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“SOUTH CAROLINA’S TURKISH PEOPLE”

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There are many different renditions of fact and legend regarding the Turkish people of Sumter County, South Carolina.

One historian, exercised unusual bluntness for an academician by putting it this way in a publication celebrating the Palmetto State’s tri-centennial anniversary:

A stranger visiting Sumter County today may come across a baffling breed called "Turks." In recent years these Turks, known also as "Free Moors," have claimed and received recognition as white citizens. Their status in ante-bellum South Carolina was less clear, and their origin has been the subject of much speculation. So meager are the facts relating to them that the wildest conjectures, based on what must surely be flight of fancy and geographical ignorance, have been advanced to support their origin.¹

Among those wild conjectures was the fantasized account of Charlestonian Herbert Ravenel Sass. According to Sass, these people may have been descendants of "golden women of the East." He speculated that the Turkish people originated from "slender, raven-haired, golden-skinned creatures," stolen by pirates known as the Red Sea Men from nobles of the Great Mogul's Delhi court, who were on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and brought to South Carolina three centuries ago.²

Almost as curiously and somewhat ironically, *Ebony Magazine* called the Dalzell group a “raceless” people who distrusted Whites and disliked Blacks.³

Are the Turkish people of Sumter County a “baffling breed” whose origins are cloaked in fanciful ignorance? Are they descendants of “golden-skinned creatures” kidnapped and brought here by pirates? Is their enclave a “raceless” yet racist clan?

Turkish Traditional Narrative and Recorded History.

This obscure community of dark-skinned families has always traced its oral history back to an Ottoman refugee who served the colonial cause in the Revolutionary War; and they lived insular, shunned lives in rural Sumter County for many generations. In fact, they had to go to Federal Court to be able to send their children to “White schools” during the 1950s.⁴ Only in the past few decades have they begun to enjoy the full blessings of American life.

A brief version of their traditional narrative—as told by local citizens—held that a “Caucasian of Arab descent,” known as Joseph Benenhaley (or Yusef ben Ali, his perhaps Ottoman name), made his way from the Old World to South Carolina and served as a scout for General Thomas

Sumter in the American Revolution; and the grateful General had given Benenhaley some land on his plantation to farm and raise a family. A few outsiders married in; but most identified with the ostracized community and their progeny considered themselves as people of Turkish descent. Amazingly, they persevered as an enclosed society—numbering several hundred persons in the Dalzell area at mid-twentieth century—separate from both White and Black South Carolinians.⁵

The problem is that the traditional narrative of Joseph Benenhaley and his Turkish descendants has usually been considered no more than myth, a fable concocted to sustain them through unpleasant realities of hard history.

Most early scholars ignored or dismissed the Turkish tale and labeled these people “tri-racial isolates”, a mixture of poor White settlers, disassociated Native Americans, and runaway or freed Africans;⁶ and other writers disparaged them as “so-called Turks” and a people of low stature.⁷

For example, almost a century ago an unidentified writer for *The State* newspaper painted a dreary, fatalistic picture of this community:

Most conspicuously characteristic of all, however, is their utter lack of spontaneous joy. They wear, one and all, the air of patient and unquestioning acceptance of life as they find it. But what does the future have to promise them? Bits of flotsam from life's ebb-tide, left stranded between two layers of a civilization which provides no place for a third element. Prevented by racial instinct from amalgamation with the Negro; seeing in the future nothing but a continued marriage and intermarriage with those of their own clan, and a repetition of the age-old struggle for existence; they are faced by a problem the solution of which only the future can tell.⁸

Additionally, here is the cryptic, concluding paragraph of a provocative report written by another anonymous observer:

Unobtrusively they go their lonely way. In spite of their Baptist affiliation, their Mohammedan ancestry has stamped them with an utter lack of spontaneous joy. With tragic patience they apparently accept as unalterable their struggle to exist in abject poverty. Fired with no zeal to unite in common endeavor, beset with no adventurous spirit to roam beyond the limited radius in which they have remained since the settling of their earliest progenitors, they remain a submerged and isolated group. It is kismet.⁹

Normally, such characterizations would be considered unacceptable for consideration because of their uncertain authorship, disparaging nature, and lack of supportive documentation; however, these assessments are presented here because they apparently were the sources, thereafter, of many published characterizations—positive and negative—about the Turkish community.

