BRUSHY CREEK
THE ALEXANDER MCBEE[1] COUNTRY HOME

Roy McBee Smith*

Three miles out Augusta Street in Greenville there is a story and-a-half house at the end of Rice Street, formerly named Henrietta Street for the mistress of that house before 1893. The 672 acre tract it was built on was deeded to Vardry McBee in 1815 as part of the conveyance which included the present- day City of Greenville.[2] The house was referred to in the family as simply "Brushy Creek," for the creek which runs through the property. The house must have been originally intended for a farm overseer. No record has been found of its construction date. Vardry McBee's habit of rapidly bringing his farms to maximum production, and the fact that upon acquiring the 1815 deed his first project was a sawmill to supply his "passion for building," suggests to this author that he provided for a resident overseer upon this land not many years after 1815.[3]

The house's foundation rests upon an extensive sheet of granite. It was built with four downstairs rooms, a wide central hallway, two upstairs rooms with a dormer on the back, a wooden shingled roof, four outside chimneys, a fireplace in every downstairs room, and a high porch across the back. The kitchen was a separate building. The site of the well house can be seen in the woods in front of the house, and behind the house a vigorous spring still flows from under the hill. A formidable corn mill was built on Brushy Creek north of the house.

The house is halfway between where Vardry McBee's house was on Prospect Hill in Greenville and his mills at the place now known as Conestee - about four miles from each.

Over the years, Vardry McBee rode regularly to the Brushy Creek farm from Greenville, accompanied by his youngest child, Alexander. Alexander McBee played in its woods and creeks as a

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boy and learned to oversee its farming as a youth and man. As the last child in the family, seventeen years younger than the first, he grew up too ready to please and love. It was assumed that he should yield to and serve all the family, with little notice or need for appreciation. Mostly he wanted in his life a measure of approval from his father. For that he exerted all his efforts, until he was forty-two years old, in his father's enterprises. Of his three brothers, two were educated to be attorneys and the other, a civil engineer. But it was always expected that Alexander would learn to carry on whatever his father founded. A strain of longing ran through the otherwise frolicking nature he inherited from his mother's side of the family. The result was that he was a good man, thoughtful and compassionate, dependable and effective in many ways, and accustomed to serving without thanks or notice. It was also a result that he was especially alert to injustices to anyone and quick to try to redress them when he could. He intervened with those who would have abused emancipated slaves after the war. Indeed, his efforts after the war to improve the lives of former slaves would seem singular, except for the fact that he made similar efforts on behalf of others.[4]

In 1856, he married the remarkably beautiful and talented, Henrietta D'Oyley Thruston, the only woman he ever loved. Henrietta had black hair, brown-eyes, clear pale skin, a kind voice, a slim waist, and a graceful carriage. She had haunted Alexander since she was sixteen and began to play the organ for services at Christ Church. She told him when they married, what she had kept to herself since her husband Saxon Thruston's death in 1854, that on his death bed Saxon had recommended Alexander as a worthy husband to succeed him. It is recorded that at their wedding ball Alexander "danced his cotillion into the night."

Henrietta saw and loved Alexander's kindness and abilities. Her love fulfilled his longings. General acknowledgment that she was the most beautiful woman in the county bolstered his pride. Their marriage unleashed in him a pursuit of the most worthy goals of private and public life, through unselfish and courageous actions, under postwar circumstances more difficult than any ever dealt with by his father. Henrietta lived to see the *Greenville Mountaineer* refer to him as "The noblest Greenvillian of them all."[5]

Alexander and Henrietta raised their eight children, and her two boys by Saxon Thruston, in town in a large house on a hill overlooking the Reedy River.

The organ at Christ Church was powered by pedals for pumping by the organist's feet. When their sons, Willie and Roy, were just the right size they took turns sitting on the floor at their mother's delicate feet working the pedals with their hands.

Upon his father's death in 1864, Alexander inherited Brushy Creek. When the war ended his overseer and workers were gone. Yet agriculture offered subsistence and almost the only route to recovery. As he gradually rebuilt his devastated situation with day laborers and planting on shares, he improved the Brushy Creek house. In time it became the summer home for Alexander, Henrietta and their only daughter, Sarah. In 1887, they moved there permanently from the house in Greenville.[6] He shaped and terraced its landscape according to Henrietta's wishes. Vardry McBee's former slave, Hector, and the D'Oyley's venerable Aunt Queen who had delivered all their children, married after the war, continued in the employment of the family, and outlived Henrietta and Alexander. There was a house nearby for them on the Brushy Creek farm. Alexander and Henrietta's children provided for Hector and Aunt Queen in their old age. Aunt Queen fairly dominated the family, highly regarded and somewhat feared by the McBee children she had raised, even in her old age.

