

Lesser Glory: The Civil War Military Career of Charles Remond Douglass

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Charles Douglass in Uniform, c. 1864. Courtesy of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University Archives Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Almost immediately after having been appointed a recruiter for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, the prominent African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass enlisted two of his own sons, Lewis and Charles, into the first regiment of African Americans in the Union Army.¹ The older brother, Lewis, had a brief but highly meritorious military career, rising to become the sergeant major of the Fifty-Fourth, which became nationally famous for its courageous fighting at the Battle of Fort Wagner outside Charleston, South Carolina, in July 1863. Lewis was seriously wounded in that engagement and soon after ended his military career. When *Glory*, a film about the history of the Fifty-Fourth, was made in 1989, the filmmakers decided to cast a more mature character than the twenty-three-year-old Lewis as the unit's sergeant major, and chose fifty-two-year-old African American actor Morgan Freeman.² While slighted by modern-day Hollywood, Lewis's military career accumulated far more glory than that of his younger brother Charles, whose experiences proved much more typical of the African American Union recruit in the Civil War.

¹ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 292, 385.

² Kevin M. Levin, "Why 'Glory' Still Resonates More Than Three Decades Later," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-glory-still-resonates-more-three-decades-later-180975794/>.



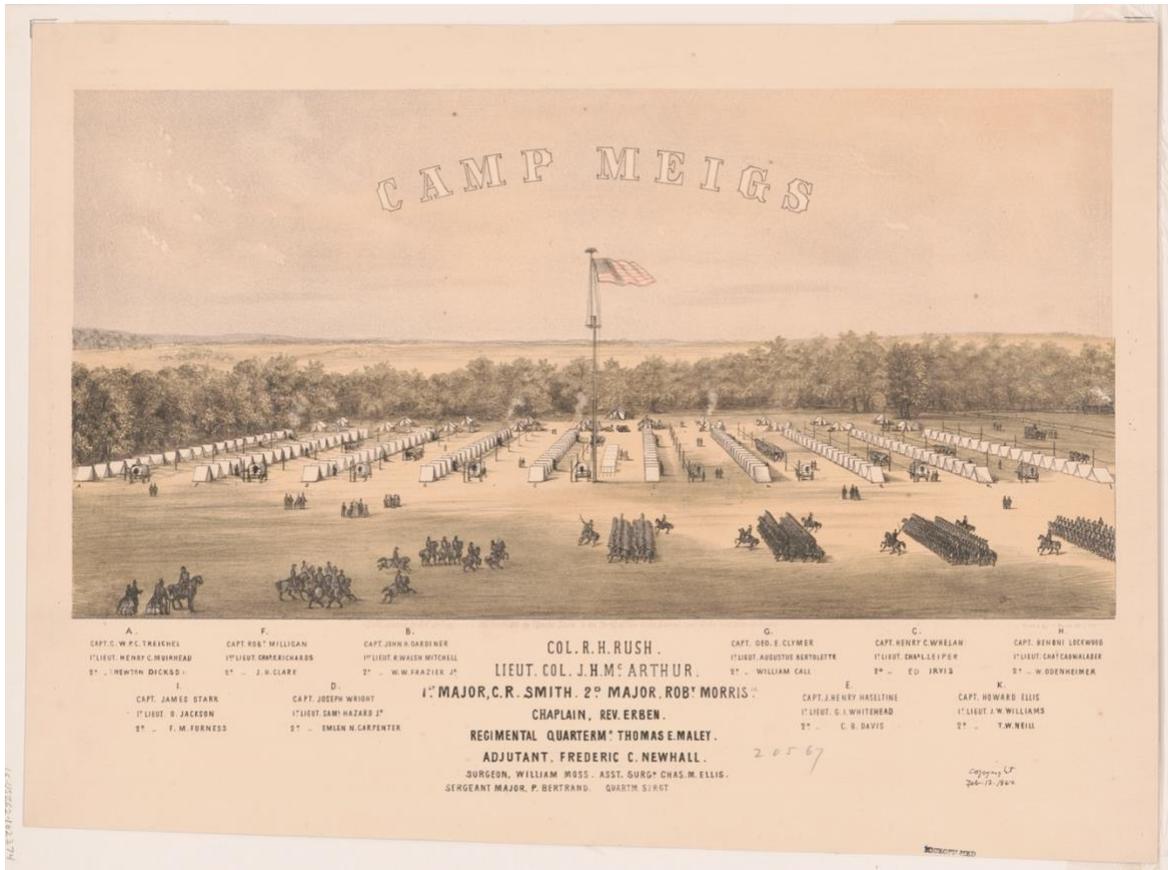
Glory poster. Courtesy of AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo.

