

Martha's family secret

Scholarly sources:

Winkler, Wayne (2004). *Walking toward the sunset: The Melungeons of Appalachia*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.

Goins, Jack H. (2009). *Melungeons: Footprints from the past*. Hancock, TN.

Meet Martha

Martha Cartwright lived in the Appalachian Mountains at the end of the eighteenth century. She was ten-years-old and enjoyed a very full life. All was well with young Martha except for one thing: Her family had a secret.

Martha and her siblings did not know what the secret was—just that it existed.



Martha lived way up in the mountains, on Newman's Ridge in eastern Tennessee. She couldn't remember a time when she had not lived there. She knew that the current year was 1790, or "seven years after the war" as people would like to say in those times. Martha was born during the Revolutionary War when her parents still lived in North Carolina.

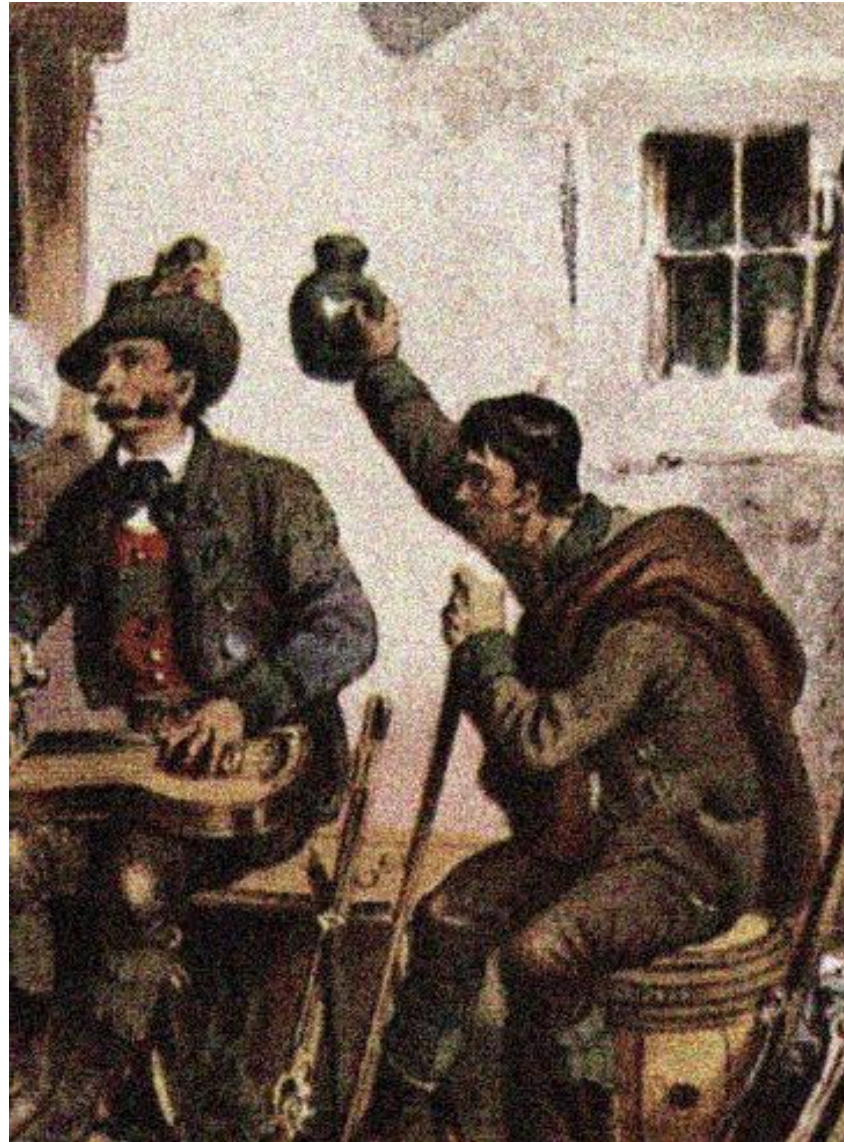
The Ridge where she lived was teeming with friendly animals and forests and streams. It was beautiful.



