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Edward W. Kinsley Papers
Collection 143-1

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Manuscript Division

Scope Note

The papers of Edward W. Kinsley (b. 1830 - d.?). Abolitionist, merchant, investor, and an agent for the state of Massachusetts, cover a period of approximately four years, from 1862 to 1865, when the Civil War was at its height. Kinsley, as a state agent and member of the committee which had been formed by the governor to recruit and fund the Massachusetts "Colored" Volunteers, was apparently one of those instrumental in supplying the black regiments as well as the white volunteer regiments. The papers were donated to Moorland-Spingarn in 1974 by Dr. John W. Blassingame, noted historian and author. The collection totals approximately « linear foot and consists primarily of correspondence. There are also official passes issued to Kinsley when he visited the camps of the Massachusetts volunteer regiments, receipts related to equipment purchase, and announcements relative to Kinsley's mercantile partnership.

The correspondence reflects Kinsley's political connections and his ability and willingness to grant favors, probably a result of his friendship with the governor of Massachusetts, John A. Andrew. Many of the correspondents, primarily army officers, sought his aid in procuring civilian positions or military promotions. Other correspondents relayed tidbits of information about battles fought, and conduct of officers.

Of particular interest is a letter from a black sergeant of the 54th Regiment, Charles W. Lenox, informing Kinsley of the valor of the officers of his Regiment. Also included are letters from family members.

The loose correspondence as well as a letterbook include references to some of the social concerns of the day; the condition of and prospects for the freedmen, and the issue of equal pay for the black troops. The letters from Colonel A.S. Hartwell, Commander of the 55th Regiment, are the most substantive in this regard.

Scope Note

In a related Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Clothing Account Books of the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War (Collection 141), there is a ledger detailing the clothing allotments of the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. The names of each enlistee and the date and place of enlistment are included in the ledger entries.

Historical Sketch

Governor John Albion Andrew of Massachusetts, a zealous abolitionist had been among the first to recognize the value to the Union of arming black recruits. After the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, Governor Andrew pressed for the authority to recruit blacks into separate Massachusetts volunteer companies. He received such authority in January 1863, and the 54th Massachusetts Infantry was conceived soon after. Governor Andrew wanted to make the 54th Regiment "a model for all future Colored Regiments", and he was convinced that as the first black organization to be raised in the North, "its success or its failure would go far to elevate or to depress the estimation in which the character of the Colored Americans will be held throughout the World." Andrew selected as the regiment's colonel, Robert Gould Shaw, then a colonel in the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry; and as lieutenant colonel, Norwood P. Hallowell, a captain in the 20th Massachusetts Infantry.

Andrew's recruiters soon found that raising a full regiment in New England, let alone Massachusetts, was next to impossible. Boston yielded scarcely one company, New Bedford another. He concluded that his recruiting officers would have to go beyond the boundaries of his state. As this would have been contrary to official policy, a committee of private individuals was formed to raise men and money. George L. Stearns, wealthy Boston ship-chandler who had helped finance John Brown, served as chairman. This Committee, whose membership eventually reached 100, became known as the "Black Committee". Those members who assisted in raising the 54th Massachusetts were largely prominent abolitionists in the state: Oakes Ames, John M. Forbes, Dr. LeBaron Russell, Richard P. Hallowell, F.W. Bird, William I. Bowditch, and the generator of these papers, Edward W. Kinsley.

Historical Sketch

Stearns enlisted Frederick Douglass to encourage black volunteers. Douglass traveled throughout the North making speeches urging black audiences to enlist in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. Douglass' first recruits in New York were his two sons, Charles and Lewis. Lewis Douglass became the 54th's first regimental sergeant-major.

By the end of March 1863, four companies were full and ready for muster, and recruits were coming into Readville, the Massachusetts training camp just outside Boston, at the rate of one hundred a week during the month of April. As a result of this, the 55th Regiment was organized in May. A.S. Hartwell, colonel and brevet brigadier-general, was transferred from the 54th, and became commander of the newly-formed 55th.

After the formation of the regiments, the "Black Committee" continued to raise funds, much of which came from the members themselves. The Committee became the supplier of the Massachusetts volunteer regiments, black and white. It also saw to the needs of the sick and wounded, and served as liaison between the soldiers and their families. Edward W. Kinsley, friend of the governor, merchant, investor, and an agent for the state of Massachusetts, was apparently one of the principle suppliers, sending the troops needed clothing and equipment upon request.

The 54th and 55th Regiments were involved in a number of battles as part of Sherman's "march to the sea." Their first engagement was the offensive to seize Morris Island and with it the control of the entrance to Charlestown Harbor. With Folly Island as a jumping-off place, the main offensive got under way on July 10, 1863. The two regiments were assigned to make a diversionary demonstration on James Island. The success of the offensive was reportedly due to the bravery of the men of the 54th and 55th.

Historical Sketch

One of the most significant battles in which these regiments fought was the one at Honey Hill, South Carolina, an area strategic to the defense of Savannah. Again, the two regiments acquitted themselves admirably, and continued to do so with each successive battle. By the end of the war, Massachusetts, thanks in large part to the efforts of George Stearns and his recruiting network, had provided the Union with 3,966 black soldiers.

Sources:

Cornish, Dudley Taylor. *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865*. Second Edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1966.

Emilio, Luis F. *A Brave Black Regiment: History of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865*, Reprint. New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969.

Luck, Wilbert. *Journey to Honey Hill*.

Series Description

Series A Letterbook Correspondence

Box 143-1 The letterbook is comprised mainly of business letters from Kinsley to his partner and business colleagues, dated 1864-1872. A large segment is devoted to letters to George Pullman of the Pullman Palace Car Co. in which arrangements were being made to transport a party of 150 to San Francisco. Of particular interest is a copy of a letter to Charles Sumner in regard to Reconstruction, and to U.S. Grant requesting a political appointment for a friend.

Series B Correspondence

Box 143-1 This correspondence consists of letters from officers in the Massachusetts volunteer regiments, primarily the 54th and 55th, and members of the "Black Committee" in which mention is made of battles fought, casualties, and requests for clothing and gear. Of particular interest is a letter from Charles W. Lenox, black sergeant in the 54th Regiment, reporting the bravery of the officers of his regiment.

Series C Passes

Box 143-1 This series consists of the official passes issued to Kinsley when he visited the of the Massachusetts volunteer regiments.

Series D Financial Receipts, Announcements

Box 143-1 Included in this series are receipts for the purchase of band instruments for the 54th Regiment, insurance receipts, and announcements concerning changes in Kinsley's mercantile partnership.

Series E Inventory and Biographical Notes

Box 143-1 This series consists of a preliminary, handwritten inventory of the collection, arranged chronologically and made prior to the deposit of the papers at MSRC. There are also handwritten biographical notes on some of the principal correspondents.

Container List

Series A Letterbook Correspondence

Box Folder

- 143-1 1 Letterbook, photocopy
2 Letterbook, original

Series B Correspondence

- 3 A-B
4 C
5 D-F
6 G-K
7 Hartwell, A.S.
8 L
9 Lenox, Charles W.
10 M
11 M
12 S
13 V-Wa
14 Wi
15 Partial Names
16 Unnamed
17 Envelopes

Series C Passes

- 18 Official passes issued to Kinsley, 1863-1868.

Series D Financial Receipts, Announcements

- 19 Receipts
20 Announcements

Series E Inventory and Biographical Notes

- 21 Inventory
22 Biographical Notes