

From the slave to the princess: The 2017 royal connection to 1864 Athens

By Rebekah Davis

Limestone County Archivist

On Aug. 22, 1864, a farmer named Joseph Betts made his way from his home in Gurley to Athens to join the U.S. Colored Infantry (USCI) stationed at Fort Henderson, just southwest of downtown Athens. Little did he know that these first steps in his fight for freedom would launch a journey that today finds one of his direct descendants reportedly soon to be engaged to Prince Harry of England.

The *Daily Mail* recently did some digging into the ancestry of Meghan Markle, the American actress who is dating Prince Harry, and they found that Markle's great-great-great-great-grandfather was Joseph Betts, who apparently was a former slave who joined the Union Army after the Emancipation Proclamation was passed in 1863. Betts' federal enlistment record shows that Betts enlisted in Athens with Company B, 106th USCI, on that August day in 1864.

The 106th USCI both provided reinforcements to the 110th USCI tasked with guarding Fort Henderson. These soldiers were primarily former slaves from Limestone County and surrounding areas, and many of them men stationed at the fort were the same ones who had built it in 1863, digging the trench around and reinforcing the walls of the five-pointed blockade.

Betts had been in Athens only about a month when Confederate troops led by Nathan Bedford Forrest rode into town on Sept. 24, 1864. After a brief skirmish and a bit of trickery in which Forrest made it appear that he had the Union troops outnumbered, Col. Wallace Campbell surrendered Fort Henderson. Betts was among the 900 men taken prisoner of war that day, according to his service record, and he was not heard from again until after the war. He was transferred to the 40th USCI in November, 1865, while still a prisoner of war, and he was listed as a deserter in Bridgeport, Ala., in February 1866. The handwritten record on that day states, "Nothing has been heard of him since he was captured and consequently he is [listed] as deserted." Betts mustered out on April 15, 1866, in Chattanooga, Tenn., still listed as having deserted in February, 1866.

The first time Betts shows up on the federal census records is after the war, when he was listed as a 51-year-old farmer living close to Gurley in Madison County, Ala. He and his wife Catherine, 45, had five children: Sarah, 19; Thaddeus, 17; Jacob, 14 (who was Meghan Markle's great-great-great-grandfather); Isaac, 11; and Genesse, eight. All but the eight-year-old were recorded as working as 'farm laborers' and none could read or write.

Before the Civil War, at least two slave owners with the surname Betts are enumerated in the 1860 Census for Madison County, and a record at the Freedmen's Bureau mentions 'Betts Plantation'. It is likely that Joseph Betts was one of the slaves who was not listed by name in 1860, like many slaves here in Limestone County who went on to be educated at Trinity School after the war. After being founded in downtown Athens in 1865, Trinity moved in 1908 to a new building inside the former Fort Henderson embankments.

Today, the United Kingdom is abuzz with the idea that Prince Harry's engagement to Meghan Markle is imminent. Meanwhile, here in Athens, the Athens-Limestone Community Association now owns the former Fort Henderson and Trinity School grounds, and the organization is ramping up efforts to build a memorial at Fort Henderson that will honor and tell the stories of the men who fought there... including one former slave whose great-great-great-great-granddaughter may very well soon become a princess.

Note: Some information for this article came from “EXCLUSIVE: Pioneering black professionals, Civil War soldiers, and immigrants from Prince Harry's England - meet Meghan Markle's ancestors as DailyMailTV reveals her extraordinary roots” by the Daily Mail.

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

Established: 1980

Staff: Archivist Rebekah Davis and Assistant Archivist April Davis

Location: 102 W. Washington St., in the 1905 L&N Passenger Depot

Hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

Phone: 256-233-6404

E-mail: archives@limestonecounty-al.gov

Web: www.limestonearchives.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/limestonecountyarchives