

## **Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Four Transcripts, Episode Four: Aaron Collins**

**Lis Malone:**

This is the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, I am the podcast producer, and I am here with the wonderfully lovely, stupendous Heather Andolina, who is the President of the Melungeon Heritage Association. And I must add, the breaker of my studio equipment.

**Heather Andolina:**

Hey, I thought we were going to keep that on the down low.

**Lis Malone:**

I'm just going to say this, don't mess with Heather because she throws a mean elbow. If you don't believe me, ask my microphone equipment.

**Heather Andolina:**

I grew up with two brothers, what can I say?

**Lis Malone:**

Well, thank you so much to your brothers for encouraging your rough behavior, so it explains a lot. I learn a little more about Heather with each passing episode.

**Heather Andolina:**

See? There you go.

**Lis Malone:**

So we are here at episode four, also known as our hump episode.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes.

**Lis Malone:**

We are right in the middle of the season. We always say this, "My gosh, it's going by very fast," right?

**Heather Andolina:**

It is, it flies by.

**Lis Malone:**

Yeah, it does... What is it, time flies when you're having fun?

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes.

**Lis Malone:**

Okay. Well, I guess it's flying and we are having fun, so that's all good news. Before we jump into our episode four guest. We have another little bit of an update for you, and this is coming from the MHA and some interesting news about some of the stuff that you guys are doing. So share away, Heather.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes, thank you, Lis. We have some exciting new developments with the MHA. We have a brand new logo and website. Our new beautiful logo debuted earlier this year, as well as an all-new redesigned website, which will make navigating our content much easier. If you haven't seen it yet, be sure to go to [www.melungeon.org](http://www.melungeon.org) to check out the all-new and improved website and MHA logo.

**Lis Malone:**

So does a new logo mean that there's going to be MHA swag in the future?

**Heather Andolina:**

Oh, I think so.

**Lis Malone:**

I think we must be able to show off our MHA support, right?

**Heather Andolina:**

Oh, yeah.

**Lis Malone:**

Okay. So I'm going to start the lobby today to the MHA board that we want goodies, we want stuff that we can buy. Maybe you could sell it on the website or at the future conference, things with that beautiful logo.

**Heather Andolina:**

I like how you think, Lis.

**Lis Malone:**

Listen, I'm all about marketing, so...

**Heather Andolina:**

Oh, yes.

**Lis Malone:**

Everything really does look shiny and new, and we encourage everybody to go check it out if you haven't already. And yeah, thanks to all those who made that happen, and I guess now onto our regular scheduled programming, as they say, right?

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes, let's do it.

**Lis Malone:**

Okay. So Heather, tell us about who you had the pleasure of speaking with for this week's interview.

**Heather Andolina:**

Thank you, Lis. Yes, I had the pleasure of speaking with Aaron Collins. Aaron Collins is an amateur genealogist and researcher. He graduated from Virginia Tech with a Bachelor of Science in Sociology and a minor in Appalachian studies. He served 12 years in the US Army Reserves, and earlier this year, started his own business, Left Handed Guy Upholstery and Woodworking. Aaron is a descendant of old Benjamin Collins by his maternal grandfather. He spent his formative years visiting his Mawmaw and Pawpaw in Sneedville Tennessee. Additionally, Aaron is on the Board of Directors for the Vardy Community Historical Society in Sneedville. Aaron currently lives with his husband and two dogs in Knoxville, Tennessee. In our episode today, Aaron and I discuss Melungeon ancestry, the Melungeon settlement of Vardy Valley, Newman's Ridge, and how one can research their own Melungeon heritage.

**Lis Malone:**

Well, thank you Heather for that preview and let's all take a listen.

**Heather Andolina:**

Hi Aaron. Thank you for being with us today.

**Aaron Collins:**

Hey Heather, I'm so excited to be here.

**Heather Andolina:**

I like to kick off our interviews with this question. When was the first time you heard the term Melungeon or learned of the Melungeon people?

