

Selected material from issue six.....

Welcome To Issue 6!

According to my best plans this issue should have been in your hands at least a month ago. However the best plans sometimes get sidetracked. In this case it came in the form of a household accident. In late September I had a fire in my kitchen and as a result had second and third degree burns on my right hand and arm and both legs and feet. Needless to say this adversely affected my typing skills! I am now well nearly recovered and a lot more careful!

I want to again thank those of you who have sent donations and who have submitted material. Besides helping with the cost of production and mailing, they also confirm that this publication is serving its purpose in getting information and research which is useful and/or interesting out to you. *Under One Sky* continues to operate on the shareware concept. I'm very much committed to this because it means that people contribute as they see fit and people who may not be able to afford a subscription are not left out. Finally, I want to thank Walter Davis, Lisa Savage and Kay Martin and everyone else who in this and past issues have helped with typing, scanning, proofreading and generally making sure that *Under One Sky* gets out to you. Thanks too to Darlene Wilson who gives *Under One Sky* its home on the Web and to the students at the Tennessee School For the Deaf who collated and folded the last issue.

You will notice that with this issue, the mailing list is gone. I really hated to do this as I have always felt the contact information was important for people to have. But the simple fact is it got too big and was simply taking up too much space. For this issue, the mailing list would have been one of the longest articles! That will change the feedback system which I use to make sure that everyone on the list does, in fact, want to be getting the newsletter. Once you go on the list, you'll get three issues of the newsletter without doing anything. After that I need to know if you want to continue to get *Under One Sky*. If you look on the inside of the back cover there is a form. Those of you for whom this will be the last issue will find a reminder sticker on that form. If there is no sticker, you're fine and don't need to do anything. If the sticker is there, **you must return the form to me in order to remain on the list and continue getting *Under One Sky*.** If I don't hear from you, I'll assume you are no longer interested and you'll be taken off the list after this issue. If you return the form, you'll get three more issues. This is just a way for me to try and manage costs and insure that people who get the newsletter want it. You don't have to send a donation. You just need to let me know you still want to be on the list. Of course, if you want to send a donation, it's always welcome and appreciated. For any of you who want back issues, that remains unchanged. Back issues (number 1-5) are \$3.50 each. I charge for back issues because I don't keep a stockpile. I only print the number I need for the list and when someone wants back copies, I have to print them as needed.

I always welcome your submissions of articles or research. I hope to eventually use most of what is sent but in some cases it may take some time. Priority is for material relating to the history and/or culture of Melungeons and other mixed-ethnic people and to genealogical material pertaining to those groups. Poetry and fiction are included as space permits. The exception is queries. I try and make sure those are included in the very next issue. And, I reserve the right not to use any submission which I feel is inappropriate.

Some folks have asked about submitting photographs. Because of the printing process I use (the least expensive one I can find!) the quality of photographs varies, especially older ones. If you have a picture you would like included with your submission I can try but I can't guarantee the quality. Because of the way the Queries section is laid out, it's very difficult to include photos there so I would discourage you from sending pictures with your query submission.

Beyond Gypsy Stereotypes

“Like the wind on the lake...”

by Walter Davis

*We are an old people. An ancient people. A people who has no need to prove anything, no aspirations to conquest, no vocation for tragedy. A people who flows blissfully into the mold of new forms from time to time, as long as there is enjoyment in doing so. And then who will flow out of the mold with cohesion, and no one will understand why. - Tchalai**

“We recreate entire cultures from fragments of pottery, and we go to great lengths to protect the sanctuaries of diminishing species. It is small wonder then that we should treasure the assemblage of the work and a threatened and wandering people whose culture has seemed to us ephemeral, if we have known of it at all.”

Edward Albee quoted in the *Gypsies and Travellers* home page of the University of Hertfordshire Press.

I have been interested in the Romani people for twenty years. When working in international development, I found that people called gypsies have an amazing history of survival in face of waves of repression. I have suspected from the first time I heard of the Melungeons that gypsies could well be part of that story. The presence of gypsies at Second Union who knew they were also Melungeons confirmed that connection. When you know their history, it is not hard to understand why their heritage is intertwined with Melungeon origins.

