

FALL/WINTER 2017

VOL. 33, NOS. 2-3

CAROLOGUE

A Publication of the South Carolina Historical Society



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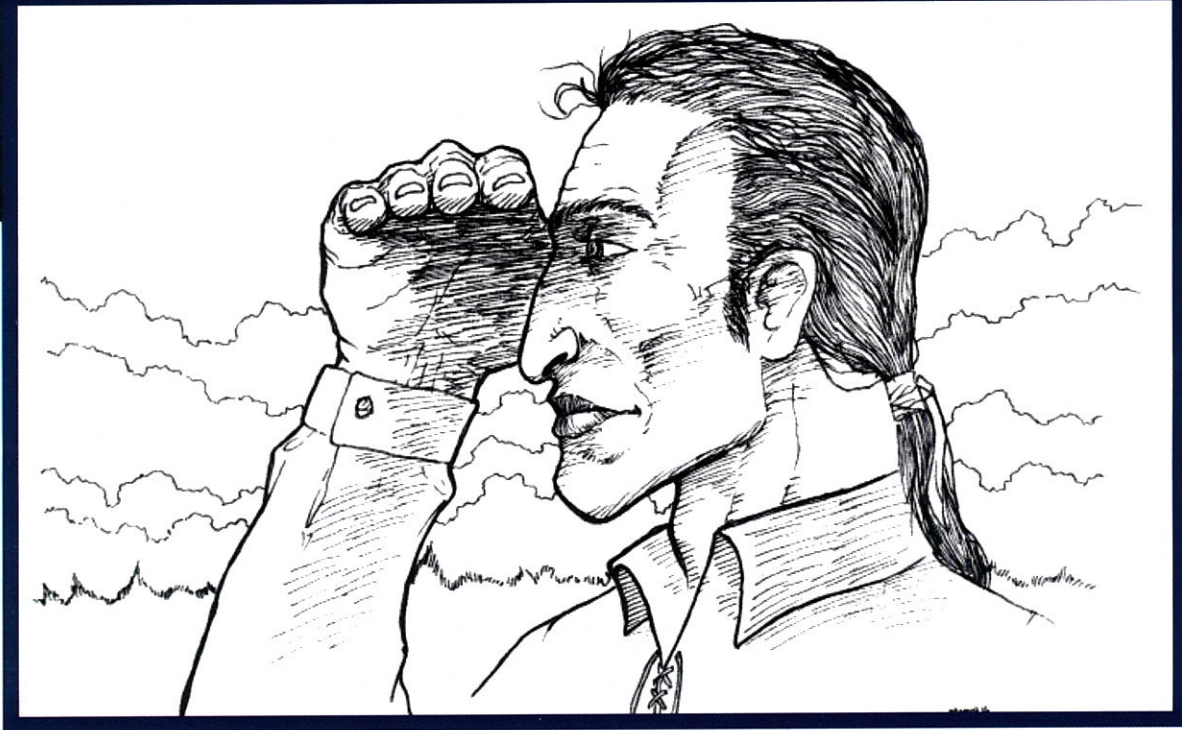
WHO WAS JOSEPH BENENHALEY?

Exploring the 200-Year-Old Mystery of Sumter County’s Turkish Patriarch and His People

Who Was Joseph Benenhaley?

Exploring the 200-Year-Old Mystery of Sumter County's Turkish Patriarch and His People

by Glen Browder and Terri Ann Ognibene



Part 1: Genealogy, Genetics, and Graveyards by Glen Browder

Among the overlooked parts of South Carolina's historical and cultural mosaic is an intriguing community known as the "Turks," "Sumter Turks," or "Turks of Sumter County." For most of our nation's history, these mainly dark-skinned people endured as a rejected, reclusive settlement. The strange enclave in Dalzell intrigues and puzzles outsiders, and few people, even the Turkish people themselves, understand their true history.

Oral tradition held that a "Caucasian of Arab descent" known as Joseph Benenhaley (or Yusef ben Ali, perhaps his Ottoman name) founded the community in a rural area about ten miles outside of the city of Sumter. Supposedly, Benenhaley served as a scout for General Thomas Sumter in the American Revolution. After the war, the story goes, the grateful general gave Benenhaley some land on his plantation to farm and raise a family. A few outsiders married in, but these communal settlers considered Joseph Benenhaley their ancestral leader, identified as people of Turkish descent, and lived separately

from other South Carolinians. Amazingly, they persevered as an enclosed society, numbering several hundred persons in the mid-twentieth century.

