

## Nancy Meredith Branch

The following is an extract from the draft text for the book *Prairie Queens* by Alice B. Gander.

**“WHAT ARE YOU CRYING for, Grandma?”** the young Iona Branch asked Nancy Meredith Branch. **“Are you crying about your boys?”** Iona Hope Branch was visiting her Grandmother Nancy Meredith Branch. They lived near each other in Little Moccasin Gap on the south bank of the Clinch Mountains just west of Holston, Virginia. It was early 1889 and Iona was about three and a half years old. Nancy and Nelson Branch lived on a sixteen-acre parcel of land on what was called Poor Valley Knob, or known as just the Knob.

**“What are you crying for, Grandma?”** What, indeed! Nancy’s sixty-two years had been full of many causes for tears of joy and wails of despair. Nancy Meredith was the second of ten children born to Hugh Meredith and Keziah “Katy” Bell in Pulaski County Virginia, in October 1826. After her mother died during the Civil War, her father Hugh Meredith married his neighbor John Rupe’s widow Melvina Rupe and had eight more children.

Nelson Thomas Branch was born in Chesterfield County, Virginia in October 1820. So far, no proof has been found about who his parents were. By 1844 he was living in Pulaski County, Virginia. He married Eunice Kelly on April 25, 1844 and they had three children, Thomas E., Sarah D “Dolly”, and Mary C “Mollie”. No record has been found about what happened to his wife but she must have died around 1848. On March 11, 1849 he married Nancy Meredith. Their first child George W “Will” was born about the beginning of 1850. They then had Harriet “Hattie” in 1852, James Cyrus “Cy” in 1854, Alfred Alexander “Allie” September 11, 1856, Susan Elizabeth in 1859, Hughy Leo in 1861, Edward Thomas in 1864, a daughter that was stillborn in 1866 and finally Robert Lee Branch in 1869. By the 1860 Census, there was no record of Nelson’s first son Thomas, who would have been 14 years old. Since there is no oral history about this son, it is believed that he must have died as a child sometime in the 1850’s.

Nelson Branch was a founder or iron molder in addition to being a farmer. Nancy was a housewife and could not read or write. But, her granddaughter Iona Branch remembered her as “the nicest little old woman I ever knew.” In the 1850’s Nelson Branch served on the Pulaski County Grand Jury several sessions. He acquired some land, initially buying 8 ¼ acres in 1851 in a partnership with his brother-in-law James P. Curtis, who was married to Nancy’s older sister Lucinda. Nelson bought 35 acres in 1853:

A certain track of land lying in Pulaski on the Fall Branch or branch of New River adjoining the land of said N. T. Branch and containing 35 acres more or less and bounded as follows to wit. Beginning at a big White Oak corner of Saw Mill Tract South of the Saw mill on hill side near a fence and with said fence S 32 West 33 poles to a white Oak and Chestnut Sprout top of the hill on James Meredith’s line and with his line N 45 W131 poles to a pine near top of a ridge thence N43 E45 poles B.O. & B. Oak sapling on big survey line thence S45 E92 poles to a black oak and dogwood near a saw mill thence S43 W15 poles crossing the saw mill branch to a W. Oak thence S45 E33 poles to the beginning.<sup>1</sup>

And then he bought out James Curtis’ interest in the 8-¼ acres in 1854. In 1859, he bought an additional 22 ½ acres, bringing his total up to 66 acres. According to the 1860 Census, Nelson Branch owned real estate worth \$1000 and had personal property of \$400. That put his family in the lower middle class economically. Respectable, but not at all rich. There is no record of him owning any slaves in that Census, and since slaves cost about \$1000

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<sup>1</sup> Pulaski County Virginia Deed Book 2, Page 587

each at the time, it is unlikely that he could have afforded any slaves.

What Nelson Branch did have, starting in 1858, was unpaid debts. He never got on solid financial footing and the Civil War probably was a factor in that. Although the family history says he served in the Confederate Army for four years, we know from his own pension application that he was not a soldier until the last six months of the war. But that does not mean he was not serving the Confederacy all four years. He was an iron molder and was likely pressed into civilian service even though not officially a soldier. There are documented cases of this happening with some of Nancy Meredith's brothers and cousins who also lived in the area.



