Property History for the McGregor House

A Public Service of the
Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area
PROPERTY HISTORY
McGregor House
Rutherford County, Tennessee
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The Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area (TCWNHA) is a statewide program dedicated to the interpretation and preservation of Tennessee's Civil War and Reconstruction legacies. Partially funded by the National Park Service, the TCWNHA is one of several projects administered by the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University.
Property History

Located at 3867 Asbury Road in Murfreesboro, Rutherford County, the McGregor House provides a representative example of the history of Middle Tennessee's early farms. Through a history of land transfers, the McGregor property retains a connection to some of Middle Tennessee's most prominent early residents. The history of the property showcases the fate of many of Tennessee's early farmsteads as much of the original farmland was sold in the mid-twentieth century for modern development. Despite the loss of much of the property's original acreage, the McGregor House stands as an example of nineteenth century architecture in Middle Tennessee. This report is an effort to record and preserve the site's history in connection to early Rutherford County settlement and the Civil War and Reconstruction experience in Middle Tennessee.

Figure 1. Map showing the location of the McGregor House, courtesy of Google Maps.

The Early Years – The McGregor Family in Tennessee

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pioneers migrated from the east coast to the Western Territory of North Carolina, settling in the territory that would later become the state of Tennessee. First arriving in the Watauga, Nolinchucky, and North Holston settlements in East Tennessee, the area's first settlers moved further west in the 1770s and 1780s, establishing the Cumberland settlement in present-day Middle Tennessee.¹ One of the earliest pioneers traversing the uncharted path from North Carolina to Middle Tennessee was land surveyor Captain John Donelson who was responsible for surveying the Virginia-North Carolina state line. Later, Captain Donelson obtained a large tract of land west of the state line and attended the signing of

the Cherokee treaty at Fort Patrick Henry in 1777, solidifying his power and prominence in the Western Territory of North Carolina.²

Donelson later led a group of pioneers further west into present-day Middle Tennessee. Leaving Fort Patrick Henry, with his wife Rachel Stockley, their children, and an estimated thirty enslaved men and women, Donelson arrived at Big Salt Lick (present-day Nashville) on April 24, 1779.³ Upon reaching their destination, he was one of the 250 colonists at the new Cumberland settlement to sign the Cumberland Compact, which served as the area’s first rudimentary constitutional government.⁴

In the earliest years of settlement in Tennessee, most of the land was partitioned into 640-acre tracts and granted to veterans of the Revolutionary War. Though highly contested territory between the North Carolina General Assembly and the Cherokee Nation, the sale of this land was justified as a necessity in light of the massive war debts accrued by North Carolina. Additionally, North Carolina declared that the Cherokee forfeited all rights to the land through their wartime support of the British.⁵ Owning and selling these large tracts of lands granted land speculators and surveyors the power to shape the landscape of the region.

The Donelson family quickly acquired considerable land in present-day Middle Tennessee by purchasing veterans’ land claims.⁶ While conducting his business of buying and selling large tracts of land in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, Captain John Donelson was killed in 1785. Accompanying Captain Donelson on the trip was his son John.⁷ Born in Accomack County, Virginia in 1755, John Donelson established himself in Middle Tennessee and continued his father’s land speculation and surveying business. Throughout the 1790s, John Donelson acquired a series of Revolutionary War Land Grants totaling nearly 5,000 acres in Davidson and Sumner counties, from which Rutherford County would later be formed.⁸

While the Donelson family was acquiring large tracts of land in present-day Middle Tennessee, the first group of the McGregor family was migrating from Northampton County, North Carolina to Tennessee. The first generation of the McGregor family had immigrated to the United States in 1761. John and Margaret (Thomson) McGregor, departed Scotland with their infant daughter Helen (b. 1761) and settled in Northampton County, North Carolina by 1762. In North Carolina, the McGregors had two more children—twin boys Lewis and Flowers (b. 1762).

⁶ Ray, 6-7.
⁷ Owens, “John Donelson.”
The Revolutionary War and the subsequent political battle over North Carolina’s western territory shaped the McGregor family’s experiences. Arriving in the American colonies on the brink of the American Revolution, the McGregor family quickly undertook the cause of their new homeland. As a new immigrant, John McGregor mustered into the 2nd Continental Artillery Regiment in 1778 for three years of service. Although the specific details of John’s personal life remain unknown, it is clear that he returned to North Carolina following his military service, where in 1790 he recorded fifteen persons in his household—two white males, four white females, and nine enslaved individuals.

