Genealogy with Stephen Hanks
Ologies Podcast
February 11, 2018

Oh Heeeyyy, it's your fourth cousin - twice removed, Alie Ward, back with a familial, historical episode of *Ologies*. So, you are here because people made babies with each other; and out of *all* the gametes and *all* of the gonads, *you* became a collection of molecules; and you're suspended in a web of family. Even a cockroach, technically, has grandparents *and* cousins - isn't that weird!? Your cat might have an uncle. And if you have children - gaze at them. They may have children who have children, and then those children might not even know your damn name. They'll just know you're dead.

But before we get into it, first a quick thank you to the select slice of listeners who are also Patrons - you know who you are, you make the show possible. Thank you to everyone spreading the word with your mouth, or with your tweets, or by wearing my face on your chest via OlogiesMerch.com. Thanks to everyone who boots the show for others to see by hitting 'Subscribe' and rating it - that actually works. And leaving reviews, like sweet, sweet Tyra Mail for me to see. Such as this fresh evaluation from DCDoppelganger, who says:

> *Feeling sad and monotonous? Life getting you down? Listen to this podcast* - Ologies *reminds you about how amazing the world around you actually is. Thanks Dad Ward! Stay curious everyone!*

Will do DC, I promise. Okay, genealogy. The first topic ever to not be an 'ology'. Look at it... gene*a*logy!? What is this, the *Berenstain Bears*!? It's an *A*lolgy? What the heck man!? Genealogy comes from the root word *gene*, meaning 'to give birth to,' like *gene*sis. And genealogy is *not* the study of genetics and how DNA works; that's just called *genetics*. So this was news to me.

Now, genealogy is the tracing of family origins, and in Old English it was called '*folc-talu*' meaning 'folk tales', but the *alogy* and not *ology* is because the 'o' in *ologies* is borrowed from the first word anyway! So my point is, that this podcast should actually just be called *Logies*, and to be honest, I'm not really emotionally prepared to process that. Also, it's taken my laptop 150 episodes to not correct *this* - my life's work - into Eulogies; or Loogies, which it's done in business emails. So, now we know -alogy is as good as an ology.

So this week's *alogist*, I suppose, has been in this field for *three decades*; starting as a personal passion that just consumed him into making it a job. I was introduced to him by someone who worked to publish his latest book, which is called *1619 - Twenty Africans*, which just came out this past July.

I immediately ordered the book. I was so happy he was down to pop into a sound booth in Portland to chat with me about his passion tracing family histories and chasing down records. Also about mystery novels and capes; questions you should ask your relatives; U.S. history and how we treat the past; how to heal from our individual legacies; the joy of cracking a case; DNA tests; technology; brunch revelations; and how *everywhere* you look there's family. So pull up a chair, and absorb the stories of two-time author, total peach, distant relative to Tom Hanks, and perhaps your relative as well: genealogist Stephen Hanks.

[*Intro Music*]

Alie Ward: I'm sure you get that with a lot of Stevens with Vs.

Stephen Hanks: I do. My name is spelled with a 'ph', as you probably noticed. But it's funny, when I introduce myself they say Steve. "Okay, Steve. Nice to meet you." I didn't say Steve, I said Ste*phen*! [*laughs*]

Alie: Now, you are a genealogist? And you've been a genealogist for quite a while now?

Stephen: Yeah, I started in '89, when I was about 30 years old, and that's when I got the bug. I was over at my dad's house that day in July, and he was watching the baseball game, and he handed me this letter he got from a cousin in Kansas, and he says, "Read this."

Of course, I didn't know anything about my family's history. I'm just a kid growin' up in Portland, Oregon. [*chuckles*] So he shows me this letter, and I start reading it, and it's an obituary of a newspaper, and all these relatives' names are listed in this obituary - they're on my dad's side of the family - and I just said, "Wow, I don't know who these people are!" And that's what got it started right there. I said, "I gotta find out who these people are. I gotta find out about the history of my family." And that's how it got started back in '89.

Alie: What was the first thing you did? Back in '89, we had libraries, and microfiche, and the Dewey Decimal system. [*Stephen and Alie laugh*]

Stephen: The old microfilm readers? Totally. No internet, no clicking of the mouse. It was old school all the way!

Aside: 'Old school' ways involved making the two to three-hour drive from Portland to Seattle's National Archives. That houses 58,000 cubic feet of records - *that's a lot of records!* - all about the Pacific Northwest: for Oregon, Idaho, Washington and now Alaska. But just in the past few weeks - this is breaking news - historians are rightly p.o.'d that the government wants to sell this building because the techy-Seattle location has become so valuable. A building sale would mean moving all of those records of the Pacific Northwest to Missouri or California, making the journey for people much longer and, let's face it, mostly impossible.

And no, you can't just jump on the information superhighway. A lot of those ledgers and records haven't even been digitized. So genealogy research, like family trees, still has its roots in the past.

Stephen: When I started getting interested in this field and wanting to learn more, I had to learn the rules of the game and how the professional genealogists did it. So I learned about census records, tax records, land deeds, courthouse records and just on and on. So I said, "Let me just start with the census records, that sounds pretty easy enough."

Every ten years they have a census. Of course, they put a privacy restriction on the first 70 years. They don't release it to the public. So the most recent census that was available to me at that time was, I believe, the 1920 census. But they had no National Archives branch in Portland. I could either fly to Washington D.C. - that probably wasn't going to work - or they said I could go to Seattle, Washington, they have a branch there.

I would take off whenever I could and just drive up, three hours up to Seattle, and just spend time looking at the old microfilm reels, and putting the old microfilm on, and cranking the machine, and boom, there they were! I found my grandparents in Manhattan, Kansas, and I started getting excited with the 1920 census.

This is the genealogist rule: work your way back from what you know, to what you don't know. That's the rule. Never do it the other way around. Never go to what you don't know and try to work your way up to the present, because you don't know who those people are in the past! You don't know what journey or what path you're gonna be on! So start with what you know, and work your way back.

