



John McNeece and Percy McNeece

(Battye, J.S., *Cyclopedia of Western Australia*, Vol.1, 1912, pp.635-6)

By his own testimony, **John McNeece** (1860-1925) was born 11 August 1860 at New York, USA – this requires verification. His father John McNeece senior (1830-1892) was in the British Army, and had married the somewhat older Catherine (c.1812-1895). Interestingly, the couple had their first child Thomas (1847-1874) when John senior was 17 and Catherine 35 years old, William (1849-1926) was born in India, and then John junior born over a decade later.

The 33 year old John McNeece senior, a private in the 8th regiment, disembarked at Fremantle in Western Australia from the *Merchantman* on 14 February 1863 with his wife and three sons. The vessel had arrived from London with 339 souls on board - 147 'free' passengers, and 192 convicts collected enroute at Bermuda. McNeece appears to have been quite young to have been a 'pensioner guard', but many were discharged soldiers who had participated in the Crimean War (1853-1856) or Indian Mutiny (1857) and had some disability that prevented them from fighting again.

Further research into government and military records would reveal more of John senior's employment locations and thus his family's circumstances. He may initially have been based in Perth from 1863, but eventually was resident in the Mid-West of WA. It is known that by 1863 there were ten men of the Enrolled Pensioner Force at Champion Bay (Geraldton) and six at the 'Flats' (Greenough). Each man was assured of £10 towards the erection of his cottage, and was entitled to the services of men from the hiring depot to work on his building, all charges on the Imperial Fund.

The Herald newspaper of June 1870 carries note of a ten-year-old son of pensioner John McNeece from the 'Flats' who was locked up in the cells at Geraldton for two nights. A brutal policeman had arrested the lad for not having paid a tax on keeping his puppy dog! Eventually Catherine McNeece walked into Geraldton and arranged for John junior's release. In 1874, following economic difficulties in England, pensioners in the Colony were informed that the 'Mother Country' would no longer pay for their work, but McNeece was granted Greenough Lots G31 and G32 in that year. Eldest son Thomas died in 'an epidemic' at Greenough, also in 1874. John McNeece senior was buried at Greenough Cemetery in 1892, and Catherine three years later. William McNeece had a family and remained at Greenough until his death in 1926.

John McNeece junior obtained his primary education either in Greenough or Geraldton, and learnt the carpentry trade in the area up until 1883. In 1912, he claimed to have taken the post of 'Government Inspector of Buildings' in the Kimberley district, prior to the days of the gold rush to Halls Creek of 1886. Although there was no such post or title in the early 1880s, his claim is at least partly backed by records that note his departure from Fremantle with Government Resident Fairbairn and a police party for King Sound (Derby), on the barque *Amur* in April 1883. McNeece was engaged to build quarters for the Resident Magistrate, his clerk, and the police. He was at Derby for the winter of 1883, but soon returned to the south of WA.

Eventually, McNeece was seized by Kimberley gold fever and left Fremantle on the schooner *Janet* for Derby in June 1886, just days after the birth of his first child. He later stated that he spent three years "trying his luck" on the diggings, during which "Dame Fortune withheld her smile on his endeavour", before once more entering the building trade at Perth. In late 1888 he gained a publican's licence for the Empire Hotel in Perth; in an 1889 letter to a newspaper, McNeece describes himself as a stair-builder at Fremantle.

John McNeece married Mary Creamer Shemeld (c.1865-1941) at St John's Church at Fremantle in August 1885, and they had children Ruby (1886), Percy (1888-1917), Jack (1889-1892), Viotti (1892), Inez (1897), Gordon (1899), John (1901), Marjorie (1904) and Zoe (1905). McNeece appears to have acted as a general contractor in the 1890s, building residences at Fremantle and other

metropolitan locations. From the early 1890s onward, McNeece had a hobby of yacht designing. He built craft for use on the Swan River, including his own yachts. Drawings of some of his vessels, and of a competition design for a war memorial at Fremantle, along with his brass office nameplate, are retained in family records.

