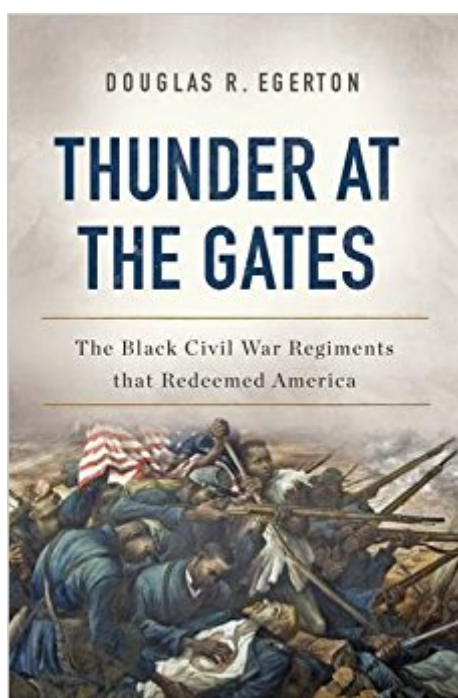


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# Thunder At The Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America



## Synopsis

Co-winner of the 2017 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize An intimate, authoritative history of the first black soldiers to fight in the Union Army during the Civil War Soon after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, abolitionists began to call for the creation of black regiments. At first, the South and most of the North responded with outrage-southerners promised to execute any black soldiers captured in battle, while many northerners claimed that blacks lacked the necessary courage. Meanwhile, Massachusetts, long the center of abolitionist fervor, launched one of the greatest experiments in American history. In *Thunder at the Gates*, Douglas Egerton chronicles the formation and battlefield triumphs of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Infantry and the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry-regiments led by whites but composed of black men born free or into slavery. He argues that the most important battles of all were won on the field of public opinion, for in fighting with distinction the regiments realized the long-derided idea of full and equal citizenship for blacks. A stirring evocation of this transformative episode, *Thunder at the Gates* offers a riveting new perspective on the Civil War and its legacy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Co-winner of the 2017 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize "Egerton brings the stories of three black regiments together, exploring their origins, their wartime service, and the post-war lives of their soldiers and officers... This is a deeply and impeccably researched work, drawing on (to name just some of the sources) manuscript collections of personal papers, the black and white press, regimental records, draft records, records of the Department of the South, medical records, pension

files, wartime letters and journals, memoirs, and photographs. Egerton's is a brisk and personable narrative history that will reach a wide audience, with its vivid portraits of lives both on and off the battlefield."-2017 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize committee"Thunder at the Gates is the first book to provide a full account of the three black regiments raised by Massachusetts in the Civil War. The 54th's famous assault on Fort Wagner is here, but so also are many other campaigns and battles fought by that regiment, the 55th, and the 5th Cavalry. The narrative is enriched by the stories of more than a dozen individual soldiers and officers, which gives a human and personal dimension to this important work."---James M. McPherson"Gracefully written and well-researched, Thunder at the Gates is an indispensable chronicle of the triumphs and tribulations of three regiments of black soldiers who fought to destroy legalized slavery and helped preserve the American Union. Egerton's powerful narrative allows the men, and the families who supported them, to live in our imaginations just as they should."-Annette Gordon-Reed, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and author, with Peter S. Onuf, of "Most Blessed of the Patriarchs": Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination"Egerton's history shows how the sacrifice of these recruits on the battlefields at Fort Wagner and Olustee not only proved that African-Americans could be dedicated fighters but also opened the way to securing rights, including equal pay for military service and the opportunity to be promoted into the ranks of commissioned officers. White Northerners may have enlisted to hold the nation together; it was their black counterparts, both former slaves and freemen, who fought for liberty."-New Yorker"[Thunder at the Gates is] a fantastic performance throughout... This is a landmark study of the true crucible of the American Civil War."-Steve Donoghue, Christian Science Monitor"[M]asterful...Some of the best military writing I have encountered."-Joseph C Gouldon, Washington Times"Poignant... artfully told and wonderfully detailed."-Paul Jablow, Philadelphia Inquirer"[F]ascinating...Reading this book will help you understand why, even in 2016, there is a Black Lives Matter movement."-Donald D. Breed, Providence Journal"The magic in this story...comes from the author's ability to build empathy for the soldiers...In Thunder at the Gates, Egerton has memorialized these brave patriot soldiers and the legacy they left for their ancestors--a legacy for us all to treasure as a part of our collective heritage."-Michael Ramsey, Roanoke Times"[Thunder at the Gates] is a brutally honest, comprehensive account of [the African American regiments'] contributions and an excellent addition to Civil War collections."-Booklist, starred review"[A] solid addition to the Civil War literature...Providing a fuller picture of black men's involvement in the war, Egerton weaves in the activities of the [54th and] 55th Volunteer Infantry Division and the Fifth Cavalry. He emphasizes the way race affected the men's military experiences, looking as much at individual black soldiers as white officers...Egerton's fine work pays respect to