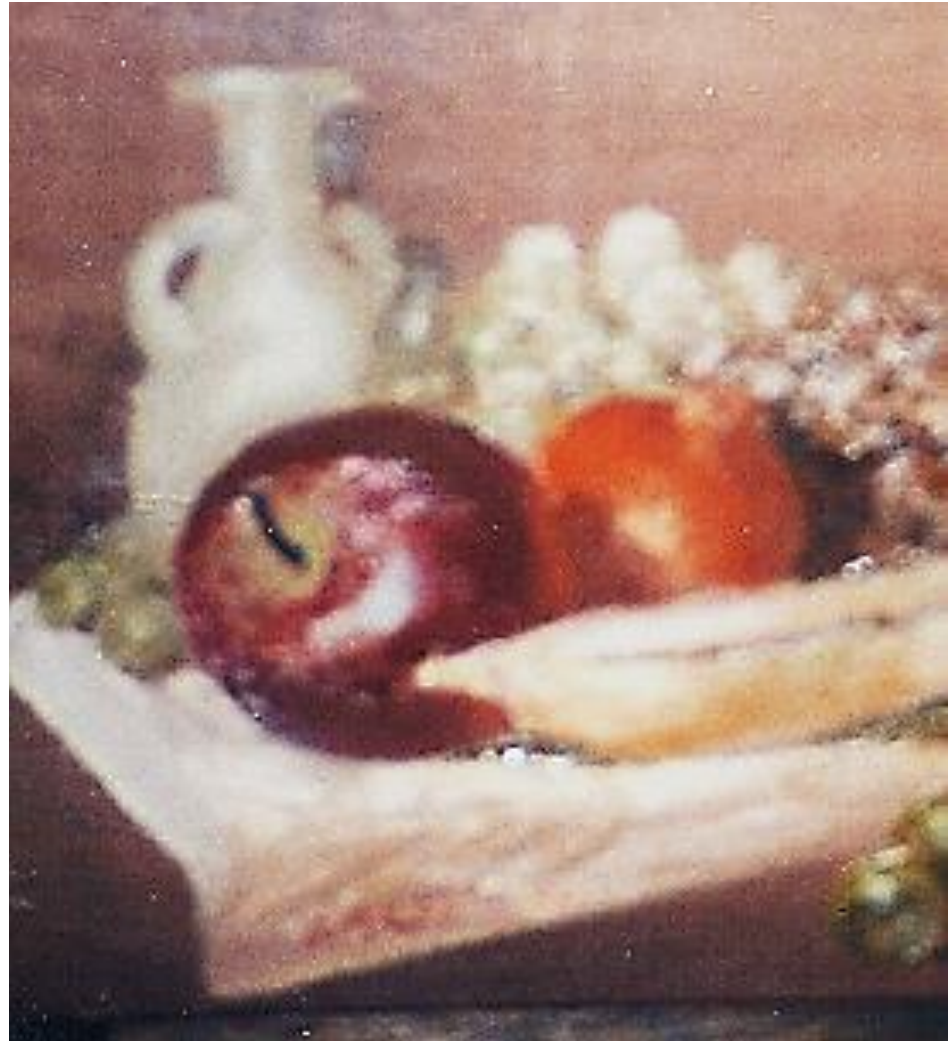
Martha lived in a large cabin with her parents, siblings, aunt, uncle, cousins, grandmother, and great grandfather.



She remembered learning to dance as a very young child to her father's fiddle and her uncle's dulcimer.



She remembered contributing to the family meals by going out picking apples and berries before she was six.



She, her siblings, cousins, and friends enjoyed much freedom on the ridge. While they were too poor to own toys or games, they used their imaginations to find ways to have fun.



They played with their dogs and rode their horses.



They learned to communicate with the wild turkeys by studying the noises they made. They could warn the turkeys if rattlesnakes or hawks were close by.



She and her brothers were home schooled. Her father taught them reading, writing, and arithmetic; her mother taught them literature; her great grandfather taught them American history.

Martha studied the same things her brother did. She also learned to care for her younger siblings, and learned how to cook, garden, and spin. One day she'd find herself a husband on the ridge and would start her own family.



At night, her grandmother told the children fanciful stories about witches, goblins, and fairies that lived in the mountain forests and streams.

Sometimes one of the siblings would ask, "Grandma, do these creatures have something to do with our family secret?"

And Grandmother would always answer the same way. "You shouldn't bother yourself with this secret business. It was why we came to the ridge, and that's all you need to know."



While Martha loved her life on the ridge, she often pondered why her family had chosen to come here.

She knew it was right after the war ended.



She only knew that this was the time that her extended family set off for new land. With only one horse, most of them walked all the way from eastern North Carolina to eastern Tennessee before settling on the ridge.



