

# ***THE NEW YORK TIMES***

**By Richard Fausset**

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## ***Tracing the Roots of South Carolina's 'Turks,' Before They Melt Away***

DALZELL, S.C. — As a teenager growing up in rural Sumter County, Brian Benenhaley resented the white people who looked down on his dark-skinned father. The resentment fueled his ambition, and he took a certain satisfaction, on high school awards nights, in bringing his father the trophies and plaques he had won.

“I’d give them to my dad, and watch some of the white folk have to come by and acknowledge that your boy did O.K., or maybe even a little better than O.K.,” said Mr. Benenhaley, 44, who is now a corporate lawyer based in Columbia, the state capital.

Such stories of pride and prejudice are common among nonwhite people in the Deep South. But Mr. Benenhaley belongs to an uncommon tranche of the population, one that never fell neatly into the region’s old racial binary.

Based on little more than oral tradition, they call themselves Turks, and have long claimed to be a kind of “white folk” themselves; indeed, they have been known to harbor their own prejudices. Mr. Benenhaley said his father, who died in 2013, would have been scandalized if his sister had dated a black boy.

Even so, people in Sumter County have long considered the Turks, who have never numbered more than a few hundred, to be in a racial category of their own, a cluster of insular, dark-complexioned families suspended in the tricky Southern space between white and nonwhite — and, some would say, between fact and legend.

For much of the 20th century, the authorities in Sumter County treated them that way, too: they were segregated into Turkish public schools, Turkish theater seats and Turkish hospital beds. But because the Turks traced their ancestry to a man described as “Caucasian of ‘Arab’ descent,” they were allowed to vote in the age of Jim Crow.

The way Mr. Benenhaley’s relatives told it, the Turks are descended from Joseph Benenhaley, who had come to colonial America from the Ottoman Empire. The empire, centered in what is now Turkey, ruled most of the Arab world at that time. Some people have speculated that “Joseph Benenhaley” was Anglicized from an Arabic name, Yusuf ben Ali.

This patriarch was said to have helped Brig. Gen. Thomas Sumter, the county’s namesake, fight the British in the Revolutionary War, and to have received a tract of land from General



Brian Benenhaley, a descendant of Joseph Benenhaley, at the Long Branch Baptist Church in Dalzell, S.C. Credit Travis Dove for The New York Times

Sumter afterward as a reward for loyal service. (It was a great-grandson of General Sumter who described Joseph Benenhaley decades later as a “Caucasian of ‘Arab’ descent.”)

The story is their sole connection to actual Turkishness: There is no trace of Anatolia in the way they speak or cook or dance. They are not Muslims or Orthodox Christians. Their historical spiritual home is the Long Branch Baptist Church on Peach Orchard Road.

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It is also a story that has never been very well documented. And over the years, several writers and researchers have suspected that it was a convenient fiction, relied upon to help a mixed-race people evade enslavement and the other abuses and indignities forced upon nonwhite Southerners.

In recent years, even some of the Turks have come to doubt their origin story, choosing instead to embrace the idea that they are Native American. In 2013, the South Carolina government recognized some of them as the Sumter Tribe of Cheraw Indians, a step that opened a rift in the small community.

Mr. Benenhaley brushes aside that idea. “We never lived as American Indians,” he said.

Now there is another layer of both clarity and complication: A new book, published by the University of South Carolina Press this spring, argues that the Turks’ quasi-mythic patriarch was not a myth at all, but a real man who probably hailed from the Middle East, or somewhere close to it.

“We’ve learned the true history of the Turkish people, solving a 200-year mystery,” said Glen Browder, a co-author of the book. “The critics that dismiss the claims about their narrative as pure racism, they were pretty much off target.”

Mr. Browder, 75, is a white native of Sumter County and a former congressman who has long been obsessed with the story of the Turks and the mystery at the core of their identity. He wrote the book, “South Carolina’s Turkish People: A History and Ethnology,” with Terri Ann Ognibene, an Atlanta-area high school teacher of Sumter County Turkish descent who wrote a doctoral thesis about her people.

The authors were aware that they were treading on sensitive ground. Online arguments between the two camps — those who still consider themselves Turks and those who now say they are Cheraw — have grown so heated that when the authors appeared recently at a local history museum, organizers requested a police presence.

Ralph J. Oxendine, the chief of the Cheraw tribe, flatly dismissed the book’s findings in a telephone interview. “They don’t have any documented proof about Joseph Benenhaley,” he said.

The authors accept that there is a Native American piece to the puzzle: The Turks began intermarrying with native people early in their history, they say. But they reject the suggestion floated over the years that the Turks should be grouped among the [Melungeons](#), mixed-race people of uncertain origin who settled in parts of Tennessee, Virginia and Kentucky.

Instead, they lay out a compelling, if circumstantial, case for the Ottoman provenance of Joseph Benenhaley.

They found an 1815 land plat signed by Thomas Sumter that labels as “Joseph’s Land” the area where Joseph Benenhaley is believed to have settled, and where many Turks still live today. They also located a 1934 letter written by a woman named Matilda Ellison, who was born in the 1840s and whose grandfather would probably have known both the Sumter and Benenhaley families in the early 1800s.

In the letter, Ms. Ellison refers to Joseph Benenhaley as “an Ottoman bonded by the Spanish at sea” who worked for Sumter as a wheelwright during the Revolution in exchange for a homestead.

Perhaps most important, the authors were given access to DNA reports for some of Joseph Benenhaley’s descendants, showing “predominantly Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/North African ancestry — with slight European markers” and “no evidence of Native American or sub-Saharan African blood.”



The Long Branch Baptist Church is the historical spiritual home of Sumter County Turks. Generations of Brian Benenhaley’s relatives are buried behind the church. Credit Travis Dove for The New York Times

Calvin Trillin, the celebrated writer for *The New Yorker*, came to Sumter County in the late 1960s, and wrote about the Turks with a mixture of amusement and scorn. He also wrote of their “obsession about being white,” and the court battles they had fought in the Jim Crow years, asserting that their ancestry should entitle their children to attend the county’s whites-only schools.

The new book may settle the question of where the Turks came from, but it comes at a time when their insularity and distinctiveness has been melting away through intermarriage and migration.

Brian Benenhaley’s mother, April Benenhaley, is a white New Yorker who moved to Sumter County when her military father was transferred to Shaw Air Force Base in 1968. She remembers seeing deep prejudice and suspicion toward the Turks in those days.

“When my daddy first got stationed here, he was told, ‘Don’t have car trouble on 441’” — the route number for Peach Orchard Road, the main route through the Turks’ home turf around the small town of Dalzell.

Like many of his generation, Brian Benenhaley moved away from the Turks’ home turf when he came of age, in search of opportunities that a low-income farming area could not provide. His skin tone is much lighter than his father’s was. Beyond the Sumter County line, no one takes him for a Turk — “just a white guy with a long last name,” he said, “who gets a dark tan in the summertime.”

The book, he said, will at least help him explain to his children who they are.

“There’s also some pride there, because it affirms that Joseph Benenhaley, or Yusuf ben Ali, served admirably at an important time in our nation’s history, and made a contribution,” he said.

But unlike some of his forebears, he says he takes no particular pride in the idea of whiteness. Mr. Benenhaley is a longtime Republican activist, and an evangelical Christian who says his faith compels him to reject racism of any kind. The racial overtones of Donald J. Trump’s presidential campaign disturbed him enough, he said, that he did not vote for anyone in November 2016.

It was not the first time that he was puzzled about which box to check, if any. “Even to this day,” he said, “I still feel confused, on forms, about how to mark what my race is.”

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