

## **Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Four Transcripts, Episode Six: Scott Withrow**

**Lis Malone:**

Welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast, presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone and I'm here with Heather Andolina, who is the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association. Wow. I'm surrounded by such greatness. You know what? You don't have to be great yourself. You just have to hang out with people who are great and you're automatically elevated.

**Heather Andolina:**

But you're great too, Lis.

**Lis Malone:**

She just doesn't want me to edit her badly. I'm on to you, Andolina.

**Heather Andolina:**

I don't know what you're talking about.

**Lis Malone:**

Speaking of great, we are in episode six of our fourth season. We've always had some great guests and we have two fantastic updates from past guests. We've got a twofer.

**Heather Andolina:**

All right. Thank you, Lis. First up, we have William Isom, our guest from season two, episode four. He has informed us that the third season of the Black in Appalachia Podcast is now available. Help support our fellow podcasters by checking them out on your favorite podcast platform.

And then, we also have an awesome update from Katya Faris. She was from last season, season three, episode three. She has released an all new album with 10 original songs in Arabic available now on Spotify, so check it out.

**Lis Malone:**

Hey, I'd love to hear about some of the great continued work from these fine folks that have appeared on the Melungeon Voices podcast. Congratulations to William Isom with the new season. Bravo. We always love other great podcasts. And to Katya and your continued success with your music endeavors.

Congratulations to you both and we hope to hear more updates as we move forward. Great information, Heather. Thank you so much for sharing that with all of us. Let's now move into this week's episode. What do we have in store?

**Heather Andolina:**

Well, we are going to be speaking with the previous president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Scott Withrow. Scott Withrow is an author, editor, and history teacher as well as a park ranger for the National Park Service.

Scott was formerly the board president of the Melungeon Heritage Association for five years and is the current president emeritus of the Melungeon Heritage Association. Scott is the editor as well as an author of one of the essays in the book, Carolina Genesis, which is a compilation of essays about people of mixed heritage. In today's episode, Scott and I discuss the founding of the Melungeon Heritage Association and the ambiguity of mixed heritage and racial identity.

**Lis Malone:**

Heather, any intimidation speaking with your presidential predecessor?

**Heather Andolina:**

Scott's awesome. No. He's been awesome this whole time.

**Lis Malone:**

He sure is. Definitely enjoyed my time speaking with him. So let's let everyone listen in and they can hear for themselves.

**Heather Andolina:**

Hi, Scott. How are you today?

**Scott Withrow:**

Hi, Heather. I'm doing well. Thank you.

**Heather Andolina:**

Good. I'd like to start off with this question. When was the first time you learned about the Melungeon people or heard the term Melungeon?

**Scott Withrow:**

I learned that ... I remember exactly what happened. I was with a school district and I got a humanities council grant. The title of the class was South Carolina as Part of the Appalachians, and the representative of the humanities council here in South Carolina said, "Well, why don't you get Brent Kennedy? He speaks about the Melungeons."

Well, I'd seen the name a few times in books or magazines, but I didn't know a lot. Brent came down. Dr. Brent Kennedy came down and talked and that was my first interest. I went to the first union and quite a few after then, so that was the beginning right there.

**Heather Andolina:**

Scott, tell us about your Melungeon ancestry.

**Scott Withrow:**

I didn't know that I had any at one time, but Dr. Brent Kennedy again pointed out in a meeting that I might have Collins ancestry. And I looked into my genealogy and I did. I have Collins grandparents, quite a few years back. Great-great whatever. It was William Collins and we don't know his wife's name.

Their daughter, Suzanne, married William Dobbins, so I'm descended from that family in North Carolina. I found out later that many of the Collins ... There are a lot of Williams in the Collins, so that's my

problem in tracing this family. The number of Williams in the family. William was a very common given name among male Collins members.

**Heather Andolina:**

That is interesting. I too have Collins, so maybe somewhere you and I might be distant cousins.

**Scott Withrow:**

Yes, it could very well be. Yes. My Collins ... If it was the same Collins in Tennessee, in Vardy, mine came south instead of migrating west into what became Tennessee. Not everybody made it there to that area, and some people of course migrated from that area.

**Heather Andolina:**

Exactly. Mine went into Vardy. Mine were from Vardy Valley.

**Scott Withrow:**

I'm still trying to find a link there between Vardy Valley and mine. I think there is, but I haven't found it yet. Maybe by DNA some way. I've talked with other people also about their Collins and doing a lot of research in North Carolina. And it's so early that the research is not easy.