So, I found my grandparents' names, I said, "Okay, I'm on the right track." And I just started working my way back. It started getting tricky as you get further back in time, and that's what got me even more excited because I'm like a detective, like a *Perry Mason*; just start looking under the rocks! So I went to 1910, and the 1900 census, and this was getting really exciting. I was finally able to locate my great-grandparents - I knew their names - and it just blew me away. I found them in Kansas and found out that they had moved to Kansas from Mississippi. The thing about that experience was that they came from Mississippi under a different set of living, as you know where I'm coming from... slavery. That was a big shockaroo.

Aside: Stephen's first book was 2013's *Akee Tree: A Descendant's Quest for His Slave Ancestors on the Eskridge Plantations*. He has such an amazing way of writing about the process of genealogy through his own narrative, and how one discovery can kind of ignite another.

Stephen: The further you go back in time… I was able to find them on the 1880 census. The 1890 census, I guess, was burned in a fire in 1921. That's something that all genealogists, if you're studying Greek, Italian - whatever your ancestry is, that's something that you have to live with; the 1890 census is gone forever.

Aside: Stephen told me that through the 1870 census, he discovered his grandparents lived in a little town called Duck Hill, Mississippi, hailing from what is now Montgomery county. The same place that Oprah Winfrey's family is from! Small world, but big deal given that Oprah Winfrey is the closest thing this country has had to a queen.

Stephen: There they were, 1870, June something. I couldn't believe it, there they were. I never met these family members but these were my ancestors and so when I got to that point, I was just in heaven. The problem is, going beyond 1870 is the trick, as far as African-American genealogy. But I've had many different clients, many different people... just even friends that I've done it for: Italian, Greece, so forth... it's exciting.

Alie: You've established yourself as a genealogist: you've written multiple books, you've consulted on multiple documentaries. Going back to your own history, were you always someone who liked mystery novels, like detective novels?

Stephen: I did.

Alie: Yeah? Was that kind of in your genes?

Stephen: Oh my god, *Sherlock Holmes*! I can remember as a kid just staying up late at night and just watching *Sherlock Holmes.* It always had to be this one actor who played Sherlock Holmes, he was the one I fell in love with. I can't remember his name right off the bat…

Alie: Oh, I'll look it up!

Aside: My guess is that this is Ronald Howard, who, in nearly 40 episodes of detective capers, portrayed the caped icon:

[*clip from Sherlock Holmes from 1955:]*

"What are you doing anyway?"

"Research."

"Research!?"

P.S. I just learned that that cape is called an Inverness cape, and it's named after a rainy region in the Scottish Highlands where Scottish wear this sleeveless cloak thing because it provides easier access to their *sporran*, which is there long, hairy fanny pack/coin purse that hangs over their junk area.

Anyway yes, *Sherlock Holmes* loved a good problem to solve, and on the topic of clever Scots...

Stephen: Sherlock was my guy, and then of course James Bond - who's not gonna like James Bond, the Sean Connery? [*I know I love you James!*] But yeah, I totally was into the mysteries and the detectives early on, definitely.

Alie: And after you were handed this obituary and you started driving up to Seattle to look at the archives - you mentioned you were in your thirties - have you been able to balance genealogy with other careers, or at some point did you have to decide what you were going to dedicate your career to?

Stephen: That's a good question; I did have to kind of juggle back and forth because I had the passion and drive to want to be a genealogist. I tried to start up my own business… actually I did start my own business, it was called Genealogical Networking Services, and I went back to school and learned how to do computers, [*chuckles*] 'cause I didn't know that.

So I started my entrepreneurship, and I was getting requests all across the country, it was amazing! I still have those inquiry letters to this day, all over the country, people asked me to do this, that, 'can you look this up?'; Native American. Just anything you could think of, and I had fun doing it. The only problem was people had a tendency to not want to *pay* you, but they want you to do the research first, and then send me a payment. So it got to be kind of hard to make a living out of it, but I always had the passion for it.

I had to do other types of work, just to pay the bills. Finally I was able to, just recently actually… Five years ago I finally got a really nice job that goes right along with my genealogy... I'm working for the school district here. I'm a records clerk, and it's amazing how many people come in - walk in, or email, or phone - they want to do research about this, that or the other, and that's just right up my alley, doing research, and it ties right into the genealogy. For the first time, after so many years, I finally got them both together; genealogy and just doing historical and local research, so it's cool.

Alie: That's amazing. And I know that you chronicled these discoveries that you made with your family in your first book *The Akee Tree*, and I would love to hear more. I know it's the 'AHH-key' tree or 'ah-KEY' tree; you could pronounce it either way. [*laughs*]

Stephen: I know. I say 'ahh-KEY' tree, but then I've heard people say 'AHH-key'...

Alie: I wasn't quite sure, so I just messed it up either way! [*laughs*]

Stephen: But my auntie - who just recently passed away in St. Louis, Missouri - she was my mother's sister, she would take trips to Jamaica as often as she could, and she pronounced it AHH-key. She sent me a picture of it, and I put it in the book…

Aside: So the AHH-key tree, or ahh-KEY tree, depending on how you say it, is native to West Africa and it bears this red fruit that in due time yawns open to reveal dark black, glossy seeds and this yellow, spongy flesh. It's popular in Caribbean dishes, but if you try to eat that sucker before it's ripe, your impatience might get rewarded with the very self-explanatory 'Jamaican vomiting sickness'. Anyways, let it ripen, and then cook it with cod and it's just supposed to be heaven on Earth!

Now Stephen's book, *The Akee Tree*, has sepia-toned photographs of his ancestors and the silhouette of this tree behind them. He told me that his first book was narrative fiction, based on his family experiences and inspired by books like Alex Haley's *Roots*. But later he revised it to be purely non-fiction.

Stephen: It took about ten years to do the research on that, and my whole goal when I first started out was just to learn about my family on both my father and mother's sides. I wasn't trying to go all the way to Africa or anything like that - just learning about the family. But every time I would go further back in history, I kept getting excited. I'm like, "How far back can I go!? This is getting to be interesting now!"

