

Chapter 92

A Possible Origin of my Nigerian Ethnicity

[originally written 25 November 2022]

Introduction

One of the main reasons that people have their DNA “tested” on Ancestry.com is to learn about their ethnicity. I’m sure that many people remember the Ancestry.com commercial where Kyle learned that his ancestors were not from Germany but from Great Britain – so he traded in his lederhosen for a kilt:

<https://youtu.be/2J5n8kzpbCs>



Ancestry.com – Kyle

And along those same lines, my distant Swedish cousin Henrik Johnsson (a well-known TV personality in Sweden) appeared in an Ancestry.se commercial, in which he learned that he had ancestors from Great Britain (Storbritannien - ST):

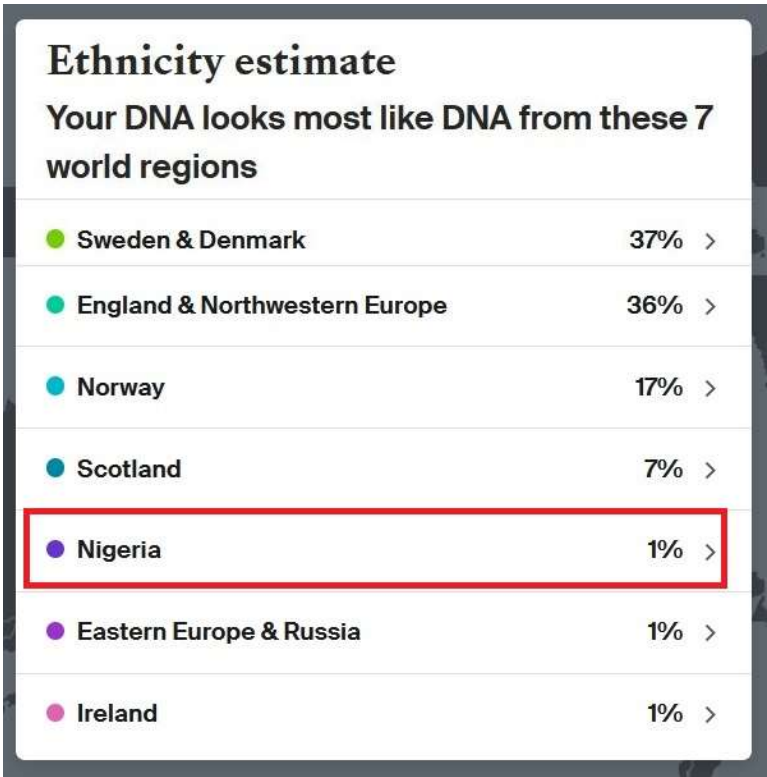
<https://youtu.be/qqjjZMl3V9Y>



Henrik hittade nya släktingar när han gjorde sitt DNA-test hos Ancestry

I have never put much stock in the ethnicity “estimates” on Ancestry.com or 23andme.com, but apparently these estimates are important to many people.

Let me now jump right in and show my ethnicity estimate from Ancestry.com:

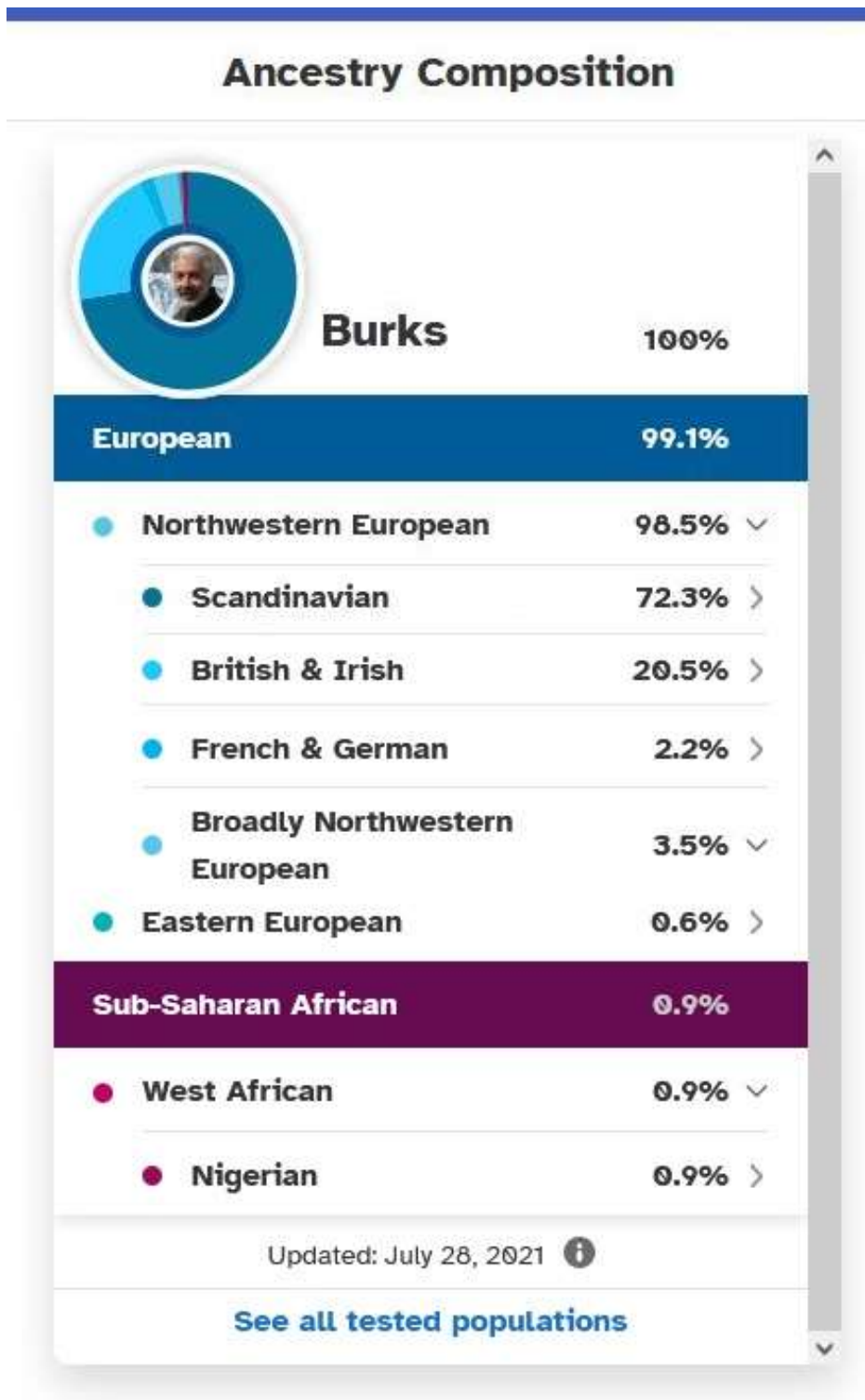


Given that my father’s ancestors were largely from England and my mother’s ancestors were from Sweden, it is not at all surprising that Ancestry.com estimates that my ethnicity is 54% from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, and 43% from England, Northwest Europe, and Scotland. Of course, the one thing that really stands out is that my ethnicity includes 1% from Nigeria. Given what I know about my family tree, I just don’t see how this is possible. I have known about this result for many years, but I never knew how to deal with it.

For the readers who don’t know much about the geography of Africa, here is a portion of a Google Map showing the location of Nigeria:



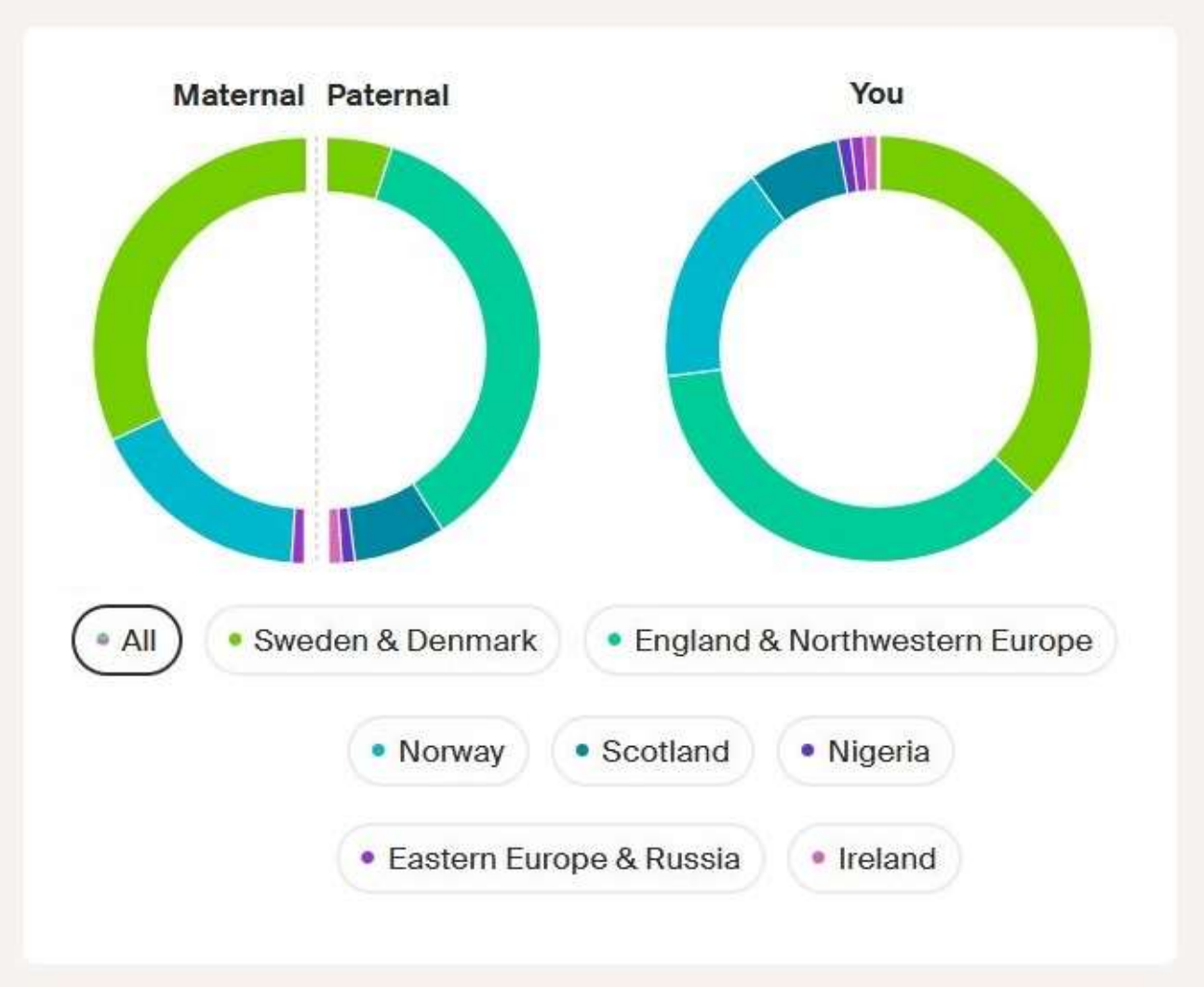
I recently re-visited my ethnicity estimate from 23andme.com:



Oh my! 23andme.com also found that I had 0.9% Nigerian ethnicity. This gives me some confidence that the finding of 1% Nigerian ethnicity from Ancestry.com is not in error. But where in my pedigree did this come from? With some of the new tools on Ancestry.com, I now have attempted (and largely failed) to answer this vexing question.

