

Who were the Melungeons of the US South?

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Introduction

Speaking of his ancestry, Lincoln once humorously remarked, “I don’t know who my grandfather was, but I am much more concerned to know what his grandson will be.”

The Melungeons are a people mired in the past. These are people lost in plain sight in the history of the United States. This is a story of a people moving from being unknown in the fabric of society at large, yet rising to national prominence and recognition. The Melungeons are a people identified through genealogy, family stories, legends, legal records, and scientific investigation. Their origins are as mysterious and exotic as the history of people themselves. Who are the Melungeons of the US South?

The Melungeons are considered lost people in the life and lore of American History. Their very existence is steeped in mystery and controversy. They have been an enigma in American History. Are they the lost peoples of America?

Will Allen Dromgoole, of Nashville Tennessee, educated as a lawyer but forced to turn to writing because women could not be lawyers in the 1800’s, wrote a series of articles for “the Nashville Sunday American” and “the Boston Arena” between 1890 and 1891 about her discoveries concerning the Malungeons. She was not the first to put in print information about the Melungeons but was the most read in her time. Her accounts of her personal visits to the mountains of Tennessee were unfortunately very derogatory and derisive to the very people who helped her understand their culture and their times. Her articles depicted the Melungeons in an extremely negative light, enraging some east Tennessee politicians, and resulted in her not being reelected to the Tennessee Senate position of engrossing clerk (a senate clerk who monitors and

vets the bills between houses). As a result, she then moved to Waco Texas to become a teacher and to continue writing. (18:92)

Dromgoole reported that a Tennessee politician when asked “what is a Melungeon” replied: “A Melungeon isn’t a Negro, he isn’t an Indian, and he isn’t a white man. God only knows what he is. I should call him a democrat, only he always votes the republican ticket.” (18:93)

According to the earliest legends after the revolutionary war, Melungeons were born of a devilish mixed marriage on a high bald knob in Appalachia. Lively and wild and full of deceit, the mixed offspring were called “children of perdition”. The phrase “children of perdition” means they came from unblessed and therefore uncivilized unions, common law marriages – the only way mixed race couples could marry. Even before the Melungeons became a lost colony, black and white storytellers just a hop, skip and jump from the nation’s capital were scaring children with Melungeon bogeyman stories – “be good or a Melungeon will grab you”. (20:85)

The Melungeons

This is the backdrop for our inquiry on the Melungeons of the US South. What of the term Melungeon? How is it defined and explained?

The name Melungeon has been considered denigrating and truly repugnant to those it represents. The Melungeons have lived a life separate from the rest of the communities in which they lived. They have been maligned, persecuted, and victims of discrimination.

If we reach back in time we find that “Melungeon was originally an epithet, which implied more than a mixed-ethnic heritage; it meant one who is sneaky, disreputable, poor, ignorant, and untrustworthy – at least in the eyes of the people who used it.” (18:254)

The genesis of the name Melungeon is truly mired in mystery. There are multiple accounts to its origin. Yet, only in the records of Tennessee and Virginia does the name appear.

A “proposed theory for the origin of “Melungeon” is the Afro-Portuguese term *melungo*, supposedly meaning “shipmate”. Yet another is the Greek term *melan*, meaning “black”. Author Brent Kennedy, in arguing a Turkish origin for the Melungeons, maintains that “Melungeon” derives from the Arabic *melun jinn* and the Turkish *melun can*, both pronounced similarly to “Melungeon” and both translating to “cursed soul” or one who has been abandoned by God.” Was this clearly a reference to the condition in which the people found themselves? (18:6)

“The definition of the word Melungeon has always been a bit vague. Scholars, journalists, and even Melungeons themselves disagree on who is and who is not a Melungeon. Some anthropologists have limited the term to a few families located near Newman’s Ridge in Hancock County, Tennessee traditionally considered the home of the Melungeons. More recent researchers have expanded “Melungeon” to include settlements of people related to the Hancock County group who migrated elsewhere in Tennessee and in Kentucky and Virginia.” (18:3)

