

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Three Transcript, Episode Five: Janeen Stephens

Lis Malone: This is the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, Podcast Producer, and I am joined by Heather Andolina, the President of the Melungeon Heritage Association. It's so funny because I see Heather's face and she's always got her little gears turning like, how's Lis going to refer to me this week? Like she does a little different each week.

Heather Andolina: That's exactly what I'm thinking.

Lis: I know. I got to be ready to give a little Zinger.

Heather: And you always do.

Lis: But they're always kind zingers. Yes, they are sweet zingers. Yeah, I think I want that on a t- shirt. Yeah. Okay.

Heather: I like it. Yeah, me too.

Lis: Okay, trade. I'm putting a trademark on that.

Heather: So okay. It's all yours.

Lis: So here we are. We are at episode five. So, we're, we're past the hump, we are moving into the back end of the season. But you know what? We are not losing any momentum. Are we girl?

Heather: No, we're not. There we go.

Lis: So, I thought it would be interesting for this week to circle back and talk about a few things that have come up in past episodes. And I would even say past seasons of the Melungeon Voices Podcast. And for anybody who is new to the podcast, and just learning about all of these fascinating aspects of the Melungeon people and those of mixed ethnic origin. I thought we should maybe just touch upon a couple things that you know, I, myself am new to learning about the Melungeon people since working on this podcast, who may be joining us and not know some of the background in the history. And I think we're going to move forward, try to add some of these little nuggets of knowledge to your listener base. So Heather, I'm going to defer to you because you are the historian, you are the president. And you will know a whole lot more about this than me. All right, let's just talk about a few things. In this episode. We've heard the name Walter Plecker. And I know it's this is not a name that brings smiles to lips. But I think it is important that we tell people who Walter was and what his significant role was in history.

Heather: Yes, Lis we have discussed Walter Plecker in other episodes, and just recently in the prior episode with Ron Carson. So, I'm going to tell everyone a little bit about Walter Plecker. Walter Plecker, was the head of Virginia's bureau of vital statistics back in the 1920s. He advocated and helped push through Virginia's 1924 racial Integrity Act, which basically categorized all non-whites as colored, which of course included the Melungeon people.

Lis: The name Walter Plecker, is not a name that is new to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. His name has come up since season one in several discussions that we've had with guests. And that leads us to another phrase that we've been hearing throughout the podcast again, probably since episode one of season one is the one drop rule. For anybody who is new to the podcasts, can you share some information about what that one drop rule means?

Heather: Now, the one drop rule goes back before the 1900s, but it became more prominent in the 20th century. Basically, the one drop rule referred to a belief that a single drop of quote unquote, African blood makes a person quote unquote, black. It was also known as the quote unquote, one black ancestor rule.

Lis: And this belief about the One Drop Rule connects very well into this week's discussion with your guest, Janeen Stevens. And now before we go into all about Janeen, another interesting term that has been coming up in these podcast episodes, on a more pleasant note than Walter Plecker, is GEDmatching. And I know that you and Janeen are going to be talking about this a little bit more. But I know that people have been asking about genealogy and GEDmatching. What is GEDmatching? And how can people find out more about themselves?

Heather: Yes Lis, I'm going to give a little bit of information on what GEDmatch is, and what a GEDmatch number is as well. GEDmatch is a family finder tool used to help people locate relatives and identify their genetic heritage. Their website is www.gedmatch.com. A GEDmatch number is a unique kit number that is assigned to a person after their raw DNA is uploaded into the GEDmatch database. The kit number is an easy way to make DNA connections and find people related to you.

Lis: It sounds like a fantastic tool. Because there are so many references between you and guests about oh, we have to swap our GEDmatch numbers and see who is related to who and learning that you guys are cousins or something fantastic along those lines. So, I know we sound like a walking billboard. We should be paid a commission.

Heather: I'm telling you.

Lis: Well, if the GEDmatch, people want to sponsor the Melungeon Voices podcast, I'm sure we would be open to that. But enough about all this talk and enough about us. Of course, let's talk about who your guest is this week.