I think the Hillsborough area, Hillsborough County, early Granville County, Moore County, which was created from Bladen County ... Those are some of the counties that there were Collins in. Near present Durham, North Carolina, the Eno River, that area. I'm interested in the migration roots of people moving west, maybe through that area.

But maybe not everybody moved west. Maybe it was my family who came further south into Cleveland and Lincoln and Rutherford County in Western North Carolina. There were quite a few Collins there I can never connect. Or haven't so far. I may some day.

**Heather Andolina:**

I think you will. You have been involved with the MHA since the very beginning as well as served as its board president for five years. Would you share a bit about when and how the MHA was started?

**Scott Withrow:**

It started in Wise, Virginia with Dr. Brent Kennedy and others there. The first union was 1997, and I went to it and quite a few afterwards. I missed a few somewhere along the way, but I certainly remember a lot of them. There was quite a large crowd the first year and second year. A lot of people coming. More than Brent Kennedy thought.

They had a tent outside one or two years, I know. And then, we met at Kingsport and we met outside there. We just happened to not have rain, I suppose, and that worked well. You can never tell, of course. I've enjoyed going to these meetings. I always learned something.

Some of the very first, Don Marler spoke. He was from Louisiana and Texas and was connected to Redbone history, and I learned a lot from Don also about the Redbones in Louisiana and Texas and South Carolina too.

**Heather Andolina:**

And it's been going 27 years now.

**Scott Withrow:**

Yes. It's hard to believe, but yes. And I think I was president for five ... About four or five.

**Heather Andolina:**

Right before me.

**Scott Withrow:**

Well, I was going to be president for two years and I decided, "Well, I'll stay on, if they'll have me." So I remained for those years. It grew on me.

**Heather Andolina:**

With all the years you've spent with the MHA, what significant changes have you observed over the years?

**Scott Withrow:**

One of the changes is that we met in different places over time. We always have done that some, but we spread out more and more in North Carolina, places like that. Older people in the group are now passed. Johnny Gibson Ray was one, and Claude Collins and others. I've seen that change over the years too.

There are others too, but those two I can think of right off. Those are the biggest changes I've seen. Some of the passing of some of the older Melungeon family members, and also the change more to technology and the use of the internet and Facebook too.

**Heather Andolina:**

Scott, how about all of the advances we have made in genetics with DNA?

**Scott Withrow:**

Certainly, that's a big part. I'm still learning and I think other people are too. There's so much out there, but I think that it's important. We've done that with DNA and quite a few advances. I'm still learning a lot myself day to day.

I'm a traditional researcher in lots of ways, but sometimes you can't find the documentation. So I think the genetic research, DNA research is ideal now.

**Heather Andolina:**

It's a perfect match with science and research in further study of the Melungeon people.

**Scott Withrow:**

It is. And it's exciting too. New books are coming out all along. It's a journey of discovery.

**Heather Andolina:**

Speaking of books, you're an editor and have both edited and written an essay in the book, Carolina Genesis. I have it right here. What inspired you to get involved in the editing and contribute your writing to this book?

**Scott Withrow:**

Well, Brent Kennedy did at first. He always encouraged me to write, but I couldn't always travel to certain places as easily. So I wrote about someone in the book, Joseph Willis, who lived in South Carolina, who was born a slave in eastern North Carolina. His father was the plantation owner.

There may have been Native American ancestry also, but while he was still a slave, he fought for Francis Marion the Swamp Fox of the American Revolution. With the permission of his father, I'm sure, and mother. He was emancipated in ... I've forgotten the date right now, but his first cousin, John Willis, founded the city of Lumberton, North Carolina. It's near where the Lumbee Indians are.

He migrated west at some point to Greenville, South Carolina and lived across the Reedy River here and there. I got somebody to throw up a plat of his property there, 600 acres as I remember. It's part of West Greenville now. He was here a while, and then moved on to Louisiana.

When they had the Redbone conference in Alexandria, Louisiana, I went out and Dr. Brent Kennedy was there then and spoke about Joseph Willis. He became known as the father of the Redbones there in Western Louisiana. That all interested me, that travel, the migration. Why did he migrate? Better economic opportunity? Was it for racial reasons? All of that enters in together when people migrate, so that was part of that.

**Heather Andolina:**

They definitely were just like the Melungeon people, migrating from the East Coast into Appalachia.

**Scott Withrow:**

Being able to go out there was great. I remember Don Marler and his wife, Sybil, took us to an early folk cemetery out there that had grave shelters or grave houses very similar to the ones in Appalachia.

