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OF THE
Freedmen's Missions
OF THE
United Presbyterian Church,
1862-1904.



Printing Department Knoxville College,
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
OF
Rev. Joseph G. McKee,
The Pioneer Missionary to
The Freedmen in Nashville, Tenn.

BY REV. JAMES McNEAL.

(Published about 1875 in a pamphlet Describing the work among the Colored People in Nashville. Edition was exhausted. Reprinted by Knoxville College in 1903.)

The subject of this sketch was born in County Down, Ireland, and came to the United States when he was about 14 years old, landing at New York. How he passed his youthful days till he entered upon his college life, the writer of this sketch has no means of knowing. In due time, however, he entered Westminster College, in New Willmington, Pa., and after some years of dilligent study, graduated with the honors of his class. After the ordinary course in the Theological Seminary, he entered the ministry of the United Presbyterian Church, to the principles of which he was warmly attached while he lived. He was for some time a missionary in Nebraska, and traveled thousands of miles over the prairies, much of this distance on foot, hunting up the lost sheep, gathering them into the fold, and preaching the Word of life wherever he could find an opportunity. As long distances intervened between the settlements, in these journeys he sometimes had to sleep out on the prairies, with the canopy of heaven for his covering, while the sparkling stars looked kindly down on the slumbers of the lone missionary. Thus laboriously and faithfully he did the work of a pioneer missionary in this then frontier land, "enduring hardships as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

When he closed his labors in the West, his attention was turned to India, where he had an uncle, who was a missionary of the Irish Presbyterian Church, and very much wished that his nephew would join him in that far-off land. The war of slavery, however, which was intended to rivet the chains of four millions

of bondmen, through the overruling providence of God, having produced the contrary effect of knocking these chains to pieces, and the Federal army having opened the way for missionaries among these ignorant, down-trodden creatures, he began to inquire: "Why go to India to teach the heathen there, when there are millions of wretched heathens at our very doors, who can be approached much more easily, and who have at least as strong claims to our Christian sympathies?" He was confirmed in these feelings, when on the 24th of September, 1863, he arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, and found himself in the midst of thousands of fugitive slaves collected about the city. In the presence of their heathenish ignorance, their deep degradation, and their squalid wretchedness, he abandoned all thoughts of going to India, and felt that he was called of God to spend and be spent for the bodies and souls of these abused, miserable immortals. After exploring some other places along the railroad, he chose Nashville as the most favorable spot for opening a mission among the freedmen; and here as missionary of the Second United Presbyterian Synod of the West, he commenced his life-work among the lowly, by opening a school in the First Colored Baptist Church. He came as a friend of the colored man, and in imitation of the Great Friend of sinners, he labored both for his body and his soul. He literally fed the hungry, clothed the naked, sheltered the houseless, whispered consolation in the ears of the dying, and taught to sinners the way of everlasting life. An idea of the nature of his work at the commencement may be had from what he wrote himself in his "Historical Memoranda," from which we now quote:

"As the dreadful winter of 1863-4 set in, when fuel cost from \$25 to \$50 per cord, and rent from \$5 to \$10 per month for a poor leaky room, and other things in proportion, long trains of fugitives might be seen coming in with barely enough of covering to serve the purpose of decency, the stronger before, carrying infants and little bundles, the feebler and little children dragging away behind, with naked feet and legs, plunging through the mud and snow, and at night camping on the wet and frozen ground with

no roof but the clouds. Often have we labored till late at night to get them crowded into quarters, and have been compelled to leave some of them on the street unprovided for, and returning in the morning, have found them beyond the power of cold and hunger: 'Where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.'" Such is only a very small specimen of the scenes in the midst of which he, with his faithful helpers, was called to labor daily during the inclement season of the year. He labored, too, in the face of the bitterest and most fiendish opposition and hate. Stones were thrown at him in the streets, and also through the window into the school.

After his business in Nashville became known to the white people, no one would allow him the shelter of a roof at night. Like the Savior whom he was serving, "he had not where to lay his head." At last he obtained a small house on McLemore street, in which he could have a shelter from the rude blasts of autumn. To the bare walls of this tenement he would return in the evening to rest his weary limbs. We may learn something of the state of his feelings at this time by the following verses, which he hastily jotted down in this lonely place:

I am sitting lone and wearily
 In these silent, empty walls,
 While the faggots crack sounds drearily
 Through the dim unfurnished halls,
 For slavery's poor.

