

WALTZ THROUGH TIME

The Case of the Curious Colonel

Civil War vet John McKee founded McKee City

by Jim Waltzer

WHEN THE FAMILIES who worked the land of McKee City gathered for their annual Christmas party, the maker of the feast presided. But John McKee, Civil War veteran and father of his eponymous city, did not always play Santa Claus in his lifetime. He had set exacting standards for his farmer tenants, and while he also was happy to assume the role of benefactor, both personas were built on a foundation of ego.

McKee was a black man — most likely a mulatto — who had accumulated great wealth, a rarity in the 19th century. Born in slavery in 1821 Virginia, he gained freedom as a youth and eventually went north to Philadelphia, where he worked in a restaurant, married the owner's daughter, and developed a taste for real estate. After he convinced his wife to back him in purchasing a block of row houses, he found that he liked being a landlord.

Come the Civil War, McKee joined Union Negro troops raised in Philadelphia, rose to the rank of colonel and, by all accounts, fought valiantly. Some historians have suggested that, when he resumed his career as a Realtor, he took advantage of migrating freedmen unaware of property due them in the South as part of the terms of their freedom. McKee and others, the charge goes, provided rental homes for the ex-slaves in return for their signing away their land.

What is indisputable is that McKee acquired thousands of acres of coal land in West Virginia, and additional holdings in Georgia and Kentucky. He sold some of these properties and used the proceeds to reinvest in Philadelphia, New York, and New Jersey. At his financial peak, he was worth an estimated two million dollars.

One of his New Jersey investments was land along a railroad right-of-way in Egg Harbor and Hamilton townships. In 1884, McKee purchased some 4,000 acres of wilderness here and fashioned them into a cooperative farming community. The colonel was a strict enforcer of the letter of the law. His leases specified precise dimensions for each farm, detailed instructions for clearing the land, and the type and quantity of seed to be sown. Tenants who complied for five years could renew for another 10.

Yet beneath his rigidity, Col. McKee may have had a yearning for utopia or, at least, peaceful coexistence — circumstances he obviously never knew in his early years. In his namesake town, he built three-story saltbox houses with plastered walls and front porches. Stables, a sawmill, a frame schoolhouse, a general store and a town hall fleshed out the landscape. Farms situated by the Pennsylvania-Reading Railroad near today's Black Horse Pike claimed 50 acres, those along Harding Highway (Route 40) twice that many. And yes, at Christmastime, there were toys and turkey to celebrate the harvest.

Of course, there are few traces of the original community in today's McKee City. The tenant farmers have yielded to suburban homeowners, and retail shoppers rule the roost. Modern landmarks such as Hamilton Mall and Atlantic City Race Course (at the site of the former McKee City traffic circle) stamp this area as a crossroads of commerce rather than a true city. The Colonel might decry the dissolution of his vision, but he'd likely approve the capitalist impulses.

John McKee died in 1902 at the age of 81, but not before he carefully planned yet another legacy that would lack legs. The master record-keeper compiled a 36-page will that provided for his children and grandchildren, and also placed a considerable portion of his estate in trust to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for the purpose of building a military school for orphans in nearby Bucks County. For the Catholic Church, it was a bequest out of the blue, since McKee had not informed it of his intentions and, what's more, had been born Protestant.

With the money came vintage-McKee instructions emblematic of the man's curious mixture of decorum, precision, and rampant ego. A complex campus layout was provided and fireproof structures mandated. The curriculum was to be based on that of the U.S. Naval Academy. Furthermore, the will specified that an inscribed statue of the Colonel astride a horse be front and center on campus — McKee included a photograph so that the sculptor could capture his likeness. On the Fourth of July, students would be required to decorate the statue's pedestal, and wear brass buttons engraved with the McKee name.

Alas, McKee's school for orphans was never built. His will had also stipulated that his properties remain unsold until the death of his last surviving heir, and when that finally occurred in 1948, estate assets were insufficient to build the school as outlined. Appreciation on his properties, evidently, had been modest compared to 20th century inflation. The Church did, however, use the McKee money to establish a college scholarship fund that, on an annual basis, boosts fatherless boys and honors the spirit of the Colonel's intent.

Jim Waltzer's Tales of South Jersey, co-authored by Tom Wilk, is published by Rutgers University Press.