the black soldiers who fought and died black liberation."-Publishers Weekly"Egerton presents a captivating narrative... [His] study of the individuals and attention to their lives after the war is extremely well researched and well documented. This is an important addition to the shelves of Civil War books."-Library Journal, starred review"Massachusetts sent three black regiments into Union service, including the famous 54th Infantry featured in the film *Glory*. Douglas Egerton evocatively recovers the story of these soldiers and their officers, exploring their campaigns, the symbolic impact of their service, and how wartime activities shaped their postwar lives. This is a deeply satisfying rendering of an important subject."-Gary W. Gallagher, author of *The Union War* and *Nau Professor of History, University of Virginia*"We have long known of the history of the pioneering black Massachusetts regiments of the Civil War--the Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth infantry and Fifth Cavalry--and their impact on the military and political battlefields. In this deeply-researched and stunningly narrated new study of their exploits, Egerton, by focusing our attention squarely on the men, both the enlisted and officers, has found a new and exciting way to retell the story of those whose actions had a profound impact on the outcome of the struggles against slavery and racial oppression."-Richard J. Blackett, Professor of History, Vanderbilt University"Only those who have known slavery can understand how fiercely the fire of liberty can burn in the human heart. Douglas Egerton's account of Massachusetts' African American volunteers--the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Infantry and 5th Massachusetts Cavalry--lays out vividly the energies and personalities that prompted their gallant rush. As was said in 1863, so Douglas Egerton says for us now: Tell it with pride to the world!"-Allen Guelzo, New York Times bestselling author of *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*"None were braver in the fight' wrote the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar about Massachusetts' black regiments, and Douglas Egerton takes up that refrain, chronicling with nuance and insight the heroic struggle for freedom and justice of soldiers such as Lewis and Charles Douglass, William Carney and Stephen A. Swails. Egerton brilliantly interweaves personal stories and political context, evoking the battlefields of Ft. Wagner and Olustee, and the profound legacy of what happened there. This is a great book, worthy of the men who inspired it."-Elizabeth R. Varon, author of *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War*

Douglas Egerton is the Merrill Family Visiting Professor in History at Cornell University and a professor of history at Le Moyne College. The award-winning author of seven previous books, he lives in Fayetteville, New York.

Everyone who has seen the movie *Glory* is familiar with the outlines of the story of the 54th

Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. That "Brave Black Regiment" is also immortalized in August St. Gauden's magnificent sculpture in Boston, as well as in books, magazine articles and on film. Mention Fort Wagner and the student of the Civil War can give you a virtual blow-by-blow description of the regiment's most famous fight. But how many of those who know so much about Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his men know anything at all about the 54th's sister regiments, the 55th, and the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry? Thunder at the Gates is a collective regimental history of the three black Massachusetts regiments. While I at first wondered if author Douglas Egerton's decision to combine the story of the three regiments into one volume made sense, I came to see the virtues of this approach. The white officers all three regiments came from the same social milieu of earnest, educated, upper-class abolitionists. With the notable exception of Robert Gould Shaw, they were mostly from the elite of Boston. Some were even related to each other by blood or marriage. In addition, it was not unusual for officers from one of the three regiments to transfer to another of them. Putting them all together also highlighted the contrasts among the white officers. Charles Francis Adams, who would command the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, comes across as a snobbish man of great prejudices. Col. Pen Hallowell of the 55th Massachusetts, on the other hand, was the sort of man who led his men but who also learned from them. Douglas Edgerton also gives us insights into the men who filled the ranks of the regiments. The three regiments were not identical in where they drew recruits from. The 54th Massachusetts recruited nationally from throughout the North and had very few Massachusetts men below the rank of lieutenant. The 55th included many former slaves. The men of the 5th Cavalry knew that they were a particular experiment because many whites believed that black men were incapable of the initiative required for an effective cavalry trooper. The author tells the stories of some of the men, including that of the African immigrant Nicholas Said and William Carney, the Medal of Honor winner. Egerton also looks at the discrimination the black troops suffered from the Union high command, and their direct actions taken to bring attention to the disabilities they had imposed on them. Resistance to unequal pay set the tone for soldiers bent on forcing the Federal government to recognize them as equal to white men. Douglas R Egerton teaches at Cornell University and a professor of history at Le Moyne College. He brings remarkable scholarship to this project, but offers his findings in clear text. This is a fine book for those readers interested in the military aspects of the war. It also examines the interplay of race, politics, and the army at a liminal moment in American history. Overall the writing is effective. This is a welcome addition to the literature on black soldiers in the Civil War. Pat Young blogs at The Immigrants' Civil War.

With Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the War Department permitted black regiments to be raised and fight for the Union in the Civil War. Though many Northern Democrats complained about black soldiers, the administration went forward with close to 200,000 soldiers and sailors joining the effort to defeat the South in this conflict. Many dreaded the prospect that the war's aim was changing from preserving the union to one also of ending slavery. Douglas Egerton in *Thunder At The Gates* argues that many in the North and the South believed that colored troops could not be controlled by white officers and would not make good fighting men. In the end, this excellent historian showed this point of view was incorrect and groups of men like the Massachusetts 54th were courageous and changed American society forever. This book tells the story of three interconnected regiments; The Fifty-fourth, and the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Infantry and the Massachusetts Fifth black cavalry, by following the lives and careers of a small number of soldiers. Their story started before Ft. Sumter, continued into the battles of Reconstruction and continues today. This writer shows how individuals tried to change this struggle into as Lincoln stated in his Gettysburg Address as "a new birth of freedom." Additionally, the soldiers chronicled in this title declared that their purpose in enlisting was to show that their race was entitled to state and federal citizenship. Also, they sought to liberate their loved ones that they had left behind in the South and unite their families. Richly narrated and drawn from an array of firsthand accounts, the author sheds new light on the complexities and significance of The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America, both on and off the battlefield. This work published by Basic Books of New York details the difficult events that followed the initial enlistment of black soldiers, what colored troops went through to be able to fight leading to the liberation of slaves, and the occupation of the South after Lee's surrender. Egerton provides a clearer picture of the postwar United States and its attempts to be one nation again. Additionally, he does a first rate job of describing what changed for the veterans back home as well as the legacy of the regiments throughout American history to 2015.

I was interested after reading a similar book. That said, I just picked this up to read more about the Civil War. I ended up feeling it got a little off-track when it focused on daily lives of some citizens. I didn't mind it that much due to how it tied into the main story, though. First off, this provided great information about the war. It focused on both well-known people and lesser-known people. It also focused on conditions the soldiers and civilians had to face. In addition, it contained information on

how the army worked at that time. Likewise, this contained a brief glimpse into the Confederate's struggling economy. An important court case was also mentioned. In addition, it mentioned several people's lives and deaths after the war ended. I found this enthralling due to how detailed the descriptions became. It helped that the soldiers celebrated a few times and that made their hard work worth it. All that said, it was a worthwhile read.

I'm a history buff and just love all the details to this story. I highly recommend it.

I have been an Egerton fan since reading his stellar work, "Year of Meteors: Steven Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War." Egerton's reputation as an author was the reason I bought this book, although I am little interest in stories of the Civil War. The book provides as much detail about the battles fought by three Massachusetts volunteer regiments as one would want. But the book's value is in telling the story and providing an understanding of the African American soldiers who made up those regiments, including the 54th Massachusetts of "Glory," the movie, fame. Egerton knows the arc of a good story and has the sensitivity to bring life to it.

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