

OAKBOURNE

(McChesney Homestead)



Bruce Macdonald

HISTORY

Three generations of McChesneys, and their enslaved people, lived on a homestead extending north to the edge “of the Brownsburg lots.” In 1778, James McChesney purchased a 612-acre parcel south of Brownsburg that was the 1750 Borden grant to Robert Kirkpatrick. By 1787 the homestead consisted of 580 acres, and ownership passed to his son Robert in 1793. The tax value tripled in 1797, suggesting a house may have been built that year. Robert eventually owned more than 1,500 acres in the county, and distributed his holdings to his sons. George McChesney became the owner of the homestead about 1840, and after moving to Roanoke County sold it to his brother Zachariah in 1850. Zachariah sold it to brother Adam in 1868, and in 1884 Adam sold it to Henry P. Mitchell of New York. Thomas S. Rees bought it from Mitchell in 1906 and his descendants have owned the historic house down to the current owners.

OCCUPANTS

James McChesney, a native of Ireland, and his wife, Sarah, raised their children at the homestead. Their son Robert (1768–1842) married Elizabeth Johnston (1768–1848) in 1792. She was the daughter of Captain Zachariah Johnston, an early landowner near Brownsburg. Their son George ran the farm for about ten years, and though Zachariah McChesney became the owner in 1850, it is doubtful he lived there because he owned a large home at Spring Hill in Augusta County, and census records show him living there.

SLAVERY AT THE McCHESNEY HOMESTEAD

James McChesney owned seven enslaved people in 1783: Nancy, Peter, Bridget, Henry, Willy, Charles and Jenny. Over the years the number of enslaved people increased. Anne (or Annie) Redd (1795–1873), said in an 1873 deposition that she was owned by Robert McChesney as a child, and in 1816 was given to Robert’s daughter Ann when she married Isaiah McBride. Dr. David Green,



The slave dwelling at Oakbourne, the McChesney Homestead.

David Green (top) and Maurice Miller (bottom, at the grave of his ancestor Levi Miller in Lexington's Evergreen Cemetery), discovered that they share an ancestor, Annie Redd, who was enslaved at the McChesney Homestead.



associate professor in the University of Virginia engineering department, researched his family history and determined that his ancestors were enslaved at the McChesney Homestead. Maurice Miller, also a descendant of McChesney slaves, conducted his research individually in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Their work converged and they concluded that they have a common ancestor, Annie Redd, and are distant cousins. They have connected with each other through correspondence and both have visited the site of the McChesney slave house.



For the 1830 census Robert McChesney reported 16 enslaved people, and in his will transferred ownership of some of them to his wife, Elizabeth, for life, and then to son George. The people named were Deaton, Jim, Elick (Alec), Frank, Hannah, Sukey "the elder," and her granddaughter Sukey, Evelina and her son George. Sukey, Hannah and two other enslaved people owned by Robert McChesney, Dinah and William, were communicants at New Providence Presbyterian church. Zachariah McChesney reported five enslaved people in Rockbridge County for the 1850 census, and seven in 1860, including Maria, Monis, Hannah, Joe and Ben.

EXISTING SLAVE HOUSE

The house is of typical brick masonry construction with a standing seam metal roof. There are two rooms, each with a fireplace,

with no connecting doorway. One of the rooms was converted to use as a milk house by the Rees family in the early 1900s and has a concrete floor. There is a full-length open front porch. Unique double-arch brick masonry caps cover the two chimneys. The dormer-type construction, originally having a stairway, provided access to the loft. The adjacent period log cabin has a fireplace and may also have been a slave house.

By Larry Spurgeon and Paul Hahn, with generous assistance from the research of David Green and Maurice Miller.

The rear of the slave dwelling (brick, right), with log cabin, which may have been another slave dwelling, at left.



Unrestored interior of the McChesney Homestead slave dwelling.