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The Lost Sword of the MA 54th

Anne Bentley 00:01

It's a field officer's sword. It's leather scabbard and a red, crimson silk sword sash that is so inextricably wound through the scabbard and is deteriorating so so excessively that I don't dare touch it. But these were the sword and scabbard and sword sash of Robert Gould Shaw.

Katy Morris 00:27

[Intro music fades in] This is Katy Morris.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:32

This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Katy Morris 00:34

And this is The Object of History, a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:39

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history.

Katy Morris 00:46

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:54

We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Katy Morris 01:00

In this episode, we're looking at a set of items related to the Massachusetts 54th. The first African American regiment raised in the north during the American Civil War.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:10

We shall take a close look at the once lost sword of Robert Gould Shaw, the young white colonel who died leading the 54th in their attack at Fort Wagner.

Katy Morris 01:19

We'll also look beyond this famous artifact at the ordinary men who served in the 54th. In remarkable numbers, they answered the nation's call to service.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:29

Despite unequal pay, discrimination, the threat of enslavement and death, they fought for the hope of building a better, freer and more just republic.

Katy Morris 01:40

Our Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley, will walk us through the circuitous path of Shaw's sword and how it finally came to reside in our collections.

Anne Bentley 01:48

No one knew where the sword was. It had disappeared.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:51

With Stephen T. Riley librarian Peter Drummey, we shall also take a close look at a few surviving photographs of 54th Massachusetts soldiers and learn about these extraordinary young men.

Peter Drummey 02:03

Again, this is the human story behind the official story.

Katy Morris 02:09

And we're here again with Anne Bentley, welcome back to the podcast.

Anne Bentley 02:12

Thank you. It's always fun to talk with you folks.

Katy Morris 02:16

We have asked you to pull together some items related to the 54th. I know it's something from the collections that you really enjoy sharing.

Anne Bentley 02:25

It is, and for one of these items, it is in my now 47 years here, as far as artifacts go, I think it is the most important and most meaningful in in our history, to me, personally, to have been honored with curating and researching and documenting this item. This is not just a story about an object, it's a story about the family who gave us the object, and a story most especially about the men who were related to that object one way or another. So, the first object came to us in 2013. The Mass Historical Society and the Smithsonian co-curated an exhibition on the 54th regiment. And just before it went on exhibit down at the Smithsonian, a gentleman by the name of Robert Minturn showed up here with a sword. And it wasn't just any sword. He thought it was the sword that his great-grand uncle, Robert Gould Shaw carried at the Second Battle of Fort Wagner. And he felt that we should have it, and it should go in this exhibit. And of course, when, when you get an object in, you have to do your research on it. So, I examined the sword carefully, and it turned out to be an Ames Manufacturing Company sword Chicopee, MA. So, it's a Massachusetts made sword, and it's up the period that's well and good. It comes from the family. That's excellent. So, the next thing I have to check is, is this actually the sword that he carried at the Second Battle at Fort Wagner?

Katy Morris 04:15

Right? How do you know?

Anne Bentley 04:17

Well, it's a mystery. It's a detective hunt. You find a little clue, and you follow that clue, and it could pan out, or it could lead you to another clue. And these are literally one word in a in a sentence, in a letter here, or a little throwaway something in an in an imprint there. So, in my research, one of the things that we discovered is in 20 years after Fort Wagner, Luis F. Emilio, the regimental historian, wrote an article. He described the sword Shaw carried at Fort Wagner, in conjunction with a full description of everything that he could see Shaw was wearing down to his pocket watch, his signet ring, the silver eagles on his shoulder straps. And he said of the sword that it was an English sword, a field officer sword of English manufacture, with the initials of his name marked. So obviously, if it's an English sword, this Chicopee, Massachusetts sword, could not be the one that he actually carried. We still were thrilled to have this, because that would mean that he carried it at Antietam. And to us it was, it was an honor to have this sword, and it went on display in in Washington, and it left us all scratching our heads, you know, wonder where that I wonder where that sword went. And we all figured, well, we'll never know. Fast forward a couple of years, and the family is clearing out their mother's home, getting ready for a yard sale.

