

An Exploration of *Civil War Boston*

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In this, the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, there are many documentaries, books, and newspaper and magazine articles revisiting America's greatest tragedy and triumph. The facts of the Civil War are widely known, especially for those who study and teach history. Seared into our national consciousness are Antietam and Gettysburg, slavery and emancipation, states' rights and national unity, Confederacy and Union, Lee and Grant, Davis and Lincoln. Far away from the battlefields was Boston. Boston, the epicenter of the American Revolution, also played a significant role in the Civil War despite no battles being fought there.

Thomas H. O'Connor, in his book *Civil War Boston*, presents a comprehensive study of Boston in wartime, at home and on the battlefield. He explores the actions of the city's abolitionists, African-Americans, Irish immigrants, women, and business community. In doing so, he paints a picture of a highly-involved populace that both significantly impacted the war effort and was transformed by it. The focus here will be on Boston's military and social contributions during the war.

There are some challenges with the book. O'Connor presents an exhaustive study of the war and in doing so has the tendency to go off on tangents that go far beyond the lives of Bostonians. The book would have benefitted from excising such material. Repetition is another failing of the book. A number of ideas and facts are repeated from chapter to chapter. The book would have been better served with a more tightly-edited and focused approach to Boston during the Civil War. O'Connor also falls into the trap of making absolute statements such as "every house displayed some public symbol of mourning" (231). Finally, O'Connor relies extensively on newspaper accounts when more varied primary sources would have painted a deeper and richer portrait of life in Boston during this time.

Apart from its shortcomings, *Civil War Boston* depicts a city fundamentally involved in all aspects of the war. O'Connor's exploration of the roles of various groups during the war is effective and highly informative. This is where the educational opportunities lie. Massachusetts students are steeped in the state's role in the American Revolution. One wonders to what extent they learn about the state's role, and more specifically that of Boston, in the Civil War.

Perhaps most widely known are Boston's abolitionists. William Lloyd Garrison started the abolition movement in Boston in 1831 (8). He called for total, immediate, and uncompensated emancipation and published the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*. Boston native Charles Remond, an African-American, became one of the first paid, full-time, antislavery speakers in the area (16). Women formed the Boston Female Antislavery Society (8).

Boston was a bastion of abolitionism. On the day of John Brown's execution, church bells tolled, guns fired salutes, and church services were held in his honor (34). There were, however, vocal anti-abolitionists in Boston, and secession and the possibility of civil war led to fear and panic. In the winter of 1860-61 mob violence broke out three times at gatherings of abolitionists (42). Boston Democrats were opposed to the Emancipation Proclamation, saying it amounted to confiscating private property and was in violation of the Fifth Amendment (137).

When the Emancipation Proclamation took effect January 1, 1863, Boston celebrated. Church bells pealed throughout the day. A gala was held at Boston Music Hall, with black and white attendees. Present were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. When a messenger arrived and read the proclamation, the audience erupted in cheers and applause. Emerson read "The Boston Hymn" and said Boston had earned the right to be associated with the slave's redemption (127). The war still raging and their work not finished, abolitionists fought for a constitutional amendment

abolishing slavery; this became the Thirteenth Amendment. When the amendment passed, there was a one-hundred-gun salute on Boston Common and church bells rang throughout the city (220).

Boston played a significant role in the Civil War. When the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, many in Massachusetts believed the war would be over within months (50). A popular slogan at the time was “Peace in Ninety Days” (61). The firing on Fort Sumter actually occurred on the eighty-sixth anniversary of the battles at Lexington and Concord. Ironically, it was Charles Francis Adams, grandson of John Adams, who said: “We, the children of the third and fourth generations, are doomed to pay the penalties of the compromises made by the first” (50). On April 20, 1861, Massachusetts troops arrived in Virginia, the first of the Union army to set foot in a seceded state (63).

Massachusetts men were so eager to enlist in the early weeks of the war that supply exceeded demand. Three thousand men travelled to other states to enlist. In the summer of 1861 Congress approved 500,000 additional volunteers and Massachusetts men continued to exceed the state’s quota (68). One wonders how this compared to other states. Was this typical at the time? O’Connor has the tendency to imply that Massachusetts was exceptional, but does not offer comparative data.

As Abraham Lincoln emphasized early on, the war was about preserving the Union, not about ending slavery. On July 4, 1862 Boston celebrated with banners hung from public buildings and homes saying “Union—Constitution—Law” and “Obey the Laws—Support the Constitution of the United States” (99). This was in response to rebellion by the Southern states.

By the end of 1862, 79,000 Massachusetts men had enlisted. They came from such elite colleges as Harvard and Tufts, from farms, factories, and shops. O’Connor states: “Patriotism

touched rich and poor, educated and uneducated, newly immigrated, and established old families” (103). Massachusetts soldiers suffered heavy casualties at Bull Run (70). At Antietam, nine of seventeen officers were killed. There were heavy losses at Gettysburg.

On the home front, Soldiers’ Relief Societies were organized throughout Massachusetts. To ease overcrowding in hospitals around Washington, plans were made to bring soldiers home to local hospitals (65-66).

By the end of 1864, more than 87,000 men had signed up for three-year enlistments. Many units lost more than twenty percent of their men. The “Fighting Nineteenth” returned to Boston with only seventy-five of 1,915 men left. Only 119 of 1,000 Irish soldiers in the 28th Regiment survived. Seventy-one members of the 2nd Cavalry were captured and sent to Andersonville. Two survived (203).

