

MELUNGEON HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

Spring 2016 Newsletter

20TH UNION

June 23 - 25, 2016

Vardy, TN - Big Stone Gap, VA

President's Column
by Scott Withrow

It's always a pleasure to return to Big Stone Gap, Virginia, and Vardy, Tennessee. It is especially auspicious this year because it is 20th Union and our focus is on Melungeons in Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. While we welcome members and speakers from people of mixed ancestry who are not necessarily Melungeon or Melungeon-related, it is appropriate, I think, for our 20th Union to return to our roots, so to speak--to southwest Virginia and East Tennessee. I hope all members can join us. Next year, we will branch out once again, possibly emphasizing migration and a sense of place with diverse people and places, meeting, we hope for the first time, between the Tri-Cities area of Tennessee and Virginia and Knoxville, Tennessee.

This year, we have a special workshop offered by Mike Gilley of the Wampler Library, Mountain Empire Community College. **If you arrive early, as I plan to do, on June 23, prior to 20th Union, you can take advantage of genealogy workshops on African-American research, genealogy software packages, and an introduction to DNA studies. These workshops are free of charge to members of the Melungeon Heritage Association and the Wise County Historical Society.** More detailed information on these workshops will be forthcoming on the MHA website: <http://melungeon.ning.com/> We thank Mike and Mountain Empire Community College and our other collaborators for the weekend--the Wise County Historical Society, the Vardy Community Historical Society Museum, and the Southwest Virginia Historical Museum State Park--for opportunities to bring people together from throughout the region and nationwide to share in Melungeon history and genealogy. Contact Mike Gilley at mgilley@mecc.edu to register (registration is encouraged).

On Friday, June 24, we will visit Vardy, Tennessee where DruAnna Williams Overbay will speak to us at the Vardy Community Historical Society Museum. You may wish to drive directly to Vardy or caravan/carpool from the Big Stone Gap area. For those driving on their own from Big Stone Gap or elsewhere, use the following address as a GPS point in Vardy, Tennessee, near the museum: 3865

Vardy Blackwater, Sneedville, TN 37869-6432. For those who wish to arrive first in the Big Stone Gap area and caravan or car-pool from there, please meet at the Holiday Inn –Norton, Virginia parking area (1051 Park Ave NW, Norton, VA 24273) at 10:30 a. m., Friday, June 24. I have attached a hand-drawn map of the trip from Big Stone Gap to the Vardy Museum. Vardy is a wonderful experience—a Melungeon homeland to be sure in a beautiful valley tucked away in the Ridge and Valley Province of Appalachia with a celebrated history.

Friday evening is special, and I hope everyone can join us. At 6:00 there is a reception (light fare food and refreshments), in the Victorian Parlor, Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park, 10 E 1st St N, Big Stone Gap, VA 24219. Julie Williams Dixon’s photographic exhibit, “People and Their People,” will be on display during the reception, and, afterwards, at 7:00 Julie will discuss her exhibit and facilitate a discussion focused on the value of photography in historical genealogical study. Again, Julie welcomes participants to bring family portraits to share with the group.

On Saturday, June 25, we will begin 9:00 a. m. at the Goodloe Center, connected to Phillips Taylor Hall, Mountain Empire Community College (campus map attached) and end by 4:00 p. m. Our speakers include Wayne Winkler, Stephanie Musick, and Laura Tugman, .At 1:45, Paul Johnson will introduce S. J. Arthur and Wayne Winkler, who will present the history of the Melungeon Heritage Association.

Walk-ins are welcome to 20th Union, but pre-registration assists MHA in better service and planning for the Union. MHA will, however, need pre-registration from all those persons planning to attend the reception on Friday evening, June 24 at the Southwest Virginia Historical Museum. We have received a special rate for rooms with the Holiday Inn-Norton, 1051 Park Ave NW, Norton, VA 24273. If you want to stay there and get the discount call the local number at (276) 679-6655 for reservations and say you are with MHA. Their toll-free national reservation number doesn't work for discounts.