Let me introduce some ethnic words that may not be familiar to you: Romani, Romany or Roma. These are words that gypsy people use to describe themselves. They accept gypsy for its cultural context but Roma or Romani (or Rom for individuals) are words of growing pride for the Roma and revelation for the rest of us who may or may not share their heritage. These are unifying words of many different gypsy communities in different lands. They are words used in their international organizations founded at the First World Romani Congress in London in 1971. (The *Patrin Glossary* explains the term “Gypsy” or “Gipsy” as a corruption of Egyptian originating from the mistaken belief that the Roma were from Egypt.)

In recent years, there has been a new rise of anti-gypsy hate and violence in Europe, Canada, and elsewhere. It raised a concern in my mind when I saw an increasing wave of anti-gypsy information being distributed on the Internet, even in Melungeon discussion groups. Many people have stepped forward to answer the stereotypes and challenge the historical inaccuracies. It is serious business to do so because history suggests that anti-gypsy

words become translated into anti-gypsy deeds and provide a rationale for racist victimization of others.

Periodic repression and enslavement of gypsies began in the 1200s. The Inquisition targeted them as it did Moors, Jews and other groups. They fled Spain and later Portugal to Turkey, Holland and the New World. In a parallel to the “free persons of color” laws here, later the gypsies faced repression in many countries solely based upon their ethnicity. Laws making it a capital crime to be Romani remained on the books for two centuries in Britain where royal policy was essentially genocide. Many other European countries had similar laws. Slobuzenja (Abolition of Romani Slavery in Rumania) was less than a decade before Lincoln’s *Emancipation Proclamation*.

As we struggle to reveal the story of the Melungeons, we can ill afford to buy into the stereotypes of the Roma still presented in the media. Stereotypes were more than words when it came to Melungeons. Words were used to justify laws and deny access to education as they did with native Americans and people of African descent. It won’t serve Melungeon heritage to ride on the back of the oppression of the Roma.

The Roma were among the greatest numbers of victims of Hitler after the Jews. The fact that they are a distinct group with ancient traditions made them vulnerable to be singled out for victimization. As largely landless, they did not possess ground to occupy and defend. We must realize that anti-gypsy bigotry is deeply imbedded within



Western society -- in myths, in official policies, in popular music, in advertising and in our very language. Even when other forms of racism becomes superficially unacceptable, anti-gypsyism remains tolerated and permissible. Few of us in "white"-defined culture are blameless when it comes to treatment of the Roma. Oh we may not directly insult a Roma, may not even know one, but we participate in the bigotry in a thousand little ways, including our silence.

Sadly, even the more open-minded media has fallen into the stereotyping that is prominent elsewhere. Ellen Kushner in *Sound and Spirit of the Gypsies* for Public Radio International and National Public Radio station WGBH Boston in February 1997 tried to sound sensitive while making statements like, "They speak their own language. They disregard local law. They practice suspicious professions - fortune tellers, dancers, fiddlers, horse traders, living a mysterious romantic lifestyle." Isn't it interesting how some of the same old cliches used about Melungeons appear so frequently when other groups get stereotyped?

Kushner described the persecution they have faced as a people and then provided unwitting justification with terms like "strange, disturbing, alien... mysterious magical powers... threatening to others... hidden to us." After saying, "Spain, Rumania, the British Isles, the U.S. – gypsies live in all these places but most do not consider themselves to be OF these places," Kushner goes on to selectively quote Isabel Fonseca who lived and traveled with gypsy families in eastern Europe: "...the gypsies have no home. And perhaps uniquely among peoples, they have no dream of a homeland. To traditional gypsies history is not an important concept... Knowledge of past events often does not extend beyond what the oldest gypsy in a community can recall." Finally, Kushner said that few gypsies know their own history, even the recent past.

There are several layers of contempt in the words above. We know first hand how oral (as opposed to written) history has been held in low esteem by many historical researchers. As far as not knowing one's own history, imagine your people had just experienced the extermination of 500,000+ men, women and children – in a matter of a few years, not from racist street thugs but by organized systematic official state terror. (Jan Yoors in *Crossing, A Journal of Survival and Resistance in World War II*, Simon and Shuster, New York, 1971, pp 33-34, estimated the actual number of Gypsies killed to be between 500,000 and 600,000). As a

Roma named Nadia said in a letter to WGBH, "Let me assure you that there is scarcely a Rom, as there is scarcely a Jew, that is unaware of the Holocaust. Those who survived cannot forget, some marked with numbers burned into the flesh forever. Those who lost their loved ones cannot forget."