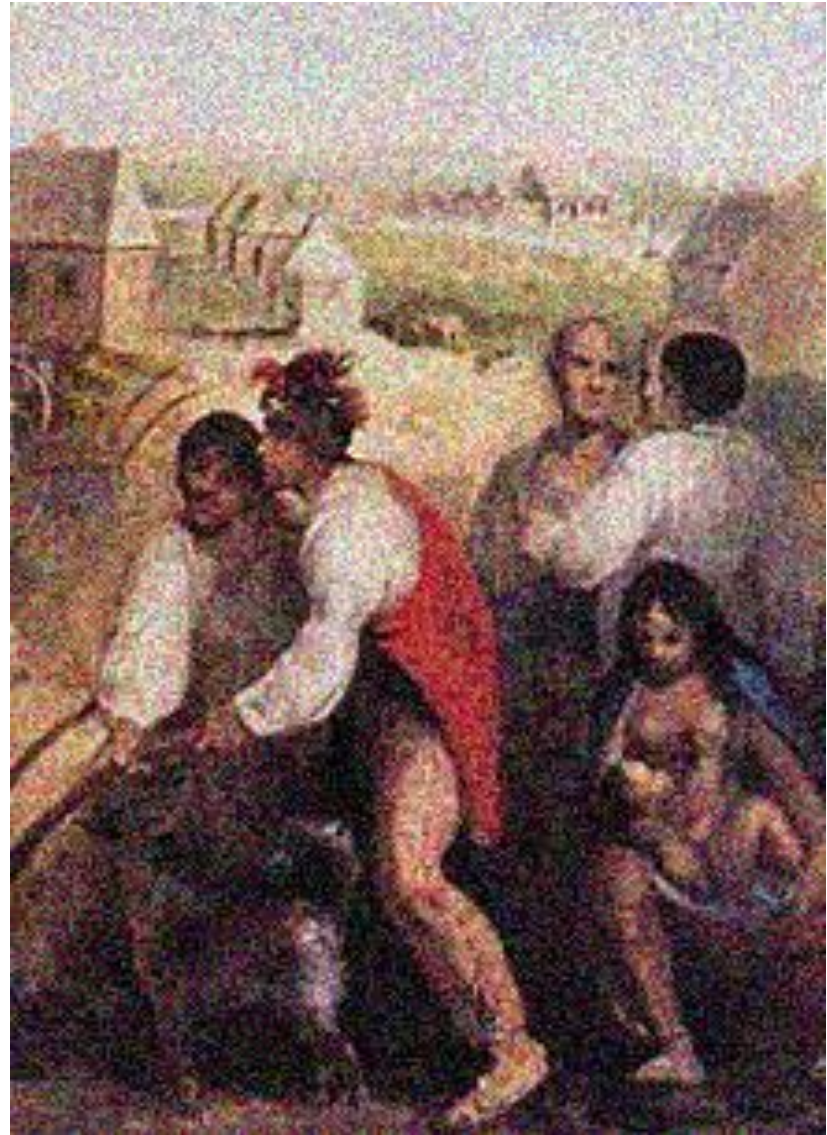
But why the ridge? The ridge was hard to farm because of the rocky topsoil. They never had much of a crop—barely enough to feed themselves.



And the people were unlike those they knew in North Carolina—or at least that was what Grandmother had told her.

All the people who lived on the ridge were descended from a small group of families named Goins, Collins, Mullins, Gibson, Sizemore, Lawson, Moore, Bunch, Riddle, Minor, and Bowling. The people in the surrounding towns called the ridge people Melungeons, but no one knew where that name had come from.

“They’re all mixed-up races,” the townspeople would say. “They had to go up yonder on that ridge because no one else would have them.”



