Since the announcement of the impending marriage of Prince Harry of Great Britain to American actress Rachel Meghan Markle, there has been heightened interest in the genealogy of the bride. Much research has been accomplished for Miss Markle’s father’s family and several connections to English royalty have been discovered. However, the ancestry of Miss Markle’s mother, Doria Ragland, has been the subject of much speculation, misinformation and some rather casual genealogical research. The confusion is understandable to a degree because the Ragland family is African-American and for many years the history of African-Americans has been largely omitted and/or ignored in available official and genealogical records. This is an attempt to utilize historical documents to chronicle the amazing American journey of the African-American Ragland family.

Rachel Meghan Markle was born on 4 August 1981, in Los Angeles, California, the daughter of Thomas Wayne Markle and Doria Loyce Ragland. The couple married in Los Angeles on 23 December 1979. According to Doria’s half-brother the ceremony was held in a Buddhist temple officiated by “Brother Bhaktananda, a self-styled spiritualist and yoga teacher. Born in September 1956, Doria was 12 years younger than her new husband, a divorcé with two children. They had met on the set of the American TV show “General Hospital” where Doria worked as a trainee make-up artist and Thomas was a lighting director. The marriage ended in divorce in March 1988 when Meghan was just 6 years old. In spite of this setback and some ensuing financial troubles, Doria showed her strength and independence by returning to university and receiving her master’s degree in social work. She continues to teach yoga and provide social services primarily for the geriatric community.

Doria Ragland was also raised in a single parent home. Her mother, née Jeanette Arnold, was abandoned by her first husband Joseph Johnson, a professional roller skater. Shortly thereafter, she met Doria’s father, Alvin Azell Ragland. Ragland was an antiques dealer and former Baptist minister. Just months after Doria’s birth the family moved to Los Angeles in search of a better life. However, soon after their arrival in California, Alvin left the family. He served a brief stint in the military and opened his own antiques business called “’Twas New.” Although Alvin continued to have contact with Doria, he did not assume the responsibility of raising his daughter. That was left to Jeanette. Alvin married on 6 May 1983 to 29 year old Ava D. Barrow. He died on 12 March 2011 in Los Angeles.

Alvin Azell Ragland was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on 21 February 1929, the son of 22 year old Steve R. Ragland and 16 year old Lois Russell. The Chattanooga city directory for 1929 included “Stephen Ragland (colored)” as a presser for Liberty Dry Cleaning Company. He was living as a single man with his parents at 1021 Grove Street, but by the 1930 census Steve, Lois and young Alvin were in the household of Lois’ father, James Russell, a 61-year-old hotel porter. Steve’s occupation was again listed as a “presser” for a local cleaners. However, Alvin became one of the third successive generation of Ragland offspring raised in a single parent home. By the publication of the 1935 city directory for Chattanooga, Steve R. and Lois had divorced and she had remarried to T. Coleman Harper, a bellman at
the Northern Hotel in Chattanooga. The newlyweds lived with Lois’ father at 1159 West Terrace in a small shotgun style house valued for taxes at $25. This marriage also failed. According to the 1940 census Lois “Harper” was living as a single woman in her father’s house and working as a laborer for a dry cleaning company. Her 10 year old son Alvin used the last name of “Harper” even though T. Coleman Harper was no longer living with the family. The 1941 city directory showed T. Coleman Harper still employed as a bellman at the Northern Hotel, but living elsewhere. Alvin was listed as “attending school” in 1940, but by 1944 it appears that he was forced to drop out of school to help the family financially. Again using the “Ragland” family name, the city directory reported him working as a bus boy at the Hotel Patten Coffee Shoppe. His mother Lois changed jobs almost yearly working in various laundries around town.

Steve R. Ragland, Alvin’s estranged father, continued to live in Chattanooga at least until 1952. The Chattanooga city directories from 1944 through 1952 include him as manager of the Victory Pressing Club with his residence at 320 ½ West 8th Street. A “pressing club” was a uniquely Southern invention whereby individuals paid a monthly fee, usually $1.00, to have their clothing “pressed” when needed. Apparently, the Victory Pressing Club went out of business in 1952. Social Security record indicate that Steve R. Ragland left Chattanooga and lived for a time in North Carolina, West Virginia and Ohio, before moving to California where he died on 7 May 1983. He was buried in the Inglewood Park Cemetery in Inglewood, California.

According to Steve R. Ragland’s burial record, he was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on 8 April 1908, the son of Jeremiah and Claudie (Ritchie) Ragland. The 1910 census for Atlanta, shows “Steve R. Raglin” living with his parents on “Brennen Street” (Brannen Road) while his father worked as a porter in a local saloon. Interestingly, the entire family, including both parents, were listed as “mulatto” in the census. This racial designation was also used to describe the family in the 1920 census. After that date all African Americans were described simply as “Negroes” in subsequent census registrations without reference to their skin color or possible racial heritage. According to Wikipedia, in census records the term “mulatto” referred to someone of mixed white and black ancestry, but the available historical records show no evidence of any interracial mixing in the Ragland family extending back to the end of slavery in 1865.

