

## **Episode 4: Transcript**

**Guest Paul Johnson-** Author and retired Library Director, Paul Johnson, shares insight into his research on Sarah Stanley Grimke and her connection to several mixed ethnic members of a distinguished Coastal Carolina plantation family, as well as Paschal Beverly Randolph and his possible connection to President Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.

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

Welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. I'm your cohost, Lis Malone, on this wondrous journey, and I'm here with the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Ms. Heather Andolina. Heather, once again, it is truly a pleasure to be joining you on the podcast.

**Heather Andolina (Host):**

It is a pleasure to be with you as well, Lis.

**Lis:**

Don't worry, the check is in the mail for the nice words for me. This week you had a conversation with Paul Johnson. And for anyone who may not be familiar with his work, can you share a little bit about him with the listeners?

**Heather:**

I sure can, Lis. Paul Johnson is an author, editor, publisher, and retired library director. His book, *Pell Mellers: Race and Memory in a Carolina Poquoson* is available on Amazon. In my interview with Paul, we discuss and explore his recent work, the *Sarah Stanley Grimke Collected Works*, which entails research into several mixed ethnic members of a distinguished coastal Carolina plantation family.

**Lis:**

Let's take a listen.

**Heather:**

Hi Paul.

**Paul Johnson (Guest):**

Hi, Heather. Great to hear your voice.

**Heather:**

Good to hear you too. Tell us about your unique family heritage that you discuss in your book, *Pell Mellers*.

**Paul:**

I discovered in three successive stages, things that I never was told as a child growing up in South Norfolk, which is now part of Chesapeake, Virginia. The first was when I was in graduate school as

a librarian in training and took a class in genealogical research and was told to go home over spring break and find the oldest living relative on each side of your family and ask them a series of questions. The first question that I asked my oldest paternal relative was "What do you remember about your grandfather?" Her answer was, "There was a trunk in the attic that we grandchildren were forbidden to ever open, so of course we did, and the only thing inside was a blue uniform." Then, I started finding out about my own lineal ancestors having service in the North Carolina Infantry US, that is, they were Union soldiers, but I didn't pay much attention to anybody else's ancestors.

It wasn't until 20 years later that I really got into genealogical research. I recognized that all these kids, I was rubbing shoulders with in school that had these names from Bertie County in the same area, were all these people who had fought for the Union or rather whose ancestors had. The community I was in was like a reincarnation almost of this Unionist enclave from the 1860s and '70s, which a lot of people had fled to urban industrial jobs to escape the farm.

The third thing that I found was that there was another layer beyond the community being Unionist, which is that in the colonial era, a lot of these families were defined as mulatto, even though they were all white in every census from 1790 on. It was like, there's this layer of we were all fighting for the Union together and there's a layer of, there's this mixed ancestry in the colonial era. Then, there's this 20th century layer of political exile and we're not even going to talk about our Unionist heritage because it's very unpopular. When I finally encountered Melungeons, I just resonated from the point of view of a political minority, more than an ethnic minority, and yet the ethnic aspect underlay the political aspect.

**Heather:**

That is so interesting. And it brings me to my next question. How did you learn about Melungeons or the Melungeon Heritage Association and how did you become involved?

**Paul:**

I was completing the research that became my book, *Pell Mellers* in 2007. Lynn, a librarian friend alerted me to the fact of Lisa Alther's forthcoming nonfiction book about her own past called *Kinfolks: The Search for My Melungeon Heritage*. And before I even got the book, I went to a National Genealogical Association Conference in Richmond, where I saw the Melungeon Heritage Association board members, president, vice president, treasurer, all lined up at a booth and talked a lot about how I was seeing similarities and resonances about secret family history. And nobody really knows who the ancestors were and everybody has lots of stories. And I saw on that table, a book called *Legal History of the Color Line* by a Frank W. Sweet, who ultimately became my publisher for *Pell Mellers* and ended up going to several unions and just meeting lots of terrific, wonderful people through MHA, including many of the people who have written about this subject.

And I will say the people apart from the scholars, just the people who are looking for their ancestors, the thing I find in common with MHA members and visitors is that we all have stories about Indian ancestors and we all have either DNA evidence, or other historical evidence of African ancestry. And many of us have stories about lots of other possibilities, but nobody can ever find the Indian ancestor or the African slave ancestor. We are all facing multiple brick walls of mulatto's or free people of color. And you can't get past it to find out what's the story except through DNA. And so it's been fascinating to connect with Melungeon descendants using DNA to try to get through some of their brick walls.

**Heather:**

You know, Paul, that's a really good point because that's what my family with the Gibson and Collins has run into, and you're right. We've been running up against a lot of brick walls with the Indigenous or African ancestors. And that's a really good point.

**Paul:**

The first Melungeon Union at which I was a speaker had the shocking surprise to me of having another speaker there who was also pursuing Bertie County ancestry roots. And he, his name is Todd Beckham, and he is your predecessor, is a Melungeon filmmaker, having worked with the Bertie documentary that came out in 2013. Well, Todd is a Collins descendant in Bertie County and of Melungeon Collins's in Tennessee, who found out that there is a DNA connection between a man named Henry Bunch and his ancestor Valentine Collins, which shows some kind of Melungeon connection between the Bunch's and the Collins's that belongs in Bertie County.

And what blew me away about this is that Henry Bunch, who was the progenitor of this Melungeon DNA Collins, was the owner of land that was purchased in 1792 from his heirs by my triple great grandfather, John Butler. And my family cemetery for the Dunlows and an adjacent one for the Johnsons are there on that land. So, the very place I was going to, to do my research, had this historical significance to Melungeons, which nobody knew about at the time until Todd came along with his DNA.

**Heather:**

Get out. So how do you feel about DNA as far as trying to find Melungeon ancestry? Do you think it's very important?

**Paul:**

I think there are two aspects of DNA research that are just absolutely indispensable and have been very constructive. That is the family finder aspect where you can get through a brick wall, but you can't get through by paper, by finding out who your cousin is and getting to the common ancestor. And I've seen so many people figure out so many things with that, that it's worth the money if you don't pay any attention to any of the rest of it. I also think that the Y and mitochondrial tests give us pretty solid, reliable historical evidence. On the other hand, having spent surely over a thousand dollars getting the various ancestry composition results from various companies and getting results that are all over the map, literally, and they change every time you go back and look, I don't trust any of that. And I think it's led a lot of people into a lot of arguments about old world ancestry when it would have been much more productive to figure out how we're all related to one another in the new world, which you can do with the other aspects of DNA.

**Heather:**

Gotcha. No, I see exactly what you're saying. So tell us about your most recent research into Sarah Stanley Grimke. And what is the significance of your findings?

**Paul:**

I got into studying about Sarah, not because of the mixed ethnic heritage of the family that she married into, but because I'm a librarian and even my academic scholarship has had a lot to do with figuring out mysterious literary sources and who wrote this and is it fiction or nonfiction? And that's... With Madame Blavatsky and Edgar Casey, I was working with that. And Sarah is another example where

she was only published posthumously in book form a couple of years after her death. But her main claim to fame really was being the anonymous collaborator of a pseudonymous author. And as you get into her family history research, you realize that both of these people were hiding their identities for reasons of family scandal and controversy. And in Sarah's case, she was a very idealistic young daughter of an abolitionist clergyman from the North who went to Boston and became one of the earliest female graduates of Boston University in 1878, met and married a man who had been an enslaved South Carolinian of a very prominent aristocratic family.

His name was Archibald Grimke. Now the interesting thing about why Archie, which I'll call him henceforth, was in Boston is because he had two aunts who were very celebrated abolitionist firebrands, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, the oldest and youngest daughters of this wealthy planter family who defied Charleston society and the authority of their parents, and the disapproval of everyone around them, to first become Quakers and then become abolitionists and then go up North and never set foot in South Carolina again. So they're these wonderful heroines of feminism as well, because both of them had a lot to say about that subject. And they discovered in the early 1870s, they read a newspaper story about these two young men named Grimke, who were distinguishing themselves in a scholarly way at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. And Angelina, the younger of the Grimke sisters wrote to them thinking, "There's got to be some connection to my family."

And he wrote back and said that he and his two brothers were the sons of their brother, Henry Grimke, who had been dead for some years at that point. Well, any other Grimke sister, the ones in South Carolina, would just have been horrified and never communicated again. But these abolitionist ladies were intrigued and said, "We want to make things right to you. We want to help your education." And they both ended up at Harvard. So this is why Sarah, my Sarah, the second, meets and marries Archie. They have a daughter that they named Angelina, but the marriage breaks up after a few years, basically over a lot of issues, but racial antagonism and conflict had a lot to do with it. And then even after they break up, Sarah wants custody of the daughter, but three more years later, she sends her back to the father saying, "She's too dark. Everybody's ostracizing her. She's really got to live in a black community because it's scarring her the way people are looking at her and talking to them."

So, Angelina Grimke... And there is a point that I'm coming to about all this... Definitely you look at her, very beautiful, very talented, looks like a black woman in every picture you see, and yet she's one of those cases where seven of eight great-grandparents was European and only one African. So really knowing what we know about the way things usually turn out the luck of the draw was that Archie and Sarah's daughter would be somebody who could pass and stay with Sarah, but she didn't. And this brings up all these traumas in Melungeon history where families split up over color because some people get more discrimination than others and the white ones abandon the darker ones.

So that is a very sad element of this. And yet Angelina ends up so much better off because her Uncle Francis, who is the minister, very well respected of a prominent African-American Presbyterian church in Washington, and his wife, Charlotte Fordham Grimke had been childless because the daughter they had right around the time Angelina was born, died in early infancy. So she becomes a surrogate daughter to her uncle and aunt during a period where her father becomes a diplomatic representative to the Dominican Republic and goes away to Santo Domingo for several years of her teenage life. So just a tremendous family. He was a founder of the NAACP. The sister-in-law was a free black, fairly wealthy woman who after the Civil War, decided to go South and become a school teacher in the Sea Islands, helping the Freedmen and has written about it.

So, I've grown to love every member of this family, even Sarah, who broke the hearts of her husband and daughter, because there's things to love about all of these people we do research on. But I must say ultimately, it's the daughter, Angelina Weld Grimke, there's all this energy from both lines. She

writes lots about politics in line with her father and the aunts and everything, but she also writes, is mostly a poet and a playwright. And she has this airy, mystical quality, but very much what we see in Sarah Stanley Grimke.

So that's how I got fascinated. I keep using the phrase going down a rabbit hole because every book I've ever written has had this quality of you never realize how far you're going or where you're going. You're just chasing evidence.

**Heather:**

Wow. That is so fascinating because I can remember in school learning about Sarah and Angelina Grimke, but never learning about their nephews and the extended family. That is really fascinating.

**Paul:**

One of the truly fascinating and horrible aspects of it is that the father tried to do the right thing and instructed in his will, that his... This was not a mistress in the sense that she was on the side. Rather he was widowed when he took up with this enslaved woman. But he tried to make it so those boys would be well taken care of. But his white, older son who was half-brother to Archie and his two brothers immediately said, "I don't care what that will said. I'm enslaving you now." And he did. And two of them ran away. Archie managed to stick it out. So there was just tremendous... And then of course, when the aunts in South Carolina find out about this, I think that has something to do with why they were bending over backwards to help them... Because they had been so grievously harmed by their half-brother. Montague was his name. And it just sounds like something, a Montague would do.

**Heather:**

Absolutely fascinating, very much looking forward to when you do the full presentation at next year's Union. So tell us also about Paschal Beverly Randolph and how he is significant to mixed race studies.

**Paul:**

One of the most intriguing connections to me is that he takes this name Randolph, even though apparently only the best evidence is a father named Randon, R-A-N-D-O-N. Better evidence that his mother was free black, but allegedly born in Vermont, which on the one hand makes you think that, "How many black people of any kind were there in Vermont?" But on the other hand, any ones that were there were free because they were the first state to abolish slavery. But then he said he had Virginia Randolph ancestry. And to me, a lot of this reminds me of the Jefferson Hemings saga because Thomas Jefferson's oldest bi-racial son, by Sally Hemings, was named Beverly Hemings. Thomas Jefferson's mother was a Randolph. Thomas Jefferson's daughter, Martha AKA, Patsy, married a Randolph. Therefore his grandchildren were... So apart from what if this guy was just making this up? Probably because he liked the sound of the name, but at the same time, probably there's some kind of family connection that he would even want to make this claim.

So, both the Beverly and the Randolph sound interesting in terms of the mixed ancestry, but more interesting or more Melungeon like is that he definitely acknowledges aristocratic European as well as African American ancestry. Very emphatically claims Native American ancestry. Talks about it to some extent, but also claims Iberian and Middle Eastern. If you looked at Randolph's ever-changing ethnic self-identifications, it's like a catalog of everything that was ever said about Melungeons during

the same time period. And yet his life is entirely lived in the North. So remains mysterious how much connection he has to Melungeons genealogically.

And yet one thing that I encountered frequently enough when working with MHA is the mixed ancestry folks in the Northeast have a lot in common with the ones in the Southeast. And even as far away as Nova Scotia, you meet people of mixed appearance with tri-racial heritage that once you start comparing notes, the stories sound similar. So I think Randolph is probably an example of a tri-racial New Yorker who doesn't know a whole lot of truth about his heritage, but has heard all kinds of stories. And he's just repeating all the stories he's heard growing up and throwing in a few of his own. That's the impression I get. And to me, that resonates tremendously with what Melungeons were saying about themselves at exactly the same time period.

**Heather:**

It sure does, Paul.

**Paul:**

Well, it is a great pleasure to me to pursue somebody who has been completely forgotten. So I'm not into spiritualism in terms of wanting to go to a seance and talk to the spirit of a dead person, but I am into it in the sense of really wanting to bring people back from the dead, but doing it in a literary way rather than through a Ouija board.

**Heather:**

So, Paul, in your opinion, how has the perceptions of Melungeons changed or evolved since when you became a member of the Melungeon Heritage Association in 2007 and the past 13 years?

**Paul:**

The first Union that I attended was in 2007, but I was there just very briefly to see Lisa Alther because by then I had not only read her book, but she had very graciously written an endorsement for mine. And there was a big buzz at that point about Julie Williams Dixon's new documentary film, Melungeon Voices, first of several documentary projects, as we know. And at that point I just saw the Melungeons as this very localized phenomenon that were right there on the Virginia/Tennessee border and had interesting connections to my own community and to others, but remote connections. But what I found is I kept coming to these Unions and eventually became treasurer and registrar. So I was seeing exactly where the membership checks were coming from and where the registrations were coming from. And I realized that Melungeon heritage is not a highly localized phenomenon, but it really stretches from coast to coast almost with concentrations definitely in specific places.

But you look at MHA attendance and membership, and then on a much wider scale, I was the administrator of a Facebook discussion group that had over 4,000 members. And so, I was really seeing where everybody was coming from asking their questions and looking for their Collins's, and they're Mullins's et cetera. And again, I was seeing this very widespread pattern of Melungeon descendants all over the country. And further explaining that is something called Google Trends, where you can put a word in and see what states people are using that search term. And over what period of time is there a rise and fall in people Googling the word Melungeon. And what you see is that, yes, East Tennessee, the metro areas there, Knoxville, Tri-Cities always on top.

But where else are there hotspots of people Googling Melungeon? Charlotte, Raleigh, Nashville, Lexington, Kentucky, West Virginia, big West Virginia presence. So again, it's like, you look at what you know, when this little tiny microcosm of who comes to MHI and who joins it, or you can look at this

macrocosm of thousands of people online or thousands of people just using Google. And you can see the same thing. That there's a heartland or a ground zero that's right around the Virginia/Tennessee line. But when you get to third and fourth and fifth generation descendants, they're everywhere.

**Heather:**

Having now been the president, I see exactly what you're talking about. It is. It's nationwide. It's a lot bigger. I agree with you. Well, Paul, it has been great having you on the podcast today, and I very much look forward to seeing you at next year's Union and hearing your full presentation.

**Paul:**

I would have loved to be in Berea this year, but I will just be looking forward to next year.

**Heather:**

Thank you so much.

**Paul:**

Thank you.

**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.