Henrietta loved the Brushy Creek house and farm. Its gardens and pond were reminiscent of the Charleston and Lowcountry manor houses of the D'Oyley heritage. Her parents had moved to Greenville from Charleston before she was born. Her speech and her children's speech retained traces of that accent and certain distinctive pronunciations.

The house embraced them and their visiting or lodging children and grandchildren from time to time. Its front and east-side windows reflected the sunrise, and its back windows the sunset beyond Brushy Creek. Its wide central hall captured every summer breeze when the windows were opened. Its windows framed the snow scenes and reflected the flames from the fireplaces. In winter the pond would sometimes freeze for skating. In the warm months

there were barbecues, and dances on a floor constructed on the grounds for the occasion.

Articles of furniture from their big house in the village, and from his late parents' house on Prospect Hill, were moved to the Brushy Creek house. This included the unforgettable portrait of Henrietta which is even today duplicated and cherished by generations of her descendants. It also included the somber engraving of Benjamin Franklin in the ornamental frame that Vardry McBee acquired for their home in Lincolnton, North Carolina, before Alexander was born, and which Henrietta would have willingly done without. They brought the heavy black bureau with posted bedstead of the D'Oyley family, said to have been made by slave craftsmen on the Lowcountry plantation, the walnut chest with grapes craved on its handles, the giant pine bedstead made on one of the McBee farms, the dining room table and buffet with lion's feet, the pine jelly cupboard, and the oaken wall clock with Roman numerals and octagon shaped frame, which struck the hours and quarter hours, and was said to suddenly release its spring and strike erratically if family tragedy was approaching.[7]

They learned the sounds of the creaking of the floors of the house as its beams grew warm or cold, of footsteps up and down the narrow stairway, windows being shut against the rain and cold, curtains being drawn, fires banked, and how the tickings of the several clocks were made sharper by the wooden walls.

For six seasons Henrietta enjoyed the house and from its garden paths saw the woods budding to green, turning to autumn colors, then losing their leaves. In 1893 her health began to fail. Her breathing became increasingly difficult. Aunt Queen and Sarah attended her. Alexander was by her bed as her strength slowly ebbed away on November 8th, in her sixty-first year. For Alexander, thereafter, the past was in the house more often than the present.

His eldest son, Elias, had been in Washington with Senator Matthew C. Butler and as counsel to a committee of the Senate for several years. He returned to Greenville to practice law, and with his wife, Eltinge, and their daughters, Lucy and little Henrietta, moved to Brushy Creek to help care for his father.[8] But it was lonesome for Alexander with Henrietta gone. He still found himself sometimes

expecting to see her sitting in her favorite chair or walking in the garden.

It was only four years until he followed her. His physician had warned him for weeks that he might die of a stroke at any time. He did die of a stroke at sunset on August 14, 1897 at Brushy Creek, in his seventy-sixth year.[9]

That Saturday morning his daughter, Sarah, was visiting relatives near Caesar's Head, and he had ridden into Greenville. He visited about the town and perhaps with his best friends Hamlin Beattie, Absolom Blythe, R.H. Earle, P.D. Gilreath, J.W. Cagle, or H.C. Markley, and with Henrietta's brother Charlie D'Oyley who had lost an eye at Gettysburg.[10] With at least one of these he may have taken a cup of kindness.

Before he started the ride home it was his custom to stop by Christ Church to visit Henrietta's grave. He would soon be buried beside her, if his doctor was correct. Her grave was already surrounded by McBees. There were his brothers Luther and Pinkney, his sister Martha beside her husband, his sister Malinda, so beloved by all the family but who had never married because her only love had been killed in a duel with Ben Perry. Ben's grave was just a few paces north of the church. To Henrietta's left was his father Vardry McBee's grave, and next to it his mother's, where they had lain now for thirty-three years.

