McKim, James Miller

(14 November 1810–13 June 1874)

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McKim, James Miller (14 November 1810–13 June 1874), antislavery and freedmen's relief official, antislavery and freedmen's relief official, was born in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, the son of James McKim, a tanner, and Catherine Miller. In 1831, three years after graduating from Dickinson College, McKim was swept up by the evangelical movement known as the Second Great Awakening and began what would be an often interrupted preparation for the ministry. Then, in 1833, a local black barber persuaded him to read William Lloyd Garrison's *Thoughts on African Colonization* (1832), which attacked the prevailing reformist view that America's racial problems could best be resolved by expatriating slaves and free Negroes to Africa. As McKim later recalled, this experience led to his sudden and complete conversion to immediate emancipation, a cause that seemed to him simply an extension of the Lord's work. Thus it was that in December 1833 the abolitionists of Carlisle, all of whom were black except McKim, chose McKim as their delegate to the founding meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. Although he played only a minor role in the convention, as the youngest delegate, he caught the attention of Lucretia Mott, who was so impressed with McKim that she invited him to be her house guest for the duration of the convention and then kept him on for over a week more. Although his acquaintance with Mott introduced him to new and unsettling ideas, for a time McKim continued down the path to a traditional ministerial career. In 1835 he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and took up a pastorate in Berks County, Pennsylvania.

In August 1836 McKim was recruited as an antislavery agent into Theodore Dwight Weld's "Band of Seventy," and over the next sixteen months he canvassed Pennsylvania on behalf of the cause. Soon his new vocation drew him again into contact with Lucretia Mott and her Hicksite circle. Here, amid this Quaker faction that emphasized the importance of personal belief guided by spiritual revelation, McKim was further introduced to religious opinions that were so liberal they frightened him. To his diary he confided, "I certainly feel as though I had left my old moorings and were drifting into the unknown depths of radicalism. I sometimes feel I shall lose my character and my opportunities of usefulness" (quoted in Cohen, p. 156). By 1838 McKim had traveled so far from his old moorings that he felt compelled to publish *A Letter to the Presbytery of*

Wilmington, renouncing his belief in the doctrine of vicarious atonement, which holds that Jesus Christ died for the sins of humanity. This action was tantamount to inviting the Presbytery to oust him from his ministry for heresy, and it did so in October 1838. At that time, McKim was engaged to Sarah Allibone Speakman, the daughter of a prosperous Hicksite, but their marriage could not take place until he had a secure position. With this purpose in mind, Mott arranged for him to become the publishing agent of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in 1840. That year he married Speakman; they had three children, one of whom was the noted architect Charles Follen McKim.

From 1840 to 1862, under one title or another, McKim served as the paid general agent of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, administering virtually all of the organization's affairs. He managed and sometimes edited its newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Freeman,* published its tracts, hired its lecturers, organized its meetings, and lobbied state legislators in support of its policies. In addition, he aided fugitive slaves and skillfully turned some rescues into propaganda opportunities for the cause. When John Brown (1800–1859) was executed after his failed attempt to incite a slave insurrection at Harpers Ferry in 1859, McKim escorted Brown's wife to Virginia to retrieve Brown's body and played a significant role in efforts to exploit the incident for the antislavery cause.

Throughout most of his antislavery career, McKim was a dutiful follower of Garrison's brand of abolitionism, which embraced pacifism, rejected human government, and condemned the U.S. Constitution as a covenant with slaveholders. Such beliefs did not, however, prevent him from cultivating good relations with Pennsylvania lawmakers or from becoming an admirer of John Brown. Most important, when the Civil War began, his Garrisonian beliefs did not stop him from immediately welcoming it as an "abolition war." Soon McKim sought to convince his fellow abolitionists that "*the pulling down* stage" of their movement was over and that "the *building-up*—the constructive part—remains to be accomplished" (*National Anti-Slavery Standard,* 3 May 1862). He urged them to stop carping against the government and instead to support the northern cause and work to shape the postwar conditions under which the freedmen would live.

