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WHO WERE SOUTH CAROLINA'S TURKISH PEOPLE?

GENETICS AND GENEALOGY HELP SOLVE A TWO-HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD
MYSTERY

By Glen Browder and Terri Ann Ognibene

South Carolina has always been an intriguing place for research on regional and national history. Most commonly, the Palmetto State has been scrutinized and depicted through a binary lens of racial supposition; and there is an all too often conception of this state as an eternal realm of black-and-white society.

However, the reality is that South Carolina has experienced surprising richness in its ethnic origins and evolving culture over many generations. As demonstrated by Walter Edgar, the state's premier chronicler, before the Europeans there were as many as forty different Indian nations; and by the end of the eighteenth century there were at least twenty-five West African ethnicities and nine European ethnic groups. "Thus South Carolina's population is a rich mosaic, a variety of people from three continents. Over the centuries the interaction of these peoples produced a culture that made South Carolina a special place."¹

Of particular pertinence to our project, historian James W. Hagy pinpointed South

Carolina's rich diversity prior to the Civil War. Hagy wrote that one could find non-Europeans and non-Christians with exotic ethnic backgrounds, including Muslim slaves, abducted Moors, African Jews, and even "misnamed Turks" who contributed to the state's early experience. And with reference to the famed culinary dish of the Palmetto State, he said that "while pilau has rice as its base, the other ingredients give it taste."²

Obviously, the more we learn about South Carolina's cultural past, the more we can understand our state's special place in regional history—and the better we will appreciate the problematic yet inclusive intricacies of the broader American experience.

In the rest of this article, we will take a look at one of the hidden riches of South Carolina's cultural history; and we will unravel the two-hundred-year-old mystery of the Turkish people of Sumter County.

THE TURKISH PEOPLE OF SUMTER COUNTY

Among the overlooked parts of South Carolina's historical mosaic was a community of ethnic outcasts in the Carolina midlands. They were commonly known as the "Turks," "Sumter Turks," or "Turks of Sumter County."³ For most of our nation's history, they endured as a settlement of rejected, reclusive people. Outsiders were intrigued and puzzled about the strange enclave in Dalzell; and, even among the Turkish people themselves, there was and still is little understanding of their true history.

A brief version of their oral tradition held that a "Caucasian of Arab descent," known as Joseph Benenhaley (or Yusef ben Ali, his perhaps Ottoman name), was the founding father of the people who lived in a rural area about ten miles outside of the city of Sumter. Supposedly, Benenhaley had served as a scout for General Thomas Sumter in the American Revolution; and

the General had given Benenhaley some land on his plantation to farm and raise a family. Whether this was true or not, his name and ancestry have been imprinted upon descending generations of Turkish people who lived among themselves ever since the beginning of our country.

The problem is that the traditional narrative of Joseph Benenhaley and the Turkish community has often been considered no more than myth, a fable concocted to sustain them through unpleasant realities of hard history. Furthermore, there are many other renditions of fact and legend regarding the Turkish people.

One historian, Marina Wikramanayake, 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.⁴

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.⁵ Almost as curiously and somewhat ironically, *Ebony Magazine* called the Dalzell group a “raceless” people who distrusted Whites and disliked Blacks.⁶

Thus, there have always been doubts about the Turkish people's traditional narrative. Critics scoffed at the idea of an Arab warrior helping win the American Revolution; they dismissed the notion of a community of dark-skinned Ottomans surviving so long in rural South Carolina; and they disparaged the identity and culture of the Turkish people. Many believed that this settlement originated as a haven for societal remnants—poor White settlers, disassociated Indians, and runaway or freed African slaves—and that the Turkish narrative was either a racist artifact or a fairy tale for comforting a scorned community.

Much of their identity problem related to their precarious situation in southern history. These people developed their secluded existence and tightknit folkways in an especially difficult regional environment. Negotiating uncertain paths among Whites and Blacks, they have lived separately and suspiciously within the raucous racial realities of their time and place.

However, the basic question regarding their history—“Why is their true story unknown?”—can be answered simply and with certainty. Thus far, no one has been able to produce any authoritative evidence or contemporaneous testimony, only vague oral history, relating to their epic tale. Generations of scholars, journalists, and activists have referred to the community’s traditional narrative and attempted to tell the story of South Carolina's Turkish people. But they have been stymied by a lack of documentary records; and they have been unable to overcome the reluctance of these people to share whatever information they had or to talk about life in their enclave.

An inquiring visitor learned a half-century ago that the Turkish community has always resisted being asked anything by outsiders. University of South Carolina graduate student Mike

Boliver tried to interview them for a study in the 1970s; and he got nowhere. In an unpublished report based on that experience, he said: “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.” One Turkish old-timer told the visitor that some sort of historical study should be done—but he “found himself old and with a bad heart and unable on that account to stand up against the rest of the community.”⁷ In short, these people have refused to talk about themselves; and outsiders have not and cannot tell “their story.”

THE TRADITIONAL STORY OF ORAL HISTORY

It has been impossible for scholars to verify Turkish oral history with documents available prior to our project.