Would he be judged by how much he had fallen short of his father's achievements? Not if he was judged for having tried. He had had no ambition for political office, but his father's memory imposed on him a feeling of unending obligation to assist in the affairs of the community. He served two separate terms as intendant or mayor. He was Commissioner for the Poor during the war, magistrate for forty years, and had even been coroner when no responsible person offered to do it.

In 1866, he served in the House of Representatives with that blue ribbon group who legislated so nobly, when most of the personal property of the state had been destroyed or stolen, the banks were all broken, there was no money, the crops had been consumed by the Confederacy and ravages of Federal troops, the people were at the point of starvation, and under military rule. When that session of the

legislature convened, Columbia was a desert of ashes as far as the eye could see, with chimneys and shattered brick walls standing here and there. They paid their own expenses, levied no taxes for operation of the government, depended upon voluntary public service at all levels, but enacted good measures and restored law and order. They offered for re-election in 1868, but were defeated by a slate of former slaves, including one of Alexander's own former slaves,[11] as Congressional Reconstruction and carpetbag government took over. A few months after Alexander's defeat for the House, he was called upon to run for county commissioner, and was elected. All that can be said of his county service during this time of miserable resources was that he worked hard. Once he wrote his brother in Lincolnton that he was so tired of it all and wished he could just run away. When people later began to refer to him as "Squire McBee," he figured he might have earned the title.

He had helped found Methodist missions to former slaves, assisting two of his former slaves to become Methodist ministers.[12] In 1875, when there was Ku Klux Klan rowdiness in Greenville and its culprits were arrested in Newberry, Alexander acted swiftly to have them brought to Greenville for trial, which ended further Klan activities in Greenville.[13] His fellow vestrymen of Christ Church met secretly in his mill office from April through October of 1866, weighing the sad decision to require their rector to turn over all church records and submit his resignation.[14] Vardry McBee had served for years on the vestry for that rector and had always praised him highly.

All these were efforts, not achievements like his father's, in Alexander's view. But he had been on the committee to bring the Atlanta and Charlotte Air Line Railway through Greenville.[15] His father could have given him some credit for that. He had been a founder of Piedmont Manufacturing Company, one of the region's leading mills.[16] Also,he got the McBee Mill on the Reedy River back on its feet,[17] was an organizer of the Camperdown Mills[18] and of the first national bank in the state.[19] He personally financed and built the first public water works for Greenville.[20] Now, that was a project his father might even be envious of. His father could not have found much fault with the work he had done as president of the Agricultural

Association and master of the Grange. When Catholics in Greenville wanted to build a church, there had been ugly controversy with bitter attacks upon Catholicism and the Pope. The swiftness with which he contributed, then raised most of the balance of the building fund, and obtained the donation of an acre of land owned by his brother who lived in Lincolnton, attests to his anger over the controversy.

Well, he had done the best he could without inheriting the single-minded, relentless discipline of his Quaker father. Instead, he was afflicted with a sense of humor that led him even to tease his father by referring to him as the "Commander in Chief." He liked dancing, music, dinner parties, shooting matches, hunting, companionship, and more than a dram of whiskey. After his father died he had a dog named "Whiskey." His efforts had, he thought, all been driven in imitation of his father rather than by any virtue of his own. He never saw that the irrepressible thrust that spurred him daily must have been springs of energy inherited from the "Commander in Chief."

Resuming his journey home, he passed through the cemetery gate into Coffee Street, pausing to look back at Christ Church's steeple. He turned his horse left into Main Street and ambled down the hill to the new steel bridge which had replaced Tom Gower's wooden bridge over the Reedy.

To his left from the bridge he glanced from the Camperdown Mills building across the rushing falls to his father's old stone mills. His eyesight was not good enough anymore to make out more than a green spot at the bluff to his right up the river from the bridge. That was where he and his companions had fixed the diving board over the deep pool, on an afternoon like this, when he was a boy. But he could see the old "enchanted tree" with its rock seat just large enough for two. It had been the destination of couples on moonlight walks from summer parties in his youth.[21] The cotton mill had been given the same name as the Camperdown elm trees along the rock he had chiseled his name on, beside the names of generations of young people.[22]

