

Colonel William McCreight

By William Randolph McCreight

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Born: the 14th of June 1774, Winnsboro, South Carolina

Died: the 7th of November 1859, Winnsboro, South Carolina

Buried: Zion Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Winnsboro, South Carolina

The McCreight family originated in Scotland and later moved to Ireland. On the 29th of October 1772 David McCreight, his wife Mary Harper, three sons: William born in 1735, James born in 1745, David born in 1749 and two daughters (names unknown), sailed from Belfast, Ireland aboard the ship *Pennsylvania Farmer*. They landed in Charleston, South Carolina the 28th of December 1772.

William and his wife Agnes Smith remained in South Carolina, Fairfield County at Winnsboro. James moved to Crooked Creek, Indiana County. David and his wife Martha Orr went to Bath County, Kentucky, then to Tranquility, in Adam County, Ohio.

The McCreights had land arraigned in South Carolina before they arrived. They stayed in Charleston two weeks, to finalize legal matters, before travelling to their land in Winnsboro while the town was still being laid out. They built log cabins where the family lived.

William and Agnes had a son, named William, born on the 14th of June 1774. Two years later William Sr. died on the 5th of December 1776, when his son was two and a half years old. William is buried in the McCreight family cemetery on his father David's land grant near Winnsboro.

William's mother remarried, but he did not get along well with his stepfather. At the age of eight he left home and a year later bound himself as an apprentice to a contractor for four years.

In 1797 William married Agnes Nancy ¹ Austin and built a two-room cabin and a shop in Winnsboro. He manufactured fabrics and began producing mills and cotton gins that remove the seeds from cotton. He built the first cotton gin to process a bale of cotton in South Carolina. He also built the Fairfield County Courthouse in Winnsboro. He ordered the parts of a clock from Europe and installed it in the tower in Winnsboro.

¹ There is dispute about this first name, but Nancy is inscribed on her gravestone. ²

The first house in Winnsboro, S.C., built by William McCreight

In the war of 1812 William commanded a company of Winnsboro light infantry and later resigned this commission to command the 25th Regiment of the South Carolina Militia with the rank of Colonel. He was a Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church for 50 years and President of Sion College for ten years. He was the first intendant [mayor] of Winnsboro and served 15 years, then declined re-election.

In her book *Inventing the Cotton Gin* Angela Lakwete presumes William had a license to produce and sell gins from Eli Whitney. This seems unlikely, because no evidence has been found and William produced a different type of cotton gin than Whitney patented. Although cotton gins had been used since the 1st century AD and were found on every continent, Eli Whitney is generally known as the inventor of the cotton gin. Eli Whitney patented his own design for an improved mechanical roller cotton gin on the 17th of March 1794. The patent was not validated until 1807 and was assigned the number X72. An article published in the *Library of Southern Literature* in 1870 claimed Catherine Littlefield gave the idea to Whitney, because women could not apply for patents.

Fairfield County S.C. courthouse, designed by Robert Mills and built by Colonel William McCreight. The stairs were added later.

Whitney's gin used a roller with hooked spikes and a mesh. Cotton fibers torn off passed through the mesh the seeds could not pass through. Whitney's gin could process fifty-five pounds of cotton per day. It transformed Southern agriculture and cotton became a major part of the national economy.

Whitney and his partner Miller did not sell cotton gins. They charged planters 40% of their yield, paid in cotton, to process their cotton. They could not meet the demand, the gin was 3

simple to produce, and resentment of his payment policy caused planters to infringe Whitney's patent and build gins themselves. Patent laws were weak and legal costs eroded profits. Patent laws were later changed, making it easier to contest infringements, a year before Whitney's patent expired and his company went out of business in 1797.

In 1810 federal census counted 2,741 cotton gins in South Carolina. Roller gins had been largely replaced by saw gins. In some districts there were no roller gins at all. The average saw gin had 40 saws, one had 100 saws, two had 130 saws and the largest had 140 saws. William produced saw gins and his are included in this survey.

The details of William's gins can be found in his newspaper announcements. By 1796, a year before Eli Whitney's company went out of business, at least three other people already held patents for cotton gins. William's newspaper announcement in 1809 said: After seven years of experience he had reached a state of great perfection in cotton saw gin design. This means he did not begin cotton saw gin production until 1802; five years after Whitney's company went out of business. In fact William and his son James both held patents on their own improved cotton gins and they were licensed as far away as Texas and Virginia. William sold his cotton gins for \$3.00 per saw, if the customer picked them up in Winnsboro and \$3.50 per saw if he delivered them to the customer. This means his cotton gins cost an average of \$120.00 FOB or \$140.00 delivered, but could cost up to \$490.00. In the early 1800s this was a substantial investment for a planter.