Kushner closes with a quote from another journalist interpreting a Roma phrase, "We were meant to be wanderers, no one will change our ways..." Ironically, wandering seems to have been a means of survival for this people. The Rom carry their history with them. Why should they entertain a journalist who obviously spent practically no time trying to understand their experience? Why did Melungeons hold their stories close when the journalists and anthropologists came knocking? Is it because both people had history to draw upon that told them that totally revealing themselves could lead to victimization? Better to not to say too much to the outsider.

Out of India

Interdisciplinary work like that which is rediscovering Melungeon history is helping to establish that the Roma are descendants of warrior classes of North-India – Kshatriyas, Rajputs, and Jats. Dr. W. R. Rishi wrote in "Rroma and Dom," 9/4/98, "A large number of Rajput and Jat soldiers, as also their families, were taken prisoners by Muslim invaders. The emigrants were not only Rajputs and Jats and Khatri (Kshatriyas), the rulers of principalities and heads of republics and the fighters. In order to be self-sufficient and to allow inner mobility, they attracted men and women from all population groups of India."

There was a time when the gypsies' legends of India were discounted by scholars but no longer. (Academics sometimes follow behind what people know about themselves.) Romani groups still retain words and phrases close to Sanskrit, Kashmiri, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, and Nepali. The common gypsy language Romane is closely related to Sanskrit. The many Romane dialects, however, have incorporated words and phrases from many lands. (Modern scientific study is providing some markers back to the origins of the Roma as in the case of the frequency of ABO blood groups.)

There are some 15 million Roms dispersed across the world. Their history is one of suffering and misery. But it is also one of the victories of the human spirit over the blows of time. Today the Roms revive their culture and are looking for their

identity. On the other hand, they migrate into the societies in which they live. If they are understood by their fellow citizens in their new homelands, their children will enrich the society's atmosphere...

Former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi speaking to the International Romani Festival, Chandigarh, India, October 28, 1983.

Gypsy ancestors came out of northwest India a millennium ago. (From 1001 to 1026, Sindh and Panja in India were invaded seventeen times by Turko-Afghan troops of king Mahmud from Ghazni [Iran] and a half million slaves were taken.) Some of the descendants of those who stayed in India are called the Banjara today. In those ancient times, India was prosperous and some groups began trading in a nomadic way. The basic caste system is said to have had its origin in four groups: priests, gentry, merchants and peasants. Nomadic traders traveled selling cooking utensils and providing entertainment. Such commerce was not unique to Asia

As Islam spread into India on the east and southern Europe on the west, the nomads of India traveled, living in tents, making metal products that were highly valued, jewelry, herbal medicines and entertaining (including puppetry). Along the way, other people who had lost land or a way to make a living (such as soldiers) joined in. The different groups began to fuse into a distinct people. These groups included castes called Zott and Rom. Different gypsy communities in various parts of the world draw their own self-descriptions from ancient identities, the Halebi in Egypt, the Zott in the Middle East, the Rom in the Balkans, and the Siberska Roma in central and western Russia.

When gypsies moved into Europe from Asia Minor, they traveled to the Italian peninsula, Iberia (Anatolia), the Holy Roman Empire, Scandinavia, Russia, the Baltic region, the Lowlands, France and eventually the British Isles. As they moved, they became known by different names in different places but Rom became a common part of their name, whether Rom in Hungary or Romanichals in France. The Cale (a word which also appears as Kale with an accent on the e) from Spain and Portugal came to Mexico. In Mexico and South America, they still call themselves Cale. Romanichals came to the Americas from Holland and England to the Carolinas and spread north and west from there. Romani migration also landed in northern Brazil and traveled west into Colombia and south as far as Argentina. I have seen Romani families in the streets of Cali, Colombia. Romani peoples traveled throughout Central America and

along the coast of western North America. In Quebec, they are known as Manouche or Rom. The word for gypsy in Spanish is Gitano.

In Europe, there are the Sinte of Poland and southern Italy, the Luli near the Caspian Sea, the Sansis of northern India, the Arhaga of Iran and Iraq, the Kaale of Finland, the Tattare of Norway. There are even the Romanichals of New Zealand and Australia.

