

MacNeill, Janet Smith (Jennie Bahn) ^[1]

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By Nancy V. Smith, 1991

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Janet Smith MacNeill (Jennie Bahn), subject of North Carolina legend, was born in Scotland, the daughter of John, a lowland Scot, and Margaret Gilchrist Smith. The Smiths migrated to the colonies about 1739 and settled in the region that became [Harnett County](#) ^[2], N.C. Margaret Gilchrist died on the voyage to America and John Smith died sometime before 1754.

A contemporary of [Flora MacDonald](#) ^[3], Janet Smith was well known to her Scottish neighbors as a spirited, attractive young woman. Traditionally, she is said to have been small, redheaded, and fair complected. Her neighbors nicknamed her "Jennie Bahn," meaning Jennie the Fair.

Jennie Bahn and her husband, Archibald MacNeill, were said to be the largest cattle raisers in America before the [Revolution](#) ^[4]. One of the earliest and most famous legends surrounding Jennie Bahn has her regularly driving 3,000 head of cattle from Cross Creek to Philadelphia. Because it was impossible to take enough feed for a herd this size, much less buy it during the long journey to Philadelphia, this legend has been refuted. It is known, however, that she would occasionally help drive a herd of around 1,500 to Petersburg, Va. According to one story, on one trip she tried to buy feed from a Virginia farmer but he refused to sell it to her. Not to be outdone, she let her cattle inside his fences to graze. It is also known that Jennie Bahn did visit Philadelphia, where she met Benjamin Franklin. She was so impressed by Franklin that there has been a Benjamin Franklin in the MacNeill family and collateral families since that trip.

Another legend concerns her original, though inaccurate, surveying techniques. She would take a slave to a tract of land and send him walking until he heard her bell. At the clang, he would change direction. Her neighbors did not like her methods of surveying and accused her of infringing on their land. She was never taken to court for these infringements, however, because she wisely patented the tracts under the names of her husband and children. Her name never appears on the records at the land grant office in [Raleigh](#) ^[5] or on the records of the [Fayetteville](#) ^[6] courts.

As the driving force in her family, Jennie Bahn is said, at the start of the Revolution, to have divided her six sons so half would serve the king and the other half would serve the cause for independence. She remained neutral in order to sell cattle to both sides. This way the MacNeill family could brag about its sons no matter which way the war was going and make money at the same time. Actually, five of her six sons served with Loyalist forces. Of these five, "Nova Scotia" Daniel and "Leather Eye" Hector were known as outstanding Tory leaders, and "Cunning" John led his troops in the on-slaught at the Massacre of Piney Bottom. As for Jennie Bahn, it is said that she regarded the British troops stopping by her home with the utmost distaste.

Jennie Bahn married "Scorblin" (scrubbling) Archibald MacNeill sometime before 1748. They had seven sons and two daughters. After the war Jennie Bahn and Archie MacNeill moved to their home in [Cumberland County](#) ^[7] on the lower Little River in the Sandhills. They were buried together in the nearby MacNeill cemetery. The final legend surrounding Jennie Bahn comes after her death. Her tombstone is said to have been so heavy that it was 125 years before it was taken from Fayetteville and placed on her grave.

References:

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Ben Dixon MacNeill, "Highland Family Comes Home to Celebrate" (clippings, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

John Oates, *Story of Fayetteville* (1972)

Subjects:

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Authors:

Smith, Nancy V. ^[11]

Origin - location:

Cumberland County ^[12]

Harnett County ^[13]

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. ^[14]

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