

## VARDRY McBEE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

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In the life of every village which becomes a city, you will find a man of energy and vision who dreamed dreams and translated them into reality.

In 1815 was recorded one of the most important deeds in Greenville history—the conveyance by Lemuel J. Alston to Vardry McBee of Lincolnton, North Carolina, transferring to him 11,028 acres of land for a consideration of \$27,550.00. Thus, the territory, which now comprises the present City of Greenville with the exception of a few lots previously sold, passed into the hands of a man who, for almost half a century, was to develop Greenville in industry, agriculture, commerce, transportation and, perhaps even most importantly, its schools, colleges and churches.

Greenville, in 1815, when this transaction took place, was a small and straggling village, with a log Court House and jail, more or less appended to the vast estate of Lemuel J. Alston which lay to the west of the village and which comprised this vast acreage. Lemuel J. Alston had come to Greenville shortly after the Revolutionary War from near Georgetown and, with his grants and purchases from Revolutionary soldiers, had added together these tracts until he owned 11,028 acres. The Alston home, called "Prospect Hill", stood at the west end of the Avenue above the village and was a most palatial home for that particular period. Alston had made some effort to develop the village and surveyed off some 50 lots but these lots sold rather slowly and, at the time of his conveyance to McBee, very little development had taken place.

In 1810 Alston ran for Congress for this district for a second term but was defeated for this office by Elias Earle. Alston never got over his bitter disappointment in this defeat and this, coupled with the attraction of the lands being opened to the west, led Alston to sell his lands to McBee in 1815.

Who was this man who bought this vast estate from Alston? Vardry McBee was born June 19, 1775 in Spartanburg district at what was called Limestone Farm—present site of Gaffney and Limestone College. His father, Vardry McBee, Sr., was a Quaker

who had moved into this district which, at the time of Vardry McBee's birth, it was disputed as to whether it was a part of North Carolina or South Carolina. Vardry McBee, Sr., pronounced his name with the accent on the first syllable as though it was spelled "Mackby". Vardry McBee, Sr., a Quaker, like General Nathaniel Greene when the revolution threatened, cast aside his religion, was baptized an Episcopalian and went into the Revolutionary Army. He was elected to the command of a company of militia, and for several years was in the active service of his country. After the fall of Charleston and the surrender of the state to Lord Cornwallis, Capt. McBee retired into North Carolina and there joined the "Over Mountain Men". When the times became better he returned, and succeeded in capturing a Tory fort three miles from his house. At the close of the American Revolution, Capt. McBee, like hundreds of others, found himself in financial difficulties, and had to mortgage his lands, including the present beautiful seat of learning, and former fashionable watering place known as the "Limestone Springs." When he failed to recoup his fortunes, the mortgages were foreclosed and he was left without the means of educating his children. Vardry was taken from school when twelve years old and worked as a laborer on the "Limestone Farm" until he was eighteen.

Vardry McBee was, therefore, born a British subject and, during the course of the struggle for American independence, young Vardry was old enough to see and to remember some of its thrilling incidents. The Battle of the Cowpens was fought within a few miles of his father's house, and he remembered hearing the firing of the guns, and seeing the American calvary in pursuit of Col. Tarleton and the British troops after their defeat. The Battle of the Cedar Springs was also fought within a few miles of the home. He remembered three of General Clark's wounded soldiers being brought to his father's, bloody and almost lifeless, carried in front of three horsemen, and hanging across the pommels of their saddles. One of them proved to be Gen. Clark's brother. He was nursed by the family, and afterwards married one of McBee's sisters.

When he was eighteen, Vardry McBee determined to go to Lincolnton, North Carolina, to learn the trade of a saddle-maker under the direction of his brother-in-law, Joseph Morris. When his apprenticeship in the saddlery trade was completed, Vardry Mc-

Bee sought his fortune in Charleston. It was, however, at a time when business was dull and no employment was available, except a job in a retail grocery. In the fall of 1800 he returned from Charleston and accompanied his parents in their removal to the state of Kentucky. Later, he went to middle Tennessee where he established a saddlery. While in Tennessee, he was persuaded by a James Campbell of Charleston to return to Lincolnton and open a store in co-partnership with him and there he made his start as a merchant.