Some contemporary activists have even claimed that these mysterious families are/were Native American Indians.¹⁰ Several ancestors with Native American links married into the Turkish people in the 1800s; and numerous individuals with surnames associated with the Turkish community now identify with their Indian heritage. These people have disavowed the Turkish narrative and have achieved state recognition as the Sumter Tribe of Cheraw Indians in 2013.

But most Turkish people have persisted in claiming Turkish identity believing their oral history. As one elderly Turkish gentleman, Eleazer Benenhaley, has written: “God knew what He was doing when He created me. . . . I have lived 73 years as being of Turkish descent. I have no desire to be anything else.”¹¹

Confirmation of the Turkish People’s History.

Most recently, exhaustive and comprehensive research has been presented regarding the history of the Turkish community over the past two centuries; and this new research confirmed their traditional narrative. The authors of this manuscript produced thorough documentation of the Turkish settlement in *South Carolina’s Turkish People*, which was published by the University of South Carolina Press in 2018; and, consequently, the South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs (which had previously certified the Sumter Tribe of Cheraw Indians) settled this controversy by clarifying the official record regarding the Turkish people.¹²

The SCCMA’s Executive Director issued the following annotation (dated Nov. 26, 2019):

The historical and ethnological backgrounds of numerous dark-complexioned families of Sumter County, SC, have until recently been matters of oral tradition and weak documentation. Some, who considered themselves of Native American ancestry, hailed ties to North Carolina Indians from the Revolutionary War era; and others, who considered themselves of Turkish descent, subscribed to a narrative of an Ottoman patriarch dating back to the same period in Sumter County.

The Native Americans (including some individuals who also were related and associated with the Turkish community) organized themselves as the Sumter Cheraw Indians early in the current century. They believed the Turkish people to be Native Americans who long ago adopted the “Turk moniker” in order to avoid persecution by White authorities. Their application for tribal certification was approved by the SC Commission for Minority Affairs in 2013.

*However, new research provided in a recent publication has demonstrated conclusively that the Turkish people of Sumter County originated from patriarch Joseph Benenhaley and constituted a separate, distinct community of their own for most of the past two centuries; and it would be erroneous for anyone to characterize the Turkish people as Native Americans or as part of any Indian Tribe recognized by the South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs. Persons interested in the story of this group should consult *South Carolina’s Turkish People* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018) by Dr. Terri Ann Ogibene and Dr. Glen Browder.*

Therefore, the South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs hereby acknowledges the history and heritage of the Sumter County Turkish community and adds this annotation to its official files regarding certification of the Sumter Tribe of Cheraw Indians.

The bottom-line, big-picture significance of this annotation is that the South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs thereby rendered an official and conclusive judgement in favor of the Turkish traditional narrative.

The rest of this paper will present selected documentation of the Turkish people's history.

General Sumter's Land Survey.

The initial documentation attesting to Turkish oral history was an 1815 land plat of a portion of property belonging to Revolutionary War hero Thomas Sumter (1753-1823). This document, found in the basement of the Sumter County Courthouse, consisted of a survey that was requested and signed by General Sumter; it had "Josephs Land" clearly marked near Long Branch.¹³ Decades after Benenhaley's death, the Sumter County Probate Court described the homestead as "Real Estate of Joseph Bennenhally, deceased, situate in said County on waters of Black River, and containing thirty three acres (33) more or less, originally granted to said Joseph Bennenhally by Thomas Sumter by Deed dated November 1815."¹⁴

Matilda's Letters.