Charles (born 1844) and Lewis (born 1840) were both mustered into service at Camp Meigs in Readville, Massachusetts, in early April 1863. Camp Meigs was named in honor of Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs and was located only a few miles from Boston's outskirts. Thousands of Union troops received their training there before moving on to join the war.³ The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry and its sister regiment, the Fifty-Fifth, were among the very first African American units raised after Lincoln authorized their recruitment when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863. The strongly antislavery Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew had assembled a group of former abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass, to raise the needed two thousand enlisted men for these units. Douglass had recruited his own sons Lewis and Charles for these units.⁴ The Fifty-Fourth completed its training in mid-May 1863. After a grand review through the streets of Boston, which Frederick Douglass came to watch, the regiment shipped out to South Carolina on 28 May 1863.⁵ Charles became ill with a congestive disorder during training and was unable to accompany the Fifty-Fourth when it shipped south.

³ Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 110, 248; Steven M. LaBarre, *The Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry in the Civil War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2016), 26.

⁴ Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867; Selected from the Holdings of the National Archives of the United States, Series 2: The Black Military Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 75–76; Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863–1865*, 2nd ed. (1894; New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 8–14; Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 197–210.

⁵ *Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors and Marines in the Civil War*, 8 vols. (Norwood, Mass: Norwood Press, 1932), 4:656–57.



Camp Meigs. Lithograph by F. Moras, c. 1861–62. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91727588/>.

In early September, Charles wrote his father to thank him for sending five dollars. Charles reported that fellow soldiers at Readville were so underfed that they were stealing chickens from neighboring farmers and that many more were hospitalized for various camp ailments, including dysentery. One reason Charles was glad to receive money from his father was that he was still participating in the boycott by members of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts against the discriminatory pay offered to Black soldiers.⁶ The Union Army paid African American soldiers just \$10 a month but deducted \$3 for rations and uniforms. At the same time, White soldiers received \$13.50 in pay plus a \$3.50 clothing allowance per month.⁷ Charles told his father, “I hope our boys wont except of any less than what they enlisted for.”⁸ Even passage of the Army Enrollment Act of 1864 the following June only partially eradicated such inequalities.⁹

⁶ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 6 July 1863, in Celeste-Marie Bernier and Andrew Taylor, eds., *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection* (Edinburgh, Scot.: University of Edinburgh Press, 2018), 203–08.

⁷ John David Smith, *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois State University Press, 2013), 68–69.

⁸ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 8 September 1863, General Correspondence File, reel 1, frames 847-49, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 412. Charles Douglass mistakenly substitutes “except” for “accept.”

⁹ James M. McPherson, *The Negro’s Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 197–203; Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 184–95.

Charles credited Captain Eric Wulff for watching out for the men left behind when the Fifty-Fourth had shipped South, declaring that the officer was “a man every inch of him he is a Swede by birth but he is my friend.”¹⁰ When that unit had departed for South Carolina, Wulff had been detailed to remain at Fort Meigs to conduct additional recruiting and hunt down deserters from the Fifty-Fourth. Subsequently, he was assigned to the staff of Brigadier General Richard A. Pierce, the commandant of Camp Meigs, and Charles assisted Wulff in those assignments over the winter of 1863–64.¹¹

Not all Bostonians were pleased with the presence of a training camp for African American soldiers so close to the city. Charles reported to his father that shortly after learning of the Union victory at Gettysburg, he got into a fist fight with an Irish American for declaring that George Meade was a better general than George McClellan. A police officer had arrested the other brawler and Charles bragged, “I got my mind made to shoot the first Irishman that strikes me they may talk but keep their paws to themselves.”¹²

Meanwhile in South Carolina in July of 1863, the Fifty-Fourth had participated in a heroic but unsuccessful assault on the Confederates’ Fort Wagner, which guarded the city of Charleston. Almost half of the unit’s men were killed or wounded in that attack. The regiment’s White colonel, Robert Gould Shaw, was killed, and its sergeant major, Lewis H. Douglass, was seriously wounded. Official reports of the battle portrayed the Black regiment’s performance as courageous and disciplined, dispelling widespread doubt about the efficacy of Black soldiers in combat.¹³ Rumors reached Charles at Readville that he and the recent recruits would soon be sent to South Carolina to help replenish the ranks of the Fifty-Fourth. He also heard that Governor Andrew was planning to have Lewis promoted to a commissioned officer’s rank.¹⁴ Frederick Douglass wrote friends that he was planning to travel to Boston to see off Charles and added that he was sorry that the Union Army was still hesitating to promote African Americans to officer’s rank.¹⁵ While a contingent of soldiers was sent from Readville to reinforce the Fifty-Fourth, Captain Wulff apparently pulled strings and had Charles ordered to stay behind in Boston to assist him.¹⁶ In fall of 1863, the Fifty-Fourth in South Carolina lost track of Charles’s whereabouts and erroneously reported him as a deserter on its muster rolls and demoted him from a corporal to a private, but that was later corrected.¹⁷

