McKenzie College, Red River County, Texas

Milton Jordan
As the frontiers of European American settlement moved into the southwest, American education, especially higher education, struggled to keep up. This struggle was evident on the frontier in Texas. From the days of Stephen F. Austin's first settlement through the years of early statehood, many schools, institutes, colleges, and universities were planned and some begun. Not many survived for more than three or four years. One that did was McKenzie College, established in Red River County in Northeast Texas, which survived for over twenty years.

John H. McLean was fifteen years old when he left his home in Marshall, Texas, and traveled approximately 120 miles to McKenzie College. He arrived in the winter and after his first night there found himself, about 4 a.m., awakened in an unheated dormitory room by the ringing of the college bell calling him to morning-prayer. The chapel service began in half an hour and McLean quickly learned that missing chapel meant missing breakfast. He and most of his classmates sometimes headed off to the service with a blanket over their shoulders, their nightshirt over their britches and their shoes untied.

McKenzie College, located near Clarksville, began everyday with early morning prayers, scripture, a lecture, and singing. For those who attended morning-prayer, breakfast followed. Each day, Sunday excluded, continued with recitations, lectures, mid-day and evening prayers, and study until the closing prayer service, often as late as midnight. Students attended mid-week prayer meetings as well. On Sunday morning, prayer and breakfast were followed with Sabbath School, an eleven o'clock service, and an evening service. The College adopted the Bible as "the only sure foundation of moral light." It was to be read daily by every student and "studied as part of the course without which no one can be properly educated." Tom Yarbrough remembers that when he arrived at the college that Dr. McKenzie, founder and president, took him to the library to secure books he would need. Learning that Tom did

---

Milton Jordan is from Georgetown and is the current president of the East Texas Historical Association.
not own a Bible, the McKenzie said, "Well, you must have one; you can't go through this school without a Bible." The course of study, however, went far beyond scripture. The courses listed for college students included Latin (Cicero and Tacitus), Greek (Homer and New Testament), Chemistry, Moral and Natural Philosophy, and Mathematics including geometry and calculus. Electives were offered in Music and Modern Languages, German and Spanish, and other subjects.

The strict, task-filled schedule was purposeful at McKenzie College. The catalogue stated, "We wish every student who comes here to have work to do and plenty of it, to keep constantly at it and to do it well." M. B. Lockett, a student in the later years of the school, said he thought it "was a religious reformatory and to my mind it was a real reformatory." In case students fell behind in their constant work, a "general average of the standing of each student [was sent] monthly to his parent or guardian for the exercise of favorable influence."

Although McKenzie and most of his instructors were Methodists, they did not force their particular brand of Christian practice on their students. B. F. Fuller, a Baptist, said that when he arrived at McKenzie College he was nervous about the difficulty he would have in continuing there. His experience, however, proved different. He continued in school and later, though still a Baptist, taught at McKenzie College.

Like most colleges of that era, McKenzie's extra-curricular activities were tied closely tied to academic goals. The school had two, often competing, newspapers, The Bee, run by the young ladies, and The Owl, run by the young men. John McLean remembered that a later, "more pretentious college paper, The School Monthly, was edited and published by T. P. Patton," a student other students usually referred to as "Tin Pan." The school also supported literary or debating societies, The Philologian, founded in 1854, and The Dialectic, founded a few years later. "These societies contributed much to the social and academic life of McKenzie College." McLean thought that the literary societies were crucial to his and others' learning. After 1860, McKenzie, like most schools, instituted a "military department," to organize the male students into companies for drill each day.

In many ways McKenzie College was typical of the schools of its time. During the first years of Texas' existence as a Republic and a state, "the only institutions of higher education were those that came into being under various religious denominations." The Texas Congress approved, in 1839, a bill to provide fifty
leagues for the endowment of two state colleges.\textsuperscript{15} The first did not open until nearly forty years later.\textsuperscript{16} In 1840 the Rev. Chauncey Richardson, a Methodist clergyman, obtained a charter from the Texas Congress for Rutersville College near La Grange.\textsuperscript{17} Marshall University, located in the city of that name, received a charter in 1842, and Baylor University in Independence was chartered in 1845.\textsuperscript{18} These schools under different names or in different places continue to offer higher education in Texas.