Katy Morris 05:58

No.

Anne Bentley 05:59

Yes!

Katy Morris 06:00

I they see where this is going, and I'm already stunned.

Anne Bentley 06:03

It's, well, Brenda Lawson, our Director of Collections, and I went out to the home where Mary Wood, Robert Minturn's sister, hosted us and showed us some portraits and documents and things like that that we collected and brought back to add to the Minturn family papers here, and a couple

days later, I got an email from Brenda that said, "Mary Wood just called. They have another sword." I couldn't type back fast enough, "Yes, that's it! That's the sword!" Because they were all excited, because, based on our earlier examination of the first Fort Wagner sword they had given us. We all knew that it had to have his initials on it, and it had to be British. And Mary and Robbie Minturn were there in their kitchen at night with the flashlight looking at all the swords they'd brought down from the attic. And they saw that on the second sword, it said, "Wilkinson, Pall Mall, London." And looking very carefully, they were able to see the very small letters "RGS" in the decoration on the blade. So right there, that was 98% of yes, this was it, but we still had to work on it. Brenda went to collect it from Mary Wood and brought it back, and she says it's on the table in processing. So, I went down, and I got off the elevator. I didn't get within 10 feet of that, and I knew it was the sword. You just know it by looking at it. It's got an aura to me; it's got an aura. So, I thought, well, just because I think it is doesn't necessarily make it so. So, the documentation is another story. When we started out, Mary and I knew two things. It was an English sword, and it had his initials on it, sum total of what we knew. So, working together, we have managed to trace it from its birth to its loss after the battle, to its recapture, to its loss, to its discovery in the attic.

Katy Morris 08:12

To its fake out discovery, and then its true discovery.

Anne Bentley 08:18

Exactly. It was in documenting the sword, it was my introduction to the men of the 54th who followed that sword into battle. A lot of people are under the assumption that these were all Massachusetts residents, but no, they were mostly from out of state and Canada. Some were freed slaves who had made their way to Canada. Many of the Massachusetts enlistees were men of careers, of occupations. There were teachers. There were teamsters. There were fishermen. Some obviously were well read and could write well, and others were illiterate and could only x their names.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:08

Since Anne introduced us to the 54th we wanted to know more about the individual experiences of the men who made up the regiment. I asked Peter if he could share items from our collections that might help us to connect to the personal experiences of the soldiers. So, what objects do we have here?

Peter Drummey 09:28

I've brought out a couple of objects that are both examples and things that I'm actually very attached to from our collection. One is a photograph. This is a Carte de visite photograph. Carte de visite simply means visiting card. And when modern photography came into being, people got the idea that when you visited someone, you would leave a little photograph of yourself as a visiting card. They're small, about two inches wide and three inches or a little bit tall. So little photographs about the size of a business card, and many soldiers had these during the Civil War, and they kind of collected them and exchanged them. So, they also made albums with sort of slots in them, so that your photographs would slide into the slots, so you could keep organized your collection.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:19

Well so who would have paid for this image to be taken?

Peter Drummey 10:23

You're right that the early photographs are expensive, but people seem to be prepared to pay for them. So, I have a Carte de visite album kept by one of the officers of the 54th regiment. It has a photograph of a very young drummer, an African American drummer, and this person's identified as Miles Moore. He was a musician in the 54th regiment. When he enlisted, he enlisted as a laborer from Elmira, New York. There's some question about both his place of birth and his age. One thing that's remarkable about this story of the regiment is how young many of the soldiers are. Some people think that it's literally the case that Miles Moore might have been 10 or 11 years old. It's very hard from Civil War era photographs, to be sure. My own impression is people look older than they are often in early photographs. You had to hold your expression and stance as your photograph was taken, and that might have made you look more serious, but he's clearly a small if