Before and during the Revolutionary War, the area known today as Tennessee was an uncultivated frontier. At the conclusion of the French and Indian War, King George III issued the Proclamation of 1763, which appropriated the land west of the Appalachians as Native American territory thereby prohibiting settlement by colonists. Despite this proclamation, colonists moved west over the Appalachian Mountains in search of new fertile farmland. The defiant nature of these early trans-Appalachian settlers led to their support for a large-scale rebellion against the British. Thus, the western territory of North Carolina became a pro-independence region.

Following the conclusion of the war, this same group sought statehood from Congress. The earliest attempt at forming an independent state was in 1784; however, North Carolina and Congress refused to recognize the new state and it dissolved by 1789. After North Carolina ceded its western territory to Congress in 1790, settlers attempted statehood once again. In 1796, Tennessee became the 16th state in the Union.

Although John and Margaret McGregor established roots in North Carolina, their children would soon leave and head for the newly admitted state of Tennessee. Just four years before John McGregor’s death in 1797, his son Flowers McGregor departed North Carolina and became the first of the McGregor family to settle in Tennessee. On October 5, 1793, at thirty-one years old, Flowers married his wife Polly Payne in Sumner County. Together they had three children—John (1794 – 1836), Ransford (1801 – 1882), and Albert (1803 – 1860).

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Flowers and Polly McGregor joined the early settlers in Middle Tennessee, though they lacked the influence the McGregor family would later hold. As in other places of early settlement, present-day Rutherford County's land was concentrated in the hands of a few land speculators, such as the Donelson's. This concentration of land granted these families considerable wealth and power. In *Middle Tennessee 1775–1825: Progress and Popular Democracy on the Southwestern Frontier*, historian Kristofer Ray explains:

Men such as James Robertson, John Donelson, Isaac Bledsoe, and Kasper Mansker set up stations to defend the small white community, assess contested lands, gather claims of their own, and use padded surveys to increase their acreage. This group would use their eastern connections, their access to and control over tens of thousands of acres, and their position at the head of local militia companies to become the frontier elite in the 1770s and 1780s. Therefore, while Flowers and Polly McGregor were among the earliest permanent settlers in what would become Rutherford County, they were never as powerful as the early land surveyors. Flowers and Polly McGregor did, however, raise a family, laying the foundation for the McGregor family's prominence in the region.

Following the establishment of Rutherford County in 1803 from land in nearby Davidson, Wilson, Williamson, and Sumner Counties, the town of Jefferson was named the county seat until being moved to Murfreesboro in 1811. Evidence suggests that Jefferson is where the McGregor family initially established roots in Rutherford County. After the county seat was moved to Murfreesboro, brothers John and Ransford McGregor gained prominence in Jefferson and played a role in the civic affairs of the town. Ransford was heavily involved in the purchase and transfer of many of the town's original lots during the 1820s and 1830s. John McGregor served as Jefferson's postmaster from October 1827 until August 1835, resigning his position just five months before his death.

In Rutherford County, the McGregor family was introduced to multiple influential families, notably the Donelson and Wade families. In the 1820s, marriage solidified the McGregor family's connection to the Donelson family, which contributed to the growth of the McGregor family's economic prosperity. In 1825, John McGregor (1794–1836), War of 1812 veteran and former Tennessee Adjutant General, married Milbry Donelson (1806–1836) of Davidson County, a relative of President Andrew Jackson's wife Rachel Donelson Jackson. The previous year, in 1824, John McGregor extended the

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13 Ray, 7.
McGregor family’s practice of using enslaved labor with the purchase of an enslaved man and woman from Turner B. Henley. Then, between 1825 and 1837, John and his brother Ransford received four land grants in Rutherford County. In two separate entries dated September 07, 1825, the state of North Carolina granted John McGregor a total of 95 acres on the east fork of the Stones River. John then received another large land grant in September 1835 for 135 acres adjoining the McGregor family’s growing plantation in Rutherford County.

An integral character in the story of the McGregor’s rise to prominence was Levi Wade. In 1819, Wade migrated from Maryland to Rutherford County, Tennessee, where he quickly became a “potent factor in the advancement and development of that county.” Wade’s involvement in Rutherford County’s development is best exemplified through his work securing the Nashville, Murfreesboro, and Shelbyville Pike; as a member of the Board of Directors for the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad; and as a representative for Rutherford County in the 1839 – 1840 state legislature. Wade, like others before him, used his success and influence to gather large land estates in Tennessee. Additionally, Wade became an extensive slaveholder, owning an estimated one hundred enslaved individuals at the start of the Civil War, and helped the McGregors, specifically Ransford and Albert, acquire the enslaved labor used on their first farm. Levi Wade became an acquaintance of the McGregor family, serving as a guarantor in the execution of John McGregor’s will in 1835 and providing Albert McGregor (1803 – 1860) with enslaved labor until his death in 1860.