Learning More About My Nigerian DNA

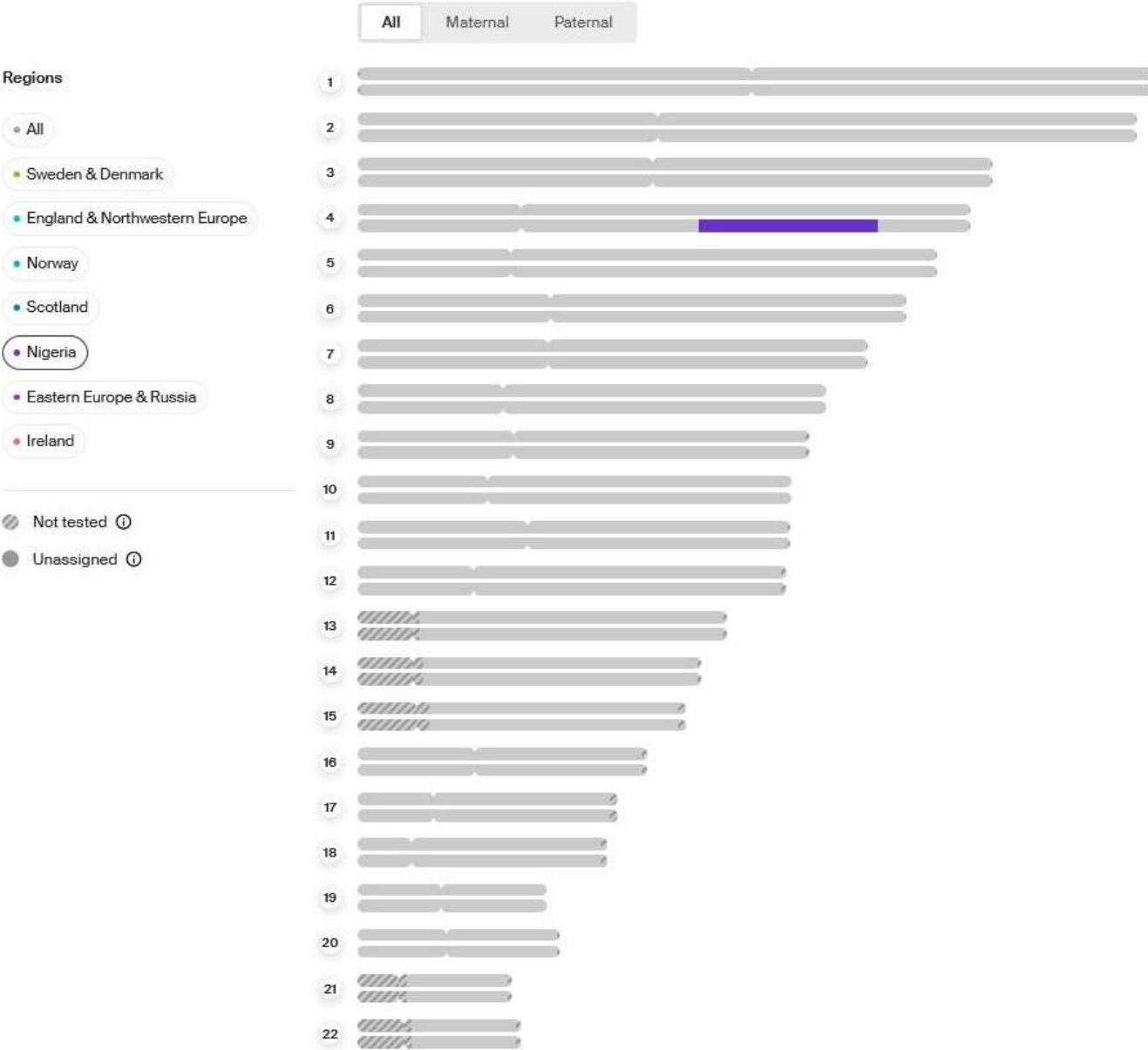
Ancestry.com recently brought out a number of new tools related to DNA. One is their “SideView” technology, which splits up a user’s DNA into maternal and paternal sides. Here is my result:



This graphic shows my parent's ethnicity in the circle at the upper left, and my ethnicity in the circle in the upper right. My mother's ethnicity is the left semicircle, and the graphic shows that my mother (who had four Swedish grandparents) had DNA from Sweden & Denmark (light green), Norway (teal), and a tiny bit from Eastern Europe and Russia (purple). My father's ethnicity is shown in the right semicircle. Many of his ancestors had immigrated to America from Great Britain in the 1600's, so it is not surprising to see that his DNA largely from England & Northwestern Europe (green), plus Scotland (darker green), Ireland (orangish), Sweden & Denmark (lighter green), and a small amount from Nigeria (dark purple). So at this point, I know that my father's ancestors contributed my Nigerian ethnicity.

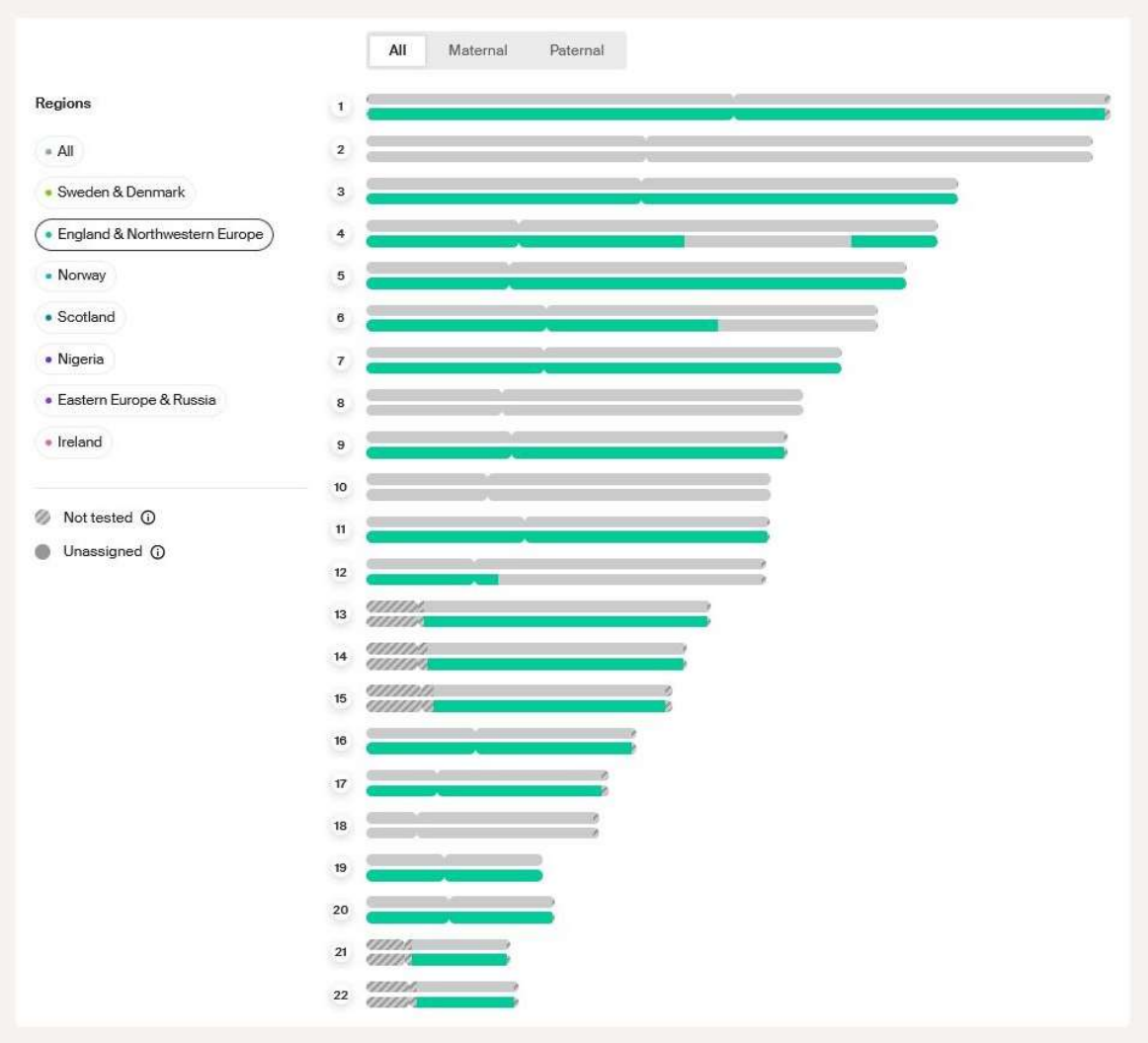
Another new tool on Ancestry.com is the "Chromosome Painter", which is still being beta-tested as of late November 2022. This tool "paints" a user's ethnicity onto the various chromosomes. Here is my result, showing just my Nigerian ethnicity:

Where are your ethnicities in your DNA? With the chromosome painter, you can see for yourself. We've "painted" your chromosomes (the colored bars below) with the regions they're associated with in your ethnicity estimate. Select an ethnicity to see it highlighted. Choose Maternal or Paternal to see which chromosomes were passed down by whom.

