

McBee, Silas ^[1]



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by Allen H. Stokes, Jr., 1991

14 Nov. 1853–3 Sept. 1924

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Silas McBee, editor, architect, and educator, was born in Lincolnton of Scottish ancestry. His father was [Vardry Alexander McBee](#) ^[3], three times clerk of the [Lincoln County](#) ^[4] Superior Court and an investor in railroads and cotton mills; his mother was Mary Elizabeth Sumner McBee. Silas was educated at Lincolnton Academy and the University of the South at Sewanee, Tenn., where he received a degree in 1876. He later served on the university's board of trustees (1878–86 and 1887–1907). In recognition of his service as an [Episcopal](#) ^[5] layman, editor, and architect of church buildings, the [University of the South](#) ^[6] awarded him an honorary doctor of civil laws degree in 1919.

Before entering the field of religious journalism, McBee devoted himself to educational work in the South. Interested in raising the level of funding for his alma mater, he served as the university's commissioner of endowment from 1891 to 1893. For a time, beginning in 1883, he taught and served as principal of the Fairmount School for girls at Monteagle, Tenn. McBee also traveled in Europe during the 1880s to study cathedral architecture. Returning to the United States, he designed and supervised the building of churches in Houston, Tex., Nashville, Tenn., Lincolnton, N.C., and Florence, S.C. He also designed Walsh Memorial Hall at the University of the South, assisted in planning the bronze of [Zebulon Baird Vance](#) ^[7] for Statuary Hall in the U.S. capitol, and acted as consulting architect with Ralph Adams Cram in planning a cathedral at Manila. He lectured widely on church architecture and contributed to the idea of constructing the Cathedral of St. John in New York and the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. McBee was associated with the firm of Nixon and McBee of Atlanta, Ga.

In 1896 McBee became editor of *The Churchman*, a leading religious periodical. He held this position until 1912 but still maintained an interest in architecture. In 1913 he founded and became editor of *The Constructive Quarterly* ^[8], an interdenominational journal concerned with the discussion of Christian philosophy; he continued as editor until 1923.

In his theology McBee was ecumenical. In 1911 the continuation committee of the Edinburgh Conference sent him on a tour of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East in the interest of Christian unity. McBee's account of his journey, *An Eirenic Itinerary* ^[9], relates his travels and interviews with leaders of the Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Coptic, Jewish, and Moslem faiths. Through his devotion to the ecumenical movement, he developed many intimate friendships with Anglican and Roman Catholic prelates. McBee served as vice-president of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew and of the Laymen's Missionary Movement. On three occasions he was a delegate to the Quadrennial General Convention of the Episcopal church.

McBee was also interested in foreign missions and the propagation of the social gospel in American politics and international affairs. His correspondents included Albert T. Mahan, Jacob Riis, William Howard Taft, and Theodore Roosevelt. If not a registered [Republican](#) ^[10], McBee was entirely sympathetic with the Republican party of Roosevelt and Taft and encouraged Roosevelt to broaden the party's base of support in the South.

In his later years, declining health prompted McBee to move from New York to Charleston, S.C., where his daughters Emma Estelle and Mary Virginia Vardrine operated Ashley Hall, a school for girls. He died in Charleston but was buried at University Cemetery, Monteagle, Tenn. McBee was married twice: in 1877 to Mary Estelle Sutton (d. 1891) of Mississippi and, after her death, to Louise J. Post of Great Neck, N.Y.

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