VARDY MCBEE
THE FOUNDING FATHER OF GREENVILLE

Roy McBee Smith*

Editor's Note In 2002, the Greenville County Historical Society placed a bronze statue of Vardry McBee on Court Square on Greenville's South Main Street. Roy McBee Smith's paper was presented before the Historical Society at its meeting on February 10, 2002, as background for this event.

In 1815 Vardy McBee purchased 11,028 acres on the waters of the Reedy River and Laurel Creek, which included the land within the present city limits of Greenville and much of the present metropolitan area beyond. The purchase included the former owner's mansion on Prospect Hill at the west end of the present McBee Avenue, where the water works building is today. Vardry McBee paid $27,550 for all this. How was such an extensive purchase possible? Because agricultural practices had exhausted the soil of all nutrients by the continuous planting of a single crop and other abuses, the land had been on the market several years with no one interested. Since the days of ancient Rome, agriculture was carried on by using up all nutrients in the soil and then moving on to new land. But this was an opportunity for Vardry McBee, who on his own had studied the improvements in agriculture which began in England in the last years of the 1700s.

Until then, even in Europe, there had been no important improvements in agriculture over the centuries. He had long observed families pulling up stakes and moving west, leaving plantations with fine houses, but burned out soil. The new agricultural information available in this country was ignored. It continued to be ignored for another century. Some present members of the Society no doubt remember farms in this and in other states with great gullies carved out by erosion from failure to properly plow and terrace. In one period of 20 years, more than 200,000 people left North Carolina and moved

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west leaving unwanted plantations.

Vardry McBee bought one of these abandoned plantations in Lincoln County, North Carolina and, in a way described as "remarkable," rebuilt the soil and at the same time produced an abundant crop. He bought several burned-out plantations and turned them rapidly into flourishing farms. He studied new methods of plowing, terracing, soil chemistry, fertilizing, seed selection, drainage, rotation, and cattle breeding. He became second to no one in the country as an agriculturist. It was always his favorite enterprise. He said it was the noblest industry, and he fretted when other pursuits interfered with it.

Vardry McBee had also seen that the Greenville area had many rushing water courses sufficient to operate any machinery known at the time, and that it was in the path of Tennessee and Kentucky drovers on the way to Charleston and Augusta. He saw that the mountainous landscape was beautiful - later referred to as the "Switzerland of Carolina." Upon closing the purchase, he set about to rebuild the farm lands and to build a town. He gave the land for the first four churches, and for the male and female academies. He helped recruit able professors and paid their salaries from time to time over the years.

The ante-bellum South systematically opposed manufacturing as likely to create a pro-tariff element and undermine the agrarian economy. Those attempting manufacturing were threatened with ruin. But as political leaders of the state frowned, Vardry McBee entered into the production of cotton and woolen textiles, built a paper mill, a nail and rolling mill, a foundry, a brickyard, a tannery, a saw mill, a saddlery, and founded a quarry and gold mines. He established an interstate chain of general merchandise stores, when chain stores were virtually unknown. He was a pioneer in railroading. South Carolina had the first steam locomotive railroad in the nation, and at the time it was the longest railroad in the world. He was elected president of the Louisville, Cincinnati and Charleston Railroad Company, was the principal promoter of the Greenville and Columbia Railroad and, in his middle seventies, constructed a branch of that railroad into Greenville.

On Main Street, a block up from where the Peace Center is now

located, he built what would today be called a cultural center. Its architecture was remarked on years after it was gone. It was available for receptions, concerts, dances, and lectures. The town people named it McBee's Hall. The congregation of Christ Church met there while its present church building was under construction. Furman classes were held there while its buildings were under construction. For such actions, he began over the years to be referred to as the "Founding Father of Greenville."

He was born in Spartanburg District in 1775, as the Revolutionary War began. His father and three brothers fought at King's Mountain and the Cowpens. Another brother fought with the Swamp Fox and was paralyzed by a musket ball. Vardry McBee was the last of ten children. His parents had come down from Halifax County, Virginia, after the French and Indian War. When he was 19 years old, he went to Lincolnton as apprentice to a saddle maker. There he became a partner in a mercantile business. He married Jane Alexander of Rutherfordton. They had nine children and would outlive five of them. As a young man, he was crippled from being thrown from a horse and could not walk any distance. He died when he was 88 years old in the last year of the Civil War, as Sherman was beginning his march to the sea. Jane died 49 days after he did. They are buried in Christ Church cemetery in Greenville.