Other efforts to provide higher education in these early years included the University of San Augustine under Presbyterian leadership, and Wesleyan College, another Methodist effort, also located in San Augustine. Washington College, Independence Academy, Nacogdoches University, Guadalupe Academy and Matagorda Academy were also organized or chartered.\textsuperscript{19} These and as many more of a similar nature were short lived usually five to six years at most. In this regard, McKenzie College was atypical. It existed for much longer than other schools of its day and was financially and academically more stable throughout its life. A primary reason for this success was the determination of its founder.

John Witherspoon Pettigrew McKenzie was McKenzie College. He was founder, owner, president, business manager, teacher, chaplain, recreational supervisor, and, with wife Matilda Hye Parks McKenzie, ran the Female Institute and supervised the women’s dorm.\textsuperscript{20} To understand the school and its success, it is necessary to know something of this man and his family.

J. W. P. McKenzie was a North Carolinian who apparently lived in Georgia, Tennessee, and perhaps South Carolina during his younger years. His educational background is obscure.\textsuperscript{21} He was admitted into the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1836 and soon transferred into the frontier Arkansas Conference. The conference sent John and Matilda McKenzie to the Choctaw Tribes in southeastern Oklahoma. In 1839, the Methodist Church were appointed the McKenzies to the Clarksville Circuit, also known as the Sulphur Fork Circuit, in the Republic of Texas.\textsuperscript{22}

The Sulphur Fork circuit involved responsibility for the area from the Red River on the north, east to the Sulphur River on the south, then west to the area of present day Dallas and Denison. It took several months to make a trip around the circuit.\textsuperscript{23} Soon after his arrival, McKenzie purchased 420 acres west of Clarksville. After three or four tours around the widespread Sulphur Fork circuit, McKenzie’s health forced him to take a leave of absence--what Methodists call location.
He located on his Clarksville plantation. Since he was no longer in the Methodist “Itinerant System,” McKenzie named his plantation “Itinerant’s Retreat.” Andrew Davis, one of McKenzie’s early students, described the small beginning of the school at this plantation, “In the first Brother McKenzie [had] only fifteen or eighteen students, taught in a compartment of the dwelling.”

John D. Osburn, whose Southwestern Historical Quarterly essay on McKenzie College is the starting place for the study of the college, claimed that the first term of McKenzie’s school began in the fall of 1841 with approximately sixteen students. These students studied at the high school or elementary levels. Classes met in a small log cabin that measured twenty by sixteen feet. From such small beginnings, in less than fifteen years a full campus had developed. The increase in numbers of students demanded the school move into what Davis called “four splendid buildings.”

The size of the student body and the breadth of instruction grew steadily. By 1845 the enrollment was sixty-three distributed within Elementary, Female, and College departments. Two years later McKenzie College received its charter from the State of Texas. The college, all male, had eighty-six students. The total enrollment, including Preparatory and Female departments, may have exceeded 200. The curriculum of the Female Department at McKenzie was similar to the College course of study. Although basically equal academic work was demanded of them, women who completed their course were awarded diplomas, not degrees. McKenzie Institute received a second charter in 1853.

In 1854, when the fifteen year-old John McLean arrived from Marshall “there were nine professors and teachers and over 300 students.” Frederick Eby, writing in The Development of Education in Texas, asserted that the nine faculty members were probably the largest number of any college in the area at the time. The years 1854 through 1860 mark the high point of McKenzie College. The student body and faculty were at their most numerous and the school’s reputation spread throughout Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, the Territories, and even into Missouri. In these years the College boasted a campus of four large, multi-storied buildings. The president’s home served also as the dormitory for young women. The Main Building housed the chapel, offices, recitation rooms, laboratory, and library, also serving as a book store. The third floor was used by the literary societies for their meetings, debates, and oratory. Two dorms for young men were the Grant and Duke houses, named for their
builders.32

In 1858 the Education Committee of the East Texas Annual Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, within whose territory McKenzie College then operated, reported that the “Institute now numbers between two-hundred and fifty and three hundred students.” The Committee recommended that the Bishop appoint J. W. P. McKenzie as president and that a committee be formed to “receive a regular transfer of the Institute to this Conference.”33 At the time, McKenzie College never belonged to this or any other Conference. “Throughout its existence the college was a private enterprise owned and operated by” J. W. P. McKenzie.34

