

## **Episode 2: Transcript**

**Guest Beverly Scarlett:** District Court Judge and Author, Beverly Scarlett, shares her personal journey in discovering her Melungeon ancestry which began with a mysterious family photo and later developed into her deep genealogical family research which has inspired her new book due out this summer.

**Lis Malone (Co-Host):**

Welcome to Melungeon Voices podcast. I'm your cruise director, Lis Malone, here once again with the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Heather Andolina. Heather, how are you today?

**Heather Andolina (Host):**

I'm doing very well. How are you, Lis?

**Lis:**

I look forward to any excuse to get to talk to you again, Heather.

**Heather:**

I know.

**Lis:**

It's called social distancing people.

**Heather:**

We're staying safe.

**Lis:**

So for this week's episode, you had a very interesting conversation with a fascinating woman, Beverly Scarlett. So I'm sure everybody is dying to know a little bit about our new friend, Beverly.

**Heather:**

Yes, Lis. Beverly Scarlett is a district court judge and author with over 36 years of genealogical research, into her Harris family history. Her book, The Harris Family of Orange County, North Carolina: 318 Years of Black American Indian Culture is due out this summer for direct purchase from Lulu Publishers. All proceeds from her book will benefit the nonprofit, Indigenous Memories. During our discussion she shares her personal journey in uncovering her hidden roots, which later helped to shape her future writing.

**Lis:**

Great. Let's take a listen.

**Heather:**

Hi, Beverly.

**Beverly Scarlett (Guest):**

Hello Heather.

**Heather:**

The first question I have for you is that you have a very fascinating story on how you got interested in researching your ancestry. Can you tell us what happened?

**Beverly:**

Yes, Heather, I'm very happy to share that story. I was actually packing to go away to college and I was literally just digging in my parents' attic to find anything I could take and place on my dorm room. I came across a portrait of a person that appeared to me to be an Indian man. I took the portrait down stairs to the kitchen where my mother cooked and I asked her, "Who is this Indian man? And why are you hiding an Indian in the attic?" I got a very short curt response that was unlike my mother or my experience with my mother. That essentially said, "That is not a man. That is my grandmother, put that back and don't ever touch it again." And of course that caused me to want to know more. And after I went to college and earned my mother's trust, of course, I went to St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, which is a historically black college. And got exposed to a lot of black culture that I hadn't been exposed to black writers.

One in particular, Charles Chesnutt. My favorite story, I think it's *The Wife of His Youth*, but it's a story about a man in slavery and he escapes and his wife never remarried and she looks for him. And of course she eventually finds him. Doesn't recognize him. He has a very different life and is about to propose to someone else. But more importantly, the story gets in to the stratification within communities of color because his wife was a very dark skin lady and he is a very fair person. So that just intrigued me. I wanted to know more about my family because I knew from family reunions that we went from the lightest light to the darkest dark, and nobody ever talked about the color variation. We weren't allowed to. So eventually I earned my mother's trust and she started to talk, but that's how it all began.

**Heather:**

Beverly, that is a very fascinating story. I love that story. So how, or when did you learn about the Melungeon people?

**Beverly:**

That is very interesting. So I learned of the Melungeon people... It's actually been fairly recently, I would say within the last five or six years, just following up on my mother's story and preparing to write the book that I've written. I knew that I live in a tri-racial isolate, but it's one that people don't talk about probably don't know about. So I was Googling, tri-racial isolates one day and the story of the Melungeon people came up. And of course you read one story and it's fascinating, you follow another link and you follow another link. And then I end up with the Melungeon Heritage Association and I told my mom about it. And she was like, "Yeah, let's go ahead and join." So I immediately enrolled myself, my mother and my daughter.

**Heather:**

That is wonderful. Well, that leads me into my next question, which is about your book, *The Harris family of Orange County, North Carolina: 318 Years of Black American Indian Culture*. In your book, you do discuss the Harris family, but you also discuss other Melungeon families like the Collins's as well. Can you tell our listeners more about your family ancestry and its connections to the Melungeon people?

**Beverly:**

Yes. I am happy to share that. So part of my process of verifying my mother's stories, of course it wasn't that I didn't believe my mom. But probably because of my employment, I have to be able to verify. But I, of course, joined ancestry.com and I followed the lead of my great grandmother's name. And it took me a while to find my great grandparents on the census. Because they had Sally's husband Frank, listed as black. Sally listed as a mulatto, but they didn't have them listed as being married. And now I have more information. I totally understand why. And especially in light of people like Walter Peckler and the eugenics movement, although that comes later is just the way people view people. And everything was based on color, but following these leads and I find Sally living in a household at the age of 13 and the head of the household is Alan Collins, his wife, Elisabeth Collins.

