

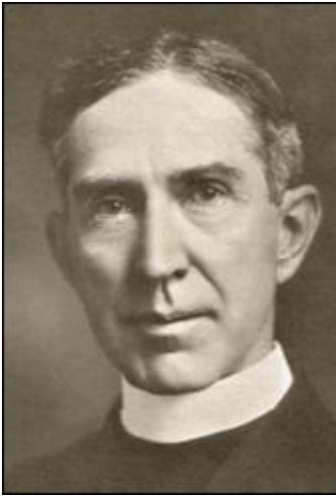
To Be or Not to Be

J. H. McKENZIE AND C. H. TEBBETTS

1894-95 AND 1895-96

Robert B. D. Hartman

J.H. McKenzie



John Heyward McKenzie was already a proven educator when he arrived on the north shore of Lake Maxinkuckee on May 4, 1894, to sign an agreement with H.H. Culver to “maintain a school . . . with a competent corps of teachers, (and) pay all expenses connected with the maintenance of the school . . . “ The founder agreed to “put said buildings in condition for permanent occupancy,” and “if found necessary,” add a gymnasium.

With those simple rubrics, McKenzie set up headquarters in the old Chautauqua assembly building’s, Culver Park Hotel and prepared to lead the newly formed Culver Military Institute. After expenses connected with the maintenance and operation of the school had been paid, “any surplus would be divided equally between the two parties of the contract,” according to the agreement.

A PhD and newly ordained Episcopal priest, McKenzie formerly headed the Ohio Military Institute and brought impressive credentials to Henry Harrison Culver’s attention. Alas, Mr. Culver would soon begin to have second thoughts about his new leader. The first came in early June of 1894 when McKenzie wrote from his home in College Hill, Ohio, proposing that the school’s success would be greater if it was called St. Paul’s, arguing that the name “Culver” had little academic recognition with the public.

In a handwritten response to McKenzie on June 8, Mr. Culver wrote, “you seem to have your heart set on the name St. Paul ’s and I am inclined to consider your wishes. Go ahead and call it St. Paul ’s with the distinct understanding that when we come to incorporate, we can change the name if I wish.”

When Mr. Culver informed his family of McKenzie's proposal, they were incensed and he withdrew his concession. "I can see no reason why the school being named for me should be in the way of securing future endowments." Interestingly the first incorporation papers referred it as the Culver Academy . By Thanksgiving of 1894, "Military" had been incorporated in the school name.

Further dissention between owner and headmaster developed when official bank checks were printed with his name and title of "J. H. McKenzie, President. Mr. Culver wrote; "You have never consulted me on this . . . I object to you using this title in the future . . . You are simply the Principal of the School." Another bone of contention developed when McKenzie's request for the construction of a chapel was rejected.

Angst between owner and administrator continued throughout the school year. McKenzie found financial support from a group of friends and attempted to buy the school for \$50,000 with payments of \$5,000 annually, but with no mention of interest. Culver countered with a proposal of \$50,000 for 45 acres with \$10,000 down, \$1,500 in annual payments – and with interest of eight percent. He also mandated the property be used as a Protestant school and its name be "forever that of Culver . . . (and) any departure from this shall be a violation of the conditions . . ." Clearly St. Paul's was a burr under his saddle!

McKenzie finally acknowledged defeat on June 6, 1895, when he wrote Mr. Culver that "it would be absolutely impossible for us to continue under any circumstances . . . there is an absolute loss of mutual confidence. It is the will of God." His letter of resignation closed: "You have fine opportunities there, and I hope you will be successful." This pretentious posturing was correct, but the road to success was filled with many difficulties.

McKenzie's talents found a better fit when he moved about 65 miles to the northeast to become Rector of the Howe School (later the Howe Military School) where he served with great distinction until 1920.

Clinton H. Tebbetts

Clinton Tebbetts would have confounded even the verbal Al Nagy. Though officially designated in the school catalog as "Superintendent and

Commandant,” his tenure of about 14 months is a totally blank file. There is nothing to reflect his financial agreement with Henry Harrison Culver, no letters, no memorandum, no arrival or departure date, and only one photograph. Given the school’s penchant for record keeping, one can only assume that his administration and resignation, if it was that, were purposely purged from Central File. Whatever the circumstance, conjecture sets Tebbetts' stage.