The last year that McKenzie College was a success was 1860. That year the Catalogue reported an enrollment of 246 students in all departments, instructed by a faculty of eight.35 The surviving Charter for McKenzie Male and Female College is dated in January of that year and signed by M. D. K. Taylor, Speaker of the House, Edward Clark, president of the Senate, and Sam Houston, Governor of the State of Texas. The original of this Charter is in the McKenzie File, Special Collections, Southwestern University Library, Georgetown, Texas.

The Civil War brought an end to the school’s prosperity. War basically emptied the school of male students, decreased the number of females enrolled, and depleted the faculty as well. By the close of the 1860-1861 school year, a majority of the college students were in Texas military units or seeking ways to join one.36 In June 1861, McKenzie deferred the general examinations. These and the Graduation exercises to follow, apparently cancelled, had been a time of excitement and celebration on campus that drew much public attention and large crowds.37

McKenzie College struggled to continue operations on a reduced scale throughout the war and for a few years afterward. It finally proved to be too much. The Trinity, now North Texas, Annual Conference, met in Dallas in October, 1868, and the Education Committee reported that McKenzie College had suspended operation. The Committee recommended that Dr. McKenzie be appointed head of the college and pledged the Conference to build up and sustain it.38 Within a year McKenzie had ended all efforts to sustain the college in Clarksville and was soon involved with Francis A. Mood of Soule University in Chapel Hill, Texas, in establishing the central college for Methodists in Texas, now Southwestern University in Georgetown. McKenzie College is one of four institutions through which Southwestern University traces its history. The other three are Rutersville
and Wesleyan Colleges, previously mentioned, and Soule University. Southwestern, in its library’s Special Collection, also holds the records of these institutions including their charters. Several McKenzie students were involved in the establishment and early years of Southwestern. One of them, John H. McLean, was regent (president) from 1891 - 1897. He had served as vice regent under F. A. Mood in the 1880s.39

Frederick Eby considered McKenzie College to have been “the most prosperous and vigorous institution in the southwest, if not west of the Mississippi River during the period up to the Civil War.”40 Unlike the financial situation of many Texas and area schools which had trouble to stay solvent for any length of time, McKenzie College remained financially secure for over twenty years. This unusual success depended on several factors. The first was the commitment and constant effort of J. W. P. and Matilda McKenzie and their family. Brothers, daughters, sons, sons-in-law, and likely a few nieces, nephews, and cousins were regularly involved in the school and on the plantation. They worked as instructors, agents, dorm supervisors, and overseers at the plantation.41 For brief times the college was nominally under denominational control, but McKenzie himself was always in charge. His determination was essential to continued stability of the college.

Secondly, McKenzie was committed to what today would be called the organic growth for his school. Other schools, such as Methodist projects at Rutersville and Wesleyan, made and announced elaborate plans, secured charters, and sought financial backing from one and all, and were soon defunct. J. W. P. McKenzie began in a different mode. He did not start his school until two years after he settled at Itinerant’s Retreat. He made no attempt to secure a charter or the financial support of others. He taught the few students he could gather each year and developed plans for the next year on the basis of experience.42

Finally, the most significant factor in the twenty year success of McKenzie College was its full integration into the structures of McKenzie’s plantation. His first purchase of 420 acres in 1839 grew steadily over the next twenty years. By 1860 the plantation had grown to over 3,000 acres.43 M. B. Lockett, a student in 1862-1863, was amazed that “the Old Doctor ever fed his students.” It is “beyond my comprehension at this time,” he wrote, “unless he raised everything the students consumed and this most likely he did.”44 According to McKenzie’s daughter, Mrs. Smith Ragsdale, the entire farm was for the use of the college, which included slaves. Corn and wheat for bread and hogs and cattle for meat
supplied the college throughout the year.\(^4^5\) Apparently the plantation never produced cotton.