Perhaps the most dramatic testimony to the group's oral narrative was a series of letters written by Matilda Ellison Benenhaley (1842-1936), grand-daughter of South Carolina's largest Black slave-owner, who married into the Turkish community. In these letters, which had been passed down from generation to generation, Matilda wrote that the original Benenhaley was indeed "an Ottoman," had been "bonded by the Spanish at sea," "kept from freedom in the Indies," but "persevered" and was "made free," served with "General Sumter in the War, who gave him land at "the Home Place near the Branch" after the war."¹⁵

Genetics, Genealogy, and Graveyards.

The Turkish people have always been extremely skittish about genetic testing, but DNA results for eight direct descendants of the supposed patriarch, Joseph Benenhaley, support the traditional narrative. Although such testing has its problems, several cases from a select group can be useful in combination with other information; and these collective reports complied with hypothetical origins from a Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/North African progenitor, with substantial White European admixture, some evidence of Native American linkages, and no significant Sub-Sahara African contribution.¹⁶

Additionally, a genealogical census of 270 Joseph Benenhaley descendants who lived in the Dalzell area during the 1800s provided salient and persuasive patterns. Benenhaleys comprised slightly over half (51%) of the individuals in that group; and six intermarried families—Benenhaleys, Buckners, Hoods, Lowerys, Oxendines, and Rays—accounted for almost all (91%) of the names in that confined community during its formative generations.¹⁷

Finally, a survey of graveyards at the two churches (Long Branch Baptist Church and Springbank Baptist Church) that have served as principle places of worship for the Turkish people during the 1900s produced an impressive display of this distinct community's heritage. The survey showed that people who were either born Benenhaleys or married into that "first family" comprised a slight majority (51%) of interred individuals; and the same six family surnames again accounted for virtually all (91%) of the individuals resting-in-peace in those cemeteries. Also, few individuals with Turkish-community names were buried outside the Dalzell area, attesting to the isolation of that group.¹⁸

This research demonstrated that the Turkish people did indeed endure as an enclosed ethnic community—originating from Joseph Benenhaley and known as "the Turks"—in rural South Carolina for almost two centuries.

Oral Interviews.

From the Revolution until the dramatic social changes of the 1960s, as throughout most of the South, whites and blacks in Sumter county lived in different areas, attended segregated schools, went to their own churches, and often sat in separated places in theatres and buses. The Turkish people didn't really fit cleanly into this broader black vs. white paradigm. Outside Dalzell, they were always shunned as "the Turks". Somewhat like their black neighbors, they were subject to insults, intimidation, and systemic oppression.¹⁹

Usually, they kept to themselves. Most Turkish people of Sumter County have adhered to an ancestral understanding that they are "white people". Their skin color has been described over the years as dark brown, light brown, olive, and tanned; but it is not uncommon, nowadays, for them to be light-skinned with blond hair and blue eyes. Most believe that the original Benenhaley was truthful in declaring his ancestry, but they do not adhere to Old World ways. Their culture mainly reflects their long experience as dark-hued common folk harried by discrimination in rural South Carolina. Their existence has always revolved around the family, their school, their church, their farms, and whatever jobs they could find.²⁰

The Turkish people have always been reluctant to talk with outsiders about experience in Dalzell. As one scholar reported in the 1970s: "The mood of the community strictly opposes any sort of historical investigation. The people will tell any would-be historian that they don't know anything, don't think that anyone else does either, don't see any point in it, and think that he should go talk to some other member of the community."²¹

However, four elderly individuals—"Boaz," "Helen," "Jean," and "Tonie" (all pseudonyms because feelings still run high in this area)—did share information about their personal lives and community experience; and their common statement as "the Turkish people" is a passionate and moving declaration:

"We are the Turkish people of Sumter County in the state of South Carolina. Our story has never been told fully and accurately. We have roots that extend all the way back to the Revolutionary War, and we fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War and for America in World Wars I and