Unlike succeeding generations, Steve R. Ragland grew up in a two-parent household. His father, Jeremiah (AKA “Jerry” and “Jerry Miah”) Ragland, was born in Henry County, Georgia, on 6 September 1882 or 1883 (his death record states 1883 while census information gives the date as 1882), the son of Steve Ragland and a woman named Texas. By 1902, Jeremiah had moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he found work as a bartender for “Lichtenstein & Hersowitz,” a saloon located at 110 Decatur Street which catered to Atlanta’s growing Jewish community. Jeremiah married about 1904 to Claudie (“Laudie”) Ritchie and continued to work as a porter for Lichtenstein & Hersowitz at least until 1910. By 1913 Jeremiah Ragland moved his young family to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he went to work for Julian Distilling Company, distillers of “Feldwood Kentucky Whiskey.” Family tradition has it that he was offered the higher paying position while working at the Jewish saloon. The future looked bright and Jeremiah was confident enough to secure a mortgage to purchase a small house at 620 West 10th Street in Chattanooga.

However, Jeremiah’s good fortune was short-lived. Julian Distilling Company closed its doors early in 1916 and Jeremiah found himself unemployed and unable to make the mortgage payments. Taking a leap of faith, he opened his own tailor shop at 215 East 9th Street in Chattanooga, one of only
two “colored” tailors in the city with competition coming from 28 white owned tailor shops. He kept the business open until 1918, but it was clear that he lacked the necessary skills to continue the business. In the February 23rd edition of the 1918 “Chattanooga News,” W. L. Marquet of 211 West 8th Street, placed a “help wanted” ad for “good pressers.” Marquet was the son of a French immigrant who settled in Chattanooga after the end of the War Between the States and was a tailor by profession. His business, “Marquet Dyeing and Pressing,” was the ideal place for Jeremiah Ragland to develop his abilities. The 1918 Chattanooga city directory included “Jerry Ragland, porter, W. L. Marquet.” By 1921, Jeremiah opened a new cleaning and tailor shop at 211 West 9th Street called “Liberty Dry Cleaning Company.” Perhaps the name expressed his status as a free and independent businessman, hopeful for the future. In the 1920 census for Chattanooga, he proclaimed himself proudly as a “tailor” with his “own shop.” In order to assist her husband with the family’s dream his wife Claudie went to work as a maid for Miller Brothers Department Store in Chattanooga. In 1935, Jeremiah formed the “West Side Pressing Club,” similar to the business operated by his son Steve several years later.

The family lived in a succession of rental houses until Claudia’s death in 1939. According to the 1940 census, after Claudie’s death Jeremiah lived with two of his daughters at his rented house at 1141 West Terrace. Obviously, the drive to succeed had been passed to their children. By 1940, their daughter Dora completed her education at Tennessee A & I College and was a teacher in the Chattanooga city school system while their daughter Lillie finished one year of college and worked as a restaurant cook. Interestingly, both Dora, the teacher, and Lillie, the cook, made annual salaries of $560 in 1940.

“Jerry M. Ragland” died at Walden’s Hospital in Chattanooga on 4 October 1944 after a 9 day bout with pneumonia. He was buried in an unmarked grave in Greenhill Cemetery. Even his death certificate reflected his independence. His daughter Dora provided the information and noted that her father was a “tailor” who worked “for self.”
Several entries from Jeremiah Ragland’s death certificate have led to some fantastic and erroneous genealogical assertions. According to the certificate, Jerry M. Ragland’s parents were Steve Ragland and Texas (last name “unknown”). These names coupled with the racial classification of the family in the 1910 and 1920 census returns as “mulatto” have led to some fantastic claims. The most outrageous was that Jeremiah’s mother “Texas” was a white woman named Texas Hendricks from Heard County, Georgia. There was a white woman named Texas Hendricks who was born in Heard County in 1853, the daughter of John and Elizabeth Hendricks. However, Texas Hendricks married Charles James and is listed in the 1880 census for Heard County along with her husband. The couple moved to Calhoun County, Alabama, where they were included in the 1900 census. Texas Hendricks James died in Georgia in 1937.