I dream not now as formerly,
 Of the dear in distant lands;
 But sadly ponder what to do
 With these contrabands,
 Starving poor.

Tell me not of Burmah's heathen,
 Far away o'er ocean's foam;
 Teach them, teach them who can reach them,
 We have heathen nearer home,
 God's own poor.

Slavery's prison pens unpeopled,
 Slavery's Bastile bolts unbarred,
 On us pour their pleading myriads,
 Crushed in soul, and body scarred,
 Suffering poor.

Notwithstanding the opposition with which he met, he persevered most unflinchingly, and with a devotion to principle truly heroic in what he conceived to be the straight forward path of duty.

The same benevolent Christian principle that prompted to labor for the downtrodden African, led him to pity the poor prisoners of the Penitentiary, among whom he superintended a Sabbath-school for a long time, with his usual energy, and with the most gratifying results.

He was a most laborious and incessant worker, often continuing at the desk fifteen hours a day. He preached, visited, and cared for the religious interests of the Mission generally; superintended the schools; kept accounts with the Board and teachers, and part of the time was a member of the City Council and Superintendent of Education for the county. He had not a strong physical constitution. His lungs were especially his weak part. His incessant and exciting labors soon began to tell on his health, and as early as March, 1864, after a few weeks of suffering, he had to go North, hoping that, in a short time, he could return to his chosen work. His strength not improving, he repaired to Europe, making a last visit to his aged parents, and passing the summer in Ireland. On December 29 he returned to Nashville, with health much improved, and resumed the management of the Mission.

He was not one who could labor moderately, but whenever and wherever he engaged in work, taxed himself to his utmost strength. After incessant and almost herculean labors, continued almost four years longer, on July 20, 1863, he was taken with a profuse bleeding of the lungs, recurring at intervals till August 5, when the last and greatest bleeding took place, in which he lost about two quarts of blood. At this time he was Superintendent of the Mission, Superintendent of Education for the county, and Alderman for the city. Having resigned all these positions, he, his wife (formerly Miss Ada Arbuthnot, a teacher in the Mission) and babe, left Nashville for Ohio, about August 18, hoping his health would improve.

But his work as a missionary was done, and it only remained for him to show how a Christian could suffer and die. On the 25th of September following, at the residence of his father-in-law, Rev. Arbuthnot, in Harshville, Adams county, Ohio, he peacefully

closed his labors, his suffering and his life, and we trust that his freed spirit went to dwell with that Savior who came to "preach the Gospel to the poor," and "went about doing good."

Thus Rev. J. G. McKee, the Christian philanthropist, the pioneer missionary to the Freedmen in Nashville, closed his laborious career, literally sacrificing his life in the cause of God and downtrodden humanity. He was a man of good natural talent and respectable literary requirements, and an interesting preacher, who might have succeeded well as a pastor in any congregation of the church, but who, from his own choice, labored in missionary fields. He was a man of untiring energy, very systematic in all he did, and possessed of great administrative ability. Hence it was he could perform so much labor, and do it all thoroughly and well. He was a kind and genial companion, possessing much of that ready wit and warmth of feeling so often found in natives of the Emerald Isle. But, better than all this, I think it can be said of him as it was of Barnabas, that "he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of Faith."

"The blessings of those who were ready to perish came upon him" and the colored people mourned for him as if each had lost a father.

Funeral services were held for him in McKee's chapel, Nashville, on October 3, after his death, at 3 o'clock p. m., at which a sermon was preached by his warm personal friend, and one, too, who was engaged in a similar work, Rev. D. I. Robinson, of Edgefield, from I. Thes., iv:14, and appropriate remarks were made by Rev. Mr. Campbell, Pastor of the Second Presbyterian church, and by General Eaton, State Superintendent of Public Instruction. The chapel was literally jammed, and hundreds came who could not gain admittance.

Many cried and sobbed aloud, not being able to endure the thought that their pastor and best friend had left them forever. May his memory long be honored, and while it is honored, may his mantle fall on others, who will go forth and imitate his labors of love in the service of that Savior whose spirit he so faithfully exhibited.