With an enormous workload at the turn of the century, from around 1899 to late 1901 prominent Fremantle architect Frederick William Burwell (1846-1915) was assisted by John McNeece as a draftsman and clerk of works, before McNeece set up his own architectural practice in 1901. At the commencement of the twentieth century, McNeece was responsible for the design and erection of many large structures at the port of Fremantle. These included Davies' Buildings and the Economic Stores 93-95 High Street, Mason's Buildings, the Commercial Hotel 80 High Street, and Fisher Beard's large emporium, besides J. & W. Bateman's warehouse at 317 Murray Street, Perth.

Perhaps embarrassed by his humble upbringing and lack of formal training, with the publishing of the *Cyclopedia of Western Australia* in 1912 McNeece felt it necessary to make claims to architectural credentials that, with the benefit of internet research, can be seen as fabrications. The spurious statements he provided to the publication included: *"He was educated in his native city [New York], also attending several schools in Brooklyn, and subsequently was articled to the George Clutes, architect and civil engineer of the latter place. At a later date he carried on as a builder in America, but prompted by a spirit of adventure and with the object of enlarging his knowledge and experience he left his native land for Australia, landing at Sydney. Finding the building trade very brisk he joined the ranks of contractors in that State, and after a brief sojourn there came to Western Australia, where he accepted the post of Government Inspector of Buildings in the Kimberley district," ...*

John McNeece junior's eldest son, Percy, was born in Perth on 25 February 1888. He was educated at East Perth and Beaconsfield State Schools, and when fourteen years of age entered his father's office, where he served his articles to the architectural profession. Upon completion of his indentures he continued at Fremantle, and was admitted to partnership with his father during 1911. From 1912-1917, McNeece & Son are listed at 81 High St, Fremantle.

Percy married Kathleen Lawn at Fremantle in 1914, the couple had a daughter Marjorie in July 1915. Percy had an illness of some kind. He died and was buried at sea, returning from the eastern States in May of 1917, 'having failed to find relief from his malady in the Blue Mountains'.

By the early 1920s John McNeece had become an associate member of the West Australian Institute of Architects. After the *Architects Act of Western Australia 1921* received formal assent, McNeece registered with the Architects Board of WA on 10 July 1922 (registration no. 26). His dishonesty in claims to architectural training may not have been publicly challenged, although one can imagine older Geraldton-Greenough residents chortling as they read of their former apprentice-carpenter's imaginary experience. In any case, there were a number of other prominent architects in the State, including Great War hero Sir J.J. Talbot Hobbs (1864-1938), who initially only had trade training, and yet by scope of many years of diligent work, had been accepted in the profession.

McNeece undoubtedly made a significant and valuable contribution to the built environment in Fremantle and in metropolitan Perth. In addition to numerous workman cottages in Fremantle and surrounding suburbs, other places that he designed and tendered include shops at 85-87 High Street Fremantle for George A. Davies (1901); nine shops, Canning Road (Highway) at Plympton (1903); two brick & stone villas, East Street, Fremantle for H. Dixon (1903); a hotel at Mt Kokeby [midway between Beverley and Brookton] (1905); the Exchange Hotel at Pingelly (1906); the Bateman residence 'Sydenham' at Moss Street, Plympton (1908); 49 Clotilde Street, Mount Lawley (1910); and the Princess Theatre and shops at 29-33 Market Street, Fremantle (1913).

One of McNeece's more interesting post-war projects was the design in 1921 of picture gardens at Bannister Street, Fremantle for prolific theatre developer Thomas Coombe, later Sir Thomas. John McNeece is listed in *Wises Directory* as an architect up until 1923. He died 16 September 1925 aged 65 years, at 78 Wray Avenue Fremantle. At his death he was noted as a former member of the municipal council at Fremantle, past president of Fremantle Sailing Club, and member of Perth Flying Squadron. Mary McNeece died at 70 Wray Avenue in 1941 – it appears McNeece developed a number of houses at this location, some of which were occupied by family.

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Contributing author: John Taylor

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Exchange Hotel, Pingelly of 1906 (Google 2014)



4-16 Adelaide Street, Fremantle of 1908 (Google 2014)



Commercial Hotel of 1908 at 80 High Street, Fremantle (Flickr geoff-inOz photo 2009)



J & W Batemans, Murray Street, Perth of 1910 (*Cyclopedia of Western Australia*, Vol.1, 1912, p.686)



Princess Theatre of 1912-13 at 29-33 Market Street, Fremantle for T.M. Coombe (Google 2014)