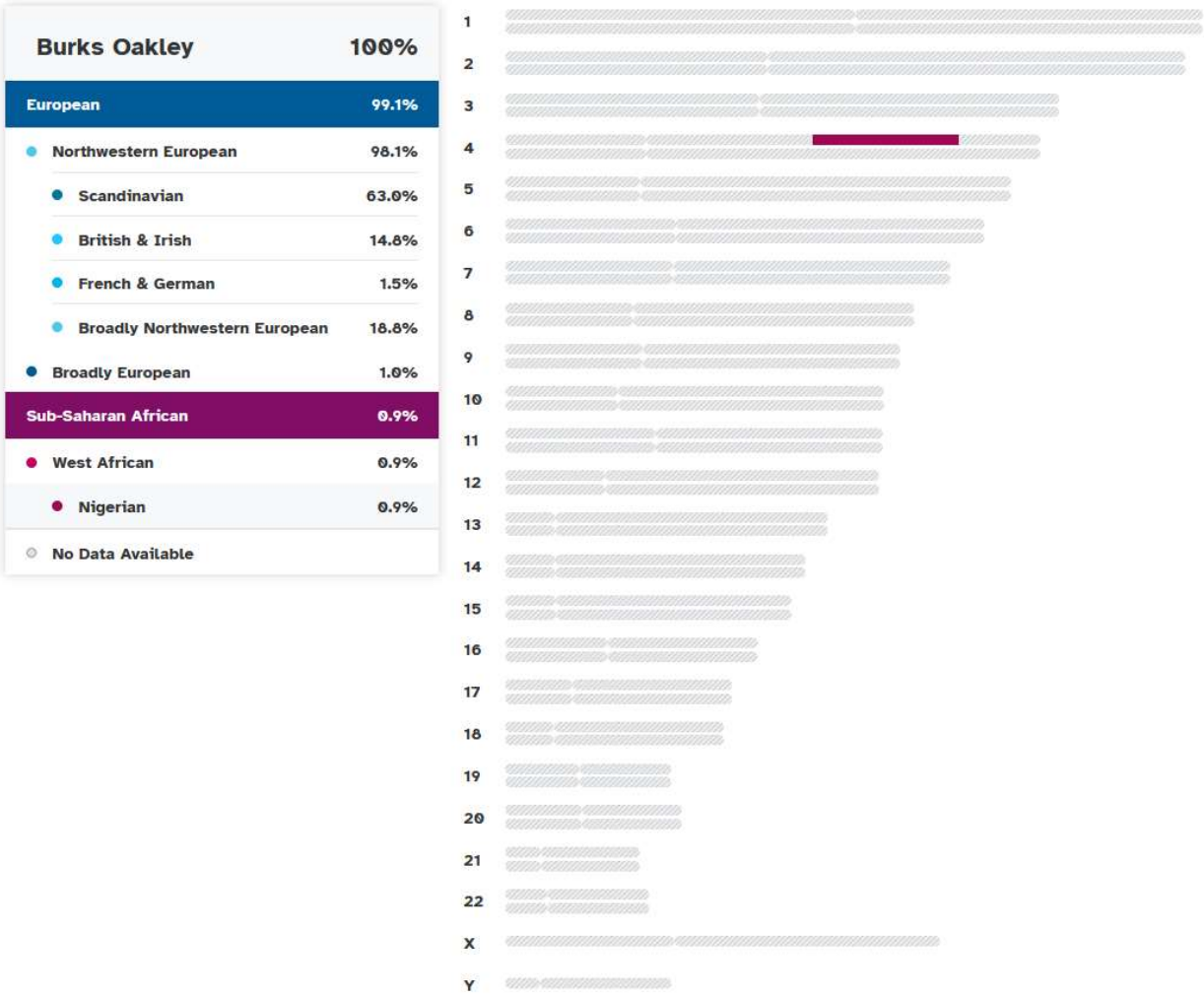


My Nigerian ethnicity comes from a single segment of DNA that is located on Chromosome 4 (not that this location means anything to me).

By comparison, my “England & Northwestern Europe” ethnicity (36% of my ethnicity) is distributed across many of my autosomal chromosomes, as shown in the following chart:



It turns out that 23andme.com also has a similar chromosome painter tool, and it also found that my Nigerian ethnicity is located in a single segment on Chromosome 4:



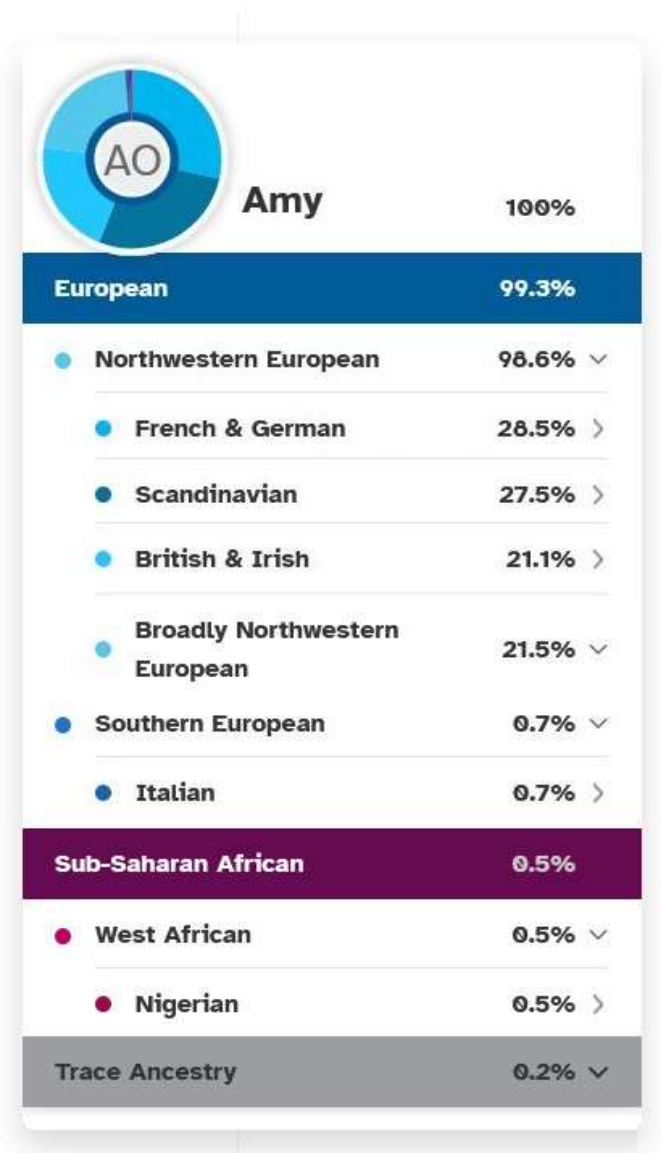
Since both Ancestry.com and 23andme.com mapped my Nigerian ethnicity to Chromosome 4, this adds support to the idea that my Nigerian ethnicity is real, and not a random error.

My Younger Daughter, Amy Oakley

Amy Oakley is my younger daughter, and I also looked at her ethnicity estimates on Ancestry.com and 23andme.com.

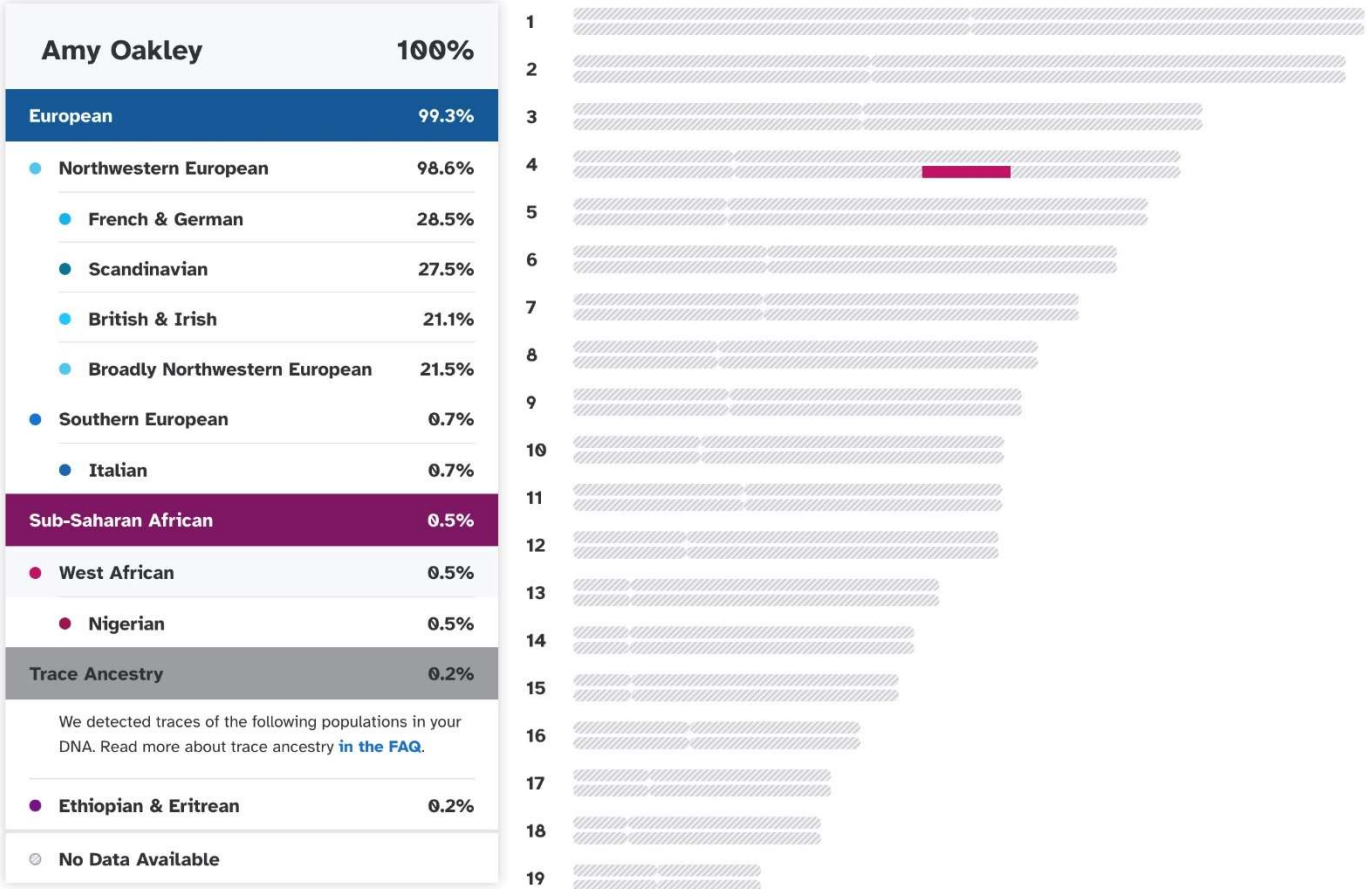
Since I was found to have 1% Nigerian ethnicity on Ancestry.com, I was hoping to see that Amy had 0.5% Nigerian ethnicity. But her ethnicity estimate didn’t include Nigerian. And then I realized that Ancestry.com only reports ethnicity estimates to the nearest integer – nothing to the right of the decimal point.

