

**The Philadelphia Sunday Press**  
(April 20, 1902)

**Began Life a Penniless Negro;  
His Will Disposes of Over \$4,000,000.  
Knew No Sentiment**

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Colonel John McKee, who recently died in this city, was in some respects the most remarkable negro in America.

During a lifetime of eighty years he accumulated an estate of over \$4,000,000.

He was a man absolutely devoid of sentiment, as that quality is supposed to enter into every-day life, and yet there are hundreds of people who will testify to his kindness of heart and a desire to do good in his own peculiar way.

In the bosom of his family Colonel McKee was strict and severe.

He was not given to any display of affection, and the history of his domestic circle does not seem to record many acts inspired by a tender heart.

This statement is borne out by the terms of his will recently made public, which created consternation among the members of his immediate family and descendents and surprised all who knew him.

This will is a remarkable document.

It is written on thirty-two pages of foolscap.

Each page is signed by the testator.

He devised to his only daughter, Mrs. Abbie A. Syphax, an annuity of but \$300; to her five sons he willed \$50 each yearly, the child of a daughter deceased, a like amount.

The consternation created by the reading of the will quickly gave place to a determination to fight its provisions. The heirs at law moved promptly and their caveat against its admission before the Register of Wills was filed before the will found its way to court.

So unusual were the terms of this will and so singular in their relation to benefits designed for his family that it was said officials of the Catholic Church (to whom Colonel McKee – barring a few unimportant bequests – left the residue of his estate in trust, naming Archbishop Ryan, the head of the church in Philadelphia, as one of the trustees) decided that they could not in equity accept the gift which deprived his own flesh and blood of their legal rights.

This reason is said to have gained additional strength from the fact borne out by the declaration of a church authority, who is said to enjoy confidential relations with Archbishop

Ryan, that Colonel McKee's relations or inclinations with or toward the Catholic Church were not such as would justify the leaving of such an immense property to them.

There is no authority more appropriately fitted to express an opinion of Colonel McKee and his life than him whose words are here reproduced.

The tendency of his whole life was best illustrated by the first game of marbles he ever played as a boy in Alexandria, Virginia.

With the winning of this game was expressed the great desire of his afterlife and the keynote of his character – acquisitiveness and accumulation.

“Colonel McKee” said the person alluded to above, “never ceased in the pursuit of acquisitiveness and accumulation until his eyes closed in death.

“He did not even rest as a boy of very tender age until he had won all the marbles from his playmate companions, and as far as the stock of marbles among the juveniles in the old Virginia town was concerned McKee had them cornered absolutely.

“There was no romance to his life. It was simply a life of hard work and the making of money.

“He viewed life and individuals from only one standpoint and that was what it and they were worth to him financially.

“If they had no financial value he had no use for them.

“He was devoid of sentiment and was strictly business in everything he said or did.

“Those characteristics and relations extended during the period of his life to the direct members of his own family. He exempted no one.

“At one time in his career he took a great interest in the Presbyterian Church on Lombard Street, of which he was a member in good standing for nearly sixty years.

“His father-in-law was a very religious man as well as a man of some means. In this respect Colonel McKee acted to please him.

“Colonel McKee had a keen knowledge as to the value of real estate.

“He was hardly ever known to have made a bad investment or to have had a good deal fail in his hands.

“He was a remarkable man for continuous and steady work.

“In this respect he was tireless and persistent.

“He had one peculiarity that stood out prominently among the rest.

“He never ran after anybody, but he required all men to come to him, and was willing to wait until circumstances brought them to his door.

“He strongly exemplified the principle contained in the well-known sentence, ‘all things come to him who waits.’

“Probably the best evidence of this quality was given by Colonel McKee about a year ago, when it was said that a syndicate of New York financiers headed by none other than J.P. Morgan himself approached Colonel McKee and desired his terms for the sale of large tracts of land which he owned in West Virginia.

“This land was in the heart of the soft coal region in which district Mr. Morgan and his associates were supposed to be acquiring great interests.

“Colonel McKee named the terms, but the syndicate thought them too high.

“At any rate they didn’t agree and, although representatives of the syndicate somewhat frequently renewed their overtures, Colonel McKee stuck closely to the price he had originally named and at the time of his death the matter was still unsettled.

“In alluding to the subject a short time ago, Colonel McKee said he was willing to wait, because he knew the time would come when the property would prove to be worth the price he had placed upon it.

“In singular contrast to his strictly business methods was his reputation as a landlord.

“Colonel McKee probably had a larger number of smaller tenants than any man in the city.

“To them he was known as one of the best of the owners. They say he always kept his properties in good repair, and prospective tenants contended for preference in renting his houses.

“At any rate, he always had a list of applicants ready to take the first house he had empty.

“At Christmas times he would expend a large sum of money for the purchase of toys and other small gifts, in the sharing of which would be included the children of the entire neighborhood. All the children would come in and none would be refused.

“These scenes, which would occur upon the morning of each Christmas Day, were enacted at his residence, 1030 Lombard Street, and it would require several police officers to attend the crowds that would assemble there.

“It was a very interesting as well as a curious sight to see mothers bringing babies in their arms, with other children tugging at their skirt, and to see all of them receive some evidence of Colonel McKee’s good will.

“The keynote of his every-day life, however, is best exemplified in his gift of the house on Patton Street to his daughter.

“She was supposed to be his favorite child, and she was constant and faithful in her attendance upon her father until the day of his death.

“The house on Patton Street is numbered 1355, and it is not far from the Schuylkill River, in the vicinity of Gray’s Ferry Road.

“It was the very meanest house in Colonel McKee’s possession, and located in the poorest neighborhood of any he owned property in.

“This virtually turning his daughter out of the homestead at 1030 Lombard Street, where she had lived and taken care of her father and settling upon her the very least of his possessions, was one of the incomprehensible acts of the negro Croesus, and his family are vainly trying to discover the reason for it.

“As various incidents come to light in the life of Colonel McKee the fact is apparent that whatever appearance of outward liberality any of his acts may have possessed, in the bosom of his family he was scarcely ever influenced by any motive of this character.

“He was a resident of Philadelphia for nearly sixty years, coming to this city at age 21, in the year 1843. He lived here ever since.

“He was born in Alexandria, Va., in 1822, and was apprenticed by his uncle in the brick business in his native town. There he stayed until he attained his majority, when he turned his face towards the North.

“The natural desire as a boy, to possess more marbles than any other boy he played with was cultivated by young McKee in all his boyish sports. He showed a disposition to acquire and to hold whatever he fancied and that principle remained with him until the last day of his life.

“It has been frequently asked how it was that a man who for years has not left the limits of Philadelphia could acquire so many outside properties. That is explained when Colonel McKee’s propensity for trading is brought to light.

“If he possessed one peculiarity stronger than another it was that of trading one thing for another whenever the opportunity offered itself.

If a man wanted a small house in Philadelphia and for that house was willing to give a piece of land in West Virginia or in a more distant locality, Colonel McKee would trade with him.

“Most of the land he had acquired in this way he had never seen. But the history of these deals shows that his natural acuteness was invariably to his advantage and that the property outside always proved worth more than that he traded for.

“There is another side of the declaration that Colonel McKee kept his houses in good repair.

John Donohue, who was his right hand man in Kensington, where he owned so many houses, said that while the Colonel was a good landlord he didn't think he invested \$50 a year in repairs to his 209 houses.