“However, whites who live near Melungeons knew exactly who was and who was not a Melungeon. “Melungeon-ness” was based on family affiliation: Melungeon family names included Collins, Mullins, Bunch, Bowlin, and a few others. Not everyone with a “Melungeon” name was considered a Melungeon by neighbors, however. The definition was very subjective, with lots of gerrymandering for particular individuals. Thus the definition of a Melungeon was anyone whose neighbor referred to them as such.” (18:4-5)

“How did they come to America? Their ancestors suddenly appeared in Tidewater Virginia nearly two centuries earlier. “In 1619, the first Africans, 20 men and 3 women, were imported to Jamestown, not as slaves but as indentured servants. At this time, slavery did not exist in Virginia.” (12:83) These first Africans were part of a group who were taken prisoner in a battle between the Portuguese and the African Ndongo tribe and then transported on a Portuguese slave ship “St. John the Baptist”. That ship was intercepted by a pirate ship and the 23 Africans were subsequently transported to Jamestown. (4:18)The land of the Ndongo was Angola in Africa.

As the stigma of a mixed racial heritage dimmed in the late 20th century and was replaced by a sense of pride, interest in the genealogy and history of the Melungeon people was born. With the advent of the internet and popular press, the story of these people has become larger than life, with their ancestors being attributed to a myriad of exotic sources: Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony, Ottoman Turks, The Lost Tribes of Israel, Jews, Gypsies, descendants of Prince Madoc of Wales, Indians, escaped slaves, Portuguese, Sir Francis Drake's rescued Caribbean Indians and Moorish slaves, Juan Pardo's expedition, De Soto's expedition, abandoned pirates and Black Dutch, among others. Melungeon families themselves claimed to be Indian, white and Portuguese. (12:1)

“In 1848, to escape racial prejudice, the Melungeons altered the story. Their ancestors became “Portuguese pirates”. Some truth was there: Angola was a colony of Portugal so their ancestors were Portuguese, not ethnic Portuguese but Angolan subjects of Portugal.” (4:20)

As having Melungeon heritage became desirable and exotic, the range of where these people were reportedly found has expanded to include nearly every state south of New England and east of the Mississippi, and in the words of Dr. Virginia DeMarce, Melungeon history has been erroneously expanded to provide "*an exotic ancestry...that sweeps in virtually every olive, ruddy and brown-tinged ethnicity known or alleged to have appeared anywhere in the pre-Civil War Southeastern United States.*" (12:1)

In east Tennessee, however, History was to take a different course, partly from a combination of circumstances arising from the overwhelming Scotch-Irish and English ancestry of the settlers and the Negro slave question. Among the Anglo-Saxons of East Tennessee, a Melungeon would be noticed. If a section were race conscious already, it would make them stand out even more. Couple these factors with greed, and you have the situation as it must have existed in the 1830's, the Tennessee Constitutional Convention of 1834 succeeded in declaring the Melungeons “free persons of color”. Where they had been “free persons”, they became “of color, two words which deprived them of their rights to hold property, to vote, and to even sue in court. White settlers of the area proceeded to move onto their lands. The Melungeons headed for the hills and became a band of marauders. (16:3-4) This sounds reminiscent to the trail of Tears experienced by the American Indians whose land was taken from them in the 1800s as they were forced to move west.

In the 20th century Melungeons experienced further discrimination. Forced sterilization and segregation was imposed on members of the population who did not meet the social norm. In 1932, the “Plan for Peace” proposal offered by Margaret Sanger was established to weed out and isolate those with unwelcomed hereditary traits. (20:110-111) The Melungeons were among the people defined possessing such traits.

