

Fitzgerald, Robert George ^[1]

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by Marvin Krieger, 1986; Additional research and revision by Alyssa Putt, NC Government & Heritage Library, August 2022

October 24, 1840– August 4, 1919

See also: [Murray, Anna Pauline \(Pauli\)](#) ^[2]

Robert George Fitzgerald, soldier, farmer, educator, and businessman, was born to Thomas Charles Fitzgerald (ca. 1808–1879) and Sarah Ann Burton Fitzgerald (ca. 1818–ca. 1889) in New Castle County, Delaware. Thomas was manumitted from enslavement at age of twenty-four in 1832, thus Robert Fitzgerald was born free from enslavement. He attended the African Free School in Wilmington, Delaware in his early years.

In the 1850s, Fitzgerald's parents purchased a 25-acre farm in Hinsonville, Pennsylvania and the Fitzgerald family -- including Robert's siblings, William Fitzgerald and Richard Fitzgerald -- settled in the the growing Black community. Fitzgerald's parents also invested in a local brickyard where Fitzgerald and his siblings learned brickmaking. In addition to learning the trade of brickmaking, Fitzgerald attended the [Institute for Colored Youth](#) ^[3] in Philadelphia and then studied at Ashmun Institute, the predecessor to [Lincoln University](#) ^[4].

The Fitzgerald brothers were involved in the Civil War even before the passage of the Enlistment Act in July of 1862 permitted Black men to join the military. Robert Fitzgerald cleared pathways for roads and bridges, transported horses, led mule teams, and worked as a cook in Union camps for \$26 a month. In August of 1862, Fitzgerald was shot by a sniper in Virginia and sustained a shrapnel wound in his eye that temporarily and totally impaired his vision. Fitzgerald regained his vision after receiving medical care in a hospital, but the injury and the shrapnel that remained in his eye led to lifelong complications.

After his time working alongside the Union army, he served in both the Union Navy and Union Cavalry during the Civil War. Fitzgerald enlisted in the U.S. Navy on July 19, 1863, only a few months after the U.S. military began recruiting Black and African American men. He served on the bark *William G. Anderson* ^[5], which patrolled from the Gulf of Mexico to the lower Mississippi River. In October of 1863, Fitzgerald again experienced impaired vision from the injury to his eye and was deemed unfit for duty. He was honorably discharged from the Navy on January 14, 1864. On January 15, 1864, undaunted, Fitzgerald enlisted in the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, Company F. He served as a private in the all-African American regiment until he was honorably discharged from service on October 4, 1864 due to complications from Typhoid and his vision impairment.

After the Civil War, Fitzgerald returned to his studies at the recently renamed Lincoln University. He then taught at the Freedmen's Chapel School located near Amelia Court House, Virginia.

Concerned with the plight of the southern black community, Fitzgerald went south to establish [Freedmen Bureau](#) ^[6] schools in Goldsboro and Hillsborough, N.C. On August 8, 1869 he married Cornelia Smith, the multiracial niece of Mary Ruffin Smith, a benefactress of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[7]. Subsequently, he erected the largest brick structure in Durham. 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 developed a vision impairment and retired to the family home on Carroll Street, adjacent to the Maplewood Cemetery in Durham. After his death, his six children moved to various sections of America where they contributed to science and literature. His grandchild, [Pauli Murray](#) ^[2] -- who was raised by Robert and Cornelia Fitzgerald and their daughter Pauline Fitzgerald Dame in their Durham home -- was a renowned civil rights activist, lawyer, priest, and gender equality advocate.

References:

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[Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes* \(1956\)](#). ^[2]

Robert G. and Cornelia S. Fitzgerald House: Pauli Murray Family Home 2016 Structure Report. Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice. 2016. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c65c2920cf57db461b27ed8/t/5f2ab7...> ^[9] (accessed Jul 6, 2022).

"Walking in Proud Shoes: Pauli Murray's Family Genealogy Story." National Museum of African American History and Culture, January 30, 2021. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/walking-proud-shoes-pauli-murrays-...> ^[10] (accessed July 6, 2022).

Additional Resources:

"Walking in Proud Shoes: Pauli Murray's Family Genealogy Story." National Museum of African American History and Culture, January 30, 2021. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/walking-proud-shoes-pauli-murrays-...> ^[10] (accessed July 6, 2022).

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