I'm not sure that everybody who had a grave shelter was Melungeon or Redbone, but a lot of people who were did have grave shelters in these areas of Appalachia, West Virginia, and Louisiana also. So I got interested in that too. The grave shelters and burial practices.

**Heather Andolina:**

That's very interesting.

**Scott Withrow:**

Of course, some of them, the Redbones, went on to Texas, Ashworth, and I got interested in those families who went there.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes. You had written about the Lungeons of Arkansas. We have your article in the MHA newsletter.

**Scott Withrow:**

Yes. There were a number of families who went out there. There was what we think was a Gibson family. They go back to Stony Creek Church in Virginia, known for its Melungeon members. Especially, in the Church minutes, it mentions Melungeons. There was also a Hall family. They settled in the eastern part of the Ozarks along the White River.

I've got to go out there now too and do more research, but I've met some wonderful people along the way who helped with research out there. Made a lot of calls and emails through Arkansas, and so there were Melungeons in Arkansas.

**Heather Andolina:**

Scott, in your opinion, how do mixed heritage groups like the Melungeon people blur the lines of racial identity?

**Scott Withrow:**

I think it has to do with often the community that they lived in, how they were accepted as white or black, or whoever, Native American. I think it had to do with who was taking the census and who they knew in the community. Sometimes I've always thought it was personality too, that some people had a personality that made themselves available. It's been said too that people who fought in battles, in war, like the American Revolution made themselves more acceptable among white culture that way.

The line is often blurred because of census, who is the poll taker that the census taker saw in the family, how they were perceived in the community. One of the Hall men has been written up about being a real person of the frontier in Arkansas. All of that plays in. Of course, there was discrimination, certainly. Not getting the best land always. The voting. Other things.

I've researched people in Virginia along Peddler's Creek who have some Monacan ancestry, and as long as they were up in the mountains near where the Blue Ridge Parkway is today, they were considered Native Americans. But when they moved down to work in Buchanan or some of the other towns in the valley of Virginia, they were known as African then or Black.

So it's how people want to perceive them and the blurring of identity. Here, you have that opposite of Native and African. Not particularly opposite, but you have that change of perception. Of course, they might've been competing for jobs with other people, so that may have been where that came from.

**Heather Andolina:**

And that goes right into my next question. The Melungeon people have been described as, quote, "Too white to be Black and too Black to be white." End quote. How much do you agree with this description?

**Scott Withrow:**

I think they were caught in the middle, really. They wanted to be sometimes perceived as white. There became a denial sometimes for people in the family. They wanted to be part of the white community sometimes. Not everybody lived in a large Melungeon community like the Vardy area, and some people migrated to live in cities too.

I'm thinking of Detroit, Michigan during the auto industry boom there. People were moving and they wanted to forget about their past, move on, and be part of the mainstream of American life. But it's wonderful that many people of Melungeon descent have discovered that ancestry now that they left behind sometimes.

And it's understandable that someone would want to do that. It's not denying. Well, it's denying in a way, but it's learning to accept also. So I think that they're coming back to looking at their ancestry and many people are. And that's all good.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes, I agree with you on that, Scott. I think it's wonderful that we have so many more people reaching out to our organization, the MHA, to learn more about their Melungeon ancestry. We get all kinds of inquiries every day and I think it's just fabulous.

**Scott Withrow:**

I'm glad. I'm glad that that's happened.

**Heather Andolina:**

Scott, is there anything else you wish to share with our listeners?

**Scott Withrow:**

I think I've mentioned, I've just met a lot of wonderful people along the way. I like to think of all the positive things that have happened, and I like to think of the positive things that are happening now and will happen in the future.

I think the MHA has a good future. It's in good hands. I hope I can attend many more unions and I'm glad you're meeting sometime in North Carolina too. That's good. Especially, I think, in the Hillsborough area.

**Heather Andolina:**

Scott, we don't know that for sure, (wink, wink), but we'll be announcing that later in the season.

**Scott Withrow:**

Sounds good to me.

**Heather Andolina:**

How can our listeners get in contact with you?

**Scott Withrow:**

Heather, you can contact me by Facebook, where I have an account. You can also contact MHA and they'll pass the message along.

**Heather Andolina:**

Scott, thank you so much for being on our podcast and for your ongoing contributions to the MHA. It was an absolute pleasure talking with you.

**Scott Withrow:**

Thank you, Heather, and I enjoyed it all and look forward to the next unions.

**Heather Andolina:**

We'll see you there, Scott.

**Scott Withrow:**

Great. I plan to be there.

**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 [melungeon.org](http://melungeon.org).

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