On commencing business, Vardry McBee made it a rule from which he never later departed to keep for sale no articles manufactured by his customers unless he bought them from the customer. In this way, he always tried to encourage home industry as a merchant as well as a manufacturer. In 1804 he married Jane Alexander, daughter of Col. Elvis Alexander of Rutherford County, North Carolina, and, throughout a long life, this most distinguished lady was to contribute much through her care, prudence and industry towards that large fortune which Vardry McBee later acquired.

In 1805 McBee discontinued his mercantile business temporarily and bought a large farm, house and lot in the village of Lincolnton. He now began to read to improve his mind, the subject of agriculture being his favorite study. He successfully brought back the land to good production and carried off many premiums for the finest products at some of the North Carolina agricultural exhibitions. It is said that Vardry McBee planted the first field of blue grass in North Carolina and cultivated that crop for pasturage along with clover, lucerne and other grasses. In 1812 he was elected Clerk of the County Court of Lincolnton and held that office for twenty-one years. In the meantime, he continued his farming, mercantile interests and other activities.

Even though he purchased his estate in Greenville in 1815, Vardry McBee did not come to Greenville for many years, although he set on foot many activities which were to make the village outstanding. His friends in Lincolnton remonstrated with him against the purchase of the Greenville land and told him he would not be able to make the payments but McBee's judgment told him better. He was attracted by the location of Greenville, its many streams furnishing water power and the fact that it appeared to be the crossroads to the mountains of North Carolina. During

these years McBee traveled back and forth to Greenville, starting numerous industries. In 1817 Mr. McBee built a very superior flour mill in the village, and, in 1829, another one built of stone, these mills being on the site of Richard Pearis' trading post. His brother-in-law, a Mr. Alexander, was the miller and lived on the hill above the post.

In August, 1820, Vardry McBee deeded to Jeremiah Cleveland, William Toney, William Young, John Blassingame, Spartan Goodlett and Baylis Earle thirty acres of land adjoining the village for the purpose of establishing the Greenville Male and Female Academies. Thus there came into being Greenville's first educational institutions which were to be operated on high standards and which attracted to Greenville many young men and women of promise who were later to contribute much to its history. Outstanding among these men was Benjamin Perry who states in his memoirs that he was influenced to come to Greenville because he had heard favorable things of the Male Academy and decided to enter it to read the "Iliad" and pursue mathematics and natural philosophy under the Rev. Mr. Hodges. Thus, in the spring of 1823, Benjamin Perry went to Greenville and, except for a few months the following winter, it was to be his lifelong residence and to which and his native state, he was to make tremendous contributions. Among other boys at the academy with whom Perry developed lifelong friendships were Randell and Theodore Croft who later became physicians in Greenville; Elias Earle, William Thompson, son of the Chancellor, George F. Townes, a future lawyer, editor and politician of Greenville.

Around this period Vardry McBee also acquired some land approximately six miles southeast of Greenville on Reedy River to construct on this site a cotton factory, a woolen mill and a paper mill. In this period he brought to Greenville other men who were to contribute much to the growth of the city and whose descendants have long been prominent in Greenville history. Among these was John Adams, a millwright, who was to help construct the flour mills and the subsequent mills on the Reedy. Also, coming to Greenville was J. W. Cagle and Eben Gower who was to later found the outstanding carriage factory of Gower, Cox and Markley. Emanuel Robinson was persuaded to move in from Lincolnton. John Logan, and many others came through his influence.

In 1824 we get another glimpse of Greenville as seen through the eyes of Robert S. Mills of Charleston, author of *Mill's Atlas*, and *Statistics of South Carolina*. He was a noted architect who designed the old Record Building and helped to build it. Robert Mills wrote in 1824:

The village is regularly laid out in squares and rapidly improving. It is the resort of much company in the summer and several respectable and wealthy families have located themselves here on account of the salubrity of the climate. These have induced a degree of improvement, which promises to make Greenville one of the most considerable villages of the State. It has been preferred as a residence to Pendleton, perhaps on account of its not being affected to immediately by the cold damps of the mountains . . . The public buildings are a handsome brick Court House, lately erected, a jail, a Baptist meeting house, an Episcopal Church, and two neat buildings for the Male and Female Academy . . . The private homes are neat; some large and handsome. Two of the former Governors of the State have summer retreats here . . . Governors Alston and Middleton. The number of houses is about seventy, the population is about 500. [McBee had given the land for the Baptist Meeting House and for an Episcopal church at that time.]