For example, Anne King Gregorie—a history professor, president of the South Carolina Historical Society, editor of the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, and author of *Thomas Sumter* (1931) and *The History of Sumter County* (1954)—was thoroughly stumped to explain the origins of Joseph Benenhaley and the Turkish people. In her biography of the General, she abstrusely referenced Sumter’s tenant this way: “and there was one Benenhaly, a mysterious Ben Ali possibly”; and she described Benenhaley’s descendants as dark-skinned people who “are as much a mystery to their neighbors as the mound builders.”⁸

We were able to flesh out an elaborate collage, as a starting point for this discussion, based on the words and works of Turkish friends, academic scholars, and amateur genealogists.

The main elements of the traditional narrative revolved around the fabled Joseph

Benenhaley, a subject of the Ottoman Empire, who somehow ended up in South Carolina. The story goes that he was chosen by General Thomas Sumter himself to be a scout for his regiment fighting the British in the Revolutionary War; and he proved to be such a valiant scout that, at the end of the war, Sumter gave him some land from his own plantation for farming and raising his family. Thomas Sumter also vouched for Benenhaley as a White man in the racially-structured South and helped his family throughout the General's lifetime. But the Benenhaleys and their kin never assimilated into the mainstream populace of that area. Instead, these tightknit folk suffered isolation, segregation, and discrimination; and they kept mainly to themselves in rural Sumter County for the next two centuries. A few outsiders married in, but these families considered Joseph Benenhaley their ancestral leader and identified themselves as people of Turkish descent. Amazingly, they persevered as an enclosed society—numbering about 500 persons at mid-twentieth century—separate from both White and Black South Carolinians.

For the Turkish people, this traditional tale has always been an important matter of both pride and pain. Debate has raged for many years; and numerous analysts have provided both support for and opposition to the narrative.

Loyal Supporters

The central and most interesting testimony in support of the traditional narrative of Joseph Benenhaley and his people came from General Sumter's great-grandson, Thomas Sebastian Sumter (1852-1934).

Sumter spent his life in the Stateburg area; and he claimed that he got most of his information from his father, who had spent a lot of time talking about these matters with the General. Growing up among the Turkish people in the late 1800s, he knew some of them by

name, including Benenhaley's elderly widow, who the great-grandson said lived near where he was born.

Great-grandson Sumter was the first to record the special status and character of this community in *Stateburg and Its People*.⁹

In my narrative of the people of Stateburg, I have heretofore made mention only of the Bennanhaly and Scott families. These people deserve more than a mere mention as they know no other country than this, and claim no other home than the ones they now live in, among the old hills of Stateburg, enjoying the respect of every one, with a flourishing school, and a church where they and their children assemble each Sunday to worship their Creator.¹⁰

According to this writer, Benenhaley was one of the men who joined General Sumter and fought with him during the Revolutionary War. Sumter provided the following anecdote detailing how the "Gamecock" got his nickname and recruited Benenhaley in Goose Creek Parish, near Charleston. (The blue game hen mentioned in the following paragraph was a prized specimen whose offspring were famous in those parts for courage and winning bloody battles.)

It was during this period the war of "American Independence" broke out.

It was not long before he had a following of friendly Indians and whites to join him in the fight for freedom. It was on one of his recruiting trips he came upon a crowd of men fighting some chickens at a cross road, and upon his remonstrating with them many agreed to follow him and fight for

their country. One in the crowd called out “Boys that’s the blue hen’s chicken, let’s follow him, he is the game cock.”

Hence he got the soubriquet “Game Cock.” It was from this crowd he enlisted Joseph Bennanhaly, and a man who gave his name as Scott. He made Joseph Bennanhaly his scout, in which capacity he continued during the war. He was a Caucasian of “Arab” descent.¹¹

Early in the 1800s, General Sumter rendered another service to Benenhaley and Scott and their descendants. The two men were involved in a court case in Sumter County; and their race was a factor of consideration. Some citizens at the time objected to the right of the men to vote and to sit on a jury; and General Sumter was called to testify on behalf of these two individuals. Thomas Sebastian Sumter related this incident thusly: “On one occasion the fact of their dark complexion brought up the question of their having a right to sit on a jury and when General Sumter was sent for – the writer was told this by the late Col. Jas. D. Blanding, who was about 18 years old, who said he saw General Sumter walk in, place his pistol on a desk and deliberately shake hands with both men and turning, asked if that was sufficient.”¹²

General Sumter was one of South Carolina’s most distinguished citizens and founders of the Republic, and his word was respected. White men and Black men did not shake hands with each other at that time in history; and the fact that Sumter recognized and defended their status carried a great amount of weight in the community. The case was dismissed, thereby establishing the Turkish people of Sumter County as White

citizens.

In later years, reported the great-grandson, “General Sumter ... gave the two old soldiers a piece of land near his home at Stateburg, S.C., where they lived and he cared for them during his lifetime.”¹³

Thomas Sebastian Sumter’s nephew, F. Kinloch Bull (1896-1987), related similar memories of growing up in Stateburg. Bull, an eyewitness to Turkish life in the early 1900s, supported the legendary origin of that community and provided interesting observations of their lives in his memoir, *Random Collections of a Long Life*.¹⁴

In the early part of the century when I was a boy growing up in Stateburg, there was a colony of Turks, consisting of probably several hundred men, women and children, living and farming on an area about eight miles northeast of Stateburg and near the small town of Dalzell ... In a way it was a curious situation that over the years they had been able to retain their racial identity, not associating at all with negroes, and little with white.”¹⁵

Bull recalled them as farmers and laborers who liked to fish, hunt, and play poker. "In all they were a cheerful people," he wrote; “and with some a drooping mustache and fierce look belied a pleasant disposition.”¹⁶

Finally, there is personal testimony from Dr. Eleazer Benenhaley, perhaps the Turkish community’s most respected person alive today. Dr. Benenhaley was born in 1934, is a lineal descendant of Joseph Benenhaley, and preached for ten years at Long Branch Baptist Church in Dalzell. He now lives in North Augusta, SC, with a Doctor of Ministry degree and a long string of pastored churches on his resume.