¹⁰ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 8 September 1863, General Correspondence File, reel 1, frames 847–49, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

¹¹ Emilio, *Brave Black Regiment*, 334; LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 51.

¹² Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 8 July 1863, in Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 207–09; Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 396.

¹³ Emilio, *Brave Black Regiment*, 90–91, 105; Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 152–56; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 13–17; Donald Yacovone, *A Voice of Thunder: A Black Soldier’s Civil War* (Champaign, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 256.

¹⁴ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 18 September 1863, General Correspondence File, reel 1, frames 849–50, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; also in Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 217.

¹⁵ Frederick Douglass to Louise Tobias Dorsey, 21 November 1863, Frederick Douglass Collection, Sterling Library, Yale University.

¹⁶ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 18 September 1863, General Correspondence File, reel 1, frames 849–50, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; also in Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 217.

¹⁷ Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 139–41.



Storming Fort Wagner. Chromolithograph, c. 5 July 1890. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2012647346/>.

After having raised two infantry regiments of African Americans for the Union Army, Governor Andrew wrote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton in September 1863, requesting permission to recruit a Black cavalry regiment.¹⁸ Not receiving an answer, Andrew wrote Stanton's aides to ask him "if he does not think it worthwhile to have this experiment tried of a Colored Cavalry enough to accept four companies to be mustered in at the minimum one by one."¹⁹ On 23 November 1863, Andrew received the War Department's approval to raise the regiment but with permission to pay enlistment bounties only to officers.²⁰ After much protest from enlisted African Americans and their supporters like Frederick Douglass, Congress finally removed this discrepancy in June 1864.²¹ The Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment would be the only all-Black cavalry unit raised by a state during the Civil War.

Charles spent the summer and fall months doing clerking and housekeeping work at Fort Meigs before finally being assigned to the newly authorized Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment. All of the new regiment's officers would be White, as was typical of military practices at the time, and most had prior experience serving in other units at lower ranks. Their colonel was Henry Sturgis Russell, a twenty-five-year-old Harvard graduate who had seen combat and been

¹⁸ Only the state governments of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Louisiana raised regiments under their own banner. Other Blacks served in the U.S. Colored Troops, organized directly by the federal government. Smith, *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops*, 47–49.

¹⁹ As quoted in LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 21.

²⁰ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 21–23.

²¹ The African American enlisted men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry and its sister regiment, the Fifty-Fifth, both refused to accept either their reduced pay or the supplement offered by Massachusetts to make up the difference. Smith, *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops*, 68–69, 71; LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 15.

captured in action in Virginia and then paroled the previous year. He was a first cousin of Robert Gould Shaw, the commander of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts. Several other recent Harvard graduates were found among the regiment's officers.²²

Like its predecessors, the Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts Infantry Regiments, soldiers were recruited for the Fifth by agents who crisscrossed the Northern states seeking able-bodied African Americans. Andrew issued a proclamation, acknowledging the discriminatory pay the federal government offered enlisted African Americans but offering each recruit a bounty of \$3.25 a month from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.²³ The state's adjutant general added a more ideological appeal: by joining the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, African Americans "will illustrate their capacity for that dashing and brilliant arm of the military service . . . at a time when they hold the destiny of their race in their own grasp; and when its certain emancipation from prejudice, as well as slavery, is in the hands of those now invited to unite in the final blow which will annihilate the rebel power, let no brave and strong man hesitate."²⁴ As James McPherson observed, African American soldiers had a strong ideological motivation for their military service.²⁵

The Massachusetts government's efforts drew fruit by attracting recruits from widely different locales. The new soldiers reported their civilian residences from such faraway places as France and Hawaii, most likely from the ranks of seamen then ashore in Massachusetts. Every Northern state and several Southern states supplied men for the cavalry regiment. An analysis of one company (D) in the Fifth revealed that 53 percent of its privates were born into slavery.²⁶

Nineteen-year-old Charles Remond Douglass was assigned to Company I of the Fifth. Governor Andrew wrote Stanton requesting that Charles be reassigned from the already deployed Fifty-Fourth to the Fifth. On account of his "valuable assistance in recruiting the 5th Mass. Cavalry," Andrew requested a promotion for Charles to the rank of "First Sergeant," the top enlisted man in his company. Andrew also based this recommendation to Stanton "by reason of the influential position of his father among the colored people of the U.S. and the important aid and influence he has exerted in promoting colored military organization."²⁷ Stanton concurred and approved Charles's transfer and promotion.²⁸ Company I would be commanded by Charles's friend Captain Eric Wulff.