he's a teenager, he's a small, young-looking teenager, and I think he would have said he was 16 to make himself plausible. Now he would have been too young to enlist as a soldier. But I think the 54th was simply recruiting musicians without regard to their age, sort of considering them to be noncombatants, in the sense that while calls and drumbeats were used as signals. In fact, there were more musicians than they needed for communication. So many of the musicians became stretcher bearers during a battle, and therefore were not necessarily carrying weapons or combatants. But in any case, Miles Moore has this extraordinary experience when he's young. Moore was living in New York, enlisted in the 54th as most of the men who enlisted in the 54th were not from Massachusetts, had come here to Massachusetts or to recruiting stations that Massachusetts had set up, because at first, Massachusetts was essentially the only state in the north recruiting black soldiers. This experiment that they started.

Anne Bentley 12:46

And there were so many men enlisting that when they reached the 1000, they needed for the regiment, they began the 55th regiment, and they trained so stringently that Shaw actually was reprimanded for being so hard on his men, and he fought back. He said, "No, I'm training them the way I was trained, because what we teach them now will save their lives in battle. They are going to be the epitome of an absolutely top-notch army regiment, and so they have to be trained." They all joined, following the promises of Massachusetts, who was recruiting for their regiments that would be under the auspices of the United States Army. And the two remaining enlistment posters that exist for the 54th regiment are in our collection, and they very clearly promised the men \$13 a month. They get \$50 bounty pay for signing up, and they get \$13 a month, the same as every white soldier.

Katy Morris 13:45

How much is that like? I have no concept of what \$13 in the 1860s means to someone or to a black man in particular.

Anne Bentley 13:57

It was probably very, very good money. And then the \$50 bounty that money was probably incredibly helpful to their families, but when they got down to South Carolina after their glorious march out of Boston, the US Army informs them that, no, we're not going to pay you \$13 for soldiers. We're going to pay you \$10 as laborers, and on top of that, we're going to charge you \$3 for your uniforms, so that every month you'll get \$7. To a man from Colonel Shaw down to the littlest drummer boy, they all said, "No, we will not show up at payroll until you honor your obligations. We have trained as soldiers. We carry guns. We are expected to lay our lives on the line as soldiers. You will not insult us by offering us less than you enlisted us for." That these men fought, bled and died for 18 months without a cent, that's how long it took until after the devastating Battle of Olustee Florida, where the United States government was finally brought to honor their obligations retroactively, which did not help half the regiment that was dead by that time. These men could have just laid down their weapons when they first got South Carolina and walked off.

Katy Morris 15:39

Why do you think they didn't?

Anne Bentley 15:41

Because they had honor, and they had commitment to fighting for freedom. This was their road to the end of slavery. By the time Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, we were running out of white bodies. The only way forward was going to be if the black soldier was submitted into the Union Army, that's how dire things were. And Lincoln recognized that. Frederick Douglass had been saying since the beginning of the war, give the black man a chance, and nothing can stop him. And so finally, finally, after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 the chance came, and all of these black soldiers answered the call. So that, so that this Fort Wagner sword, yes, it belonged to a very brave young man who tragically died in battle. But it's more that it's the emblem of the men who followed him into that battle.