This traditional tale brings both pride and pain to the Turkish people of Sumter County. Loyal descendants cling to their oral history, some confidently and others through faith. But critics have doubted the narrative for decades, believing Joseph Benenhaley and his Turkish progeny to be no more than myth.

The mystery thoroughly stumped Anne King Gregorie, a history professor, former vice 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). In her biography of the general, she abstrusely referred to Sumter's tenant as "one Benenhaley, a mysterious Ben Ali possibly." She described Benenhaley's descendants as dark-skinned people who "are as much a mystery to their neighbors as the mound builders." In *A World in Shadow* (1973), a publication celebrating the Palmetto State's tricentennial, historian Marina Wikramanayake exercised unusual bluntness about the "baffling breed called 'Turks.'" "So meager are the facts relating to them," Wikramanayake wrote,

Above, Joseph Benenhaley (c. 1753–1823) was the patriarch of the Turkish people of Sumter County. He reputedly was from the Ottoman Empire and helped General Sumter as a scout in the American Revolution. This is an original sketch for the project by artist Charles Marsh of Summerton.

“that the wildest conjectures, based on what must surely be flight of fancy and geographical ignorance, have been advanced to support their origin.”

Most analysts believe that the Dalzell community began as a “tri-racial isolate group”—that is, an aggregation of disassociated Indians, poor white settlers, and fugitive Africans. Others label them surreptitious Native Americans who claimed Turkish descent to avoid persecution. Still more include them among the Melungeons, a diverse Appalachian group with mixed ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage. Some have given up altogether and consider them to be of indefinable ancestry or ethnicity.

Thus far, no one has been able to produce authoritative evidence of the traditional narrative. Scholars, journalists, and activists recount the narrative, but they are stymied by a lack of documentary records and are unable to overcome the reluctance of the Turkish people to share information from their enclave. As a result, skeptics and naysayers prevail in the debate over the history and nature of the group.

Two full centuries into their existence, the true story of South Carolina’s Turkish people had yet to be told. That was the challenge my colleague, Dr. Terri Ann Ognibene, herself a Turkish descendant, and I took on about a decade ago.

Our self-assigned mission was a daunting one: we were trying to empirically prove or disprove a sketchy tale from long ago that seemed to be based on lore, hearsay, and phantom evidence. Our first task was to develop an analytic model consisting of seven propositions defining “the Turkish community” theoretically and operationally. Most significantly, we posited that the Turkish community began with Joseph Benenhaley—the original Ottoman Turk—during the founding years of the American nation. Propositions 2 and 3 were judicious elaborations of connectedness in the growing community. Outsiders who married Benenhaley descendants thereby gained entry to the Turkish group; and being born to a Turkish parent carried birthright inclusion. Propositions 4, 5, and 6 were that these people constituted, mainly, a dark-hued ethnic group, and they quickly experienced isolation and

discrimination in the Dalzell area. Finally, proposition 7 was that they consciously identified with the Turkish community as an outcast society throughout their history.

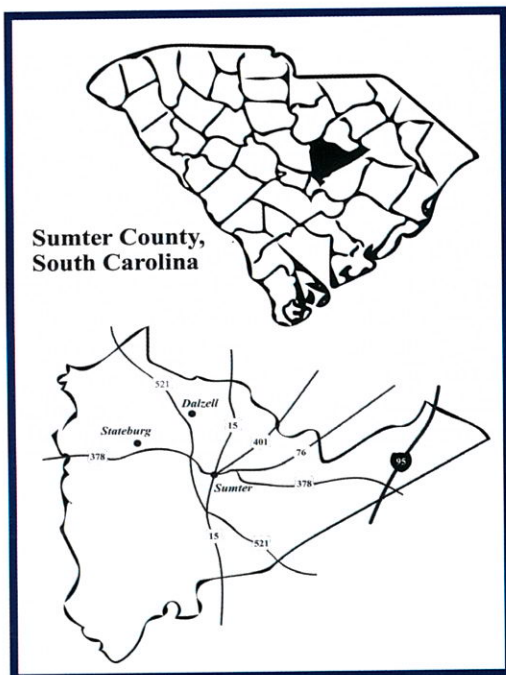
We then employed a variety of investigative methods to confirm or deny these propositions. We charted the Turkish people’s genealogical history, probed the genetic background of living community members, and visited traditional graveyards to reconstruct their early and evolving story. The data confirmed Joseph Benenhaley as the “first father” of the group and shed supportive light on the history of this enduring and intriguing community.

Genealogy

Rigorous scouring of the United States census, vital records, family histories, legal reports, and genealogy websites provided valuable information about the patriarch and his growing,

common family. Compilations of national demographic information indicate that Joseph Benenhaley and his descendants were, indeed, the “first family” of the Turkish community in Dalzell. Census data compiled from a popular genealogical website showed no other “Benenhaley” households in the country at the beginning of the 1800s.