What was he like as a person? He was small, and his eyes were green. He was raised as a Quaker and preferred Quaker meetings, which were scarce in these parts, so that he attended all denominations but attended regularly. He was on the vestry of Christ Church for years and laid the corner stone for it, but never became a communicant. Two years before he died he joined the First Presbyterian Church, of which Jane had been a founding member. As a young man he adopted Ben Franklin's method for building character by daily recording his efforts at industry, justice, moderation, tranquility, humility, and avoiding unnecessary talk. Along with these he cultivated proper speech, enunciation and posture. One is reminded of the Broadway musical in which Ben Franklin sings: "I invented myself."

Vardry McBee was a steady, quiet, dependable man, careful of the feelings of others. He was a listener. He said he was educated by

listening. He chuckled about people who had the "disease of not listening." The proposed Greenville Regional History Museum will have a life-size figure of Vardry McBee, which when approached by a visitor, will begin to tell about Greenville. This will probably be more talking than Vardry McBee ever did at one time in his life.

He did not nurture resentment. His ambition was in his labor. He did not covet praise. He acknowledged the achievements of others. His acts, his language and his personal life were simple. He had a sunny exuberance of spirit and at times was playful. He was a devoted husband and father. He was involved in important and controversial matters, but he kept criticism of others to himself. He did not drink, but he did not proselytize that opinion. He enjoyed good food but ate small portions. When he was ill, he fasted. He was up and about before daybreak every morning.

He was sensitive. When his 18-year-old son died suddenly of a fever, his grief was so intense that he became physically ill and his family feared he might never regain his health. On the rise of the Jones Gap Road to Caesar's Head, he would stop and gaze down at that view for a long moment. Once he noticed the soreness in the shoulders of one of his son's horses, which that son was unaware of. He quoted the poetry of Robert Burns and Alexander Pope, and the writings of Plutarch. He had less than two years of formal schooling.

He had constant energy. One winter day when he was 77 years old he rode his horse to Spartanburg for a meeting and back to Greenville that afternoon, and it was snowing. He was most pleased if something was created or organized.

In 1850, there was a strong secession movement in the Southern states. The South Carolina legislature called for a convention with delegates elected from each district to determine whether South Carolina would secede. He gathered all the publications available, shut himself up in his drawing room on Prospect Hill, and studied the issue. When he emerged, he announced he was against secession. He agreed with the South's grievances, but thought they could be worked out in Congress. When C. G. Memminger, known as the greatest orator in the state, came to Greenville from Charleston; he made a two-hour speech which turned the crowd into a frenzied mob. That night they stormed through the village with torches, threatening to tar

and feather any Unionist they found. Vardry McBee filed as a Union delegate to the state convention, only ten days before the election. He was elected as one of only five Union delegates in the state. The Union delegates worked to change or divert enough votes to defeat secession, and it was postponed for nearly a decade. When secession finally came, he spoke in favor of it and strongly supported the Confederacy. Five of his grandsons served in the Confederate army

One interesting trait of Vardry McBee was that though textile mills were new in the South, especially in the Backcountry, he strove for high quality. Other textile mills aimed to produce a fabric suitable for field hands. However, he sent his textiles to New York and sold them at a "handsome profit." This is surprising in view of the added transportation costs and that he was competing with the long established New England textile industry. Also, his paper mill made stationery "of a very superior quality and a fine quality of wrapping paper." If he manufactured a product he personally mastered the production process, from understanding the structure and operation of the machinery, to understanding all the characteristics of the raw materials. He would stay in the "loom house," as he called it, and personally perform the operation for days at a time until it was perfected, before he turned production over to workers.

His general merchandising stores were not ordinary, Backcountry stores. Their attractive architecture was remarked upon years after they were gone, and his display of goods was in the modern idea of merchandising. It has already been mentioned that his agricultural products were of superior quality. His gold mines were highly productive, and he sent gold bars to the United States Mint.