Another alarming “official” response to the Melungeons came in the 1920’s. Dr. W. A. Plecker, first chief of Virginia’s Bureau of Vital Records, determined to permanently “mark” all Melungeons, and those “claiming” to be Native Americans or Mexican, as non-white, in state records-and to trace them should they try to relocate. Plecker had enacted through the Virginia Legislature “An Act to Preserve Racial Integrity” which mandated that people with more than 1/16th of Indian, Melungeon, Malay, West Indian, East Indian, Mongolian, or Negro blood were prohibited from marrying a “white” person, this law being retroactive. All birth, death, and marriage certificates were to be forwarded to his office for the Plecker certificate to be attached.” This law was rescinded in 1967. (7)

“The Melungeons were thought by most to have at least some African-American ancestry. American popular thought in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century subscribed to the “one drop” rule expressed often by Southern novelist Thomas Dixon: “One drop of “Negro blood” makes one a Negro”. “Blood” referred not to the bodily fluid but to all aspects of one’s genetic background. In many cases, the law considers tri-racials black; they attended segregated

schools, and were drafted into the military as blacks.” (18:12) Melungeons established their own schools.

The term “tri-racial”, used to describe populations with Native American, African American, and white European ancestry, is “not a description of an individual’s DNA; but rather it is a description of a community,” Paul Johnson, former corresponding secretary and Vice President of the Melungeon Heritage Association, said. In isolated locations, people white, black and Indian were able to intermarry. By living that way, they become outlaws or outcasts who were not living according to the rules of the society around them.

“In 1946, William Gilbert presented the first comprehensive survey of tri-racial groups in the US”. (18:19)

Gilbert lists ten major tri-racial groups with several related groups. They include:

1. Brass Ankles and allied groups in South Carolina including Red Bones, Red Legs, Turks, Marlboro Blues, and others.
2. Cajans and Creoles of Alabama and Mississippi.
3. Crotans of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia
4. Guineas of West Virginia and Maryland. (Other names include “West Hill Indians” and “Cecil Indians”)
5. Issues of Amherst and Rockingham Counties, Virginia
6. Jackson Whites of New York and New Jersey.
7. Melungeons of the Southern Appalachians.
8. Moors and Nanticokes of Delaware and New Jersey.

9. Red Bones of Louisiana.

10. Wesorts of southern Maryland.

In addition to their uncertain ethnic background, Gilbert notes that “These small local groups seem to develop especially where environmental circumstances such as forbidden swamps or inaccessible and barren mountain country favor their growth”. (18:19)

Most information about the Melungeons is based upon family lore, legend, local history, court cases, census, and family genealogy. Roberta Estes and others have worked to provide another method to define Melungeon ancestry and history. Her tools were both a historical timeline for Melungeon movement and habitation as well as DNA analysis including, Y-line, Mitochondrial and Autosomal DNA. (12:36)

While Y-line testing gives a direct view into the ancestral source of the Y-chromosome, hence the paternal (surname) line, and mitochondrial into the ancestral source of the maternal line, autosomal DNA testing functions differently. (14)

Autosomal testing tests the DNA inherited from all of one's ancestors. Each individual inherits half of their DNA from their mother and half from their father. Grandparents each contribute about 25% to each grandchild, but not the same 25%. Which DNA gets passed to each child in each generation is a function of how the DNA is combined, and each child inherits differently from each parent. (12:36) (15)

Ancestors double in each generation, so you carry a little more than 1%, on average, of the DNA contributed by each of your 64 great-great-great-great-grandparents born about 1800. (12:36)

For both genders, mitochondria DNA is inherited only from the mother. Men have their mother's mtDNA, but do not pass it on to their offspring. Women have their mother's mtDNA and pass it to both their female and male offspring. (13)(14)

The results of DNA tests not only tell us about genealogy, they also tell us about deep ancestry, known as genetic anthropology or population genetics, and identify an individual's deep ancestral clan. This is how we determine whether a participant tested is of African, Asian, Native American or Indo-European descent for the particular surname tested. (13) (14)

An article called the "Melungeons, A Multi-Ethnic Population, by Roberta Estes, Jack Goins, Penny Ferguson and Janet Lewis Crane, first defines the Melungeon Population study group, then uses Y-line, mitochondrial and autosomal DNA to evaluate Melungeon ancestry in conjunction with existing documentary records. (12:1)

This is where it becomes difficult for some to understand the approach of the researcher - historian, anthropologist and genealogist. The researcher depends upon records, family trees, and scientific evidence. The non researcher may depend more heavily upon family lore and legend. Estes and others took a scientific and genealogical approach by bounding the groups based upon discernible evidence. Lore and legend are a great way to start the search but other analysis and evidence is required to complete it. Estes defined what was to be her core group.