**Aaron Collins:**

That's a hard question for me. I think the first time I heard it was in elementary school. I grew up in Hancock County, and even though I am a Melungeon descendant, I really think the first time I heard it was elementary school. And I have a vague memory of going and asking about it and just basically being told that we weren't Melungeon. And that they were basically dirty people and there wasn't much left... Nothing much more expanded upon outside of that.

**Heather Andolina:**

So when did you learn about your own personal Melungeon ancestry?

**Aaron Collins:**

I see again, that's a hard question for me because I will say I became extremely interested in it when I was entering college and studying Appalachian studies. That's kind of when I just really started exploring it and what it was, and then learning about what is a Melungeon, and that's the million-dollar question.

But learning, I guess how to research and to investigate for myself during that time. And just kind of knowing that it was just almost a knowledge thing for me. And when you think of... Or when I think of Melungeons, I think of the cultural aspect, like the way the lifestyle maybe. And I hit every checkbox. So I have the last name Collins. I'm from Hancock County, Sneedville, Tennessee. So my Melungeon ancestor is my maternal side are on Newman's Ridge. Of course, we always called it the Ridge.

We never refer to it as Newman's Ridge. So if you were going somewhere, you would be going over the ridge or up the ridge. And that referred to Newman's Ridge. And that's just a section of it because there's also Prospect Ridge, which is along Newman's Ridge, but it's another sort of community. Thinking of the checkboxes, last name being from the area, being on the Ridge, just like, "Oh, then I must be Melungeon." And then you start looking at my family's skin color. My grandfather is very olive skinned and throughout the year... Most of the older children of my grandfather, so like the uncles. It's funny because it seems like the older they are, the darker they are. I mean that's pretty much that in a nutshell.

**Heather Andolina:**

Can you share more about your personal Melungeon ancestry with us?

**Aaron Collins:**

Yeah. So from research, like I said, on my maternal side. I descend from old Benjamin Collins and you hear a lot that he was at some point [inaudible 00:08:14] one of the first named Melungeons. And so if you come down from old Benjamin, he had a son, Benjamin Jr. And then Benjamin Jr. had a couple sons, Marvel and Isom Collins. Marvel had Sarah Collins and Isom had George Collins. George and Sarah Collins had different mothers, but they married and George and Sarah Collins had Eldora Collins. Eldora Collins had Obie Collins, which is my Papaw Obie Collins had my mother, Faye Collins, and then Faye Collins had me.

**Heather Andolina:**

That is awesome-

**Aaron Collins:**

And then if you want to go on the Gibson side, my grandmother descends from Emily and Andy Gibson. So my grandmother's mother was Myrtle Gibson, and then Myrtle Gibson's parents were Andy and Emily Gibson.

**Heather Andolina:**

So I too have Collins and Gibson. So we most likely are... We probably are distant cousins.

**Aaron Collins:**

I'm going to say... I mean, as much as we look alike, I would say we're probably second cousins somewhere.

**Heather Andolina:**

Oh yeah, I think so. So Aaron, for our listeners who may have Collins in their ancestry. How can they identify their Collins line and in general their Melungeon heritage?

**Aaron Collins:**

Well, again, your research as a listener, as an individual is going to help you find where you fall in the Collins line. Your Melungeon... An individual person's Melungeon ancestry. It's so broad. I think today, I think if you're a purist, you're going to want to find and go back to some of those originally named Melungeons. Now of course, they never called themselves Melungeons. The first person who asked who they were, they said Portyghee or Portuguese. Melungeon is a term that was given to the people by outsiders. So it's a very difficult journey. And the Melungeons are a tri-racial isolate group. So my advice, number one for anyone is really just dig in, ask the hard questions to family. You're going to get roadblocks. Within my family by grandpa. I'm not sure if he ever really believed or owned the fact that he was a Melungeon.

He did say it a couple times. He may be rolling over in his grave with me saying we were Melungeon. It was extreme stigma. My grandfather was born in 1910, he died in 2000. Part of that stigma is what is some of the big barriers in research, in my research. I'd like to share one if I can, if I'm not going too far but-

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes, please.