As we all know, Abraham Lincoln ended slavery in 1865; 1863 some say because of the Emancipation Proclamation. Like I mentioned earlier, I found my great-grandparents on the 1870s census. That was the first time that African Americans were listed on a Federal census. For the first time as far as *everyone*, because it was five years after the end of the Civil War. So now everyone is just a regular citizen - the way it was supposed to be! But if you want to go further back - 1860 - well then you're going back into the old system of things, when the South was at its peak and cotton was king and all that. So 1860, that's when you really get into the struggle of trying to identify who your ancestors are.

Now, for some people, they have what they call Free People of Color. I learned about that as I became a genealogist. There were some people who had the designation of… they were a free person of color, meaning they were emancipated or they were set free a long time ago, maybe 1800s, and their family just were free all the way up, right through the Civil War, everything! They were just cruising, they were free. So they never had that problem of being found on a census record because their family had always been free.

Aside: 'Free People of Color', by the by, are referred to as: Free People of Color, and just the distinction is just a very painful reminder that they were the exception, and not the rule. Stephen explored the beginnings of the laws that would shape - and scar - the nation for the last 400 years in his book *1619 - Twenty Africans: Their Story, and Discovery of Their Black, Red & White Descendants*.

Stephen: But in Hampton, Virginia, there was a little ship that came in, in August of 1619, and it had 20 Africans on it. They were taken off of a slave ship that was heading to Veracruz, Mexico. Some pirates attacked the ship and took about 50 Africans off of the slave ship! 20 of them came to the coast of Virginia. They let them go. They traded them for food. And long story short I did this book based on this. And DNA is so interesting now too... Everyone is taking a DNA test, trying to find out about their ancestry, we have TV shows about it…

Aside: Please see: *Finding Your Roots*, *Genealogy Roadshow*, *Faces of America*, and *Who Do You Think You Are?* The latter of which, fun fact, is produced by Lisa Kudrow a.k.a. Phoebe from *Friends*, and she even did an episode on Courtney Cox, and: [*Lisa Kudrow: "Okay, and she was hoping that her family were good people and no one, like, murdered anyone, and it turns out her ancestors murdered the King of England!"*]

I looked into this further and a red-hot poker may have been involved. But we don't need to go into it.

Anyway, part of discovering one's genealogy is facing that, guess what? Just because they're *your* ancestors, doesn't mean that they're the protagonist of the story. It's easy as a white person to think that, say, Black History Month doesn't involve you. But if you live in America, it does - it involves all of us. With knowledge comes context, and with context comes understanding. DNA tests are expanding that knowledge more and more.

Stephen: So I took my DNA test, and come to find out that I have some connections to these first Africans. That's what this latest book is about. The further you go back in time, it just gets harder and harder to locate your family if your ancestry or your inheritance was slavery, but it can be done.

Alie: I'd love to hear more about your personal family discovery, and what that was like for you when you were tracing your genealogy, tracing your family history, and you made that discovery that you had, obviously, relatives who were slaves in the South. What was that like for you to connect?

Stephen: It was amazing. I interviewed so many different relatives, so many different cousins. Most of my father's side had passed away, but my mom's was still around. It was just amazing interviewing people. We didn't have the internet back in those days, so you can't just get on Google, and type in a web search, and click on a document, and print out your family tree! It doesn't work that way! So I had to travel around. I didn't fly, but I would get on the Greyhound bus, and I would just travel to Mississippi, to Kansas. I went to Virginia, South Carolina... just interviewing people, going to courthouses.

And I'll never forget this day; September 22, 1994. That was the day that I took a trip down to Duck Hill, Mississippi to meet the great-granddaughter of the man who my ancestors worked for. It was deep. We corresponded over the phone, and she said she'd be happy to meet me – her and her husband – and I told her about my book and that I'm trying to write this information, I'm trying to research my family, and I just would like to know where my ancestors lived, and where they worked at, and the land… just everything about it. I just wanted to breathe it, touch it, smell it, whatever. I wanted to get down there and see that. She said, "Come on down. Just let us know when you're coming and we'll meet you."

So I planned my trip, went down there in September of 1994, and we met at the local bank there – it's a little, small town – and we just embraced. We just embraced and made a really deep connection. We're still friends to this day. Well, actually, her son and his wife are friends with me, because she's now passed on. She was about 75 years old in 1994, but she just opened her arms. I had a rental car, and I drove up from Jackson, Mississippi, up the Interstate 55, and got into town there. And she hopped into my car. [*Alie laughs*] She didn't know me from Adam! The first time we met, she hopped into the passenger side – her daughter drove her up there – and she tells her daughter, "Okay, I'll see you later on today! Bye bye!"

She's that confident to get into the car with me, a total stranger, but that's the connection we had that day. It was amazing. I'll never forget it. She took me to the old family site, the old plantation home that her great-grandfather lived in. And she took me to the family cemetery, and some of my ancestors were buried in her family cemetery. It was just amazing.

Aside: Just a sidenote; I was casually fully crying in my recording closet at this point.

Stephen: I just was taking notes the whole time, and that was a turning point. That just broke through to finding another generation of my family. And long story short, Alie, by the time it was said and done, I was able to work my way, starting in 1920, all the way back to the 1700s, 1730s.

Alie: Oh, my god!

Stephen: Yeah! I couldn't believe it. I had no idea that I could go that far back, but I had paper documents from the courthouses and estate records. I just followed the paper trail, you know, just like Perry Mason and Sherlock Holmes! [*both laugh*] Like they said, 'follow the paper trail!' [*from Perry Mason: "I heard you had a reputation for… resourcefulness."*]

Aside: So Stephen followed those clues, and it led him to Virginia in the 1730s and an archived estate inventory.

Stephen: You know, when somebody dies, they have to do an estate inventory of all your property? And they did that back then too, pretty much the same. And so this person's plantation home that this paper trail pointed me to, his name was Colonel George Eskridge. And he had Africans that were working on his tobacco plantation. Tobacco was the main crop at that time. And when he died in 1735, they had to do an estate inventory of all his belongings. And of course, unfortunately, they listed human beings as property at that time. That's how they did things. But they were African names. When I looked on the inventory, they were African names. I couldn't believe it. And so, through a little bit more research, I was able to identify one of them. And it was just amazing. Just amazing.

