

Clan MacNeil's Early History in Nova Scotia

By Vincent MacNeil

This following article is about the first outing of the Clan MacNeil in Cape Breton at the summer residence of Mr. & Mrs. A. D. MacNeill at Ben Eoin, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The author states that Mr. Frank H. MacNeil of New Waterford addressed the crowd in Gaelic. He spoke of how and why the MacNeils left the Isle of Barra and settled in Iona in 1802. I wish I could have been there to hear my great-grandfather speak!! Thanks to Dan DeCoste, a cousin of mine, I have this to article to share! Enjoy!

Kisimul Sept Annual Outing and Gathering.

From the August, 1929 Edition of the Clan MacNeil News

The outing of the Kismul Sept of the Clan MacNeil Association of America on August 7th to the summer residence of Mr. and Mrs. A D. MacNeil at Ben Eoin was a splendid success, and greatly enjoyed by the large number of MacNeils and their friends who attended from Glace Bay, New Waterford and Sydney.

Mr MacNeil's neat summer cottage is situated in a beautiful grove with an opening leading to the shore, which serves to give a charming view of the waters of East Bay from the 100 foot square knoll of green just in front of the cottage. The visitors received with every kindness and after a pleasant hour spent in renewing acquaintances and several excellent bagpipe selections by Mr. MacLeod who accompanied the MacNeils of New Waterford, Mr. Macdougall, as president of the Kisimul Sept, welcomed the members and their friends to the first outing of the clan in Cape Breton and expressed the wish that they would greatly enjoy themselves. He remembered that it was significant and appropriate that the first outing of the ancient clan should be to Ben Eoin, the only place in America that for over a hundred years pre ... (can't read this line due to damage from the paper fold) name. Ben Eoin is called after its first settler, John MacNeil, and while he was not present to welcome them the last settler, another MacNeil, was there to give a truly Scottish welcome.

Mr. MacNeil went on to explain that the MacNeils, in becoming organized as an association did not claim any superiority over the other clans, but they did claim they had a history and tradition that were worthy of being revered and preserved. After pointing out the practical value of the work in which the association was engaged he strongly recommended all MacNeils to become familiar with the history and traditions of their clan through the Clan MacNeil News. Mr. Francis H. MacNeil of New Waterford then addressed the gathering in the ancient tongue of the MacNeils, which is so well preserved among them in Cape Breton to this day. He gave a very interesting review of how and why the first MacNeils left their native Barra and crossed the Atlantic and followed them in their travels until finally in 1802 they settled on the shores of the Bras d'Or Lake at the place now known as Iona. Rev. John J. MacNeil, Chaplain of the sept, then

gave a short address in which he pointed out many of the outstanding characteristics of the MacNeils, and referred to how within recent years they were filling positions of authority with trust and responsibility. Rev. Father MacAdam, one of the invited guests, praised the members of the Association for the efforts they were putting forth to preserve the traditions of the clan, and while he admitted the antiquity of the Clan MacNeil, he facetiously remarked that the clan he belonged to went back to the Garden of Eden. Mr. Alexander S. MacNeil, district of New Waterford, and a councillor of the Clan MacNeil Association, expressed his great pleasure in being present at so interesting a gathering and closed his admirable address by mov... (can't read this line due to damage from the paper fold)Mrs. MacNeil for the very great kindness shown the visitors. This note was seconded by John J. MacDougall of Brookside Street, Glace Bay, an invited guest, and the gathering rose to their feet and sang. "For they are jolly good fellows," and Ben Eoin from its highest pinnacle resounded the echo. Mr. MacNeil responded on behalf of himself and Mrs. MacNeil. The lunch baskets were spread on the green and all partook of their contents most heartily. The floors of the cottage were indulged in for a short while to bring a most pleasant outing to a happy conclusion. The visitors voted the affair a splendid success and expressed themselves as being deeply indebted to Mr. and Mrs. MacNeil.

What Francis H. MacNeil Might Have Said

We may never know exactly what Francis Hector said in his address to the crowd at Big Pond in 1929; however, his own writings give us a good indication of the stories he might have told. I was extremely lucky to find the following two accounts written by him of early MacNeil history in Cape Breton. These stories were passed down to him by his father Hector Rory MacNeil and his grandfather Rory "Mor" MacNeil. Francis Hector's grandfather Rory "Mor" and his great-grandfather Donald (Ruairidh) were two of the first four MacNeils to come to Cape Breton in 1802. The first story is about the first MacNeils who came to Cape Breton and the settlers that followed them. The second article describes a confrontation between the first MacNeils and the Native people of Cape Breton in 1802. I have typed these letters as Francis H. wrote them.