**Aaron Collins:**

... part of the Melungeon cultural or traditions used to be putting grave houses over the graves of people who passed away. You'll get a different answer as to the reason why. But my family cemetery had grave houses. Eldora had one, which is my great-grandmother. Her husband had one. And then around 1960s, '70s, when the Walk Toward the Sunset play, the outdoor drama about the Melungeons rolled into town. They were taking people on tours to see cemeteries that had... And I think my understanding now it wasn't there, of course, is that they would put them in a van and they would ride around. And all of a sudden the grave houses on our family cemetery were structurally unsound and had to be removed.

One was destroyed, the other one was moved to my Papaw's yard. He put a floor in it and turned it into a playhouse for my mother and her sister. And then I got to play in it as a child. My uncle turned it into a storage shed and within maybe four years or so, finally tore down. But the stigma of the grave house of having people toured around and, "Look, there's a Melungeon grave house" was not something that our family was proud of at all. It was taken down and thus we couldn't be associated with being a Melungeon.

**Heather Andolina:**

Are there any grave houses still around?

**Aaron Collins:**

There are. You'll find... I know in Hancock County there's a Trent Cemetery that has them. There's a few... You'll still find them in random places. And again, the structure of a grave house can vary too. It could be four poles with a piece of tin over it. To the one in the Trent Cemetery is very... I would say elaborate. They're like lattice almost. And some of them have little medallions on them and they seem to be very well maintained. Sometimes they're painted, sometimes they're not. But yeah, if you go around, you'll find them. But they are rapidly deteriorating if they're not being maintained. And the reason they were put up, if that was going to be a question no one really knows. My great Aunt Mary, I

asked her, I said, "Well, why did they do that?" And she said, "Well, my dad, he just died suddenly." So we put it up and that was her response.

**Heather Andolina:**

Were there any in Vardy Valley, or in Newman's Ridge?

**Aaron Collins:**

Newman's Ridge is geographically... It's a pretty long ridge or mountain. So Vardy is... And again, growing up, we never called it Vardy, sorry, because I'm on the board there of Vardy and that is the community. But we always called it Blackwater. So Blackwater was the valley. It was the road that went along the base there of Newman's Ridge on the opposite side of the town of Sneedville. And in my lifetime, I don't know of any, but if you... Trying to think of how to best describe geographically, so if you're coming off what's called Vardy Blackwater Road and you were to go back in towards Sneedville you would then take an immediate right, and that is called Snake Holler. And the valley continues, and again, it's at the base of Newman's Ridge. And that's where you'd find my family cemetery, where the grave house were located. So yes and no is the answer to your question. And I would say maybe I would imagine there were grave houses on those cemeteries throughout there. I don't know of any in my lifetime surviving.

**Heather Andolina:**

You mentioned you serve on the board for the Vardy Community Historical Society. What is it and what is the organization's mission?

**Aaron Collins:**

The Vardy Community Historical Society is an organization that was formed by the alumni of the Vardy School. The Vardy School is a remnant, I guess, of the Presbyterian mission that came in. The Presbyterian missions started with a church, and then they sort of expanded. And they had a really wonderful educational system there, down Blackwater in the Vardy community. It was more of what today I think we would say is like a Montessori style. It's very hands-on. That mission, the school, I think went up until maybe the eighth grade or so. And a bunch of the alumni had a reunion and got together and said, "We need to do this more often and we need to turn this into a place that records and documents the history of the Vardy Valley, of that area of the children who went to school there, of the Presbyterians who came in and missionized and brought in to this very isolated area, the outside world."

The school exposed the children to things that they probably never would've been exposed to of the outside world. So the mission overall, and don't quote me completely on it, is to document, preserve the history, not only of the Melungeons, but of that particular community within Hancock County. And what the Presbyterians did and sort of the legacy of that education and the school that was there. Once the Presbyterians sort of left, because the Presbyterian style of religion did not stick in the area and they left. And then that school became a county school. And then not long after becoming a county school, and I don't know the dates exactly, it just sort of no longer was a school. The building itself is completely gone. And what stands today is the church. It's the second church that was built. And then the Vardy Community Historical Society was able to purchase the log cabin that was built by probably the most famous Melungeon Mahala Collins Mullins.