The criteria she and her research team established was that “In order for a surname to be included in the Melungeon DNA projects, at least one historical record must exist stating that this family was considered to be Melungeon during the 1800s and early 1900s in Hawkins and Hancock Counties of Tennessee or adjacent areas.” The 15 surnames included Bell, Bolin, Bunch, Collins, Denham, Gibson, Goins, Goodman, Minor, Moore, Mullins, Nichols, Riddle, Sizemore and Williams. (12:22) (15) (9)

“The list of Core Melungeon families was taken from multiple historical resources, including the 1830 census, Lewis Jarvis records, court records, tax lists, Plecker’s lists, Droomgoole’s articles, the Shepherd Case, the 1880 census, voting records, Eastern Cherokee Indian Applicants, Rev. William Humble’s correspondence, William Grohse’s records as well as other records.” (12:22-23)

Their project results stated that “The DNA evidence alone suggests a strong African component in the Melungeon heritage. This evidence is corroborated by a multitude of historical documents for many families. Of these families with African Y-line haplogroups, all of them are found in Louisa County Virginia before the migration south and west began. Hanover County was the parent of Louisa County and many families are found there as well, associated with other Melungeon core families beginning in the 1600s.” (12:83)

“While there is plenty of evidence supporting African heritage both genetically and through historical records where the various families were referenced as “of color” in some fashion, there is absolutely no evidence that any of the Melungeon ancestors were enslaved.” (12:87)

“If the Melungeon ancestors with African Haplogroups were never enslaved, and we know they were not in the 1750s and some were free as early as the 1650s, it is certainly possible that they were imported between 1619 and 1642 as indentured servants with Christian names due to the Portuguese custom of baptizing slaves before departure from Africa. In 1642, the Portuguese abandoned the slave trade to the English and the Dutch and slaves no longer arrived having been baptized, eliminating any possible claim to freedom based on Christianity.” (12:87)

“Given the proven Native ancestry families to the Melungeons combined with cultural styles that are perhaps suggestive of a maternal culture, Native or African, via illegitimacy, one would expect to find Native or African mitochondrial DNA. However all mitochondrial DNA to date has been European. This was not expected given very high levels of consanguinity and intermarriage within this group from at least the mid 1700s through the mid-1900s.” (12:98)

“The great majority of families that lived in Hawkins and then Hancock County, Tennessee, that is, the classic Melungeon area, can using standard genealogical evidence, be traced back through a migration pattern that came either through central North Carolina and then western Orange County and Wilkes County and into that area or through southwestern Virginia - Montgomery and Grayson County, and in to Hancock County. “ (18:208)

What people most wanted to know was whether or not their ancestors were Melungeons. This is extremely difficult. Kennedy states: “There is no paper trail.....There is no paper to say ”This person is a Melungeon, this person is a Lumbee....” In the case of the Melungeons, often people were trying to hide that identity. The last thing they were going to do was get it written down on a piece of paper.” (18:215)

Brent Kennedy similarly to Roberta Estes selected a Melungeon DNA study and chose those for his genetic study who had known Melungeon ancestry. These people were those who knew of their biological kinship with families that had been labeled “Melungeon” in the past. Since, the term Melungeon was used primarily in Hancock County Tennessee, and Lee, Scott, and Wise Counties in Virginia, the subjects chosen for the DNA study were descended from families in that geographical area.” (18:233)

“The DNA results show that the Melungeons as a group are definitely tri-racial. While nearly all Melungeons have been willing to accept the idea of Indian descent, the notion of African ancestry has been an anathema to many, particularly in the years when African Americans faced state sanctioned segregation and discrimination.” (18:240)

