Thesis Approved

By

Frank F. Byrne Major Adviser

Richard Harrington J. Dean
WILLIAM SANDERSON McCORMICK: A BIOGRAPHY

BY

MARY KATHARINE FROST

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the Creighton University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History

Omaha, 1961
Cyrus Hall McCormick has the lion's share of the McCormick family fame, and rightly so, for his invention and skillful marketing of the reaper revolutionized American agriculture. His younger brother, William Sanderson McCormick, is all too little known. Yet his contributions to the reaper and to C.H. McCormick and Brothers Company--the great grandfather of today's International Harvester Company--came only second in importance to those of his more renowned brother. Based on the abundant records found in the McCormick Collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, this paper intends to bring to light William S. McCormick's contributions to the company. It also hopes to magnify an individual who was part of a process fundamental to American history--the process by which Americans turned from agriculture to industry. As a case in point, William McCormick's life shows that the American farmer was only one step removed from urban economic life. Even as a simple farmer,
McCormick was a capitalist who produced in a wide and varied market. When he left farming and entered industry it was relatively easy for him to carry on complex financial operations. Finally, this study will show how William McCormick carried on business during the peculiar economic situation wrought by the Civil War, and that the nineteenth century entrepreneur was akin to the present day businessman in that he too laughed, and worried and worked too hard.

I owe debts for this work. The greatest is to my parents who have done everything possible to assist me in this undertaking. Secondly, to Dr. Frank L. Byrne who has introduced me to the writing of history. Thirdly, to Mrs. Herbert Kellar who has generously made the manuscripts of the McCormick Collection accessible. Lastly, to the chairmen of the history department and the graduate school of Creighton University who have provided me with the framework for graduate study. To each of these I express my heartfelt appreciation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. &quot;The Good Life&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. &quot;In the Garden City&quot;</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. &quot;Reins Tightened&quot;</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. War and Gold</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Reaping the Revolutions</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter I
"The Good Life"

The Appalachians and the Blue Ridge Mountains hover over Rockbridge County, Virginia. At any time and in any year they are beautiful. Each season they change their raiment. In spring they wear bright pink rhododendron. In summer they dress with green forsts and blue haze. Their fall finery is multicolored leaves. Only in winter do they stand almost naked, shrouded as if in mourning by a thin veil of gray and purple mist. 1 On a farm in the Valley of Virginia, situated between these mountain ranges, William Sanderson McCormick was born on November 2, 1815. There he spent his youth and early manhood. He grew to love this valley—so much so that when his brother, Cyrus Hall McCormick, offered him a position as superintendent of the McCormick Reaper Works in the prairie city of Chicago, William McCormick left only with reluctance. William McCormick's roots were deep in this valley. His Scotch-Irish grandfathers

had come there as staunch colonials to practice their Presbyterian beliefs out of sight of England's disapproving mien.\(^2\) His parents remained there to raise their family of eight children: Cyrus, Robert, Susan, William, Mary Caroline, Leander, John and Amanda. His father, Robert McCormick--industrious, imaginative and retiring--and his mother, Mary Ann Hall McCormick--businesslike, energetic, and passionate for small luxuries--worked hard to realize the bounty of Virginia so that their children could enjoy "the good life."\(^3\)

Robert McCormick's concept of the good life was to possess simple but adequate material means, to enjoy the independence of a self sufficient estate, to form associations among his equals, and to follow a fundamental religious and moral code. His horizons did not extend far beyond home and farm, church and village. His aspiration for his sons was that they would become gentlemen farmers on estates near his own.

Thus all young William's training prepared him for this scheme of living. He received religious instruction on Sundays at the nearby whitewashed church and on

\(^2\)Mary Caroline Shields MS, 1882, 1883, Genealogy, BG, 83, The McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. Unless otherwise indicated, all manuscript items cited in this chapter are in the McCormick Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

\(^3\)Ibid. William J. Hanna MS, 1885, Statement of Polly Carsons, a neighbor of the McCormick's, p. 73.
weekday evenings at his father's knee. He memorized the Shorter Catechisms and remained faithful to this Calvin colored Christianity throughout his life. William's formal education was rudimentary but sufficient for all practical purposes. Robert McCormick hired tutors to teach his own and neighboring children when William was fourteen, fifteen and sixteen years old. The first tutor, Mr. Samuel Fox, came armed with a whip, a dictionary, "Harris' English Grammar, Adams' Geography, Mrs. D's Natural Philosophy and Titler's History." William's memory was quick, his manner diligent, and he fared well under Fox's tutelage. Under a new instructor, Mr. Wamsley, William struggled with the essentials of bookkeeping. He found Wamsley a poor teacher and unable to explain satisfactorily John Gibson's text, A New and Improved System of Practical Bookkeeping. In spite of this early difficulty, in later years, his father relied particularly upon him to care for the family accounts.