Dr. Benenhaley spoke with pride when writing in his biography about the role of Joseph Benenhaley and the Turkish people in the history of this area: “What other family group in Sumter can trace their ancestry further? Parks and schools are named after General Thomas Sumter, but what other group can claim closer association with the General than the people of Turkish descent?”¹⁷

Dr. Benenhaley also expressed complete confidence in the traditional narrative in another brief monologue: “But as for me, I trust the oral tradition of my grandmother and those before her” ... “Oral Tradition and family biblical records can have more creditability than records kept by those whose views are colored by bigotry.” Certainly, Dr. Benenhaley had no doubts about who he is: “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.”¹⁸

Unimpressed Critics

Many skeptics have been less impressed with the exotic tale of Joseph Benenhaley; and some naysayers have been brutally dismissive of the traditional narrative.

Included among the harshest critics have been noted South Carolinians. For example, Chapman J. Milling—medical doctor, historian, and poet born in Darlington County—described the Turkish people and other such communities as remnants of “doubtful stock” who “endured a rather miserable existence and gradually merged with the surrounding population.”¹⁹ Sociologist James Brewton Berry, originally from Orangeburg, characterized them as “so-called Turks”²⁰; and historian James W. Hagy of Charleston labeled them “misnamed Turks.”²¹

Many scholars have discounted the Turkish people’s traditional narrative based on the logic and reality of early American history. To these critics, the story of Joseph Benenhaley rang

hollow; and the tribulations of Native Americans seemed a more likely explanation for the strange history of these families in the Dalzell community.

South Carolina Indians who stayed behind after the relocation of most tribes in the 1830s often were forced to submerge themselves into out-of-the-way settlements that served as common refuge for Whites, Indians, and Africans who had nowhere else to go. Hence the origin of the Dalzell group according to these analysts.²²

Later on, these Native Americans faced struggles of a different sort because of speculation that they were African descendants; and some mixed-race and lighter-toned Indians attempted to avoid recrimination by redefining themselves as variations of acceptable ancestry for White authorities and White society.²³

Numerous other analysts based their doubts about the Turkish narrative on field studies in the Southeast. They concluded that the many small communities in this part of the country originated as enclosed mixtures of White European, Native American, and African ancestry.

Cultural anthropologist William Harlen Gilbert, Jr., first identified and labeled groups of this nature as “mixed-blood racial islands.”²⁴ Gilbert introduced them, generically, as people with no known history who lived separately from both the White and Black castes of America. He described them as “complex mixtures in varying degrees of white, Indian, and Negro blood”; and he said that early whites considered them as “mere squatters” rather than legitimate settlers.²⁵

Gilbert said that the South Carolina groups were called different names locally but generally resembled each other. He listed the “Turks in Sumter” along with other stereotypically-disparaged groups, such as the “Brass Ankles,” “Croatans,” “Red Bones,” “Red Legs,” “Buckheads,” “Marlboro Blues,” “Greeks,” “Portuguese,” “Clay-eaters,” “Yellow-

hammers," "Summerville Indians," and "those Yellow People."²⁶

Demographer Calvin L. Beale attempted a more thorough inventory; and he formally labeled most of these groups as tri-racial isolate communities.²⁷

According to Beale, the tri-racial isolates numbered not less than 77,000 persons in more than 100 counties in 17 and perhaps a couple more Eastern States, with settlements ranging from less than 50 to more than 20,000 people. Like Gilbert, he included "the Turks of South Carolina" among their ranks. He said that "the precise origin of these groups is unknown in most instances," but "they seem to have formed through miscegenation between Indians, whites, and Negroes—slave or free—in the Colonial and early Federal periods."²⁸

As a result of the aforementioned research, the term "tri-racial isolates" became the standard categorization for such groups; and early analysts presumed that the small enclave of Turkish people shared commonalities of origin with those settlements. Their presumptions soundly trumped oral history, apparently without any reliable evidence from the Dalzell area to support those presumptions. Perhaps as a consequence, numerous other observers—as recounted in the next few paragraphs—have pronounced the story of Joseph Benenhaley doubtful history and the notion of Turkish ancestry as functional legend.