Heather: Yes, our guest this week is Janeen Stephens as you have mentioned, and she is a distant cousin of mine, which we'll of course, talk more about in the episode. Janeen Stephens is a native of Michigan and graduate of Wayne State University, and has been researching her family genealogy and history for over 10 years. Growing up, she was exposed to the oral history given by her grandparents who were born in the early 1900s. And she experienced a deep longing to understand more about the history of her family. For this week's episode, we explore how one may discover their mixed ancestry, possible ties to the Melungeons, and other origins through DNA.

Lis: Sounds like yet another fascinating conversation. Let's listen.

Heather Andolina: Hello, we're here with Janeen Stephens. Hi, Janeen. How are you doing?

Janeen Stephens: Very good.

Heather: First things first, tell us about your ancestry. And how did you get into researching it?

Janeen: Well, Heather, my ancestry is multicultural. I got into researching my family history at a very early age. I had known that my paternal grandmother had Native American within her background. But her mother passed away when she was very small. So, there was limited information that was shared with the family. In regards to her mother's background, some of that information was lost due to her passing away early. So, I would at times go to my grandmother's house and talk with her and interview her in order to learn more about her. And I just became interested. I was always that child that hung around their grandparents and listened to the stories that they would tell. And as time went on, and as I grew closer to loving genealogy. I just spent a lot of time with my grandparents and asked a lot of questions about their backgrounds.

Heather: Janeen, can you elaborate a little more on your mixed ancestry and what that included?

Janeen: Okay. My paternal grandmother was connected to the Chickasaw Nation. One of the stories that she would always tell me was that once her mother had passed away, there was an Indian chief who helped her father with raising her and her siblings. And then I was able to get a hold of the death certificate for her grandmother. And WL Colbert was the informant on the death certificate, and also listed as her uncle's employer. So, as I did further research in the census records, I realized that WL Colbert was the great grandson of the leader of the Chickasaw Nation. And he actually lived one farm from her father. So, when I kind of put the pieces together, I realized that they were directly connected with the leaders of the Chickasaw Nation. So that's on my paternal grandmother side. I also was able to uncover more information to support with our family had already told us that we were connected to the Beans who were the early settlers of Tennessee. I was able to triangulate with a group of individuals through GEDmatch, and was able to identify that on chromosome five, our family were direct descendants of William Bean and Lydia Russell, on my maternal side, and was able to learn that my maternal grandmother was a descendant of the progenitors of the Lumbee nation. So, she's an Oxendine through the McNair family. They were in North Carolina. But my grandmother's family had migrated to Alabama. So, some of that information was lost through history. And through DNA connections, and researching records, I was able to put those connections back together and discover who my grandmother's ancestors were, you know, back to North Carolina. So, I've uncovered a lot I've been researching for over 10 years. So, there's a lot of different information that I've been able to learn about myself and to learn about my ancestors that tie back to colonial VA that connect to Native Americans. And then I also am working to try to learn more about my African ancestry. And I do know that through research, that there's also connection to my maternal side that goes back to Margaret Cornish. So that would take us back to Angola. And my specific ethnic mix is about 69%, West African, and 30% European. But within that, I've been learning and understanding how to identify those native ancestors because my ancestors appear to have been a Scots Irish mix. When I take a look at the chromosome painting for GEDmatch, you can see that there are over lapping ethnicities that lay on top of the Native American DNA. So definitely multiracial and definite descendants of the Melungeons.

Heather: Perfect, because that brings me to my next question. You and I are distant cousins. So, tell us a little bit about your DNA research and the connections you've uncovered specifically between your family and mine.

Janeen: Taking a look at the kits that you have from your family, and then discovering the matches that we shared in common. I was able to find one of your close cousins that I matched, dug a little bit deeper, and realized that we were both descendants from the Henderson family.

Heather: Janeen, really quick, I'm going to interject to let our listeners know how we connected because it also is connected to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. Dr. Arwin Smallwood is who connected us and he was a guest on our podcast last season, episode seven. You had reached out to him and then he told you to reach out to me and that's how we connected and then we discovered that we are distant cousins.