And then there is... I'm trying to remember. I know there's Nancy, but there's a daughter. Yes, Nancy. I can't remember her maybe Strayhorn. I can't remember her name right now at the top of my head. And then there is a child and then there is Nanny Collins and then Sally Ray. Sally Ray is the only mulatto in that household, according to the census. So I follow up on Nancy and I find where Nancy had been married. I find that her husband was killed. The young person in the household has a name as the husband and I did the math. And it's very likely that he is the son of a former spouse, not Nancy. So I started looking at the ages and the head of the households, the oldest son, it comes right on down to Sally being 13, but nobody explains why this one mulatto. And this is before the civil war, so she is living in this household with alleged white people.

I have a relative in Hampton, Virginia that put me in contact with Scott Collins. So, I emailed Scott several times, we formed a good relationship and he started to tell me about the history of the Collins's, and he says, "Beverly," he says, "We're mixed race people and said is very likely that Allen passed as white. So he could help other people." And lo and behold, as I pull up other census reports on Allen every 10 years as somebody else different in his household. And so I said, "I believe Scott is absolutely right." So, from there, I journey to our state archives in Raleigh and I get Orange County's first tax rolls, and there are Collins and Gibbons. And of course, I know the story about Vardy and Buck because I've read that online.

I did more digging and found out that Vardy of course bought land there in Tennessee, but he also had a lawsuit in the Western part of North Carolina. I figured out that based on my research and my math and I'm not a mathematician, so it may not be exactly correct, but it's close enough. I think that Vardy had land in what is now Tennessee, but used to be in the far Western portion of North Carolina. That's where his lawsuit is filed because he can only file in the state where he has land or some other form of standing. And of course, most of the people coming into North Carolina came via Virginia straight down, not far from where I currently live now, and then they walked across. So that's how I made the connection.

**Heather:**

That is so cool. I myself have Collins and Gibson in my family. So when I read that in your book, I was like, this is really cool. It helps me with my research as well. So thank you so much.

**Beverly:**

Well, thank you. That's exciting to hear. The other fascinating piece is that when we look at the numbers year wise, they sound so, so, so very long ago. But if you think about generation wise and people age and having children and grandchildren, it's really not that long ago.

**Heather:**

No, you're right. It isn't. It isn't. Beverly, were there any surprises for you while you were doing research on your family?

**Beverly:**

Yes. There were several. So the most noted surprise for me was learning about a cemetery that is literally stone's throw from where I live. I must admit the cemetery is not referenced in the book, but it will be in volume number two. It is a cemetery of my family mainly, so I thought at the time I wrote the book. I thought my mother's father's side of the family. Well, I've learned since writing the book, that is her family, my mother's mother's family, my mother's father's family as well. But the cemetery has native American and African Americans buried in the same spot. The reason I know there is a clear definition in the markers. They're all rock, but you can clearly see what's river rock. You can clearly see quartz river rock. One of the more recent burials, which would be my mother's father's grandfather, he actually has a tombstone. I think he was interred in 1909 or 1910. He lived to be 106 years old.

But he actually has what we would consider a headstone and he's at the back. So if, when you look at the front is just a sea of beautiful river rock, field rock, and it's fascinating. So I'm trying to learn more about this little tri-racial Isolate. Another surprise was learning that the Indian trading path that typically follows what we know as interstate 85. It actually veered and came right along where I live. And that is St. Mary's road. It pretty much hook you... Let's see something that people would recognize is the area of Stagville plantation. And it brings you right to Hillsborough. But just before you get to Hillsborough, it makes a sharp left, goes down. What is now Pleasant Green road and connects to I85. Now this trading path in the area of where I live today was actually the road to the Catawba nation. So there was a lot of trading with Europeans, Indians. It all happened right here along this road. I was just like, "Oh my goodness." That's one of the surprises, but also the most fascinating thing ever.

**Heather:**

That is very fascinating. Do you feel that you're finished researching your family ancestry or is there still some rocks to be looked under? So this was your mother's side. Have you looked at your father's side?