Historian Rosser H. Taylor put it curtly in the 1940s: "One of the groups, the Turks, settled near Stateburg. Their origin is obscure. The belief commonly held that General Thomas Sumter had a Turkish or Arab bugler in his command during the Revolution, who settled at Stateburg and sired the group, is not susceptible of proof."²⁹

Sociologist Brewton Berry was also one of the early skeptics: "The so-called 'Turks,' of Sumter County, are said to be descendants of laborers imported from Turkey by General Thomas Sumter, or of Turkish pirates stranded on the Carolina coast, or of refugees who escaped from

their pirate captors. The legends are numerous and never convincing.”³⁰

Sylviane Diouf, an award-winning historian of the African Diaspora, was less charitable: “Such confusions could reach ridiculous proportions: the members of a Muslim family who had lived in Sumter County, South Carolina, since the Revolutionary War were reputed to be alternatively ‘Turks,’ ‘Free Moors,’ ‘nobles of the Delhi Court,’ and ‘subjects of the Emperor of Morocco.’ Then in a complete turnabout, they were labeled ‘free blacks’ in 1830; but another shift in perception allowed them to serve in white regiments during the Civil War.”³¹

Most recently critical has been Native American activist Steven Pony Hill.³² Hill stated that “The true history of the ‘Turks’, which can be verified by historical documentation, is that they are of American Indian ancestry.” Hill claimed family links to the South Carolina group and attacked the term “Turks” as an outdated slur. He dismissed “the fantastical origin theory,” asserting that “These copper-skinned, high cheek-boned people whose grandparents learned that they could gain equality under the identity of ‘Turks’ that they were denied as ‘Indians,’ have in the most recent generations begun to reclaim their rightful birthright as persons of Indian descent.”³³

Unwarranted and Premature Dismissal

There is no doubt that the skeptics and naysayers have prevailed. Many subsequent commentators have inclined toward the notion of the Dalzell community’s origin as surreptitious Native Americans or accepted the tri-racial paradigm of disassociated Indians, poor White settlers, and fugitive Africans; and some considered the group to have uncertain, indefinable ancestry and/or ethnicity. Also, published accounts have been replete with damning doubts and outrageous opinions about these folks. Most expressed derogatory stereotypes; and some

charged them with racist mythmaking.

Our contention was that these assessments and criticisms had been unwarranted; and it was premature to dismiss the traditional narrative of oral history. Two full centuries into their existence, the true story of South Carolina's Turkish people had yet to be told; and that was the assignment we took on about a decade ago.

RECONSTRUCTING THE TURKISH COMMUNITY

Our self-assigned project was a daunting mission. We were dealing with a classic cold-case mystery—trying to prove a sketchy tale from long ago, with only suggestive lore, hearsay testimony, and scarce evidence. Unlike other founding fathers of history, Joseph Benenhaley kept no diary or personal writings; and there had never been any accounting of his ancestral origins or his role in the lineage of the group. Nor could anyone figure out the makeup and nature of this assemblage during its formative and successive generations.

It would be necessary for us to develop an empirical basis for assessing the original Benenhaley's origins and place in the history of the Dalzell community, and hence the validity of the Turkish oral tradition. Therefore, we ambitiously attempted to reconstruct that settlement, as best we could, in order to pass judgment, retrospectively, on the traditional narrative.

A quick note on theory and methodology seems in order at this point, since operational definition of the terms "Turkish people" and "Turkish community" underlay the analytic framework of our project. We developed a set of seven propositions identifying members of that group. First and most significantly, we posited that the Sumter County Turkish family began with Joseph Benenhaley—the reported "Caucasian of Arab descent" and presumed original Ottoman Turk—during the early years of the American nation. This was a central truism of oral

history, which we hoped to confirm or deny in our project. Propositions two and three were judicious elaborations of connectedness in the growing community. This meant that Turkish lineage extended, mainly, to and through Benenhaley's descendants. Outsiders who married descendants thereby gained entry to the Turkish group; and being born to a Turkish parent carried birthright inclusion. Propositions four, five, and six were that these people constituted, mainly, a dark-hued ethnic group and they quickly experienced isolation and discrimination. Finally, proposition seven was that they consciously identified with the Turkish community as an outcast society throughout their history. Summarily and fundamentally, this analytic model held that "the Turkish people" have comprised a powerful cultural experience—with definitive subcultural character—rather than a simple geographic or social network.

After defining the Turkish people operationally, we proceeded to probe their genetic background and chart their genealogical history. These two data sets—considered together—would serve as a factual depiction of their early and evolving story.

Genetic Background

Genetic analysis can never provide a perfect depiction of ancestry and it is fraught with limitations and uncertainties. However, it can be helpful when used in conjunction with other information as part of an extensive investigation.³⁴

Despite great reluctance among most Turkish people to even talk about genetic testing, we were successful in accessing DNA reports—either the full documents or relevant results—for eight living members of this community who were direct descendants of Joseph Benenhaley. Admittedly, eight individuals provided a small sample for generalizing about Turkish history; and we think that we would see somewhat different results if we were able to test a larger sample

of people. But we are confident that the genetic profile of these descendants, combined with the results of our broader project, provides credible insights into the early generations of this community.

We examined these genetic reports for possible clues about the ancestry of Joseph Benenhaley and his contribution to the lineage of this community. The most impressive finding was that six of the eight reports for living Turkish people indicated varying but significant connections to the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/North African region. To generalize, these reports complied with hypothetical origins from an Ottoman progenitor; and they revealed continued Benenhaley influence on the lineage of the group for many generations. Just as interestingly, the reports were collectively consistent with substantial White European admixture, some evidence of Native American contribution, and no significant Sub-Saharan African linkages for this sample of descendants.