The Fifth began training over the winter of 1863–64. Drilling with their horses for hours daily, they mastered the basic formations needed to maneuver on the battlefield. A problem occurred in that only enough horses were provided for four of the regiment's twelve companies to be trained at a time. Recruits were issued sabers and carbines and learned to use them in combat situations. In their off-duty time, men from the unit organized a "debating club," and were reported as "discussing the important questions of the day with signal ability."²⁹ On 1 May 1864, Governor

²² Cornish, *The Sable Arm*, 204; Smith, *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops*, 52–54; LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 27–34.

²³ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 34–35.

²⁴ As quoted in LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 35.

²⁵ James M. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15–17, 90–91, 100, 117.

²⁶ Noah Andre Trudeau, "Proven Themselves in Every Respect to Be Men: Black Cavalry in the Civil War," in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*, ed. John David Smith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 283; LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 36–40.

²⁷ As quoted in LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 40–41.

²⁸ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 41.

²⁹ As quoted in LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 44.

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Andrew visited the regiment and gave an address, complaining about the injustice of the federal government's discriminatory pay policy. The governor already had received protest letters signed by a dozen men in the Fifth complaining that the state had still not paid them their promised enlistment bounties. Recruiters in the field also reported complaints about unpaid bounties. In response to the problem, Massachusetts abolitionists and other sympathizers had raised money to help support the families of the men of the Fifth and two earlier African American regiments raised in Massachusetts. Despite these disappointments, the soldiers gave Andrew "nine rousing cheers as he walked down the line."³⁰



John Albion Andrew (1818–1867). Photograph by Mathew Brady, c. 1860–70. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Frederick Hill Meserve Collection. https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.81.M3907.

Andrew's address turned out to be an informal farewell to the Fifth, which received orders to depart by train to Camp Casey outside Washington, D.C., in early May. On the way, Captain Wulff was involved in a distressing incident that Charles witnessed. Wulff was addressing his company during a stop in Baltimore when a tipsy sergeant, Amos Jackson of Connecticut, fell out of line. When Wulff reprimanded the soldier, the latter cursed him. Wulff demanded the sergeant's stripes, which he refused to give up. Wulff then drew his gun and shot at the sergeant, but the bullet instead struck and killed a nearby private. The Army investigated the incident and six of the unit's enlisted men, but not Charles, complained that Wulff had been the person who was intoxicated. In a letter to his father, Charles seems to have placed the blame on Sergeant Jackson because he "was a little drunk but not drunk enough to not know what was right."³¹ Although not

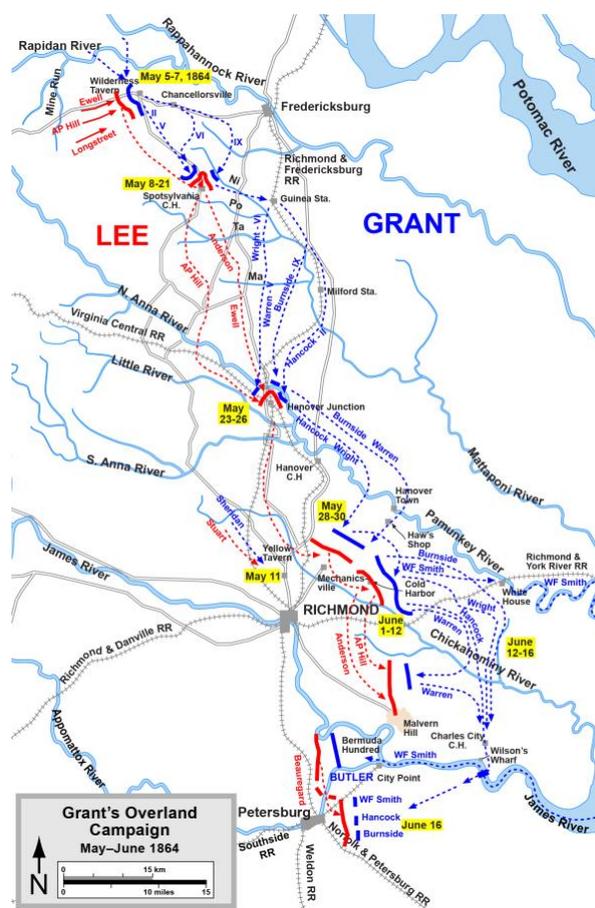
³⁰ As quoted in LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 47.

