

Born into enormous wealth, fled Natchez with her family during the Civil War, educated by the best private tutors money could buy, spent her teenage years traveling and entertaining in Europe, presented to Queen Victoria at the Court of St. James's, returned to Natchez, became a recluse and met death at the hands of a murderer.

Jennie Merrill was born into an extremely wealthy old Natchez family.

One of her great-grandfathers was Pierre Surget of France, who immigrated to Natchez in 1788 where he built a land empire that totaled one hundred thousand acres by 1840. Her other great grandfather was the famed William Dunbar of Natchez, an outstanding planter, inventor and scientist who was requested, by President Jefferson, to explore part of the Louisiana Purchase.

When her parents, Ayres Merrill and Jane Surget, married in 1851 her mother's well-to-do father, Francis Surget, gave the couple a wedding gift fit for royalty -- the fabulous Elms Court, a beautiful Natchez mansion, complete with an informal park with barns, stables, a carriage house, servant's quarters and a complete staff of household servants.

Monumental decision

Jane and Ayres lived a lavish and happy life in Natchez for a decade. But in the 1860s, during the Civil War, her husband was faced with a monumental decision; choose the Confederacy or the Union.

Jane's husband chose to save his mansion and cotton plantations over the Confederacy. This invoked the wrath of many fellow Natchezians, especially when he lavished Southern hospitality upon the Union invaders of Natchez, one being his distant cousin General Ulysses S. Grant.

With the Merrill family facing possible harm General Grant secured passage for them, and other Union sympathizers, on steamboats headed north. Ayres settled his family in New York City where he prospered, acquiring a town house in Manhattan and a lavish cottage in Newport, Rhode Island. It was here that their daughter Jennie was reared and schooled by the best of tutors in splendid surroundings.

Life in Europe

When Ulysses S. Grant was elected President of the United States in 1869 he called upon his friend and distant cousin, Ayers Merrell, to serve as Ambassador to Belgium. By this time Jennie's mother had died, but her father packed up his children and sailed to Belgium where they lived in high style. As a young girl Jennie Merrill continued her education with private tutors and traveled extensively throughout Europe.

As a teenager, Jennie, along with her brothers and sisters, was presented to the court in Brussels and later to England's most loved monarch, Queen Victoria, at the Court of St. James's. At both occasions Jennie Merrill, with her Southern charm and European sophistication, created a sensation. Barely five feet tall and weighing less than one hundred pounds Jennie held her own with European royalty because she herself was an American princess -- aristocratic, wealthy and beautiful.

Return to Natchez

When Jennie's father became ill he resigned his ambassadorship and the family returned to the United States. But only Jennie and her father returned to Natchez where they once again resided at Elms Court. Back in the home of her early youth, Jennie entertained lavishly at Elms Court and she continued to travel extensively.

Upon the death of her father, Ayers Merrill, Jr., in 1883 all of his children inherited \$250,000 in cash along

with an extensive amount of property. However, Elms Court was burdened with a mortgage and Jennie wound up living in several antebellum homes throughout Natchez. She finally moved to Glenburnie in 1904, a mansion with forty-five acres of land surrounding it.

Eccentric and recluse

After her father's death Jennie slowly began to withdraw from the social life she embraced throughout her entire life. She also gradually became antisocial and extremely conservative.

As time passed Jeannie became more and more eccentric and reclusive. She hung onto the late-Victorian style of life, wearing out-of-date clothing and never replacing her coal-oil lamps with electric lights. Jennie became one of Natchez' oddities. She even put a sign at the gate to her property letting everyone know they were not welcomed.

Only one person was welcomed at Jennie Merrill's home, her second cousin and faithful friend, Duncan G. Minor, who was somewhat odd himself. Each evening for more than thirty years Duncan would ride several miles on horseback from his home to Glenburnie where he would be greeted by a friendly smile and warm welcome from Jennie. His visits always lasted late into the night.



Many rumors floated around Natchez about the relationship of Jennie Merrill and Duncan Minor. Some saying they were secret lovers, other saying the two wealthy aristocrats just visited to relive old times and still others were saying the couple secretly married but didn't want anyone to know.

Murder at Glenburnie

Late in the evening of August 4, 1932 Duncan made his usual ride to Glenburnie to visit Jennie. But instead of being greeted with the usual friendly smile and warm welcome Duncan came upon a grisly scene of blood, gore and death.

Jennie Merrill had been murdered! It was believed her neighbors, with whom it was know she had been quarreling with, murdered her. The neighbors, Richard Henry Clay "Dick" Dana and Octavia Dockery, were arrested and jailed for the crime. However, that eventually turned out not to be the case.

News of the murder of Jennie Murrell was carried in papers throughout the South, in New York, Chicago and San Francisco as well as the far away places of London, Paris, Rome and Brussels.

Jennie Merrill and the three people most closely connected to her death; Duncan Minor, Dick Dana and Octavia Dockery had surnames that were immediately recognizable too much of the world. For decades their ancestors had been linked with national and international money, authority, power and prestige.

Source:

The Goat Castle Murder --- By Sim Callon & Carolyn Vance Smith