We were not surprised with the finding regarding White European admixture, considering Joseph Benenhaley's wife and others of that background who married into the community in the early generations. We also knew that some individuals of mixed White and Indian ancestry had merged into the Dalzell community in the 1800s.

However, the absence of significant Sub-Saharan African linkages constituted an especially notable finding when compared with conventional presumptions about the history of the Turkish community. For the most part, previous analysts—whose work we covered earlier—have dismissed the Turkish narrative and categorically lumped the “Sumter Turks” among the many other ethnic settlements in this region. They have usually described these groups as tri-racial isolates, deriving from clustered remnants of White, Indian, and/or Black background.

Often, critics belittled the idea of Turkish ancestry and called the traditional narrative a racist scheme.

Some may be uncomfortable talking about this aspect of our investigation—because of racial sensitivities and history in this part of the country. But this project was not about race. Our investigation was about how early and contemporary analysts have distorted the historical ancestry, ethnicity, and character of the Turkish people. Their distortions not only were unfounded and insulting; they also have hindered the Turkish people in understanding and celebrating their own cultural heritage. Therefore, it was important that we determine—through thorough investigation—whether oral history or outside presumptions should prevail in the case of these people.

Since our findings were so significant and sensitive, we decided to seek professional input from experts with solid credentials and with whom we had no previous relationship. We submitted our genetic conclusions to Dr. James Bindon, former chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Alabama. He is a biological anthropologist whose distinguished career includes research among South Pacific Samoan, Mississippi Choctaw, and Alabama African-American populations. He responded thusly: “I think the report of the DNA results is well-stated and certainly is consistent with the Turkish hypothesis ... You have clearly done a great deal of work to untangle this mystery.” We also contacted Dr. Donald N. Yates of DNA Consultants in Phoenix, AZ. Yates is Principal Investigator, owner, and founder of DNA Consultants. One of our Benenhaley descendants had been part of a study by his company; and that individual’s report, presented online, showed strong links to the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/North African area, slight Native American association, and no matches for Sub-Sahara Africa. Dr. Yates confirmed those findings; he also added the following comment about the skin

tone of the Turkish people of Sumter County: “I think the Benenhaley case ... demonstrates that dark, exotic looks often have nothing to do with African heritage.”

In short, our collection of DNA reports sustained the idea of an ethnic group congruent with the narrative of origins from an identified Ottoman founder/progenitor.

Genealogical History

Our next task was assembling an evolutionary census of Turkish persons who lived during the 1800s. We reasoned that this would give us a comprehensive picture of individuals and families in the group during that first century.

We dedicated many months to diagramming the beginning and growth of this settlement; and the United States Census, family histories, legal reports, vital records, and online websites were our primary sources. Getting the right information was tedious and time-consuming; but these documents provided valuable information about Joseph Benenhaley and his expanding communal family.³⁵

Joseph Benenhaley was recorded as a resident of Sumter County in both the 1810 and 1820 censuses. He was listed as head of a household of seven persons in 1810, most likely himself, his wife Elizabeth Miller Benenhaley, his mother-in-law Mrs. Miller, a son Francis (1802), a daughter Sophronia or Sophonia (1804), a son Joseph II or Joseph Jr. (1805), and a daughter Catherine or Katie (1808). He appeared again in 1820 as head of a household of twelve persons, which likely included the original seven plus a daughter Leo Cadeo or Cadia (1810), a daughter Jensey or Jency (1817), a son Lyrandor or Lysander (1819), and two unidentified daughters born about 1813 and 1815 (however no evidence has been found specifically confirming the last two births or what may have happened to those two children). Later censuses

indicated that Joseph and Elizabeth then had a daughter Isabella (1824) and a son Ferdinand (1825). Although oral history dates Joseph's death as "about 1823," it seems that he probably died sometimes later in the 1820s. Certainly, available records are ambiguous; and these names, spellings, and dates are speculative. However, we are confident that this is a reasonable portrayal of the original Turkish family.

Several online sources of national demographic information soundly support designation of Joseph Benenhaley and his namesake descendants as the "first family" of the original and continuing Turkish community.

To illustrate, data compiled by a popular genealogical site (www.ancestry.com) showed no other households anywhere else in the country by that name in 1810. About a century later, in 1920, almost all (95%) of Benenhaley households nationwide were located in South Carolina, most of them in Sumter County; and, currently, a majority (76%) of Americans named Benenhaley are located in the Palmetto State. Furthermore, our accounting of national interment data (www.findagrave.com) shows that 89% of Benenhaley graves are in Sumter County, mainly at their two local church cemeteries; and only 4% of deceased Benenhaleys are buried outside South Carolina. Even in death, the Benenhaleys have demonstrated loyal ties to their cultural home.

We also affirmed from decennial federal censuses and other reports that several additional surnames entered the communal mix in the second generation, and others thereafter. The most prominent families married into the group in staggered manner. First came the Oxendines in the 1830s, the Rays in the 1840s, the Hoods and Lowreys in the 1870s, and the Buckners in the 1880s. The group absorbed well over a dozen surnames during that first century. However, the Benenhaley brand continued its prevalence; and the members of the Turkish

community—including those who married in—considered Joseph Benenhaley their ancestral leader, identified themselves as people of Turkish descent, and lived apart from Whites and Blacks.³⁶ Many in the outside world called them, collectively, "the Benenhaleys" or, simply and often derisively, "the Turks."