The Arrival of the MacNeils in Cape Breton

In the year 1799, two families emigrated from Barra, Scotland, to seek new homes in the New World, as then known. The heads of the families were, Donald McNeil and Johnathan McNeil. They left Glasgow, Scotland aboard the ship in August, and landed at Pictou, Nova Scotia, late in September. Both families followed down the Gulf to Arisaig (Antigonish Co.) where some Scottish families had settled some years before. They were told by Donald "Og" MacNeil , who fought at the siege of Louisbourg, on his return to Barra, that the shores of the Bras D'or Lakes would be the best place to settle in Cape Breton. They built small huts at Arisaig, where they spent the winter. Next summer, 1800, Donald MacNeil and his son Rory (Morr) and Johnathan MacNeil and his son John, came down to Cape Breton in a small row boat. When they came to St. Peters, where the canal now is, they were obliged to haul their boat over land a distance of half a mile. After rowing for some distance down the Big Bras D'or Lake, they came to the North Side of the narrows, where they landed. Staked out lands, and decided to settle down. Those were the first MacNeils, who settled in Cape Breton. After clearing some land, they returned to Arisaig, with the intention of coming back the following summer, but misfortune

overcame them, as Donald MacNeil, one of the heads of the families, took sick and died that fall. This misfortune discouraged Johnathan MacNeil for awhile, but early in the Spring of 1802, they came back to Cape Breton, where they cleared and burnt the land and planted potatoes. In July of that year, another vessel landed at Pictou, in which were emigrants from Barra. These Barra men made their way to Cape Breton, and settled on both sides of the Grand Narrows. Those who settled on the North side were, Donald MacNeil (Donald Ban's son) and Malcolm Campbell, who was married to Donald "Ban" McNeil's daughter, and Roderick MacNeil, who was married to another one of Donald "Ban's" daughters. They settled to the west of the first settlers. Another man by the name of Rory MacNeil, (Donald Murdock's son), settled to the North East, on lands later owned by the writer of this copy, and now by Dan A. MacDonald, who resides on it. Donald MacNeil, brother of the above Rory, and who was married to a daughter of Johnathan MacNeil, "Eoin Mac Dhomhnuill ic Iain", their two sons, Neil and Big James, with their mother, moved after the death of their father to Jamesville, where they settled and where their descendants are still living. This Donald MacNeil (Eomhnuill MacRuairi), who was in ill health, although he came across, died in 1805, and was the first death among the MacNeil immigrants. At this time no burial grounds were fixed on either side of the narrows, and when it became known to the deceased's sister, then the wife of Neil MacNeil (Ban) of Coopers Pond, that no place for the interment was offered by anyone on the North Side, she requested that the remains be taken to the South Side and interned on a part of their land, which she allotted. Now the Christmas Island Cemetery is on this very land, where this first pioneer was buried in 1805. It is hard to believe what hardships those pioneers went through during the first years. There were no roads, and travel and trade was all made by water. Their boats were too small to carry a cow. Finally, in 1803 when each family gathered enough hay, they made a few trips to a French settlement near St. Peters, where they bought 4 or 5 yearling heifers. Those yearlings freshened in 1805, and this was the first milk they had, since they left the Old Country years before.

By Francis H. MacNeil

MacNeils Confronted by Micmac Indians At Iona, 1802

In the year 1799, there emigrated from Barra, Scotland, to Pictou, Nova Scotia, two families - Donald MacNeil (Domhnul Mac- Ruairidh) with his wife Margaret (Peigi Ruairidh) and a family of nine children - they were Donald, Michael, Rory, John, Hector, Margaret, Sarah, Christy, and Mary. The other family, were Johnathan MacNeil (son of Donald MacNeil) married to Margaret Campbell, sister of Malcolm Campbell, and they had four children: John, Neil, James, and Margaret. Margaret later married Donald MacNeil (MacRuairidh). This Donald MacNeil was the first one to die on the north side of the narrows and his were the first remains to be buried on the south side of the Narrows - at Christmas Island Cemetery in the year 1805. These two families spent the winter of 1799 in huts at the Gulf Shore at Arisaig. In the summer of 1800, Donald and his son Rory, and John came down the Bras d'Or Lakes and settled on the North side of Barra Strait (Grand Narrows) at Saunndraidh, afterwards named Iona. They were the first MacNeils to build homes in Cape Breton. After labouring for weeks to clear land at Iona, they returned to the Gulf intending to return the following year, 1801, but Donald's death postponed their return until 1802. During the weeks spent clearing the land, they were visited by a band of Indians, who arrived in a flotilla of about forty canoes. By means of sign language, the Indians made it known that they were claiming the land and that they would scalp the white men if they did not evacuate