Some of the traditional groups are so old that you cannot say this is The Gypsy. No country has one group. There are about 12 million gypsies in India as well as another 20 million beyond. Languages and customs can vary, even among people of similar racial make-up. There have been huge migrations over the centuries, sometimes as a result of economic reasons but often as a result of waves of intolerance and repression. First Spain, then Portugal, deported Gitanos (Ciganos in Portuguese) to the Americas. The Portuguese also deported to Angola, Sao Tome, Cape Verde and Brazil.

It is clear to me that many of the people (Sephardic Jews, Basque, Turks, etc.) from Europe who may have contributed to the Melungeon mix, have traveled alongside the Gypsies. On Columbus' ship in 1498 as he sailed away for the new world were Gitanos. Why should

we believe that they did not intermarry in the many places where they crossed paths?

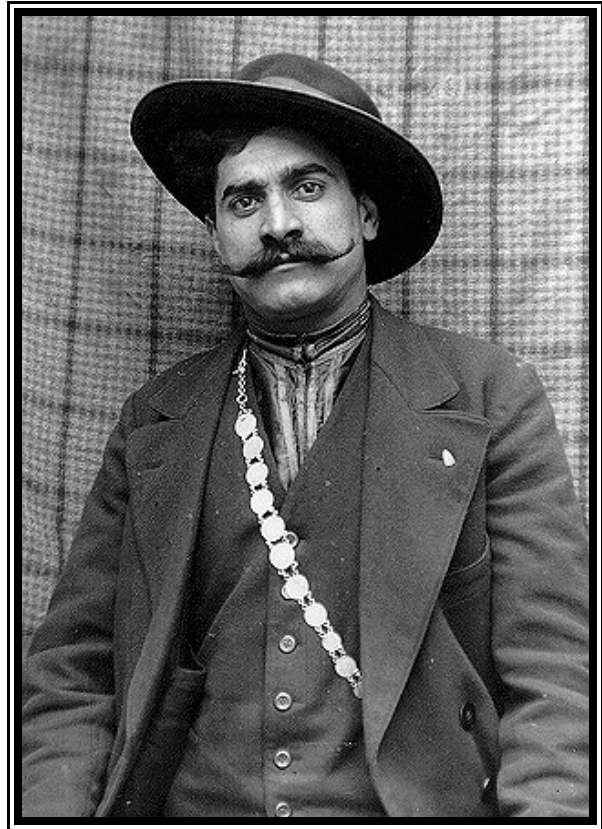
Arriving in the New World, did the Roma like others decide it was wiser to pass where possible by other names? Those who continued to live by their own traditions were punished by circumstances and by official actions so there were reasons to conceal.

In the 20th Century: Nazi Repression

Among the victims of Hitler, the Gypsies were a major target for liquidation, as a people. "For Nazi Germany the Gypsies became a racist dilemma. The Gypsies were Aryans [according to fascist typology], but in the Nazi mind there were contradictions between what they regarded as the superiority of the Aryan race and their image of the Gypsies."

The origins of "racial purity" in Germany had deep roots. Among them, beginning in 1899, Munich's Office for Fighting the Gypsy Nuisance, which photographed and fingerprinted gypsies and recorded their genealogies. Its powers extended to all of Germany in 1929 and had the collaboration of Interpol (the international police agency). The office did not officially close until 1970. (The significance of genetic and genealogical study by the German state should not be lost on us given the parallel in the Virginia state government's efforts against Melungeons under Plecker.)

The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 dealing with the Jews were amended to include gypsies. They were simply classified as non-Aryan. In 1937, they were "classified as asocial, second-class citizens, subject to concentration camp imprisonment. (*Destiny of Europe's Gypsies* by Donald Kenrick and Gratton Puxon, New York: Basic Books, 1972). Being "asocial" made one a criminal just for existing. Some had been sent to camps even before this classification. Beginning in 1940, gypsies were expelled from Germany to Poland. Extermination efforts were carried out in occupied Russia along with that of the Jews. In 1942, Himmler ordered all gypsies to be sent to concentration camps, with few exceptions. A special camp was erected at Auschwitz-Birkenau. 20,000 gypsies were gassed there. In Poland, gypsies were shot by police. (From *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka – the Operation Reinhard Death Camps* by Yitzhak Arad, Indiana University Press, 1987). Besides Auschwitz, gypsies died in Dachau, Mauthausen, Ravensbruck, and other camps. By the 1943 Citizenship Law of Germany, gypsies were omitted altogether – since they were not expected to exist much longer. Their total extermination was



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authorized by Himmler in 1944.

