

James H. McGee

Early Settler
1786-1840

by Daniel Coleman

James H. McGee predicted that a great metropolis would someday rise in place of the small, rugged community of fur trappers and traders he found when he arrived at the junction of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers in the late 1820s. While McGee seems to have had great foresight, the transformation of wilderness into the booming frontier town he envisioned was in large part due to his own industrious tenacity.

James Hyatt McGee was born in Virginia on January 1, 1786. His father, a Scots-Irish immigrant, moved the family to the Kentucky frontier when James was a child, settling in the area of Bardstown. In 1812, James married Eleanor Fry, and the couple started a new family on a small farm near Shelbyville.

Eleanor's younger brother, Solomon Fry, pushed farther west in 1821, moving to the newly admitted state of Missouri and encouraged his family back home in Kentucky to do the same. Six years later James and Eleanor McGee joined Solomon in Clay County. The McGees were accompanied by their seven children who ranged in age from 2 to 15. Eleanor's parents and younger sister also relocated with them to a farm near Liberty.

In November 1828, McGee purchased some 400 acres of land across the Missouri River in Jackson County. The area was indicated on maps of the period simply as the location of a fur warehouse established by the Chouteaus, a regional fur trading family. McGee acquired more land incrementally over the next decade at prices between \$1.25 and \$1.50 per acre. His holdings eventually comprised a tract of over 1,000 acres, roughly extending south from today's 9th to 23rd streets, and west from Troost Avenue to Summit. The family constructed a log cabin, followed in 1834 by Kansas City's first brick house. The two slaves enumerated in his household in the 1830 census make him Jackson County's first known slaveholder.

Throughout the 1830s, McGee engaged in a number of enterprises. In addition to farming, he purchased a mill from some earlier

French settlers, and when the U.S. relocated various Native American tribes to reservations in the area, McGee was awarded a lucrative government contract to provide the Indians with flour. He operated a distillery and sold whisky, as well. When the town of Westport grew due to increased Santa Fe Trail traffic and Indian trade, McGee established a sawmill to meet the demand for lumber there for new building construction. He probably served as an informal banker, profiting from loans to neighbors.

Eleanor McGee is commonly thought to have managed much of the family's business activities behind the scenes while James McGee groomed his sons to succeed him and encouraged the marriages of his daughters to promising male suitors. For this reason the family continued to prosper after McGee's untimely death on May 26, 1840, at age 54. Eleanor administered the family's extensive holdings successfully for another 49 years, and his 10 surviving children lived to see the city their father envisioned develop upon his now very valuable land. The next generation of McGees continued in the enterprising tradition of their father: among them was Fry McGee, a member of the group of investors who platted the original Kansas City town site; Aaron Burr Harrison (A.B.H.) McGee, a prominent outfitter and businessman; and Elijah Milton McGee, who became a successful real estate developer and served a term as Kansas City's mayor.

Sources

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