Alie: You've had a long history of going into musty bookshelves and microfiche all the way up to internet and to DNA tests. Genealogy, the field expands, it seems like, every year with technology. On one hand, we learn that we are literally, like, all related, but on the other, it uncovers some really painful truths about our histories, and about slavery, and about colonialism. How do you feel, as a genealogist, that can affect us emotionally? Do you think it can bring up pain? Or do you think it can help heal something, or is it empowering?

Stephen: I think that initially, it does cause a little bit of pain and uncomfortableness, because for some reason in our country of the United States of America, I don't think we've ever fully grappled with what happened after 1865. I don't think we ever really had any discussions about race and that topic. I just don't think we ever really dealt with it, because there were so many things that came on right after. You know? Okay, slavery ended, everybody's celebrating, dadada! And then, boom. We had a whole set of other problems that came right after that, with Jim Crow and segregation, and the KKK, and on and on. And so we never really dealt with it.

I kind of look at it like, it's just like a person who has an addiction. Maybe having an addiction with alcohol, or drug addiction, or whatever it is. The first step is acknowledging that you have a problem. And then you discuss it with someone, and you try to get help, and the more you discuss it and acknowledge it, it starts to heal you and you start to feel better.

Aside: Stephen notes that South Africa's post-apartheid public hearings held by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (which it was then called), allowed victims of abuses and violence to speak out and explain the physical and emotional impacts of apartheid. And it also gave those who perpetrated violence a chance to ask for amnesty and forgiveness. Stephen thinks that having a similar healing process in America could lead to better understanding, compassion, and healing.

Stephen: If you study your roots, and you find that you have people that are in your family that are of a different ethnicity or culture, embrace it and get to know who they are. Reach out to them and introduce yourself. Because they're your family. The DNA tests that are so popular now, people are finding that out more and more, that we're all so much more closely connected than we ever have been. Because we're all related, really, when you look at it.

So, it *is* painful at first, but just acknowledging that we had a problem but that we want to move forward and just be in peace. That's one thing about doing genealogy, for me, is that it is a little emotional sometimes, but I have to put that aside and put that on one little compartment, and look at it from the perspective of, 'this is history.' And I want to learn about history and I want to learn about people. Cause we're all the same. And if we do that, we're going to do fine. We're gonna be fine. [*from Nelson Mandela's inauguration speech, May 10, 1994: "The time for the healing of the wounds has come."*]

Alie: How has the advent of consumer DNA tests changed what you do and how you research?

Stephen: It's very interesting. That's a very interesting question. When I first took the test and got results back, I had about 2,000 connections of people that were related to me. And they did it from, obviously, the highest ratio down to the lowest ratio. And so I could look at my top twenty and say, "Wow, these are really close to me."

Aside: Stephen has taken two DNA tests and his father, before he passed away, also took one. And their raw data led them to the Eskridge family name he was already familiar with, which validated the technology for him. He was like, "Oh! This works!" But sometimes results might surprise you. Turns out that iconic Lizzo's iconic *Truth Hurts* genealogical ripper [*clip from Lizzo's "Truth Hurts": I just took a DNA test, turns out, I'm 100% that bitch*] isn't 100% her brainchild! So, a London musician with the handle MinaLioness tweeted that exact line in February 2017, and it became a meme, and Lizzo liked the meme. She tossed it in a song.

The original tweeter was like, "Uh, hello, excuse me, Lizzo, that is my DNA joke." And some legal things ensued, but fences have been mended, and fast forward last October when Mina tweeted out, "I just took a DNA test, turns out I'm a credited writer for the number one song on Billboard." All's well that ends well.

Stephen: And I'm getting ready to take another DNA test here shortly. Because there's so many companies out there, and people are choosing which companies they want to do it with. So either my cousins haven't taken the test on the companies I took it with, or they haven't taken one at all. Or it could mean that my family that I thought was my family, [*laughs*] maybe they weren't my family, ya know?! You never know.

Alie: If you take a DNA test through, say, 23andme, but then you have relatives who have taken it through, like, Ancestry, does that mean you just might be not connecting because you're using different companies?

Stephen: Yes, exactly. And that's the point, that I want to take another test through another company. Actually, I do want to take it through Ancestry, because I think that a lot more of my family – in fact, I've heard – that more of my cousins are taking the Ancestry one. So I want to get on board and just see how I line up with that. 23andme, it's a great company, I've gotten a lot of good hits and connections with that. So I did validate that, that this DNA stuff is for real, because I did know their names and they did show up. They were there on my mother's side, but no one on my father's side showed up.

Alie: How does that work? I might have to look this up, but how does that work with the Mitochondrial Eve and things coming down from the X chromosomes? Do we tend to find out more about our maternal sides when we take DNA tests than we do paternal?

Aside: Mitochondrial Eve has become the pop cultural name of the most recent known maternal ancestor we all share, because mitochondrial DNA is only passed on through maternal lineage. Scientists do not love this biblical name, as it's misleading from a narrative standpoint, let's say. But this Mitochondrial Eve is what's called an MRCA – most recent common ancestor. And she can vary depending on genetic discoveries. So if a more recent common ancestor lineage is discovered, for example, it's a different Mitochondrial Eve. But, yes. All related, all of us. Wild.

Stephen: For a female that wants to do genealogy, and using the DNA tool, in order for them to learn more about their father's side, they need to try to see if they have a brother that can take the test, or their father, or an uncle… you know, anyone on the paternal side.

Aside: This is called a Y chromosome test, and it's helpful to figure out, say, if two families with the same surname are indeed genetic relatives. So, ladies, surprise your dad or brother with a DNA test. It's a gift that just keeps giving you information! And then, of course, there is the mitochondrial DNA test you can do. Everyone has their mom's mitochondrial DNA, and this is helpful because historically women's history can be erased, or at least very illegibly smudged, by the taking of surnames. More on that later. Oh, and you can get single nucleotide polymorphism testing, which scans your DNA for variations in the CG and AT pairings. And they'll tell you what traits, or diseases, or – in some cases – parents you might share with folks in their database.