Across the bridge to his right, this side of Chicora College campus, was the long grassy slope his children had played on in front of their big house on what was still called McBee's Hill. He had not

seen his son Willie in nearly a year, since Willie had brought his English wife, Edith Hudson, from their home in Providence, Rhode Island, when turnip greens were in. Even from the time Willie was in Mrs. Mazyck's Sunday school class at Christ Church, he knew he did not want to farm. He was sent to the University of the South at Sewanee, with his cousins from Lincolnton. Now he was an insurance executive in Providence and played golf and bridge. He and Roy had been so close. They named sons after each other, and Roy named his fourth daughter Edith, for Willie's wife. Roy and his wife, Ella Thompson, and their big family lived on the large farm Alexander had given him on Laurens Road. Roy had finished Greenville Military Academy in 1882, sometimes called Captain Patrick's Academy.[23] Ella had finished Greenville Female College in 1888. In 1902, they would move from the Laurens Road farm to the large house at 609 East North Street so their children could attend school in town.[24]

Alexander now turned into the Augusta road. Through the trees to his left he saw that the Furman bell tower had already taken on the pink tint of late afternoon. He had held the staff that day long ago while his father and his civil engineer brother, Pinkney, had surveyed off the tract where the college would be built. It had been a bitter sight when Stoneman's raiders camped among those oak trees after they had looted the town, set fire to Wesley Brook's house, shot and killed old Mr. Choice and Alexander's slave, Andrew. But they did not find the gold dust from the McBee gold mines he had hidden.

Ahead, on top of the hill to his right, was Mrs. Mary Cleveland's house. It had been Tandy Walker's house when Alexander was a young man. He remembered the suppers with champagne and dancing in the wide old hall [25] - those long-past days of parties and balls, picnics, fishing parties, and Fourth of July celebrations before the war.

Here came the street car pulled by mules on iron rails paid for and built by Tom Gower. It was on its last trip for the day, with a few passengers, up Main Street and out West Washington to the depot for the next train.

Mrs. Annie Thruston's brick house,[26] with side porches on the first and second stories and a garden on the side like Charleston

houses, was next on the right. Beyond the Cagle place and Captain O P. Mills' fine residence there were not many houses before he was passing the farms on his right he had given his sons Taylor and Joseph. The Brushy Creek house would be Sarah's. But Sarah would marry Dr. Albert Beck of Monroe, New York, and never live at Brushy Creek again.

His son, Roy, had received the Book of Common Prayer as a prize in Mrs. Hortense Morris' confirmation class on Easter Sunday, 1880.[27] It was brand new and not falling apart as so many were in the pews at Christ Church, or like the one The Reverend Mr. Holley had used at Henrietta's funeral. The Order for Burial of the Dead had not been changed in 104 years. It required Mr. Holley to read from page 271: "I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me ..blessed are the dead who die in the Lord ..for they shall rest from their labors."

The sun was beginning to reach the tree line along Brushy Creek when he rode into the stable. Elias and Lucy were sitting in rocking chairs on the high back porch. He climbed the steep stairs to the porch. As he moved towards a chair, he was stricken. He reached for the bannister, then fell over it onto the granite slab twelve feet below. His physician reported that he was dead before his body hit the granite slab.

The August 18th *Mountaineer* reported that

> ... he was a gentleman of great heart and its every beat was true and strong for his people and his country. He was a South Carolina gentleman and the parts of his robust, honest, broad-minded character were those that have given his state that which has made it reputable and honorable. There was in him no littleness. He was liberal, kindly, charitable and genuine. Scarcely in Greenville is a spot not associated with his name and his life. Where he was known he was loved.

Henrietta would have liked what they wrote. So alas would his father.

Endnotes

[1] Alexander McBee, b.5/22/1822 Lincointon, N.C.; in 1856 married Henrietta D'Oyley Thruston, b. 4/2/1833, Greenville. Their children Elias A., Wm. de Bohun, Silas Le Roy, Wm. Pinkney, Luther, Joseph, Taylor, Sarah; all but Wm. de Bohun and Sarah buried in Christ Church cemetery; Alexander attended Pleasant Retreat Male Academy, Lincointon, and Greenville Male Academy. He managed his father's cotton, woolen, paper, foundry and grist mills, tanneries, farming operations in Greenville. *Vardry McBee, Man of Reason in an Age of Extremes*, Second Edition, by Roy McBee Smith, Laurel Heritage Press, Spartanburg, S.C. 1997. See Genealogical Data p. 336-337; This biography has 33 pages of chapter notes which support most substantive statements in this paper not footnoted herein. Chapter 12, notes 3 and 8, pp. 348-349, for D'Oyley's in Charleston.