RACISM IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by Stephanie Musick

Some background information:

I graduated with an undergraduate degree in Business Management with a minor in History from Bluefield College, located in Bluefield, Virginia. I was uncertain about my career at this point, and I started working in the local school system and found my passion for teaching and learning. I earned a teaching license while working. I stayed with the school system for several years and then decided to attend graduate school. I attended Emory and Henry College in Emory, Virginia. I wrote my capstone paper on the Writ Robinson collection of artifacts. I started teaching History at Bluefield State College in Bluefield, West Virginia after graduation. I became a member the Tazewell County Historical Society and Melungeon Heritage Association per the encouragement of Dr. Terry Mullins (my former high school history teacher). I decided to take an additional graduate class at Virginia Tech. The professor wanted us to compile and begin the research process on a specific historical question. I began researching the question in the article below. At this point, the research is ongoing.

This paper will be at the end of this newsletter

MELUNGEON BUS TOUR

Former MHA president and 20th Union presenter Wayne Winkler will again lead a Melungeon Bus Tour on Saturday, June 11th. The tour will depart the Southwest Virginia Historical Museum in Big Stone Gap at 8 a.m., and will visit sites important in Melungeon history. Stops include the site of Ft. Blackmore (an important stop for settlers moving west, including several Melungeon families), the site of the Stony Creek Primitive Baptist Church (where the first written mention of Melungeons appeared), the Hancock County Historical and Genealogical Society in Sneedville, TN, the site of the outdoor drama Walk Toward the Sunset, and the Vardy Community Historical Society Museum and Mahala Mullins cabin. For more information, contact the Museum at (276)523-1322.

Schedule – 20th Union

June 23, 24, and 25, 2016 Big Stone Gap, Virginia, and Vardy, Tennessee

Thursday, June 23

Pre-conference Genealogy Workshop-Mountain Empire Community College. The following speakers have been contracted to do a genealogy workshop on Thursday, June 23, prior to 20th Union. The speakers are sponsored by Wampler Library, Mountain Empire Community College at no charge to members of the Wise County Historical Society (WCHS) or the Melungeon Heritage Association (MHA). Contact Mike Gilley at mgilley@mecc.edu to register (registration is encouraged).

9:00 a. m.-12:00 noon...Dr. Paula D. Royster: African American Research for the Novice. Ms. Royster is a Humanities and Cultural doctoral student at Union Institute and University where she is working on a creative dissertation on the Ottoman Empire's role in the Arab-Oriental Slave Trade.



12 AM – 1:30 PM Lunch on your own.

1:30 – 2:50 PM..... Philip Edwards: "Family of Tree Makers": Computer-Automated Genealogy in 2016. Philip Edwards is a Hybrid Academic Librarian and Information Technology Specialist at Wampler Library of Mountain Empire Community College (MECC) in Big Stone Gap.

3:10 – 4:30 PM..... Lynda Davis-Logan: DNA for Family History Studies (DNA terminology, various companies for DNA) Lynda is a retired teacher

who has studied genealogy for 50 years. She attended 13th Union in 2011 at Chief Logan Conference Center, Logan, West Virginia, where she was motivated to begin a study of DNA.

Friday, June 24

Those wanting to carpool/caravan to Vardy, meet at the Holiday Inn parking lot at 1051 Park Ave NW, Norton, VA 2427 at 10 a.m. (Norton is approximately 12 miles north of Big Stone Gap). For those driving on their own from Big Stone Gap or elsewhere, use the following address as a GPS point in Vardy, Tennessee: 3865 Vardy Blackwater, Sneedville, TN 37869-6432. A hand-drawn map (not to scale) with directions from Big Stone Gap to Vardy is included. Vardy Community is one valley over and north of Sneedville, Tennessee in the Ridge and Valley Province of Tennessee-Virginia. Meet at the Vardy Museum/former Vardy Presbyterian Church.