Stephen: And that's another thing, too, about these DNA companies. They're always updating their results. The results get updated because more and more people are joining them, and so they're getting more hits. The DNA results keep updating and you get more people that join and you get new names that just keep popping up.

Alie: That's gotta be the best email to get. I get those from 23andme that'll be like, "You have new relatives!" My family's Catholic on both sides, which means there's a million of us.

Stephen: Oh! You took your test through 23andme?

Alie: Yeah. I did! And I have *so* many relatives. My dad is one of 11 and my mom's one of 6, so we've got a lot of us out there. But that's gotta be the most exciting email to pop up in your inbox, that you have new relatives.

Stephen: Totally!

Alie: You gotta be like, "Jackpot!"

Stephen: Totally, yes.

Alie: And I, actually, told listeners that I was going to be talking to you today, and they sent in questions. Can I ask you some questions from them?

Stephen: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

Alie: Okay, great. Like, literally hundreds of questions for you. [*both laugh*] I know! Everyone's so excited.

Aside: Okay, but before we dive into your genealogical queries, as you know, each episode we donate to a relevant charity, and one that Stephen advocates for is BlackPast.org. BlackPast is dedicated to providing a global audience with reliable and

accurate information on the history of African America and people of African ancestry around the world. They aim to promote greater understanding through this knowledge, and to generate constructive change in our society. They have over 6,000 pages of genealogical resources and history available, and again, are at BlackPast.org. That donation was made possible by some sponsors of the show, which you may hear about now.

[*Ad break*]

Okay, let's hop into your questions.

Alie: So, let's see. First patron question. This was asked by Rachel Casha, Jennifer Tran, and first-time question-asker Danielle Lavoie: What's the deal with second cousins versus first cousins once removed? Rachel Casha says: the whole 'once removed' hurts my brain and I don't understand. [*both laugh*] What does that mean?

Stephen: Yeah, that's a good question. Well, I'll take the first part 'cause that's easier. The second cousins would be, like… You have your first cousins; you have your mother, she has a sister, which would be your aunt, and your aunt has children. And those children would be your first cousins. [*"Cousssssins…"*] Cousins twice removed, and all that, I'm still trying to wrap my head around that! [*both laugh*]

Alie: That makes me feel better. Because if a genealogist who has published several books and is a consultant for PBS shows doesn't quite get it, that makes me feel so much better.

Stephen: Oh my. Yeah.

Aside: Okay, I looked up a flowchart for this and… my soul hurt, but I think I got it. So your first cousin's child is your first cousin once removed. So your first cousin's kid's kids are first cousins twice removed. So 'removed' is in regard to generations. Same grandparents, different generation. Now your second cousin, according to Genealogy.com, is someone who has the same great-grandparents as you, but not the same grandparents. So third cousins have the same great-great-grandparents, fourth cousins have the same great-great-great-grandparents, and so on. So that 'cousin removed' business is about generations, unlike, on my Italian side, feuds. Blistering, family-shattering feuds.

Alie: In my family, my dad's one of 11, and each of those siblings have a lot of kids, and we just resort to levels. Like, my grandparents are a level one, my dad is a level two, that makes me a level three. And so our family reunions, which are ginormous, literally different colored t-shirts, so you know who's a level two or something. [*both laugh*] Like, "Who's kid is that?" And you're like, "I dunno, they're in a yellow shirt, they're a level four!" So it helps us.

A lot of people wanted to know about the reliability of sites like Ancestry. Maggie Fraser, who's a first-time question-asker, wants to know about reliability. Michelle Minert, Lisa, Emm, Kendyll Burnell, Jessie Cole, Bennett Gerber, who's also a first-time question-asker, Deanna Juan, and Henna N, they all kind of want to know: Can we rely on these?

Stephen: Yes.

Alie: Yeah? Cool. Good answer!

Stephen: Very good question. Yeah. I have heard different comments about different companies, and you definitely want to do your research, and whatever company you choose to go with, know a little bit about their ratings and how they're doing, how people feel about them. I've heard some things about Ancestry, pros and cons. I have heard… and I don't know if it's true or not but I'm going to find out cause I'm getting ready to take my test with Ancestry, so I will know. But I have heard that they ask you different questions about putting in a profile. And so you start putting in names, like, "Well, this is my grandfather, this is my grandmother, my great-grandfather, boom boom boom. He was born in Maryland, or Jackson, Mississippi," whatever.

And if someone else in another part of the country, they go in there, and if one of their names matches with yours – just on the family tree, not the DNA part, just the profiles – they seem to send a message back and forth to each other that you might want to look at this person, 'this person might be related to you.' Just by the names you put on your profile. And so, that's kind of something that makes you think, 'be careful.' Because you may not have been able to fully establish those names that you're putting on your profile, if they're truly related to you. Unless you have concrete proof, no problem.

But if you're a genealogist, and you're doing the family tree, and you've been following the paper trail, you know, the old school methodology, that's just what it says on paper, that these are your family. But how do you really know? What if somebody had a child out of wedlock, you know? So be aware, because that could throw you into the wrong direction. Just because you match another person's profile just based on the names, that may not hold water. But if you take the DNA and you're connected, well then you have something to work with.

And so I was like, "Well, if I take this Ancestry test, I'm not going to put any names right yet on my profile." I'm gonna just wait and see who pops up first and then I'll go from there. 'Cause I don't want too many people… It might give me the wrong leads, you know what I'm saying? So, yeah, just do your research and know what company you choose to go with.

Alie: Along that line, a lot of listeners, like Erin, Jess_Lin, Maria Kumro, and Concetta Gibson – Jess_Lin is a first-time question-asker – all ask about surnames. Jess_Lin mentions that there's a law in Quebec, Canada, that forbids a woman from taking her husband's surname after marriage and asks: Are there any cultures or countries in which women traditionally don't take their husband's name? And does that ever cause issues when tracing back families?

