

Heck, Jonathan ^[1]

Heck, Jonathan McGee

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5 May 1831–10 Feb. 1894



An 1880 engraving of Jonathan McGee Heck. Image from [Archive.org](#).

^[2]Jonathan McGee Heck, businessman and developer, and [Baptist](#) ^[3] layman in the post-[Civil War](#) ^[4] era, was born in Monongalia County, Va., located in that part of the state that became West Virginia, the son of George and Susan McGee Heck. He attended Rector College and studied law in Morgantown, Va. Admitted to the bar, Heck soon established a large practice and served briefly as justice of the peace and commonwealth attorney. As early as 1855 he bought property along the Monongahela River; he continued buying land in the region until 1866 and owned property there as late as 1892. In 1859, Heck and an associate contracted to furnish gas and water to the city of Morgantown for fifty years, but the project was abandoned after one gas well was dug. On 10 Mar. 1859 Heck married Mattie A. Callendine.

As civil war threatened, Heck found that his loyalties lay with Virginia and the South: "Leaving his young wife and child and the handsome home which he had provided for them, renouncing all his former ambitions and accumulated wealth, he came to Richmond, and once and forever cast his lot with that of the southern states." On 10 May 1861 he was commissioned colonel of the Thirty-first Regiment of Virginia Volunteers, which he was to raise and equip. At the Battle of Rich Mountain against the troops of General George B. McClellan, Heck was captured and paroled with others; "for some unaccountable reason, [he] was held under parole long after those with him were allowed to return to active service." One account suggests that he was "cheated out of his command at Rich Mountain." As a parolee, he was nevertheless elected to serve in the Virginia General Assembly. As soon as permitted, Heck returned to active service in the Confederate cause—not as a soldier this time, but as a "purchaser of materials for the manufacture of implements of war."

During the war his growing family moved several times, settling briefly at Staunton, Va.; [Raleigh](#) ^[5], N.C.; and Buffalo Lithia Springs, Va. The family was to locate finally in North Carolina, living first in [Warren County](#) ^[6] and later in Raleigh. On 25 Aug. 1863, Heck (still identified as a citizen of Monongalia County, Va.), bought from William D. Jones of Warren County, N.C., 2,012 acres on Shocco Creek in Warren County for \$45,000. As the owner of the "large and then far-famed health resort, Jones's Springs, . . . he with generous-handed liberality threw it open to the many homeless refugees, who were then seeking refuge in North Carolina." Among those who had taken refuge at Shocco were the wife and children of General Robert E. Lee; Lee's daughter, Annie Carter, died there in 1862 and was buried in the Jones family cemetery. When in 1866 Warren County citizens arranged for a monument to be erected there for Annie Carter Lee, Heck wrote to the former general, who responded from Lexington, Va., that "when able to visit the grave of my daughter, for which I have a great desire, I will remember your kind invitations [to] go to your house."

Evidently through his experience as purchaser of materials for the Confederacy and as contractor for making war materials, Heck developed both a familiarity with North Carolina's industrial potential and perhaps much of his substantial personal capital—resources that would stand him in good stead after the war. He traveled far and wide to acquire goods for the war effort, and he was involved in several enterprises, among them a bayonet factory in Raleigh and the firm of

Heck, Brodie, Inc., which manufactured bayonets using the rich mineral deposits along the Deep River in Chatham County [7]. In October 1864, Heck, Brodie & Co., "Government contractors," were authorized to "select from the military prisons at Salisbury, N.C., and Danville, Va., sixty prisoners who may volunteer to work in their bayonet factory on Deep River, N.C."

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Heck emerged from the war with energy and investment potential, ready to expand his fortune and that of his adopted state amid the new order—in contrast to many whose fortunes had profited from an agricultural system based on enslavement and low-cost labor. Colonel Heck, as he was consistently known, was, recalled his associate Kemp P. Battle [8], "the first man in Raleigh to endeavor to break up the business lethargy prevailing after the surrender." He was, another author stated, "one of the men who built the New South, and was extraordinarily successful in promoting the industrial and agricultural development of the State." At thirty-four, six feet tall, with black hair and beard and eyes, Heck was a strikingly attractive young man, and he combined undeniable southern credentials and connections with useful northern associations and a supply of capital. Whether his capital derived from retained West Virginia holdings, profits made during the war and invested in other than Confederate currency, or other sources is not certain.

Heck's first project after the war was remarkable more for the promptness of organization and spirit of enthusiasm amid prevailing discouragement than for long-term success. He joined with Kemp Battle, William J. Hawkins [9] (president of the Raleigh and Gaston Railroad Company), and Bailey P. Williamson to form Battle, Heck, and Company, whose goal was to "make known in all feasible ways the lands in North Carolina for sale and to induce Northern people to buy and settle among us." Losing no time after the surrender, Heck obtained in June 1865 the necessary warrant of pardon and by 8 July the company's first issue of the *North Carolina Advertiser* was out.

