

Episode 5: Transcript

Guest Robert Wells- Software developer, Robert Wells, repurposed his professional skills in both research and analysis to pursue genealogical studies. In this episode he shares his knowledgeable insight while providing tips on how to apply genealogical records, DNA analysis and third-party ancestry records services to learn more about your own personal family tree, as well as ways to avoid common research pitfalls. Also, host Heather Andolina shares insight into her current documentary film, "Infamous Characters Notorious Villains" and how her family's Melungeon heritage discovery served as inspiration.

Lis Malone (Co-Host):

This is the Melungeon Voices Podcast, presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, and speaking of the Association, as always, I'm here with Heather Andolina, President of the Melungeon Heritage Association. Greetings to you, Heather.

Heather Andolina (Host):

Hello, Lis.

Lis:

And hello to you too, Heather. Before we jump right into this week's interview, I would love to chat with you about the work that you're doing with your documentary film. For those of you who have been listening to this podcast series, I'm sure that you've probably noticed that a few guests have referenced speaking with Heather during her filmmaking process. The film that you're working on is called Infamous Characters, Notorious Villains, and I know that this is a family affair of sorts. Heather, can you give some information to people about this endeavor?

Heather:

I sure can, Lis. The film that I'm working on along with my brothers, the film basically is about our journey in discovering our Melungeon heritage. That started about a few years ago, I would say about five years ago. Myself, as well as other family members, started taking the DNA tests through ancestry.com, and of course the DNA was coming up showing other ethnicities like European, African, Indigenous, Jewish, even Middle Eastern. That got us interested into delving deeper into our family history.

Lis:

Now, Heather, for people who don't know what you look like, and they're just hearing your voice, and obviously they hear your name, Heather Andolina, and Andolina is your married name, tell people what you look like, because I think it's interesting for people to get more of a sense of who you are in talking about this filmmaking process, because you've discovered all of these other ethnicities within your bloodlines.

Heather:

Now I, myself, I am lighter complected, but I do have features, like I have high cheekbones, so I do have some features that I've actually been told are Iroquois features, actually. And then when you look at some of my other family members, though, we're all a little different. We do have family

members who are darker complected, my grandmother having been one of them. She was a light mocha color. My grandmother was really the one who got us started on this journey. She had always been interested in her family history and her family ancestry, and she always knew that there was something. She was told it was Cherokee, but we knew there was something more. My grandmother always said we were a Heinz 57, she never realized how right she was.

I remember the first time I heard the term Melungeon, and we were actually visiting my great-grandmother, my grandmother's mother, and I overheard my mom and one of her cousins, Missy, talking. Missy mentioned the term Melungeon, and she goes, "Gayle," that's my mother's name, she goes, "Gayle, I think we're Melungeon." And she's like, "They were a mixed ethnic group of people who settled in the Appalachian region, Northeastern Tennessee, Southeastern Kentucky, parts of Western Virginia and North Carolina." And she goes, "I think we are Melungeon descendants."

I remember that, and that was a few years before we actually did the DNA, but having done the DNA and then getting involved in the Melungeon Heritage Association and finding out that we have several surnames that are Melungeon surnames and our family comes from that area, and so it's really been quite an experience. And our documentary is really about the whole journey for us.

Lis:

Now, if people want to follow your film company on social media, they can find you under, no pun intended, Underbyte Films. It's U-N-D-E-R-B-Y-T-E Films. People can find you on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and am I forgetting anything?

Heather:

YouTube as well.

Lis:

And if you can give everybody your website URL.

Heather:

Yes. You can also find us on our website at www.underbytefilms.com.

Lis:

In speaking to you about this film project, and I think we're all anxiously awaiting the completion of your project, you've won a number of film awards on the work that you've done so far on your film. So it's a very anticipated project. This is a perfect segue way into this week's interview with Robert Wells. Let's fill people in on who Robert is and how fitting this interview is with your particular project, Infamous Characters, Notorious Villains.

Heather:

Robert Wells is a software developer with over 20 years of experience. His experience with analysis in solving complex problems has given him an unique perspective in analyzing DNA. Robert began his genealogical journey in 2010 and has been able to break down brick walls in his family ancestry, using DNA. In my interview with Robert, he shares insider tips and a roadmap on how to follow your genealogical path.

Lis:

Wonderful. Let's take a listen.

Heather:

For somebody who is brand new to understanding their ancestry, Robert, can you provide a basic overview of what genealogy is?

Robert Wells (Guest):

Yeah. Just real simply, genealogy is just the study of your family history. Where history will be the study of country or world events, it's really just history that is focused on your family or someone else's family if you're doing research for them. But it just really comes down to a family history.

Heather:

What would be the very first step one could take in learning and discovering more about their own personal ancestry?

