African American soldiers displayed their courage during their attack on Fort Wagner. The 54th Massachusetts Infantry charged across 200 yards of open beach in their effort to reach the fort.

6. Fort Wagner: African Americans and the War

Early in the war, abolitionists had urged Congress to recruit African Americans for the army. At first, most Northerners regarded the conflict as "a white man’s war," but Congress finally opened the door to black recruits in 1862. About 186,000 African Americans, many of them former slaves, enlisted in the Union army, and another 30,000 African Americans joined the Union navy.

The Massachusetts 54th Regiment

Massachusetts was one of the first states to organize black regiments. The most famous was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, commanded by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Two of the 54th Infantry’s 1,000 soldiers were sons of Frederick Douglass.

The men of the Massachusetts 54th were paid less than white soldiers. When the black soldiers learned this, they protested the unequal treatment by refusing to accept any pay at all. In a letter to Lincoln, Corporal James Henry Gooding asked, "Are we Soldiers, or are we Laborers? . . . We have done a Soldier’s duty. Why can’t we have a Soldier’s pay?" At Lincoln’s urging, Congress finally granted black soldiers equal pay.

After three months of training, the Massachusetts 54th was sent to South Carolina to participate in an attack on Fort Wagner outside of Charleston. As they prepared for battle, the men of the 54th faced the usual worries of untrained troops, but they also faced the added fear that if captured, they might be sold into slavery.

African Americans at War

The assault on Fort Wagner was an impossible mission. To reach the fort, troops had to cross 200 yards of open, sandy beach as rifle and cannon fire poured down on them. After losing nearly half of their men, the survivors of the 54th regiment retreated, but their bravery won them widespread respect.

During the war, 166 African American regiments fought in nearly 500 battles. In addition to initially receiving less pay than white soldiers, black soldiers often received little training and poor equipment. They also risked death or enslavement if captured. Still, African Americans fought with great courage to save the Union.

7. Appomattox: Total War Brings an End

During the first years of the war, Lincoln had searched for a commander who was willing to fight the Confederates. The president finally found the leader he needed in General Grant, whom he made commander of the Union forces in March 1864. Grant’s views on war were quite straightforward: "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on."

Using this strategy, Grant mapped out a strategy for ending the war. He would lead a large force against Lee to capture Richmond, and at the same time, General William Tecumseh Sherman would lead a second army into Georgia to capture Atlanta.

Grant Invades Virginia

In May 1864, General Grant invaded Virginia with a force of more than 100,000 men and met Lee’s army of 60,000 in a dense forest known as the Wilderness. In two days of fierce fighting, Grant lost 18,000 men but still refused to retreat. "I propose to fight it out along this line," he said, "if it takes all summer." He followed Lee’s army to Cold Harbor, Virginia, where he lost 7,000 men in 15 minutes of fighting.

By the time the two forces reached Petersburg, a railroad center 20 miles south of Richmond, Grant’s losses almost equaled Lee’s entire army. However, Grant was able to reinforce his army with fresh troops, whereas Lee, who had also suffered heavy losses, could not.

Total War

Grant believed in total war—war on the enemy’s will to fight and its ability to support an army. With his army tied down in northern Virginia, Grant ordered General Philip Sheridan to wage total war in Virginia’s grain-rich Shenandoah Valley. "Let that valley be so torn that no crows can fly over it. If you have to carry your rations along with them, you must do so," ordered Grant.
In December 1864, Sherman captured Savannah, Georgia, and from there, he turned north and destroyed all opposition in the Carolinas. Marching 423 miles in 50 days, he reached Raleigh, North Carolina, by March 1865, and there he waited for Grant's final attack on Richmond.

The War Ends For nine months, Grant's forces battered Lee's army at Petersburg, the gateway to Richmond. On April 1, 1865, the Union forces finally broke through Confederate lines to capture the city, and Union troops marched into Richmond two days later.

Grant's soldiers moved quickly to surround Lee's army. Lee told his officers, "There is nothing left for me to do but go and see General Grant, and I would rather die a thousand deaths."

On April 9, 1865, General Lee, in full dress uniform, arrived at Wilmer McLean's house in the village of Appomattox Court House. He was there to surrender his army to General Grant, who met him in a mud-splattered and crumpled uniform.

The Civil War, 1861-1865

- Union states
- Border states
- Confederate states
- Territories
- Union victory
- Confederate victory
- Indecisive or a draw

Appomattox Court House a village in Virginia that was the site of the Confederate surrender to Union forces under the command of General Ulysses S. Grant

Most battles during the Civil War took place in or near border states or in Confederate states.