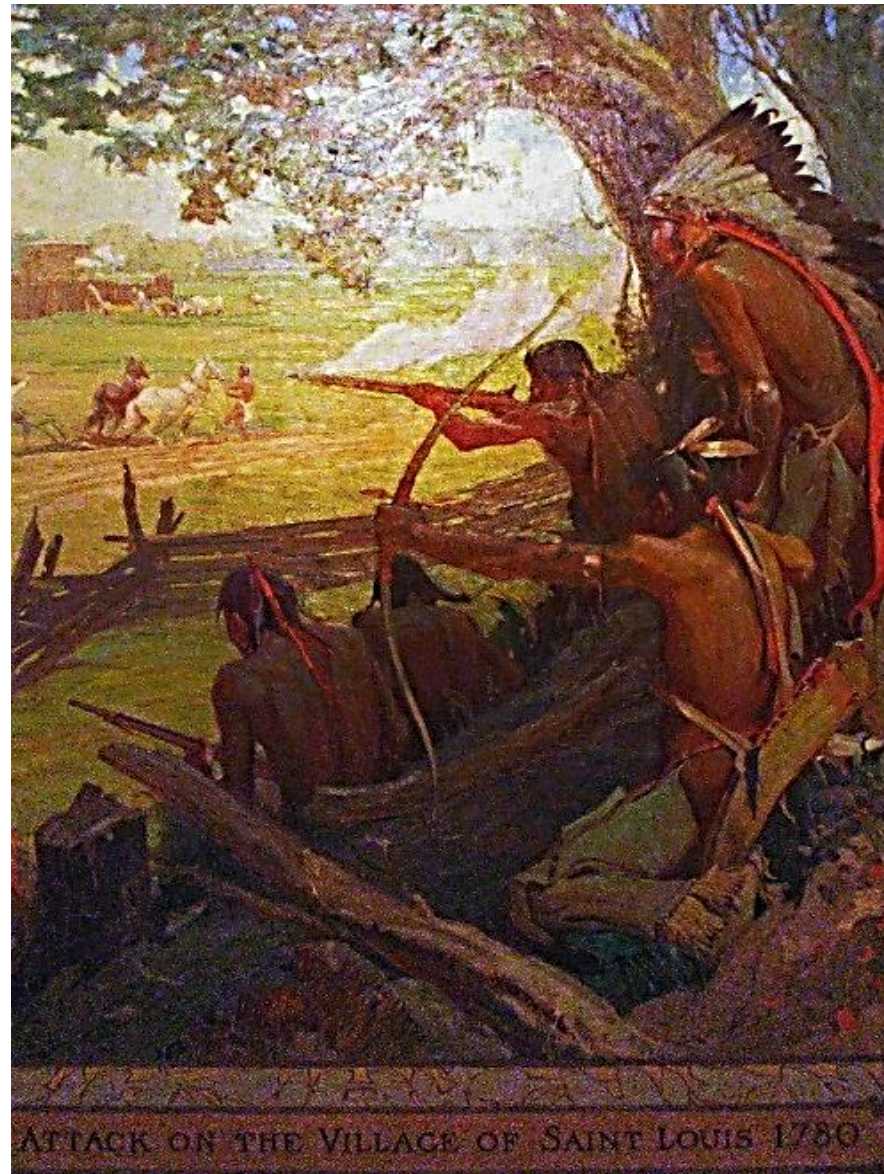
Martha loved her neighbors on Newman's Ridge. Some were the children of Cherokee or Creek Indians and Scots Irish frontiersmen.

They'd tell Martha how they happened to come to the ridge.



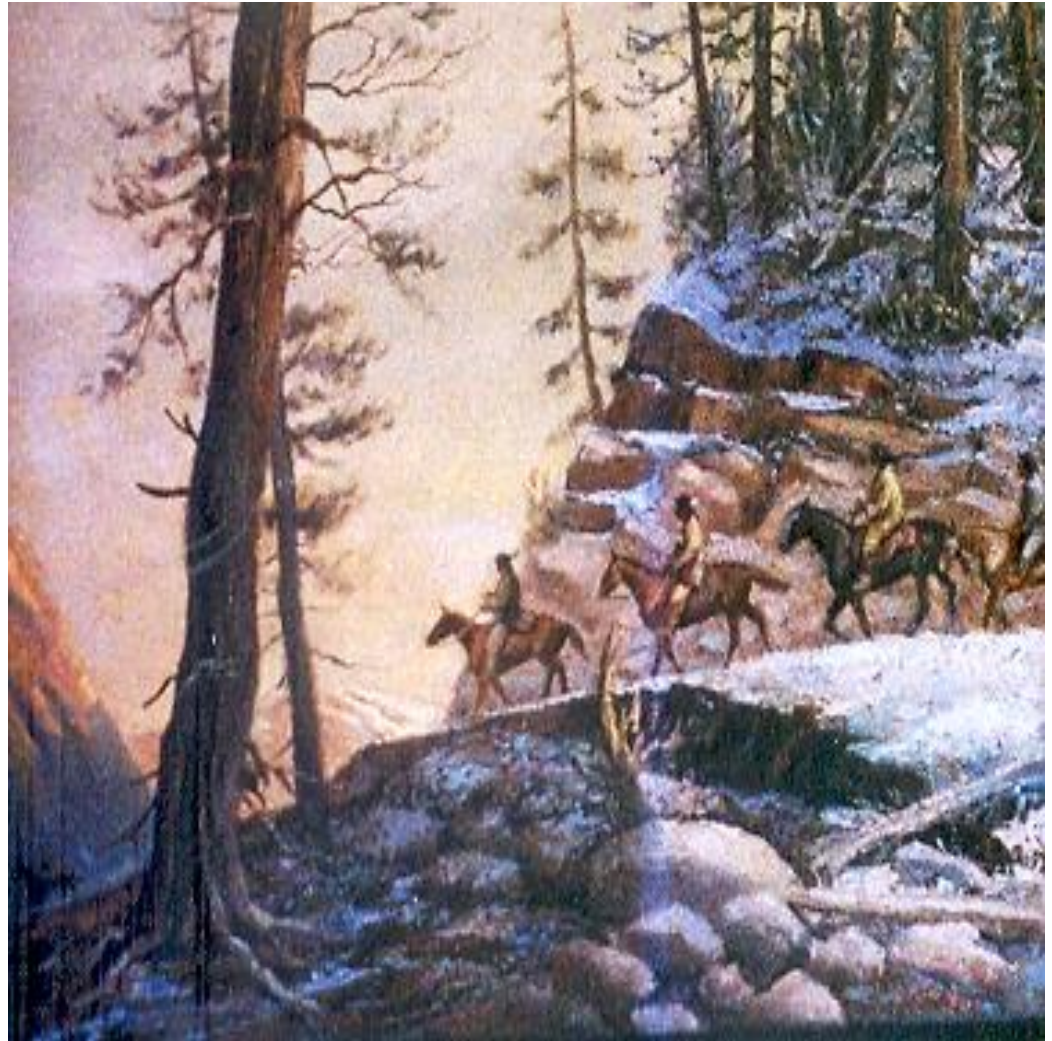
"First we had it bad with the English," they'd say. "They kept breaking treaties and running us off our lands at sword point.