Anne Bentley 16:45

So, in my research, this is what, this is what we have come up with. This is the sword chronology. On April 17th, 1863, Robert Gould Shaw was commissioned Colonel 54th Mass Regiment. Mid to late April, his uncle George Russell ordered an officer's sword for Shaw from the master English sword Smith Henry Wilkinson London and English firms have been in business since Noah and keep good records. The other good thing is that Wilkinson swords are numbered near the hilt on the ricasso is the number 12506, and sure enough, Wilkinson was able to supply me with the record that on May 11th, 1863, that sword was proofed. That meant that the sword was tested for durability and strength, and it passed. On May 23rd, 1863, the sword was etched and mounted on its hilt. We know that on July 1st, 1863, he received the box from Uncle George with a beautiful new sword. So, he receives his sword, and he first uses it in Battle of Grimball's Point, July 16th, 1863. At that point, he had two more days to live, and after Grimball's Point, they spent two days marching through meyer. This is the Carolina shoreline. So, there's muck, there's meyer, there's reeds. At night when they were marching their single file on on boards that are laid down over this swamp stuff, they'd eaten all of their provisions. They had no water, very little sleep, if any. And remember, they're in South Carolina in the middle of summer, in their woolen uniforms. They got there, and they're what, maybe three football fields down the beach, something like that, for distance, you stop and you picture. They waited and waited because it's still daylight and the charge was in the evening, because that would make them less of a target, from the Confederates, who are up higher than they are with a clear view to the masses down there. It's on a narrow beach, and there's one point where they all they almost have to narrow down. It's like getting onto a freeway. You've got to you've got to get all these bodies through there, and you're all huddled there, you're stopped. You can't move away from anything, and that's really easy pickings for someone who's sniping from the top of the ramparts. For four hours, these men are there on the beach, waiting for the order. They're sweltering under July sun, in their woolen uniforms, looking at their fate. It's just, it's just, I am speechless, thinking of the courage that must take to sit there or stand there, or...

Katy Morris 19:52

Anticipating that.

Anne Bentley 19:53

Anticipating, anticipating this. It's, do you know, it's one thing in the heat of battle. You know, it starts and you're running but this was not that. This was waiting. In revolutionary times, this type of action was called a forlorn hope. In World War Two, we called it a suicide mission. They knew they probably weren't going to get out. In fact, twice, Robert Gould Shaw said, "I will die this night, but my men will prove themselves."

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:34

Once again, we turn to Peter to learn about the individual experiences of the battle and what it was like to be on the ground at Fort Wagner.

Peter Drummey 20:42

We know the military history of the Civil War, the operations and the attack on Fort Wagner, the military operations regiment. Its official history is well recorded. I think modern research in the Civil War has widened that view to include much more study of individual soldiers, and that makes this story. Again this is the human story behind the official story.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:11

Well, we have several other objects here. It strikes me that there is another photograph in the room that's been looking over your shoulder this whole time, of an African American soldier.

Peter Drummey 21:21

This is, this is one of the most striking stories about the 54th and I have a photograph of William H. Carney as a mature man, a photograph from about 1900 so he's a mature man by that time, but someone who, as a young soldier in the 54th has one of the most remarkable stories during the attack on Fort Wagner. The color Sergeant the regiment, is badly wounded, and it's in this very ferocious battle under terrible circumstances, it's Carney who manages to both retrieve and protect

the regimental colors. Now, regimental colors, the flags of both the regiment and national colors that a regiment carried, they're both symbolically extremely important. The regimental flags were actually handmade by supporters, often wives of soldiers or volunteers, when they the regiment received its colors, its flags, it was a ceremony, an important ceremony, but in any case, on the battlefield, the regimental flags, the colors are carried to show where the center of command of the regiment was on the battlefield. So, they this wasn't just symbolic. They had a useful purpose. That's why they were being carried in the advance. And so, the regiment is gets to the parapet of the Fort Wagner fortifications, and then is driven back, and Carney saves the flag, even though he's been wounded as well, saves the flag and manages to keep it and bring it back to Union lines, even though he's badly wounded. In Civil War battles, the loss or capture of flags is often seen as having a tremendous significance, and the fact that he protected and preserved the colors of his regiment is seen as being it is just on its face, heroic, but symbolically very important. Carney is recommended for the relatively new decoration, the Medal of Honor, but in fact, doesn't receive this until many years after the Civil War. It means that Carney is both the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor, and he's not because it's such a long time after the war that he's finally given the decoration for the events from 1863 that other people have received medals in the intervening decades. Nevertheless, this is an extraordinarily important event, and in some aspects seem so distant from us, people involved in battles where there were bayonet charges and musicians playing drums, and something that looks like it's from a very distant past.