The old Pulaski County, Virginia courthouse.

By 1870, Nelson was in serious financial trouble and started trying to find ways to hang on to his farm. He put some property in a trust to help pay some upcoming debts, several of which were owed to his wife's relatives.

Witnesseth, That the said Nelson T. Branch doth grant unto the said Joseph H. Covey the following property to wit: One Bay Mare, One Gray Mare, One two-horse Waggon, one set Harnesses, Nine head of sheep, one sow and nine pigs, two cane mills and one calf in trust to indemnify and save harmless David B. Bill as this security of the said Nelson T. Branch in five several forthcoming bonds, this day executed by

the said Branch with the said Bill as his security.<sup>2</sup>

In 1867 Congress passed a new law that was intended to standardize Bankruptcy procedures. This law was further amended in 1872. Nelson applied for Bankruptcy as a way to get out from under his debts while hanging on to his farm. When Nelson filed for bankruptcy in 1872 he listed his personal property as follows:<sup>3</sup>

One Milch cow	\$15.00
25 Bushels Corn	12.50
Household & Kitchen furniture	40.00
Mechanic's Tools & Foundry Patterns	20.00
One yoke of Cattle	100.00
One Wagon	35.00
Total	\$222.50

He also listed his 66 2/3 acre farm as valued at \$400.00. His outstanding debts totaled \$931.33 at the time he filed for bankruptcy. This resulted in about four years of court proceedings that ultimately did not save his farm. The final judgment was that there were already a number of liens against his property before the Bankruptcy act and these had priority.

So his farm was taken from him and sold at public auction for \$1010 in 1876. That did not clear enough after expenses to pay his outstanding debts of about \$950.

Nelson and Nancy Meredith Branch moved from Pulaski County to a 16-acre parcel of land called The Knob near Holston in the Moccasin Gap area about

<sup>2</sup> Pulaski County Virginia Deed Book 4, Page 516

<sup>3</sup> National Archives & Records Administration, Philadelphia, PA. Abingdon Division, law of 1867 Bankruptcy Docket and Case file 162.



**August, 2000 view of “The Knob” where descendants of Robert Lee Branch still live. This view is from the road below the Branch Cemetery.**

1876. It is not clear what caused the Branch family to move to Washington County, but the Bankruptcy court at the time was in Abingdon. They certainly had a number of occasions to come to Abingdon during the bankruptcy proceedings that went on for several years. It is also likely that Nelson knew some people from the area who had served in the Civil War with him. According to the oral history recalled by Iona Branch, when they moved to Washington County they only had \$200 and one riding mare. In the 1880 Census, they are living in Washington County in the general neighborhood of their daughter Hattie who had married Charles Nunley in 1876.

**In any case, the family acquired the deed to this 16-acre parcel of land on September 22, 1900:**

Beginning on the top of the Poor Valley Knob at two post oaks, thence N32 W70 poles to a planted rock on the North side of the turnpike road at the foot of a spur of Clinch Mountain, thence S53 W40 poles to a planted rock, thence S32 E59 poles to the top of the Poor Knob, thence N66 E40 poles along said knob to the Beginning.<sup>4</sup>

**It appears that Nelson and Nancy Branch may have rented this farm for a period of time before buying it. They were certainly not in a strong financial position when they left Pulaski County. Their daughter Hattie Nunley’s farm was just around the corner from this parcel of land.**

The Branch boys all had to get out and make their own living. Will worked for the railroad in Abingdon. Ed worked on building bridges across Kentucky and Missouri. Alfred and Leo both homesteaded in Colorado although Alfred only lasted a year before moving to Missouri. Only the youngest, Robert, stayed in the area and his descendants still own and live on the 16-acre plot on “the Knob”.

Nelson applied for a Civil War Pension and was awarded \$30 / year. Nancy died sometime between 1900 and 1909. Nelson died in 1909. They are buried in a cemetery across the road from the Charles Nunley house on Mendota Road. There are no tombstones remaining on their graves, if there ever were any.



**March, 2001 photo of the Charles Nunley house on Mendota Road. The house was built in 1910 and is now owned by his grandson, Lonnie Nunley, Jr.**

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<sup>4</sup> Deed Book 63, Page 340, Washington County, VA