Janeen: Yes, absolutely. So, I'll tell you a little bit about that. As I started taking a look at my own personal DNA, I felt like there was something to the puzzle that was missing. And I started to try to uncover what could be the possible lineage of my ancestors. And looking at my DNA results. I was seeing Austronesian and I was seeing Micronesian. And I also was seeing East Asian. And there was a huge question mark for me as to how to interpret these results, and why those ethnicities were lying close to my Native American. So, during my own particular research, I actually stumbled upon a presentation that he gave at the end of the presentation. He offers for the listeners to reach out to him if they had any additional questions. So, I did and when I did, I gave him my surnames. And I told him that one of the surnames that I had that was connected to the Carolinas was Lucas, so he responded right away and I was very surprised to get a response on a Saturday he provided me with information to study. And then, you know, he said, Heather is somebody that you should definitely talk to. And that was how we connected. And once I learned that you had DNA tested your family, I was very eager just to compare. And once I compared, I was able to see that there was shared DNA between yourself and I. So random by chance meeting, and then finding, finding a DNA cousin. Yes. And now as far as the fact of finding out how we what lines we particularly shared, that discovery came about by digging through your family tree. And then once I found out that your family was located in the Appalachian area, and I knew that I was a descendant of the Beans, who were early settlers there. I just started scouring through your tree, and I started looking at the matches that I had that shared in common with you. And I expanded on my mother's side of the family, which was a jump from where I actually thought the connection would be, and found that she was a descendant of the Hendersons that we're connected with Daniel Boone. So that's a line that I know that we share in common as descendants. But I have reason to believe that there could be multiple ways that we're related, since they're shared their DNA on multiple chromosomes. And I do see where we share DNA that lives right in an area where I have Native Americans. So not sure if we will actually be able to make those discoveries. But I believe connections that we have are going to be an addition to the Henderson family that will be shared DNA that comes from the Longines of Appalachian area.

Heather: You had mentioned Daniel Boone and some of the early settlers that came into Kentucky and Tennessee in the late 1700s. Can you elaborate a little more on that, because many Melungeons came through along with Daniel Boone, and many of the early settlers as well.

Janeen: Yes. We are also descendants of the Blevins, the Blevins family, were of the millennia and ancestry. There were multiple Melungeon families that were there. And then, as you can, you know, draw a conclusion that when you are intermingling or intermixing, with people in society, there's going to be a merging of DNA. So, we know for sure that there's multiple families that were there and those areas named for the families that traveled through so you have Newman's Ridge, you have been stationed Tennessee. And we know that they came in contact with the Natives when they traveled over

to the Appalachian area. We know that there's the Cherokee that were present there, a very large tribe, that people still exist today, there's a lot of people that are on in different DNA groups that are known to be Cherokee, that I've been able to do comparisons with and see where there's DNA matching. Another thing too, that I have also learned is that many of the people that are sharing with me on chromosome five, their families are branching out from the Tennessee and Kentucky area. Chromosome five is the chromosome that I know I've inherited from So, Lydia Russell, and William B.

Heather: Now, we know that many of these families migrated further west and to the Appalachian Mountains, to escape a lot of the racial laws that were being set in Virginia and North Carolina. We're going to skip ahead a little bit. And I know you wanted to discuss the one drop rule and Walter Plecker. What is the one drop rule and who was Walter Plecker.

Janeen: In summary, the one drop rule, as developed by Walter Plecker, was motivated by the eugenics movement and in the eugenics movement. We ended up in a situation where the census records don't properly reflect the actual ethnicities of those being taken in the census. So, the Virginia natives were not able to hold their identity as being Indian, and being forced to identify as colored. So, when you see the see on the census record, that can be an indication to you that that person actually might have been Native American as opposed to just solely being African and when I've also been finding even like with the Colbert's, I totally overlook the Colbert's as being a possible Native connection. Because on the census records, they're listed as white. So, it makes it difficult to be able to truly understand the ethnicities of your ancestors, when the census record is all, you have to go on, and the census record is not clear in terms of what the ancestry of your relatives are.