Stephen: Wow, yeah, totally. I have heard that too, that there are some cultures where it's a maternal line and the female just goes by her maiden name as the surname, yeah. I would say too that that happens to be a problem a lot in genealogy. Not a problem that cannot be overcome, and I have come across that, even myself in my own research. Say I find a person on the census, and say her name is Mary Johnson, just for example. But then if you read further in the other columns of Mary Johnson's family line, it says that she's single, but then she has two or three children in her household listed as son, daughter, whatever. But they are her children. So then, you have to ask yourself the

question, “She’s single, but she has children?” Okay, and then the children have different names.

And so sometimes I’ve had that problem where I’m trying to figure out, well, Mary Johnson, if I can’t find her marriage certificate to show that these are her children from her husband, I don’t know if Mary Johnson is her married name or if that’s her maiden name. And so that happens sometimes, where it’s a question mark. That is a really big challenge with genealogy, trying to locate the maiden names. And the best thing that most genealogists are able to do is try to find the marriage certificate, and if that doesn’t work, then a death certificate sometimes will show the maiden name. And if you can’t find the marriage or death certificate, it’s gonna be a tough one.

Aside: One study showed that, in 1980, 98.6% of American women - almost 99% - took their husband’s name after marriage. But that’s declined in recent years to about 80%. Now, what percent of men adopt a new name after marriage these days? Hmmm… 3%. So this next tip is a revelation.

Stephen: The other genealogist rule is: Look at who’s living next door. Look who’s living next door or even a few houses down, because families tended to stay together. Your family that you found on the census might be living right next door to another family member. It's just amazing when you find that connection like that. Many times I've had that discovery, and I was like, “Wow! I spent two years trying to locate, and here they were living right next door!” [“*What? Were you there the whole time?”*]

Alie: And that brings me to a question a lot of people asked. Anna Thompson, Concetta Gibson, Jessie Dragon, Margaret Ebacher-Rini, Chelsy O’Leary, Sarah Jean Horowitz, and Larissa. Larissa and Chelsy are both first-time question-askers and Larissa asks: What's the best place to start to actually look into family history? What are some questions that we should be asking ourselves, and our family, and professionals like librarians in order to look into our history?

Stephen: Great question. They're all great questions. Your listeners, they're the best.

Alie: Yeah!

Stephen: The first thing to do when you want to get started on your genealogy is, you know, start assembling your family tree, and ask questions from your family if they're still living. If your father’s still living, if your mother’s still living, or grandparents. Whoever’s closest to you that’s still alive. Even your siblings. Sometimes your siblings have more of a recollection than you do. Sometimes my brother will come up with stuff I don’t even remember! And he’ll be telling me, “Yeah, and…” and wow, I didn’t know that! So, just sit down with a pen and paper and start making a list on the paternal side, your father’s side, and the maternal side, your mother’s side. And then just start going from there.

List your parents first, then their parents. Put down where they were born, obviously, if you have that information, where they died. If you can find the county name of where they were born or died, that even helps too. Find out what year they were married, like your grandparents. Find out how they met each other. That’s always been such a fascinating question to me; how did the grandparents meet each other? Or the great-grandparents, how did they meet each other? Just because you were born in Chicago, Illinois, and you died in New Orleans, Louisiana, for example, how did great-grandpa

meet great-grandma? Or how did grandma meet grandpa? And then you find out, "Oh they got married in Atlanta, Georgia." And then…

Alie: What were they doing there!

Stephen: Exactly! That's the point. What were they doing there? Was there family there in Atlanta? Write all that down of where they got married, because those could be clues later on down the road. They may not mean anything now but they might later. So just start putting a chart down, father's side on one side of the paper, mother's side on the other side, and just work your way back on who their grandparents and great-grandparents were, and just list as much as you can. Then whatever blanks you have, fill in the blanks by interviewing your relatives; the aunts, and the uncles, and the grandmothers, and the grandfathers. Try to fill those blanks in as much as you can.

And go to the family closet, or wherever… Whoever's the one that's holding the records in the family, consult them. There's always somebody in the family that's got all the marriage records, they've got all the pictures, the photographs, the obituaries, the death notices, the birth certificates, and all that sort of thing. Go to that person and just plow through all that and write all that down. Even make photocopies if they'll allow you to.

When you interview someone that's really old… [*"How old?"*] [*chuckles*] What does that mean, 'really old'? Sometimes I feel like I'm really old! [*Alie laughs*] But when you interview a parent or a grandparent, I even ask them, "Is it okay if I can record it?" Record it and that way you're not missing anything.

Alie: That's great. And you'll also learn so much about your family. Who doesn't want to learn more about people's history centered right around them? I think that's such a good bonding project too, you know?

Aside: So treat yourself to a nice new notebook, brew a pot of tea, and then sit down and interrogate a loved one, gently.

Alie: A few people, including Beatriz Bevilacqua, Bee Wilson, and first-time question-asker Lizzie, for example, all wanted to know about adoption. Lizzie asks: My dad is adopted and knows some of his biological family's background, but what does that mean for our genealogy? Do we trace the adopted family's history? Do we trace the bio family's history? Both?

Stephen: Excellent question. I would say do both if you feel like it. If you have a yearning for wanting to know both, go for it. I know that in my family my grandfather, who I met… I never did meet my father's parents, so I never did know my paternal grandfather or grandmother. They both passed before I was born. But on my mom's side her mother remarried, and so her husband was always… He was the one I always called grandpa, but he was not my biological grandpa, but to this day he will always be my grandfather.

So I did a genealogy search on his family. I wanted to know about him, and found out that he had Native American heritage from Tennessee, and I found out he had an Aunt Minerva and she lived to be 100 years old. And I recorded that. I still have that on tape. Cassette tape, by the way. [*laughs*] I need to update that.

So, I would say that for adoptions, why not look at both sides? The biological and the adopted side, absolutely. For adoptions, I've had people that have contacted me over the years that wanted to get help trying to locate their biological parents.

Aside: What about turning over some hefty forensic boulders?

Alie: I had a few people, Juliebear, Laura Merriman, Stephanie Broertjes, and first-time question-asker April Perry… April Perry wrote in and said: I'm a forensic scientist, DNA analyst more specifically, and our field has been all abuzz with genealogy in the past few years as cold cases are being solved using public database searches. April's curious what your take is, including some possible ethical dilemmas. How do you feel about it?

Stephen: Yeah, that's been on the news recently. Some people are leery about putting their DNA information on a website where law enforcement agencies can come in and check into that, and they have cold cases they're trying to solve, and you might know some information about it. It's kind of scary. I don't know, that's a good question.

If it can create closure to someone, I wouldn't mind participating in solving something. But of course I wouldn't want anything to turn back on me, you know? But I'm clean, I haven't done anything, so I'm good. I have a clean conscience. I guess you have to think about that if you… When you take a DNA test you're susceptible to whatever is out there, so just be careful. I know there's a lot of pros and cons. That's a very big question right now.

Alie: It's such a new quandary, a new ethical dilemma that we've just never encountered before, so I think a lot of people are still wrapping their brains around the benefits of getting closure or apprehending someone versus how, from a molecular level, invasive that is on your actual genes. It's really interesting. I think a lot of people are super ambivalent, meaning they're seeing the good and the bad.

Rachel C wrote in, she had a great question. She said: I've heard that out of a group of three people, two black and one white, it is just as likely for a black and white person to be more related as it is for the two black individuals to be more closely related. If that is really the case, then what the heck is race anyway, and why does it persist in modern times?

Stephen: That is so true. I mean, race is just a classification. Even now, when we fill out forms, they have checkboxes where you can mark whatever ethnicity you wish, but now they're becoming more where you can mark that you're biracial, and even triracial. That's a problem for the governments. They want to have solid data so they know who's in our country and da da da. But I say, why not just embrace all… Why do you have to pick one or the other when you have so many that are part of your DNA?

I have to admit, I've been just picking the one, African American, but there were a few times where I did pick biracial, because I am… If I can remember my ratio… I'll just round it off. I'm about 80% African and about 18% European, which includes Scandinavian, British, and then 2% Native American *and* Southeast Asian, which blew me away. I'd like to learn a little bit more about the Southeast Asian part, the Philippines, Vietnam, places like that. And the Native American part, I'd love to learn more about my Native American ancestry.

In regards to that, race is just a classification. We're all related. It's interesting, the book that I just recently came out with, *1619 - Twenty Africans*, one of the points I mention in the book is that when those Africans came to Virginia in the year 1619, they didn't come as slaves, as we know as slaves that come to our mind. They were indentured servants, and so they didn't have the designation of being slaves. What they meant was, indentured servants, just like those that were coming from England, they work for a certain period of time, they were indentured to their employer. So those Africans were indentured, and once they served their time they were given their freedom just like all the other indentured servants.

Virginia… it wasn't until 1705 when the slavery laws, the really hardened slavery laws came into being, the year 1705. Prior to that there were a lot of African-American families in colonial Virginia who were not slaves, they were not under slavery. They had a hard life, yes. They had a very hard life. Many of them were taken advantage of, no doubt about it, but they were not classified as slaves. So where I'm going with this is that many of these Africans, they had children, and their children had children… There were probably about two or three generations of African Americans who were free in this country before, *before*, the slavery laws were even enacted. That's huge. A lot of people don't know about that, and I didn't know about it until I took my DNA test and found out that I was related to some of these early African-American families.

What I also found out was that a lot of the African families that were free in the early part of our colonial history, they were intermarrying with the Irish, with the Native Americans, with the Germans. They were intermarrying, becoming a family. So, many of the American families that are in this country today, whatever surname you want to use, Johnson, Smith, whatever, if your family's been in this country for, you know, going back to colonial times or the American Revolution times, chances are you are a mixed family. Chances are you're a mixed family in some way, shape, or form, in one way or another. Native American, or… It's just a fact.

But that is not taught in our schools, not in our history books, that there were at least two or three generations of free people before slavery laws even were passed. Virginia is kind of what everybody looks to as the mother of the slavery laws. The other states looked to Virginia, 'whatever they pass, we'll pass'. But there were quite a few decades before slavery even got entrenched. So that allowed a lot of families to have freedom. There were a lot of African families that were able to buy land. You couldn't do that as a slave. You couldn't buy land. They [the Twenty Africans] could sit on juries, they could barter and trade.

A lot of people don't know the history of that. Again, there was a lot of intermarriage. A lot of the Africans were marrying Irish and Scottish women because there was a shortage of African women, so there's a lot of intermixture in our society today. Your listener brings up a very good question, that chances are, if you have three people, and if you're white and the other one's black, you're probably just as much related as the two people that are the same race, definitely.

Alie: Was that a discovery also that you made in your own family with your sister-in-law?

Stephen: Yes, my sister-in-law. Absolutely. My sister-in-law, this blew me away… This is a perfect example. My wife's sister, that would be my sister-in-law, she has children, and we went to go visit one time, and we're sitting around the breakfast table there at the restaurant, chit-chatting, and my sister-in-law's daughter says, "I can remember old grandma, she was from Mississippi, and she used to cook so well, and I remember all these different dishes she would make." She said she was from Jackson, Mississippi, and I said, "Oh, really? What was her name?" And she said, "She was Grandma Grantham [phonetic]. Her maiden name was Grantham."

I almost fell off my chair. I said, "Grantham?? That's a name that's come up in *my* family research! When I get back home I'm going to look that up because that's very interesting." I said, "Some of my family members maybe your grandmother's family!" So when I got back home that night and I went through the records, I said, "I'll be dog-gone." My sister-in-law's children are related to me! When I took my 23andme test there was one genetic cousin that we had a connection with – this was like 2011 – and me and her, we had communication back and forth trying to figure out how we were connected. We couldn't figure out a thing, but she sent me her family tree and her family name was Grantham, her ancestors were Grantham. It was just amazing.

Aside: In his book *1619*, Stephen writes of the encounter: "

"We might be related!" we joked. I was black and they were white. When I later got home I looked up the information my sister-in-law's daughter gave me about her paternal grandmother. Turns out, it wasn't a joke after all. That my sister-in-law's children and I were related.

So, if everyone learns a little about their genealogy, chatting over waffles is about to get way more interesting!

Alie: If you hadn't asked over breakfast, "What was her name?" You never would have known that!