In 1809 William manufactured fabrics and cotton bags, but apparently after 1812 he concentrated solely on cotton gin and mill production.

Colonel William McCreight imported the parts of a clock from Europe and installed it in the tower in Winnsboro, S.C.

In 1817 in the *Southern Patriot and Commercial Advertiser*, William announced the arrival of English sheet iron for gin saws on 1809 terms. In 1836 William and his son James patented a reverse motion gristmill and improved cotton saw gin. They manufactured these in Winnsboro and also licensed production to Bloomfield & Elliot in Raymond Mississippi.

William's employees included whites, free blacks and ten black slaves. He required all of these employees to attend his daily family prayers. In 1802 a South Carolina planter named William Elliot apprenticed a black slave named April, who may have been Elliot's own son, to William. April served his apprenticeship and continued to work for William, on behalf of Elliot, for a total of fourteen years. He learned blacksmithing, cotton gin production, reading, writing and calculation. In 1816 Elliot released April from slavery. April legally changed his name to William Ellison and opened a cotton saw gin production business in Stateburg. He later became a cotton planter and owned black slaves himself. His businesses survived the civil war and in 1874 the credit agency R. J. Dun & Company rated him as honorable, upright, hard working, industrious and 4

worth \$7,000 to \$8,000.

Books concerning William Ellison's and William McCreight's relationship include:

1. *Stolen Childhood, Slave Youth in 19th Century America* by Wilma King
2. *The Essence of Liberty* also by Wilma King
3. *No Chariot Let Down* by Michael P. Johnson & James L. Roark

These authors present two very different accounts of this relationship:

In chapter one of *Stolen Childhood*, Wilma King wrote about the distress of slave parents at delivering their children into a life of bondage. She described the indifference of April Ellison towards his daughter Maria Ann. April Ellison was freed in 1816. He became a prosperous landowner and bought the freedom of his wife Matilda and their daughter Eliza Ann. Maria Ann, the offspring of another woman remained in bondage. William McCreight, whom he trusted, held title to his daughter, who lived as if she were a free person. After fourteen years of freedom April Ellison finally bought Maria Ann, but never emancipated her. Maria Ann technically remained enslaved.

This unjustly presents William Ellison in a bad light and William McCreight slightly less so. Wilma King failed to mention that the state of South Carolina legislature passed a law in 1820, four years after William Ellison was freed, making it illegal to free slaves. She also did not mention that William McCreight never owned Maria Ann. He helped

William Ellison, with no benefit to himself, with a deed of trust. This was a mechanism used to circumvent the law of 1820 and allow slaves to live as free persons even though it was forbidden to free them.

This is clearly described by Michael P. Johnson & James L. Roark in *No Chariot Let Down*.

No Chariot Let Down says, although many slaveholders wanted to free slaves, by an 1820 act of the South Carolina Legislature, slaves could not legally be freed. The deed of trust was used as a way to circumvent this law. A slave owner could vest the ownership of a slave to a trustee and the terms of the trust allowed the slave to live as a free person. On 17 November 1830, ten years after the act was passed, William Ellison bought his daughter Maria from her owner. He could not free her, but he made a deed of trust with Colonel William McCreight, under whom he had served his apprenticeship, when he was a slave himself. In contrast to what Wilma King calls "*indifference to his daughter*", the deed of trust begins by saying: "*Under consideration of the love and affection I have for my natural daughter Maria*". The deed of trust established de facto freedom for Maria and allowed her to live as a free person with her father, or anyone else he designated. He reserved the right to emancipate Maria, if in the future South Carolina law allowed, or in another state. In the event Ellison predeceased William McCreight, William was to secure Maria's emancipation in South Carolina if possible, or another state, at the cost of Ellison's estate and without contest by the executors. Neither William McCreight nor any of his heirs were to have any right to Maria's services, nor service of any of her children.

William did not own Maria and derived no benefit for himself. Though his participation in the deed of trust he made Maria as free as any slave could possibly be under the South Carolina law of 1820. 5

In later life William sold his house and farm to his eldest son James and went to live on a nearby farm. He died of pneumonia on the 7th of November 1859. He had three sons and seven daughters. He is buried in the Zion Presbyterian cemetery in Winnsboro, South Carolina.

Colonel William McCreight 's gravestone, broken into three pieces, Zion Cemetery Winnsboro, SC

Mount Sion Presbyterian Cemetery in Winnsboro, South Carolina, where many McCreights are buried.

Descendents of Colonel William McCreight

Mary Henry Randolph, wife of Robert Jackson McCreight

Robert Jackson McCreight

1819-1888

Colonel William McCreight's son, **Robert Jackson McCreight** (1819- 1888), took over his businesses.