In the 1810 census for Sumter



Left, Map of South Carolina, Sumter County, and Dalzell: Map showing the Dalzell community where the Turkish people lived for two centuries. Source: Graphic artist David M. Smith and photographer Mark Dupont. Right, General Thomas Sumter (1734–1832). According to oral history, the “Gamecock” recruited Joseph Benenhaley for his military unit in South Carolina during the American Revolution. This is a copy of a portrait originally painted by Rembrandt Peale around 1795. Source: Sumter County Museum.

District, Joseph Benenhaley was listed as the head of a household of seven persons that likely included: himself; his wife, Elizabeth Miller Benenhaley; mother-in-law Mrs. Miller; son Francis (b. 1802); daughter Sophronia or Sophonia (b. 1804); son Joseph II or Joseph Jr. (b. 1805); and daughter Catherine or Katie (b. 1808). By the 1820 census, his household had expanded to twelve, probably including the original seven plus daughter Leo Cadeo or Cadia (b. 1810); daughter Jency or Jency (b. 1817); son Lyander or Lysander (b. 1819); and perhaps two unidentified daughters born around 1813 and 1815. Later censuses indicate that Joseph and Elizabeth had two additional children: Isabella (b. 1824) and Ferdinand (b. 1825).

We eventually identified 270 individuals who were born or married into the community in its first and formative century. The Dalzell group absorbed well over a dozen family surnames

Sumter County Turkish Community During the 1800s

Growth by Decade

	Number	% of Total
1790s	4	1%
1800s	+8	3%
1810s	+6	2%
1820s	+3	1%
1830s	+16	6%
1840s	+33	12%
1850s	+26	10%
1860s	+19	7%
1870s	+42	16%
1880s	+54	20%
1890s	+61	23%
Total	270	100%

Family Surnames

	Number	% of Total
Benenhaley	137	51%
Oxendine	56	21%
Ray	22	8%
Hood	14	5%
Buckner	11	4%
Lowrey	6	2%
Other	24	9%
Total	270	100%

These tables show the growth of the Turkish people and the six core families during the first century of the community's history. Source: U.S. Census, vital records, obituaries, cemetery interments, and genealogical websites.

during the 1800s, some of European background and others with mixed white and Native American ancestry. These records suggest that the Oxendines joined the community in the 1830s, the Rays in the 1840s, the Hoods and Lowreys in the 1870s, and the Buckners in the 1880s. The Benenhaleys represented slightly over half (51 percent) of the 270 individuals identified, followed by the Oxendines (21 percent), Rays (8 percent), Hoods (5 percent), Buckners (4 percent), and Lowreys (2 percent). These six families intermarried considerably, and their surnames accounted for 91 percent of the Turkish people in those early generations.

Genetic Background

We supplemented our genealogical history with genetic research, and DNA reports sustained the notion of Ottoman origins. Although a single DNA test cannot indubitably identify an individual's ancestry or ethnicity, multiple tests for specific genetic signatures can be helpful when used in conjunction with other information about the group.

Despite great reluctance among most Turkish people

to even talk about genetic testing, we obtained DNA reports from eight living members of the Turkish community who were direct descendants of Joseph Benenhaley. The genetic profile of six of these indicated significant connections to Mediterranean-Middle Eastern-North African regions, along with substantial white European admixture and some evidence of Native American linkages. This result came as no surprise, since many people of mixed white and Indian lineage merged into the Dalzell community in the early years. More notably, however, the DNA results showed no discernable contributions from Sub-Saharan Africa, contradicting criticism that the community had claimed Turkish ancestry to cover African roots.

Graveyard Interments

Finally, to obtain a different and perhaps truer grasp of Joseph Benenhaley's ancestral role and the cultural character of the Turkish people, we visited church graveyards in the Dalzell area. The church was their most important social institution; therefore, what better way to define their community than with an inventory of individuals who chose to be buried and were accepted for burial at this central institution?