Even a half century later, Germany has not fully left its anti-gypsy past behind. It has internationalized its amnesia. In 1991, Germany voted against the UN - Human Rights Commission's resolution on the "Protection of the Roma" with the position that "the Roma are not a minority."

Anti-Gypsy Hatred in the 1990s

Several years ago, I did a training for community organizers from Poland, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic and Hungary. Consistently across their borders, the group in their societies that was victimized by racist laws or racist cultural norms were the Roma. Socialist or capitalist, the majorities in those countries stigmatized and isolated the Roma. France still requires passes to be stamped by the police in each parish. In some places, Roma have been denied access to education and housing.

In Europe today, the Roma are recognized by the European Union as a group deserving of special protection and are represented in international bodies dealing with human rights.

Clearly, repression of the Roma is not a thing of yesterday. Last fall, at a time when skinheads were attacking gypsies in the Czech Republic, Britain

and Canada were treating gypsy emigrants in a way unique in their policies toward asylum seekers. 90% of the more than 500 Czech applicants for refugee status in Canada last year were gypsies. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that "For the first time in Canadian history, the arriving ethnic group has not been helped by the resident ethnic group. The Czechs are not helping their own." It was reported that there was harassment of gypsy emigrants by immigration officials and the Czech language trans-lators. One out of five residents of Toronto's 2000 bed family shelter last August were gypsies because without refugee status, they were not allowed to work or to receive the stipend given to refugees until a hearing on their application. (The *Monitor* reported that the mayor of Ostrava in the Czech Republic had paid two-thirds of the cost of sending Gypsies to Canada.) Some of the Roma fled the Czech Republic after experiencing skinhead gang attacks and had to leave much of their belongings just to protect their families. 150,000 to 300,000 Roma live in the Czech Republic.

The history of British intolerance also continues. One example involves the monarch herself. Roma have worked seasonally on the estates of the Queen. She has even driven past and waved to them. Yet in July of this year, according to the *Sunday Telegraph*, the Queen herself took out a personal High Court writ to evict six gypsies from Crown Lands in Norfolk. It is almost unheard for the Queen to act in such a way. The problem? The gypsies had "squatted" for four days in two caravans on land she had purchased two years previously. Lord Norton, a professor of government at Hull University said Her Majesty's action was "extraordinarily unusual." Perhaps not so unusual if one looks at the actions of her English and German ancestors.

People of Romani descent have enriched the arts of

many lands and have served in legislative bodies. Romani, like other people, work, own homes, pay taxes, and send their children off to military service.

Some are heroic and a few are troublemakers. (Let's remember that all those who exploit the Romani culture are not the "gypsies" they pretend to be.) While the Romane language may be a common root, there are numerous dialects. Religious traditions are as varied as the lands in which Roma live: Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Pentecostal and Baptist. In most places, the Roma live and work alongside others in peace. In other words, the Roma are like the rest of us and indeed may be "us".

I have a simple suggestion to make. Before you participate in the chorus of myths, know the Roma. Read their story of survival. Listen to the music they have given us and the literature they produce. Read how their genealogies were used to liquidate them. Remember when you hear the jokes or venom aimed at gypsies, words do have consequences. Hatred in the form of words has often become hatred in the deed. To generalize about the Roma is as unfair as generalizing about any group. And if you generalize, hold in mind that their strong sense of community, cultural traditions, and strong family ties – things that Americans supposedly hold dear, have been used by their enemies against them time and again. If Romani communities are cautious toward the world around them, it is the result of a millennium of reasons.

The Roma are a convenient scapegoat in times of certainty. They serve the role of The Other, supposed devils to be cast out for sins they never committed. They should be welcome in Melungia, as the cousins they are. As the Romani anthem says, "We shall succeed where we make the effort." UPRE RROMA (Stand Up, Roma)



Gathering Again Second Union 1998

“Celebrating the richness of culture and the diversity of heritage that is Appalachia.”