II. However, for two centuries our rich history has been overlooked or misrepresented, our cultural identity has been questioned, and we were denied equal access to education because of the tones of our skin. We persevered; and we prevailed. Now, though our spirit endures, the Turkish community faces new and different challenges, as a fading ethnicity, in the twenty-first century.”²²

The four participants all stated that they were White people of Turkish descent; and they related their origins to General Sumter having brought their ancestors to Sumter County. Boaz explained his confidence and pride in the traditional narrative this way. "I assume I accepted it just like anyone else who would have been from whatever ethnic background they were from. That's who I am ... and I hold my head high.”²³

The respondents expressed strong feelings about how Turkish separatism became so entrenched and ugly for so many generations. Boaz speculated that each ethnic group probably just felt more comfortable being with people like themselves: “I don't want to have anything to do with you just as much as you don't want to have anything to do with me.” Despite his explanation of mutual disdain, it was clear that Boaz viewed white discrimination as the main cause of the extended, lonely history of this community. He noted, with sadness, that “the Turkish boys and girls were not allowed on teams like the American Legion baseball teams and those types of things. The segregation was almost as bad as the segregation of the Blacks. Not as bad, but bad enough.”²⁴

Tonie remembered having to stay out of school for a year during the integration movement. “It was awful,” she said. “You never knew what they were going to say to you or what they were going to do to you. Even the teachers were prejudiced. Traumatic. Kids calling you ‘Turk,’ the bus leaving me and I would have to go back home. I'd have to have an excuse the next day about why I wasn't in school, and I would put, ‘The bus driver refused to pick me up.’ They didn't care. If they were the only ones on a seat, they would put their books on the other side of the bus so that you couldn't sit there, and dare you to move them.”²⁵

Helen told a story about how a White hair stylist treated another Turkish teenager. “This girl was dark, and she was a friend of mine. She said, ‘I'd like to get my hair cut.’ I said, ‘There's a beauty shop up the street.’ She said, ‘Well, call and make me an appointment.’ We walked up to the beauty shop, and we walked in. The lady said, ‘I'm ready. Come in. You can sit in that chair.’ I said, ‘It's not for me. It's for her.’ She said, ‘Oh I can't cut her hair.’ And she didn't.”²⁶

Jean told this story. “One night, when the KKK was on the rampage, somebody burned a cross in my dad's yard. We got up the next morning and there was a cross burning in our yard; and for about two weeks, a lot of people stood guard out there. That was when the KKK was in full swing. I was terribly upset and afraid because you know what the KKK was doing. It was just kind of dreadful. We were scared. We were afraid to go outside the house.”²⁷

All four denied that they were Native Americans; and their attitudes varied from puzzlement to indignation at the notion of Indian descent. Interestingly, too, they had little to say and spoke nothing negative about their relations with Black people.

In wrapping up the interviews, the respondents explained why they finally have spoken out about their reclusive community. Boaz stated: “I think it’s good for some of those who have their ideas so to speak about the ‘Turks’ to understand our feelings. We’re proud of who we are.” Jean said she hopes to tell the story of the “Turkish people and their experience.” Helen said she wants to tell about “the injustices that the Turkish people endured.” Tonie put it very simply and pointedly: “I think the world needs to know what happened back then.”²⁸

The Turkish People Today.

Today, South Carolina’s Turkish people (who prefer to be called “the Turkish people” rather than “the Turks”) are not as enclosed as in the past and life is better for them. Most now marry outsiders. Many have moved to other areas, either to start a family or to attend college and begin careers.²⁹

The Turkish people also say that, generally, they are “treated right” in Sumter County of the twenty-first century.³⁰ Attorney Brian Benenhaley, for example—a great-great-great-great-great grandson of the community patriarch—says that no one calls him a “Turk” anymore; he’s “just a white guy with a long last name who gets a dark tan in the summertime.”³¹ Just as importantly, he said, recent research 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.”³²

In simple terms, the research presented here is important because it tells, for the first time, the full and accurate history of this community. Now, the Turkish people understand and can celebrate their heritage.

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