Finally, the new statue to be placed on Court Square will be of a man who was likeable. We have seen how the voters of not just the town but of all the district (county) elected him, though he entered that race at the last minute as a candidate with views contrary to all the state, and after a torch bearing mob had threatened any one with that view. He was elected president of the Louisville, Cincinnati and Charleston Railroad "without any solicitation on his part," defeating the candidatechosen by John C. Calhoun, the virtual dictator of South Carolina. It was said that if Calhoun took snuff, South Carolina sneezed. James Petigru, the oracle of Charleston, considered by many

to be the greatest lawyer in the country, had also sought that position.

Before Vardry McBee came to Greenville, Lincoln County elected him to the North Carolina State Convention on Internal Improvements which met in Raleigh and chose him as secretary of the Convention. After he moved to Greenville, Lincolnton named a main street "McBee Street" for him. When Lincolnton had its bicentennial, its pictorial map showed his house there as one of the 25 points of historical interest. But to this author the finest testimonial was by a kind lady reader of his biography, who told the author she had fallen in love with Vardry.

Hopefully, those who view the statue over the years will like it also, if they know something about him. That may make the statue a rarity, because most statues are of aggressive, egocentric people we admire but would not enjoy. We celebrate their accomplishments and abilities, but with personal things about them we would not like. Jefferson was great, but research is showing him insincere, devious, consumed by ambition. John Adams we have recently learned was greater than we had known, but he admitted he was obnoxious and everyone agreed. Andrew Jackson believed the world was flat and would fight you if you argued about it.

And if this statue, in addition to being liked, could speak like his figure planned for the museum, might not it say to a person of any age: "Whatever your problem, whatever your discouragement, whatever advice you may be looking for, the answer is in effort. It is not the spectacular, talented, brilliant ones who win in the lifelong race, but the steady, quiet, dependable ones. Whether student, young business or professional person, homemaker and mother, middle-aged or elderly, your quandary can be resolved by effort."

We could go to the statue in old age and ask, "What should be my outlook and attitude?" And the answer from his life could be, "Come with me in this my 77th year and we will ride our horses to Spartanburg for a railroad meeting, and back this afternoon, even though it is snowing. Tomorrow we will supervise the construction of the depot with stone from my quarry."

Or the answer might be, "Take a look at my to-do list on that last January morning of my 88 years when I got up before daybreak and looked forward to my work for the day."

Hopefully the statue will be likeable, and will remind some of those who come to see it that this man's life of daily effort helped bring about many good things - Greenville, South Carolina, among them.

This presentation concludes with the last paragraphs of the biography of Vardry McBee, the second edition:

> The Main Street bridge now conceals the river from automobiles passing over it. Starting from the water falls under the bridge, one can still discover the outlines of the village Vardry McBee knew. Main Street is no longer steep from the the river as it was on both sides then. The leveling of hills and filling in of lots has gone on for more that a cenutry and a half. But the oldest streets follow pretty much their original courses and have kept the useful names they received too early to honor village families - names like River Street, Fall Street, Spring Street and Broad Street.
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> The pastures and orchards, the smell of wood smoke and burning charcoal are gone, along with the sounds of hooves of horses and mules and the rattle of wagons and carriages. The four central churches are still where he helped them locate. Tall office buildings dwarf the steeples, stores and houses, still among many green trees. Fresh rains, of course, still sweep down from beyond Paris Mountain. Vardry McBee would recognize the Beattie and Kilgore houses, even in their changed locations, and Elias Earle's Town House, and Whitehall, Lowndes Hill, and other houses of his day, which have been preserved.
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> Vapor lights and neon signs of the central city screen out the night sky. Back from them, up on Prospect Hill, for example, the closeness and clarity of the stars and moon are as wondrous as they were to him. If any ghost returns to a South Carolina city, now and then, and watches from its hilltop on moonlit nights, it must be the small one of Vardry McBee.

Pleased with the vigor and initiative of its people, and proud of their public accomplishments, he would be too considerate to startle any one of them by a sudden appearance.

ENDNOTE

Roy McBee Smith, *Vardry McBee, Man of Reason in an Age of Extremes*, 2nd Edition, Revised and Enlarged, Laurel Heritage Press, 1997. This volume has 33 pages of chapter notes, and 12 pages of bibliography. Its 24-page topical index should lead the reader to reach references for all substantive matters referred in this paper.