Episode 4, 2005: Slave Banjo, Baltimore , Maryland

Wes: Our next story unknots the family mystery of a modern American instrument.

Tukufu: it's 1865, and the Civil War is over. Nearly four million African American slaves have been released from bondage. A tidal wave of humanity floods the promised land in the north, where free blacks try to leave behind the horrors of slavery and create a new life. Dave Brown has found what he believes may be the only surviving example of a banjo carried on this epic migration.

Dave Brown: I had learned to play the banjo when I was in college. When I did see this banjo for sale, I -- I -- I knew enough to know it was something of interest to me. I actually bought it in an online auction, the old-fashioned way.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I've come to Baltimore, Maryland, to meet Dave and find out more about this mystery instrument. Okay, so this is the banjo.

Dave: That's it.

Tukufu: So it looks old and very beaten up, a really tattered kind of base there, and the part up here seems to be broken off. So, what do you know about this banjo?

Dave: All I know is what's on the note on the inside.

Tukufu: Oh, okay.

Dave: It tells us that the banjo came from a man named Rice, whose father was a conductor in the Underground Railroad.

Tukufu: okay.

Dave: And Rice had purchased it from a childhood friend who had been a recently freed slave.

Tukufu: Wow. Now, what can I find out for you?

Dave: I'd like to find out if this story is true. Was this banjo owned by a slave?

Tukufu: If this story is true, it's remarkable: a slave banjo carried from the horrors of the plantation South following the Civil War, literally an instrument of interracial friendship. I'm excited about this investigation, so I'm going to go and see what I can find out and get back to you.

Dave: All right.

Tukufu: Now, this banjo does have a story to tell. Part of that story is going to be told from the physical structure of the banjo itself. Another story will be told by this letter that's attached to the back of the banjo. It tells the story of a mulatto, Christian Anderson, who had been a slave until his 12th birthday, when he was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. In Ohio, Anderson became a classmate and friend of J. Rice, the son of a white abolitionist. Anderson must have come north after the civil war. Rice then bought the banjo from Anderson years later. But something is a little odd about this story. I've always thought of the banjo as being played mostly by white people. Would a slave really have owned an instrument like this? I'm meeting with blues man Taj Mahal. He's spent his life exploring the roots of African American music. That was beautiful. So, can you tell me a little bit about the origin of the banjo?

Taj Mahal: The grandparent of this instrument is from Africa. The instruments moved to the United States and then they went through a transformation over several centuries. The name in Africa is... [speaking African], but now the closest -- the closest name to banjo is... [speaking African], which is in the Gambia, but, you know, here we are with banjo.

Tukufu: If the banjo came from Africa, how did it end up being seen as a white person's instrument? That amazing transformation has its roots in the decades before the Civil War, when whites appeared in blackface, playing the instrument in minstrel shows. By the late 1800s, the banjo had evolved into a fancy parlor instrument of the upper class. The banjo's hidden history and the racist buffoonery of the minstrel shows has kept many African Americans from playing the instrument.

Taj: Well, yeah, I mean, part of that whole minstrel idea about banjos was what really kept me away from -- from – from playing the instrument, although it would -- it would have this, like, kind of sound to it that would grab me, but it just, like, the visuals was not working with that sound.

Tukufu: He tells me that for a people who had been prohibited from reading and writing, song was a way that culture was remembered. Musicians were specially valued members of the slave community. He says it makes perfect sense that a slave, heading north to freedom, would have carried a banjo. The results of this musical migration can be heard today in a variety of American music, including bluegrass and country.

Taj: You talk to most of the -- most of your country guys, they all cite having learned guitar, mandolin, banjo from an older black person in the neighborhood. Then taking that rhythm and taking his type of roots and putting them together and creating new music.

Tukufu: That was beautiful. Thank you very much.

Taj: My pleasure.

Tukufu: So a banjo could have been important to a slave, but we don't know if this one is from the right time period. I need to date it. I also want to investigate the story in the note, so I'm enlisting the help of fellow history detective, Wes Cowan.