I then looked at Amy’s ethnicity estimates on 23andme.com – and these estimates are shown here:



Bingo! As expected, Amy shows up as having 0.5% Nigerian ethnicity!

Amy used the Chromosome Painting tool on the Ancestry.com website, and her Nigerian ethnicity appears on Chromosome 4, just like my segment:



This is certainly my first experience mapping ethnicity inheritance onto a single chromosome. What amazing technology!

Where Could My Nigerian Ethnicity Have Come From?

I did a Google search to find out more about people who have always thought that they were 100% white but have found that they have about 1% DNA from sub-Saharan Africa. It turns out that there are plenty of other people who have a similar DNA profile. (!!!) Here is an excerpt from a blog posting on the 23andme.com website, which was written by a man who had discovered that his ethnicity included 1% sub-Saharan Africa:

<https://blog.23andme.com/articles/hidden-african-ancestry/>

Researchers at 23andMe looked at the genetic ancestry of about 78,000 customers likely to consider themselves as entirely of European ancestry and found that somewhere between 3 percent and 4 percent of those people have “hidden” African ancestry.

The percent of African ancestry is relatively low, with the majority of individuals having just 0.5 percent to 0.75 percent – which suggests that those people have an African ancestor who lived about six generations, or about 200 years, ago.

The blog posting goes on to have:

Somewhere in our family’s past we had a black ancestor who was “absorbed” into white society. That story was hidden until our DNA revealed it.

What’s also interesting is that our evidence of African ancestry, which is very small, can’t be seen in the next generation – the generation of my

children and my sisters' children – who seemed most excited by the new finding and were most disappointed that they didn't have it.

At this point, I should note that my first-cousins once-removed Hal Oakley and Mark Eidem do not have any Nigerian ethnicity, at least at the level reported by Ancestry.com.

The author of the blog posting referenced above also speculates that one of his ancestors was a Melungeon. The Melungeons lived in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. The Melungeons are thought to be of European, African, and Native American ancestry. Could it be that one of my father's ancestors was a Melungeon?

The Wikipedia article about Melungeons is well worth reading. Here is an excerpt:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melungeon>

Melungeons (mə-LUN-jənz) are an ethnicity from the Southeastern United States who descend from Europeans, Native American, and sub-Saharan Africans brought to America as indentured servants and later as slaves. This "race-mixing in the U.S. [wasn't] a new phenomenon". Historically, the Melungeons were associated with settlements in the Cumberland Gap area of central Appalachia, which includes portions of East Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and eastern Kentucky. Tri-racial describes populations who claim to be of mixed European, African and Native American ancestry.

The Wikipedia article goes into more detail about this:

According to the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which Virginia incorporated into law in 1662, children born in the colonies were assigned the social status of their mother regardless of their father's ethnicity or citizenship. That meant the children of enslaved African or African-American women were born into slavery, but it also meant the children of free white or mulatto women, even if they were fathered by enslaved African men, were born free. The free descendants of such unions formed the majority of the ancestors of the free families of color listed in the 1790 and 1810 censuses. Early colonial Virginia was very much a "melting pot" of peoples, and before slavery hardened as a racial caste, white and black working-class people had often lived and worked in close quarters and formed relationships and marriages.

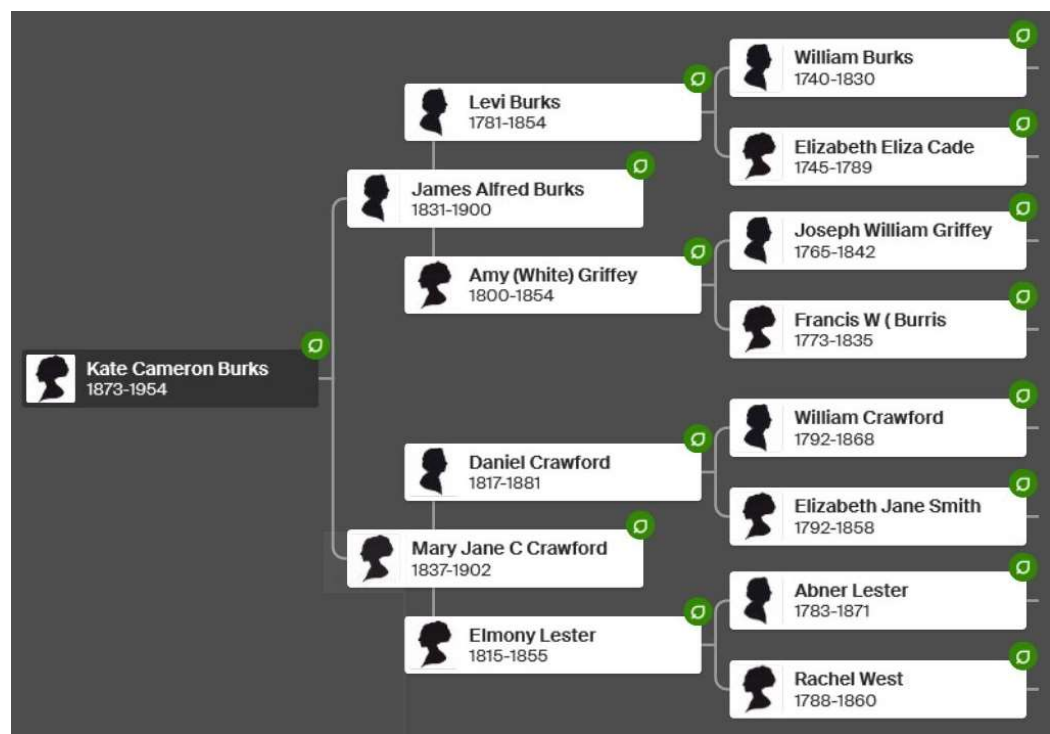
Over the generations, most individuals of the group called Melungeon were persons of mixed European and African descent, sometimes also with Native American ancestry, whose ancestors had been free in colonial Virginia.

Searching for Clues

My father's father was Ray Miller Oakley (1876-1948). I didn't think it would be likely that the Oakley family (and others on the Oakley side of my pedigree, such as the Millers) would have Melungeon ancestry, since they all were from New

England. So I focused on the Burks family, with its roots in colonial Virginia.¹ But what was I looking for? What type of evidence?

My father’s mother was Kate Cameron Burks (1873-1954), and here is her pedigree chart:



At this point, I reasoned that if Kate had a Melungeon ancestor, then some of my DNA matches with descendants of one or more of Kate’s ancestors would also have Nigerian ethnicity similar to mine.²

Searching for my DNA Matches with Nigerian Ancestry

Ancestry.com developed the ThruLines™ software, which shows all of the DNA matches that users have with descendants of their ancestors, all the way back to their fifth-great grandparents.

I decided to go through Kate Burks’ ancestors in a systematic way. I started with her parents, James Alfred Burks and Mary Jane Cameron Crawford. I looked at the ThruLines™ chart for James Alfred Burks (which should be the same as the ThruLines™ chart for his wife).

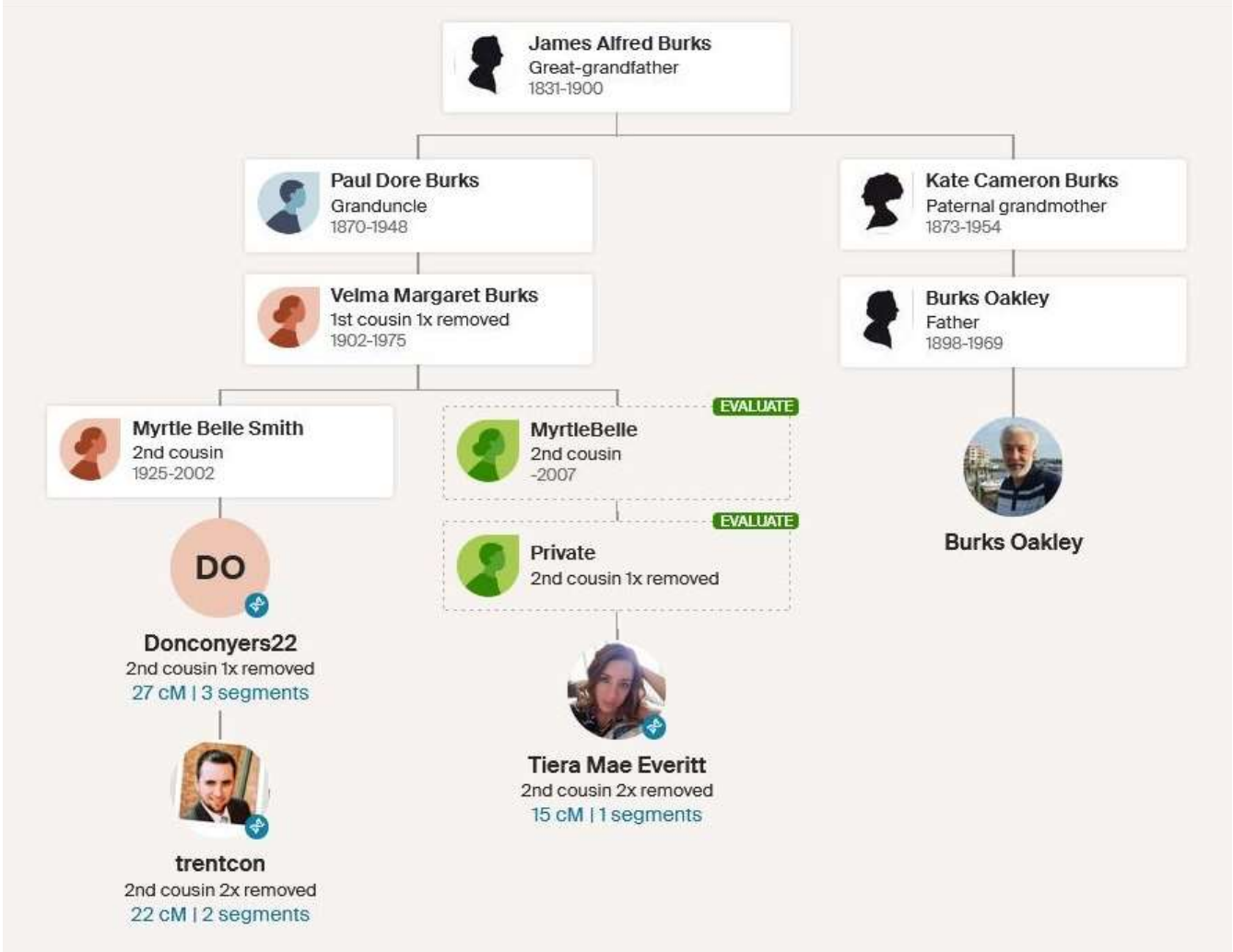
Here is my ThruLines™ chart for James Alfred Burks from Ancestry.com:

¹ <http://www.burksoakley.com/QuincyOakleyGenealogy/6-BurksGenealogy.pdf>

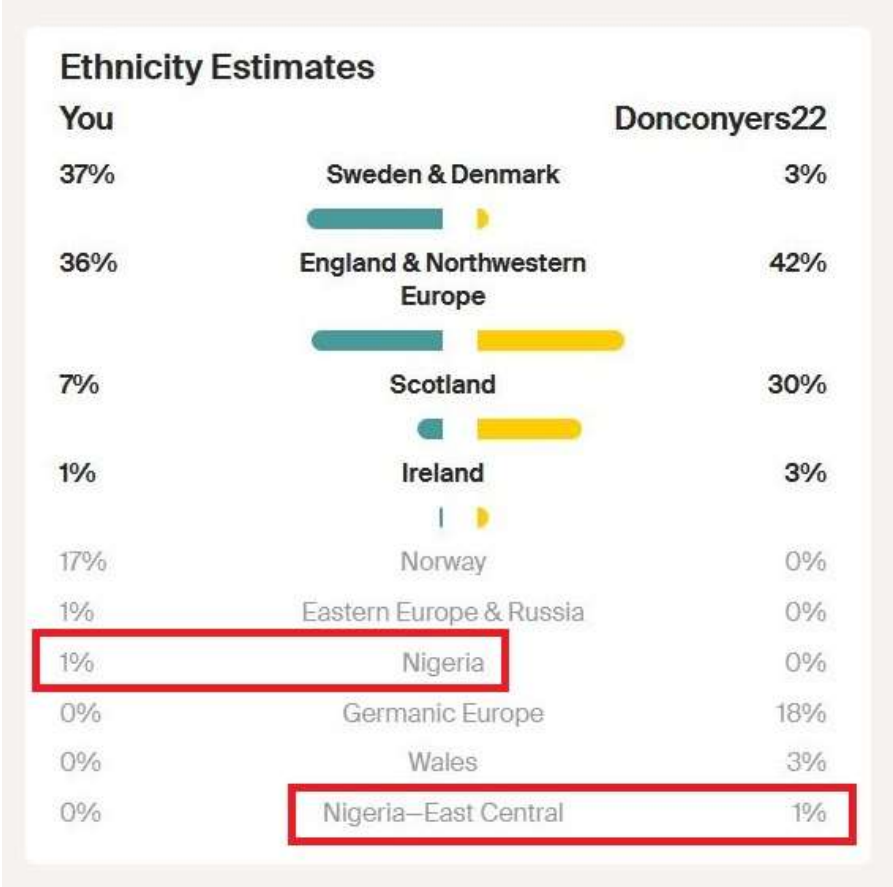
² I’m not at all sure that this reasoning is correct. It seems right to me, but I wouldn’t bet the farm on it.

ThruLines® for James Alfred Burks

ThruLines® uses Ancestry® trees to suggest that you may be related to 8 DNA matches through James Alfred Burks.

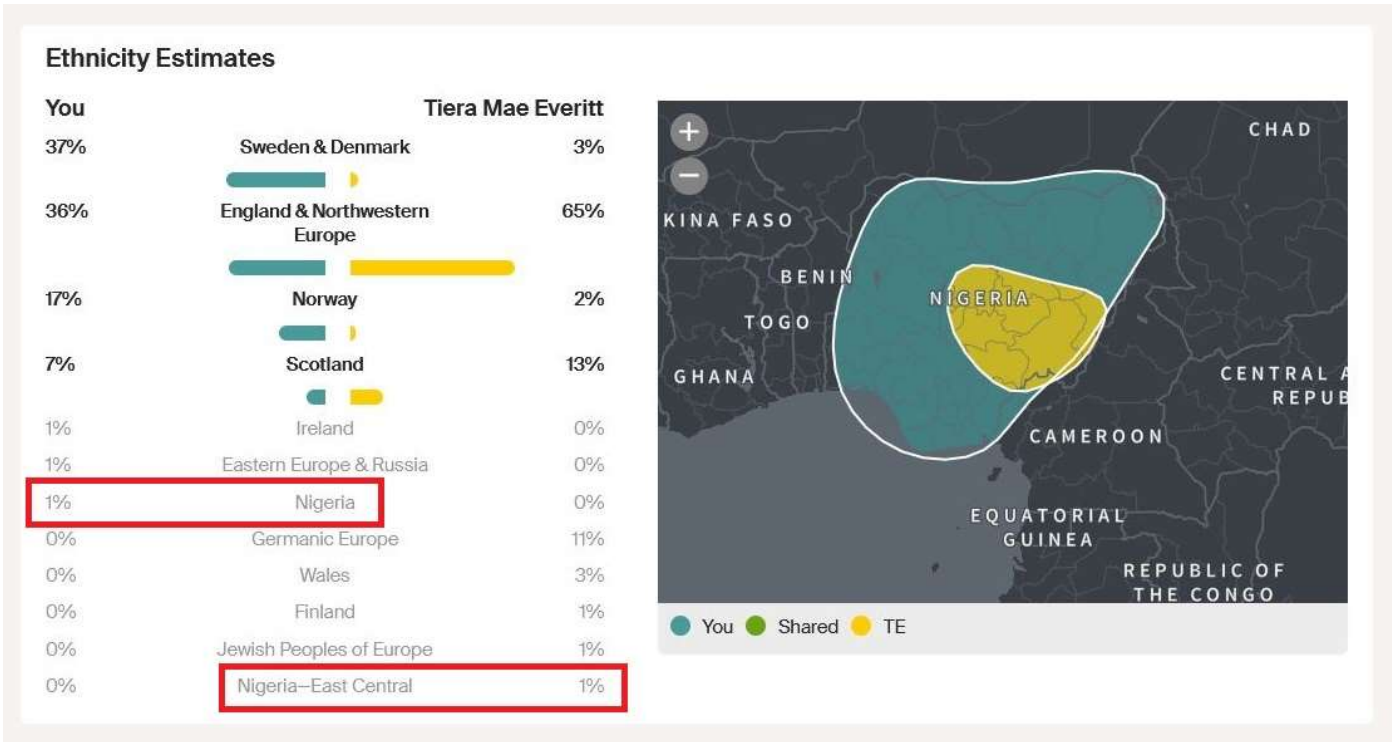


This chart shows that I have DNA matches with Don Conyers and his son Trent Conyers, and I believe that Tiera Mae Everitt is also Don’s daughter (her family tree lists her paternal grandmother as MrytleBelle, but she was really Myrtle Belle Smith). So this chart gave me three Burks descendants to examine. Here is the Ethnicity estimate for Don Conyers:



Oh my! Don’s ethnicity includes 1% Nigeria-East Central. Wow! This finding certainly supports my hypothesis that a Burks ancestor (from way back in the past) was a Melungeon.

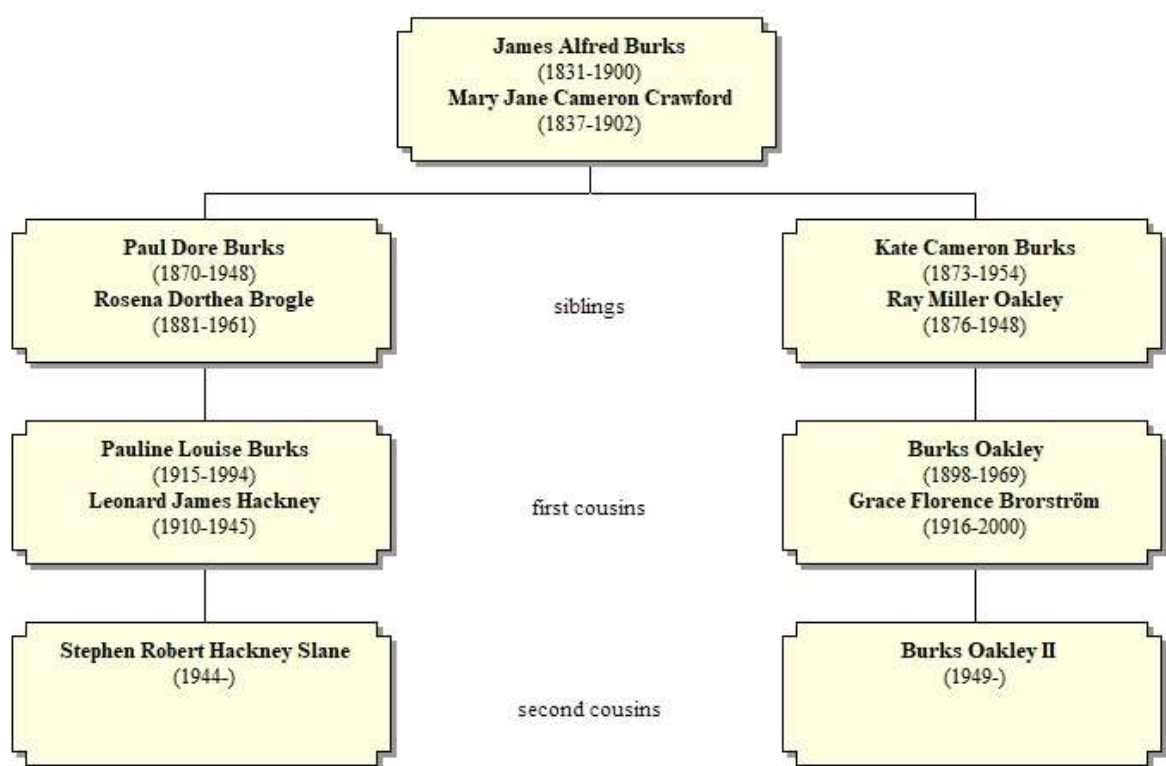
I went on to look at Don’s daughter, Tiera Mae Everitt. Here is how our ethnicities compare:



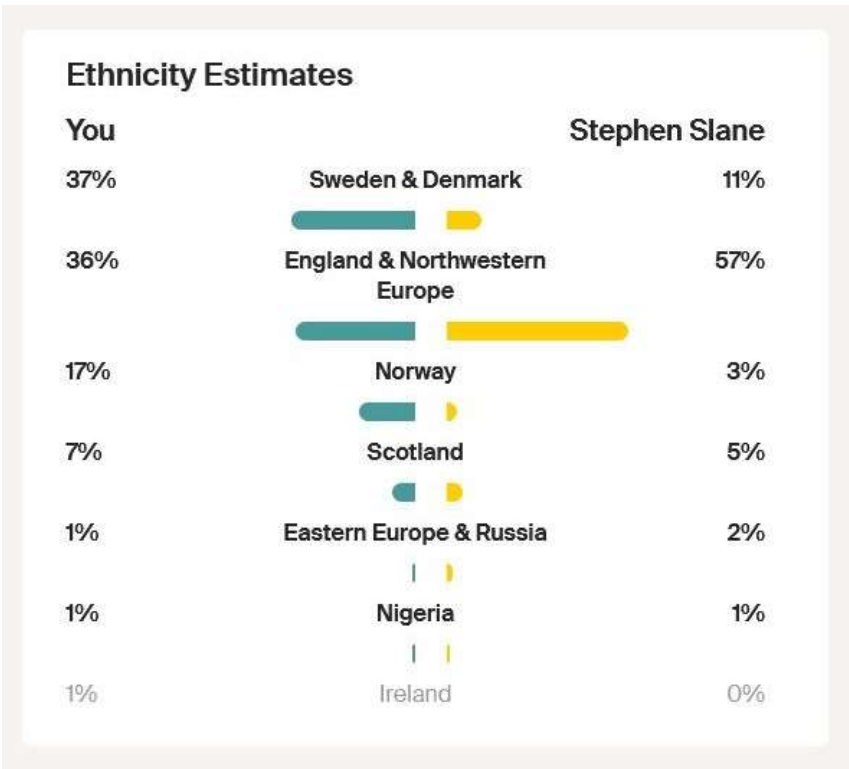
Wow! She also has the 1% Nigeria-East Central ethnicity. In the graphic shown above, I zoomed in on Nigeria in the panel at the right to show the overlap between my Nigerian ethnicity (in dark green) and Tiera’s Nigerian ethnicity (yellow).

I also looked at Don’s son, Trent Conyers, but he did not have any Nigerian ethnicity.

I remembered that I have a DNA match on Ancestry.com with Stephen Slane, and he also is descended from James Alfred Burks and his wife Mary Jane Cameron Crawford. Unfortunately, Stephen does not have a family tree on Ancestry.com, so he doesn’t show up in the ThruLines™ chart for James A. Burks. But I have corresponded with Stephen’s wife, and I am very sure of his Burks ancestry. Here is how Stephen and I are related:



Here is a chart comparing my ethnicity with Stephen’s:

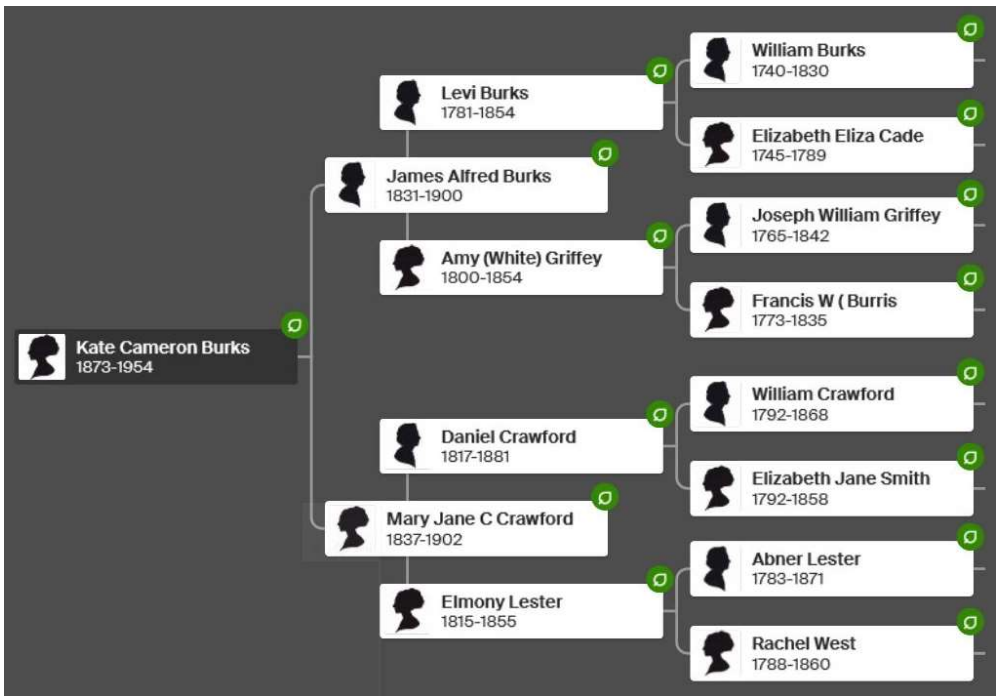


Son of a gun! Stephen has 1% Nigerian ethnicity!

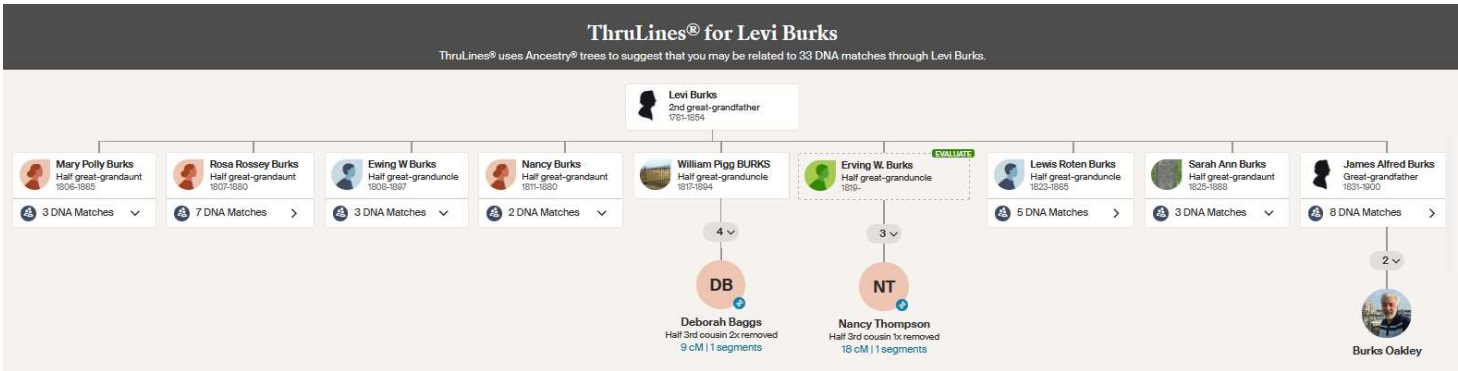
At this point, I can tentatively conclude that my Nigerian ethnicity did indeed come through my great-grandparents, James A. Burks and Mary Jane Cameron Crawford. They passed this DNA to their daughter Kate Cameron Burks, and also to their son, Paul Dore Burks, who in turn passed it on to subsequent generations.

Finding that my Burks relatives also have 1% Nigerian ethnicity adds support to the idea that my Nigerian ethnicity is real, and not just a random error. Of course, I knew that I received this ethnicity through my father, and I had discounted the idea that it came through the Oakley side of the family (since they were in New England, while the Burks family was in Virginia).

I guess that I now need to go back another generation, to see if the Nigerian ethnicity came from James A. Burks or from Mary Jane Cameron Crawford.



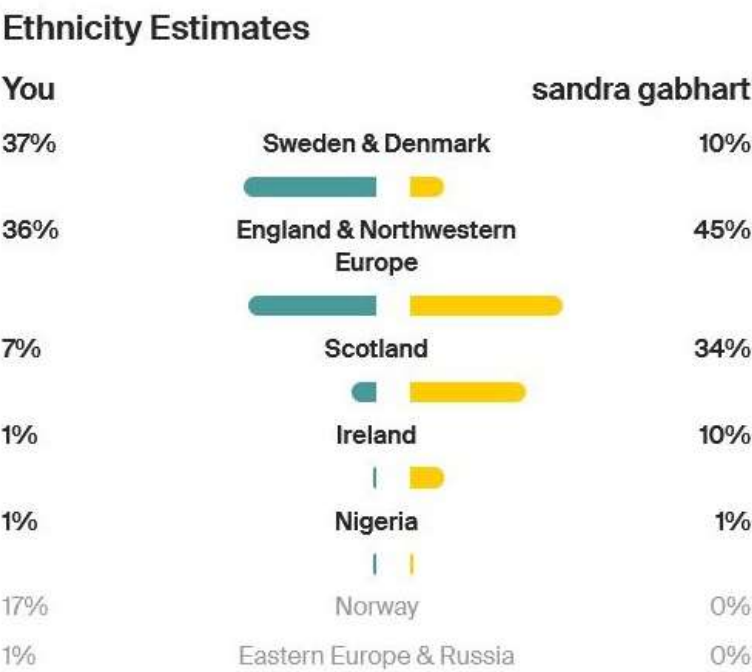
So I next moved to Levi Burks. Here is his ThruLines™ chart:



Wow! I have 33 DNA matches with descendants of Levi Burks. At least I’ve already looked at the eight matches with descendants of James A. Burks. And all the others are “half” relationships, from Levi’s first marriage to Sarah “Sally” Pigg.