³¹ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 31 May 1864, General Correspondence File, reel 2, frames 32–34, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; also in Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 225–26.

charged by military authorities, within a few weeks Wulff resigned his commission and left the army.³²

Arriving in Washington, D.C, the unit suffered the indignity of having been converted from a cavalry into an infantry regiment. They turned in their cavalry weapons and were issued rifles. Colonel Russell was placed in charge of a brigade that included the Fifth and two other African American infantry regiments and all were ordered to report to Fortress Monroe in Virginia via steamships. A war correspondent with a Massachusetts newspaper reported: “It is hard to convince the men that the government has not broken faith in enlisting them for cavalry and then making infantry of them; it does appear like injustice at first thought, but few moment’s reflection of the emergency in so doing.” The reporter noted worries that neither the officers nor men of the regiment had received infantry training but hoped that the unit would be converted back to cavalry once “the emergency” was over.³³

The emergency in question was the multi-pronged offensive that Union Army General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant was launching against the Confederates in Virginia that spring. Grant hoped that by attacking the outnumbered Southerners from several directions simultaneously, he could overwhelm his opponent Robert E. Lee, capture the Confederate capital, and bring the war to a successful conclusion for the Union side.



Overland Campaign. Courtesy of Hal Jespersen.

<https://www.cwmaps.com/freemaps/Overland-Richmond.png>.

³² LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 57–60.

³³ As quoted in LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 64.

One key component of Grant’s offensive was an attack on Richmond from the southeast, along the peninsula between the James and Appomattox Rivers, by two army corps under the command of Major General Benjamin F. Butler, an influential “political general” from Massachusetts. Butler made an initial advance to within five miles of Richmond, and Grant authorized the dispatch of reinforcements to capitalize on this success.³⁴ The Fifth Massachusetts and a regiment of heavy artillery from Connecticut were ordered to catch up with Butler’s command.³⁵ When disembarking from steamers at City Point only twenty-two miles from Richmond, the Fifth was assigned to the Third Division of the Eightieth Corps—infantry units.³⁶ This unit was composed of six regiments of African American soldiers under the command of Brigadier General Edward W. Hincks.



Benjamin Franklin Butler (1818–1893). Photograph by Mathew Brady, 1864. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Francis James Dallett.
https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.88.7.



Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard (1818–1893). Photograph by unidentified artist, c. 1861–65. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Totten family.
https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2012.6.3.

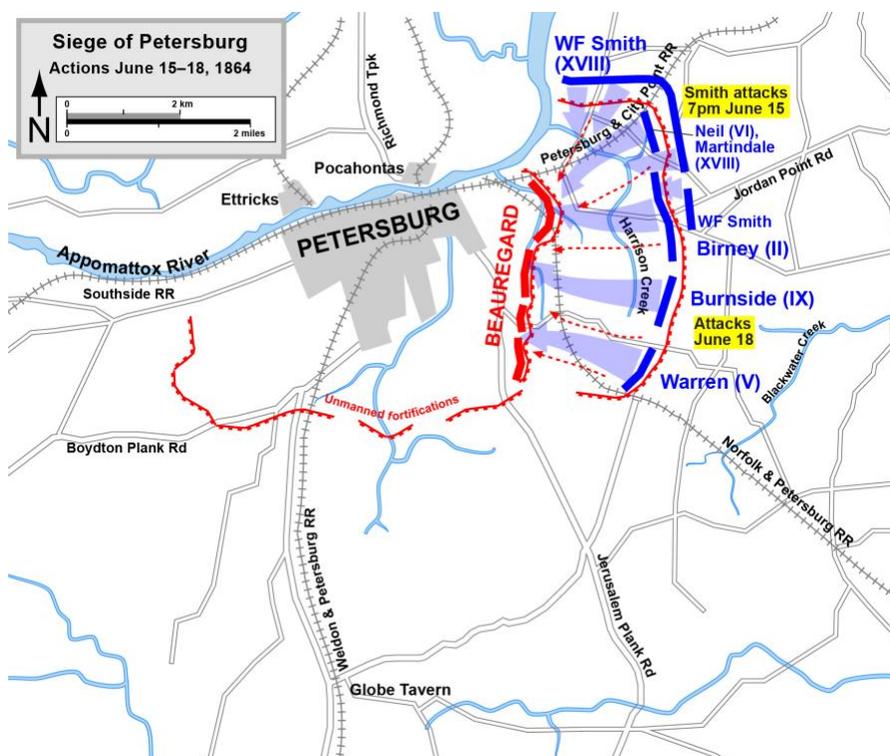
Before attacking Richmond directly, Butler moved his force of thirty-three thousand men eastward to capture Petersburg, an important industrial center twenty miles to the south, to cut off key supply lines to the capital. Butler advanced so cautiously that the Confederates had time to dig fortifications between his forces and Petersburg. The Confederates blocking Butler were mainly young boys recently called up, old men previously deemed unfit to fight, hospital convalescents discharged on account of the emergency, and parolees from local prisons, under the command of Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard. Beauregard so quickly constructed fortifications that he effectively “bottled up” Butler and then was able to send part of his force to help Lee fend off attacks by Grant on Richmond to the north.³⁷