“In short the DNA study indicates today’s Melungeons are primarily of European Descent with some Native American and African American ancestry. The Melungeons are by no means uniform in their genetic background; they are a mixed-ethnic population with varying degrees of mixture within the population.” (18:240)

The DNA studies have created a stir in the press. The controversy centered on an AP article written by the Associated Press regarding the study entitled “DNA reveals Melungeon origins”. “In the core Melungeon area of Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, “the general response was, there’s really nothing new here,” Paul Johnson said of reactions to the study. “The affirmation of African-American ancestry was made by Melungeons to outsiders as far back as the 1890s and in 1848.” (18:182)

A 1963 article in the Nashville Tennessean Sunday magazine, Louise Davis wrote “Melungeons like many of the other citizens of Hancock County (Tennessee), have broken out of the rigid trap of a region that has never had a railroad and only a few highways to lift them over the fierce barrier of the mountains until recent years.” There has been an exodus of Melungeon people from Hancock County elsewhere to find jobs and homes. A 1964 United Press International article echoed this view with the headline “Melungeon line almost extinct.” (18:182)

Where have all the Melungeons gone? “A former teacher asserted that education played a part in the disappearance of the Melungeons: once they had a college education they seldom come back. They go to Chicago, or other distant places where they can get good jobs and nobody will ever call them Melungeon.” (18:182-183)

In 1969, The University of Tennessee and Carson-Newman College developed an idea to increase the economic viability of Hancock County, the poorest County in the state. The only assets they could find were the beautiful scenery and the Melungeons. The community with the help of Dr. John Le Weldon of the Carson-Newman College drama department developed the idea for an outdoor drama based upon a 1942 novel published in 1965 by Kentucky author, Jesse

Stuart, called “Daughter of the Legend”. Outdoor dramas were major players at the time in the US with other productions like “Unto these Hills” and “Trail of Tears” both involving the Cherokee Indian experience. The playwright Kermit Hunter who authored both of those plays took the basis of Stuart’s story to develop a drama entitled ‘Walk toward Sunset.’ The drama is a three part story. Part one is about the origins of Melungeon people and tells the story of the movement into Appalachia because of prejudice and avarice of others. Part two tells the story of a white young man, after the civil war, who falls in love with and marries a Melungeon girl despite the culture of the time. Part 3 tells the story of the coming together of the entire community because of a small pox epidemic. The drama pulled together the fabric and diversity of the Melungeon Culture. (18:192-193)

The drama invigorated the community and provided a vehicle for both community and Melungeon pride. Many people were proud to recognize their Melungeon heritage. The play ran for 6 years. Many tourists flocked to Hancock County and enjoyed the production and the introduction to the history and lore of the Melungeons. The county enjoyed the increase in revenues, jobs, and publicity. It was a true boon to the county.

The missing Melungeons appeared with a new pride and focus on their heritage. Melungeons claim Abraham Lincoln through his mother Mary Hawes (5) (18:214), Elvis Presley (9) (19) (18:214), and Tom Hanks (Melungeon Website) as fellow Melungeons. The Melungeon Heritage Association among others arose to bring together the dispersed Melungeon people and capture the family stories as a part of the greater Melungeon heritage. Television interviews, books, Internet information, reunions and genealogy sessions are today focal points for the discovery of

Melungeon heritage and culture. Allen County Public Library sponsored a workshop on the Melungeons in August of 2012. Roberta Estes, Jack Goins and Wayne Winkler, Melungeon researchers, were among the honored presenters. The Melungeon story did in fact come to Fort Wayne and Allen County.

Conclusion

“The Melungeons, as a people, are walking toward sunset. Most of Melungeons who features branded them African American long ago have assimilated into that population. Those with primary Indian and Caucasian features have intermarried with whites for so many generations that most have lost any distinguishing characteristics.” (18:257) Yet the Melungeon culture has now found a new dawn of inquiry, pride and family ties associated with being Melungeon and found their place in the rich and diverse history of the United States. The Melungeons are among us as friends, neighbors, co-workers and perhaps even family. The Melungeons have moved from the darkness of yesterday into the light of history today.

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