Other than not raising cotton, McKenzie and his school were fully invested in the Antebellum Southern economy. As Lockett explained, “Dr. McKenzie was a determined pro-slavery man and equally as determined a secessionist. He often entertained us with his notions on these subjects.”\(^4^6\) The plantation was worked by only two slaves in the beginning. As it grew in size McKenzie increased his number of slaves. By 1854 he reported twelve slaves on his plantation tax records. By 1860 the number was twenty five and in 1861 it had grown to thirty six. W. B. Jones noted that “McKenzie College and its closely related plantation were fully integrated into the economic system” of the Old South.\(^4^7\)

The close relation of the school to the plantation economy of its day explains much of its success and also its failure. The collapse of the plantation economy in the South and the end of slave labor was a primary cause of McKenzie College's failure.\(^4^8\) The loss of large numbers of students to the war effort and later to the work once done by slaves, brought the end of the school.

As we have seen, McKenzie struggled for another eight years to maintain the school, but gave it up by 1868. For a brief time, 1873 - 1874, McKenzie served as the first president of Marvin College in Waxahachie. Marvin, another effort at higher education by Methodists, continued only until 1878. McKenzie, who was never comfortable under the direction of others, was in poor health, however, and soon returned to Clarksville and retired. On Monday, June 20, 1881, at 5:30 a.m.--after the time for morning prayer--John Witherspoon Pettigrew McKenzie died at Itinerant's Retreat.\(^4^9\)

The college and its president were remembered into the twentieth century with alumni reunions near the old campus in Red River County. Perhaps surprisingly, these students remembered their time at this “religious reformatory” with much joy.\(^5^0\) The last college building, perhaps the Grant House, was taken down in the 1940s, and some of the timbers used for a new barn.\(^5^1\) A later structure, constructed late in the nineteenth century by one of McKenzie's descendants, was destroyed by fire in October 1990.\(^5^2\) The Texas Historical Commission placed a Medallion Historical Marker at the old school site, located off highway 37, about three and a half miles southwest of Clarksville in 1963. The name, at least, of the school and its founder, is carried into the twenty-first century by the Methodist, now United Methodist Church, in Clarksville,
McKenzie Memorial United Methodist Church.

More than a name, of course, is involved. In its twenty plus years of existence McKenzie College kept before the state of Texas and its people the important role of colleges and universities. Before the state or the larger society had taken their responsibility for it, Dr. J. W. P. McKenzie had made sure that higher education thrived on the frontier.


2. G. C. Rankin, ed., *Texas Christian Advocate*, Dallas (August 2, 1900), p. 4. This issue is often referred to as “The McKenzie Issue,” and is available in the McKenzie File, Special Collections, Southwestern University Library, hereinafter T. C. A.


9. T. C. A., p. 3.


12. McLean, *Reminiscences*, p. 46. The constitution and By-laws of both the Philologian and Dialectic Societies are located in the McKenzie File.


21. John D. Osburn, “McKenzie College,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 63.4 (1960), p. 533n. This essay provides guidance to many of the sources for the study of McKenzie as well as much information on the
College from a native of Clarksville, Texas.


23. R. W. Jones, Southwestern University, p. 70.


33. East Texas Conference, Minutes of the East Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, Nov. 10th-16th, 1858 (Galveston: Texas Christian Advocate, 1859), p. 10, in McKenzie File.

34. R. W. Jones, Southwestern University, p. xi.
35. Catalogue, pp. 3-6.
36. R. W. Jones, Southwestern University, p. 70.
37. R. W. Jones, Southwestern University, p. 72.

41. Davis, "Folk Life," p. 339ff. Also see the Faculty listing in the Catalogue, p. 3.

42. W. B. Jones, To Survive and Excel, p. 32.
44. Lockett, Autobiography, p. 41.
45. R. W. Jones, Southwestern University, p. 73. Jones is here quoting from an unpublished thesis by B. E. Masters which reported an interview with Mrs. Ragsdale published in the Dallas Morning News, May 16, 1926.

46. Lockett, Autobiography, p. 46.
48. R. W. Jones, Southwestern University, p. 75.
49. R. W. Jones, Southwestern University, p. 84.
50. T. C. A., pp. 1-5.
52. Wanda Bray, "McKenzie College Burns," The Clarksville Times (Oct. 11, 1990), in McKenzie File.