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16 April 2021  
Interdisciplinary Photo Essay

### Conflicting Legacies of Freedom and Equality in the Boston Common



The Boston Common and the Back Bay area contain various statues and monuments, but the two that perhaps best represent the word “legacy” are the statue of George Washington and the Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment memorial. Washington was not only a general in the Revolutionary War, but a crucial part of winning American independence. As the first president of the United States, Washington navigated the country through the struggles of its early years. These deeds have cemented his legacy as one of America’s most revered figures. However, this is forever marred by his status as a slave owner. Washington subverted and corrupted the ideals he advocated for by engaging in the slave trade and owning a plantation. In the nineteenth century, the North and South grew increasingly polarized on the practice of slavery, ultimately breaking out into the Civil War. The Civil War saw the creation of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, one of the first African-American regiments in the military. This represents Massachusetts’s legacy from the Civil War: a state actively advancing the ideals they fought for. Still, it should be acknowledged that the white commander, Robert Gould Shaw, is depicted as riding above the regiment, signaling that racial equality was not yet achieved. Furthermore, the placement of these two monuments in the Boston Common, a public park placed in the center of Boston, expounds the conflicting legacies of the city as well. The statue of Washington represents Massachusetts’s status as a hub for colonial patriotism; in fact, the first shots of the American Revolution took place in Lexington and Concord. On the other hand, the memorial of the 54th Regiment demonstrates Massachusetts’s development as not only a prominent abolitionist state (home to Frederick Douglass and Charles Sumner), but as an integral place in the continuing fight for racial equality. The Boston Common itself was the location of massive protests in the summer of the 2020 following the death of George Floyd. While the United States has not always lived up to its expressed ethics, the contrasting legacies of the Washington and the 54th Regiment illuminate Massachusetts’s own legacy: a state steadfastly adhering to, and rectifying when violated, the central American ideals of freedom and equality.