And she was a bootlegger. She was known really for her brandy, but then it sort of shifted to moonshine. She has the tagline, "Catchable, but not fetch-able" because of her excessive size. They say she had

elephantiasis I'm not sure the accuracy of that. There are some other diseases that mimic it, but she was reportedly in excess of 500 pounds. So her cabin was sort of in pretty bad shape. And again, that was located on the top of the ridge, what I would call Prospect Ridge actually, but it is Newman's Ridge. So the commute, the Historical Society was able to purchase that and disassemble it and then move it down off the ridge into the valley, reassemble it and turn it into just, I think a wonderful museum. The museum is open on Saturdays from May until October. It is free. Donations are accepted, but it's a great place to get to see how people live and to experience a little bit of the Melungeon culture. But not only that, just the Appalachian culture.

**Heather Andolina:**

Oh, yes, I completely agree. I've been there and it is just wonderful. How did you get involved with the organization, Aaron?

**Aaron Collins:**

I did a tour. I'd been out to my family cemetery and went over and was just kind of touring around. And DruAnna Overbay, one of the founding board members and I just sort of hit it off. And I then went back for one of their events. They have a pretty big event in June, and I have been on a mission of getting some photographs labeled. One of my family members passed away and knew I was really into the genealogy and research. And mailed me about 95 family photos, which 80 maybe had identifying... Any sort of identifying label. And so I had taken and blown all these up and put them on poster boards. And I took them to the event and I had markers and I just said, "If you know who these people are, please label put a question mark if you're not sure, but attach a name." I'm down to about maybe four photographs that are unnamed because I was lugging these things around everywhere. Then DruAnna just said, "We'd like for you to be on the board." So now I've been on the board for two years roughly.

**Heather Andolina:**

That's fantastic.

**Aaron Collins:**

And then of course there's that connection too, because Vardy is named after Vardaman, another one of the original Melungeons, sort of the patriarch. And again, a theory is that old Benjamin, which is my line, and Vardy were either brothers or very closely related.

**Heather Andolina:**

Aaron, is there anything else you would like to share with us about yourself or Melungeon heritage?

**Aaron Collins:**

Yes, I would love to share a few things. Definitely for people who are researching, A lot of people have heard Will Allen Dromgoole. I'm not sure if I'm saying that right. D-R-O-M-G-O-O-L-E. I'm going to quote the Melungeon tree and it's four branches. It's an article she wrote. She was a lady who came in, in 1890s I think. And actually stayed with the Melungeon people. It's kind of controversial. People say that the Melungeons and the people of the community would call her Will Allen "Damn Fool" and some other kind of names like that. I don't know for sure. But back to researching, in some of the culture and some of the traditions would-be names. And because of the Collins, like I had referred to with Vardy

Collins and Old Ben Collins, how do you separate and how do you keep... Like who is your clan or your group or your tribe?

So she was writing that. I'm going to read it from her. Ben Collins' children were just distinguished from the children of Sol and Vardy by prefixing the Christian name. Either of the father or mother to the Christian name of the child, for instance, Edmond Ben, Singleton Ben, Andrew Ben, Zeke Ben meant that Edmund, Singleton, Andrew and Zeke were the sons of Ben Collins. So personal connection to that is my great-grandfather, Will Collins was always referred to as Will Pearman. Most people who would've known him would... I mean, I guess they may have known his was a Collins, but he was called Will Pearman. And Will was born out of wedlock, and he was raised by Pearman Gibson. So he was referred to as Will Pearman because Pearman was his father. My grandfather would be called Obie Will.