That Greenville was industrialized was shown by a map of Greenville County in *Mill's Atlas* published in 1824. Practically every stream had its falls on which was situated grist mills like those of Edwards Mill on the Tyger towards Greer and the Peden Mills in the southeastern part of the county. This map of Greenville County also indicated that on the Enoree River near the Spartanburg County line, there was situated McCool's Cotton Factory and a little south of that point was Benson's Iron Works. The 1824 map indicates the location of the McBee Mills on Reedy River and also two other industrial sites.

McBee continued to live at Lincolnton, however, but operated stores in Lincolnton, Greenville, Spartanburg, and in several other towns. The chain store is often considered as being a comparatively recent development but Vardry McBee had a chain of stores operating very successfully prior to 1836. Patronizing home industry and selling in his stores these products in the various towns of Lincolnton, Greenville and Spartanburg, he used his combined buying power; also through his stores he found a ready outlet for the product of his mills. Paper from his mill on Reedy

River furnished the news print for the weekly newspapers of Greenville, Spartanburg and Charlotte. In his stores were found cotton cloth, woolens, fine flours, grits and other products of the farm, saddles and harness, wagons and guns which were made in this territory. Thus, the self-educated industrialist and farmer set in motion the progress which has made Greenville a city.

In 1836, Vardry McBee, at the age of sixty, moved from Lincolnton to Greenville and occupied the house on Prospect Hill. For many summers he had leased this house as a summer hotel to Edmond Waddell who had, in effect, made a fortune in operating it. Waddell was rather an uneducated man who liked to brag and one story is that he told a citizen one day: "I must get Mr. McBee to put a condition to the house so that I can entertain my low-country friends in a most hostile manner."

The little village was growing and new citizens were coming in. Col. William Toney had built the Mansion House which was to become the outstanding hotel of the up-country. Ben Perry had passed the Bar Examination and numerous other men were active in helping to build the town because McBee had set the proper attitude and atmosphere in which progress could be made. As the village grew it became necessary to widen some of the streets of the original village. When this was determined, according to the story coming down in the Powell family of Greenville, Vardry McBee mounted his horse and rode around to all of the people on that street with the statement, "As much as the village takes away from you to widen the street, go back on my land the same distance so that you will continue to have what you bought."

Mr. McBee rode his horse daily over his plantations and to his mills. He had been crippled as a small boy in a fall from a horse and could not walk great distances but daily he often rode a horse fifty miles or more and, apparently, felt no unusual fatigue. Thus, he supervised his plantations and his mills and stores, The Greenville Store being that of McBee and Irvin situated about seventy-five feet north of what is now McBee Avenue on Main Street. He continued his devotion to agriculture and Col. Wade Hampton said of his farm that it was one of the finest of the upcountry. Greenville had elected him President of the Agriculture Society and had awarded him the premium for the best managed farm in the district. His maxim was never injure land but try to make it better—not "clear and wear"—but build.

In the meantime, Vardry McBee had helped to start two more churches having deeded sites for the Methodist Church originally situated just southwest of Christ Episcopal Church and also land for the First Presbyterian Church on what is now West Washington Street.

Vardry McBee, thinking ahead of his time and with unusual energy for his years, became interested in the railroads and when the project of the Louisville, Cincinnati & Charleston Railroad was active in South Carolina, McBee subscribed liberally to it. On the death of Robert Y. Hayne who had been elected the first President of the company, McBee was elected to preside over the company, at a salary of \$4,000.00 a year. In order to discharge the duties of his office he had to spend the greater portion of his time in Charleston. The routing of this railroad was debated in South Carolina and this controversy found Vardry McBee on one side and John Caldwell Calhoun on the other. Calhoun favored a route going up through Rabun Gap and McBee and his friends favored the route up towards Hendersonville and Asheville. However, financial pressures and growing conviction that the route to Cincinnati through the French Broad Valley provided too many problems influenced Vardry McBee to resign as president. Another reason for McBee's resignation as president of the railroad at this time was the fact that while in Charleston, two of his relations in Greenville, who had been connected in business with him, but in whose affairs at that time he had no interest, failed, and involved him in a lawsuit. Attempts were made to make Vardry McBee responsible for these debts due by Messrs. Alexander and Henning. In consequence of these lawsuits, and knowing that his friend, Col. Christopher Gadsden would be elected to succeed him, he resigned the presidency of the railroad and returned to Greenville. On his return from Charleston, he said to his legal counsel, "I have so acted through life, that there is not a fact or circumstance which my enemies can produce against me to affect my character in a court of justice." The result of these trials did show most conclusively the truth of this remark.