³⁴ Gordon C. Rhea, *To the North Anna River, Grant and Lee, May 13–25, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 2–13, 16

³⁵ Rhea, *North Anna River*, 96.

³⁶ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 64–66.

³⁷ William Glenn Robertson, *Backdoor to Richmond: The Bermuda Hundred Campaign, April–June 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 53–130; Richard S. West, Jr., *Lincoln’s Scapegoat General: A Life*



Siege of Petersburg, 15–18 June 1864. Courtesy of Hal Jespersen.
https://www.cwmaps.com/freemaps/Petersburg_June15-16.png.

The Fifth was placed into the line where Butler’s “offensive” had stalled out a week earlier. It engaged in typical picket duty, where light skirmishing occurred with patrols sent out by the Confederate Army. Charles wrote his father, “Our boys are very anxious for a fight I think their wishes will be complied with shortly as for myself I am not over anxious but willing to meet the devils at any moment and take no prisoners remember Fort Pillow [where Confederates had massacred Black Union soldiers attempting to surrender] will be the battle cry of the fifth Mass Cavalry.”³⁸ General Butler visited the Fifth and promised its officers that the regiment would soon be mounted.³⁹ Although a pre-war Democrat, after joining the army Butler became a firm believer in the fighting capacity of the African American.⁴⁰

Under pressure from Grant to resume his advance, Butler ordered Hincks’s division and another division commanded by Major General Quincy Adams Gillmore, coincidentally the same officer who had ordered the famous attack of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts at Fort Wagner in South Carolina the previous year, to test the strength of Confederate fortifications.⁴¹ In charge of the thinly held Confederate line was Brigadier General Henry A. Wise, a former governor of Virginia and one of the South’s “political generals.”

of Benjamin F. Butler, 1818–1893 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 232–39; LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 75.

³⁸ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 31 May 1864, General Correspondence File, reel 2, frames 32–34, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; also in Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 225–26; Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 422–23.

³⁹ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 66–69; Rhea, *North Anna River*, 18, 126–27.

⁴⁰ West, *Lincoln’s Scapegoat General*, 112–15.

⁴¹ Robertson, *Backdoor to Richmond*, 239–40.

Captain Wulff had finally been discharged from the unit and both of its lieutenants were absent when word came to Company I to prepare for action the next morning. In temporary command, Charles had each man carry a cartridge box of forty rounds, a backpack with blankets and two day's rations, a canteen, and a musket. The regiment was on the march at two in the morning.⁴²

Hincks formed his six regiments shortly before sunup on 9 June 1864, with the Fifth in the second line. As the division moved through a heavy thicket toward the Confederate entrenchments a mile away, a Union cavalry division ordered to support Hincks got lost and rode away from the battlefield. When the attackers were within a quarter mile of the enemy fortifications, Confederate artillery opened fire. The charge of Hincks's first line was driven back, so the Fifth and another regiment waded through their retreating colleagues, fixed bayonets, and charged. Charles Douglass noted a phenomenon that historian James McPherson describes: only about twenty of the one hundred-man company actually engaged in real fighting.⁴³ The African American soldiers overran the first line of Confederate trenches and captured one piece of enemy artillery. In the attack, four men were killed and nineteen were wounded. Two of the dead were from Charles's Company I. The regiment's colonel and major both received serious wounds. Charles was part of a detachment of fifty men sent to escort the wounded and the captured artillery piece back to camp. He later led the group back to recover the bodies of the regiment killed on the battlefield. Buoyant, Charles wrote a letter to his father, later reprinted in both Rochester and New York City newspapers, predicting that "before you receive this, you will, no doubt, hear of the fall of Petersburg, for our forces are at the last line of entrenchments, a quarter of a mile from the city." Charles predicted that credit for the victory would be given to the African American troops.⁴⁴

This engagement became known as the Battle of Baylor's Farm, though what occurred on the battlefield is disputed in reports. Early in the fighting, Hincks had been wounded and field command fell to Colonel Samuel Duncan, commander of one of the African American regiments; Duncan had directed the poorly managed attack on the Confederate lines. After capturing the enemy's forward trenches, the Union soldiers came under heavy fire from the main Confederate trenches. One by one, the Union regiments had been broken and fled the field in disorder. General Hincks recovered soon enough to file a damning report on the Fifth's part in the engagement. He blamed the Fifth's "awkwardness in maneuvering" for delaying the division's initial attack by forty-five minutes. When they did advance, Hincks described them as "little other than an armed mob." Following the wounding of many of the Fifth's officers, Hincks concluded that "considering its inefficiency . . . [it] would be a reckless and useless exposure of life to no purpose" and ordered the Fifth withdrawn from the battle.⁴⁵ General Gillmore allowed his other division to just "simulate" an attack and then withdraw. Overall, the battle was an embarrassing Union defeat. Butler placed the blame on Gillmore and had him relieved of his command.⁴⁶ Butler never was

⁴² Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 16 June 1864, in *Rochester Express*, n.d., reprinted in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 2 July 1864.

⁴³ McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 6.

⁴⁴ *Rochester Express*, n.d., reprinted in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 2 July 1864.

⁴⁵ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 1st ser., 1:555–57.

⁴⁶ Robertson, *Backdoor to Richmond*, 240, 254; West, *Lincoln's Scapegoat General*, 242–43; William Glenn Robertson, "From the Crater to New Market Heights: A Tale of Two Divisions," in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*, ed. John David Smith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 173.

able to capture Petersburg in order to assist Grant's main thrust on the Confederate capital.⁴⁷ One contemporary observer described the campaign's outcome: "Butler has just bottled himself up in Bermuda Hundred and indeed made a nice mess to it."⁴⁸ The poor performance of Black units in these early engagement around Petersburg, while largely attributable to White commanders, probably helped persuade Generals Ulysses S. Grant and George Meade to override the initial plan to allow another all-Black regiment lead the assault in the Battle of the Crater a month later, which had disastrous consequences.⁴⁹



Point Lookout, Md – View of Hammond Genl. Hospital & U.S. Genl. Depot for prisoners of war. Print, c. 2 March 1864. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003656672/>.

Within a few weeks, the Fifth was reassigned from the Richmond frontlines to Point Lookout, Maryland, to replace another African American regiment as guards at a camp for over twenty thousand Confederate war prisoners. As many in the Fifth correctly suspected, General Butler had ordered the exchange of units to get a better-trained infantry unit for his frontlines.⁵⁰ In fact, federal units usually posted to guard prisoners were composed mainly of soldiers deemed too ill for field duty but not ill enough for discharge.⁵¹ The military prison was located on the site of a former health resort on a peninsula jutting into the Chesapeake Bay. The number of prisoners held there had swelled during 1864, as General Grant had ended the previous policy of exchanging captured soldiers with the enemy as part of his ruthless strategy of attrition. The only exciting moments for the Fifth as guards came when a Confederate cavalry unit unsuccessfully attempted a raid to liberate the prisoners in July 1864.⁵²

The Point Lookout posting proved a tedious and demoralizing assignment for the regiment. Hope for a return to action came at the end of the summer when command of the Fifth was transferred to Charles Francis Adams Jr., son of the American ambassador to Great Britain and

⁴⁷ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 78–90.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Rhea, *To the North Anna River*, 276.

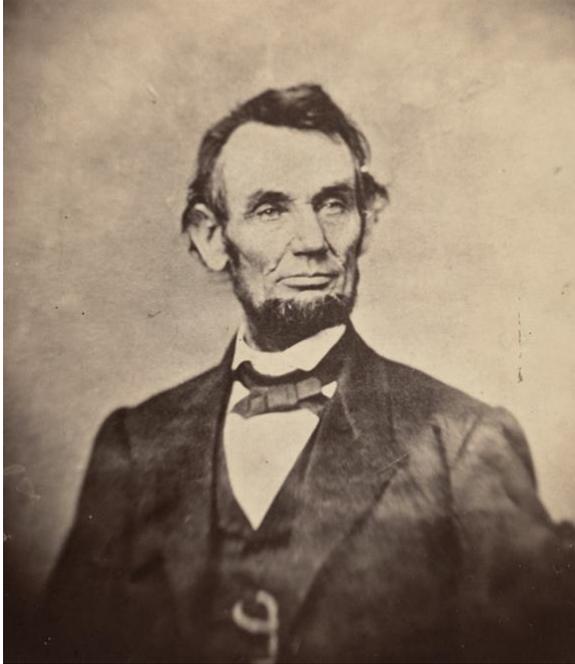
⁴⁹ Richard Wayne Lykes, *Campaign for Petersburg* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1970), 24–36.