The community's numbers increased steadily throughout the nineteenth century. Our rough estimate—based on calculations from available documents—indicated that the settlement grew by six people in the 1810s, three in the 1820s, about fifteen in the 1830s, about thirty in the 1840s, about twenty-five in the 1850s, about twenty in the 1860s, about forty in the 1870s, about fifty in the 1880s, and about sixty in the 1890s.

Eventually, we were able to identify 270 individuals who were confirmed or were likely to have been born or married into the group during the 1800s. Admittedly, one could quibble with our list. Census methodology has changed over time; and reported results differ slightly from one source to another. It is impossible to devise an exact re-creation of any community stretching back two centuries; and this is particularly true of these reclusive people. However, we considered it a very close approximation of the familial community during that century.

Our genealogical history provided salient and persuasive patterns. The Benenhaleys represented slightly over half (51%) of the individuals identified in the 1800s, followed by the Oxendines (21%), Rays (8%), Hoods (5%), Buckners (4%), and Lowreys (2%); and these six family surnames accounted for 91% of the listed individuals. (Furthermore, an analysis of interments in cemeteries of the two local churches that have served as places of worship for the Turkish people showed similar proportions for the core families of that community.)

In sum, our genetic and genealogical research provided solid support for the traditional narrative on two critical counts: First, these efforts vouched for Joseph Benenhaley's ancestral

connection to the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/North African area; and, second, they affirmed his extensive paternal impact on descendent generations. Interestingly, too, this research demonstrated admixture of other bloodlines into the lineage. Finally, these findings suggested the isolation of the Turkish people as an ethnic subculture. Most generally and importantly, we think that we have evidenced the real origin and nature of this community.

PROCLAIMING THE PATRIARCH AND HIS PEOPLE

Ever mindful of previous doubt and skepticism, we sought professional counsel regarding how best to characterize our findings about Joseph Benenhaley and his people.

We solicited the aid of perhaps the only expert who has examined the histories of the Turkish people of Sumter County and other ethnicities in South Carolina. Ethnohistorian Wesley DuRant Taukchiray (previously known as Wes White, Jr.) is a legendary character with singular qualifications in this area. Most pertinently for our project, Taukchiray gathered valuable documentary material on the Dalzell community in the 1970s for the Smithsonian's Center for the Study of Man; and he produced a 1975 report on the Turkish community.³⁷

After lengthy tracking, we located Taukchiray by cell phone on a secluded mountain in rural North Carolina. We mailed him a hardcopy of our draft manuscript so that he could examine the evidence and conclusions; and we engaged him in mail and phone conversations about the project during 2014 and 2015.

Taukchiray wholeheartedly endorsed our research and findings. He said that the collected evidence resolved important questions that have long haunted these people: "You have proven Benenhaley was the Turkish progenitor and you have validated the oral history of that community." Throughout our conversations, he repeated: "This all makes sense."

Finally, we could confidently proclaim Joseph Benenhaley, a man of apparent Ottoman descent, as historical patriarch; and we could declare the Turkish people, with various admixtures, as his descendent community.

THE MYSTERY HAS BEEN SOLVED

After a decade of rigorous research, we have solved—by reasonable evidentiary standards and to the satisfaction of acknowledged experts—the mystery of Joseph Benenhaley’s ancestry and the origin of the Turkish people. Of course, it is impossible to confirm every detail of the traditional narrative in this short presentation. But we can pass judgment, based on the findings presented here and research to be reported elsewhere, regarding the basic tale of this ethnic community during its formative years and for many generations in rural Sumter County.

These Findings Part of a Larger Project

Readers can rest assured that our conclusive statement relies on much more research and analysis than could be included in this article. We will present in our upcoming book—*South Carolina's Turkish People* (2018)—an abundance of material supporting the findings reported here, along with new evidence and interviews with living Turkish people about their mysterious history. Included in that abundance are the following five points of interest regarding the full and true story of the Turkish people:

- Our book will account for the Turkish people's early history in the New World. The global slave trade during the Age of Discovery was, very plausibly, how Joseph Benenhaley made his way from the Ottoman Empire to South Carolina. Also, the Turkish people and Native

American Indians traveled an entwined, conjoined course in Sumter County; but, throughout, the Turkish people endured as a distinct community in Dalzell.

- New evidence will attest to Joseph Benenhaley's background and role in the founding of the Turkish community. For example, Secret letters from long ago within the Turkish community cite Joseph Benenhaley's Ottoman ancestry and relationship with Thomas Sumter; and legal records buried deep in the Sumter County courthouse certify the General's deed of land to Benenhaley right where and when the Dalzell community began.
- Our research will show that the Turkish people, White people, and Black people have always had curious relationships and practices in their schools, churches, and hospitals; and the Turkish people may have preferred living among themselves almost as much as they were spurned by the outside world. Even the graveyards of Sumter County testify to the existence of this community as an enclosed, reclusive subculture throughout the past two centuries.
- Extensive interviews with older Turkish individuals will reveal, for the first time, their reflections on ancestry, ethnicity, and their struggle against discrimination. These Turkish citizens will talk about relations with White people and Black people when they were growing up. They will tell about life at the "Dalzell School for Turks" and the "awful" and "traumatic" experience of integrating the White schools of this county. They also will speculate about the future—their hopes for assimilation and concerns about losing their heritage.
- There's more. A few Sumter County citizens—Black and White—will recount their experiences with the Turkish people over the past century. Several Turkish individuals—ranging from an 11-year-old girl to middle aged men—will explain what life is like for the Turkish people today. Two prominent direct descendents of General Thomas Sumter and Patriarch Joseph Benenhaley will discuss, from a contemporary perspective, the historical experience of

South Carolina's Turkish people. Finally, our upcoming book will include dozens of illustrations, including fascinating photographs that have been hidden away by Turkish people for many years.

