

This Month in Clay County History: The Forresters - Clay County's First Free Black Family

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A long time ago, back in 1860, a census was taken in Clay County, Florida. Counted among the farmers, ranchers, merchants and others citizens of the county were a family of free African Americans, the Forrester Family. They were the only free African American family listed in the entire Clay County census at that time.

The patriarch of the family was a man named Cyrus. He was eighty-four years old, living on the south bank of Black Creek in a community called Magnolia. The land he lived on was his own. Cyrus Forrester purchased it from the government in 1853. His wife, Dorcas, and six of his seven children lived with him. Lewis Charles Forrester, Cyrus' son, lived next door on his own property. Cyrus owned cattle, pigs and chickens and had a total of forty acres under cultivation. His property, personal belongings, livestock, and farm implements were valued in excess of \$2,000. By all accounts, the Forrester Family was doing well.

Not much is known about Cyrus' early life other than he was born in the late 1770's or early 1780's. Where Cyrus was born is unclear as sources list his place of birth as Florida, South Carolina or Georgia, depending on which source you trust. Cyrus' life likely began as a slave of William Pengree. Records show a child named Cyrus listed in William Pengree's will as a thirteen year old boy worth \$200. Cyrus then belonged to Pengree's wife, Rebecca, then to John Forrester who was the son of John Forrester Sr., a partner of the trading firm Panton & Leslie. Rebecca and William Pengree's daughter married John Leslie. This is may be how Cyrus Forrester got his surname, from John Forrester of the Panton & Leslie Company.

Exactly how Cyrus Forrester gained his own freedom and that of his children is open for speculation. However, once achieved, it is clear Cyrus made the most of his freedom. In about 1840, Cyrus bought his children and their mother out of slavery. He had three sons, Lewis Charles, Isadore and George Elias Forrester. His daughters were Matilda, Therassa and Felecia. Dorcas is presumed to be the mother of these children. Lewis Charles Forrester was about fourteen years old when he was freed. Dorcas, Matilda, and Lewis were previously the property of General Duncan Clinch.

Over time Cyrus amassed a sizeable tract of land for his family and supported them well. As Cyrus neared the end of his life, he gathered his children near and instructed Lewis, as the eldest son, to take charge of the land. Cyrus' wish was that upon his death it be distributed equally amongst the children. Cyrus likely died sometime between 1860 and 1862. Where he is buried is unknown.

The Civil War impacted the Forrester Family in late 1862. Marauding groups of Rebel soldiers scoured the county, looking for former slaves to force into labor. When a group camped in the brush near the Forrester home, the family decided it was best to keep a low profile. As it was, Lewis' sister-in-law and three of her children had been kidnapped already and transported to Georgia. Thankfully, a family friend or "guardian" (most likely a white male) had secured their safe return.

One day, in fall of 1862, the Union gunboat USS Cimarron cruised the St. Johns River. She crossed paths with Byrd Millers' small boat. Byrd was married to Therassa Forrester, Cyrus' daughter. He told the Union sailors about the Rebel soldiers. The gunboat proceeded to shell the enemy encampment. Taking advantage of a way out, the Forresters packed hastily, taking with them little more than the clothes on

their backs. They also had \$311 in gold dug up from its hiding place in the garden. They boarded the Cimarron. During the night, their mother, Dorcas, discovered that she could not find the gold. It was never recovered.

The family was taken to Baten Island at the mouth of the St. Johns River. Located on the north side of the river across from Mayport, the island had become a refuge for free and "contraband" blacks. They stayed for eight weeks and then went further to Fernandina where they spent the balance of the war.

All three Forrester sons served the Union cause. George Elias and Isadore enlisted in the Navy and served on the Cimarron. Lewis Charles joined the Army. Isadore died during the war. His name is on the war veteran's monument in Green Cove Springs.

In 1867, the Forresters returned to Magnolia and found that their farm badly plundered. The cattle were gone along with all the other livestock. This resulted in Lewis filing a war reparations claim on his family's behalf. The Forresters were well respected in the community and had no trouble securing character references for their application. Among those who gave affidavits were Joseph Brooker, Samuel Hendricks, Clay County Deputy Clerk William Peeler, and other well-known members of the white community. The special commissioner in charge of Lewis' case, L.C. Moheison, found that "there can be no question of his loyalty; that he was as reliable and honest a man as there is in east Florida-white or black. His word is given full credence by everyone." Lewis Forrester was granted \$1,672.50 of his \$ 2,152 claim. On June 15, 1878, after fees were paid to attorney Samuel Niles, Lewis ended up with a measly \$480.

Lewis Forrester married Affa Gray on January 29, 1854. At that time they were not given a marriage license because according to Affa, "that was in slavery times and there was no license then but I was married by a man named Adam Fleming and he was an ordained minister."

Affa was a free-born woman whose family was from St John's County. After the war, she and Lewis were married again 'under the law' on December 17, 1868. According to Affa she has no license for this marriage because the courthouse burned down. She did have a certificate of marriage signed by the officiating minister, C.B. Simmons, and that sufficed for her pension claim. Lewis and Affa had two sons and three daughters: Anna, Susan, Mary Barbara, Lewis Franklin and David.

Lewis Forrester was an active member of his community. His name is found on the voter list in 1874 along with his brother George and nephew Charles, possibly George's son. Lewis served on a grand jury and also represented Magnolia on the Clay County School Board. His greatest achievement was his demand that teachers be paid their full salary, regardless of the students' ability to pay, so long as the school was reported favorably upon by the superintendent. Lewis' name is found on an 1873 petition he and his neighbors signed asking the County Commissioners to build a road. The proposed road was to be from Middleburg by Chalker's Ferry to Magnolia.

Records show that in 1874 taxes were assessed on Lots 3, 5, and 8, Section 28, Township 5S, Range 26 east. This was Lewis Forrester's land. He had two horses, six cattle and five hogs. His real estate was valued at \$364 on which he paid \$3.05 in taxes. Lewis worked as a carpenter, a farmer and a preacher. He became so debilitated from rheumatism and strokes that he was unable to walk later in life, but Lewis was not deterred. His work ethic was so strong that, even when unable to walk, he secured work he could do with only his hands.

On July 3, 1889, Lewis Forrester lay dying. Attended by Dr. Charles Merrill, Lewis died surrounded by his family and was later buried at Magnolia Springs Cemetery in Green Cove Springs.

Affa, now a widow, lived on with her children, daughters Mary Barbara (Barbary) and Susie, who married Miles Hines. Also residing there is Affa's nephew, Theodore Lycurgus, her niece Sarah E. Dunham (George Elias Forrester's daughter) and Dunham's daughter, Althea Dunham. Susie and Theodore worked as table waiters in a local hotel. Affa Forrester's neighbors were her family as well, sister-in-law Therassa (with six living children) and her brother-in-law George.

Affa, unable to support herself, applied for a Civil War widow's pension. She did not live long enough to collect. She died July 2, 1901. The petition was not granted due to her death. Affa is buried in the Forrester/Redmond Family plot in Mt. Olive Cemetery in Green Cove Springs. However, the deaths of Affa and Lewis Charles Forrester were not the end of the Forrester story. Their descendants and the rest of the Forresters still have their own stories to tell. They are represented well in Clay County history as Clay County's first free black family.

Lewis Forrester	84	m	13	Farming	2000	400	Fla x
Lucas	56	f	"				"
Jordan	20	m	i	Farming			Geo
Elias	19	m	i				Fla
Telesio	17	f	"				"
Maklida	14	f	"				"
Lewis Forrester	34	m	"	Farming		25	" x

1860 Clay County Census