I first looked at descendants of Levi’s daughter Mary Polly Burks – no Nigerian ethnicity.

I next looked at descendants of Levi’s daughter Rosa Rossey Burks – and one of them is Sandra Gabhart:



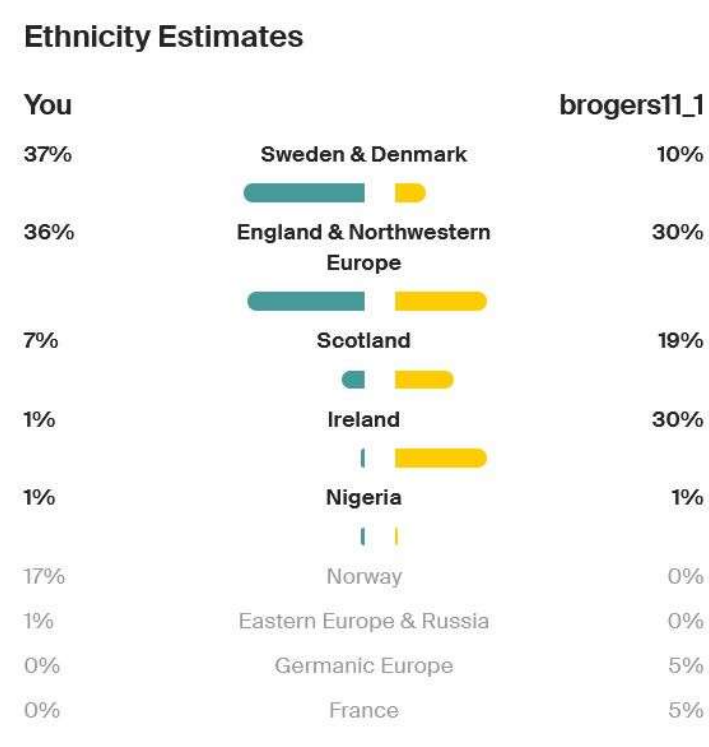
Sandra also has 1% Nigerian ethnicity.

Descendants of Ewing Burks do not have any Nigerian ethnicity.

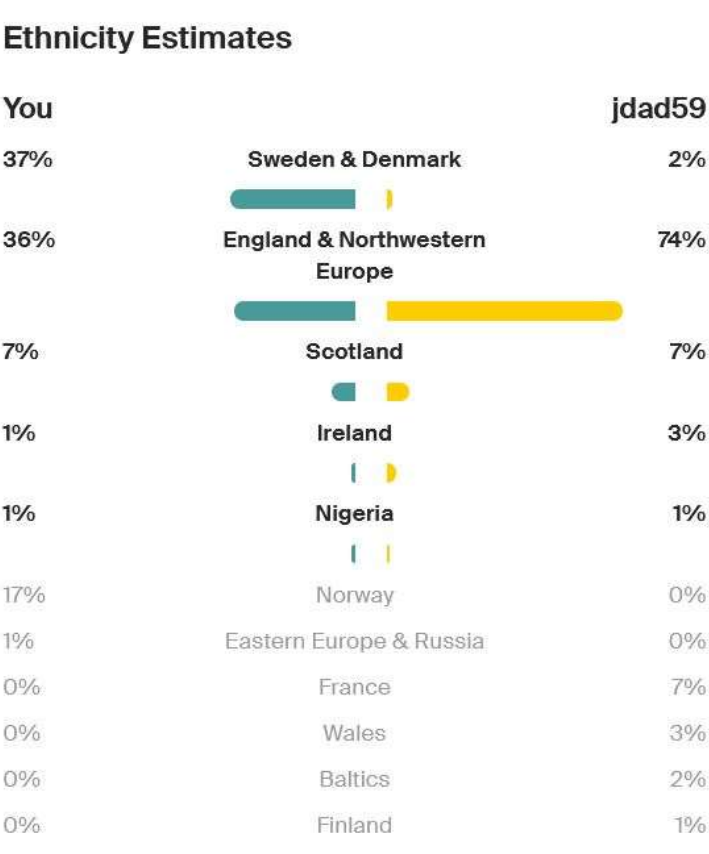
I next looked at the descendants of Levi’s daughter Nancy Burks, and found that someone with the username “crrtol” has 1% Nigerian ethnicity:



I went on to look at my DNA matches with descendants of Levi’s son Lewis Roton Burks, and I learned that a woman with the username brogers11_1 has 1% Nigerian ethnicity:



The last one of Levi’s children I looked at was Sarah Ann Burks, and one of her descendants was someone with the username of jdad59, who also has 1% Nigerian ethnicity:



So all of this is very encouraging – descendants of Levi Burks do indeed have Nigerian ethnicity. Remember that Levi was married twice, and all of his children I mentioned above had a different mother than James Alfred Burks. So this should rule out the possibility that the Nigerian ethnicity in my line came from Levi’s second wife, Amy Griffey. This also should rule out the possibility that the Nigerian ethnicity came down through the Crawford branch of my family tree.

These conclusions, of course, are tentative at this point. For completeness, I went on and examined my DNA matches with descendants of Daniel Crawford, Abner

Lester, William Crawford, and Joseph William Griffey. I did not find Nigerian ethnicity in any of my DNA matches with descendants of these direct ancestors.

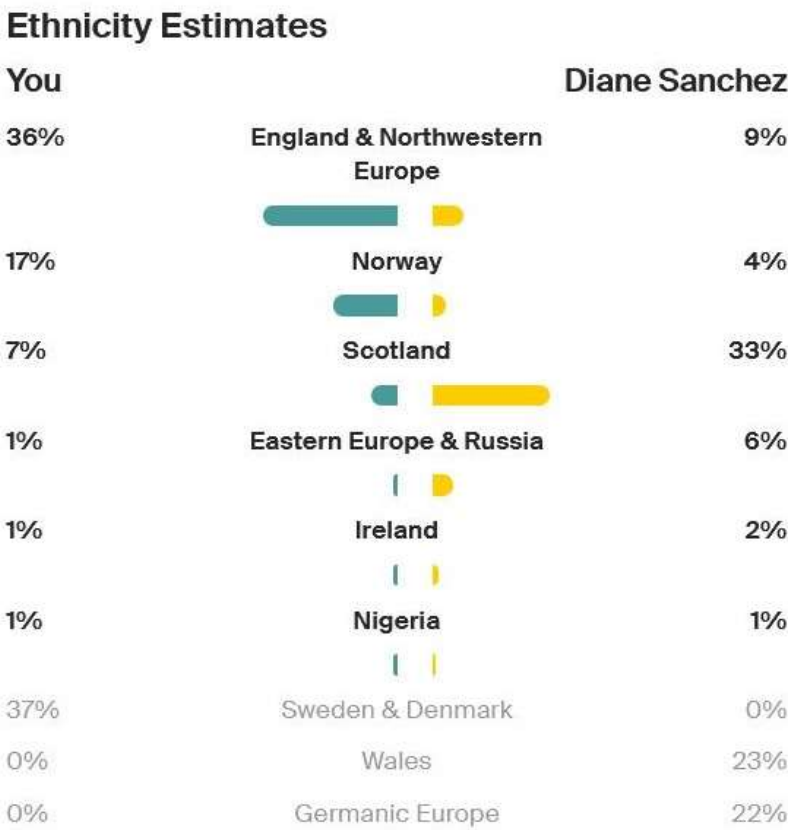
So at this point, my working hypothesis is that my Nigerian ancestry came to me from Levi Burks. His parents were William Burks and Elizabeth Cade, so it would appear that one of them was the source of the Nigerian ethnicity.

Here is my ThruLines™ chart for William Burks:



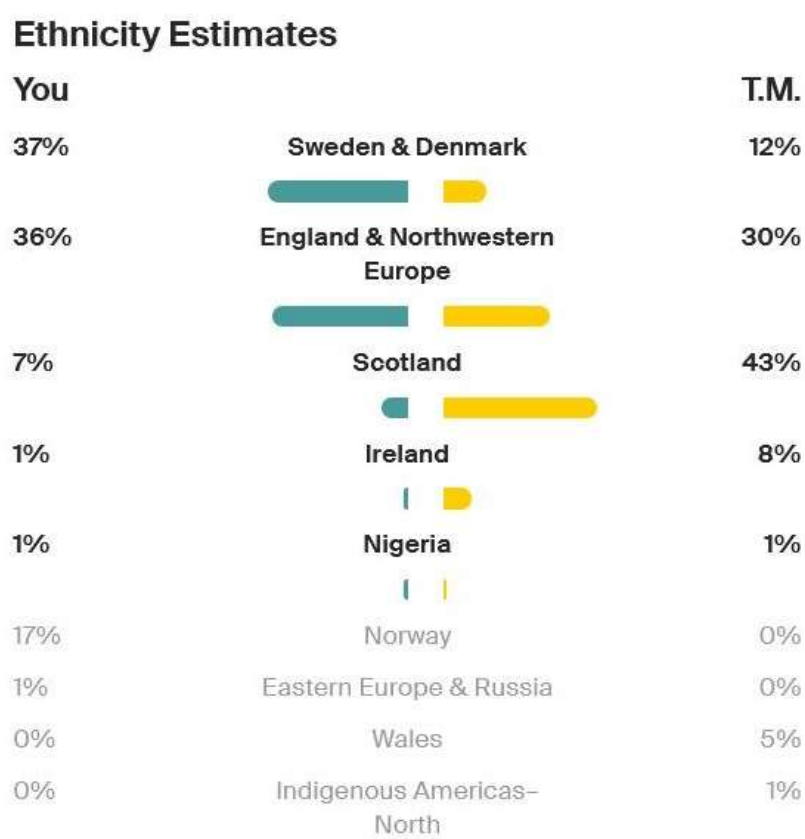
This chart suggests that I have DNA matches with 125 descendants of William Burks. I have DNA matches with descendants of six of his children (plus Levi Burks). I should add that my ThruLines™ chart for William's wife Elizabeth "Eliza" Cade has 133 matches, and I haven't taken the time to find the differences.