4 Mary Caroline Shields MS.

5 William S. McCormick to Cyrus Hall McCormick, May 1, 1832. Unless otherwise indicated, all letters cited in this chapter are located in the Cyrus Hall McCormick Personal Papers File.

The course in bookkeeping was the finale of William's formal education. Life's activities crowded out the probability of further study at Washington College in nearby Lexington. Although the door to the world of the liberal arts remained closed to him, another entrance more in keeping with the pragmatic demands of American life stood before him. The gate of the family estate of Walnut Grove opened to him the world of practical science, agriculture and business. There on that self-sufficient estate, William learned first how to labor and then how to manage. He assisted in raising flax, hemp and sheeps' wool for clothing; cattle and hogs for meat; corn and wheat to feed the family and its livestock; and fruit and vegetables for family nourishment. He cleared the land of timber and fashioned boards at the family saw mill. He scythed wheat and turned it into flour at his father's grist mill. He removed lime from the earth and rendered it usable at the family lime kiln. By hard labor and the gradual acceptance of responsibility, he contributed to the doubling of the family estate which by 1830 had grown to twelve hundred acres of land worked by nine slaves and eighteen horses. William had played a small part in helping his father achieve moderate wealth, and all the time became deeply imbued with his father's way of life.

William's young life was not all work. As a youth of seventeen he hunted small game, a pursuit that he continued throughout his life, albeit with more pleasure than success. William also kept a watchful eye on the young ladies of the neighborhood and followed the local gossip which he shared with his brother, Cyrus, who was three years his senior. The prevalence of death and disease made this a prominent subject of conversation and gave him a thorough appreciation of good health. The death of a friend made him acutely aware of the uncertainty of daily life and of how little man can know "what a month or even a day may bring forth," an attitude which he carried with him all his life. The lucrative trade that widespread disease provided for self-styled doctors came under his shrewd observation. With characteristic humor he remarked to Cyrus that physicians "will be so thick... they will have to ride two on a horse."  

When William was twenty years old, his father gave him the responsibility of managing his business affairs. At the same time, Robert McCormick awarded Cyrus a farm in Rockbridge County. This was in accordance with his plans that his sons become respectable gentlemen farmers. Farming, however, did not agree with William's elder brother, and after one year he left the farm and convinced

---

8W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, May 1, 1832.
9Pattison MS, p. 1.
their father to join with him in the iron trade, an occupation of considerable local esteem. The Panic of 1837 wrought havoc to the newly begun furnace and when the iron furnace succumbed in 1841, Cyrus turned to the sale of one of the most promising of his inventive experiments—the mechanical reaper. The life of William McCormick was profoundly affected by the young inventor's repudiation of the farm and his turn to industry. Cyrus' dominating influence and the strong spirit of family solidarity drew William McCormick into the web of his brother's affairs. William had assisted Cyrus in his iron enterprise by managing their father's share of it and by looking after the books. During its drawn out demise, William handled related law suits and sold leftover iron. This left his brother free to develop and sell the reaper.

At the age of sixteen, William McCormick had watched as horses pulled the first McCormick reaper through a neighbor's field on a July day in 1831. His father had tried unsuccessfully to invent such a machine and although he did not achieve his goal, Cyrus succeeded where their

10 Hutchinson, I, pp. 97, 126, 127.

11 Hanna MS, Statement of William T. Rush. About the McCormick family neighbor Rush declared, "They were a national family for if you strike one you strike all."

father had failed. Cyrus' amazing machine equipped with iron-tipped fingers working on a scissors principle performed one of the most backbreaking of harvest duties—the cutting of the wheat stalks. In addition, a revolving wooden reel laid the stalks into bundles ready for binding. William used this product of his brother's inventive genius in succeeding harvests although activities other than perfecting and marketing the reaper consumed Cyrus' time. When, eight years after its invention, his brother made machines for sale in the Walnut Grove blacksmith shop in order to pay his iron furnace debts, the reaper began to play an even greater part in William McCormick's life. As he had aided Cyrus in the iron trade, so too he would help him in the beginnings of the reaper business, and eventually he would turn from farming to industry.