"We were always fighting for survival."



"But when the war started, the English convinced some of our Cherokee fathers that they'd be better off siding with them than the Americans. So we fought alongside the English in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. And when the Americans won, they persecuted us even more than the English had. We ended up with nothing much left.

"So we came here with our horses where there was this ridge land that no one else wanted. And we've been comfortable here with others with the same stories."



They were referring to the children of free African Americans and English Quakers—more neighbors of Martha's Cartwright family.

Mixed race people were often forced out of other states in Appalachia.



One of these mulattos was James Moore. He'd lived in North Carolina and had even fought in the Revolutionary War on the American side. "My brother John and I were in the North Carolina company commanded by William Humphreys," Mr. Moore told Martha proudly.

"But why did you choose the American side rather than the English side?" Martha asked.



"My family was tired of having to live with the corruption of those English and Norman nobles," he answered. "Our family had been free for at least four generations but our deeds to our land were never secure. My father had bought land owned by the Norman royal--the Earl of Granville. And when my father came to claim it, somehow the records had disappeared. I wanted to fight to kick those royal lines out of America after the war," he exclaimed. "And we sure did that!"

"But did fighting on the American side help you later?" Martha asked.



"Not at all. They labeled us Free Persons of Color, but some Americans got the idea that anyone with even one ounce of colored blood should be a slave. We were always in danger of being kidnapped back into slavery, even though we'd been free for generations. We came to the ridge where none of those slave hunters would bother to look."

Martha was happy he had come.



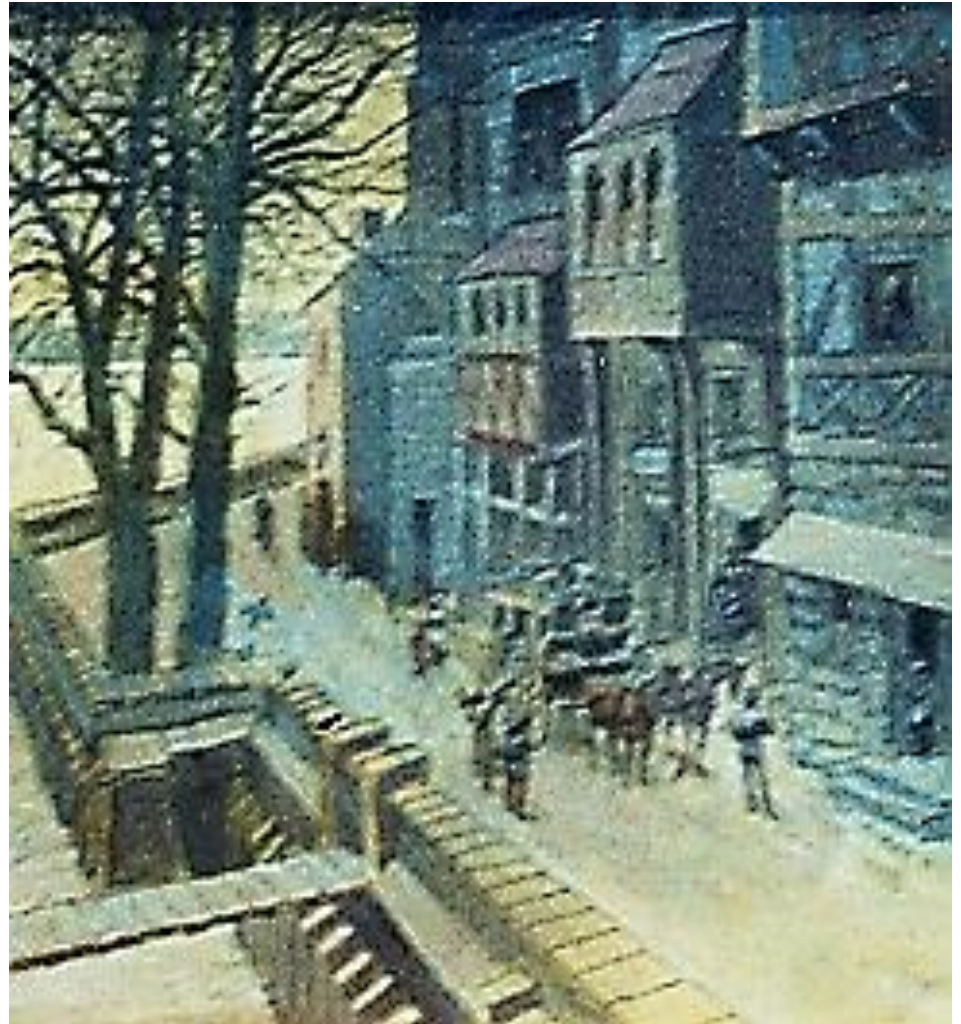
Martha kind of knew what James Moore meant. She'd experienced something like that when she had to leave the ridge to buy supplies in neighboring towns.