The *Advertiser*, notable in its positive approach to the new day so soon after the surrender, is an interesting document of a very early attempt to promote immigration and investment into the South—a precursor of many such projects in the years that followed. The *Advertiser* analyzed and described in glowing terms the state's wealth of development potential—its temperate climate, wide range of possible crops, rich mineral deposits, sources of waterpower, and forest resources. The North Carolina Land Agency, as the firm's real estate arm was titled, offered for sale a multitude of properties ranging from William S. Pettigrew [10]'s 7,000-acre Magnolia Plantation on the Scuppernong River, to 15,000 acres of turpentine land on the Cape Fear River [11], to the High Shoals mining and manufacturing operation in Lincoln [12] and Gaston [13] counties. Late in 1865 the agency listed for sale a total of 132 separate offerings, including 146,700 acres of agricultural land plus manufacturing, commercial, and residential property. The consistent theme of the publication was the need "under the recent change in the system of labor," to begin anew in "starting North Carolina in a career of prosperity heretofore unknown." The effort met with favorable response from Governor W. W. Holden [14] and from newspapers in North Carolina and beyond, including the *New York Times*. Heck and Battle made a long promotional journey to northern cities and established an office on Broadway in New York, where inquiries were numerous. Yet the project failed by the end of 1865. Recalled Battle later, "Seldom did an enterprise have greater prospects of success, seldom did an enterprise so suddenly and completely collapse." The *Advertiser*, and in later years Kemp Battle, cited the threat of confiscation of southern lands during Reconstruction [15] as the chief reason for the hesitancy of investors and hence the failure of the company.

The partners emerged from the venture still ready for new projects; Battle recalled that, despite the loss of money, they had "had for months . . . active, interesting work in exchange for gloom and despondency and . . . made connections." Two of Heck's next enterprises involved innovative development ideas concerning resources he had become acquainted with during the war years—the Deep River industrial development and the Ridgeway Company.

Geological reports before the war indicated that the coal [16] and iron [17] deposits along the Deep River were among the best in the nation, with potential for a "national foundry." During the war, these resources were vital to the Confederate effort, and Heck had investments in the area. Soon after the war, George Lobdell of the Lobdell Car Wheel Company of Wilmington, Del., sought to use the iron there—reportedly after being impressed with the quality of Confederate steel used in train wheels, which had been made from Deep River ore. He joined Heck in an ambitious development plan for the region, including navigational improvements to allow access to the port at Wilmington, development of the existing furnace at Endorf [18], construction of a big furnace and a dam at Buckhorn, expansion of mining at nearby Egypt and elsewhere, and development of the towns of Lockville and Haywood. Some of these tasks were accomplished, and the firm estimated that a half-million dollars was sunk into the project. Under a series of names—such as the Deep River Manufacturing Company, Cape Fear Iron and Steel Company, and American Iron and Steel Company—Lobdell, Heck, and others created one of the most extensive industrial development enterprises in the state in the early 1870s. Again, however, grand ambitions were thwarted, this time by the discovery that the mineral deposits were smaller than anticipated and the fact that the navigation system on the Deep and Cape Fear rivers was never completed satisfactorily. The operation soon declined.

During the decade after the war, Heck was also involved in an immigration and development plan for Ridgeway, a community on the railroad in Warren County, and home of William J. Hawkins, an associate of Heck, Battle, and Company. The Ridgeway Company was chartered on 22 Aug. 1868, with Heck, Hawkins, Peter R. Davis, and A. F. Johnson as incorporators. Extensive advertising was done in the North and abroad, in hope of creating a bustling city amid the sad fields of Warren County. Orchards were planted, streets laid out, some construction done, and a stone placed to mark the center of the metropolis. Immigrants did come—Germans, Englishmen, and others; in fact, a community of German farmers established there maintains its cultural identity to the present. But Ridgeway never became the thriving city its developers envisioned.



A cup presented to Jonathan M. Heck by the city of Raleigh in 1892 during its centennial celebration. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

Despite the failure of these schemes, Heck's vision, energy, and willingness to take risks contributed to the renewal of business and industry in the state. Far from being a dreamy idealist, he was an astute and adventurous investor, a successful businessman whose fortunes grew rapidly. Other enterprises, less colorful perhaps, did succeed, making him a wealthy and respected business leader. Among these were several iron or coal operations, including the Moratock Mining and Manufacturing Company near Danbury, the Coal Creek mining operation in Tennessee, and copper enterprises in Virginia. In addition, Heck was a major developer, along with R. S. Pullen ^[20], of the new residential section of Raleigh, called Oakwood, which grew as the town recovered from Reconstruction.

Heck's confidence in the new day was expressed in the house he built on North Blount Street, soon to be Raleigh's fashionable avenue. Actually Mrs. Heck's house, the impressive three-story frame dwelling in the modishly ornate Second Empire style, was the first major home to go up in Raleigh after the war; it was built in 1869–70 by contractors Wilson and Waddell, and designed by architect G. S. H. Appleget. The contract for the house survives, along with an almost identical contract for a house for Heck in Ridgeway, but no information has been found to suggest the latter was built; certainly no similar house now stands in Ridgeway.

As his fortunes rose, Heck became a "liberal contributor to many causes for his town and state," with particular interest in Baptist affairs. A member of the First Baptist Church in Raleigh, he had been elected a trustee of Wake Forest College ^[21] in November 1865, and along with John G. Williams he funded the school's first postwar building—the Heck-Williams Building, constructed in 1878. For some years Heck was president of the board of trustees. He contributed substantially to the Baptist Female College in Raleigh and was a Baptist lay leader, serving as president of the Baptist State Convention. Other civic activity included participation in the reorganization of the state agricultural society, providing "a handsome house and property for a North Carolina Confederate soldiers home," and in 1892 service as chief marshal for Raleigh's centennial celebration.

Colonel and Mrs. Heck had thirteen children, of whom adult sons were George C., John M., and Charles M., and daughters were Mary Lou (Mrs. W. H. Pace), Fannie E. S., Minnie C. (Mrs. B. G. Cowper), Mattie A. (Mrs. J. D. Boushall), Susie, and Pearl. Of interest in North Carolina are Charles, for over thirty years head of the physics department at North Carolina State College, and Fannie ^[22], an influential leader in the Woman's Missionary Union of the Southern Baptist Convention. Heck died in Philadelphia, where he had gone for treatment of cancer. He was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Raleigh.

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