Anne Bentley 24:28

This was a foot charge. This was not, Shaw was not on his horse. The way he would normally be, because this is the beach. So he was, he was at the head of his men and was the first to fall on the ramparts and Clara Barton after the war for her Bureau of Wounded and Missing Soldiers in reply to a letter from a family of one of the black soldiers who was trying to find their son. In the letter she wrote, she says, "I remember the charge on Wagner. That terrible night at the 18th of July, 1863. During four long hours preceding that charge, I watched those doomed men marching and counter marching or fixed in a solid phalanx, waiting that charge of death, then for other hours of carnage, such as God grant you may never realize where the rolling volleys of destruction alone lit

up the misty blackness of the night that they bore the wounded back along the wave washed beach and the surging ocean sang at solemn requiem for the dead."

Anne Bentley 25:48

July 18th was the assault on Fort Wagner. Shaw was shot in the chest as he reached the rampart. He was the first up. Overnight his body was robbed of everything, including the silver eagles that denoted his rank, his clothes, boots, sword, scabbard, everything down to his underclothes. The only things that were ever recovered were the sword and the sash. So, July 19th, Robert Gould Shaw was buried. July 24th his effects were sent up to the family. Then, couple years later, at the end of the war, on June 3rd, 1865, Brigadier General Charles Jackson Payne located Shaw's sword. General Payne wrote to his family quote, "I heard the other day of the sword of the late Robert Gould Shaw killed at Fort Wagner, in the possession of a rebel officer about 60 miles from here. I sent out and got it. The scabbard was not with it. I am going to send it on as soon as I have an opportunity." So that's where the first time we see this, since Shaw has received it. My colleague, Mary Yacovone discovered a fabulous account, "Brevet Lieutenant Solon A. Carter presented a paper titled 14-month service with Colored Troops 1900. He said in his speech, on the march from Goldsboro, the division was halted for a midday rest near a little hamlet consisting of a few scattered houses. General Payne and staff rode into an enclosure and dismounting, proceeded to partake of their frugal lunch. The owner of the premises appeared and in the course of conversation, inquired if any of the colored troops composing the command were at Fort Wagner. He volunteered the information that a gentleman living in the neighborhood near whose house we should pass was at Wagner at the time of the assault by Colonel Robert G Shaw's 54th regiment and had that officer's sword in his possession. General Payne took the man's name and location of his premises and directed one of the staff to take a small escort visit the house, and if possible, obtain the weapon. Upon searching the premises, a sword was found and delivered to general Payne. In July 1865 upon leaving the service, the late assistant Adjutant General himself was charged by General Payne with the duty of restoring the sword to Colonel Shaw's father. The sword in question proved to be the one carried by the gallant colonel, and was identified by the initials, "RGS" delicately etched upon the blade. In a postscript to one of his letters, Mr. Shaw wrote quote, the sword was a present to my

son from his uncle, Mr. George R. Russell, who purchased it in England and caused the etchings to be made there. In a subsequent letter acknowledging its receipt, he says, quote, I thank you most heartily for all the care and trouble you have taken so far as such words may be applied to an inanimate thing. It is the weapon which has done the most for our colored people in this war, and it is to me, likewise, as well as to you, a source of great satisfaction, that it was recovered and restored by officers of colored troops." So, we were 99 and nine tenths percent there, and on the eve of our we were going to display it and announce our acquisition of the sword on the anniversary of the battle, and literally on the eve of that, I got a call from former colleague. He had discovered this letter, and he wanted me to know about it. Lydia Maria Child wrote on January 28th, 1876, "I spent last winter with the parents of Colonel Shaw in their home in New York City. The flag of the 54th regiment was in their hall and the sword of Colonel Shaw. There is a history about that sword. It is very handsome, being richly damascened with the United States coat of arms and the letters 'RGS' beneath. It was a present from a wealthy uncle in England, and he received it a few days before the attack on Fort Wagner. When his mother showed me the weapon, she said, 'This is the sword that Robert waved over his followers as he urged them to the attack.'" So that's, that's, that's our Fort Wagner sword and its history traced from birth to recovery, and it's, as I say to me, it's a national treasure, because it means so much more than just one man's death on the ramparts at Fort Wagner.

Katy Morris 30:59

Just as you've been talking it's amazing how much meaning and history and significance one object can hold.