Although William attended mainly to the farm in the reaper's first struggling years, he gradually assumed responsibility in the growing business. After Cyrus had made arrangements for several agents to manufacture and sell the reaper in the East, William's brother left to do the same in the West, relying on William to conduct all relations with eastern agents. In the summers of 1845 and 1846 at Cyrus' behest, William sent machine parts and advice to various places and reported to the travelling

---

inventor on the activities of their business associates. On horseback William McCormick rode through Virginia and North Carolina and found ministers of the Old School Presbyterian Church helpful in opening the way for sales contacts. Opposition from day laborers and apathy of slave owning cultivators were obstacles that this salesman had to overcome. To advertise the reaper, he and his younger brother, Leander, arranged for reaper trials in Virginia and Maryland. They brought and set up the machine, explained its workings, and left amid a flurry of printed instructions. Whenever possible, William rather than Leander showed the machine at important places because Cyrus had more confidence in the former's ability to handle the necessary correspondence.14 It also fell to William McCormick to defend the McCormick reaper against Obed Hussy's reaper which was invented in the same period. The two inventors had begun a fierce verbal battle in newspaper columns which stimulated farmers to investigate this new product. William McCormick continued this rivalry in field competitions where formers could see and judge for themselves. At the close of the 1846 season, he proudly boasted to Cyrus that the McCormick reaper had triumphed over the Hussy at two trials.15


15C.H. McCormick to W.S. McCormick, May 12, 1845, August 6, 1845. Hutchinson, I, 193, 199.
By these activities, William McCormick was gaining a place in the growing firm. Nevertheless, he had not surrendered himself to the business as he would in later years. Cyrus McCormick had redirected the family's goals and had broadened its horizons, but William McCormick's roots were deep in the simple life that his father lived and preached. While this life that centered around farm and village demanded from him hard physical labor, he could still stop for a few moments to breathe deeply the freshness of spring or the new cut smell of harvest. He could look across the valley at the Virginia mountains standing silent and take their serenity into his soul. Yet from Cyrus McCormick, William McCormick increasingly felt a pull more consonant with the new generation and its doctrines of opportunity, wealth and progress. Cyrus, while close at hand, had already showered him with responsible positions that enabled him to blossom into more than a simple country gentleman. With Cyrus away seeking his fortune in the West, William might well uproot himself to follow.

In the mid 1840's, William McCormick felt himself buffeted by fate both toward the adventurous life of Cyrus, and toward the stability of a career as a gentleman farmer. On the one hand, his ties with other members of his family loosened or snapped. His sister, Amanda, married Hugh Adams and went with him to operate a grocery at Kerr's Creek, Virginia. Leander McCormick
married Henrietta Hamilton and set up housekeeping on a farm which Cyrus had left to become an iron maker.\textsuperscript{16} The crowning blow to the family was the death of his father, Robert McCormick. On a January night, 1846, when a fire broke out in one of the McCormick machine shops, Robert McCormick rushed outdoors without stopping to dress warmly. While putting out the fire he caught a severe cold, and later suffered complications. By May he was bedridden and on July 4, he died at the age of sixty-six.\textsuperscript{17}

On the other hand, as family bonds weakened, William's ties to the Virginia soil became stronger. By his father's will, he became executor of the elder McCormick's property. After paying specific legacies, he became the owner of Walnut Grove.\textsuperscript{18} On July 11, 1848, the new landholder married Mary Ann Grigsby, the daughter of a planter locally renowned for his political and military record and for his interest in education.\textsuperscript{19} William McCormick then began housekeeping on his own estate. Because he was without the direction of his father and of his

\textsuperscript{16}Hutchinson, I, 214, 240.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., pp. 237-239.
\textsuperscript{19}Henrietta Hamilton McCormick, Genealogies and Reminiscences (Chicago: n.p., 1897), p. 46.
mechanically inclined brother, Leander, who had gone West to assist Cyrus, William McCormick discontinued the manufacture of reapers at Walnut Grove after 1847, and made farming his chief interest. He had approximately ten slaves to help him and he bought, sold, and hired slaves as the occasion demanded. To all of these he gave adequate food, clothing and medical care, and to some, actual affection and admonitions to be faithful servants. The happy farmer left unheeded Cyrus McCormick's repeated urgings for him to manufacture reapers on a large scale either at Walnut Grove or in the West.

Nevertheless, the demands of the reaper trade remained persistent, and William McCormick continued in his drift toward industry. He endeavored to sell machines

---


still on hand. When Cyrus McCormick was seeking to renew his reaper patent in 1848, William McCormick gave pertinent testimony and rounded up neighbors to do likewise. 23 By the fall of 1849, William McCormick could see that his impetuous, driving brother would not fail in the reaper trade as he had done in the iron business, for Cyrus McCormick had consolidated all manufacture under one roof at a new factory in Chicago and was receiving net returns of approximately $30,000 annually. 24 When Cyrus McCormick again pressed his well qualified brother to assist him in the management of the business, the wavering William McCormick consented to try the position temporarily. William McCormick set out for Chicago and worked under Orloff Dorman who was Cyrus McCormick's partner for one year. 25 The work agreed and William McCormick made an irrevocable decision to remain in Chicago. In the late summer of 1850, he returned briefly to Walnut Grove to auction off his livestock, collect

24 Hutchinson, I, 265.
his debts, and arrange for the care of his farm. On September 20, 1850, William McCormick left the "good life" of his native Virginia, and, at the age of thirty-five, became manager of one of Chicago's foremost industries.