I began at the left with William's son George Burks, and the very first DNA match I examined was with George's descendant Diane Sanchez – and here is her ethnicity estimate:



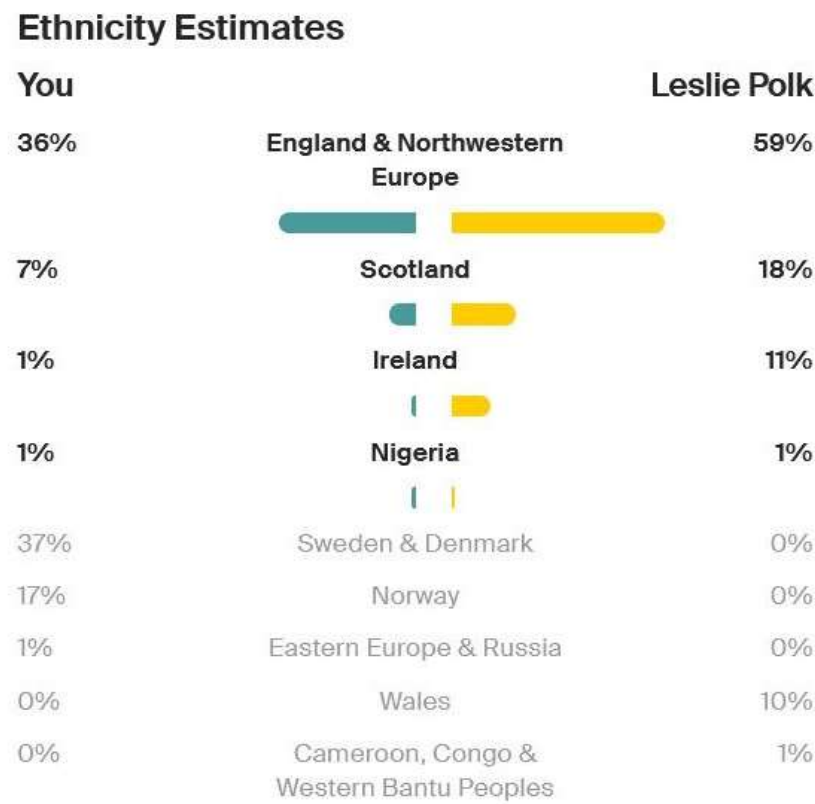
Oh my! Right off the bat, I find that Diane has 1% Nigerian ancestry. Amazing!

I next looked at William’s daughter Elizabeth Burks, and one of her descendants was a person with the username T.M. – and here is his/her ethnicity estimate:

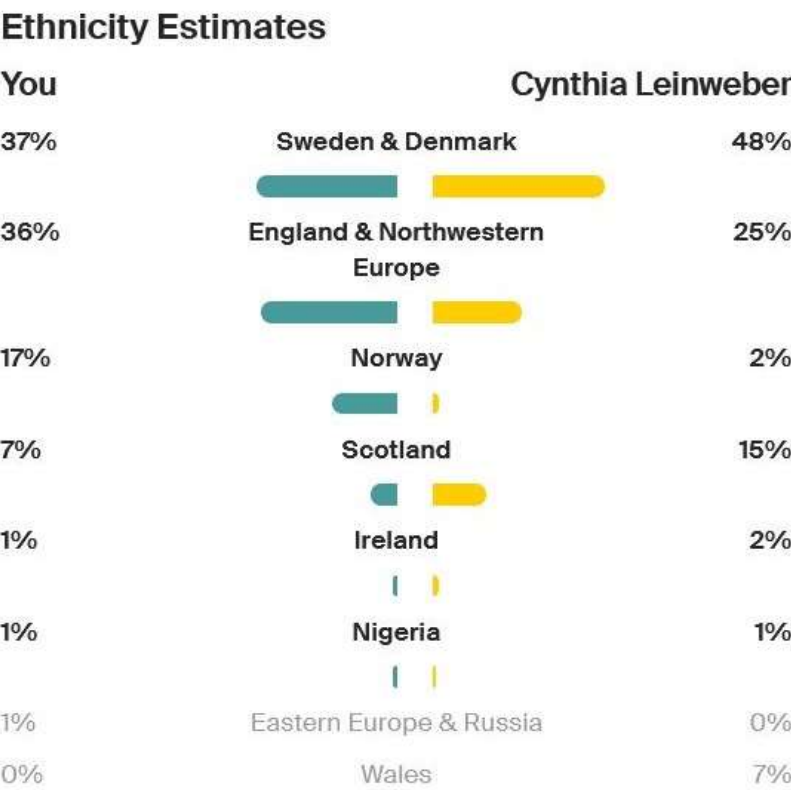


T.M. also has 1% Nigerian ancestry.

Another one of Elizabeth’s descendants is Leslie Polk, and here is her/his ethnicity estimate:

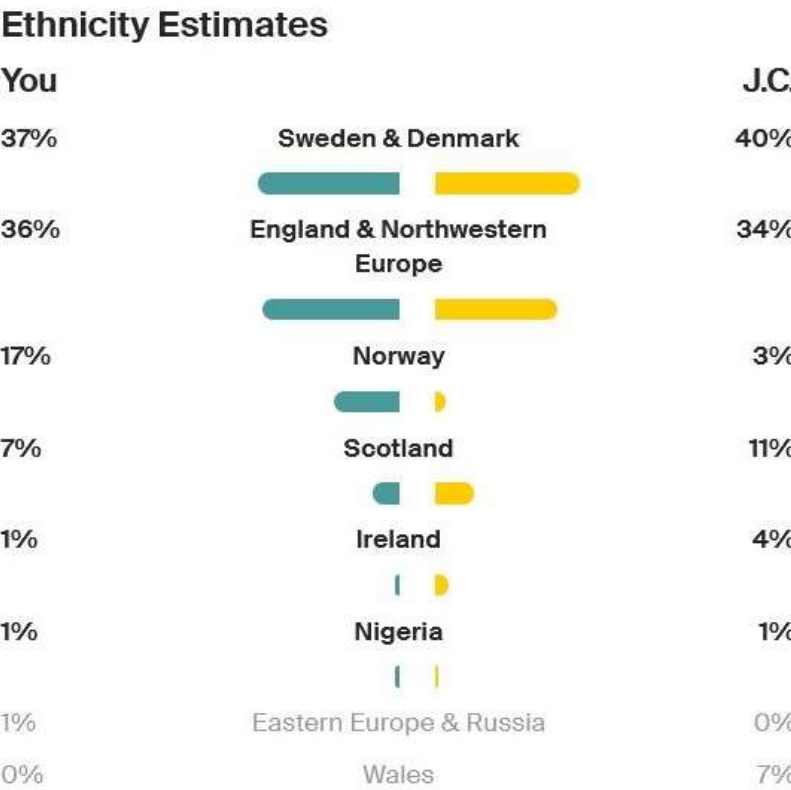


I next looked at William’s daughter Frances Burks. One of her descendants is Cynthia Leinweber – and here is Cynthia’s ethnicity estimate:



Once again, she has 1% Nigerian ancestry.

Another descendant of Frances Burks is J.C., and here is J.C.’s ethnicity estimate:



J.C. also has 1% Nigerian ancestry.

Overall, I found that five of my DNA matches with descendants of William Burks and his wife Elizabeth “Eliza” Cade have 1% Nigerian ethnicity. At this point, I’m going to state that either William or Elizabeth is on a direct ancestral line back to the source of my Nigerian ethnicity.

William Burks and Elizabeth “Eliza” Cade

When I first became interested in genealogy and DNA, I wrote about our Burks family history:

<http://www.burksoakley.com/QuincyOakleyGenealogy/6-BurksGenealogy.pdf>

I just re-read that document and was reminded that Samuel King Burks Sr. lived in Virginia and owned a number of slaves. His wife, Mary Elizabeth Davis, was one-quarter Native American.

While there appear to be good historical records of our Burks line, William Burks’ wife, Elizabeth Cade, is a real mystery. She appears in numerous family trees on Ancestry.com, some of which have her being born in North Carolina.



Various family trees list her father as Robert Cade (born 1720) and her mother as Frances Baker, but I haven’t been able to find any information about either of them – no records, no sources. Right now, I have no clue how to determine if Elizabeth Cade was a Melungeon.

Where To Go from Here?

I’m struck by the Wikipedia article I quoted earlier:

Early colonial Virginia was very much a “melting pot” of peoples, and before slavery hardened as a racial caste, white and black working-class people had often lived and worked in close quarters and formed relationships and marriages.

I can put the Burks family in the right location at what I’m guessing is the right time.

It seems that Levi Burks was the carrier of the Nigerian ethnicity. Did he get this part of his ethnicity from his father or from his mother?

I have to admit that I have no experience looking at the inheritance of ethnicity. Just because I have found a group of my DNA matches who have 1% Nigerian ethnicity doesn’t mean that their Nigerian ancestor was the same person as my Nigerian ancestor.

I guess that the next step might be to contact several of my DNA matches who have 1% Nigerian ethnicity and ask them to use the chromosome painter to identify which chromosome this ethnicity resides on.

Since Elizabeth Cade is largely an unknown, my guess is that I'll never know the origin of my Nigerian ethnicity.

Final Thoughts

As I was writing this chapter, one of my Google searches turned up a YouTube video entitled "How many generations back is 3% ethnicity in your DNA test results?" – see:

<https://youtu.be/9hbE4Vihf4g>

This video was produced by Andy Lee at Family History Fanatics. In this video, Mr. Lee presented some good information about dealing with ethnicities in the 1% range – and he suggested several reasons that a 1% ethnicity could actually go back as far as a sixth-great grandparent.

I only went back to my third-great grandparents (William Burks and Eliza Cade) in my "research", and I now realize that might not have been far enough back in my family tree.

At this point, the best I can write is that it is very likely that one of Levi Burks' ancestors in Virginia was married to a Nigerian, and that is the source of my 1% Nigerian ethnicity.