

MacNeill, Ben Dixon ^[1]

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MacNeill, Ben Dixon

by David Stick, 1991

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Ben Dixon MacNeill, author and journalist, was born on a farm four miles from Laurinburg, the third child of Scottish parents. His father, Angus Benjamin MacNeill, cultivated a small farm but was more interested in singing and fiddling than in agriculture. Known as "Ben MacNeill the Singing Master," he traveled in several southern states, frequently conducting singing schools. His mother, Flora McKinnon MacNeill, exercised an especially strong influence on young Ben, sharing with him an interest in flowers, birds, animals, and even snakes, and encouraging his inquisitiveness. Recognizing his natural affinity for words and their usage, she bought him a blue-back speller, his first book, and followed that later with a copy of *Webster's Dictionary*.

The family moved to Laurinburg, where Ben attended a classical academy conducted by Professor W. G. Quakenbush and worked in the summer in the Dickson Cotton Mills. Even then, at age eleven, he had a reputation for telling tall tales, and with encouragement from Mrs. Walter McEachin, his Sunday school teacher in the Presbyterian church attended by the family, he became an avid reader of classical literature and poetry. Later he was to describe his acquaintance as a teenager with [John Charles McNeill](#) ^[2], the poet, who at the time was a columnist for the *Charlotte Observer* ^[3]: "He was vaguely my cousin. I doubt that he was really. He was a magnificent figure—godlike. And he treated me like a contemporary. I would look dumbly at him and know that, somehow, I'd be a writer, too."

In 1905 MacNeill was sent to [Bingham Military Academy](#) ^[4] near Mebane, and later attended [Davidson College](#) ^[5] for a brief period. His first full-time job was as a teacher at the Troutman School in [Iredell County](#) ^[6], followed by another stint as a teacher in the Marvin School in Grays Creek, to which his family had moved from Laurinburg. His students remembered him more for his storytelling than for his teaching ability.

The urge to write was still strong, and he gave up teaching for a job as a reporter with the Wilmington *Morning Star*, an association that was interrupted during World War I by three years of service in the army, in which he became a machine-gun instructor. Returning to the *Morning Star*, he was promoted to city editor, though his interests were more in writing than in editing. In 1920 he left Wilmington to become a reporter for the Raleigh *News and Observer* ^[7], covering state government and the [General Assembly](#) ^[8] among other assignments. His flair for words and his ability to write interesting stories about otherwise mundane happenings attracted the attention of the paper's editor, [Josephus Daniels](#) ^[9], whom the reporter once described as "a daddy to me," and Ben Dixon was given a special roving assignment, traveling throughout the state and writing about anything that interested him. His column, "Cellar and Garret," became one of the most popular in the South.

Following the death of his father in 1931, he returned to Grays Creek and for a brief period managed the family's gristmill, but it was not long before he was writing special features for the *People's Advocate* in Fayetteville.

In 1937 MacNeill went to Manteo to become publicity director for [Paul Green](#) ^[10]'s symphonic drama, *The Lost Colony* ^[11], the focal point of the celebration on [Roanoke Island](#) ^[12] of the 350th anniversary of the first attempt at English colonization in the New World. His articles on this innovative experiment with drama were published throughout the country and were a contributing factor to the success of the Green play, which became the longest running outdoor drama in America; it is still shown annually in Waterside Theatre at Fort Raleigh. When *The Lost Colony* was forced to close during World War II, MacNeill reenlisted in the army, this time as a major, and subsequently became public relations officer at Fort Knox, Ky. After three years of service he was discharged for physical disability with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

He resumed his duties as publicity director for *The Lost Colony* when it reopened in the summer of 1946, but failing health and a desire to do some serious writing resulted in his retiring to the village of Buxton, at Cape Hatteras, where he lived until his death in a small cottage on a knoll close by the [Cape Hatteras Lighthouse](#) ^[13]. It was here that he wrote, and put aside, his first and only novel, *Sand Roots*, which was published after his death, and his highly successful personalized account of the people who lived on the Outer Banks, *The Hatterasman*, winner of the Mayflower Cup award in 1958.

In his declining years he frequently "held court," seated in a special chair in the small living room of the cottage at "Buxton on Cape Hatteras" when visitors came to call, recounting his experiences and telling fascinating stories for hours on end. To one such visitor, in late May 1960, he said: "I am in the place in this world where I most want to be." Death came to

him a week later while he was seated in his favorite chair.

Additional information from NCPedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina:

According to an article published in the Raleigh News & Observer on December 7, 1958, the Mayflower Cup Award was presented to Ben Dixon MacNeill in 1958 by former U.S. president Harry S. Truman. In 1905, a relative, N.C. poet John Charles MacNeill, received the cup from then president Theodore Roosevelt.

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Additional Resources:

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Ben Dixon MacNeill Photographic Collection. Digital North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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