The 1900 census for Henry County, Georgia, presents more clues to the identity of Jeremiah’s parents. In 1900, Stephen “Raglan,” born about 1850 in Georgia, and his wife “Ellin” lived on a rented farm adjacent to the Clayton County border, just 5 miles from the town of Jonesboro. According to Jeremiah Ragland’s death certificate, Jonesboro was his birthplace. The census included two children in the household of Steve and Ellin (AKA “Ellen”) “Raglan,” a son named Henry and a “grandson” named Jerry (Jeremiah) Raglan, born about 1881 or 1882. An examination of the 1870 and 1880 Henry County censuses reveal that Steve and Ellin “Raglin” also had a daughter named “Texas” Ragland who was listed as age 12 in 1880 and as 2-year-old “Anna” in 1870. “Texas Anna” (AKA “Texanna” in later records) Ragland was missing from the household in the 1900 census. It appears that she moved to nearby Atlanta, Georgia, where she married Cosby Berry Smith on 26 September 1892.
1880 Henry County, GA Census listing Texas Raglin as the daughter of Stephen Raglin

1900 Henry County, GA Census listing Jerry Raglan as the grandson of Stephen Raglan

Marriage of Texas Ragland and Cosby Berry Smith 25 September 1892

A more logical explanation of the parentage of Jeremiah Ragland is that he was the son of then 14-year-old Texas Anna Ragland by an unknown male. Since Jeremiah was raised from a child in the household of his grandfather Stephen Ragland, it is likely that Jeremiah considered him to be his father.
One genealogist went so far as to suggest that Jeremiah was the result of an incestuous relationship, but no supporting evidence has been uncovered to support such a claim. Further proof of the identity of Texas Ragland who married Cosby Berry Smith is found in her death record. She and her husband Cosby moved to California about 1905, where she died on 26 January 1962. Her birthdate was recorded in her burial registration as 6 September 1868 in Georgia and her mother’s maiden name was given as “Lemons.” According to Henry County, Georgia, “colored” marriage records, her father Stephen Ragland married Ellen “Lemons” in Henry County on 18 August 1869. Although described as a “mulatto” in later census records, Jeremiah Ragland was listed as a male black in the 1900 census. His mother Texas as well as his grandparents Steve and Ellen Ragland were also described as black. However, it is a possibility that Jeremiah’s biological father was either a mulatto or a white male.

In any case, the grandparents of Jeremiah Ragland were Steve and Ellen (Lemons) Ragland of Henry County, Georgia. In the 1870 Henry County census, “Stephen Ragland,” age 22, black male, was living with his wife Ellen, their son Charlie and their daughter [Texas] Ann, age 2. This was the first U.S. census that included the names and ages of former slaves. Significantly, Stephen Ragland and his family were living on the farm of Mary Ragland, age 60, a white female with real estate valued at $3,000 and $1,500 in personal property. Also living on the farm was a black male “A. Ragland,” age 40, and his wife “Vinny.” According to Henry County marriage records, “Anthony Ragland (colored)” married Viney Merritt on 25 July 1867. Living next door to Stephen and Ellen Ragland were Charles and Mariah Lemons, the parents of Ellen.

Mary Ragland was the wife of Lemuel Ragland, the only white slaveholder by the name of Ragland listed in the 1860 slave schedules for Henry County, Georgia. In that year he recorded the ownership of 23 slaves and 5 slave houses. Although only the ages and genders of the slaves were listed in the schedule, his holdings included one male age 12 (Stephen Ragland) and one male age 33 (Anthony Ragland).

Lemuel Ragland was a wealthy cotton farmer who was born in Chatham County, North Carolina, on 20 May 1807, the son of William and Sarah Ragland. He married late in life, not until 19 August 1852, when he wed Mary R. Jackson in Henry County. The couple had no children, but they did take in an orphaned relative, Robert W. Ragland, prior to the 1860 census. The family plantation house, located near I-75 in Henry County, was a modest, comfortable dwelling, but certainly not a “Gone with the Wind” type mansion. In the 1857 Henry County tax list his 20 slaves and 800 acres of land were valued at $17,950, over $500,000 in today’s money.
Lemuel Ragland, although too old to serve, was a strong supporter of the Confederacy during the War Between the States. His ward, Robert W. Ragland, served as a private in the 9th Georgia Infantry in the Confederate Army. He fought in the battles of Yorktown, Frayser’s Farm, Malvern Hill, 2nd Manassas and Fredericksburg before succumbing to typhoid fever near Richmond, Virginia, on 13 June 1863.

