

**MEMORIAL OF ROBERT MCCORMICK:  
BEING A BRIEF HISTORY OF HIS LIFE,  
CHARACTER AND INVENTIONS  
INCLUDING THE EARLY HISTORY OF  
THE MCCORMICK REAPER**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649334070

Memorial of Robert McCormick: Being a Brief History of His Life, Character and Inventions including the early history of the McCormick Reaper by Various

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**VARIOUS**

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CHICAGO:  
BARNARD & GUNTHER, PRINTERS, 44 & 46 LaSALLE STREET.  
1885.

H.

## PREFACE.

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This book is a photo-engraved reprint of a pamphlet printed in Chicago in 1885. As it contains much valuable history, it is thought to be a suitable compliment to "Overlooked Pages of Reaper History, Chicago, Illinois, 1897." The name of the author is not given in the original publication, but the contents show plainly an effort to establish the fact that to Robert McCormick and Leander McCormick of Virginia belongs the credit of inventing the McCormick reaper.

J. RUSSELL PARSONS,  
LEWIS MILLER,  
JOHN F. STEWARD.

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, June, 1898

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## ROBERT McCORMICK.

SKETCH OF HIS BIRTH, LIFE, CHARACTER, INVENTIONS, ETC.

Robert McCormick, the subject of this sketch, was the sixth child of Robert and Martha (Sanderson) McCormick; he was born June 8, 1780, in a large old-fashioned log house on "Walnut Grove" farm, his father's homestead, in Rockbridge county, Virginia. His father, Robert, was a native of Central Pennsylvania, having been born near Harrisburg in 1738. His grandparents, Thomas and Elizabeth (Carruth) McCormick, came to America from the North of Ireland, in 1735.

Mr. McCormick received a common school education at a country school, near his own home, and was brought up by his parents according to the strictest tenets of the Seceder branch of the Presbyterian church.

On February 11, 1808, he married Mary Anna Hall, daughter of Patrick and Susan (McChesney) Hall.\*

Mr. McCormick was a man of great energy, and determination of character, but withal of a most kind and generous disposition. He was highly esteemed as an upright, reliable citizen, a man of great moral worth, and one "whose word was as good as his bond."

When advised by his lawyer at one time when in financial trouble (brought about through the rascality of his partner) that he could legally evade paying his debts that were pressing him, by putting his property out of his hands, his reply was "no, I would rather die and leave my children without one dollar, than that it should ever be said that their father had done a dishonest act."

Throughout his life he took great pleasure in the acquirement of historical and scientific knowledge, and was very fond of astronomy. He subscribed to the leading magazines of the day, and kept himself well posted in all that was transpiring around him.

He was a man of remarkable mechanical genius, and seldom failed to accomplish what he undertook. Having blacksmith and carpenter shops, and being himself naturally a good workman with

\* Patrick Hall was born in Armagh county, Ireland, in 1751, emigrated to America in 1770 and settled in Augusta county, Va., where he married Susan McChesney about the year 1775.



almost any kind of tools, it was no hard matter for him to make whatever he desired of either wood or iron.

The first record we have of his endeavors in the line of invention was in the construction of a reaping machine, on which he worked and experimented from and after 1809. From the nature of the testimony concerning his early inventions in this line, it would appear that he may have constructed more than one machine between the years 1809 and 1825. At all events, there is evidence to show that he was engaged at various times during those years, experimenting on his reaper, and that he used various devices for cutting, and in all probability he made more than one complete machine during all those sixteen or seventeen years. This would seem to be corroborated by the statements, first, of his nephew (Robert McCormick), who says that his father told him that the said Robert McCormick had invented a reaper in 1809; second, of his son Cyrus, who states that his father had invented a reaper in 1816; third, by Robert McCormick (his nephew), again, who states that his uncle Robert showed him in the year 1825 or 1826, a machine he had just invented.

His first machine is described as being in outline and general form very much like the reaper of the present day. It ran on two wheels, with a platform to receive the grain in the rear of the cutting apparatus. One of the cutting devices he used on this machine was a system of rotary saws, about eight or ten inches in diameter, which revolved, shear fashion, past the edge of a stationary knife. The saws were driven by bands from a cylinder, which was turned by the revolution of the main wheels of the machine. This machine had vertical reels (very similar to some of those used at the present day) to sweep the grain across the cutters, and when cut, delivered it on a platform in the rear of the cutters, and an endless apron carried it across the platform and delivered it on one side of the machine. Another cutting device which he used consisted of stationary curved sickles, against which the grain was forced and cut by vertical reels with pins in their peripheries. The horses walked at the side of the grain, drawing the machine, and were attached to it by shafts or a pole. The machine was not what would be called a success, but it had the main features that are vital in the construction of all grain cutting machines of the present day, and therein justifies the claim made for its author, of originality of thought, and priority of invention, and demonstrates beyond a doubt that in him was the conception of, and to him belongs the credit of inventing, and constructing the first reaper which cut grain successfully. The certificates printed hereafter clearly establish the fact that he anticipated, in nearly all essential and vital points, every other American or English reaper. The

parts of his early machine were for many years stored away in the loft of the old malt house, on the home farm, and were familiar objects to those about the farm.