10:30 a. m.Leave Holiday Inn parking lot, Norton, Virginia for carpooling/caravaning to Vardy, Tennessee. **Drive on your own from other locations if you wish.**

11:45 a. m......Arrive Vardy (approximate time)

11:45 a.m. -12:30 p. m.....Lunch at Vardy (sandwich lunch provided, bring a lunch if you require gluten-free or an otherwise special diet)

12:30-2:30 p. m...... Tour Vardy Historical Museum/District

6:00 p. m...... .Reception (light fare food and refreshments), Victorian Parlor, Southwest Virginia Historical Museum State Park, 10 E 1st St N, Big Stone Gap, VA 24219. Exhibit of Julie Williams Dixon's photographic prints, "People and Their People." Afterwards, the exhibit will be moved to our Saturday meeting site (Goodloe Center), Mountain Empire Community College.

7:00 p.m...... Julie Williams Dixon. Following the reception, Julie will talk briefly about her photography exhibit, "People and Their People," and also facilitate a group discussion focused on the value of photography in historical genealogical study. Again, she welcomes participants to bring family portraits to share with the group. (Again at Southwest Virginia Historical Museum State Park, 10 E 1st St N, Big Stone Gap, VA 24219)

Saturday, June 25

We will meet in the Goodloe Center, adjacent to Phillips-Taylor Hall, Mountain Empire Community College, 3441 Mountain Empire Rd, Big Stone Gap, VA 24219. Directions to the Goodloe Center: Mountain Empire Community College is located off US Highway 23 just

south of Business 23 exits for Big Stone Gap. **Traveling south from Norton, turn right onto the campus. Turn immediately to the left on the Campus Loop Road. Travel to the top of the hill and park in parking lot E on your left. Traveling north towards Norton, turn left onto the campus just before Business 23 exits for Big Stone Gap. Turn immediately to the left on the Campus Loop Road. Travel to the top of the hill and park in parking lot E on your left. All activities are in the Goodloe Center across the road from parking lot E.**

Handicapped parking is available behind the Goodloe Center (See the campus map). Signs will be posted. Williams Dixon's photographic prints, "People and Their People," will be displayed in the Goodloe Center.

9:00 a.m......Announcements: Mike Gilley, Scott Withrow

9:30 a.m.-10:15 a.m......Wayne Winkler: Melungeon Keynote Talk

10:15-10:30 a.m...... Break

10:30 a. m.-11:15 a.m....Stephanie Musick: Tazewell County Schools in the 1930s

11:15-11:30 a.m...... Announcements

11:30 a.m. -1:00 p.m.... Lunch on your own

1:00-1:45 p.m...... .Laura Tugman: Ongoing Melungeon Research

1:45-2:30 p.m. S. J. Arthur, Wayne Winkler (Paul Johnson-Introductions): History of the Melungeon Heritage Association

2:30- 3:00 p. m.Break/Executive Committee meeting/prepare for final announcements/raffle

2:45 or 3:00-4:00 p. m....Final announcements/raffle

RACISM IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By Stephanie Musick

Section 1--The Question

Main Question

Did racism exist in Southwest Virginia public schools during the 1930s against those who did not fit the typical white norm?

Supplemental Questions

1. What is racism? What is discrimination? Are these behaviors taught or learned?
2. Who are defined as non-whites, Melungeons, mongrels, and people from other races?
3. What racial discriminations were occurring in the 1930s, specifically in Southwest Virginia?
4. What was defined as a public school in Southwest Virginia (specifically Tazewell County)?

5. Who was Walter Ashby Plecker and what were his beliefs? Were these beliefs connected to the Klu Klux Klan (KKK)?
6. Was this area affected by the Jim Crow Laws?

Section 2--Historiography

I have found very little literature that exists on this specific topic. The stigma of Virginia is that everything about the Commonwealth stops at Roanoke. I conducted numerous interviews, reviewed texts written about Tazewell County, Virginia, and reviewed books specifically about the Melungeon people from Hancock County, Tennessee.

