

McRae, Colin John ^[1]

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by John L. Bell, Jr., 1991

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Colin John McRae, businessman and Confederate official, was one of eleven children of Elizabeth Mary and John M. McRae, a merchant of Sneedsboro (now McFarlan) in [Anson County](#) ^[2]. Colin moved with his family in 1818 to Winchester, Miss., where his father quickly established a successful trading and commission merchant business that operated its own barges to ply local rivers and ocean-going schooners to carry cotton to domestic ports. In 1827 the family moved to the mouth of the Pascagoula River in [Jackson County](#) ^[3]. McRae and his brothers boarded with a French family at Pascagoula and attended Frederick's School, operated by one of Napoleon's former officers. After receiving additional tutoring, he attended a small Jesuit college in Biloxi for a year. McRae took over his father's business when he died on 11 Mar. 1835 and remained devoted to his family for the rest of his life. He never married. His brother, John Jones, became governor and senator of Mississippi in the 1850s.

In 1837 McRae helped to organize the Mississippi City Company, which established the town of Mississippi City on the Gulf coast west of Pascagoula. He served one term in the Mississippi legislature in 1838 but did not stand for reelection. In 1840 he moved his successful cotton factorage and commission merchant business to Mobile, Ala., and in 1842 formed a partnership with his brother-in-law, Burwell Boykin. With his brother John, he bought stock in and promoted the Mobile and Ohio and the Mobile and New Orleans railroad companies and speculated in land.

With the advent of [secession](#) ^[4], McRae served the [Confederacy](#) ^[5] in various capacities. Always a strong [states' rights](#) ^[6] [Democrat](#) ^[7], he supported the secession of Alabama. In January 1861 he was elected to the Provisional Confederate Congress, which inaugurated the Confederate government. His major concerns were the defense of Mobile, the preparation of war, and making provision for privateering. At McRae's urging, the Confederate government in 1862 purchased the Selma Manufacturing Company for the manufacture of ordnance, armor plate, and munitions and appointed him as agent to supervise its establishment and operation.

McRae's major contribution to the Confederacy was as chief financial agent in Europe from May 1863 to the end of the war. When he arrived in Europe, the Erlanger loan agreement had been concluded and his duty was to manage the sale of bonds and disburse the proceeds. In September 1863 all Confederate financial transactions of the War and Navy departments were centralized under McRae's authority. At his suggestion, the Confederate government assumed control of all [blockade-running](#) ^[8] in 1864 in order to improve credit in Europe and secure essential supplies for the Confederacy. The major sources of McRae's funds were loans and cotton credits, and he never had enough money. In 1864 he was engaged in an unsuccessful attempt to recruit Polish exiles in Europe for the Confederate service. The capture of [Fort Fisher](#) ^[9] in January 1865 closed the Confederacy's last blockade-running port and virtually ended his duties. English creditors and the United States sued McRae for Confederate assets, but by the time the court of equity ruled that U.S. claims took precedence, he had no assets. Although he was in personal financial straits, McRae remained in England to arrange a legal defense fund for Jefferson Davis. Believing that he would not be pardoned if he returned home, he moved to Puerto Cortés, British Honduras, in October 1867, where he acquired a plantation and a store.

McRae, about six feet tall, was of medium build and had light brown hair and blue eyes. A shrewd business manager, he was energetic, impatient, and scrupulous in keeping commitments. He died in Puerto Cortés.

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