---

Chapter II

In The Garden City

William McCormick was among the hordes of people who made their way to Chicago in 1850. It was a city on the make, and attracted thousands from Europe and America's eastern and southern shores. When William McCormick arrived its population stood at 29,963, but this statistic rarely remained constant.¹ McCormick watched with interest Chicago's ever rising population figures, tabulated them for his friends in Virginia, and bragged to them that with the exception of California's gold rush towns, the Garden City's growth was unequaled anywhere in the United States. McCormick's business brought him into Chicago's muddy markets with their swirling throngs clamoring in accents clipped, gutteral or burred. He called his new town "a little world of a place" and rightly so, for over half of her residents were immigrants, mainly from England, Ireland and Germany, who had come to this rising metropolis to seek their fortune or to

rest before proceeding westward.  

William McCormick reacted to Chicago with pride and enthusiasm but he was not certain he would make his home there. He kept Walnut Grove because he thought he might return to it. During his first five years in Chicago he wrote much and often to those with whom he had entrusted the care of his farm instructing them to keep it "snug and thrifty in appearance" in case he should come back to it. When his mother visited him one year after he had moved to Chicago, he thought of making the homeward journey with her on the "Floating palaces" of the rapidly improving canal and river travel to remain at Walnut Grove. In 1854, he renewed his employment contract for only one year, thinking that when the year was completed, he would return to Virginia for good.  

The tension that resulted from being thrust from

---


a relatively peaceful life as a farmer into a position of responsibility over a rapidly expanding factory was undoubtedly a major cause for William McCormick's desire to return to Walnut Grove. He could get little direct assistance from Cyrus McCormick who spent most of his time in Washington and New York involved in patent law suits. In his first months in Chicago he had Cyrus McCormick's partner, Orloff Dorman, for guidance. When Cyrus McCormick closed relations with Dorman in 1850 and became sole owner of the factory, William McCormick was on his own. In his first years at the factory, William McCormick spent most of his time either in the machine shops supervising the laborers or in the surrounding countryside experimenting on improvements or exhibiting the reaper at fairs or competitive reaper trials. His salary in 1854 was $3000, a relatively modest sum for his position, although it was $2000 higher that that of the factory's highest paid bookkeeper.  

---

4Salem G. Pattison (compiler), The McCormick Extension Case of 1848: Testimony of William S. McCormick (1900), thereafter cited as Pattison MS, pp. 37, 29.
The summer of 1852 found William McCormick travelling with his carpet bag through Maryland and New York exhibiting the reaper and establishing agencies to sell them. From New York, he sailed to England to participate in several reaper trials there. When McCormick invaded England with the McCormick reaper, he was entering a rich field in which the financial harvest had scarcely begun. A gold medal awarded to the reaper at the World's Fair in London the previous year and such left handed publicity as the Times of London gave when it declared, "the reaping machine from the United States is the most valuable contribution from abroad to the stock of our previous knowledge that we have yet discovered," were factors in bringing knowledge of this invention to the English farmers. When William McCormick arrived in England in the summer of 1852, the chief object of interest at agricultural fairs was the mechanical reaper.

5W.S. McCormick to W.T. Rush, July 12, 1852.


However, William McCormick was not the sole representative of the reaper in England. Obed Hussy who had brought his reaper there in 1851, had arranged for the manufacture of it there as did Cyrus McCormick, and returned in 1852 to challenge the McCormick reaper publicly at reaper trials. The English people took delight in the rivalry between the men and their machines and avidly followed the contests.\(^8\) On Friday, August 13, 1852, William McCormick appeared at a meadow near Kelleythorpe to engage in a contest sponsored by the Driffield Farmers' Club. Hussy himself was not present, but an English manufacturer of Hussy's reaper entered the competition against McCormick. McCormick, assisted by his able mechanic, D.C. McKenzie, was eminently successful. The committee of five judges declared that the McCormick machine was far superior to the Hussy in speed, power, efficiency and durability.\(^9\)

William McCormick and Obed Hussy met personally at the trial sponsored by the Cleveland Agricultural Society at Cisborough on August 26, 1852. Heavy rains delayed its opening until one o'clock and it lasted until seven o'clock that evening. The damp stalks

\(^8\)Hutchinson, I, 393, 399.

\(^9\)Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (XIII, 1852), Appendix B.
matted down by the rain made it tedious to operate the reapers. Even though the ground was dry the following day, the uneven terrain made further difficulties for McCormick. Neither his nor the Hussy machine was fit enough to win the prize of twenty guineas. An English machine based on the Hussy principle won the premium.¹⁰

McCormick, however, won prizes at other trials. The Cirencester Agricultural College, the Yorkshire Agricultural Society and the Durham County Agricultural Society judged his machine to be the best. Hussy won at other trials and at the end of the season, neither achieved a pronounced victory in England.¹¹ Nevertheless, the rivalry which William McCormick sustained with Hussy fostered interest in the mechanical reaper and paved the way for a future market there.

McCormick returned to Chicago in late October and remained until the following May. Late in the month he set out for Virginia. His trip was to serve a double purpose. He hoped to stir enthusiasm in the reaper among Virginians, and he wanted to see his mother who had been ailing since January. When McCormick reached Richmond he received word that his mother had

¹⁰Ibid., Appendix C.
¹¹Ibid., p. 301.
died of typhoid fever at the home of his sister, Amanda Adams. Sorrow and sense of aloneness surged over him and blotted out the bustle and confusion around him. He thought of all he owed to his mother, and at the same time, meditated upon his own death. To his close friend, William T. Rush, he confided, "But alas, those silken cords in my care are severed, and I have no earthly passport, and must resign myself to the fate which must erelong befall us all."\(^{12}\)

When William McCormick returned to Chicago in September, 1853, his thoughts on death vanished in a blast of complaints from farmers and agents about that year's model of machine. The company had made a combination reaper and mower because the majority of farmers raised both wheat and grass. There were difficulties in devising a machine to serve the double purpose because the grass tended to be moist, matted, and wiry, whereas grain was stiff, brittle and stood straight. However, the 1853 machine was not satisfactory for either grass or grain, and William McCormick bore the brunt of the dissatisfaction. Letters of complaint came in through 1856. McCormick made restitution to the farmers and preserved the company's good name by sending machine

parts that would improve workability or by granting a reduction in the price when a dissatisfied farmer bought a subsequent model.13

In addition to problems of production, William McCormick had to cope with the financial problems of selling reapers. In late 1854, there was a minor financial panic in the nation. Good currency disappeared. To the discouragement of agents collecting payment for reapers, only unsound currency mainly from free banks was in abundant circulation. Dismayed agents deluged the company with letters seeking advice on which currency they should accept and which they should reject.14 Although McCormick had to take his chances on accepting a variety of currencies that year, he and his brothers avoided similar difficulties when they made it company policy to accept only drafts on their New York or Philadelphia bank. The agents then would only take that currency with which they could purchase a draft on either bank.


Such difficulties forced William McCormick to relinquish outdoor work and to apply himself mainly to the work of the office. All company correspondence fell to his charge.\textsuperscript{15} Subjected to business pressures and deprived of the fresh air and physical activity to which he was accustomed, his health weakened. Formerly hardy, he fell prey to acute attacks of indigestion and periodically was confined to bed by what doctors diagnosed as dyspepsia.\textsuperscript{16} In July, 1855, after the worst of the financial storm had passed, he traveled to Virginia to take the waters at Cold Sulphur Springs and to relax among old friends and relatives.

While William was enjoying the waters, he received an urgent request from Cyrus McCormick to give testimony in a law suit against J. H. Manny, a reaper manufacturer of Waddam's Grove, Illinois. William McCormick had felt the keen competition that Manny was bringing to bear on his business and readily agreed to come. William McCormick was aware that the previous season Manny had manufactured about 2000 machines, approximately the same as had been manufactured in his plant.\textsuperscript{17} He knew also

\textsuperscript{15}C.H. McCormick to Dr. N.L. Rice, December 3, 1854.
\textsuperscript{16}W.B. Silver to C.H. McCormick, January 24, 1854.
\textsuperscript{17}Hutchinson, I, 431. In 1854, the McCormick Company manufactured 1558 machines, Statement of 1849-1857, C.B. #17, pp. 48, 49.
that his testimony was exceedingly valuable. He had witnessed the reaper in every phase of its development, and having worked with it both as a farmer and as a manufacturer, he had full knowledge of its technical aspects. These he could explain with ease to judges and lawyers not so well versed in mechanical principles. It was not difficult for him to point out the similarities and differences between the two machines. In 1851, by testifying against the firm of Seymour and Morgan of Brookport, New York, he had gained valuable experience useful in such suits for patent infringement.

When McCormick arrived in Cincinnati where he was to give testimony, he was still in poor health. This made him irritable, caused his temper to flare up on occasion, and made him object to the tedious hours on the witness stand. Yet there is no doubt that he was in sympathy with his brother's case. To his bookkeeper, W.J. Hanna, he wrote in a hopeful vein. "We expect to use up Manny and Co. so far as making reapers and make them pay well for the past. I believe there is scarcely a doubt but that we can stop all who use the Reel...If we do we can choose our makers of machines." The

18Pattison MS, pp. 36, 37, 38.

19September 5, 1855.
McCormick brothers' hopes were not realized. They lost the case in the Circuit Court and again in 1858 when it was given a hearing in the United States Supreme Court. In the following years William McCormick's enthusiasm for legal battles waned. In 1857, after testifying in a suit against Obed Hussy and having some difficulty because he was missing some of his books, he declared emphatically to Cyrus, "By the way, I hope I shall never again have to give testimony in these old cases." Often he said that the real way to keep ahead of competitors was not by seeking extensive patent protection but to make and sell a good product. At the same time he had no compassion for those who opposed his brother in the courts. After the State of Illinois petitioned Congress against a McCormick monopoly in the Manny case, William McCormick had little desire to give a requested donation to the Illinois Agricultural Society. He felt the McCormick name became well enough known because of the State's opposition in Congress. Why, he thought, should

---

20 Hutchinson, I, 448. Abraham Lincoln was one of Manny's counsels. Hutchinson, I, 435, 436.


22 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, February 1, 1859.
his brothers seek further glory in their home state by contributing to its agricultural society. He delayed payment to let the society "sweat awhile," and later gave $2000.23

William McCormick was not one for philanthropy at this time or any time. Unlike his brother, Cyrus McCormick, who gave heavily to the Presbyterian Church, the Young Men's Christian Association and numerous other charitable causes, William McCormick never was inclined to give away large sums of money. He was generous toward his close associates. He provided a minister's family with clothes and furniture upon their arrival in Chicago. He was influential in getting his brothers to join with him in providing his widowed sister, Mary Caroline Shields, with home and livelihood. He gave small gifts to men in his office. While hardly indicative of philanthropy in the broad sense, William McCormick's generosity did show his preference to give to people whom he felt close to, rather than to impersonal organizations.24

23W.S. McCormick to W.J. Hanna, September 5, 1855.

William McCormick's venture into what was then considered big time industry gave him little time to develop philanthropic or any other kind of interests. Nor did the city of Chicago change him much. At the end of five years, he was still the same man with modest aspirations, with a tendency to worry too much and to be a little irrascible. His trip to Europe did not whet his appetite for further European travel; his experience in the courts did not make him desire to seek the company of people of influence; his modest salary of $3000 did not give him means to engage much in the real estate speculation that would later consume his interest. Whether it be traveling in foreign lands or in the United States, testifying in courts or working in the office, the reaper business was his center of gravity. William McCormick's frequent trips to Walnut Grove indicated that his farm still vied with the reaper business to hold a central position in his life.
Chapter III
"Reins Tightened"

William McCormick deplored the conditions of his office at McCormick Reaper Works as "dusty, dirty, unpleasant, and unhealthy."¹ The office was a large room, thirty-nine feet long, but when six or more accountants filed in at seven o'clock in the morning, and agents and business associates crowded in during the day, it was filled with a bustle and confusion that almost defied concentration. Little beauty graced this office, unless one considered the gas lamps installed in 1859 as beautiful. Its workaday walls were covered with maps marked with outlines of sales territories. Ledgers, letter press copy books and papers cluttered the desks. Its large windows failed to catch the breezes of Lake Michigan but let in a view of the foundry and its dust and smoke.²

From this office William McCormick supervised the work of the reaper factory. There were moments when

¹W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 4, 1863, Cyrus Hall McCormick Papers File, The McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. Unless otherwise indicated, all manuscript items cited in this chapter are from the Cyrus Hall McCormick Papers File. All manuscript items cited in this chapter are located in the McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

²Ibid.
he felt a sense of imprisonment during his long day there. Yet his work was demanding and he gave to it his total energies and abilities. Although he never forgot his native Virginia, he gradually reconciled himself to the idea that he would never return there to live.³ He even found himself thinking that living in Chicago was "pleasant enough," and perhaps it was more so than he would admit.⁴ But he could not reflect much on this. There was much work to be done.

There were employees to manage—three hundred hands—with wages to pay every Saturday night.⁵ He fixed their wages on a level with the city's labor market. Between 1856 and 1858, he paid smiths $1 to $1.50 a day; night watchmen, $10.50 a week; factory foremen, $1000 a year; and the top bookkeeper, $1500 a year. He was willing to hire hands at almost any time provided they were energetic, hard working, strong,

³W.S. McCormick to James Campbell, March 5, 1857. Here McCormick in reference to why he did not return to Virginia wrote, "...each year having the reins tightened still more."