Now, to conclude this article, what have we learned about South Carolina's Turkish people?

True Story of the Turkish People

The history of the Turkish people has long been ignored, obscured, and misrepresented by outsiders. Fortunately, with help from inside that community, we have authenticated their history as conveyed in the traditional narrative. That narrative has been amended and embellished along the way; however, our judgment is that the body of evidence presented in this project weighs in heavy favor of the long-cherished story of these beleaguered people.

Most significantly, we have learned their true story. They cannot be dismissed as tri-racial isolates as that typology was professed by early scholars and journalists and activists. They cannot be pronounced as Native American Indians whose claim of Arab descent was a ruse to ward off persecution; nor can they be classified simply as the local branch of some larger, fragmented affiliation, like the Melungeons. Equally importantly, it is incorrect to depict them as indistinct remnants of unknown origins.

Our research shows that the Turkish people descended from an identified patriarch—Joseph Benenhaley, or Yusef ben Ali—who settled in Sumter County late in the eighteenth century. Ancestral data indicate that this man likely came from the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/North African region. His bloodline dominated the group's lineage for many generations; and his extended family lived reclusive lives in the Dalzell community throughout

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Certainly, the Turkish people could not claim singular Ottoman bloodline; and it would be ridiculous to say that they subscribed to any notion of Old World culture. Just as certainly, however, they never blended in with surrounding society nor dissipated among scattered fugitives; and their distinctive heritage and ways brought upon them two centuries of isolation and adversity as the "Sumter Turks." They were indeed the single historical case of an exotic ethnic leader and his followers pursuing their long, lonely course in backwoods South Carolina. And only in the past few decades have they begun assimilating into America's mainstream.

In addition to helping the Turkish people understand their history and heritage, we think our research should encourage serious scholars, journalists, genealogists, and ancestral/ethnic/racial groups to go back and edit previous accounts of the Turkish people. There are many, many documents both in print and online that are absolutely inaccurate in their depiction of Turkish history; and they need to be corrected.

Diverse, Changing Regional History

The research presented here adds a new and interesting element to an expanding literature about regional society of the past and present.

The Turkish community of Sumter County actually fits very well into a regional narrative about historical adversity, enduring strength, and change. Their story is important because it represents recognition and dignity for the Turkish people. But it also is a worthwhile addition to our understanding of southern culture. Our historic region was much richer than many thought; and this account of the Turkish people tells us something important about difficult progress in southern society.

Evolving, Inclusive American Experience

This project also speaks to our conception of the American experience. Just as southern culture is changing, the United States likewise is an evolution that, over time, has produced a nation that is greater than its parts. In this particular case, we are witnessing the problematic but promising dynamic, *e pluribus unum*, of the American experience.

To summarize, recent developments in Sumter County show how a unique ethnic subculture—after two centuries of isolation, segregation, and discrimination—is assimilating into the surrounding culture. The Turkish people are trying to hold onto their traditional heritage while embracing their rightful place in broader society. The telling of their story should contribute to their continued success in this effort; and it may help all of us better understand South Carolina and American history.

¹ Walter Edgar, *The South Carolina Encyclopedia* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), xvi.

² James W. Hagy, "Muslim Slaves, Abducted Moors, African Jews, Misnamed Turks, & an Asiatic Greek Lady: Some Examples of Non-European Religious & Ethnic Diversity in South Carolina Prior to 1861," *Carologue* 9 (Spring 1993): 12.

³ We refer to the "Turkish people" and "Turkish people of Sumter County" throughout this manuscript. We use this terminology because the word "Turk" or "Turks" has always and still conveys pain to a lot of them; it has been used commonly in the past as a derisive term, declaring them different and unworthy citizens. That connotation has moderated now; but it is

still hurtful to some of them. In our interviews, most of the Turkish people expressed preference for the “Turkish people” designation.

⁴ Marina Wikramanayake, *World in the Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 20.

⁵ Herbert Ravenel Sass, *The Story of the South Carolina Lowcountry* (West Columbia, SC: J.F. Hyer Publishing Co., 1956), 82.

⁶ “South Carolina’s Raceless People,” *Ebony Magazine* (January 1, 1957): 53-56.

⁷ Wesley White Jr. *A History of the Turks Who Live in Sumter County, South Carolina, from 1805 to 1972* (Unpublished manuscript with unnumbered pages, 1975, located at Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC).