In the 1830s, on the land John McGregor received in the land grants of the 1820s and 1830s, situated near the intersection of the present-day West Jefferson Pike and Interstate 840, John and Milbry McGregor built what has since become known as the McGregor-Gooch-Holloway House. However, both John and Milbry died in 1836 before the house was completed. Following John’s death in 1835, Ransford oversaw the completion of the construction and resumed the business of John’s 880-acre

17 Rutherford County Deed Book Q, p. 75.
21 Sowell, 34.
plantation. John’s two brothers, Ransford and Albert, continued to live in this house until the early 1850s.

Ransford married Isabella S. Henderson in 1834, and together the couple had seven children between 1836 and 1848. The Early Tax List Records for Rutherford County in 1837 shows that Ransford McGregor had 883 acres of land valued at $18,000 and four enslaved individuals, though evidence suggests this is likely a record of the McGregor-Gooch-Holloway house. The McGregor family continued to increase their farming operations to a full plantation, with Ransford and Albert owning a combined thirty-eight enslaved persons by 1840. However, Ransford McGregor and his family would only remain in the house until the 1850s, when Dr. Nathaniel Gooch purchased the home. Fire destroyed this house in the 1940s, likely contributing to the McGregor family’s move to the property on Asbury Lane.

The McGregor House

According to Betty M. Denton’s 1972 article in College, the core of the present-day McGregor house was built circa 1830 by Ransford McGregor as a “two-room affair with a dog trot or breezeway in between.” Physical evidence shows a log core of the dwelling and the width of the central hall indicates that the hall may be a filled-in open passage. However, there are no primary source documents to verify a circa 1830 date of construction or that Ransford McGregor built the house. The first record of the present-day property containing the McGregor House is in May 1830, when the heirs of William Donelson, which included John and Milbry McGregor, appointed their attorney John Fletcher to sell the 430-acre tract of land on the West Fork of the Stones River. In October of that year, Alexander Smith purchased 225 acres, and in 1837 the remainder of the William Donelson land was sold to John Madley for $1000. No evidence exists suggesting that any of the McGregor family lived on the property at that time.

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23 West H. Humphreys, p. 426-436.
26 Lamb, p. 152.
29 Rutherford County Deed Book 1, p. 199-200 (October 22, 1830); Rutherford County Deed Book W, p. 308-09 (April 24, 1837).
The first record of the McGregor's living or using the land in question is the 1860 U.S. Federal Census, which indicates that Ransford McGregor, believed to be living in the present-day McGregor house at this time, was a "tenant" who claimed no real estate. Thus, at this time, Ransford McGregor was not the owner of record for the farm on which he lived and worked. However, in a deed recorded on May 25, 1869, between Levi Wade and four of Ransford's children—John Lawson, Joseph, William, and Ransford P.—the McGregor's purchased 120-acres of land from Levi Wade in Civil District No. 7, bounded "on the West by Overall's Creek, on the east by the lower lands of Mrs. Eliza Burris, on the North by the other lands of [Levi Wade], and on the South by the Asbury Church."  

The McGregor children all received equal shares of this property, and in the census for 1870, they each claimed twenty acres of improved land and ten acres of wooded land.  

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30 Rutherford County Deed Book 16 Page 382.  
Though the McGregor family did not officially own the land and house that bears their name until after the Civil War, the gruesome three-day Battle of Stones River brought the destruction and death of the war directly to the McGregor family, devastating the farmland and changing their lives forever.

**A Union Field Hospital: The McGregor House and the Battle of Stones River**

One of the Civil War’s bloodiest battles occurred in Murfreesboro over a three-day period in 1862–1863.\(^\text{32}\) Although the Battle of Stones River was short, for the residents of Murfreesboro the Civil War brought considerable changes that altered the town’s landscape and economy. At the onset of the war, Murfreesboro’s residents anticipated a “short and relatively painless war”; however, Murfreesboro’s placement along the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad made it a strategic and valuable position.\(^\text{33}\) Following the Union occupation of Nashville in February 1862, Murfreesboro became a target for both Union and Confederate forces.

Whites who lived in town were Confederate-sympathizers and the arrival of 1,500 Union troops in Murfreesboro in March 1862 negatively impacted the town’s morale.\(^\text{34}\) The back-and-forth occupations of Murfreesboro throughout 1862 left the town shaken on the brink of the Battle of Stones River as it remained occupied by Union forces until September. The arrival of General Braxton Bragg’s Confederate forces in November, and the subsequent visit by Confederate President Jefferson Davis in mid-December 1862 was a welcome relief for the white occupants of Murfreesboro.\(^\text{35}\)

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\(^{34}\) Van Zelm, 13.

