.)

QUESTION SHEET FOR ROBERT GOULD SHAW AND THE 54TH MASSACHUSETTS

(with possible answers)

1. How does Shaw describe his quarters and St. Simons Island, where he and his men are stationed?

(He notes that he has his quarters in "the house", very pleasantly situated, and surrounded by fine large trees.

He notes, also, that the island is beautiful, as far as he has seen it, and says to Annie that she would be enchanted with the scenery there.... Noting, "the foliage is wonderfully thick, and the trees covered with hanging moss, making beautiful avenues wherever there is a road or path.)

2. Shaw notes that he leaves with Colonel Montgomery for Darien, Georgia. According to Shaw's letter, what does Montgomery do on the way toward Darien? How does Shaw describe Darien when they arrive?

(Shaw wrote Annie, "on the way up, Montgomery threw several shells among the plantation buildings, in what seemed to me a very brutal way; for he didn't know how many women and children there might be.)

Regarding Shaw's description of Darien, he says, "About noon, we came in sight of Darien, a beautiful little town. The town was deserted, with the exception of two white women and two Negroes.)

3. Upon finding out the town was deserted, what did Montgomery do with furniture and moveable property? In your view, why did he do this?

(It was common for soldiers to often forage for supplies, and when they found furniture or goods they thought they could sell or use, they would take those. Montgomery probably ordered the removal of furniture and moveable goods for his own use or to send back North for sale.)

4. After the town was “pretty thoroughly disemboweled”, what did Montgomery order? How did Shaw respond to the order? Why did Shaw feel this way about this order?

(After goods had been removed, Montgomery said to Shaw, “I shall burn this town”. Shaw replied, “I did not want the responsibility of it”, in essence objecting to the order. Montgomery fires some of the buildings himself, but one company of the 54th assisted, because, in Shaw’s words, “he ordered them out, and I had to obey”.

Shaw notes to Annie, “You must bear in mind that not a shot had been fired at us from this place, and there were evidentially very few men left in it. All the inhabitants (principally women and children) had fled on our approach, and were no doubt watching the scene from a distance.”)

5. How does Montgomery justify his actions at Darien to Shaw?

(Shaw writes, “The reasons he gave me for destroying Darien were, that the Southerners must be made to feel that this was a real war, and they were to be swept away by the hand of God, like the Jews of old.” Montgomery adds, “We are outlawed, and therefore not bound by the rules of regular warfare.”)

6. How does Shaw reply to Annie about Montgomery’s statement?

(Regarding Montgomery’s comment that the South must be “swept away by the hand of God,” Shaw notes, “In theory it may seem all right to some, but when it comes to being made the instrument of the Lord’s vengeance, I myself don’t like it.” Refuting Montgomery’s other comment about not “being bound by the rules of regular warfare”, Shaw says, “but that makes it none the less revolting to wreak our vengeance on the innocent and defenseless.”)

7. Shaw asks Annie, “remember, not to breathe a word of what I have written about this raid, to anyone out of our two families, for I have not made up my mind what I ought to do.” What concerns does Shaw have regarding his actions, or possible reactions, to the raid?

(He mentions his own “distaste for this barbarous sort of warfare”, adding, “I am not sure that it will not harm very much the reputation of black troops and of those connected with them.”)

Continuing, Shaw says there was not a deed performed which “required any pluck or courage”, and sums everything up by saying “as the case stands, I can’t see any justification” for the events at Darien. He notes “this makes me very ashamed of myself”.)

8. Farther into the letter, Shaw weighs his options regarding how to deal with this incident. What does he see as his options?

(He sees his “courses” as “to obey orders and say nothing”, or to refuse to go on any more such expeditions, and to put under arrest, probably court-martialed, which is a serious thing.”)

9. Based on Shaw’s letter, there’s no indication about what choice he made regarding dealing with the incident. If you were a friend of Shaw’s, and he asked your advice in this situation, what would you recommend he do? Why?

(Answers vary. Some may say that it is better to follow orders and stay out of trouble, others might say that no soldier is obligated to follow what he considers an immoral order, regardless of the consequences for not following it. Other students may agree with Montgomery’s assessment that this was war, and the Southern states should expect to see total war as it could be waged.)

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