[2] Anne McCuen, certified researcher National Register of Historic Places Registration, for construction and historical details of the house and property. The foundation of the house is stone piers with fill; walls weatherboard; brick chimneys; downstairs rooms have board walls 2" x 8," floors of 7 3/8" boards; hallway walls 5 1/8" boards, and floors 6 1/2" boards; ceilings downstairs 11 feet; all windows 6/6; all interior doors 4 panels.

[3] McCuen, refers to circular saw marks on some boards. She cites Hugh Howard, *How Old Is This House?* The Noonday Press, New York, 1989, p. 11, circular saws in use after ca. 1830.

Bernard Grun, *The Timetables of History*. Simon and Schuster. Touchstone Book, 1982, p. 363 F. circular saw invented 1780. Marc McCutcheon, *Everyday Life in the 1800's*. Writers' Digest Books. Cinn., Ohio 1993.p. 296 reports first circular saw as an 1814 innovation. Ben Perry wrote that Vardry McBee had "a passion for building." He brought his Greenville farms to high cultivation years before he moved from Lincointon.

[4] John William DeForest, *A Union Officer in Reconstruction*. Yale University Press, 1948. pp. 60, 63. The *Enterprise and Mountaineer* reported that about 60 former slaves attended his funeral.

[5] *The Enterprise and Mountaineer*. Greenville, S.C. July 29, 1885.

[6] *The Daily News*, Greenville, S.C., August 18, 1897, in reporting Alexander's death stated he and Henrietta had moved there "about ten years ago."

[7] All of the enumerated pieces are still in the family except the engraving of Franklin. The portrait of Henrietta is owned by Henrietta D. Boatwright of Dallas, Tx.; the bureau, bedstead by Mary Jane S. Poole of Spartanburg, S.C.; walnut chest by author; pine bedstead by Roy S.McBee

of Columbia, S.C.; ends of the dining room table by Wm. D. McBee of Union, S.C. and Roy S. McBee. Wall clock by Roy S. McBee.

[8] Roy McBee Smith, *A McBee Genealogy*. Privately printed 1983; in Greenville Public Library. p. 142: See *S.C Industries and Resources,1876*. Elias graduated Wofford College 1876; read law with M.C. Buder, married Mary Eltinge Course.

[9] *The Enterprise and Mountaineer*, Greenville, S. C. August 18, 1897; and *The Daily News* of same date, give accounts of his last day and death, his physician's warning, his fall. They differ as to height of the porch; this paper accords with family tradition that it was very high.

[10] Ibid.

[11] A. V. Huff, Jr., *Greenville, The History of the City and County in the South Carolina Piedmont*. University of South Carolina Press. 1995. p. 166.

[12] Ibid. p. 172 - 173

[13] Ibid. p. 168

[14] Christ Episcopal Church, Minutes of the Vestry. On microfilm at the church, Greenville, S.C.

[15] Huff. p. 181. Alexander has often been confused with his brother Vardry Alexander McBee (1818-1904) who never lived in Greenville though he inherited much property there. Vardry Alexander McBee has often been incorrectly referred to in local writings as Vardry McBee Jr.

[16] McCuen. Huff. p. 186

[17] McCuen. Huff. p. 185

[18] McCuen. Huff. p. 188

[19] McCuen. Huff p. 192

[20] McCuen.

[21] Crittenden, S.S., *The Greenville Century Book, 1903*. Press of *Greenville News. p. 50.*

[22] Kibler, L.A., *Benjamin F. Perry*. Duke University Press. 1946. p.74

[23] Site of the present Poinsett Club.

[24] Site of the Bi Lo Center coliseum under construction in 1998. The author moved to his grandparents' home from Florida with his mother, Edith McBee Smith, (1903-1980) and his brother, Edward L. Smith, Jr., when his father died in 1931. Though the house was only six blocks from Main Street, behind it was a smoke house, an acre of garden, a vineyard, fruit trees, a barn and barnyard with two cows, and with chickens. His grandfather still owned the farms on Laurens Road.

[25] Crittenden, S.S., p. 43. Site of the present Greenville High School.

[26] Ibid. p. 43.

[27] The *Book* of *Common Prayer*, inscribed to Roy McBee, Easter 1880, as "The First Reward, "owned by the author. Minutes of Christ Church list Mrs. Hortense Morris as his teacher.