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When the fighting ensued from December 31, 1862, to January 2, 1863, Murfreesboro was quickly "overwhelmed with severely wounded men, who were cared for in churches, hotels, schools, homes, and the courthouse" as more than 24,000 casualties were sustained in the three-day battle. 36 The McGregor House was one of the houses commissioned for use as a field hospital. The proximity of fighting to the McGregor House directly contributed to its use as a Union field hospital. Fighting on Asbury Lane began as Union and Confederate forces sought to maintain control of the Nashville Pike. Asbury Lane served as a "critical escape route for Union forces...as the Confederates advanced toward Nashville Pike. During the first day of the battle, heavy fighting occurred along the lane, which became a mass of confusion with soldiers retreating while Union officers attempted to establish a defensive line." 37

36 Van Zelm, 14.
Indicative of this degree of fighting that occurred on Asbury Lane, both the McGregor House and the nearby Widow Burris House were used as Union field hospitals. The Widow Burris house was occupied by Union reinforcements that arrived to prevent the Confederates from capturing the Nashville Pike. The fields surrounding the Widow Burris House and Asbury Church (no longer extant) were the site of brutal fighting and an eventual victory for the Union victory as they halted the Confederate advance. Betty Denton explains that both Union and Confederate forces used the McGregor House as a field hospital:

Within a short time, the converted hospital changed hands. Initially, the Union troops used the facilities, but after an on surge of Confederate harassment troops under the command of General Joe Wheeler and Patrick Claibourne, during December of 1862, the Yankees were gradually pushed out of the McGregor and Overall Creek Site. Evacuation of the hospital was made quickly by the Union soldiers. Confederate

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troops overran the home and began to use it as a hospital and vantage point for their maneuvers.\textsuperscript{40}

For many of the families throughout Middle Tennessee, the losses in the war far surpassed the loss of private property and space. The McGregor family experienced this loss firsthand when Donelson McGregor (b. November 6, 1830), nephew of Ransford McGregor, was killed in combat at Murfreesboro on December 31, 1862.

Born in November 1830, to John and Milsby McGregor, Captain Donelson McGregor remained in Rutherford County until the McGregor-Gooch-Holloway house was sold in the 1850s. Joining his brother Flowers (1828 – 1872) in Jefferson County, Arkansas, the youngest generation of the McGregor brothers became large landowners and amassed considerable fortunes in the rich and fertile lands of the Arkansas Delta. The 1860 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedule indicates that Flowers McGregor owned forty-eight enslaved people, while Donelson owned eleven and the brothers owned real estate valued at more than $100,000.\textsuperscript{41} While slavery occurred in every part of the state, the McGregor’s slaveholdings would have placed them in the upper echelons of Arkansas’ antebellum society. According to Arkansas historian Carl H. Moneyhon, “Although slavery clearly touched the lives of many white Arkansans, most slave owners possessed only a few slaves...A relatively large slave holding [in Arkansas] would have been ten slaves.”\textsuperscript{42} Like their family in Rutherford County, the McGregor brothers used the institution of slavery to further their on economic position. Given the extensive use of enslaved labor on their Arkansas farms, it comes as little surprise that the both Flowers and Donelson served the Confederacy during the war.

With the onset of the Civil War, Donelson McGregor organized a group known as “Clan McGregor” in Pine Bluff, Jefferson County, Arkansas on May 1, 1861.\textsuperscript{43} The group soon became Company D of the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment and entered into Confederate service at Lynchburg, Virginia in July 1861. When Arkansas seceded from the Union in May 1861, the First Arkansas was mustered into service.\textsuperscript{44} In March 1862 the regiment was relocated to Tennessee, where it suffered considerable losses during the Battle of Shiloh, before being transferred to Braxton Bragg’s Army of

\textsuperscript{40} Denton, Z4.


Tennessee. Following the Confederate failure to invade Kentucky in the fall of 1862, the First Arkansas Infantry was stationed in Murfreesboro.45

By the time the unit reached Murfreesboro, Donelson McGregor was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel of the First Arkansas Regiment. Participating in the first day of fighting during the Battle of Stones River, the First Arkansas Infantry captured a four-gun Union artillery battery before retreating to Tullahoma on January 3, 1863.46 During the three days of fighting, this roughly 500-man regiment reported eleven killed and ninety wounded.47 Unfortunately, Colonel Donelson McGregor was one of the unit’s wounded. Although he received treatment in one of Murfreesboro’s many Union hospitals, his wounds proved fatal.48 For his gallantry, Colonel McGregor was posthumously awarded the Confederate equivalent of the Medal of Honor.49

During the Battle of Stones River, the Union won a crucial victory, securing the fertile agricultural lands and transportation networks that sparked the Union’s “March to the Sea” as well as halting the Confederate Army’s drive north.50 For the residents of Murfreesboro, however, the Battle of Stones River and the subsequent defeat of the Confederacy fundamentally altered their town and their way of living.

