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The Real 54th Massachusetts: Dr. Douglas Egerton on the Lives of United States Colored Troops in Lincoln Lyceum Lecture

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Abstract

Two weeks ago, the Gettysburg College community was treated to a lecture by special guest Douglas Egerton, one of the recipients of the 2017 Gilder-Lehrman Lincoln Prize. Dr. Egerton works at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, where he teaches courses on race in 19th century America. Egerton's most recent book *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America* chronicles the lives of ten men from the 54th and 55th Massachusetts United States Colored Troops, documenting their experiences from the pre-war era to their deaths. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

54th Massachusetts, 55th Massachusetts, African American History, African American Soldiers, Douglas Egerton, Fort Wagner, Lincoln Lyceum, United States Colored Troops

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Real 54th Massachusetts: Dr. Douglas Egerton on the Lives of the United States Colored Troops in Lincoln Lyceum Lecture

By [Nick Tarchis '18](#)

Two weeks ago, the Gettysburg College community was treated to a lecture by special guest Douglas Egerton, one of the recipients of the 2017 Gilder-Lehrman Lincoln Prize. Dr. Egerton works at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, where he teaches courses on race in 19th century America. Egerton's most recent book *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America* chronicles the lives of ten men from the 54th and 55th Massachusetts United States Colored Troops, documenting their experiences from the pre-war era to their deaths.

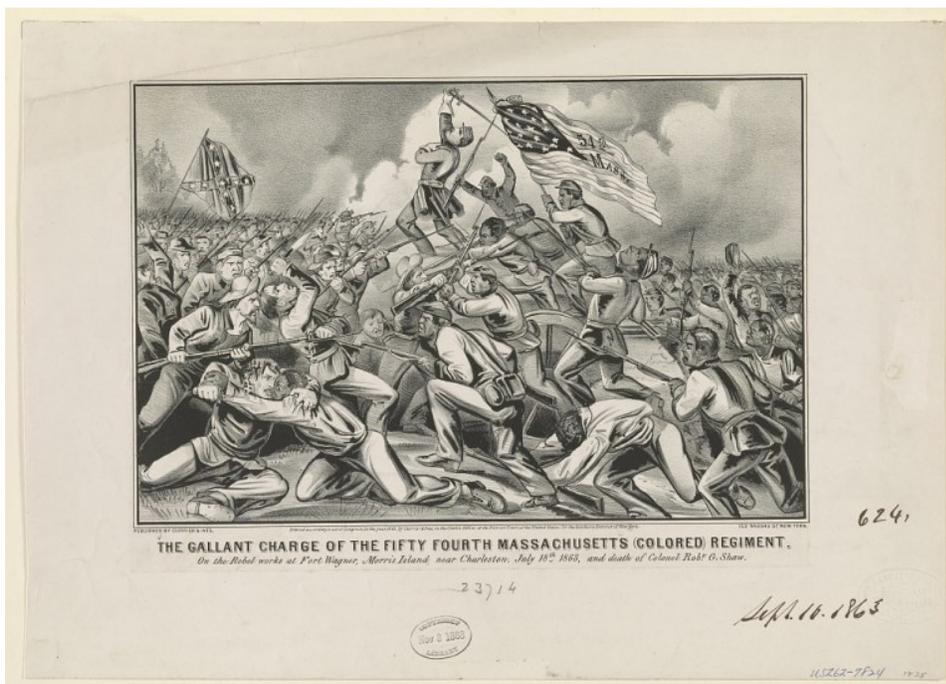


Dr. Douglas Egerton. Photo courtesy of lemoyn.edu.

Audience members were most familiar with these regiments because of the 1989 movie “Glory,” which depicts the story of Robert Gould Shaw and the black troops of the 54th, culminating in their famous assault on Fort Wagner. Egerton’s lecture, however, examined the lives of Shaw’s soldiers—rather than Shaw himself—and the country’s attitudes toward United States Colored Troops. After the Emancipation Proclamation, Americans began to ask if black citizens and former slaves would be willing to fight for a country in which many of them felt unwanted. In the South, the Confederate Government was quick to declare that, if captured, black soldiers would be enslaved and officers would be executed. While this policy would change later on, there was still a fair share of worry in the North that black troops would run from the battlefield and abandon their posts because of this Confederate threat. This was the crux of Egerton’s lecture: looking at the how the soldiers were depicted versus how they acted and examining the impact that the 54th and 55th Massachusetts had on public perception.

The history students in the crowd might have recognized Egerton's work as "history from the bottom up." Instead of emulating the film "Glory," which focuses more on Shaw than the black soldiers, Egerton discussed the rank-and-file and told their stories through their own experiences. This confronts a large issue in the history field, in which many choose to study presidents, generals, kings, and other important leaders rather than opt for the harder story to tell: that of the common man. While historians such as James McPherson and Earl Hess have examined why soldiers enlisted, Egerton studies the motivations of a more marginalized group who faced institutional oppression and still chose to fight.

Egerton worked to emphasize that, unlike in the movie "Glory," not all USCTs were escaped slaves. Those who joined the ranks as freeman—including Frederick Douglass' sons, Charles and Lewis—saw a palpable public outcry against black troops and sought a way to prove that they would not turn and run in a battle but would fight just as bravely as white troops. This was an opportunity to reunite the nation and make it a better place for themselves and their families. For those who had escaped from bondage, however, the motivation was simple: fight for the families back in the South. Many who escaped had left someone behind, be it a wife, son, or daughter, and they wanted to ensure that they could secure their loved ones' freedom and build a nation they could call their own.



Print depicting the 54th Massachusetts charging Fort Wagner. Photo via Library of Congress.

Edgerton's lecture, like his book, had a melancholy ending, as many of the troops who survived the war and served with distinction were not able to achieve the goals they had hoped. Many of them lived long lives and were able to reunite with their families, but while the South was defeated, the nation restored, and the 14th amendment ratified,

some troops still faced persecution after the war. Jim Crow soon took the place of slave drivers and catchers. As for their place in memory, the soldiers were quickly forgotten by history. When the United States returned to war in the 1890s, the 1910s, and 1940s, the same issues surfaced again. The public forgot about the heroism of the USCT regiments that fought during the Civil War and again believed that black soldiers would surely run at the first sight of combat and prove to be a liability on the battlefield. "Glory" does not necessarily help combat this image, as a majority of the film is told through Shaw's perspective and portrays many of the soldiers as runaway slaves with little to no motivation. Thankfully, historians like Dr. Egerton are working to tell these men's stories and ensure that they will have their rightful place in American memory.