

## Fitzgerald, Robert George <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Fitzgerald, Robert George

by Marvin Krieger, 1986; Revised December 2021

**24 Oct. 1840–4 Aug. 1919**

See also: [Murray, Anna Pauline \(Pauli\)](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

Robert George Fitzgerald, soldier, farmer, educator, and businessman, was born to Thomas Charles Fitzgerald (ca. 1808–79) and Sarah Ann Burton Fitzgerald (ca. 1818–ca. 1889) in New Castle County, Del. Thomas Charles earned his freedom at age twenty-four in 1832. Robert Fitzgerald was born a freeman and attended the Ashmun Institute (1858), which became Lincoln University. Before that he had studied at the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth. In 1861, Fitzgerald served with Union quartermaster troops as a contract laborer driving a four-horse and six-mule team. The following year he was wounded and discharged. Subsequently, he enlisted in the Union navy and served on the bark *William G. Anderson* <sup>[3]</sup>, which patrolled from the Gulf of Mexico to the lower Mississippi River. On 15 June 1864 he enlisted in the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, Company F, where he served until the end of the war.

Concerned with the plight of the southern black, Fitzgerald went south to establish [Freedmen Bureau](#) <sup>[4]</sup> schools in Goldsboro and Hillsborough, N.C. On 8 Aug. 1869 he married Cornelia Smith, mulatto niece of Mary Ruffin Smith, a benefactress of [The University of North Carolina](#) <sup>[5]</sup>. Subsequently, he erected the largest brick structure in Durham, and joined with his brother, Richard B. Fitzgerald, in establishing the first African American bank (which became the [Mechanics and Farmers Bank](#) <sup>[6]</sup>) and Coleman Manufacturing Company, a cotton mill owned and operated by blacks. He also participated in the founding of an African American insurance company. In 1884, the Fitzgerald brick factory produced over two million bricks, and three Fitzgerald brothers participated in major construction projects in the Durham-Chapel Hill area until Robert's war wounds restricted his activities.

Fitzgerald gradually lost his eyesight and retired to the family home in the Maplewood Cemetery section of Durham. After his death, his six children moved to various sections of America where they contributed to science and literature.

### References:

[Fitzgerald Family Diary \(Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill\)](#).<sup>[7]</sup>

[Pauli Murray, \*Proud Shoes\* \(1956\)](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

### Additional Resources:

"Robert Fitzgerald." *OrangeNCHistory ~ Behind the Scenes at the O.C.H.M.* (blog). Orange County Historical Museum. February 15, 2013. <http://orangenchistory.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/robert-fitzgerald/> <sup>[8]</sup> (accessed March 4, 2014).

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### Authors:

Krieger, Marvin <sup>[17]</sup>

**Origin - location:**

Durham County <sup>[18]</sup>

Durham <sup>[19]</sup>

**From:**

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press,<sup>[20]</sup>

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[7] [http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/f/Fitzgerald\\_Family.html](http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/f/Fitzgerald_Family.html)

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