

'I still feel confused how to mark what my race is on forms': New book aims to lift the lid on the pride and prejudice felt by South Carolina's Turks, blasting myths surrounding their true heritage

- Sumter County, South Carolina has been home to a small community known as 'Turks'
- They have claimed descendance from Joseph Benenhaley, who came to America from the Ottoman Empire after the American revolution
- Since they were neither white nor black, Turks suffered discrimination but not as much as African Americans
- New book traces lineage of Turks and confirms that they are descendants of a man who came from what is today Turkey

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6 July 2018



Brian Benenhaley, 44, says that he always knew he was different growing up in Sumter County

A new book written by two researchers has confirmed that a small community in South Carolina known as 'the Turks' is indeed originated from what is today Turkey.

The Turks are an isolated group of people that live in Sumter County, South Carolina.

They trace their origins back to Joseph Benenhaley, a man who came to America from what was then the Ottoman Empire just after the American Revolution.

Benenhaley's descendants were darker in complexion than their white neighbors, which condemned them to a life of segregation.

The community never numbered more than a few hundred, according to The New York Times.

Still, because they looked somewhat different, they were made to attend Turkish-only public schools, sit at Turkish theaters, and be treated in Turkish hospital beds.

For over two centuries, it was thought by the locals that the Turks fabricated their Middle Eastern origin because they did not want to be lumped in with other non-whites, who were victims of far worse discrimination in the Deep South.

Some Turks even doubted their community's own narrative to the point where they became convinced that they were Native American.

But a new book says that the Turks are indeed real.



Benenhaley (seen above with his family) traces origins back to Joseph Benenhaley, a man who came to America from what was then the Ottoman Empire just after the American Revolution

The book, *South Carolina's Turkish People: A History and Ethnology*, was written by Glen Browder, a white man from Sumter County who once served as a member of Congress; and Terri Ann Ognibene, a high school teacher of Turkish descent from the Atlanta area.

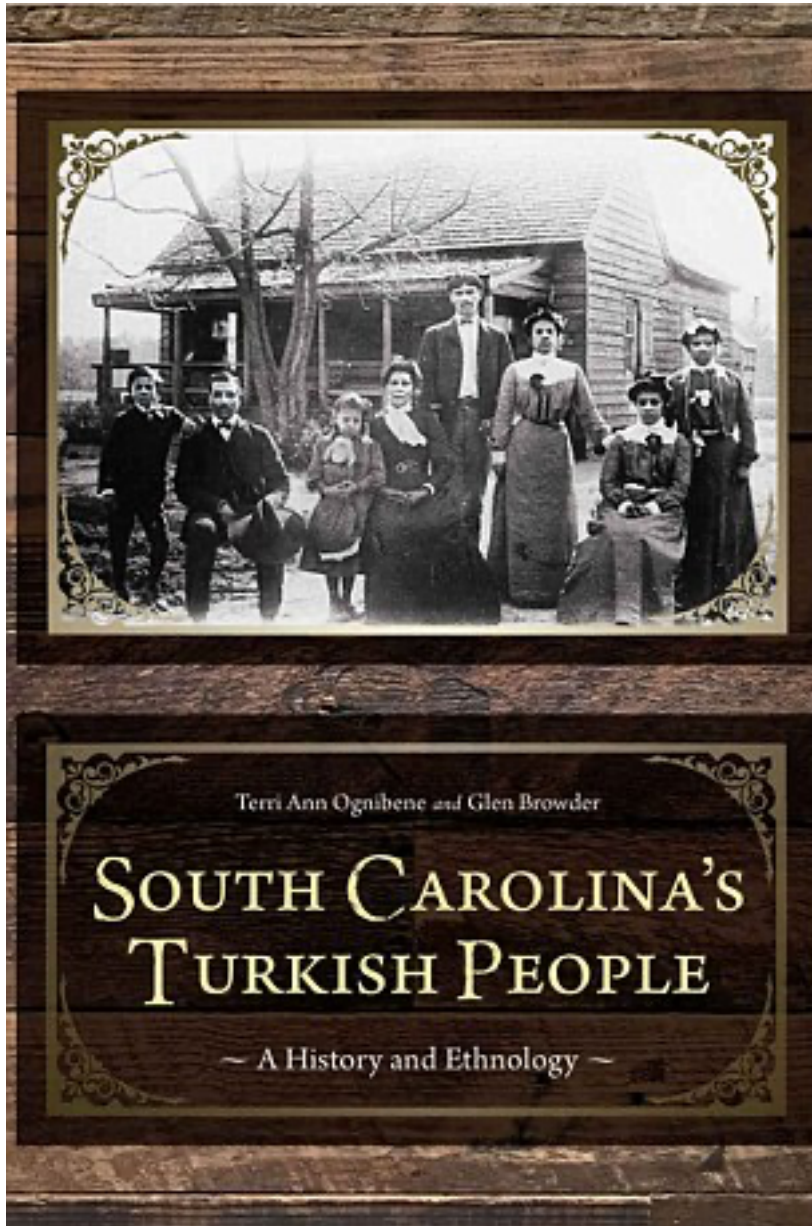
'We've learned the true history of the Turkish people, solving a 200-year mystery,' said Browder.

'The critics that dismiss the claims about their narrative as pure racism, they were pretty much off target.'

One of Benenhaley's descendants, Brian Benenhaley, 44, says that he always knew he was different growing up in Sumter County.

He says white people looked down on him and his family, which only gave him more motivation to prove that he belonged.

But people in his community are sharply divided as to whether their roots are in the Middle East or among the Native American tribe of Cheraws.



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'They don't have any documented proof about Joseph Benenhaley,' Ralph Oxendine, the chief of the Cheraw, said.

In 2013, some of the Turks were recognized by the government of South Carolina as Cheraw, a move that sharpened the divisions.

The links to Native American ancestry likely stem from the fact that a number of Turks did marry into Native American families.

But the authors say that letters and documents show that Joseph Benenhaley was referred to as 'an Ottoman bounded by the Spanish at sea.'

DNA reports from that period which were obtained by the authors show that Benenhaley's descendants were 'predominantly Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/North African ancestry - with slight European markers' and that there was 'no evidence of Native American or sub-Saharan African blood.'

Still, despite the researchers' work, Turks are still unsure of what to call themselves.

Said Benenhaley: 'Even to this day I still feel confused, on forms, about how to mark what my race is.'

(This article has been reformatted from the original version.)