Fortunately, the Association of Graduates at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point has been able to provide several paragraphs from one of Tebbetts’ classmates and, hence, a look into his career.

The story reveals bits and pieces of a happenstance career as a soldier. He was one of five West Pointers in the Class of 1870 appointed to the 4th Cavalry after graduation and assigned to army headquarters in San Antonio . Four of the classmates arrived by riverboat in New Orleans in time to be quarantined during a yellow fever epidemic. Tebbetts, however, was not among them. He had been detailed as an Instructor in Tactics and Military Science at the Kentucky University at Lexington . Unhappy with this assignment, he appealed and was ordered to San Antonio , where he joined Troop A on June 4, 1872.

Classmate Robert Carter wrote that he believed Tebbetts was disheartened by the death of another classmate and his interment in “a wretched little Post Cemetery , where his requiem was nightly sung by the coyotes and lobo wolves.” In any case, Tebbetts, a second lieutenant, submitted his resignation from the army effective about Sept. 1, 1872.

This cipher in Culver’s files was born in Fayetteville , Ark. , in 1848, and entered West Point in 1866, graduating above the middle of his class four years later. He was described as manly, upright, and “virile a man as his class could boast of.” His nickname “Betsy” resulted not from effeminate behavior but from a tendency to be “precise, prim, exacting and correct in his deportment.” A classmate, F. E. Phelps, noted he was possessed with a devotion to the discharge of his duties and absorbed with “Duty, Honor, Country.”

A civil engineer by training, Tebbetts settled in Harrodsburg , Ky. and married Kate Curry. Together they raised four daughters and a son. In 1883, they moved to Pittsburgh . Like thousands of Americans, he lost everything in the Panic of 1893, and then sought a position at Culver after McKenzie’s resignation. When he was offered the position of “Superintendent and Commandant” in the summer of 1895, he was quick to accept. Parenthetically, the only reference to McKenzie’s Culver title was “Principal.” Perhaps to avoid historical confusion, the Academy administration allowed the impression that McKenzie had also held the position of “Superintendent.” Officially, however, he was never recognized with the title.



Tebbetts’ career as the leader of the Academy was singularly inauspicious. The Rev. McKenzie’s failure to recruit and to operate a summer camp to promote enrollment left Tebbetts with 37 cadets during the school’s second year. His health was not good and he frustrated Mr. Culver with his lack of aggressive recruiting. The founder was a master of marketing and knew how to promote and make sales. Tebbetts’ failure to learn from a master grated on every fiber of Mr. Culver’s body. When the third year of the Academy opened with an enrollment of 29 cadets, Tebbetts was on a short leash.

The famous “You have the boys, I have the buildings” telegram to Alexander Frederick Fleet after his Missouri Military Academy was destroyed by fire in September of 1896 saved one man and doomed another. Shortly before Fleet arrived with more than 70 cadets and boosted enrollment to over 100, Tebbetts ended his short tenure by resigning.

In a bit of historical serendipity, he joined The Rev. McKenzie at the Howe School (it was renamed the Howe Military School during the 1940-41 school year) and served at its commandant through 1898.

Tebbetts would return to Pittsburgh in 1898 to work for the H.J. Heinz Company and later as an inspector of iron and steel for the American Bridge Company. Poor health intervened for several years and he fell on the unemployed rolls.

In 1907, the long arms of the “West Point Protective Association” brought Tebbetts into contact with a classmate who offered him a position as Inspector of Purchases for the Army’s sprawling Pittsburgh Storage and Supply Depot. The salary of \$125 per month allowed him to support his family comfortably and he remained “on duty” until his 65th birthday.

According to his classmate F.E. Phelps, “He loved West Point . . . and was sorry he had resigned – like nine out of ten.” Phelps calculated that had Tebbetts stayed in the Army he would have been a colonel in the Cavalry. In February of 1920, Culver’s second head of school, and its first designated as superintendent, passed away at the age of 72.