

3. THEMES, PEOPLE, AND EVENTS

and knowledge on his hometown and the people of color in Limestone County, Alabama, and the South in general. Bridgeforth graduated from Trinity School in 1894 and Talladega College in 1897. In 1901, he became the first known African American student to graduate from Massachusetts Agricultural College, now the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. While at MAC, Bridgeforth played football, was on the rope pull team, and a member of the College Shakespearean Club.



(Above) Massachusetts Agricultural College Football Team, 1901 (Bridgeforth in Rear Center)

George Ruffin Bridgeforth (1872-1955)

George Ruffin Bridgeforth was the son of former slaves George Bridgeforth and Jennie Andrews Bridgeforth. George Ruffin became influential in the African American community after obtaining an extensive education and focusing his influence

Bridgeforth joined the faculty at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in 1902. He later became the director of the Agricultural Department and left after Booker T. Washington's death. In 1917, he became the lead administrator of the Industrial and Educational Institute, also known as West Tuskegee, in Topeka, Kansas.

All the while, George Ruffin continued to ensure the stability of those

back home. In 1910, he and other members of his hometown community formed the Southern Small Farms & Improvement Company, of which he was the president. He was also Vice President of the Tuskegee Farm & Improvement Company. With these positions and financial backing, Bridgeforth and others went about securing land in Limestone County and elsewhere in Alabama solely for African American farmers. Throughout his career as an educator, Bridgeforth maintained and promoted the values of African American landownership. His efforts led to the creation of the Beulahland community in south central Limestone County, where several families,

including the Bridgeforths, continue to farm the land purchased 100 years ago.

George Ruffin Bridgeforth is buried next to his wife, Datie Miller Bridgeforth (1880-1971) in the Hine and Hobbs Street Cemetery in Athens. Datie's parents, Ella D. Miller (1860-1933) and Dan L. Miller (1855-1920) are also interred there. Additionally, of note, the George R. Bridgeforth House at 716 Browns Ferry Street near Trinity Episcopal Church has been bought by David W. Smith and Karen Jones Smith of the Royal Funeral Home and renovated. The history and influence of George Ruffin Bridgeforth continues.

The Bridgeforths have been a prominent African American farming and landowning family in Limestone County since the 19th century. They have been the subject of studies on African American landownership and the history of farming in the South, such as a 1990 Master's thesis by Nancy Anne Carden of the University of Tennessee entitled *A Study of Southern Black Landownership, 1865-1940: The Bridgeforth Family of Limestone County, Alabama*. This thesis focuses on the 25% of Southern African American farmers who were able to acquire land by 1910. Using the Bridgeforth family as a case study of particular success, Ms. Carden examines multiple generations from George Ruffin Bridgeforth to Darden Bridgeforth, who operates a farm in southern Limestone County today.



(Above) The Jubilee Singers, 1877 Patti Malone on the far left (Athens Limestone Community Association)

Patti J. Malone (1855-1897)

Patti Julia Malone was born a slave on Cedars Plantation in Athens. After the Civil War, she enrolled at Trinity School, which served children of former slaves and prepared them for Fisk University in Nashville. Both Trinity and Fisk were organized by the American Missionary Association. Ms. Mary Wells, principal of Trinity School, recruited Malone for a special fundraising venture: the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

The Jubilee Singers were a group of nine students chosen to tour and perform in efforts to raise money for the fledgling university. The first tour was a resounding success and raised over \$100,000 for the school. The group was disbanded but reunited on their own and toured for a couple of decades. Ms. Patti Malone debuted on January 14, 1878 in