Heather: How did that affect specifically, people of Melungeon ancestry or people of mixed ancestry?

Janeen: Well, specifically, the people have mixed ancestry, and specifically the Melungeons, they would have been greatly affected by that, because when he left the list of the surnames that he was targeting, he didn't give a list for the Melungeons as a separate list of names, he just set all the Melungeons of the Tennessee area. So, if you are part of that group, it impacts you because then you're not being able to report that you're Indian. But the good thing about it is with him having left that list, that gives you an idea that group of people carry native ancestry, that group of people are tri-racial, which we already know that by analyzing the DNA, but they're listed as a whole entire group without a breakdown of surnames.

Heather: Was there anything in your research that surprised you?

Janeen: The biggest surprise that I found in my research was why I wasn't seeing a larger display of Native American ancestry, when testing through different companies is possible to get different results. But then, when I was took my DNA over to GEDmatch. GEDmatch was able to pick up on trace amounts of Native American DNA. And I was able to then understand, after doing the research, and then talking to other people that have experience with analyzing the information as the generations go down, there's a loss of 50% of DNA with each generation. And with the intermixing, that existed beforehand, it's just possible that by the time the DNA gets to me that there's a lesser amount of Native American that can be seen on the chromosome. But that does not mean that those people were not your ancestors. So, I was very surprised to find out how much intermixing there was within these different nationalities. And also, I was very surprised to find out that existed in colonial VA, and that there are so many different routes that you can go to discover your ancestry. Being African American, I was led to

believe that I needed to just look on the census record for the clearest land owner or the next slave holder that would be closest to my family, and then assume that that person was the owner of my family. I was running into multiple lines where I couldn't find that type of scenario. And my research was frustrated. And I never considered that there were other pathways, and that all roads lead back to the Carolinas and Virginia. So that was the most surprising thing for me is to find out more about the early history of the United States of America, and to learn that we were multiracial from the start.

Heather: Yes, Janeen, that's so fascinating. And that's something that I myself have learned, since learning about my Melungeon ancestry, and realizing just how multi ethnic the history, the narrative of US history really is.

Janeen: I agree. And I think, for me, being African American, it was like bringing the veil off of my eyes. And understanding that there are so many different stories, there's not just one story, as a black person, it's like you, you, you think of a story of roots. And you feel like that's the only inheritance story that you are a part of that that's what you're born into. And it's very shocking and surprising once you do the DNA test, to find out in what your ethnicities are. And for me, it was very, very surprising to find out that I was 69%, West African, because I assumed that I was going to find results that were going to be much higher. I automatically know where in Africa my ancestors were from. And all of the questions you know how people will say, oh, well, what ethnicity are you? Or are you Native American and you really do I don't know; I finally have an answer to say this is where in Africa I'm from. So, when I looked at my results, and I saw how multiracial I was, it was a journey that was starting for me, that I never imagined, would bring me to this point. But it was enlightening. And I think that as a country overall, that if we could just understand that American history has made us one huge family, I think it would just make things so much better for us, as a nation overall, and sharing DNA with so many different people and sharing kit numbers and comparing DNA with people. I've realized that every day we're walking past people that we can share DNA with, that we're related to. When you look at your results, and you see all these matches, and you don't know any of these people, you have no clue how you're connected to them, you really realized that this country is one huge family.

Heather: We really are a mosaic of cultures. You know what, Janeen, I'm going to end it there because I think that was a wonderful wrap up to the interview. And before we go, I just want to share with everyone that this was Janeen's, first podcast interview, so she made her debut interview here on the Melungeon Voices Podcast. And if anyone wants to get in touch with Janeen, you can reach out to them at the Melungeon Heritage Association. And we'll put you in touch with her. But I just want to thank you again, Janeen, for coming on to our wonderful podcast and being interviewed. It was such a joy having you here.

Janeen: Thank you for the invite, Heather, I really appreciate the opportunity. And thank you for taking interest in me. Thank you for taking interest in my heritage. And I really appreciate the time as well.

Heather: Well, Janeen, it was our pleasure to have you.

Lis Malone: 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 www.melungeon.org. The information views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA.

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