⁸ Anne King Gregorie, *Thomas Sumter* (Columbia, SC: R.L. Bryan Company, 1931), 264-265. In her later work on the history of Sumter County, Gregorie noted the Turkish group’s “obscure and undocumented origin” and couched her assessment in terminology like “a confused tradition,” “it is possible,” and “believed to be descended”; see *History of Sumter County, South Carolina* (Sumter, SC: Library Board of Sumter County, 1954), 467-468. She further admitted in personal correspondence that she had “never seen any documentary evidence” and never solved the “mystery” of Joseph Benenhaley and his people. See brief discussions of this matter in Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark. *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1984) and *No Chariot Let Down: Charleston’s Free People of Color on the Eve of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Gregorie’s letters regarding the topic can be accessed in the Anne King Gregorie Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC.

⁹ Thomas Sebastian Sumter, *Stateburg and its People*. (There is no clear year or place of publication for the first edition of this book; it was probably published about 1920 in Stateburg or Sumter, SC.)

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴ F. Kinloch Bull, *Random Recollections of a Long Life, 1896-1986*. (Unknown Binding, estimated 1986; located at South Caroliniana Library)

¹⁵ Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁶ Ibid., 105-106.

¹⁷ Eleazer Benenhaley, *Moulded Clay* (Orlando, FL: Daniels Printing Co., 1983), 17-18.

¹⁸ Eleazer Benenhaley, *An Analysis of Neophytes and Would Be Historians* (Belvedere, SC: Quality Printing, 2008), 36, 22, 37.

¹⁹ Chapman J. Milling, *Red Carolinians* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 3.

²⁰ Brewton Berry, "The Mestizos of South Carolina," 51:1 (*The American Journal of Sociology* 1945): 34-41.

²¹ Hagy, "Muslim Slaves," 12-27.

²² For the history and politics of the Indian Removal Act, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 342-367. For its impact on Indians who remained in their ancestral home, see Geary Hobson, Janet McAdams, and Kathryn Walkiewicz, *The People Who Stayed:*

Southeastern Indian Writing After Removal (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 4-9.

²³ Brewton Berry, *Almost White* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1963); and Stephanie Rose Bird, *Light, Bright, and Damned Near White: Biracial and Triracial Culture in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009).

²⁴ William Harlen Gilbert, Jr. "Memorandum Concerning the Characteristics of the Larger Mixed-Blood Racial Islands of the Eastern United States," *Social Forces* 21:4 (May 1946): 438-477.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 438.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 439-440.

²⁷ Calvin L. Beale, "American Tri-Racial Isolates: Their Status and Pertinence to Genetic Research" *Eugenics Quarterly* 4:4 (December, 1957): 187-196.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

²⁹ Rosser H. Taylor, *Ante-Bellum South Carolina: A Social and Cultural History* (Chapel Hill, C: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 88.

³⁰ Berry, "Meztizos," 135

³¹ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998), 99.

³² S. Pony Hill, *Strangers in Their Own Land: South Carolina's State Indian Tribes* (Palm Coast, FL: Backintyme, 2010).

³³ Hill has made his "true history" claim in several online postings, including "Various American Indian Records," 2005, accessed at <http://sciway3.net/clark/freemoors/Indian.htm>. In some posts, he has worded that sentence differently to read that "the majority" of the Turkish

people are of American Indian ancestry. He rejected the "fantastical origin theory" and wrote about reclaiming their "rightful birthright" as persons of Indian descent in *Strangers*, 41 and 44.

³⁴ Such was the case in the ancestral squabbling among descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. As noted by bioethics professor Carl Elliott, the "slender thread" of genetic information provided what was needed in that situation; and the claims of the slave descendants "are now widely treated as valid." See Elliott, "Adventures in the Gene Pool," *Wilson Quarterly*, 2003): 16.

³⁵ Some likely are wondering about our decision to focus on Benenhaley instead of the man called Scott, since they show up in the traditional narrative as a team, first as recruits for Thomas Sumter's militia, then as recipients of the General's personal blessing as "White men," and finally as original settlers in the Turkish community. This decision was based mainly on the fact that our key definitional proposition established Joseph Benenhaley's lineage as the basis of the Turkish community. Also, there was nothing in the available record attesting to John Scott's role in the evolving community. Historians have always doubted that his real name was Scott; and, apparently, his children were females who married-in among the Benenhaleys and disappeared in the Turkish lineage. Therefore, we simply note that neither John Scott nor his uncertain surname has been accorded significant stature in the early history of the Turkish people.

³⁶ Wesley Durant Taukchiray and Alice Bee Kasakoff, Contemporary Native Americans in South Carolina," in J. Anthony Paredes, *Indians of the Southeastern United States in the Late 20th Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 73;, and White, *A History of the Turks* (1975), unnumbered pages

³⁷ See “Wes Taukchiray Papers” at the University of South Carolina; “Wes Taukchiray Collection” at the University of North Carolina Pembroke; “Wesley D. White Papers” at the South Carolina Historical Society; Theresa M. Hicks, and Wes Taukchiray, *South Carolina Indians, Indian Traders, and Other Ethnic Connections, Beginning in 1670* (Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1998); Wesley DuRant Taukchiray and Alice Bee Kasakoff, “Contemporary Native Americans in South Carolina,” in J. Anthony Paredes, *Indians of the Southeastern United States in the Late 20th Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992); and Wesley White, Jr. *A History of the Turks Who Live in Sumter County, South Carolina, from 1805 to 1972* (Unpublished manuscript, 1975, located at Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC).