

McGehee, Montford ^[1]

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by William Polk Cheshire, 1991

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See also: [McGehee, Lucius Polk](#) ^[2]

Montford McGehee, lawyer, planter, legislator, and public official, was born at Woodburn, his father's plantation in [Person County](#) ^[3], the youngest child of Thomas (1784–1867) and Elizabeth M. Jeffreys McGehee (1795–1825). He was graduated from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[4] in 1841 and received a master of arts degree in 1844. From 1841 to 1842 he attended the Harvard Law School and returned to read law under Judge [W. H. Battle](#) ^[5]. He was licensed by the [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) ^[6] in 1844.

Except for a European tour in 1849, during which he is said to have studied briefly at universities in Paris and London, McGehee practiced law in Milton until his father's death in 1867. He was a member of the [General Assembly](#) ^[7] from [Caswell County](#) ^[8] in 1864 and from Person County in 1872, 1876, and 1879, as well as a delegate to the [constitutional convention of 1865](#) ^[9]. McGehee, a [Democrat](#) ^[10], and his brother-in-law, Richard C. Badger, a [Republican](#) ^[11], are credited with the legislation transferring the authority to appoint University of North Carolina trustees from the [State Board of Education](#) ^[12] to the General Assembly, thus making it possible for the university to reopen in 1875 after being closed for four years.

In 1867 McGehee moved to Woodburn and managed the plantation until 1879 when, in the general financial collapse following the [Civil War](#) ^[13], it was sold, along with McGehee's considerable library, the many volumes of which were tied up with string and disposed of at ten cents a bundle. The family holdings gone, McGehee moved to Raleigh where he was commissioner of agriculture from 1880 to 1887.

McGehee was appointed by the bench and bar to deliver the memorial oration on the death of Governor [William A. Graham](#) ^[14] in 1876. Governor [Thomas Jarvis](#) ^[15] in 1879 appointed him to be one of three commissioners assigned to negotiate a satisfactory funding arrangement with bondholders of the [North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[16], in danger of passing beyond control of the state. He was a member of the board of trustees of The University of North Carolina from 1864 to 1868, when the trustees were replaced by a Reconstruction board, and again from 1877 to 1893. He also was among the founders of the Alumni Association in 1843.

In Christ Church, Raleigh, on 25 Sept. 1854, he married Sally Polk Badger (1833–1903), the daughter of [George Edmund Badger](#) ^[17], a U.S. senator and secretary of the navy. They were the parents of four sons, the youngest of whom was [Lucius Polk McGehee](#) ^[2], dean of the law school at The University of North Carolina from 1910 until his death in 1923. McGehee was a [Presbyterian](#) ^[18] and a [Whig](#) ^[19] until after the Civil War, when he became a Democrat.

References:

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[Montford McGehee Papers](#) (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).^[21]

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[John H. Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina from 1584 to 1851* \(1851\).](#) ^[22]

Additional Resources:

McGehee, Montford. *Life and character of the Hon. William A. Graham. A memorial oration*. Raleigh, News Job Office and Book Bindery. 1877. <https://archive.org/details/lifecharacterofh00mcge> ^[23] (accessed May 23, 2014).

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