Recognizing the imperfections in the machine, and always on the alert for improvements, between the years 1828 and 1830\* he invented and applied to it what is known as the vibrating sickle and the horizontal reel. By this combination his reaper became a practical success. His neighbors, who up to that time had made light of his efforts and reflected upon him for wasting time that they thought he could have applied to much better advantage by attending to his farm duties, now began to appreciate the greatness of his inventions, and to recognize in the McCormick Reaper the pioneer of the greatest labor-saving farm implement that the world had produced. Like its predecessor, but to a greater degree, in its characteristics this machine comprised the essential features of all successful grain-cutting machinery of the present day. It was drawn by two horses that walked in front of the main frame and close to the standing grain. It had one main driving wheel in the main frame, and a grain wheel or slide at the outer end of the platform. It had a cutter bar, attached to and back of which was the platform on which the grain fell. The grain was cut by a vibrating sickle, and carried back to the sickle and cast down upon the platform by a revolving horizontal reel. The reel had slats, or ribs, which dipped into the grain in front of the sickle. The grain divider of the machine was a long pointed piece of wood extending some five feet forward of the sickle, to support the grain end of the reel. The entire side of the machine, from the point of the divider named to the rear corner of the platform and across the back of the platform, was surrounded with an upright canvas about three feet in width. The grain was raked off at the side in bundles by a man who walked beside the machine. The driver did not ride on the machine, but on one of the horses that drew it.

During the years previous to 1844 there were a number of machines built. In 1844 there were twenty-five built. In 1845 there were fifty built. In 1846 there were seventy-five built, in the latter L. J. owned one-third.

All of the work on these machines was done under the direction of Robert McCormick, who continued to be actively engaged in the manufacture and improvement of his reaping machines until his death in 1846.

From this modest beginning dates the history of the vast business of manufacturing grain and grass cutting machinery, which at the present day, gives employment, directly and indirectly, to tens of

\* See certificate of William S. McCormick, pages 7, 8 and 9.

thousands of men, affords investment for millions of dollars, and turns the countless wheels of an amount of machinery that, were it possible to give the figures, it would seem incredible. When we think of the thousands of reaping and mowing machines that are annually sold to the farmers on every continent, and the millions of such machines that are now in operation, what man can look at the record of Robert McCormick's perseverance and success, in the face of innumerable obstacles, without feelings of reverence and admiration for the man in whose brain was the inception, and through whose mechanical skill and ingenuity was the successful application of an invention which has proven so great and world-wide a boon, not only to the farming community, but, indirectly, to all civilized mankind.

But the reaping machine was not the only mechanical problem that commanded the thought and inventive genius of Robert McCormick. He found time to exercise his inventive mind in other directions as well, and reaped harvests of success in several other mechanical inventions, briefly described as follows:

In the winter of 1830-31 there was a great deal of talk and much in the newspapers on the subject of raising hemp. Only one thing seemed to be in the way of its becoming a very profitable product, and that was the difficulty of cheaply and profitably reducing the fiber to its required marketable shape. Acting on this seeming demand, Robert McCormick invented a very ingenious and perfect working hemp-break, and in connection with it a horse-power, by which it was driven, and in the fall of 1831 he operated it successfully. He also invented a machine for cleaning the hemp when broken. The excitement over hemp-raising, however, dying out, the demand for the machines never amounted to much, although a number of them were built and sold.

Mr. McCormick at another time invented and manufactured a very ingenious threshing machine, in connection with which he made a horse power of peculiar construction.

He also built a clover sheller of stone, resembling an ordinary mill somewhat, but never did anything with it except for his own use. He also invented and made a blacksmith's bellows, which was of a tub form, and of which he built and sold a large number.

He invented a water power that worked by confined pressure, somewhat on the principal of the steam engine.

He also invented a hill-side plow,\* for which alone he is entitled to rank among the first inventors of the age, and had it not been for the invention and perfection of the reaper, it would probably have made the name McCormick as well known in connection with

\* See letter of Wm. S. McCormick, pages 7, 8 and 9.