Anne Bentley 31:08

Yes, it's, history isn't in the past. It's very much in the present.

Katy Morris 31:13

It's sitting between us.

Anne Bentley 31:15

Yes, yeah. Picture this brand-new sword when it was stolen, gleaming, gleaming steel with etched design in it, gilded grip, bright gold. The leather insert, the leather lining for the knuckle grip is still there the original, which is incredibly rare to have.

Katy Morris 31:37

Right, what is it that looks like such a unique material?

Anne Bentley 31:40

The grip is shark skin.

Katy Morris 31:42

What?

Anne Bentley 31:43

It's shark skin because it's impermeable to blood, sweat, everything else. The grip itself is wood, and then it's covered in shark skin that's banded in twisted bronze wire.

Katy Morris 31:58

That's insane.

Anne Bentley 31:59

Shark skin. Yeah.

Katy Morris 32:01

Can I touch it? I'm not allowed?

Anne Bentley 32:02

Not without a glove.

Katy Morris 32:03

Oh, man, have you touched it?

Anne Bentley 32:07

Not without a glove.

Katy Morris 32:08

I wonder what it feels like. It looks it was like, is it snakeskin, shark skin, and that, so you're that was kind of standard?

Anne Bentley 32:19

Yes, yes.

Katy Morris 32:21

Wild.

Anne Bentley 32:22

Yes.

Katy Morris 32:23

If I wear gloves, can I hold it?

Anne Bentley 32:25

Absolutely, absolutely. That is, I've taken more JPEGs of people holding the sword, wearing their gloves.

Katy Morris 32:34

Isn't it funny to you want, you want to touch it. You want to hold it.

Anne Bentley 32:37

You do want to hold it.

Katy Morris 32:38

But there's as though, that's, it's, it's just remarkable, the urge to connect.

Anne Bentley 32:44

Yeah, and that is letters, the words of the people they're vital. But somehow people don't expect art, the letters that we show them, to be real. But there's no denying these three-dimensional objects. They're real.

Katy Morris 33:02

When you were moving it around, I was flinching. I didn't, okay, okay, I'm going in, okay, okay, I've got one hand under the shark.

Anne Bentley 33:13

The hilt is, it's the heaviest part. So, yeah, it's still quite sharp, considering.

Katy Morris 33:20

It's so decorative. I mean, it's really, I would you're saying it would have been gleaming, and you would have been really able to see the..

Anne Bentley 33:28

Yes, yes.

Katy Morris 33:29

I can see the flag. I can see his initials.

Anne Bentley 33:34

Yes. Now, in other accounts of finding the sword, the story went that this apparently was hanging on the wall in a wooden scabbard. Now they knew they weren't looking for a wooden scabbard, but what's what's out of the scabbard is a gold hilt with this incredible officer's knot hanging from it. So that would be your indicator that there was something very special in that wooden scabbard. So, they had no hesitation about pulling it out and saw the 'RGS' on it.

Katy Morris 34:06

How does it feel when you hold it?

Anne Bentley 34:12

It feels heavy and it feels sad because I think of the promise, and I think of the sacrifice of these of these beautiful souls that fought so hard, the bravery and the commitment and the pride and the conviction. And then I think of reconstruction. So, it's heavy and it's sad. It's promises unkept.

Peter Drummey 34:49

Robert Gould Shaw's life, his heroic death, he's come to symbolize something that it's greater than any single person can carry. The extraordinary part of this story, not a gallant young infantry officer, but the raising of an African American regiment and all the people who make it up that sort of hasn't perhaps got the attention it deserves because of this focus on Shaw. This is the story of more than 1000 people who served in the regiment, perhaps 600 people who were present at the Battle of Fort Wagner. The other thing about it is it tends to freeze in time. The story of the regiment in July of 1863, which was just at the start of their military experience. This is only in the first months of existence of this unit that serves through the remainder of the Civil War. You could argue that much and even perhaps the most interesting part of the service of the 54th is what happens after the attack on Fort Wagner

Katy Morris 36:00

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