

# The Clerk's Black History Series



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**DeKalb County**



## William Harvey Carney

(February 29, 1840 – December 9, 1908)

**First African-American Medal of Honor Recipient**

**William Harvey Carney** was born a slave on February 29, 1840, in Norfolk, Virginia. His father, William Harvey Carney Sr. escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad and eventually earned enough money to purchase the freedom of his wife and son. When they reunited, the family moved to New Bedford, MA. Early on, Carney wanted to pursue ecclesiastical training to become a minister in the church, however, instead of following the call to preach, he decided to enlist in the Union Army after the Emancipation Proclamation allowed African-Americans to serve in the military. Recruited out of New Bedford, Carney joined the all-black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, commanded by 26-year-old Robert Gould Shaw, the son of a wealthy Boston abolitionist. During the summer of 1863, The 54th Infantry Regiment was sent to James Island, South Carolina, where it saw its first battle of the war. On July 18, 1863, after two days of food and sleep deprivation, Colonel



Shaw lead the 54th's charge on a heavily fortified Fort Wagner. They managed to capture the outer rifle pits surrounding the fort, however, Colonel Shaw was pinned down under a parapet and desperately tried to rally his troops forward as he lay suffering from a mortal wound. In addition to Shaw's injuries, the Union flag bearer was also mortally wounded and Carney, in a fit of patriotism and duty, seized the flag from the flag bearer and marched forward, preventing the flag from touching the ground. Although he was also wounded in the legs and chest, Carney planted the flag at the top of the parapet. The 54th continued to advance but after brutal hand-to-hand combat, were driven out with heavy casualties. The 54th Regiment held their position until reinforcements arrived and provided protective cover for their retreat. When they returned behind Union lines, Carney, severely wounded himself, was still clutching the Union flag.



"Storming of Fort Wagner"

After the devastating battle of Fort Wagner left many soldiers in the 54th dead or seriously wounded, William H. Carney Jr., returned a wounded hero and was promoted to Sergeant for his valor and bravery. Carney received an Honorable Discharge and returned to New Bedford, MA and took a job working for the city. He married Susannah Williams and had one daughter, Clara. In 1869 he began working for the post office as one of the city's four mail carriers. As a public speaker, he addressed veterans' groups and other civic organizations.

On May 23, 1900, 37 years after the battle at Fort Wagner, William H. Carney received the Medal of Honor. And because his actions took place earlier in the war than any of the other 20 medals issued after the Civil War, Carney is considered the first official African-American recipient of the Medal of Honor.

Carney died at the Boston City Hospital on December 9, 1908 as a result of an elevator accident at the Massachusetts State House, where he worked.

Upon his death in 1908, the flag at the Massachusetts state house was flown half mast in his remembrance, an honor usually given to a deceased governor, senator, congressman or U.S. President.