⁵W.S. McCormick to J. Grigsby, April 4, 1859, C.B. #20, p. 864.
stauch and faithful. He found such qualities rare in the Chicago labor market. "Hands of every description," he wrote, "except good ones," were abundant there, and he often wrote to friends in Virginia and along the East Coast to send workmen to the McCormick factory in Chicago.

Each department in the factory had its own head but William McCormick was overseer of all departments. He plunged into the multiplicity of detail that the organization of the growing industry entailed, and at the same time, he channeled his foremost energies to the most important aspects of each section. Work in a factory that made agricultural implements at that time necessarily followed the rhythm of the seasons. William McCormick coordinated the factory's output and under his direction, the company prospered.

Before the cycle could even begin, it was necessary to determine how many machines would be built for the

---


season. William McCormick reached this decision by poring over agents' sales reports, by requesting his agents to give estimations of future sales, and in general, by keeping his ear to the ground on economic conditions for the year ahead.\(^9\) Often he sought advice from Cyrus and Leander McCormick and between the three of them, the decision was made. In William McCormick's first five years at the factory, production figures hovered in the area of one thousand to fifteen hundred machines. In 1855, production doubled to 2534, and the following year doubled again to 4095 machines.\(^10\) William McCormick always desired to keep production within a safe region. He worried much in the mid season of 1856, when they had first made four thousand machines, that they had made too many. Competition of other reaper companies alarmed him and he feared a glut on the market and ruined profits.\(^11\) Cyrus McCormick's suggestion that they move the factory to a larger site where they could expand production brought William McCormick's amazed response that neither he nor Cyrus would want to "bother with this business after a few years when every county is filled up with it."\(^12\)


\(^11\) W.S. McCormick to J. Campbell, May 22, 1856.

\(^12\) W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, May 16, 1856.
He was less farsighted than Cyrus McCormick who could envision the potential of the uncultivated prairies beyond Illinois and Iowa. William McCormick also still had his father's concept of wealth. He felt that they were making enough money for comfort and security, and did not see any reason for further expansion and the corresponding risk. To Cyrus McCormick he wrote, "2000 machines is a big business, and if they can surely be made and sold, we need not seek for more." In spite of William McCormick's fears that they would not sell the four thousand machines in 1856, that year as in most every year, sales kept pace with production.

Once production numbers were ascertained, William McCormick could bargain for materials to build the machines. He ordinarily made purchases in November and December, although he bought in other seasons if the price was right. The purchase of iron and metal castings received his careful attention. His experience in the iron trade in Virginia made him a good judge of iron and he set high standards for quality. Substitution of a poor grade of iron for that of a better quality did not escape his notice and he never hesitated to send back metal castings if they were inferior. He hounded his Eastern purchasing agent and an Elizabethport, New Jersey,

\[13\text{May 23, 1856.}\]
firm and other firms to produce metal fingers that would meet his rigid requirements.\textsuperscript{14}

The actual manufacture of machines was Leander McCormick's responsibility and William McCormick did not interfere in his brother's domain except in an advisory capacity. William McCormick's emphasis on continual improvements undoubtedly led his brother to incorporate innovations almost every year.\textsuperscript{15}

By February, the first machines were ready for market. At this time William McCormick would be in the middle of negotiations with railroad and canal companies to take the machines to their destinations. McCormick assigned an office assistant to care for the shipping minutia but he himself bargained for the lowest rates and formulated shipping policies. He made it a policy for the McCormick Company to pay shipping costs to major points such as Baltimore or Richmond or to cities bordering the Great Lakes or the Mississippi River. He determined that the customer would pay the


\textsuperscript{15} J. Walker to I.W. Balentine, October 6, 1858, C.B. #13, p. 838. W.S. McCormick to Col. Griffin, April 5, 1859, C.B. #19.
costs from there. Wagoning or drayage companies offered their services to cart the machines to the agents' lots or to the farms. William McCormick did not overlook any dishonesty on the part of wagoning firms. When a Cleveland firm charged the farmer $2.00 over the rate McCormick had agreed upon, he, upon hearing the complaint, sent the company a strong letter requesting that they make the charges "fair and right." He regarded this as a "mean attempt to cheat the farmer," and pledged himself to rescue the farmer from the "clutches of these men." It was not good business to let those who favored him with their orders to be overcharged in the delivery of the McCormick reaper.

When the first machines were safely on their way, McCormick opened his campaign to sell them. Everything in his daily routine was subordinated to the sales program. In this sphere he worked almost single-handedly to spur his agents to sell machines. As the

---


17 W.S. McCormick to W.W. Chandler, June 4, 1856.

18 W.S. McCormick to Hopey and Sinclair, June 4, 1856.
ice cracked on the canals and rivers, and as railroads stretched into new parts, William McCormick issued the clarion call, "Now for the long pull, a strong pull and a pull altogether." His efforts to stir his agents reached a peak in April and May. At this time the crops were beginning to come up, and it was psychologically important to contact the farmers when they held a vision and a hope of fruitful fields.

