

Melungeons ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 2006

Melungeons are descendants of people of mixed ethnic ancestry who, before the end of the eighteenth century, were discovered living in limited areas of what is now the southeastern United States, notably in the [Appalachian Mountains](#) ^[2] near the point where Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina converge. Earlier they may have lived near the Atlantic coast but, preferring a more secluded setting and seeking refuge from persecution, chose to move west as the coastal region became more densely populated by newcomers from Virginia and elsewhere.

The origin and early history of Melungeons remain relatively unknown. They have been identified at various times as having Portuguese, Spanish, French, Welsh, and Turkish ancestry; some theories even claim that they are descendants of members of [Roanoke Island](#) ^[3] [Lost Colony](#) ^[4] of 1587. Most modern researchers have concluded that their ethnicity is triracial, with European, Native American, and African lineage. Their earliest ancestors may have been explorers, seamen, or colonists stranded along the Atlantic coast before permanent settlement had begun who later intermarried with Indians and Africans.

Melungeon skin tones varied from dark to light, reflecting their mixed heritage. In time, the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) ^[5] classified them as "free persons of color." Because of their unique appearance, Melungeons faced extensive racial and social prejudice throughout much of their history. Although rarely subject to legal restrictions such as those imposed on blacks and Native Americans, they were often ostracized socially because of their nonwhite heritage. The term "Melungeon" itself was created and used as an insult by whites. Most researchers believe that it derived from the French word *mélange*, which means "mixture." Other possible linguistic roots include *melon can*, Turkish for "cursed soul"; the Italian word *melongena*, technically meaning "eggplant" but used in reference to someone with dark skin; and *melan*, the Greek word for "black." In any case, "Melungeon" came to signify a person of low social status and "impure" bloodlines, who was ignorant or possessed other negative traits.

The mystery surrounding Melungeons also led to a variety of folk beliefs, some of which portrayed them as frightening mythical creatures capable of evil deeds, including kidnapping children who misbehaved. While Melungeon ancestry is not uncommon in North Carolina Mountain counties such as [Alleghany](#) ^[6], [Mitchell](#) ^[7], and [Ashe](#) ^[8], the majority of Melungeons eventually settled in urban areas throughout the Southeast and became practically indistinguishable as a separate ethnic group. For generations, many people, seeking to avoid being stigmatized, ignored or denied their Melungeon ancestry. By the late twentieth century, however, several organizations were celebrating and seeking information about possible Melungeon family histories. In addition, researchers continue to examine Melungeon origins, at times employing such advanced technologies as DNA testing to trace previously undetectable bloodlines.

References:

Bonnie Ball, *The Melungeons: Notes on the Origin of a Race* (1992).

Jim Callahan, *Lest We Forget: The Melungeon Colony of Newman's Ridge* (2000).

Elizabeth C. Hirschman, *Melungeons: The Last Lost Tribe in America* (2005).

Wayne Winkler, *Walking toward the Sunset: Melungeons of Appalachia* (2004).

Additional Resources:

"Melungeons ponder their curious heritage," News and Observer:

<http://www.newsobserver.com/2011/07/17/1349598/melungeons-ponder-their-curious.html> ^[9]

[Roanoke](#) ^[10] [colonies](#) ^[11] ^[10] [research](#) ^[12] ^[10] [newsletter](#) ^[12] ^[10] [North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources Digital Collections](#) ^[13], include several resources on "Melungeons".

PBS- "A Mystery People- The Melungeons": <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/finding-your-roots/stories/race-ethnicity/a-mystery-people-the-melungeons/> ^[14]

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From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[19]

1 January 2006 | Powell, William S.

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