"Here comes some of those Melungeons," she'd hear the shopkeepers shout. "These here folks look like they're trying to pass for white. They wouldn't get away with it off that ridge."

Her father would say, "But we *are* white, not that we'd be ashamed to be something else."

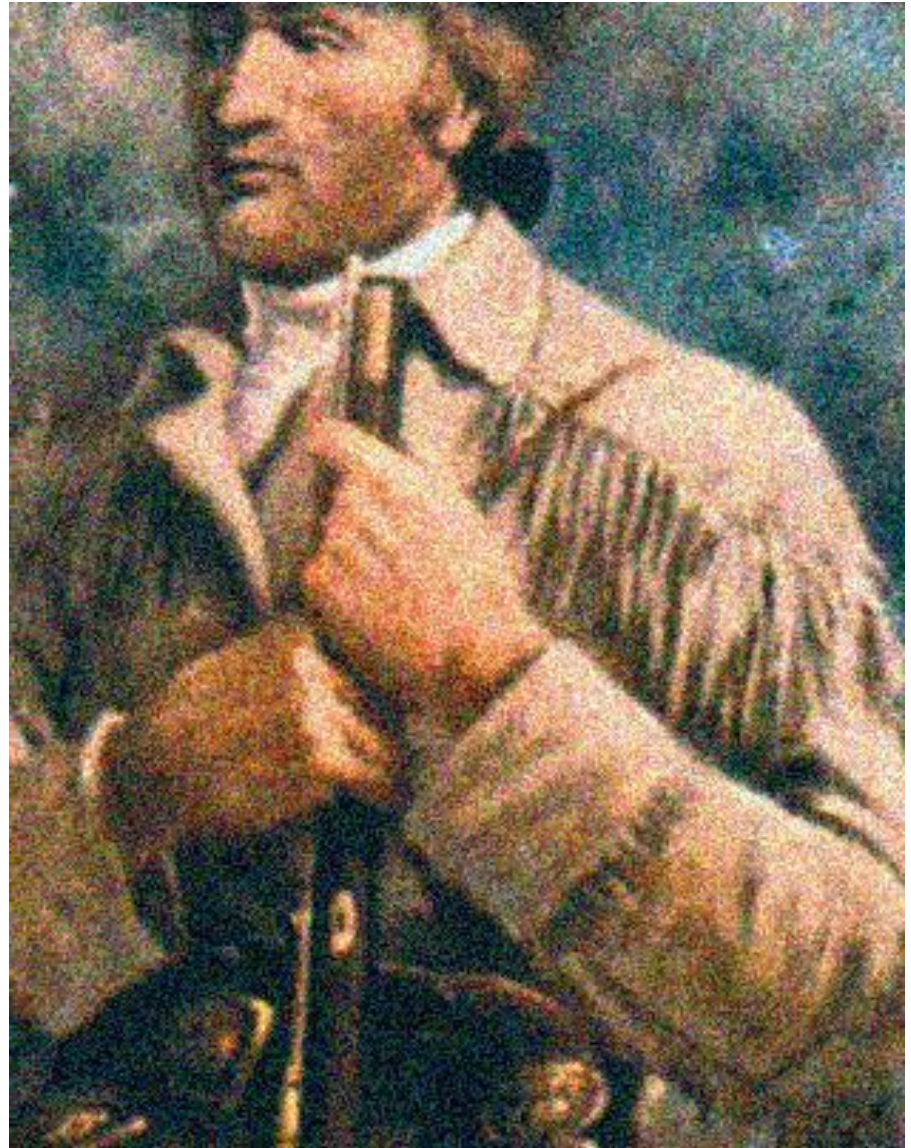
"Then what are you running away from?" they'd respond.

And again Martha would wonder about their secret.