African-Americans fought to serve in the Union forces. As early as 1853, Charles Remond and black attorney Robert Morris petitioned the state legislature to establish a black military company. It was rejected. Boston residents, without state sponsorship, then organized a black military company of their own, the “Massasoit Guards” (31). At the start of the war, Boston African-Americans called for the repeal of laws against military service. They petitioned the legislature to be allowed into the state militia system, but were denied (67). Black leaders said the inclusion of African-Americans into the military would demonstrate their bravery and help them earn the right to full citizenship (128).

With the Emancipation Proclamation, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew went to Washington, D.C. and got permission to raise additional volunteers that “may include persons of African descent, organized into special corps” (128). Thus, the first all-black unit, the 54th Regiment, was formed in Boston. There were so many African-American enlistees that an

additional regiment, the 55th, was created. The 54th was led by Robert Gould Shaw, the son of a wealthy abolitionist. Forty percent of Boston's black males of military age enlisted in the 54th. This included the two sons of Frederick Douglass (132). The regiment distinguished itself for bravery in the assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. One-third of the officers and half of the enlisted men were killed or wounded (133).

When Charleston fell in 1865, celebrations took place throughout Boston. Abolitionist Wendell Phillips said: "Can you conceive a bitterer drop that God's chemistry could mix for a son of the Palmetto State than that a Massachusetts flag and a colored regiment should take possession of Charleston?" (223)

Boston women also contributed to the war effort. Women formed sewing circles, making such articles as bandages, quilts, socks, and scarves for soldiers. They also served as nurses, and took on jobs left behind by men gone to war. A number of women rose to prominence during the war years. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony organized the Women's Loyal National League to promote emancipation. They extended their efforts by conducting a petition drive seeking a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. By June 1864, they had gathered 400,000 signatures. Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson said that their campaign had greatly assisted the struggle to secure the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment (143). Massachusetts resident Dorothea Dix was appointed Superintendent of Women Nurses for the Union Army. Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, became known as the "Angel of the Battlefield" for mobilizing expedient treatment of soldiers on the battlefield. Louisa May Alcott treated soldiers in a Washington, D.C. hospital in 1862 and wrote of her experiences in *Hospital Sketches* (147).

Boston's Irish immigrants had a conflicted role in the Union cause. According to Patrick Donahoe, publisher of *The Boston Pilot*, Irish Catholics were fighting to save the Union, not free the slaves (73). In fact, the Irish tended to have an adversarial relationship with African-Americans. In 1862, when Lincoln issued a decree banning slavery in Washington, D.C. and forbidding the return of runaway slaves, Boston's Irish reacted angrily. They were concerned runaway slaves would take jobs from poor immigrants. Donahoe wrote: "These wretches crowd our cities and by overstocking the market of labor do incalculable injury to white hands" (112). There were frequent clashes between Irish and black residents, particularly on the waterfront (209). Irish leaders tried to pass laws preventing fugitive slaves from entering Massachusetts but were unsuccessful. Whereas Boston's Irish immigrants had been the target of discrimination themselves, their patriotism to the Union and heroism on the battlefield inspired a wave of tolerance in Boston (78). Many black residents, however, remained confined to pre-Civil War jobs and neighborhoods, such as the down slope of Beacon Hill, and stereotypes continued to prevail (209).

At the war's end, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* declared "Peace!" in bold letters. Even though it was raining in Boston, flags decorated the city, people fired guns in public, stores were decorated, schools, banks, and public offices were closed, and fireworks decorated the night sky. Alcohol was dispensed free of charge and judges dismissed those arrested. According to the *Advertiser*, it was "like a dozen Fourth of July concentrated into one day" (228). Days later, upon Lincoln's assassination, church bells tolled dirges, flags were flown at half mast, and everything closed, with the exception being churches, which were crowded (230-231).

Knowledge gleaned from *Civil War Boston* can be applied in the middle school classroom in a number of ways. First, one could hold a class debate about the reason for fighting

the war. An obvious matchup would be the Confederacy vs. the Union. I suggest using local perspectives to launch a political debate on emancipation at the start of the war. Most Massachusetts Republicans demanded emancipation when the war began. They believed a proclamation of emancipation would damage the Southern war effort. Slaves would be encouraged to escape and the Confederacy would have to use troops to retrieve them, draining the military of resources. Senator Charles Sumner called for Lincoln to end slavery, saying that rather than fighting a war to end slavery, ending slavery would end the war. Charles Francis Adams chimed in: "We cannot afford to go over this ground again. The slave question must be settled this time once and for all." One team of students would research and analyze primary sources in support of these views. The other team would research and analyze Lincoln's reasoning. According to Lincoln, the North was not yet sufficiently anti-slavery to support emancipation. He needed the support of conservative Republicans as well as war Democrats in order to present a united front against the Confederacy. To move out too far ahead of public opinion on slavery could cost him this support. Another concern was that of potentially driving slaveholding border states to the Confederacy if drastic steps were taken to free the slaves (108). Debates could bring in perspectives of free blacks and slaves as well, along with those of Irish immigrants and women.

Students could also conduct research on key home front figures, writing a paper, presenting a first-person narrative as the character, or doing a PowerPoint presentation. Notable figures to research could include Dorothea Dix, Clara Barton, Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, Charles Remond, Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Governor John Andrew.

Additionally, students could work cooperatively to research a group explored in *Civil War Boston*, create a PowerPoint or iMovie, and present as part of an exhibition on Massachusetts during the Civil War. The exhibition would be open to the school community and its families.

Learning about local contributions to the Civil War can help broaden its relevancy for students. To read about the lives of Boston, Salem, and Watertown residents for example, helps to bring life to the study of the war, hopefully deepening interest and understanding.

Work Cited

O'Connor, Thomas H. Civil War Boston. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997.