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Unheeded in death but helping others

By Samantha Byles
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Col. John McKee's vision of his legacy, meticulously recorded in his will, was breathtaking:

A garrisonlike naval academy would grace the bank of the Delaware River in Bristol. A bronze replica of the colonel on horseback would survey the boys who traversed the integrated campus. Embossed on their brass buttons would be the name of McKee, said to be the richest African American at his death in 1902.

History did not quite unfold according to McKee's plan.

Today, McKee remains an obscure giant of Philadelphia history, a businessman whose achievements in life have been at least matched by his contribution in death.

He is responsible for considerably more than 1,000 scholarships given to fatherless boys during the last 57 years, according to the administrator of a trust he endowed. In the last 10 years alone, the McKee Scholarships have funded almost \$4 million for the postsecondary education of 239 young men.

And yet for 89 years, he lay in an unmarked grave; not the brick-and-marble family vault he ordered in his will, not even in his original plot.

McKee wrote his will almost two years before his death, drafting exactly how he wanted to be remembered. But even with a fortune estimated at \$2 million, in death he quickly lost control of events.

Born in Alexandria, Va., McKee made his way at 21 to Philadelphia in the early 1840s.

He initially found work in a livery stable and then a restaurant at Eighth and Market Streets owned by James Prosser, a well-known African American caterer. McKee married Prosser's daughter Emeline, and ran the restaurant until 1866, before he started buying property throughout Philadelphia.



MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff
Mina Cockcroft (left), general manager of Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, and Junious Rhone Sr., board treasurer, helped make sure Col. John McKee's grave got a stone.



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At his death, his holdings were an empire: more than 300 rental houses in the city, as well as his own house at 1030 Lombard St., an estate in Bristol Township, Bucks County, and several hundred thousand acres throughout West Virginia, Georgia, and Kentucky.

And then there was New Jersey. In Atlantic County, McKee turned more than 4,000 acres into McKee City, a settlement specifically for freed slaves and other African Americans moving North after the Civil War. McKee City included several dormitory-style houses, a schoolhouse, and a church.

(He did not found McKeesport, Pa.; another, unrelated John McKee did.)

Newspapers reported on McKee's dressing up as Santa Claus every Christmas and handing out presents to neighborhood children and tenants in Philadelphia and McKee City. Other press accounts liked to mention McKee's skinflint qualities - his unwillingness to spend more than \$50 on repairs to his house, or how he made an office of his living room. Upon McKee's death, one newspaper called him "a man absolutely devoid of sentiment."

McKee's will showed his clear plan for his money, one that shocked many of his family and friends.

An established member of the Presbyterian Church, McKee changed his religious outlook during a bout with typhoid fever.

Catholic nuns did not shy away from caring for African Americans with the disease, as some other white caregivers did, according to the McKee Scholars website. McKee was so grateful, he named Archbishop Patrick John Ryan of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia coexecutor of his will, along with McKee's attorney, Judge Joseph P. McCullen.

In his will, McKee requested a Catholic funeral at the Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul, followed by burial in Lebanon Cemetery in South Philadelphia.

But, in the first of a series of circumstances that frustrated McKee's plans, his will was not read until weeks after his death. He was buried after a Presbyterian ceremony (not at the cathedral), in Olive Cemetery in West Philadelphia.

In 1923, Olive closed, and McKee's remains were transferred to Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, Delaware County. He lay without a plaque for nearly a century.

Eden finally marked the empty burial site with a formal headstone earlier this month, after the grave caught the attention of Mina Cockroft, general manager of the cemetery, and Shelia Jones, a member of the Friends of Historic Eden Cemetery.

Eden has been trying to place monuments on many unmarked burial sites, Cockroft said.

"Shelia came to me and told me that the McKee site didn't have a tombstone, and that's probably been true since he came to us," Cockroft said. "We got in contact with the scholarship committee because they were really the only people to talk to about it."

On Sept. 9, members of the McKee Scholarship committee and the executive secretary of the McKee Scholarship Fund gathered at Eden to present a monument honoring McKee and his wife.

George Forde, former executive secretary of the scholarship fund, thought it was important that someone like McKee be properly buried, even 110 years after his death.

"It's a special occasion for a special man," Bob Stern, the current executive secretary, said at the event. Stern succeeded Forde, who died in July 2011. The scholarships provide a total of \$21,500 per student over four years, Stern said, "and it is all because of him."

McKee did not intend for his money to be used exactly that way; lawyers and judges wrestled for years to determine the proper use of his inheritance.

Originally, the money now used for the McKee Scholarships was to go toward the planned naval academy on McKee's estate in Bristol.

McKee enlisted in the 12th Regiment of the Pennsylvania National Guard on June 17, 1870, and was promoted to lieutenant colonel of the 13th Regiment in 1872.

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In his will, McKee tried to immortalize his passion for the military through "Colonel John McKee's College," which was to act as a training institution for poor, orphaned boys, black or white, from the Philadelphia area.

It was to be built only after the death of all his children and grandchildren, who in their lifetimes were to benefit from a portion of his estate.