And you'll find that a lot. So sometimes if you have a relative and you may know their name, if someone said, Will Pearman, well, there's a good chance you're not going to find that in a census. So if you're looking for someone check. That's just a piece of advice I guess my great-grandmother's brother was Nicholas Collins and all of his children were referred to with his name after. So Mindy Nick is one of the more well-known in our family. And you just call her Mindy Nick, her brother is Tyler Nick. To me, it's a very fascinating thing. I don't know of many other places or other cultures that do that, but it's pretty unique, I think, to the Melungeons.

**Heather Andolina:**

Thank you for sharing that. Aaron, where can our listeners learn more about the Vardy Community Historical Society as well as your work on social media or a website?

**Aaron Collins:**

Well, vardymuseum.org is our website for the Vardy Community Historical Society. We also would encourage people to come out and tour. I don't have anything really out there. I mean, you can look me up on Facebook and add me as a friend if you want, but I don't consider myself an expert. I'm a genealogy nerd and I love to just dig in and just go on these journeys. They're very, very fascinating. But that's... vardymuseum.org is a good place to find information about that community. Also go to the Hancock County Historical Society, take a visit to Hancock County. It is the most beautiful county in Tennessee. I am biased on that, but people... I think other people would probably agree.

**Heather Andolina:**

Oh, yes. I mentioned earlier that I had visited Vardy Valley, and I imagine that it looks the same as it did 200 years ago. It's gorgeous.

**Aaron Collins:**

And to some degree, but also what you'll find definitely along the two, Blackwater and Snake Holler is less houses. There's a wonderful map they have at the museum that chose a lot of the houses and we'll call them houses. To some people's standard they probably were more like shacks or shanties, but there were a lot of people, the population was much larger. So my grandfather grew up, up on the Ridge and he would've been above the Snake Holler side. I have found that in what is 1837, I think, is when Tennessee had a bunch of people sort of squatting on land and they didn't know what to do. So they finally deeded this land or granted this land to the people, and you'll find that my great-great great-grandfather was deeded 50 lands that he had already been established on. There's a spring there, you'll find them in earlier tax records.



So they were there, they were established. My assumption is that they were established well before the 1790s. Because old Ben served in a unit with North Carolina in the American Revolution. He was granted some land for that. It was more in the Middle Tennessee area. And so he sold it to an individual [inaudible 00:27:27] from Peyton. And you don't really ever see [inaudible 00:27:30] that. But like I said, when you come to the 1810 tax, he's in, what is today, Hancock County, it was Hawkins County, North Carolina. And then you roll to 1837, and he's living on land that Tennessee said really didn't belong to him even though he'd been there forever. And they just gave it to him, "Oh, thanks for giving me land. It's already mine." So that's another important thing in research that we'd like to mention is when it appears to you that your family may have moved a lot, they probably didn't move at all.

East Tennessee in particular was part of North Carolina. Some people thought they were actually in Virginia and they're in North Carolina. And then you'll find that they were large counties. So Hawkins County, North Carolina was almost all of East Tennessee. And then it broke off. So you'll find that your relative may be in North Carolina, and then now they're in Tennessee and they're in this county in Tennessee. But then all of a sudden they're in this county in Tennessee, and then they're in this county in Tennessee. Well, they never moved the counties formed around them. So doing your research, it could be difficult because Hawkins County kept their records. So if you're looking for someone in Hancock County, well, you're going to have to find the parent counties and your family didn't move.

**Heather Andolina:**

This has been such great information, Aaron. We really appreciate you being with us today and being on our podcast. Thank you so much.

**Aaron Collins:**

It has been an honor and a pleasure, and I have been excited. And one other word of advice real quick is if you have a photograph, put a name on it. If you know who the person is, put that name on it. If you think it's Mary Johnson, put that down with a question mark. But label, label, label. Because as much as we want to be here forever, we won't be. And also, as much as we want our memory to last forever, it's not going to. So that's a big, maybe pet peeve of mine. Label it. If you don't have the ability, get someone who can and sit there and just tell them who it is and let them write it and use something that's a little more permanent than pencil.

**Heather Andolina:**

That's great advice, Aaron. Thank you so much.

**Aaron Collins:**

You're welcome.

**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 @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.