He married Mary Henry Randolph, the 3rd great-grand-daughter of William Randolph of Turkey Island (1651-1711), who immigrated from England and was the patriarch of the Randolphs of Virginia. They were politically powerful until shortly after the civil war and were related to most of the prominent colonial families. Thomas Jefferson's mother was Jane Randolph (1720-1776), daughter of General Isham Randolph. 6

Margaret Elizabeth Alexander, wife of Edward Oscar McCreight Robert Jackson McCreight's son **Edward Oscar McCreight** (1840-1906), married Margaret Elisabeth Alexander and he moved to Camden where she lived. The Alexanders lived in a house called Tangelwood. Edward Oscar McCreight was a two term mayor of Camden and died in office. Two of his wife's ancestors were mayors of Camden and she was the great-grand-daughter of Abraham Alexander (1717-786), who was chairman of the committee that wrote the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence (from England), almost two years before Thomas Jefferson's declaration. It was read before the Continental Congress and some phrases in the Alexander declaration were used by Jefferson. Her grandfather Dr. Isaac Vardrey Alexander treated General De Kalb, who was wounded 7 times in the Battle of Camden. George Washington said "*General de Kalb came to America and shed his blood to water our tree of liberty.*" Her father

Isaac Brownfield Alexander painted the huge picture *History unfurled* under which South Carolina signed its secession from the Union. It depicted the states he expected to leave the Union, but two of them remained in the Union.

Edward Oscar McCreight 1840-1906
Isaac Brownfield Alexander (1812-1884) self portrait
Tangelwood, the Alexander house in Camden S.C.

The house of Edward Oscar McCreight in Camden, S.C. 7

Beverly Randolph McCreight (1886-1973) and his wife Sarah Katherine Sullivan. Edward Oscar McCreight's son, **Beverly Randolph McCreight** (1886-1973), took over the family business in Camden. He married Sarah Katherine Sullivan, the daughter of Charles Pleasant Washington Sullivan (1859-1946). After the Civil War, his father John Hewelet Sullivan (1821-1899) had a large plantation in Lauren County. An accident left him an invalid in great pain. When the overseer left he said he could no longer manage the plantation. His son Charles took over the plantation at the age of 12 years. Beverly Randolph McCreight's residence in Newton, N.C. The house no longer exists and a bank occupies the site. Later Charles owned eighth hotels in North and South Carolina, Florida and Virginia, including the Camden Hotel, which was described in a newspaper article as the "Elegant

Hotel Camden". It no longer exists and the U.S. Post office is on the site.

Three newspaper clippings of obituaries of Colonel William McCreight were found pasted in the McCreight Family Bible, now in possession of his 3rd great-grandson William Randolph McCreight, born 1934. These are transcribed are below.

Obituary number 1 of Colonel William McCreight

The Winnsboro [S. C.] Registrar announces the death of one of its most venerable and highly esteemed citizens, Col. William McCreight, who has held the office of Ruling Elder in that church [Presbyterian Church of Winnsboro] ever since its organization, fifty years ago; and after referring to the incidents in his history - to his military command - to the civil offices which he held, to his presidency of the Mount Zion College is entrusted, says, and truly - "Thus as a worthy citizen, a brave soldier, and a consistent Christian, he has acted well his role in the drama of life."

Obituary number 2 of Colonel William McCreight,

From the *Winnsboro Register*

Death of Colonel William McCreight

It is ever painful to record the death of a valuable citizen; It is particularly so when he whose name heads this paragraph, has been so closely identified with the growth, the prosperity and the history of a community. The void made by the death of Colonel William McCreight can never be filled. The deceased had passed through the gala days of youth, had met, and bravely struggled with, the realities of manhood and had entered upon the shady paths of old age. On last Thursday night he was attacked with what proved to be pneumonia, and yesterday between the hours of 11 and 12 AM he closed his earthly career. 8

The ruling elders of the Scion Presbyterian Church in Winnsboro included William and his son James. William served for 50 years. Source: *Historical Sketch 1787-1959*, by Charles Spencer McCants

Colonel McCreight has ever been remarkable for his magnanimity and public-spirited enterprise. In 1814 he commanded the "Winnsboro Light Infantry" and with his company was stationed in or near Charleston. For years after the declaration of peace between Great Britain and the United States of America, he retained the command of his company and continued to exercise the salutary influences of his judicious precepts and worthy example. Resigning command of his company he was elected Colonel of the 25th Regiment of the S. C. Militia. Long and faithful did he discharge the duties incumbent on his office, exhibiting throughout a true military spirit worthy of all emulation.

