Proud History

Black soldiers from CNY made Civil War sacrifice

As the nation commemorates the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War and Black History Month, Central New York should pause to remember its proud role in the fight to end slavery.

In the years preceding the Civil War, Syracuse was home to the Rev. Jermaine Wesley Loguen, an escaped slave who led later led the city’s A.M.E. Zion Church, and to the antislavery crusader Rev. Samuel May, namesake of the May Memorial Unitarian Universalist Society. Syracuse was the site of the 1851 Jerry Rescue, in which a group of citizens defied the Fugitive Slave Act, rescued the escaped slave and ushered him to freedom in Canada.

Other prominent figures included Madison County’s Gerrit Smith and Auburn’s Harriet Tubman, the escaped slave who became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and led an estimated 300 slaves to freedom. Auburn also was home to William Seward, who served as governor of New York and in the U.S. Senate. In 1860, he lost the Republican nomination to Abraham Lincoln and later became Lincoln’s secretary of state during the Civil War.

Much less well-known are the black soldiers who joined the Union Army’s ranks. These men also deserve recognition.

Two years into the Civil War, the former slave Frederick Douglass visited Loguen’s church to recruit volunteers for a new Union Army regiment of African Americans forming in Boston.

“The arm of the slaves is the best defense against the arm of the slave holder,” Douglass said March 11, 1863, in Syracuse. “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.”

Ten men enlisted that night. Others soon followed and joined the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first black regiment recruited in the North.

The regiment, whose story was told in the 1989 movie, “Glory,” was led by Col. Robert Gould Shaw, the son of Boston abolitionists. The soldiers fought at Fort Wagner, S.C., where 20 were killed, 100 were missing and presumed dead and 147 were wounded. Of those, a dozen men from Central New York were injured, and two later died.

Tom Hunter, of the Onondaga Historical Association, points out the significance of their sacrifice in an era when black soldiers were initially consigned to manual labor.

“That was a way of showing that they were willing to serve their country alongside their Caucasian comrades and make a statement that if they were willing to fight for their country, they should be able to have all the rights and privileges of citizens,” he said.

There is a story that should be remembered to honor black soldiers’ role in the biggest moral battle in the country’s history.