Clearly, this was McKim's own agenda. In March 1862 he organized the Philadelphia Port Royal Relief Committee (later the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association) to aid the newly freed blacks of South Carolina's Sea Islands. As secretary of this group, he toured the Sea Islands in June, and his public report, *The Freedmen of South Carolina* (1862), was crafted to persuade northerners that former slaves were already showing that they were capable of working independently without compulsion and that, if allowed to do so, the freedmen would fight for their liberty. McKim's trip convinced him that a government commission was needed to study freedmen's issues and to recommend the policies the nation should pursue after the war. In December 1862 he proposed the idea to U.S. senator Charles Sumner, U.S. congressman Thaddeus Stevens, U.S.

secretary of war Edwin Stanton, and others. Four months later, his plan was implemented with the government's creation of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission. Although McKim had hoped to be appointed the secretary of this body and was quite disappointed when he did not get the post, his efforts continued unabated. In 1863, as a member of the Philadelphia Union League, he launched a drive that recruited ten black Pennsylvania regiments in a ten-month period. In 1865 he was instrumental in the campaign that ended Jim Crow practices on the streetcars of Philadelphia. That same year, he played a leading role in founding the *Nation,* an organ to advocate the cause of the freedmen. His sponsorship had a more personal side as well—he sought to create a secure position for Wendell Phillips Garrison, his future son-in-law, who soon became the magazine's literary editor.

During the war, McKim had unsuccessfully advocated a coordination of the efforts of the various northern relief associations for freedmen. Once the war was over the Freedmen's Bureau was established, however, his position gained more support. In the fall of 1865 he brought into being the American Freedmen's Aid Commission (later the American Freedmen's Union Commission), an umbrella organization uniting virtually all of the secular relief groups. In 1865–1866 the commission played a major role in supporting freedmen's education. Soon, however, the American Missionary Association and other evangelical societies began to take over this educational role, squeezing out the secular organizations as they did, and in 1869, on McKim's motion, the commission disbanded, having nevertheless helped prepare the foundation for public education in the South. After the war McKim moved his family to New Jersey. He retired in 1869 but continued his involvement with the *Nation.* He died at his home in Llewellyn Park, New Jersey.

James Miller McKim was neither a gifted speaker nor an especially talented writer, but for twenty years he was the man who got things done for the antislavery cause in Pennsylvania. One antislavery colleague termed him a "prudent rash man," and he has been well described as an administrator who "applied a fundamentally conservative temperament to the prosecution of a radical cause" (Brown, p. 72). Once the Civil War began, McKim played a more independent and influential role in shaping events. He took the lead in urging his abolitionist colleagues to stop attacking the government from the outside and to instead become insiders with a say in shaping Reconstruction. He worked tirelessly to aid the freedmen, and he was the person most responsible for coordinating the postwar assistance efforts of the secular freedmen's aid societies.

Bibliography

The main repositories of manuscript sources on McKim are the James Miller McKim Collection at Cornell University, the Maloney Collection at the New York Public Library, and the William Lloyd Garrison Collection at the Boston Public Library. William Cohen, “James Miller McKim: Pennsylvania Abolitionist” (Ph.D. diss., New York Univ., 1968), details McKim’s life up to the time of the Civil War and gives a complete bibliography of primary and secondary sources. While not focused exclusively on McKim, James McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality* (1964), is the best source of details on McKim’s work during the Civil War and Reconstruction. For genealogical information, see William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., *In Memoriam: Sarah A. McKim* (1891). See also Ira V. Brown, “Miller McKim and Pennsylvania Abolitionism,” *Pennsylvania History* 30 (Jan. 1863): 56–72; William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1872); Charles Moore, *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim* (1929). An obituary is in the *New York Tribune,* 16 June 1874.

See also

Garrison, William Lloyd (10 December 1805–24 May 1879), editor, abolitionist leader, and religious reformer

Mott, Lucretia Coffin (1793-1880), abolitionist and feminist

Weld, Theodore Dwight (1803-1895), antebellum reformer and educator

McKim, Charles Follen (1847-1909), architect

Brown, John (1800-1859), abolitionist

Sumner, Charles (1811-1874), politician and reformer

Stevens, Thaddeus (1792-1868), congressman

Stanton, Edwin McMasters (1814-1869), U.S. attorney general and secretary of war