

JOSEPH HALL BERRY

PATRIARCH OF THE BERRY/COLLINS FAMILY RECORD OF CONTINUOUS SERVICE

Surfman Joseph Hall Berry, USLSS was born on January 20, 1873, in Manteo, North Carolina. He enlisted in the U.S. Lifesaving Service, the predecessor to the U.S. Coast Guard, on February 1, 1902, at 29 years of age, serving at the historic Pea Island North Carolina station. Pea Island station records show that prior to enlisting, he served under Keeper Richard Etheridge as a "temporary surfman." Dorman Pugh, one of the crew members serving under Keeper Richard Etheridge when the heroic 1896 rescue of the schooner *E.S. Newman* occurred, was also the brother of his wife, Angenora (Pugh) Berry.

Given the closeness of the community and his own family ties to the Pea Island Station Joseph Berry was familiar with the practice the Life-Saving Service had of hiring locals like himself who were experienced farmers and fishermen.

Surfman Berry knew firsthand the important role that the Pea Island station played in the community. He also understood the significance of having an African American crew assigned to the station during his lifetime, once writing to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939 after he had retired asking for her help when it was rumored that station would be turned over to a white crew. This photograph showing him sitting in a chair was taken several years after he retired. The framed picture in the photograph is the only known picture showing him in uniform.



Shown also below is the letter he wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt on July 6, 1939 (appended to this bio).

Surfman Berry served at the Pea Island Station for 15 years before retiring on December 31, 1917, after sustaining a work-related injury while helping to lift a Beebe-McClellan surfboat onto a carriage after returning from a shipwreck. His enlistment began a longstanding record held by the Berry/Collins family of continuous service in the Coast Guard and its predecessor, the Life-Saving Service. His son, Chief Boatswain's Mate Maxie M. Berry, Sr., was the last Officer-in-Charge of the Pea Island station and served in the Coast Guard for 25 years. His grandson, Lieutenant Herbert M. Collins, spent much of his early career at the Pea Island station serving as a Surfman there for the duration of World War II. He was the last Surfman assigned to the station before it was decommissioned in 1947. After leaving the Pea Island station he went on to serve in numerous other shore and sea assignments, retiring on August 1, 1973, after spending 34 years in the Coast Guard, the longest period of any Berry/Collins family member. Also, Surfman Berry's son-in-law, Marshall C. Collins, was known to occasionally serve as a "substitute" at the Pea Island Station when temporary persons from the local community were employed there from time to time. Another grandson, Maxie Berry, Jr., served in the Coast Guard for 30 years — rising to the rank of Lieutenant Commander on September 1, 1976, while working in the Office of Civil Rights at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C., where he served as an advocate for minorities in the service. Surfman Berry also paved the way for numerous others in his family to enlist in the Coast Guard creating a remarkable record of continuous service by the Berry/Collins family for years to come. Following his footsteps, he had one son, fourteen grandsons, four great grandsons, and one great, great grandson to serve behind him. One of his great grandsons even married a fellow Coastee!

The Berry/Collins family legacy, led by the patriarch Surfman Joseph Hall Berry, is an important part of Coast Guard history.

(This information was provided by Joan L. Collins, the great granddaughter of Surfman Joseph Hall Berry based on her review of his U.S. Coast Guard file and her personal knowledge of the Berry/Collins family history.)



U. S. COAST GUARD

REC'D JUL 17 1939 By

ANS'D

Manteo, N. C.
July 6, 1939.

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt
White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

Since your recent visit to Dare County, and to Manteo, N.C. I have been moved to write to you briefly concerning a matter which I am satisfied your effective interest and participation would perfect the desirable solution.

My son-in-law, Marshall Collins, who is regular cook at the Goose-Wing Club where you were entertained on your trip is satisfied that you would be sympathetic toward our present efforts, to preserve for America its only Coast Guard Station, under the direction of an all-colored crew.

For more than thirty years prior to last year, or perhaps two years ago, Pea Island Coast Guard Station # 177, was conducted by an all-colored crew. Beginning with 1916 and earlier, it has been rumored that the plan was to gradually remove the colored men from the station and turn the station over to white men. From 1916 to 1937, such was only a rumor, but in 1937, what had previously been a rumor became a fact, that the dissolution of the only colored Coast Guard Station, was the planned program of the Government, when officially a one Mr. Scarborough was placed in Charge of Pea Island Station, replacing a colored man as Captain. This planned action was further strengthened when later a Mr. Hidgett a white man, was given a position as a member of the crew, increasing the white members to two.

What I would like to know is, is there anyway such an unfair, and unjust action perpetrated against a group of people who have always proven to be loyal to the Government, in times of peace as well as in times of war, and have maintained in this County and vicinity the reputation of being above the average in conduct and service, can be halted, thus restoring to the use of the colored men in America and particularly this County, the only all-colored Coast Guard Station in America?

I am not certain whether any congressional actions have been taken in the matter, but it would seem that such is possible since there are at present two white men at the Station and the possibility that others will be placed at the station soon. I am satisfied however, that in your desire, for the right thing to be done to all mankind irrespective of race or color, that you will be inclined to make whatever investigation possible, motivating the type of solution of the matter that will support our desires. We shall warmly welcome whatever you may find it convenient to do for us.

As a retired coast guard man, I have great interest in the work the men of my race have been able to do, and the hope that the work of thirty years or more by a group of earnest conscientious men, several of whom actually lost their lives in point of service for the Government at their post of duty, or certainly in connection with their duties. I had hoped that the discarded Bodys' Island Coast Guard Station, might be turned over to a colored crew, making two for America, and I still cherish such a hope. Our greatest interest, however at this time is the restoration

Mrs. Roosevelt-

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of the Pea Island Coast Guard Station to the capable colored men of America, who labored hard to build such an enterprise, and in many cases their sons are members of the crew today.

We further feel that it would not be fair to permit such an unjust, undemocratic thing to happen without at least resorting to any and every possible peaceable measure to prevent the transfer, and have the station turned back to the persons who have worked the hardest for its development.

Again I express my confidence in your principal of life and living, with justice in both hands for all subjects in America, and feel that you will give this matter your earnest consideration. I certainly thank you in advance for anything you may do for us.

Very truly yours,

J. H. Berry
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