Wes: Well, the note says J. Rice and Christian Anderson lived in this village of Bethel, Ohio, not far from my hometown of Cincinnati. You know, it's still a tiny place, where nearly everybody knows their neighbors. I'm meeting with Underground Railroad historian Gary Knepp. Our note says that J. Rice's father, Benjamin Rice, was an abolitionist. If anyone can tell me if this story is true, it should be Gary. Have you ever heard of a guy named Benjamin Rice?

Gary Knepp: Yes, Benjamin Rice was an Underground Railroad conductor from Bethel.

Wes: A conductor, right from here?

Gary: Absolutely. What we know about Benjamin Rice was that he and his partner, Richard Mace, had a wagon that had a secret compartment in it in which they were able to put the fugitives in the wagon where they picked them up in Felicity, which was a little community south of Bethel, brought them in. They provided a cover by putting oats over the wagon.

Wes: Wow.

Gary: He told a – a relative of his, that he helped over 100 slaves escape from Kentucky, which is a considerable number.

Wes: Did he have a son?

Gary: Yes, he did. John lived in Bethel at this period in time and...

Wes: So the J. Rice in the note who befriended Christian Anderson is John Rice. That's great news. I think we found our abolitionist family. You know, I've got this note that refers to John Rice going to school with an African American kid. Is that within the realm of possibility at this time?

Gary: It certainly is possible. We do have evidence that there were integrated schools in this area around this period of time.

Wes: Gary tells me that the Ohio River was the dividing line between north and south, an iron curtain between freedom and enslavement. Seen as the River Jordan by slaves, the Ohio side of the river was the first stop for tens of thousands of runaways. The border was treacherous territory, crisscrossed by bounty hunters and kidnappers. Abolitionist families like the Rices took great risk to help escaped slaves. It's a tantalizing image: that after the Civil War, Christian Anderson's family came up this very river in search of a new life. They might have even been carrying our banjo with them.

Tukufu: Seems like Wes is onto something in Ohio. While he's looking for the Anderson family, my next step is to date our instrument. I'm meeting with George Wunderlich, an expert in early banjos.

George Wunderlich: Thanks for bringing it. Come on in.

Tukufu: So, George, this is the banjo I told you about.

George: Wow! That's incredible. Absolutely incredible. Why don't we start with one end and we'll work our way up. The first is, you see this peg. This is kind of interesting because this style of having the peg come through the fingerboard is actually very, very old. You can see here ... this is a reproduction of a gourd banjo from the Caribbean, very early instrument, and it also has that peg coming up through.

Tukufu: Right. This is an early descendant of the African gourd instrument Taj Mahal told me about.

George: Now, the most telling part about it is this peg head. If you look at this shape, what it is it's a violin peg head turned on its side. Now, this was used on commercial banjos and it was a very popular form, but as we see, it's been broken off here. And what I suspect was going on is that we had a mirror image on this side, making the shape of a lyre.

Tukufu: okay.

George: We have a banjo here. This is the newer style of this lyre peg head. During the late part of the civil war and after, what they did is they redesigned this lyre so that it met in the middle. That made it much stronger, wasn't as prone to breaking. If you hit one side of it, it wouldn't snap off.

Tukufu: Okay.

George: This banjo doesn't show that. What we see is a much larger peg head that never joined in the middle.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm.

George: I would say this peg head probably puts this banjo neck in the realm of 1853 to maybe 1860, '61.

Tukufu: Wow! So this means our banjo was made before the Civil War. Okay, so could a slave own a banjo like this?

George: Oh, absolutely. We -- we know a couple things about slaves at that time, especially slaves who had special skills. We know there are many instances where slaves purchased small plots of land. They purchased their relatives and even themselves out of slavery, so they had money through this hiring-out system. As far as having an instrument like that, it's -- it's absolutely feasible that they would have had the money and, of course, musicians make money. They may have actually used it to earn a living.

Tukufu: Tell me, how rare is this banjo?

George: If this, in fact, had provenance to a slave, it becomes one of one, or two, or maybe three of that group that would have that kind of -- that kind of history to it. And I would say, then, this could be unique.

Tukufu: Wow! Oh, that's going to be good news. All right. Thank you very much.

George: Thanks for bringing it in. This is great.

Tukufu: So now we need to track down Christian Anderson and see if we can prove he was a slave. I wonder what Wes is turning up in Ohio.

