

William H. Carney

1840–1908



WHY HE MADE HISTORY William H. Carney was the first African American to be awarded the Medal of Honor. His brave actions during the Civil War make him one of the war's most famous heroes.



As you read the biography below, think about how William H. Carney's bravery led him to action in the Civil War.

William H. Carney's life was one of great triumph over tragedy. Born a slave in Virginia, Carney was able to secretly learn how to read and write. When his master died, Carney was emancipated. He moved to Massachusetts and had hopes of studying to be a minister. He soon changed those plans.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, Carney volunteered for the Union Army. He became a member of the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry's C Company. Every member of this group of African American soldiers was a volunteer.

Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, there was still prejudice against African Americans, and these soldiers were completely separated from the white regiments. So when the men of the 54th faced the Confederate soldiers at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, they wanted to prove themselves in combat. Carney was 23 years old. The Confederate army was prepared for the attack. They launched an intense assault on the 54th. The **color-bearer** was struck and killed by a bullet. Carney caught the flag before it fell to the ground.



VOCABULARY

color-bearer one who carries the flag

The battle was not over. A bullet struck Carney in the leg. He pressed on and made it to the fort with the flag. As he watched the battle ensue, he saw a group of soldiers coming toward him. He thought they were from the 54th, so he held his flag high. But the soldiers were the enemy.

Carney wrapped the flag around its pole to protect it and then ran through a ditch and into deep water. As he waded through the water, he held the flag high. He was shot again in the chest, his right arm, and right leg. Another bullet grazed his head. When the remaining members of the 54th regrouped, a member of the 100th New York regiment offered to carry his flag. Carney replied, "No one but a member of the 54th should carry the colors."

In 1900 Carney was awarded the nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor, for his bravery. He died at his home on December 9, 1908.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Draw Conclusions** Why do you think the flag was so important to William H. Carney?

- 2. Evaluate** Why do you think the African American members of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry volunteered to fight in the Civil War?

ACTIVITY

- 3.** Make a flag from construction paper to honor Carney's efforts. Be sure to use symbols to represent aspects of Carney's involvement in the Civil War.