Although most of his family members moved away from Henry County, Georgia, Stephen and Ellen Ragland remained. The 1920 census for Henry County included the aged couple continuing to rent property and grow cotton near the town of Stockbridge. However, Stephen Ragland died on 30 or 31 October 1926. In most instances the genealogies of African-American families ends with the “brick wall” of slavery, Nevertheless, Stephen Ragland’s death certificate provided enough information to continue the family’s genealogical journey. At his death Stephen listed his parents’ names and Richard (AKA “Dick”) and Mary Ragland. Not only were the names of his parents listed, his burial place was also included. Stephen Ragland was buried in the Red Oak United Methodist Church Cemetery located at 3894 Walt Stephens Road, Stockbridge, Georgia, just 4.9 miles from the town of Jonesboro. Nearby are the graves of his wife Ellen (Lemons) Ragland, died 5 March 1924, and son Charlie Ragland, born 29 April 1870, died 9 May 1945.
Grave of Stephen Ragland (1848-1926), Red Oak Methodist Church Cemetery

GEORGIA DEATH INDEX 1914-1927

Name: Steve Ragland
Birth Date: abt 1848
Birth Place: Georgia
Death Date: 31 Oct 1926
Death Place: Paulding
Death Age: 78
Race: Black
Ethnicity: American
Gender: Male
Father Name: Richard Ragland
Mother Name: Mary Ragland
FHL Film Number: 2364269

Fortunately, much information about Stephen Ragland’s father, Richard (AKA “Dick”) Ragland, can be found in surviving records of the white Ragland family. Sarah (Williams) Ragland, the mother of Lemuel Ragland died in Henry County in 1847. Her will, written 13 July 1847 and proved 2 November 1847, left her slaves to her children. To her son Lemuel she left “a Negro man Dick about fifty-five years old” and other property.
Will of Sarah (Williams) Ragland, 1847, giving “Negro man named Dick about fifty years old” to her son Lemuel Ragland

This important document confirms that “Dick” was a slave of Lemuel and his mother. It also sets Dick’s birthdate at about 1792. The father of Lemuel Ragland was William Ragland, Junior, a North Carolina Revolutionary War veteran. He died in Henry County on the 22nd of March 1836. His will was written on 16 April 1830 and proved on 2 May 1836. In this document William left slaves Dick and Anthony along with 5 other chattels to his widow. In a codicil dated 5 February 1831, William directed that Sarah’s property be transferred to Lemuel upon her death. This document mentioned both Dick and Anthony and raises the possibility that Anthony was an older brother to Stephen Ragland.

Successive census records extending from 1790 through 1840 indicate that William Ragland, Junior, and his son Lemuel held slaves as early as the first American census in 1790. The family lived in Chatham County, North Carolina, until the 1820 census and moved soon thereafter to Henry County, Georgia. In 1790, William Ragland, Junior, owned 7 slaves, but by 1820 his holdings had increased to 23 chattels including male slaves of the right age to have been Dick Ragland. In 1860, Lemuel Ragland owned a black male aged 65. It is assumed that this was Dick, but he did not appear in the 1870 census.

There are two additional possibilities that extend the Ragland family lineage even farther back into our country’s history. “If” Dick Ragland was a slave of the white Ragland family since birth that means that he was born in Chatham County, North Carolina, about 1792. “If” Dick was born a slave of William Ragland, Junior, there is one additional document that possibly identifies his parents. On 26 March 1788, William Ragland, Senior, the father of William Ragland, Junior, wrote his will in Chatham County, North Carolina. William Ragland, Senior, left “to my son William Ragland the negroes Bena and Tabb (Tabitha) with her increase and my Buck Horn Tract of Land whereon he now lives together with thirty acres of Land off the new survey [sic] ….” Of special interest is the name of the male slave “Bena.” According to “The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation” by John F. Parker, Jr., “Bena” was an African name typically retained only by native Africans. In particular, “Bena” was a name used by the Fanti (Fante) tribe of the Akan people to identify a person born on Tuesday.

“If” Dick Ragland was born the slave of William Ragland, Junior, about 1792 in North Carolina it is likely that his father was “Bena,” an African of the Fanti (Fante) tribe. The traditional homeland of the Fanti (Fante) people comprises the present country of Ghana and adjacent areas of Ivory Coast. Therefore, based on the available evidence, the family tree of the African-American Ragland family “might” look something like the following:

RAGLAND FAMILY TREE

Bena Ragland born bef. 1770 Ghana/Ivory Coast and Tabb (Tabitha?) ___?___
Richard “Dick” Ragland born c.1792 Chatham County, NC and Mary ____?____
Stephen Ragland born 1848-1850 Henry County, GA married Ellen Lemons

Texas Ann Ragland born 1868 Henry County, GA and ____?____

Jeremiah Ragland born 1881-1882 Henry County, GA married Claudie (Laudie) Ritchie

Steve R. Ragland born 1907-1908 Atlanta, GA married Lois Russell

Alvin Azell Ragland born 1929 Hamilton County, TN and Jeanette Arnold Johnson

Doria Ragland born 1956 married Thomas Wayne Markle

Rachel Meghan Markle born 1981 Los Angeles, CA