Shortly afterwards, however, Vardry McBee joined others of Greenville in initiating a move to build a railroad from Columbia to Greenville. John Belton O'Neal was president of the railroad and Vardry McBee was interested in building it up through Newberry and Laurens into Greenville instead of the route pro-

posed by Abbeville and Anderson. Vardry McBee at this time raised his subscription to the railroad in order to keep it from going under from \$12,000.00 to \$50,000.00 which was said to be the largest stock subscription to a railroad in South Carolina up to that time. He was vitally interested in railroads as shown by an interesting letter written by Joel R. Poinsett: "Mr. Vardry McBee, a neighbor, wants me to introduce him to you . . . he is uneducated but shrewd and intelligent . . . he owns a flour mill, a paper mill, a cotton mill and houses and land; he says he is going to New York for information about railroads." Poinsett, of course, meant that Vardry McBee did not have formal education which was true; but there were few more, however, in the State of South Carolina, who were better informed and better read than Vardry McBee of Greenville.

Whilst at the north, he was induced to subscribe \$10,000 to the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad. In order to encourage the Charleston, Louisville and Cincinnati Railroad, he had taken \$15,000 or \$20,000 in that road. He took \$12,000 of stock in the Greenville and Columbia Railroad, and afterwards increased it to \$50,000, as has been already mentioned. It may with great truth be said of McBee, that very few men who have made their fortunes have appropriated so much of them to public buildings, and railroads. The Columbia and Greenville Railroad was completed to Greenville with its northern terminals between Augusta and Pendleton Streets in 1853.

Vardry McBee, in 1850, continuing his keen interest in education, assisted Furman University to locate in Greenville. In that year James Clement Furman and the Furman trustees secured from Vardry McBee some 16 acres on the south side of Reedy River and thus, Furman University came to Greenville, an institution whose great influence on the city cannot be measured in the more than a century that it has been here. In 1854, the Baptists indicated an interest in obtaining a site for a Woman's College in Greenville. Benjamin F. Perry was chairman of the committee to try to get the trustees to donate to the Baptist denomination the site of the Male and Female Academies for this purpose. In that year the trustees by a vote of seven to two voted to turn over these lands to the Baptist denomination for a Woman's College and one of the majority voting was Vardry McBee who had originally donated the land and now coupled his vote with an additional



subscription of \$1,000.00 so that the college could be located in Greenville.

Fortunately, a personal sketch of Vardry McBee was published by DeBow's *Review*, in 1852:

In morality, and all the proprieties of life, Mr. McBee has no superior. His habits are all strictly temperate and methodical. He is a man of great industry and activity of life. He retires to bed early and arises before daylight every morning. He breakfasts very early, and then employs himself in riding and superintending his business till dinner. Having been crippled whilst a young man, by being thrown from his horse, he is not able to walk any distance. He consequently lives mostly in his saddle during the day. Although now nearly seventy-seven years old, he rides fifty miles a day, and feels no inconvenience from it! He enjoys fine health, though his constitution has always been delicate. There is the same uniformity and regularity in his dress that there is in his habits and manners. His dress is a drab coat and light vest and pantaloons. In person, Mr. McBee is small, with a mild and pleasing expression of face. In his manners, he is kind and gentle, with the simplicity of a child. Seldom is he excited by anything, but there is in him a sleeping passion, which is sometimes roused.

The rising tide of secession was beginning to strike South Carolina in 1850, Vardry McBee was a Unionist siding with Ben Perry, P. E. Duncan, Thomas Brockman and Jess Senter. The *Southern Patriot*, a paper published in Greenville in 1852, listed Vardry McBee along with Judge John Belton O'Neal, and others as being among the largest slaveholders in the state and much opposed to secession. The tide was running strong and by 1860, Vardry McBee joined with James C. Furman, A. B. Crook, George F. Townes, Perry Duncan, C. J. Elford and W. P. Price to defend the right of secession and to pass resolutions to that effect.

In 1860, the eighty-five year old Vardry McBee began to dispose of some of his properties and lay aside some of his responsibilities. Notable among this was the sale of his mills on the Reedy River which was advertised in the *Southern Enterprise*, May 15, 1862, by the new owners: