Lesson 4: African-Americans in the Civil War

Class Notes 4: Teacher Edition

I. Emancipation Proclamation

Some Northerners felt that just winning the war wouldn’t be enough if _slavery_ still existed. Lincoln disliked slavery, but he did not think the _federal government_ had the power to _abolish_ it where it already existed. His primary goal was to _re-unify the country_. Later, he used his power as commander-in-chief to free the slaves. Since slave labor was used by the _South_ to build _railroads_ and grow _food_, Lincoln could consider the slaves to be enemy resources. As U.S. _commander-in-chief_, Lincoln could seize these enemy resources → meaning Lincoln could _emancipate_ the slaves.

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the _Emancipation Proclamation_. It applied to slaves living in Confederate control – NOT to slaves living in Southern areas under _Union_ control NOR to slaves that lived in the border states. This document made the destruction of _slavery_ a Northern war aim. It also discouraged the interference of _foreign_ governments.

II. Frederick Douglass

Douglass was a former _slave_ who became an important _abolitionist_. He traveled extensively giving lectures about the horrors of _slavery_ and the need to _abolish_ it. For Douglas and other abolitionists, the Civil War was a war to _end_ slavery. Throughout the war, Douglass worked toward emancipating _slaves_ and the right for African-Americans to _enlist_ in the Union _army_. He met with President _Lincoln_ to discuss these issues. Douglass helped recruit African-American soldiers. He believed that if former _slaves_ and other African-Americans fought in the war, they could not be denied full _citizenship_ in the Union. Three of his sons served as Union soldiers.

_Frederick Douglass_  "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow....I urge you to fly to arms and smite to death the power that would bury the Government and your liberty in the same hopeless grave. This is your golden opportunity."

"Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."

http://americancivilwar.com/colored/colored_troops.html

1. What is Douglass encouraging African-Americans to do in this first quote?
2. According to the second quote, what does Douglass hope African-American participation in the war will lead to for African-Americans?

III. 54th Massachusetts Regiment

Perhaps the most famous battle involving African-Americans is that of Ft. Wagner in South Carolina. The troops in this battle were the Massachusetts 54th Regiment and were led by Robert Gould Shaw, a white abolitionist from Massachusetts. Colonel Shaw was only 24 years old when he took command of the 54th. Initially he held some prejudices against the men, but he grew to respect them. The 54th was given the difficult task of taking over Ft. Wagner which would help the Union take control of Charleston, South Carolina – a key Confederate city. Of the 600 African-American soldiers who stormed Ft. Wagner, there were 281 casualties, including Col. Shaw. These brave men and their significant achievements have been memorialized in a famous sculpture by Augustus Saint-Gauden and in the film Glory. Frederick Douglass helped recruit men for the 54th, including his own son Lewis who fought in the 1863 Ft. Wagner battle.

IV. Other African-American Union Soldiers

Although the 54th Massachusetts Regiment is the most well-known, there were many African-Americans regiments. These men were called the United States Colored Troops (USCT). These men and their white officers are featured in a memorial in Washington, DC. African-Americans also served in the U.S. Navy during the war.

While African-Americans were permitted to enlist in the U.S. Army, they were not treated equally. They served in segregated units and received less pay than white troops. African-Americans were not allowed to become commissioned officers. Many African-American regiments were used for labor and often denied actual combat activity. They also faced death or enslavement if they were captured by the Confederate army. Eventually, however, the Confederacy also approved the use of African-American soldiers as their white manpower continued to diminish as the war continued.

Douglass's recruitment speeches promised black soldiers equality in the Union army, unfortunately they were not treated equally. They were paid 1/2 of what the white soldiers received and were given inferior weapons and inadequate training. Blacks were not allowed to become officers. Worst of all, black soldiers who were captured by Confederate troops were often shot. Douglass stopped his recruitment efforts when he learned of these conditions. Douglass published his complaints and then requested to meet with the president. His request was granted in the summer of 1863 and Douglass expressed his concerns about the way black soldiers were being treated by Union officers and Confederate captors. President Lincoln did give Douglass some encouragement that changes might be made in the future. Although Douglass was not entirely satisfied with Lincoln's response, he decided to begin recruiting again. Shortly after the meeting,
Secretary of War Edwin Stanton offered Douglass a commission on the staff of General Lorenzo Thomas. Douglass accepted the offer and returned to Rochester, where he published the last issue of his newspaper. He waited at home for notice of his commission as an officer, but it never arrived. Apparently, Stanton decided that Douglass would never be accepted by other officers. Douglass was extremely disappointed that the commission fell through, but he continued his recruiting work. By now, Frederick, Jr. (Douglass’ son), had joined his brothers in the Union lines. More than 200,000 blacks enlisted in the Union army and 38,000 were killed or wounded in Civil War battles. Comprising about 10 percent of the North's troops, the black soldiers made their numbers felt on the battlefields and distinguished themselves in many engagements. By mid 1864, with the help of the spirited black troops, the war was slowly turning in favor of the North.

http://www.history.rochester.edu/class/douglass/part4.html

1. What were some of the injustices African-American soldiers faced?

2. What actions did Douglass take to try and fix these injustices?

3. Why do you think Secretary Stanton decided that the other officers would not accept Frederick Douglass as an officer?

4. African-Americans made up ____% of the Union’s troops.