We focused on the two cemeteries that have served as principal houses of worship for the Turkish people: Long Branch Baptist Church, founded in 1904, and Springbank Baptist Church, founded in 1971. Close to five hundred individuals—369 at Long Branch and 122 at Springbank—have been buried in these cemeteries. “Benenhaley” appeared as the last name at the time of death on 42 percent of the headstones at these churches, followed by Oxendine (15



This is the family of William Joseph Benenhaley (1858–1920) and his wife, Cathreen Oxendine Benenhaley (1863–1934), in a photograph taken in the early 1900s. William was a great-grandson and Cathreen was a great-granddaughter of the patriarch. Left to right: William Jr. (1884–1942), Martha (1888–1917), Annie (1898–?), Katie (1899–1965), Mary Magdalene (1894–1971), Dolly (1900–1992), baby Nora (1902–1970), father William, Moses (1895–1950), Edward (1891–1952), mother Cathreen, baby Soloman (1904–1967), and Aaron (1891–1929). For the Benenhaley children for whom pertinent information was available, six of them married, including three to other Benenhaleys, one to an Oxendine, one to a Hood, and one to a Ray. Both parents and all but two of the children were recorded as buried in the cemetery at Long Branch Baptist Church, and both parents and all five children for whom records were located were identified as “Turk” on their death certificates. This is a copy of a photograph by an unknown photographer and donated by Isaac Benenhaley/David Peagler. Source: Greg Thompson Collection.



Above, the Ray siblings. These four Turkish people were ancestral relatives of co-author Terri Ognibene, whose mother was a Ray. This photograph was taken in the early 1900s. Source: Greg Thompson Collection. Below, Co-author Terri Ognibene interviewed Dr. Eleazer Benenhaley and his wife, Nina Hood Benenhaley, both sixth generation Turkish people, for this project. Source: Glen Browder.



percent), Ray (11 percent), Hood (11 percent), Buckner (6 percent), and Lowrey (1 percent). Together, these six families comprised 86 percent of the markers in these cemeteries.

When we analyzed both birth surnames and married surnames, Benenhaley's influence was even more impressive. Our inventory revealed that a majority, 51 percent, of the deceased in these two graveyards had been either born or married into the Benenhaley family. The six core families represented 91 percent of the graves. Just as importantly, our examination of other cemeteries in Sumter County revealed that few individuals with these Turkish surnames were buried outside of the Dalzell area. This graveyard survey conveyed convincing judgment on Joseph Benenhaley's patrilineal role and the Turkish people's existence as an enclosed subculture over the past two centuries.

The story of the Turkish people has long been ignored, obscured, and misrepresented by outsiders. However, after a decade of rigorous research and with help from inside that community, our project confirmed the long-cherished oral narrative. As this evidence collectively demonstrates, South Carolina's Turkish people descended from an identified Turkish patriarch—Joseph Benenhaley—who came from somewhere near the Mediterranean, Middle East, or North Africa. In the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, he settled in the area that became Sumter County. His bloodline dominated the communal family lineage, and the extended group lived isolated lives in the Dalzell community for the next two hundred years. They never blended with the surrounding society, and their distinctive heritage and ways of life brought enduring adversity. Summarily, these people are what they have always said and will always believe.

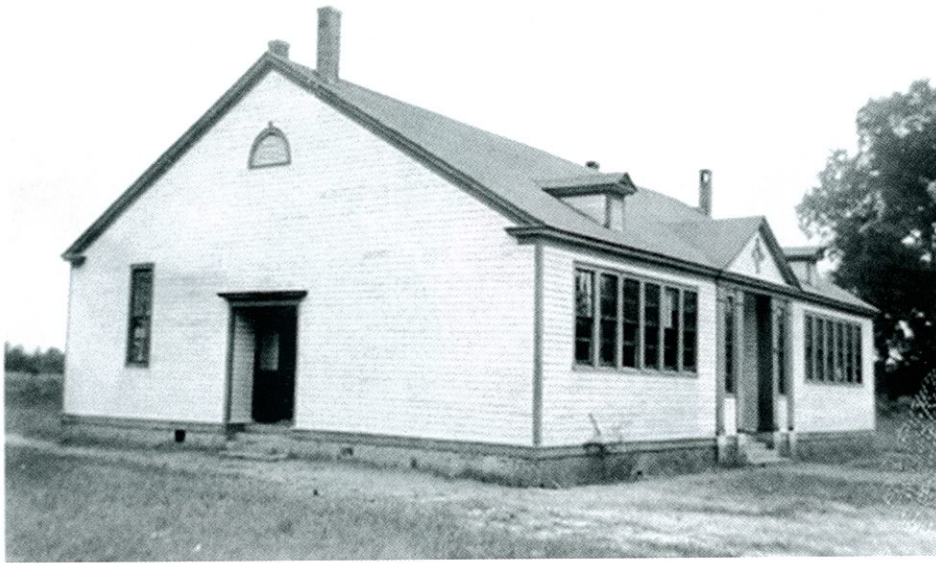
Glen Browder holds a PhD in political science from Emory University and is a professor emeritus of political science and American democracy at Jacksonville State University in Alabama. A former member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Browder also served Alabama in its House of Representatives and as secretary of state.

