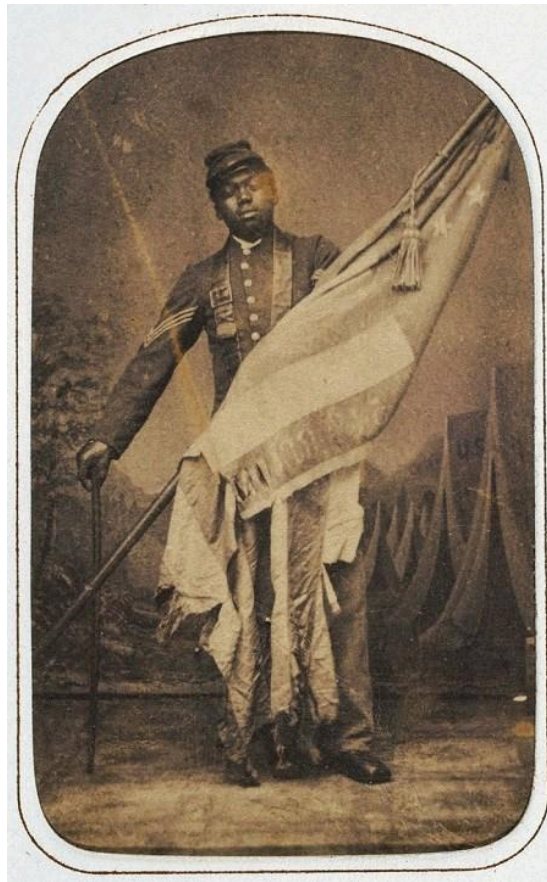


William Harvey Carney: “Serving my country and my oppressed brothers”

“I had a strong inclination to prepare myself for the ministry; but when the country called for all persons, I could best serve my God by serving my country and my oppressed brothers. The sequel is short—I enlisted for the war.”

- Sergeant William H. Carney, letter in *The Liberator* from October, 1863

Born into slavery in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1840, William Harvey Carney (1840-1908) made his way to Massachusetts to join his father and enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry on February 17, 1863. He gained the rank of Sergeant.



William Carney holding the flag he carried at Fort Wagner. Note his use of a cane.
“Carte-de-visite album of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment,” National Museum of African American History & Culture. [1864].

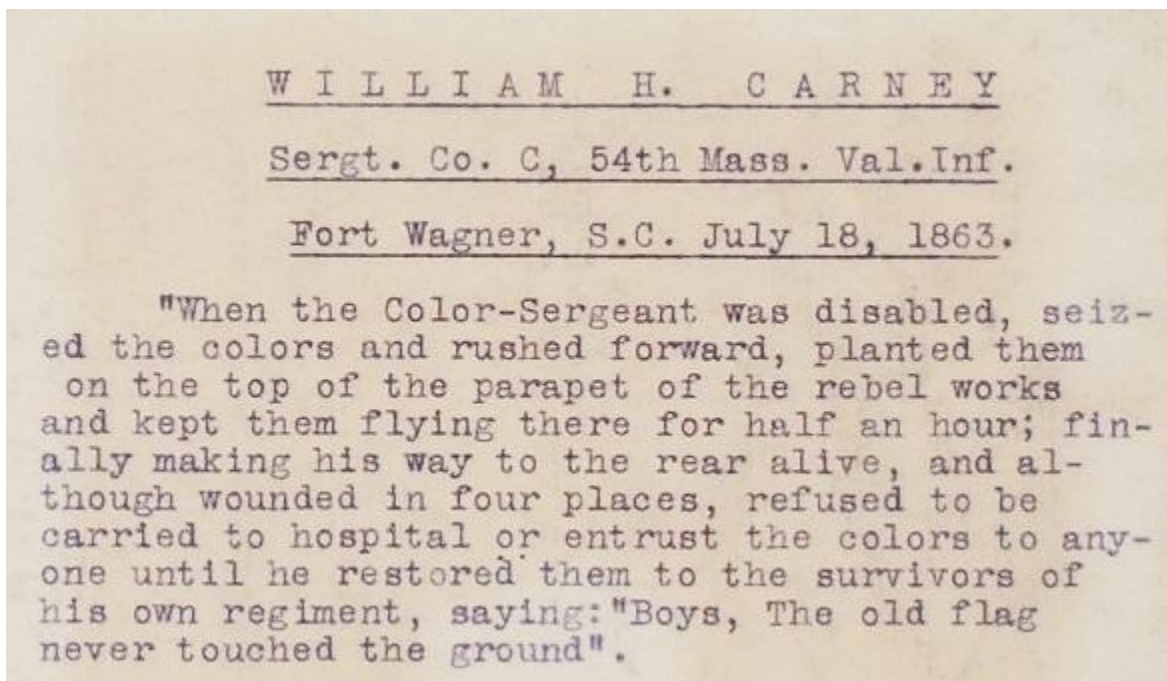
https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2014.115.8

ALT TEXT: William Carney holding the flag he carried at Fort Wagner. In his other hand, Carney holds a cane.

At the Battle of Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863, Carney was shot in the leg and arm. When the 54th's flagbearer fell, Carney carried the flag. Carney was discharged as disabled in June 1864 due to his injuries from the battle.

Later (in 1900), he received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his action, the earliest of any African American. He got the award much later, in 1900.

After the war, Carney was active in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and Black veterans' groups. The GAR was a powerful advocate for veterans pensions and services. Like many U.S. veterans, especially those with war wounds, he worked for the government, in his case, for the U.S. Postal Service, working as a letter carrier for 32 years. He then served as a messenger in the Massachusetts State House. An elevator accident there killed him in November 1908.



W.E.B. DuBois. [1900]. DuBois compiled records of African Americans recipients of the United States Army and Navy Medal of Honor from the Civil War, using official records.

Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2014645382/>

ALT TEXT: The printed card says, "William H. Carney, Sergeant, 54th Massachusetts, Fort Wagner, SC, July 18, 1863. When the Color-Sergeant was disabled, seized the colors and rushed forward."



William H. Carney. (1900.) MHS Collections Online.

<http://www.masshist.org/database/5987>

ALT TEXT: African American William H. Carney, balding and with a trimmed white beard, sits, wearing a civilian suit, and with a medal pinned to his chest.



GAR Post 1 Members. (n.d.). Close-up of William Carney (center) standing with fellow members of Grand Army of the Republic Post 1, New Bedford, Massachusetts, standing outside City Hall. New Bedford Free Public Library. Digital Commonwealth.

<https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:rr1733969>

ALT TEXT: African American William Carney poses with white members of the New Bedford, Massachusetts post of the Grand Army of the Republic, all in uniform.

For more information on advocacy by veterans, see the article on the Grand Army of the Republic.

Sources:

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<https://www.54thmass.org/regiment-history/sergeant-carneys-flag/>

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<https://www.nps.gov/articles/william-h-carney.htm>