That all changed in October. That was the month her father's cousin Jasper came to visit from North Carolina. He spent days telling the family about life back in their old home town.

But Martha was surprised to learn something. The man called himself Jasper Cartritt, not Jasper Cartwright.



Martha asked him why his name was so different from her father's.

"Well, I take it he hasn't told you then, my dear. See, our family name wasn't either Cartwright or Cartritt. It was Carteret, like the County of Carteret in North Carolina."

"But I don't understand," pleaded Martha.

"This is something you must ask your family about then."



So on Sunday she would ask. It was a beautiful autumn day. Martha's family attended a Baptist church in Blackwater, a town just over the Tennessee/Virginia border.

The walk was nearly ten miles. Not being overly religious, most of the Melungeons would only venture the journey on some of the nicest days.

Today they agreed to take the trip to Blackwater with the Goins family in their buggy and then walk back.



On this long, beautiful journey home, Martha walked alongside her great grandfather, to help him over the slippery rocks along the streams.

After about an hour, Martha asked him the question that had been on her mind. "Grandpa, why did we change our name from Carteret to Cartwright?"



They continued walking.

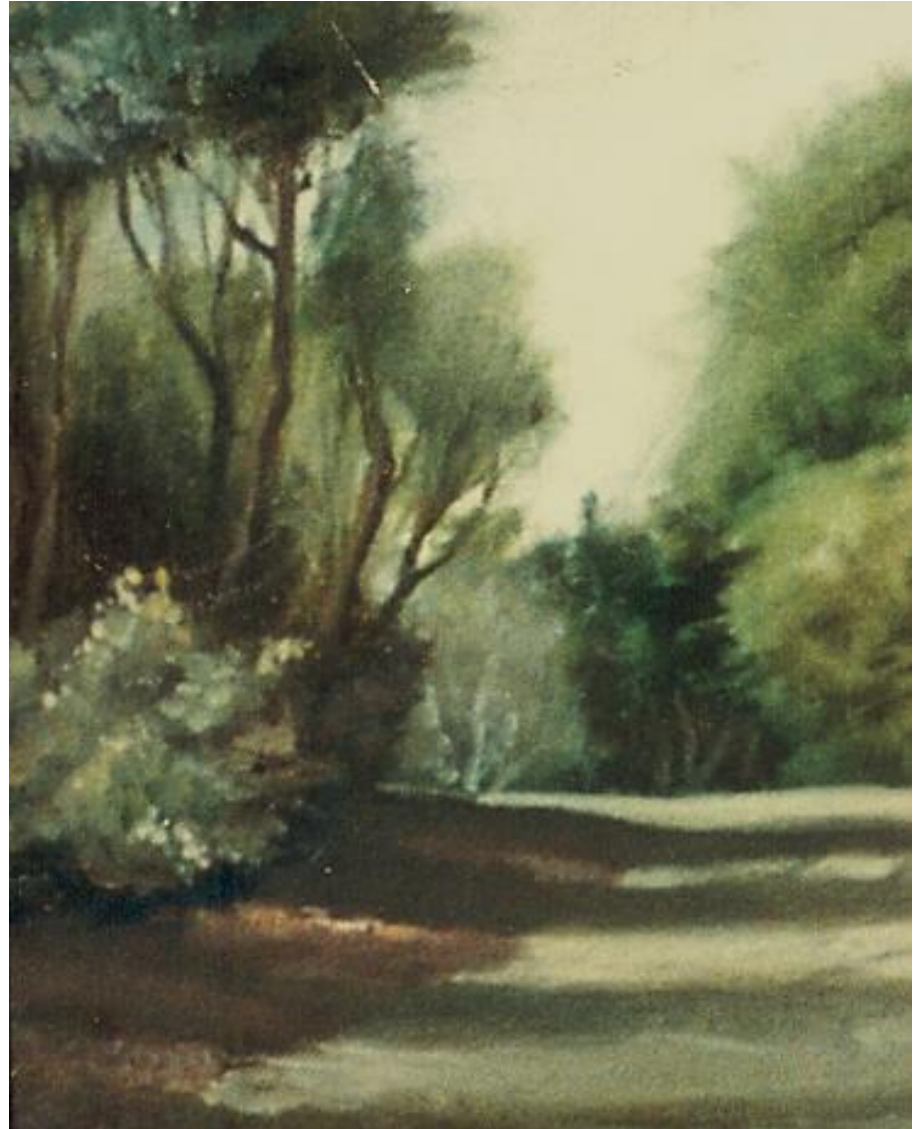
"It was not Jasper's business to tell you this," he eventually replied.

"Were the Carterets criminals?"

Grandfather laughed. "Well, I suppose you won't let up until you know. They were not criminals. They were Normans. Do you know who the Normans were?"