The naval college was to become the most storied controversy of McKee's legacy. In his will, he described a magnificent fortress academy, equipped with naval training facilities, a full music-and-drum company, and a statue of himself to be placed in front of the college, all of which was to be surrounded by an eight-foot-high, three-foot-thick wall.

McKee's will and trust were modeled after Stephen Girard's. Born in France, Girard came to Philadelphia and became one of the wealthiest men in America as a merchant, banker, and landowner. Girard's will made history, as he donated his fortune to the city of Philadelphia upon his death in 1831.

Girard College, as described in Girard's will, was to be a public boarding school on 45 acres in North Philadelphia. Girard, who was white, specified that his school would be for poor, white orphaned boys.

McKee was far ahead of his time, even in 1902.

"He was a Negro with a dream in his heart, and a determination to convert his dream into reality," Orphan's Court Judge Charles B. Klein judge wrote in a 1953 opinion. That dream, Klein noted, was the "fostering and promoting of integrated education for white and colored boys."

Klein also pointed out that McKee "was not a particularly modest man and obviously had an intense desire to perpetuate his name."

Paradoxically, McKee's ambitious project was not to cost more than \$100,000, as instructed in his will, which helped guarantee that it never happened.

The fate of McKee's estate first reached Orphan's Court, which handles probate matters, in 1947, a year after the death of his last known grandson.

The fate of the estate became a sensation followed closely in the press. The Philadelphia Tribune ran an article in December 1947 listing the responses to the question: "What to do with the estate of Col. McKee?"

Orphan's Court quickly hired an investigator to determine that all of McKee's heirs were, in fact, dead. In doing so, a legal notice was issued, resulting in a wave of people and organizations coming forward to claim McKee's fortune. About 30 hearings were held for each claimant in order to argue their right to McKee's trust.

John McKee Jr. of Alexandria claimed he was a son of the colonel and used the testimony of a 100-year-old Virginia native as proof. Theophilus M. Syphax, also known as T. John McKee, presented valid evidence proving he was McKee's grandson, but he died shortly thereafter.

It was eventually determined, however, that any familial ties were moot, because McKee's daughter, Abby Syphax, had released all rights of the will due the McKee family months after the colonel's death, in exchange for a \$110,000 settlement from the courts.

The court concluded there was not enough money or space to build the naval institution, leaving it with the puzzle of what to do with McKee's fortune.

The scholarship foundation was finally established at the direction of the court investigator, who determined that was the best way to fulfill McKee's wishes.

In 1955, the scholarship committee awarded the first of four scholarships of \$1,000 a year. Applicants for the scholarships followed criteria similar to those McKee had applied to potential students at his planned college - fatherless boys in financial need living in Philadelphia or the four surrounding Pennsylvania counties were able to receive an annual donation for each of four years toward completion of their education.

Arthur Kay, recipient of a McKee Scholarship in 2001, said that he didn't know much about McKee when he received the money, but that the criteria of the scholarship attracted him.

"I had to really Google him while I was applying for the scholarship," said Kay, who graduated from St. Joseph's Prep. "But looking back at what he did, he was more than an interesting guy."

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Kay used his scholarship toward his tuition at Loyola University in Chicago, where he studied music and computer science, and from which he graduated in 2005. He heard about the scholarship from his guidance counselor and pursued it, as his father had died from leukemia when Kay was 7.

Though he didn't know much about McKee at the time, Kay, now a solutions engineer for Sencha Inc. in Chicago, was moved by the colonel's story.

"Just knowing the history and what was going on then, to be an African American after the Civil War was not easy, but he became a wealthy member of society. And the fact that he was able to become successful without any help, I could say inspired me," Kay said.

For Garrett Basalyga, who graduated from St. Joseph's University in 2008 with a bachelor's degree in finance, McKee's scholarship reached an often-forgotten demographic.

As a student at La Salle College High School, Basalyga knew college was always an option for him, "But knowing that there was someone out there thinking specifically about male orphans, and wanting to help them out was good motivation too," he said.

Basalyga is now a financial adviser at One Penn Financial Group in Plymouth Meeting.

In order to pay for McKee's new tombstone, Stern and the scholarship committee had to file a petition to the court. Access to the money - the trust still holds an estimated \$5 million - was granted within several months, and the committee quickly organized the Sept. 9 dedication ceremony.

The tombstone simply has McKee's name next to wife's, with an image of a man on a horse.

"It's funny - he wanted a huge statue of him in his full military suit," Stern said, "but since that didn't happen, we thought it would be a good idea to honor his wishes some way."

The McKee Scholarships

The McKee Scholarships, currently totaling \$21,500 for four years of postsecondary education, are available to fatherless boys in the Philadelphia area. Applicants must submit the following information to the committee for consideration:

An application form.

Evaluation from the student's principal or guidance counselor.

SAT or ACT scores.

Student aid report.

The committee is now accepting applications, which must be submitted by March 1. Interviews are held in March and April. Recipients will be announced in May.

All information is available at mckeescholars.org. Applicants can also call 484-323-1348 or write: The John McKee Scholarship Committee, c/o Robert J. Stern, executive secretary, Box 144, Merion Station, Pa. 19066.

Contact Samantha Byles at 215-854-2771 or sbytes@phillynews.com.

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