Robert:

Well, the first step I'd recommend is to get a subscription to ancestry.com, because you'll have access to a lot of records, everything from census records, the death certificate, the birth information, to other family trees. And then from there, what I'd recommend doing is interviewing people in your family, older relatives. If you've got grandparents or great-grandparents living, or maybe you only have ankles or aunts, any older relatives that may know anything, you want to sit down and interview them to get all the information from them that you can.

And then there's a lot of different research you can do. Everybody's situation is different. Some people don't know anything past their parents, so you just have to dig really deep and dedicate yourself to it. It won't be easy in some cases. Also too, one recommendation I'd really make is when you go onto ancestry.com, you'll see a lot of trees out there, and don't get hooked into copying from those trees. Only use them for clues, because a lot of people don't really do their true research and follow genealogical standard. A lot of them copy from other trees.

That's one thing that you don't want to do right in the very beginning. Do not get in the habit of just copying information from other trees and thinking you have a genealogy, because when you do that, you're relying on other people's research, which some of the research may be very good, but chances are it may not. So the information you're getting is only as good as what the people who did the research. And some of the trees out there, people are lazy and they just go copy and go back four or five generations, maybe even further, and it's not reliable information. If they don't have records to back things up, then it's just hearsay. I look at it like I'm on jury in court. You got to have a lot of information and make sure the facts point toward what you're looking at. And if they don't, then you've got to look elsewhere. So that's kind of the way I look at genealogy. I'm on a jury.

Heather:

Well, that's great advice, Robert. Now, with the new technology of DNA, how can it be utilized in the research process?

Robert:

What DNA does, just simply, is it gives us our true biological family lines. You may have cases where there were stepmothers or stepfathers back in the line, or you can even have cases where there

were adoptions. Or going back to the late 1800s and before that, parents would die and family members would take the child in, or maybe even a friend, and sometimes they'd give them their name. And there wasn't a record for that. That's the one reason that DNA is very important, because going back that far, and we don't have a written record of it, all we have is a name and it shows up on census records and may even show up on death certificates. Now that's all we have. DNA breaks through that barrier.

Now, what I would recommend, especially for someone that's not really savvy with a computer, you may want to take some classes to get familiarity with using the computer, because when you start using DNA, and even doing other research, it's going to be real important that you are comfortable with using your computer, especially with DNA, because some of the techniques that are used, you really have to be a little bit of proficiency with using your computer. If you're not, I'd say take the time to do that. Even if that takes you a month or so, just get familiar with the computer, because it'll pay off in the long run.

Heather:

Robert, before you mentioned ancestry.com as a good resource. Are there any other providers that you recommend for DNA testing?

Robert:

Yeah. You have Family Tree DNA, and Family Tree DNA offers pretty much any genealogical DNA test that you would need. For instance, like with Ancestry, they only offer what's called the autosomal test, which tests all the chromosomes. Now, Family Tree does offer that, but they offer too the Y chromosome test, which is only for your direct male line. Female doesn't have the Y chromosome, so if you're having a problem with your direct male line, you would need to take Y chromosome test, and that would need to be done at Family Tree DNA.

Another company, My Heritage, offers autosomal testing, and they also are similar to ancestry.com, where they have records and trees. And then you also have 23andMe. I think their main focus is more on health, but they do have matching technology too. Myself, I have tested all four of those companies. Those are the four main ones I would do. There's also a site called GEDmatch, which is free, but that's more advanced techniques. There are a lot of other sites out there, but I would stick with just those, because start throwing your DNA out to six, seven, eight different sites and it's just more to keep up with. But the sites that I mentioned is where the vast majority of people are going to do their research, so I would stick with just those four.

Heather:

Thank you, Robert. That is very helpful, especially for anyone out there who, specifically if they're looking for their Melungeon ancestry, DNA is very important. So that was very helpful. Thank you. Now on to historical records, how accurate are they?

Robert:

They're only as accurate as the information that was given to the individual that filled them out. A good example of that is a death certificate. I've seen more than one instance where a mother or father, or sometimes both, are incorrect on death certificates. I don't know if you've ever had to deal with that, but when someone dies, someone in the family gives information, and you just never know if it's correct.

I've seen information in the census. Census information is only good as when the census takers come into the house and ask questions, and whatever answers that were given. I've seen answers on the census records where someone said they were married 18 years in 1900, and then in 1910 they said they were married 16. Historical records are not a hundred percent accurate. I would say that, and I would keep that in the back of my mind. Even if you get a record that says something, try to validate that record with some other piece of information.

Heather:

Robert, that reminds me of a conversation that you and I have had that sometimes family members may hide family secrets.

Robert:

You'll run across that more than you may think. I can give you an example in my own family. My great-grandfather was born out of wedlock in 1885. His family Bible has his parents' information. Well, my great-grandmother didn't even write his mother's name in, because she didn't like her. I mean, plain as a simple truth of that. And then she put his stepfather as his father in the family Bible. If my great-grandfather hadn't told my father and his brothers and sisters the real story, we may have never known what the truth was. And I can probably about guarantee you'll at least across one situation like that, where things are hidden. And going back in the past, you'll see it more so than you will today. People are more open about things today, but going back in the past, children being born out of wedlock was considered a shameful thing and people would go to great lengths to hide that.

Heather:

That's very interesting, Robert, and very true. And this leads me to my next question, because I know with my family, especially in researching our Melungeon ancestry, you do have family secrets, and we ourselves have hit several brick walls. Describe what it means to hit the proverbial brick wall. And what do you suggest one do once they find themselves there?

Robert:

Well, the brick wall simply is, and it's a very good analogy, it's where you come to a place in your genealogical research, so you go back two or three generations, four, in that area, and you can't find who the father of someone was, or the mother, or a lot of times both. None of the records make sense. I've had plenty of those in my own research. What it is, it's like everywhere you look, you're hitting that brick wall, as you would say. It's kind of like you're running, trying to get somewhere, you keep hitting a wall and something keeps stopping you, because nothing makes sense. That's how I'd describe a brick wall.

Now, how to go about getting around that? Well, the first thing I tell people to do is take a DNA test. And what I'd recommend, if you've got some serious brick walls and maybe you haven't been doing research a lot and you've just got in your DNA, go ahead and do your other DNA research and get proficient with working with determining relationships with DNA. What I would recommend if you're new to it, you don't want to go and attack a brick wall, because that's probably the most difficult thing you're going to do in genealogical research, is try to get around a brick wall. So you want to get a little experience under your belt before you start taking DNA and try to get around that brick wall.

Heather:

Fantastic. I will do just that next time we come up against another brick wall. In your research, Robert, what have you found to be most interesting about the Melungeon people, from both an ancestral and genetic perspective?

Robert:

Well, from the ancestral perspective, my first exposure to the Melungeon people were, probably been doing genealogical research about six months when I went to a conference down in Atlanta. This was back in 2010, and I never had even heard the term before. And there was a lady there who specialized in Southern genealogy, and she had a whole seminar on the Melungeon people. And so I went to it, and I was really attracted to it, because it was such a mystery, because back 10 years ago, we don't know a lot of things we know today. So it was a lot of theories about it. And then she had pictures of a lot of the people looked like and described their features. I'm going, "Well, you know, I see a lot of people in my area that meet these criteria. Some of my grandfather's brother's kind of had some of the same features."

I said, "Well, I need to go look into this and see if we have any connections there." And well, we didn't, but it had explained a lot of things for me, because you have some of the people here that would claim to have Native American in them, but they had these features that were being described by this lady, and in some of the research I did. I thought it was in my family, so I kind of went looking for it, and that's how I got interested in it. And then when I came across Heather doing the documentary, I just wanted to try to reach out to her and see if I could help her, because I had done some research in that.

As far as the DNA goes with the Melungeons, one reason I like to research is that it's a huge puzzle. It's just my nature, and even what I do for a living, is that everything's a puzzle. I have to do a lot of research and figure things out. So the Melungeon research with the DNA is very unique. Well, it's difficult, for one thing, and I kind of like that. When I'm doing things, I don't like something that's easy and just handed to me, I kind of like to work for it.

But with the Melungeons, what's happened with the people from those different areas, they have spread out through the rest of the country, so it makes some of the DNA research a little difficult. And one thing I've run across too, is some of the things when I've been doing some of the research, some of the different areas to me, I mean, I know there's a lot of different theories out there, I've been working on some of my own, but it appears to me that there are some connections between different groups, like maybe the Lumbee and Melungeons up in the area up there around the border area around North Carolina and Virginia and Tennessee. Based on some of the, I believe it was someone in your family, Heather, that appeared to be sharing DNA with the chief of the Lumbee Indians.

So that was something that really intrigued me. And then actually there are shared surnames between those two groups of people too. There's just a lot aspects to the Melungeons that are very interesting to me, and I've enjoyed researching it and look forward to researching it a lot more in the future, because I think it'll be a good while before we come close to cracking that mystery.

Heather:

I agree, Robert, it's an ongoing process, but I really appreciate everything that you've been doing for me and my family. And this has been a very informative conversation about genealogy and DNA. I've learned so much from you, Robert. Thank you for joining me and for being on the Melungeon Voices Podcast.

Robert:

Oh, you're welcome. And yeah, I've enjoyed it, and I look forward to coming up and meeting everybody in person. I know unfortunately this year, with everything going on, I don't have to go into that, we all know what that is. But yeah, I look forward to coming up. Besides, I haven't been to Kentucky in a long time, so I'll enjoy taking the trip, maybe next year, and I appreciate the opportunity to do this interview.

Heather:

Excellent. Thank you again.

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. That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N dot 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.