Nor did he neglect the interests of the town of which he has been so deserving an ornament. He was the first intendant [mayor]; and the fact that he retained the office for more than fifteen years, and finally declined re-election, is sufficient evidence of the effective manner in which the duties of the office were discharged. Ever seeking to promote the welfare and happiness of his fellows, we are not surprised to learn that for a long series of years, he labored constantly for the Mt. Zion College. During many years he was president of the Mt. Zion Society; and we hear of his doing incalculable services to the institution when it was in bad odor. In conjunction with General Buchanan he saved Mt Zion from total annihilation. Upon the resignation of Mr. Evans, he was re-elected to the presidency of the society, and for more than ten years faithfully discharged his duties.

Public spirit and constant energetic actions are not incompatible with true religion. Colonel McCreight was elected an Elder of the O. S. Presbyterian Church, when it was first organized in Winnsboro; he has been a working and consistent member for upwards of fifty years.

Thus as a worthy citizen, a brave soldier and a constant Christian, he has acted well his role in the drama of life. And with his hairs silvered by the hand of Time, his form bent by the weight of years, and his spirit sustained by the knowledge of a well-spent life, he has been called to that rest that remaineth for the faithful disciples of Jehovah. The falling leaves are a commentary on our lives. A November wind played among the branches of the bending trees, a psalm of sad and solemn melody. It

was a requiem, which told of the spirit at rest with god. - Winnsboro Register, 8th. 9

**Obituary number 3 of Colonel
William McCreight
Tribute of Respect**

The Church of the redeemer is one, though a part be in heaven and a part on earth. Whether we serve in the church below or the church above, we serve the lord. Whether we live therefore, or die we are the Lord's. - Death may separate us for a time, one from another, and distribute us to different spheres of labor; still we are one, our work is one and the master whom we serve is one.

Since we last met one of our number has been called to a higher, a holier and a more blessed service. The work of Col. William McCreight on earth is done, and the master has given him a higher place. We mourn our loss; we rejoice in his gain.

Col. McCreight was born June 14th, 1774; ordained and installed Ruling Elder of Scion Church, Winnsboro, S. C. June 15th, 1809, and died November 7th 1859. For more than 50 years he served this church in the capacity of Ruling Elder; and a great part of the time, the whole burden of the church was on his shoulders.

While he lived he did not seek honors of men, and now he needs not our encomiums. But it is due to ourselves to perpetuate his memory.

Much might be said of him as a husband, a father, a neighbor, a citizen and a patriot; but it is as a Christian, we shall ever delight to remember him. He exhibited many lovely traits of character, and was unusually free from blemishes. Among his Christian characteristics, which are well worthy of our imitation, we note his large hearted benevolence. He was always ready to sympathize with the suffering, and to aid the needy. His care and his labors were not exhausted on his own family. The welfare of the community in which he lived, of his state and country was always dear to him and to the measure of his ability he was already to aid in extending his blessings ... (here a few lines are missing).

His feelings too were very uniform. As he was found at one time, so might he be expected to be at all times. Consequently, he was very uniform in action. At all times and under all circumstances he exhibited the same Christian character. In his home, in his business transactions and in camp (in 1814 he was stationed in or near Charleston in command of the Winnsboro light infantry), the same governing principles were manifested. He was a man of strong will and determined purpose. He was by no means obstinate in his opinions; but when his opinions were formed, he proceeded forthwith to act accordingly. Nor was it enough that he alone should do right, for as far as his influence extended he endeavored to have others do right also. For many years he had in his employ a large number of persons and they were required to attend daily his family prayers.

Another of his characteristics was cheerful acquiescence in all the dispensations of providence. He passed through many trials, suffered reverses of fortune - still he was free from murmuring; always cheerful, always hopeful. 10

Christian forbearance and forgiveness were eminently characteristic of him. For a long time he conducted an extensive business; had dealings with many men; if he ever suffered wrong or unkindness of anyone, it had to be learned from other lips than his own. He had a great deal of that charity that beareth all things, thinketh no evil. In view of his death the Session adopts the following resolutions:

Resolved 1. That in this Providence we hear the call of God to each of us to be more faithful to do our might whatsoever our hands find to do, for the night of death cometh.

Resolved 2. That we do ever strive to attain more and more of those Christian virtues, which characterized our departed brother.

Resolved 3. That we tender to his bereaved widow, our deep sympathy and fervent prayers, that all the promises in God's Word to the widow may be most fully realized by her; and that we do furnish her with a copy of these resolutions; also that we send a copy of the same to the Southern Presbyterian for publication

Resolved 4. That a blank page in ... (the rest is missing)