

# BLACK SYRACUSANS FOUGHT IN CIVIL WAR

**T**his year is the 150th anniversary the start of the American Civil War.

We need to remember this was a fight between Americans, with heavy casualties (646,392) on both sides and a great rift to the nation. Also, slavery was one of the issues, and African-American soldiers fought and died in the bloody conflict.

Some of those came from New York state; about 4,125 men of African-American descent volunteered, by one count. Frederick Douglass, the former slave and abolitionist, came to Syracuse from Rochester in 1863 and delivered a fiery recruitment speech at AME Zion Church, a Syracuse building that no longer exists.

"The arm of the slave is the best defense against the arm of the slaveholder," Douglass implored.

Some 10 men volunteered, ex-slaves all. Others enlisted in coming weeks, many into the new 54th

Massachusetts regiment, the first African-American unit from a Northern state and the only unit accepting "colored" volunteers at the time. The 54th was mustered into service in May 1863. This is the outfit profiled in the 1989 film "Glory."

One of the early recruits to the 54th was Lewis Henry Douglass, son of the abolitionist. He was a 22-year-old printer from Rochester when he enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts regi-



Amelia Loguen



Lewis Henry Douglass

ment in March 1863. The 54th, although made up entirely of black soldiers (including 15 Syracuse men, according to a 1996 Syracuse Herald-Journal article by John Doherty), was commanded by a white man, Col. Robert Shaw, son of Boston abolitionists.

In July 1863, the regiment under Shaw charged Fort Wagner on Morris Island, in the harbor of Charleston, S.C. Syracuse press accounts listed 20 of the 600 men killed, 100 missing and 147 wounded. The dead included Shaw, the commanding officer. The Confederates buried the colonel in a pit with 20 of his men.

Lewis Douglass wrote to his fiancée, Amelia Loguen, about the battle. Amelia was one of the six children of Jermain Loguen, an abolitionist preacher and former slave who lived in Syracuse, in a house that used to stand at East Genesee and Pine Streets. The lot now is the site of a Rite Aid store.

The Onondaga Historical Association has the text of a letter mailed to Amelia in Syracuse July 20, 1863, from Morris Island by Lewis Douglass. He says he'd been in two fights.

Douglass continued: "The last was desperate. We charged that terrible battery on Morris Island known as Fort Wagoner (Wagner) and were repulsed with the loss of 3 killed and wounded. I escaped unhurt from amidst that perfect hail of shot and shell. It was terrible. . . . Should I fall in the next fight,

## The letter

You can read more of the letter from Lewis Henry Douglass to his fiancée, Amelia Loguen, after a Civil War battle in July 1863 at [syracuse.com/case](http://syracuse.com/case).

killed or wounded, I hope to fall with my face to the foe. . . .

"This regiment has established its reputation as a fighting regiment, not a man flinched, though it was a trying time. Men fell all around me. A shell would explode and clear a space of twenty feet, or men would close up again, but it was no use we had to retreat, which was a very hazardous undertaking.

"How I got out of that fight alive I cannot tell, but I am here. . . .

"Remember if I die I die in a good cause. I wish we had a hundred thousand colored troops we would put an end to this war. . . . LEWIS."

Lewis Douglass was named a sergeant major of the 54th. Although he survived Fort Wagner, he caught typhoid fever and was discharged from active service in May 1864. He and Amelia Loguen were married at the Loguen home on East Genesee in 1869. They spent most of their lives after that in Washington, D.C., where Lewis' widow died in 1936, at 93.

Lewis' letter mentioned six comrades from Syracuse who were wounded at Fort Wagner. George Washington died of his wounds, as did Charles Reason. Andrew DeForest, Charles Creamer, Jacob Carter and Charles Whiten survived for discharge.

In 1879, Syracuse newspapers reported that hundreds of African Americans who served in the war met here for a reunion. One of the veterans on hand was Lewis Douglass.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Contact him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, [dcase@syracuse.com](mailto:dcase@syracuse.com).