Part 2: Conversations Within the Family by Terri Ann Ognibene

We are the Turkish people of Sumter County, in the state of South Carolina. Our story has never been told fully and accurately. We have roots that extend all the way back to the Revolutionary War. We fought in the Civil War and in World Wars I and II. But for two centuries our rich history has been overlooked and misrepresented, our cultural identity has been questioned, and we were denied equal access to education because of the tones of our skin. We persevered, and we prevailed. Now, though our spirit endures, the Turkish community faces new and different challenges as a fading ethnicity in the twenty-first century.

About ten years ago, I conducted interviews with Boaz, Helen, Jean, and Tonie, pseudonyms for my family members who are still reluctant to speak openly about their Turkish history. The participants claimed lineage from Joseph Benenhaley and described themselves as white people of Turkish descent. They all mentioned General Thomas Sumter, hero of the American Revolution, as part of their story. Boaz explained his confidence and pride in this part of the traditional narrative: "That's who I am... and I hold my head high," he told me. When Dr. Browder and I completed our research in 2014, I returned to my relatives to reveal our genetic connections to the Mediterranean, Middle East, or North Africa region. I expected them to express excitement over our confirmation of their long-held beliefs, and they indeed seemed happy. Jean responded, "It's what we always thought." Tonie added assuredly, "I always knew he was a Turk."

Despite our community's connections to one of the country's greatest patriots, they were subjected to isolation and oppression. For most of their history, the Turkish residents of Sumter County lived in their own community, attended separate schools and churches, and sat in segregated areas in theaters and on buses. All of the interviewees attended the "Dalzell School for Turks" and participated in the integration of white schools in the 1950s. "The Turkish young people were not allowed on teams like the American Legion baseball teams



Above, Known as the Dalzell School for Turks, this building served the community from the 1930s until 1961, when integration with the previously white schools shut it down. Source: South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Below, These students had participated in a play at the Dalzell School for “Turks.” The second girl from the left on the front row is co-author Terri Ognibene’s mother, Pearl Ray, who still lives in the area. Source: Pearl Ray Corcoran.

and those types of things,” Boaz noted with sadness. Helen remembered going to a white hair stylist with a friend who had a darker complexion. When the two teenagers walked into the beauty shop, the stylist said, “I’m ready. Come in. You can sit in that chair.” But when Helen declared that the appointment was for her friend, the stylist responded, “Oh, I can’t cut her hair.” “And she didn’t,” Helen remembered. Jean even recalled one night “when the KKK was on the rampage.” She woke to a cross burning in her yard. “For about two weeks, a lot of people stood guard” outside the home, and she remembered feeling “terribly upset and afraid.” “It was just kind of dreadful...We were afraid to go out of the house,” she said. When I asked her

if she felt that her people were oppressed in Sumter County, her response was emotional: “We were all the time.... The whites felt that we were just kind of trash under their feet.”

Contemporary Turkish people are not isolated or oppressed as in the past. Many have moved out of the community to start families, attend college, or begin careers. Most welcome assimilation, and those who stayed in Sumter County say that they are treated fairly. Most agree, though, that the Sumter County Turkish community will likely disappear during this century. Tonie’s prediction was bleak: “Maybe in the next twenty-five to fifty years, no one will even know what a Turk was.”

The history of the Turkish people of Sumter County, until now, has been ignored, misrepresented, and even denied. Most of what we “knew” was written by people who were not of Turkish descent. Finally, our traditional narrative has been validated, our story has been told, and for the descendants of Joseph Benenhaley, life is better in the twenty-first century.

Terri Ann Ognibene earned a PhD in language and literacy education from Georgia State University. She teaches Spanish at Pope High School in Marietta, Georgia, where she was named Teacher of the Year for 2015–16.

Learn More

Readers may rest assured that our conclusive account of Joseph Benenhaley and the Turkish people relies on much more research and documentation than could be included in this short article. Our forthcoming publication—*South Carolina’s Turkish People* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018)—explains how the original Benenhaley likely made his way from the Ottoman Empire to South Carolina; new evidence (i.e., legal records and personal letters) attests to his role in founding the Turkish community; analyses of historical reports address their long-time association with Native Americans;

and extensive interviews with older Turkish individuals elaborate the inside story of their reclusive community, their relations with white and black neighbors, and their struggle against discrimination in the twentieth century.

Today, the Turkish people are assimilating into broader society while trying to hold onto their traditional heritage. The telling of the full and accurate story—here and in our forthcoming book—should contribute to their continued success in this effort; and it may help all of us better understand South Carolina and American history. ♦