⁵⁰ Trudeau, "Black Cavalry in the Civil War," 299; LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 104–05.

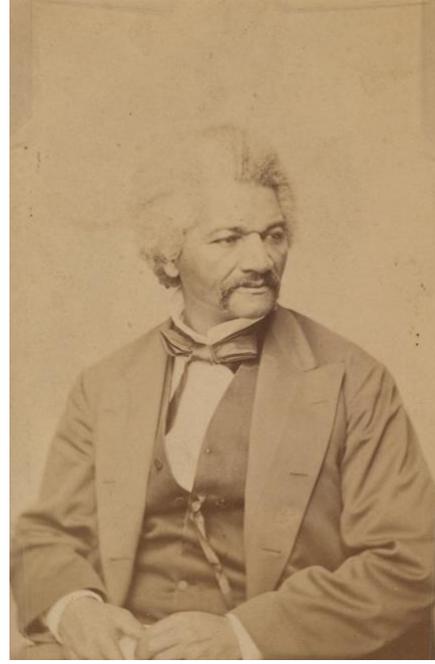
⁵¹ Trudeau, "Black Cavalry in the Civil War," 61.

⁵² LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 107; Trudeau, "Black Cavalry in the Civil War," 281.

grandson and great grandson of earlier U.S. presidents from Massachusetts.⁵³ Adams used his political connections to try to get the unit reconverted to a cavalry regiment. His efforts finally succeeded in March 1865, only weeks before the war's end. The Fifth would be one of the first Union regiments to enter Richmond when Lee evacuated the Confederate capital on 3 April 1865.⁵⁴



Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865). Photograph by Anthony Berger, 1864. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.
https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_S_NPG.78.150.



Frederick Douglass (1818–1895). Photograph by George Francis Schreiber, 1870. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Donald R. Simon.
https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.82.145.

Months before that, however, Frederick Douglass had intervened and gotten President Lincoln to discharge his son Charles from military service in September 1864 on account of poor health. On 29 August 1864, the older Douglass had written the president directly: “I hope that I will not presume too much upon your kindness . . . but I have a great favor to ask. It is . . . that you will cause my son Charles R. Douglass . . . to be discharged.”⁵⁵ Lincoln had agreed and issued Special Order 301 on 10 September 1864, authorizing the discharge. The influence of Frederick Douglass dropping his public opposition to Lincoln’s re-nomination for the presidency just weeks before the request can only be guessed.⁵⁶ On 15 September, Charles wrote his father that he had received his honorable discharge and was on his way home to Rochester; his Civil War was over. He was one month shy of his twentieth birthday.⁵⁷

⁵³ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 112–13.

⁵⁴ LaBarre, *Fifth Massachusetts*, 122–32; Trudeau, “Black Cavalry in the Civil War,” 285, 299–300.

⁵⁵ Frederick Douglass to Abraham Lincoln, 29 August 1864, General Correspondence File, reel 2, frames 54–57, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; also in also in Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 145; Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 423.

⁵⁶ William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 230.

⁵⁷ Charles R. Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 15 September 1864, General Correspondence File, reel 2, frames 58, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress; also in Bernier and Taylor, *If I Survive*, 228.

The goal of intensively studying the military career of Charles Remond Douglass was to examine the military experience of African American Union Army soldiers. Douglass's unit was typical in being poorly trained and equipped and then assigned mainly to rear-line "support" duties rather than being trusted to engage in important combat assignments. In the Union service, African American enlisted men faced numerous, assorted acts of racial discrimination. In his one time in combat at the Battle of Baylor's Farm, Charles Douglass had experiences comparable not just to other Black troops but to all soldiers under fire. Although poorly prepared, he and his fellow soldiers fought bravely, only to be scapegoated for the defeat of a badly planned and executed attack on the enemy. Unlike most other African American soldiers, Charles had "connections" that got him rapid promotion and eventually an early release. In later years, his military record always stood in the shadow of his older brother's "glory," but Charles never doubted that he had performed his duty in the Civil War.