Figure 6. Exterior view of the L-shaped addition constructed by the McGregor children after the Civil War.

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45 Christ, “First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (CS).”
46 Christ, “First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (CS).”
After the War

In the years after the war, the McGregor family rebuilt their farm and attempted to re-establish the prominence they enjoyed before the Battle of Stones River. Despite their efforts, however, the farm and family never returned to their pre-war prominence. According to Betty Denton, the McGregor house was “torn down and moved 300 feet from its original foundation” and an L-shaped addition constructed at some time during the 1860s.51

Ransford P. McGregor (1848 – 1902) was the first of the children to leave the McGregor House, following in his cousin’s footsteps and relocating to Arkansas. In 1878, Ransford P. had settled in Cotton Plant, Jefferson County, Arkansas. There, he became “one of the principal landholders of the county, rising from the possessor of a few hundred to one of the [most] wealthy and influential men of the county.” By 1880, Ransford P. was the owner of a 3,000-acre farm in Cotton Plant. He lived the remainder of his life in that town, until his death in 1902.52

Following Ransford McGregor’s death in 1882, the three of his children that remained in Rutherford County—John Lawson (1840 – 1919), Joseph (b. 1844), and Violet (b. 1842)—maintained ownership of the property and remained together in the McGregor House throughout the end of the nineteenth century. According to the 1900 U.S. Federal Census, Joseph, John, and Violet resided in the house with Joseph listed as the head of household; however, by 1910, Joseph was listed as a boarder in a home

51 Denton, 25.
off College Street in Murfreesboro, and no census data exists for the remaining McGregor children.

**Twentieth Century History**

Details of the ownership of the McGregor house after the McGregor family remain unclear; however, a deed dated August 17, 1943, recorded with the Rutherford County Register of Deeds notes the sale of two tracts of lands containing 132.64 acres along Overall Creek from S.N. and Susie H. (Hembree) Overall to Lucy Meriwether and Judith Browning for the sum of $15,000.\(^{53}\) This deed reports that the first tract, comprising 129.6 acres along Overall Creek near Asbury Church was “inherited by A. J. Hembree and purchased from his heirs.”\(^{54}\) The second tract was purchased from Sam N. Overall. Thus, these deeds indicate that the Overall/Hembree families maintained possession of the property until Judith Browning Sikes and husband, McCullough Hord Sikes, purchased the property in 1943. When the Overall/Hembree families acquired the property remains unknown. During their time in the house, the Sikes family operated a dairy farm, cattle farm, and horse riding school that remained a mainstay of the Middle Tennessee community for nearly fifty years.\(^{55}\)

The Sikes family remained on the property for thirty-five years before making any significant alterations to the property. From the late 1970s to the early-1990s, Judith Browning Sikes sold all but nineteen acres of the original McGregor land, most of it sold to TERRACO, who turned the property into the Reed Downs neighborhood. In 2001, the property was sold to Alan and Gail Wanda Lamb, who engaged in major renovations and restoration work to preserve the historic fabric of the home.

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\(^{53}\) Rutherford County Deed Book 91, p. 243-45.

\(^{54}\) Rutherford County Deed Book 91, p. 243-45.

\(^{55}\) Lewright B. Sikes, Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities – Rutherford County Chapter – McGregor House Application. May 1, 2005.
In official publications from the National Park Service, the McGregor House is shown just outside the boundaries of the Stones River National Battlefield and is listed as a Union field hospital. Although not one of the stops on the self-guided tour created by the National Park Service, the McGregor House is included as one of the “features from the time of the battle.” Its inclusion in the Stones River National Park documents highlights the proximity of the battle to the McGregor property and affords the property federal recognition as an affiliated site.

Today, the McGregor House sits upon the same nineteen acres that the Sikes family maintained and retains much of the integrity of the original landscape, though in a considerably downsized form. Although no primary source evidence exists suggesting that the McGregor family did, or did not, construct the house that bears their name, the property and its history highlights the evolution of the McGregor family in Middle Tennessee and the broader South. Furthermore, it highlights the lasting impact of the Civil War on the Rutherford County landscape and the families that lived through the brutalities of the Battle of Stones River.

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