**Beverly:**

Yes and yes, I will continue to research. I know this is just my view, but I think I have the good fortune to be living upon and raised upon land that is so rich with culture that we could dig for years and not learn at all. I grew up on a tobacco farm. So of course, part of that farming meant churning the land, churning the land, churning the land. I remember as a child, my mother was what we call the arrowhead magnet. She just walk out in the field after it's been plowed and she'd have a handful of arrowheads and my sisters and I would be looking and we might find once over five or six years is she get this go find

them. And she told me the land had always been rich in arrowheads, and that is what she and her siblings used as currency.

They would be able to purchase candy a little five, ten cent toys. So there is so much more research to be done here. And additionally, I mentioned in the places section of my book, two prominent plantations that are along the road where I live now. One is Hard Scrabble Plantation, and that was a plantation that was actually owned by a very wealthy man who had worked in the North Carolina legislature prior to the civil war. And of course, once war broke out, his plantation went belly up pretty quickly. But then there was also the Lipscomb Plantation and a lot of my mother's relatives were connected to both of those plantations. Number one, the Lipscomb Plantation, my mother's uncle actually worked that plantation. His wife worked that plantation. And then Hard Scrabble Plantation, I still have a relative that lives on that land now. But the uncle at Lipscomb's ended up being the keeper of that plantation till he died and then his son kept it.

So now the grandson is just living there. They made it a housing development, but he's just living there. So there's a whole lot more for me to learn and dig. I'm very excited about it. I am going to do a second volume that will be focused also on my mother's father's family. And as to my father's family, this was an interesting thing to find out. And that is my mother and father are I think, fourth cousins. So my dad is connected to the cemetery, the indigenous cemetery, where we have native Americans and African Americans buried together. So my parents grew up seven miles from each other, though they did not know each other until they were introduced at church. So it's just lots of information. My dad's family has always been along the Eno River. And of course we have a lot of native American culture along the Eno River, but for some reason, in my dad's family, they never embraced any amount of their native American heritage. You'd have to pin them to the wall for them to even admit it. And then they may get tight-lipped. So they only embrace their African American heritage.

**Heather:**

That's interesting. What was it like for you upon learning about your Saponi ancestry?

**Beverly:**

Earlier, I spoke about my mom's family having such color variation. There's color variation and hair texture variation. I mean they look just a beautiful, fascinating rainbow. So, I knew compared to most of my dad's family, that something was different. I also knew something was different, just starting out and separate and unequal schools. All the colored kids went to school together and later transitioned to be black kids, but we all went to school together. But my mother's family just had so much more color variation. So I knew there was something there, but my mother would not talk about it until she was much older. As a matter of fact, when we go to my mom's family reunion, my sister and I would always laugh and say, "We're going to the United Nations meeting." Of course, we never told her that, but that was our joke among ourselves.

And for me, I always wanted to know more. Once I could empower my mother and she started to talk, it became a mission for her. And once we enrolled in the Saponi Nation of Ohio, my mom became very excited about it. And up until the point that she could not physically attend the cultural meetings anymore, my mom went and she was excited to go. So it's one of those things that we've come into later in life. And when I questioned my mother about it, she told me, she said, "We always knew." And said, "There were certain people in the community that knew." Said, "But other than that, if you acknowledge any Indian heritage, you would be hurt or killed because there were not supposed to be any more Indians around here."

**Heather:**

Well, Beverly that was very interesting. Do you have any words of wisdom for our listeners who may find a mysterious photo in their attic?

**Beverly:**

Yes, I do. Inquire, ask, research delve and don't ever be afraid. This has been the most wonderful, most empowering journey for me. I think particularly given the state of racial politics in the USA right now. I think the more we dig and find out who we are and find out we really are blended. It would be easier to have conversations that we think are tough conversations. They're really not tough conversations. We just need to have them. One thing I can say about the south eastern part of the United States, it will be rare to find somebody who's 100% anything other than human beings. So explore, research. Humanity itself is such a wonderful thing. I consider people just a portion of a beautiful flower garden or bouquet, and we all have a part to play. We're more beautiful. We're all in this thing together. So think, research, ask the questions, and don't ever give up.

**Heather:**

I love that Beverly and I wholeheartedly agree with you 100%. Beverly, I just want to say a big thank you for you being on our podcast, Melungeon Voices. Hopefully we will see you next year, where you will be able to do a presentation at next year's Union.

**Beverly:**

Heather, thank you so much. And thanks again for allowing me to participate. Joining the Melungeon Heritage Association has empowered me. I love the journey and I'm willing to do whatever I can to help. So, thanks so much.

**Lis:**

You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA executive committee. We'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at [melungeon.org](http://melungeon.org). That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N.O-R-G. The information, views, and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. All rights are reserved.<sup>1</sup>

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