immediately. Thinking that the end had come, Jonathan MacNeil fell on his knees and blessed himself. When the Indian Chief noticed this, the Chief made it known that he was of the same faith and likewise made the sign of the cross. By means of sign language the Chief made it known that the MacNeils were welcome to stay. As a mark of appreciation, the MacNeils invited the Indians to share their dinner of fish and potatoes, and before giving the Chief his portion, they sprinkled it with salt. The Chief was so delighted with the taste of salt, that he bid one of his warriors to make a container out of birch bark and had it filled with the precious ingredient. With the salt in hand, they departed. The incident took place on the spot where Iona's St. Columba Church now stands. These Indians had been converted to Christian faith by the French missionaries who came with the early French settlers to St. Ann, and other areas in Cape Breton. Considering that the French had left most of Cape Breton in 1760, forty years before the MacNeils met with the Indians, one can only marvel at how well the Indians kept the faith.

From a story by Francis H. MacNeil

According to Francis Hector MacNeil, Donald Og MacNeil returned to Barra and told the people that Cape Breton would be a good place to settle. Donald (Ruairidh) and his son Rory "Mor" were from the island of Sandray. Interestingly, records exist in the parish register of Barra from 1805 to 1817 for Donald "Og"'s sons Murdock, Rory, and Barra or Ben. These records indicate that the sons of Donald "Og" were living at Sandray. One can conclude that Donald (Ruairidh), Rory "Mor" and Donald "Og" were neighbours on the island of Sandray. Donald "Og" however, was not the only MacNeil at the Battle of Louisbourg. The following land petition from the Cape Breton Land Papers indicates that Roderick MacNeil, husband of the widow Mary MacNeil was also there. This proves that MacNeils were present at this battle.

Item no.: 1423 Mfm no.: 15793 Grantee: McNiel, Mary: Year: 1816 Petition to Fitzherbert: Petitioner is widow of the late Roderick McNiel of Benaakady. Her husband, a soldier, was wounded at the Siege of Louisbourg, and settled with his family at Benaakady ten years ago, where he occupied a small marsh in lot 7, but died before he could obtain a title. Petitioner is now seventy years old, her children all have families of their own. She continues to cut the grass on the marsh, which enables her to keep two cows which provide her chief income. Her son-in-law, David Brown, is trying to dispossess her of the land. She asks a title. Note: granted.

Who Were the First Four MacNeils to come to Cape Breton?

The families Francis Hector wrote about in the above letters can be found in "All Call Iona Home". The descendants of Donald (Ruairi) MacNeil are families 35a to 56. Rory "Mor" is in family 36. The people who descend from Eoin (Donald, John) are families 56a to 85.

Who Were the Other Early Settlers Mentioned by Francis H.?

Donald "Og" MacNeil's descendants are families 1 to 35 in All Call Iona Home and are found on pages 167 to 170 of The History of Christmas Island. Francis Hector wrote, "Those who settled on the North side were, Donald MacNeil (Donald Ban's son) and Malcolm Campbell, who was married to Donald "Ban" McNeil's daughter, and Roderick MacNeil, who was married

to another one of Donald "Ban's" daughters. They settled to the west of the first settlers. Another man by the name of Rory MacNeil , (Donald Murdock's son), settled to the North East, Donald MacNeil (Donald Ban) must be part of family 164 in All Call Iona Home. Malcolm Campbell who was mentioned in Francis Hector's letter would be part of family number 286 in said book. He married Flora MacNeil daughter of Donald "Ban". Roderick MacNeil who married another of Donald Ban's daughters must be number 141a, Rory (Rory) in this book. He also wrote, "Donald MacNeil, brother of the above Rory, and who was married to a daughter of Johnathan MacNeil". This would be a reference to family number 170 in this book. "Neil MacNeil (Ban) of Coopers Pond" would be Neil Ban McNeil on page 161 of The History of Christmas Island.