

# TIES THAT BIND

*“Eight of the nine enlisted on a single day”*



NICOLE HESTER | THE NATCHEZ DEMOCRAT

Deborah Fountain is a genealogical researcher and the author of the upcoming book based on her research, “Nine at Natchez: The Remarkable True Story of Nine Former Slaves From One Family Who Became Civil War Soldiers.”

## Researcher discovers history of Civil War veterans

**D**eborah Fountain has been digging up her family’s history, and her findings about nine Civil War veterans in particular have connected her to Natchez.

Though a Kansas City native and a longtime California resident, Fountain’s intense research yielded an intimate connection with Natchez.

Fountain, an avid ancestral researcher, is driven not just by her own curiosity, but also by a desire to help others.

“I do believe it is my life’s work and will likely be my legacy,” Fountain said. “My goal is to not only research and have a better understanding of my family background, but to also be a help to as many people as possible, to help them with their family research.”

Through Fountain’s work, she discovered an ancestral connection that tied her to Natchez. Fountain discovered she is a descendant of Claiborne Thompson, a member of the United States Colored Troops.

But the story does not end there — far from it. Because Thompson was part of a group of not two, not three, but nine family members who served for the Union at Fort McPherson in Natchez during the Civil War.

Fountain said the story begins with Mary Thompson, who was born at sea on a slave ship in approximately 1804. Down the road, Mary would bear multiple children.

Jumping ahead to July 5, 1864, approximately a year after the fall of Vicksburg, Mary’s descendants decided, nearly all at once, to enlist with the U.S.C.T.

“Eight of the nine enlisted on a single day,” Fountain said.

The group consisted of three of Mary’s sons, one son-in-law, four grandsons and one grandson-in-law, all of whom served with either the 71<sup>st</sup> or 70<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment.

Fountain said the group had lived primarily on plantations in Jefferson and Franklin Counties, putting their lives at risk by leaving those plantations to serve in Natchez.

Two of the nine, Mary’s son-in-law Madison Ford and grandson Monroe Ford, would lose their lives during the war.

Fountain said the discovery of her ancestral history has instilled feelings of great satisfaction.

“I would say it’s a feeling of accomplishment and a feeling of great familial pride,” Fountain said.

“Many times, the way the history has been taught or shared, many people, I believe, seem to have an idea that the Civil War was a war that was fought between the North and the South, the blue and the gray, but I don’t think many people felt that people of African Descent, that the actually participated in the actual war ... To be able to know that, yes, we had people who were a part of that group who self-emancipat-

ed by leaving their plantations and enlisting and serving ... I’m just elated.

“It just gives me a sense of deeper purpose to keep going and to try to find out as much as I can and to share that information with as many people as I can.”

Fountain’s research has taken her all over, visiting places like the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the Mississippi State Archives, and also the local offices of the Nations Parks Service and the Historic Natchez Foundation.

Fountain specifically thanked Jeff Mansell and David Slay of the NPS and Mimi Miller of the Historic Natchez Foundation for their help.

Mansell said Fountain’s dedication to her research astounded him.

“She is a dogged researcher,” Mansell said. “I found her story to be really fascinating and I give her lots of credit for not giving up, which I think a lot of people tend to do. I think she’s really stuck with it.”

One thing Mansell said shocked him was Fountain’s the discovery that an 1880 census document listed Mary Thompson’s place of birth as being at sea.

“I’ve never seen that before in my life, with the notice that the mother was born on a slave ship,” Mansell said. “That was nothing short of simply amazing for me.”

Fountain said studying is about more than simply genetics or physi-

cal attributes, but it also lends to a person’s character and personality.

“When you learn more about your family’s history, you’re actually learning more about yourself because it takes all of those people that came before you,” Fountain said. “That’s what helps make you who you are.”

Fountain’s studies have led her to write a book, “Nine at Natchez: The Remarkable True Story of Nine Former Slaves from One Family Who Became Civil War Soldiers.” The book is set for release in May 2018.

Fountain said she wants her work to serve as a means to inspire people to research their own family’s history.

“My hope is that hopefully this article will be an encouragement, especially to the people of the Natchez community. I know there are many people who have longstanding family ties to Natchez ... but many people have no idea that their family members, perhaps they served as well there at Fort McPherson.

Fountain said those wishing to see if their ancestors served with the U.S. Colored Troops could visit [www.afroamericancivilwar.org/about-us/memorial-museum-history.html](http://www.afroamericancivilwar.org/about-us/memorial-museum-history.html) to see the list of 209,145 names of the soldiers.

She also recommended visiting the NPS website, which contains a Civil War Soldiers and Sailors database, or visiting [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com) or [FamilySearch.org](http://FamilySearch.org) as a jumping off point for researching family history.

STORY BY DAVID HAMILTON | PHOTO BY NICOLE HESTER

## WE PRAY

for those presently serving in our military and remember those who have served with honor and courage.

## WE REMEMBER

those who gave their lives to defend our freedom.

MAY WE NEVER TAKE FOR GRANTED THE IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION THESE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN HAVE MADE TO THIS GREAT NATION.

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