"Yes, they were the nobles in England."

"And in America," Grandfather said.



"So we were royalty?"

"Not really, we weren't in a direct royal line of Carterets, but we were related to them."

Grandpa went on to describe some of the American Carterets. There was Sir George, founder and governor of New Jersey, Sir Peter, governor of most of North Carolina, and on and on. "But their lives were always muddy," he added. "These nobles and big landowners fought with each other all the time over land and power."



Martha sighed. "Did we then have to leave after the war? So we wouldn't be forced to leave America?"

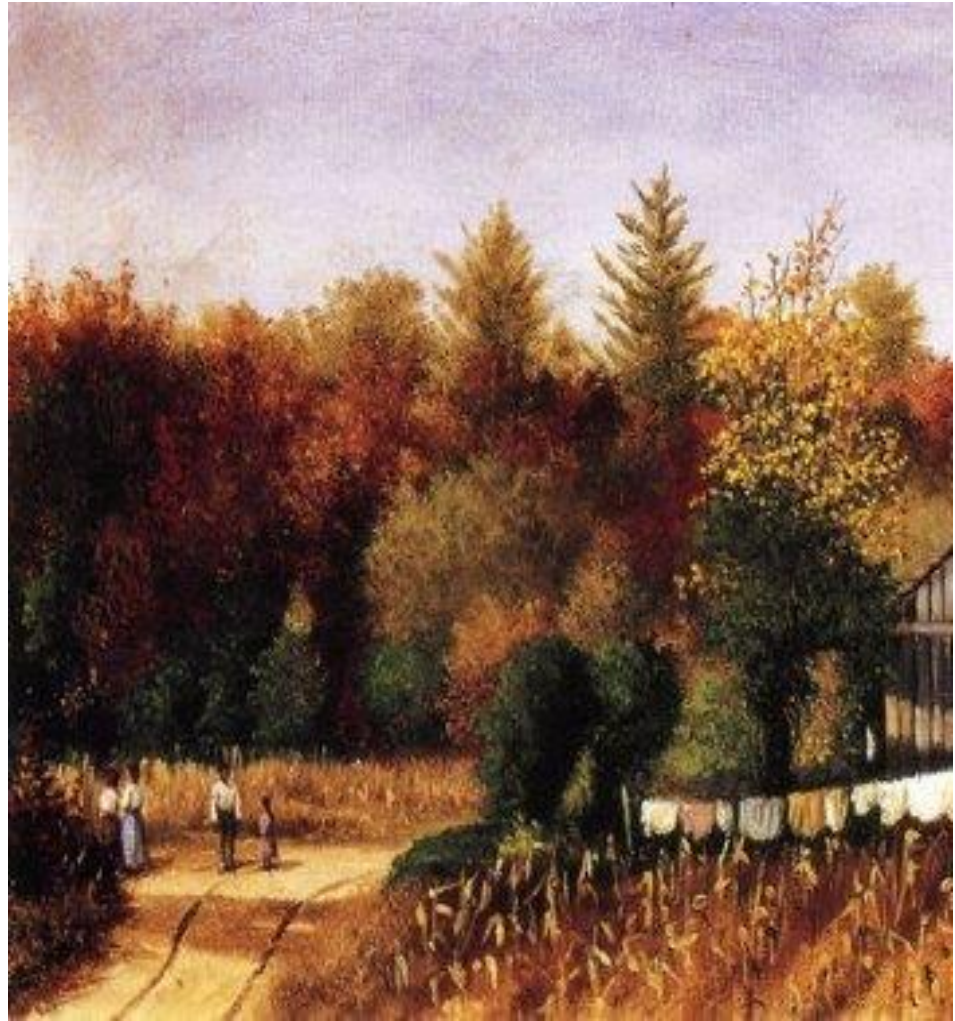
"Yes," replied Grandpa. "There was the fear that people knew we were Carterets."



And they continued the walk along the path up to the ridge.

"So that's when we changed our name to Cartwright?" Martha asked.

"No, that was earlier. People in North Carolina were mad because of some land dealings of the Carterets."



Martha had a hunch. "Mr. Moore said that he was swindled out of some land because of an Earl of Granville. Were we related to him?"

"Yes. The Earl of Granville's name was Sir John Carteret. He never came to America but he had corrupt managers. None of us wanted it be known we were Carterets then."



Martha looked ahead. She could see Newman's Ridge from where they stood. "I'm glad we aren't Carterets any more, Grandpa. I wouldn't want to be royalty. I'm glad we came here."

"We're all happy here," her grandfather responded.



And so the Cartwright children continued to live on Newman's Ridge. They intermarried with the mixed race Melungeons, and the families stayed safe on the ridge for over 100 years.



The end

Let's talk!