Stephen: Never would've known that.

Alie: If you weren't Sherlock Holmes! You're like, "Wait a second!" Get your notepad out. [*laughs*]

Stephen: [*laughs*] Oh, man. And we just love that little facet. We loved each other even before we knew that, but that just put a little spice into our conversations now every time we meet and we can bring that up. It's just a wonderful thing. Color is nothing. It's just a classification. We are all related.

Alie: Stephen says that the next book he's working on, which will be his third, will get deeper into how we're all related. I realized just then that this episode would come out near the start of Black History Month, which is in part a celebration of the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. I told Stephen that International Women's Day kind of pisses me off because it's like, "Here's your 365th share of the year pie." I asked him if he feels that way about February. This country was literally built by people of color. But it was conceived first by history professor Carter Woodson in the 1920s and finally recognized by Gerald Ford in the 1970s.

Stephen says that he too feels it should be more than a month, but that:

Stephen: I think it's just a good opportunity to educate people, all of us, everyone - when I say everyone I mean including African Americans - everyone to be re-educated about just getting along with one another. Martin Luther King Jr said:

[*clip from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream":*]

> *I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

You know, we don't judge one another based on the color of our skin but on the basis of our character. So that's what it's all about, just embracing one another and getting closer as a human family. We need each other. This world has its ups and downs, as we know, and we all need to stick together and just be civil.

I think about colonial America and how when the first Africans came here… I shouldn't say the *first* African Americans… That's going to be something coming out in my next book, who were the first? But those that came in 1619, how they were just treated just like everybody else, and then the slavery laws came along and just took away everything they had. But think of the Native Americans and what they've gone through. Goodness gracious. That's why I'm really interested to learn about that. But yeah, Black History Month, I think, is still needed as an opportunity to talk about things that we need to talk about, to acknowledge and to heal. Absolutely.

Aside: Now from the biggest issues to perhaps some sillier, or petty difficulties in the job of genealogy.

Alie: The last two questions I ask every guest, what is the hardest thing about genealogy, or the most annoying thing? Is it waterlogged books? Anything that is really difficult about genealogy, or just maybe pesters you at all? Even if it's petty.

Stephen: Yeah. One thing that kind of irks me is, someone will take their DNA test, they will log onto the website, download their data, click "Yes I do want my information to be posted on this website. Here's my email address." And then when you connect and find out, "Oh I'm related to this person. I would like to know more about you because some of the names that you have on your profile match my family." And then you reach out to that person and they don't even reply back. [*Price is Right loser horns*] That one just really gets me. [*laughs*]

Alie: You're like, "Come on!"

Stephen: Like, why did you put your email address on there in the first place if you're not going to correspond?? [*laughs*] That one's kind of…

Alie: That makes sense. So if anyone ever gets an email from a long-lost relative, reply to them! It's worth it. Reply! Do not sit on that email.

Stephen: It's worth it. Yes.

Alie: What is your favorite thing about genealogy? What just, like, fills you with butterflies, or makes you love it?

Stephen: Wow. The thing that makes me always love genealogy is being able to go on the hunt, go on the search to try to find…. To find someone's brick wall… What I mean by brick wall is you just come to a point where you can't go any further in your research. [*"Gotta break through it somehow!"*] You come to a brick wall, you've exhausted all your avenues, and you just don't know where to go. You don't know who this person is, who their parents were, or whatever the question is, and I just love to take that brick wall and try to see if I can go through it. I just love that. Just taking on that challenge. And then once you find it you're like, "Ah, Yes! Found 'em!" Love it.

Alie: Do you wear a cape? Do you have a big pipe and cape?

Stephen: I've got a cape on right now, Alie! [*laughs*]

Alie: [*laughs*] A big mustache and one of those hunter hats.

Stephen: Yeah, right. No. [*laughs*]

So find the most wonderful, smart people and ask them the stupidest questions, and before you know it you might be sitting on a plane and discover that the person next to you is your fifth step-cousin-in-law four times removed, and you'll kind of know what that means. And you might know them the rest of your life.

To get copies Stephen Hanks's books, you can go to the links in the show notes, or Inkwater Press. You can find links to the sponsor URLs and BlackPast.org in the show notes. We are @ologies on Twitter and Instagram. I'm @AlieWard on both, so follow along. Let's be friends. Ologies merch is available at AlieWard.com. Thank you to Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch of the podcast *You Are That*, they manage the merch. Thanks to Erin Talbert for adminning the Ologies Podcast Facebook group. Thank you Jarrett Sleeper of the mental health podcast *My Good Bad Brain* for the assistant editing. And of course, to a guy who's like a bro, Steven Ray Morris, who hosts *The Purrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right*, which are about kitties and dinosaurs. Nick Thorburn of the band Islands wrote and performed the theme music.

You know if you stick around past the credits you get a secret. And this week, I'm going to tell you, I drove to an ex-boyfriend's house in the middle of the night. We dated for, like, four months a decade ago. But in the parking lot of the apartment complex I remembered there was a lemon tree that was overloaded with fruit way back then. And this was not just any lemon tree. This was a Meyer lemon tree, which we all know has, like, way better lemons. Regular lemons are like a Mounds bar. Meyer lemons, they're like an Almond Joy. They're just better. I think technically they're some type of orange?

But the point is, from memory I drove through the LA hills alone at 10pm. I felt like such a creep. And I found the side street, and the lemon tree was still there with literally *hundreds* of Meyer lemons. So, I took maybe like eight or ten, I put 'em in a hat, and I ran back to my car. Granted, he hasn't lived there in, like, ten years, but it still felt dangerous, and skeevy, and very thrilling to have a bowl of the best lemons on my counter. I've been pulverizing them in a pitcher and drinking them as lemonade. And then I eat their ragged flesh and skin like a buzzard. Also, if fruit overhangs a fence, technically it's legal to pick. Also, no one's going to ever eat all those lemons. There's so many lemons! So good.

All right, berbye.

Transcribed by:

Mickey McG.

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Some links you may enjoy:

Stephen Hanks books: 1619 -- Twenty Africans and Akee Tree

Publisher: Inkwater Press

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