The definitions of racism and discrimination contain stigmas that have had lingering effects throughout history. Each one is discussed in the current literature on these subjects. Concerning the topic of racism in Southwest Virginia public schools in the 1930s, the following personal interview summary best illustrates the realities. The person interviewed was a young, third grader attending Wittens Mills Elementary School, a white school located in Tazewell County, Virginia. She recalled her parents visiting the school to discuss her family origin. In another example, she also remembered her teacher asking her on the playground if she was Cherokee. Her reply to the question was “yes.”¹

The definition of non-white includes those individuals who were classified as either Free Persons of Color², Melungeons, Mongrels, Mulattoes, or other racial type. These classifications were based on the viewpoint of having only two races, black and white.

The racial accounts that occurred in public schools in Southwest Virginia were rarely documented. In Tazewell County, Virginia, for example, the current literature only provides a listing of the public schools, with only a minimal amount of information about some of them, such as location. School records found at the local school board office, though, make the story come to life. Extensive personal interviews helped provide the location of many of these schools. Ninety-five elementary and high schools, both white and black/colored, existed in Tazewell County during the 1930s.³

The 1930s in Virginia specifically provided the distinct classification between blacks and whites, per the Director of Vital Statistics for the Commonwealth of Virginia, Dr. Walter Ashby Plecker. Individuals attending these schools were subject to the 1/16th rule per the Virginia Racial Integrity Law of 1924. This law stated that if a person was 1/16th black or colored race, they were to have attended the black school in the community.⁴ Plecker thought the Commonwealth needed to be cleansed ethnically. This viewpoint was not limited to the 1930s; this racial stigma existed well into the 1960s and even into the times of today. One source notes that Dr. Plecker had no direct connection to the Klu Klux Klan.⁵ It is so ironic, though, that the viewpoints of this individual and this group are so closely identical. It makes one wonder what was really happening! By the 1940s, Dr. Plecker drafted a letter and mailed it to all of the local

¹ Margaret Booth, interviewed by author. Bluefield, VA. November 11, 2010.

² Jim Callahan, *Lest We Forget-The Melungeon Colony of Newman's Ridge*. (Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 2000) 141.

³ Tazewell County Public Schools-Term Report-Elementary and High Schools, 1929-1930 and 1937-1938.

⁴ “Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924.”

http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/encounter/projects/monacans/Contemporary_Monacans/racial.html (accessed November 2, 2010).

⁵ “Social Origins of Eugenics.” <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay7text.html> (accessed November 22, 2010).

registrars, physicians, nurses, school superintendents, and other agencies. In this letter, he wrote that he felt as though certain individuals were trying to pass as a different race. He identified these individuals by their last names and the county in which they resided.⁶

The Jim Crow Laws began in the 1880s and continued into the 1960s. The Jim Crow Laws were a way of classifying black individuals. These people during this time were viewed as second-rate citizens. The visual signs displayed about these citizens and their distinctions were found in restaurants, restrooms, water fountains, churches, schools, and public transportation.⁷

This specific topic would be useful in racial studies about Southwest Virginia and public education. This historical discrimination needs to be examined because it affected everyone directly or indirectly that lived in Southwest Virginia.

Section 3--Method

The methodology behind this project involves a mixture of cultural history, oral history, microhistory, macrohistory, and Marxism. The main question leads to all of these elements of the mixture because of the societal view that is directly linked with the broader picture occurring at the same time. I would categorize them from the most important to the least important.

First, cultural history, in this context, is defined as the understanding of the location's history in the areas being examined. This method is linked to the early post modern view of the 1960s and the linguistic turn that occurred in the late 1970s. In this project, cultural history involves defining the culture of Southwest Virginia. The residents from this area usually have a very southern accent and are known for being very quiet. During the timeframe of the 1930s, the working culture in this area focused on coal mining and agriculture. One individual that was interviewed recalled that his family moved when he was in elementary school. At the first elementary school that he attended, everyone was from farming families. In the new school, however, he immediately noticed that there was a distinction between the rich and the poor students, due to the varying occupations of the students' families.⁸

Next, oral history is identified as the recording or writing of a narrative about what someone recalls about their past. This method dates back to the early 1960s, under the category of post modern history. In this report, oral history provides the majority of the primary source information. Several individuals were interviewed that had connections to Southwest Virginia, either by attending a local elementary school in the 1930s or by attending one of the schools that Dr. Plecker targeted with his racial actions. These individuals provided wonderful illustrations and made history come alive, again.