In July 1998 folks from all over the country again gathered on the campus of Clinch Valley College in Wise, Virginia to celebrate our Melungeon heritage. Nearly 1000 people attended over the course of the four day event, double the attendance of First Union. Speakers included Turker Ozdogan, Frank Keel, Bob Greene, Darlene Wilson, Brent Kennedy, James Loewen and a host of others. There were presentations on origins which explored the Melungeon’s Turkish, French, and Native American connections. And there was lots of history, from the exploits of Walter Plecker, to the story of the Guineas to James Loewen’s discussion of his book, *Lies my Teacher Told Me*. Walter Davis led participants through the assembly of a giant map putting it all in global and historical perspective. Other sessions examined the writings of Will Allen Dromgoole, medical issues and how-to genealogy sessions. There were performances by Denise Brown and Emily Jones Hudson and storytelling with Doc McConnell and Linda Goodman.

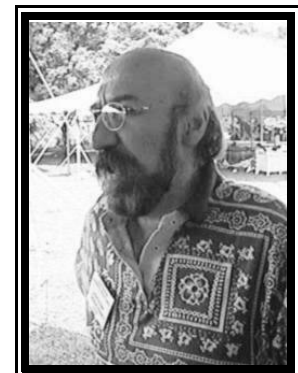
Perhaps most exciting of all were chat sessions where people gathered informally to talk about particular surnames and families. Several were pre-scheduled but by the second day people were coming together on their own to compare research, talk about family traditions and find long lost kin. Truly, this was the core of Second Union, people making connections with one another and discovering, as the theme of the gathering declared, we are one people, all colors.



Along with the fellowship and meeting new cousins far and wide was the growing understanding and celebration of the fact that we in Appalachia are truly people with roots around the world! There was a new sense of community, a new sense of pride for our shared heritage and a new understanding of our diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-racial ancestry. It was such a joy to wander the grounds and see circles and groups of people gathered to share family histories and stories and look around the circle and see faces of all colors in excited conversation. We reaffirmed personally what we had already learned through our research, that those of us who today are black, Native

American and white and a thousand combinations of all three and more, are in spirit and blood, one family.

In just a few years, we have begun to reveal and document our Melungeon heritage. No longer are Melungeons just written of as “mysterious” though to be sure there are still many mysteries and much more to learn. But now we can speak of real people who struggled to survive in an often hostile world, people



who faced racism, ridicule and hatred yet endured. Pieces of the story, our story, are being found. A mosaic is emerging of ordinary people who have stood up against the odds. The shroud of mystery is lifting to reveal a history of injustice, of oppression and tenacity, of families and pride and of sacrifices. We who embrace Melungeon heritage do so with gratitude to our ancestors and a promise to our children---we will leave for them a world that celebrates diversity and tolerance.



What about Third Union???

As Second Union ended the question that remained was “What about Third Union?” Second Union was an event of the Melungeon Heritage Association (MHA). Beside the gatherings, the Melungeon Heritage Association is dedicated to several other areas. First is continuing research and writing, telling the story of the Melungeon people, continuing to put together the mosaic that was suppressed for so long. At the same time, MHA wants to begin to collect and preserve the research and artifacts of our past. This will form the groundwork for our long-term dream of a Melungeon Research Center which would give all our materials a permanent home. Third, the organization must deal with practical considerations while moving ahead. There is a strong commitment to putting all efforts on a sound financial footing.



There **will** be a Third Union, taking place in the year 2000 and marking the Millennium as the first Melungeon gathering of the 21st Century. The extra time is to allow for planning and fundraising (Second Union was a \$30,000.00 event) to insure that Third Union is spectacular! In the meantime, the Melungeon Heritage Association will host two smaller one day events in the summer and fall of 1999

focusing exclusively on Melungeon genealogy and family history with how-to genealogy workshops and lots of time for individual family chat sessions.. At present, the two locations being considered are Berea, Kentucky and Hancock County, Tennessee. Details on these events will be made available by MHA as soon as arrangements are confirmed.



As a first step of the Melungeon Heritage Association’s plan to fund Third Union, the board applied for and in record time received, non-profit status as a 501c3 organization. As well as opening up a variety of organizational fundraising possibilities, this also means all individual contributions to the Melungeon Heritage Association are tax deductible. If you would like to offer

your financial support to the work of the Melungeon Heritage Association, you can send your contribution to: **The Melungeon Heritage Association, P.O. Box 4042, Wise, Virginia, 24293.**

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