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## **A Brief History of the Bridgeforth Family** by Pamela Bridgeforth

from a paper submitted July 16, 1987

From conversations with various family members, it became apparent that many of us were unaware of the size of the family. We knew other family existed, but had neither seen nor met them. Thus, the idea of a family reunion had its inception.

Our Bridgeforth family tree was initiated by the planting of two acorns in the 1840s, when George Bridgeforth and Jennie Andrews were born in Elkton, Tennessee (approximately 10 miles north of Alabama, where they later settled). Eventually the union of these two produced a mighty oak with many descendants.

Both George and Jennie were children of their masters. They were fortunate because they never had to work in the fields. Also, tutors were hired to educate them. In his early twenties, George joined the Union army and at age twenty-six, the Civil War ended. Rumor has it that George's master would and did give him eighty acres of land if he married Jennie. Next they moved to the Coperland Place in Limestone County, Alabama, located across the Tennessee River near Athens, and Decatur. Some years later they purchased 360 acres in Beulah Land, a community in Tanner, Alabama. This was a palatial estate. The plantation included a large colonial house and facilities to accommodate 60 to 75 slaves. Previously this property had belonged to a white slave owner. The house was a show-place in the South. This land is still owned by various family members.

During these years, nine children were born: Sarah, William Andrew, George Ruffin, Parthenia, Issac, William, Nancy, Betty and Bascom. All the children received a formal

education through high school. Issac received a Bachelor's degree in education from Tuskegee University. George Ruffin received his Bachelor's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1898 and later taught at Tuskegee University.

George Bridgeforth farmed more land than any other black agriculturalist at this time. Cotton was king and this was the farm's chief crop. George and Jennie would arise each morning at 4:00 a.m. George and his sons would tend to farming chores while Jennie and the girls would prepare a hearty repast. Then to work. George certainly had his hands full operating such a large farm, and Jennie was very busy maintaining their home and caring for her husband and children.

Jennie died in 1921, and George passed in 1923, after amassing quite a fortune. Their farm was worth approximately \$100,000: \$60,000 in cash and farm equipment, which was auctioned off for \$50,000. Considering inflation over the last 50 years, in 1987 dollars total assets would probably approach \$1,000,000.

Issac Bridgeforth met Ila Townsend while teaching school in Red Hill, Tennessee. Long before the death of his father, Issac moved back to Beulah Land and began farming with his father. Though his degree was in education, his success came from the trade that had been taught to him by his father. Issac and Ila survived the Depression and later prospered in the field of agriculture, thereby gaining the respect of blacks and whites alike throughout the area.

Issac and Ila had eight children: John, William Sousa, George Darden, Mildred, Evelyn, Christine, Omelia, and Helen. John died at a very young age. The rest of the children live quite comfortable lifestyles. George Darden has been wearing the title of "Cotton King" for approximately ten years now.

Issac died in 1961 and Ila passed in 1982. Most of the children moved north after finishing Trinity High School in Athens. Darden Bridgeforth & Sons now operate farms in Limestone and Madison counties.

Darden Bridgeforth married Elizabeth White and their union produced thirteen children: George Darden Jr., Ila Marie, John Henry, Paul, Diane, Olivia, Milton, Mitchell, William Sousa, Doris, Gregory, Debra, and Billy. Seven of the boys farm with their father. Billy graduated from Alabama A&M University and married Pamela Yvette Webb.

Billy is in partnership with his father and brothers. Billy has contributed his knowledge and expertise gained at Alabama A&M to help make Darden Bridgeforth & Sons successful. *Progressive Farmer*, which is a national magazine, says that Darden Bridgeforth & Sons is the largest cotton farming operation in the entire Southeast.

*The Bridgeforth family is apparently still going strong. Note the recent flyer from the family nursery appropriately named Beulahland Nursery.*