Third, microhistory can be defined as examining a single event in history. This concept of methodology dates back to the 1890s. For this project, the microhistorical view would be based on the single event of racism. It would further branch out to cover macrohistory, the method in which several events are examined. This category of macrohistory would add in the following subheadings: Southwest Virginia public schools, the timeframe of the 1930s, and non-white people that did not fit the traditional white norm.

⁶http://www.africanamerican.si.edu/attachments/1295/Walter_Ashby_Pleckers_hit_list_of_Native_American_Indian_Virginia_Surnames.jpg (accessed November 22, 2010).

⁷ "What Was Jim Crow?" <http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/what.htm> (accessed November 13, 2010).

⁸ Jack Proffitt. Interviewed by author. Bluefield, VA. November 23, 2010.

Lastly, the concept of Marxism/capitalism from the 1960s, in this research, represents one social class being dominated by another. For the main question, the struggle or moral issue is between who should attend the black or white schools. The students and their parents done exactly what they were told to do.

Section 4--A Preliminary Hypothesis

Initially, I surely thought racism existed. I never realized the full impact of racism, though, until attempting to answer this research question. Racism and discrimination have divided Tazewell County residents in their everyday lives, especially when these residents attended the segregated local public schools. Dr. Walter Ashby Plecker was the overseer of this distinction, dividing the residents by the color of their skin. He only saw the two racial colors of black and white. In other words, he did not have any gray area or classification. One must also ask some “what if” questions. First, what if these students would have been able to attend the correct school based on the color of their skin? Second, if so, would have they received a better education? Did these students realize the impact of what was going on around them, or was it just an accepted behavior? One white student remembered the black students being bused to another school in the county to receive their education.⁹ One black student recalls attending elementary school through the 7th grade and then attending the local colored high school. She also remembered the teachers being very caring and supportive towards the education of the students. This colored school offered advanced courses such as Latin, Algebra, Chemistry, and others. This school was also very competitive in sports. The only negative about the school that she remembered was when others came to visit their school and thought it was odd that the students played competitive sports in the two small classrooms that opened up to make one large one.¹⁰ Further research would be needed to fully understand the impact of racism, the work of Dr. Plecker, and the impact on the public schools in Tazewell County, Virginia during the 1930s era.

Additional Notes:

In preparing and researching for this paper and oral presentation, I have continued to have some recurring thoughts. I am 1/16th Cherokee through the lineage of my great great grandmother; consequently, I would have fit this model that existed in the 1930s. Which school would I have attended? I have a great, great grandfather that was raised in Hancock County, Tennessee. I also exhibit many Melungeon traits, such as the olive skin, the thin lips, the tall forehead, and the high arch in my feet.¹¹ Would I have been viewed as a person of color?

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this research question/project has been very enlightening and informative. I have interviewed some wonderful individuals who were willing to share their school memories with me. I have resided in Tazewell County, Virginia my entire life and I never knew the full effect of the actions that Dr. Plecker had taken. This project only touched the surface, and further research would need to be conducted to gain a full understanding of what actually happened in Southwest Virginia, specifically in the Tazewell County public schools in the 1930s.

⁹ Charlotte Puckett, interviewed by author. Bluefield, VA. November 28, 2010.

¹⁰ Eva Saunders, interviewed by author. Bluefield, VA. November 28, 2010.

¹¹ Katherine Vande Brake, *Through the Back Door –Melungeon Literacies and Twenty-first-Century Technologies*. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009) 33 and 36.

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