Wes: I've come to the Cincinnati Public Library to meet researcher Larry Hamilton. The library houses one of the nation's top genealogical archives. Hey, Larry.

Larry Hamilton: Hi, Wes, how are you?

Wes: Good to meet you.

Larry: Nice meeting you, too.

Wes: Well, listen, I've got a genealogical question... We know John Rice's abolitionist family lived in Bethel. Now I'm hoping Larry can help me find Christian Anderson.

Larry: Well, what kind of information do you have?

Wes: Well, you know, I've got a name, Christian Anderson. He was 12 years old when he was emancipated, and he lived in bethel, Ohio, which I know is really pretty close to here.

Larry: The first census in which blacks are enumerated is the 1870 census. If we can find him there, we might have an opportunity to overcome the genealogical wall of slavery and go back in terms of being able to find more information on him.

Wes: Larry tells me that researching African American genealogy is fraught with challenges. Before 1870,

African Americans weren't even counted in the census. Free blacks were recorded, but those records are spotty. And in the case with slaves, tracing someone is much more difficult. Slaves were considered property, so existing records often show nothing more than a person's gender or age, and occasionally, a first name. Okay, so I'm searching census records for 1870, the first after the Civil War. Clermont County, village of Bethel. If the banjo note is true, and our Christian Anderson was a freed slave in bethel, he should be listed. Ah, okay. Here's an Anderson family. Well, there are a few Anderson families listed here, but I don't see anyone by the name of Christian Anderson. Oh, here's something. Here's a guy named Vance Anderson. He's mulatto, living in Bethel, born in 1850. So he would have been around 12 at emancipation. I'm consulting local city directories to see if there's any more information about this Vance Anderson. Ah, now here's something. I'm looking in the 1883 Cincinnati city directory. Cincinnati is near Bethel, so I thought I might check to see if I could find any Andersons and a Vance Anderson, and I got him here. "Vance K. Anderson." This is the first time that he's appeared with a middle initial. You know, the note spells Christian with a "C," but I wonder if it's a misspelling and this "K" stands for the middle name, Christian.

Larry: Wes?

Wes: Hey. Meanwhile, Larry has been checking into other Anderson family members.

Larry: I found a Dennis Anderson, who served in the Civil War.

Wes: That's Vance Anderson's older brother. Looks like he served in the 14th U.S. colored infantry.

Larry: What's really interesting is the fact that on the roster he's listed as the principal musician.

Wes: Wow, you know, that's the bandleader. I wonder if this family was a musical family. We might be getting somewhere. I copied the property lot numbers from the Anderson and Rice families' census records to see where they lived. Let's see what those addresses tell us. Okay, here's Bethel. So we know one of them is living in Lot 105, right there, and one's living in Lot 209. Hey, they're neighbors.

Larry: Wow.

Wes: They almost certainly knew each other. It's a tiny town. That's pretty close. You know, there's one more thing I want to check.

Tukufu: I'm meeting Dave to tell him what we found. So, we weren't able to find Christian Anderson in the Census, but we were able to find an individual who fit all other descriptions of him along with the name Anderson. I tell him the Rice family had been abolitionist before the civil war, just as the note suggests. After the war, the Rice and Anderson families were neighbors and lived only blocks from each other in a teeny town. Our final search was for evidence that Christian Anderson had been freed by the emancipation proclamation, which would make our banjo an authentic slave instrument.

Wes: All right, let's see. I want to see where the Andersons were from. Place of origin, let's see. Huh! They're from Tennessee, a slave state.

Tukufu: The Andersons weren't listed in records of free blacks living in Tennessee. The conclusion was inescapable: a black and white truth from the old South. So we think that this person most likely was enslaved in Tennessee.

Dave: I think that's a -- that's a terrific story. It just makes it that much more special.

Tukufu: It makes it one of the rarest of banjos in existence. Experts tell us that maybe there's one or two of them in existence, and that this is the only one that they have ever heard of or ever seen. This is a true treasure.

Dave: Terrific. That's exciting.

Tukufu: Yes, it is!

Dave: I think we have to find a place to put it that's a little – little better than just my house.

Tukufu: It's been a pleasure. Thank you very much for allowing us to pursue your story. Thank you.

ENDS.