As the grain grew, William McCormick sent a volley of letters to his agents scattered throughout the Northwest, the East and the South. "Now," he repeated over and over again during April and May, "is the crucial time to sell." During these months he urged his agents to be mindful of their responsibility to sell machines; to make a "decided effort;" "to pursue their task vigorously;" to "drive the work forward;" and in the words of St. Paul, to "put up the good fight." He instructed his agents to be "thorough in canvassing the ground;" to be "on the alert for sales;" and to "keep the ball rolling." He held the company production figures ever before them, remarked often that he feared they could not sell out, and begged each to do what he could in helping realize the company goal of selling all machines manufactured. He boasted of high sales in certain counties in Iowa and Illinois and asked his

---

19 W.S. McCormick to E. Tranel, April 16, 1856, C.B. #1, p. 4.
agents to imitate these records. He informed them that it was hard labor and nothing else that enabled N. W. Jones of Scott County, Iowa, to sell a record one hundred and fifty machines in one season. He warned his agents to beware lest rival machines encroach on their sales territory and appealed to their sense of competition to outsell any rival company. Through the pen, William McCormick worked for and obtained the unswerving loyalty of his agent army.20

McCormick's hand was hard to read and his agents occasionally chided him to write plainer. To this he would respond that it was too late for him to reform, promised to make his letters shorter, and continued in his usual illegible manner.21 Nevertheless, once his


21 W.S. McCormick to F. Barnes, December 29, 1856, C.B. #4, p. 652.
agents deciphered his message, they would catch his forceful style, his enthusiasm and his sense of urgency. They could not help feeling as one agent did when he said simply, "A line from him mostly strengthens the cause." McCormick's personal touches such as greetings to an agent's family, condolences in a death, an invitation to join him on a hunting trip, or a humorous jibe, did much to weld his agents' loyalty to the McCormick Company. William McCormick's letters were a major factor in selling the McCormick reaper.

William McCormick expected many things from his agents beyond the selling of machines. He ordered them to report fully on their activities of selling, collecting and remitting. He required them to remark on the conditions of payment, and he in turn acknowledged any draft sent in payment for the reapers. McCormick required the agent to assemble the reaper and instruct

---

22 W.B. Silver to C.H. McCormick, January 24, 1854.

the farmer in its use. During the harvest, McCormick ordered his agents to go into the fields and demonstrate the machine to those who did not have them, thus laying the groundwork for the next year's sales.

For these duties, McCormick varied the pay in relation to the territory. If it were a territory where reapers were commonly in use, he paid the agents between 8% and 10% of the retail price of the machine. (A two-horse machine sold for $145 and a four-horse machine for $150.) If it were an unworked territory where an agent would have to overcome prejudice against farm machinery and other obstacles, McCormick paid the agents 12% to get started.24 These salaries were determined in cooperation with Cyrus McCormick.

In addition to stimulating the agents to sell, McCormick devised means to stimulate the farmers to buy. He sent out numerous handbills for agents to distribute or paid advertising expenses for agents who wished to draw up their own handbills.25 He sent sample machines to areas where the reaper was not yet introduced and instructed his sales agents to paint and varnish the

---


bare machine before exhibiting it to prospective customers.26 He allowed his agents to give the farmer extra wheels and sickles that sold for $6 a pair. He wrote farmers who purchased his reaper that should they sell six machines, he would deduct $25 from the price of their reaper.27 Although reluctant to sell on time, he permitted this, setting interest rates between 6% and 10% and cautioning his agents to be careful when extending credit.28 Most of his sales were in this manner with the first payment due in November or December after the farmer sold his produce, grain and livestock.

While willing to use various means to stimulate sales, McCormick had an aversion against reaper trials in which rival reapers competed for the judges' approval. From the experience of participating in many trials, he became convinced that they accomplished little in the way of good advertising. He maintained it was normal procedure for the judges to be biased; that participating machines were made of finer quality for the occasion; and in general that the worst machine had an equal chance with the best. He labeled them a "lottery business"

and considered them "all work and no pay." Any position other than first place would be humiliating for the McCormick reaper, and should this not be fairly assured, he wanted no part of public reaper trials. He therefore urged Cyrus McCormick to desist from this type of advertising. In its place, he recommended that as many farmers as possible get machines and try them for themselves, and at the end of a season's use, publish their opinions of the machine.

William McCormick firmly believed that a quality product was better advertising than reaper trials and more advantageous than his brother's efforts for complete patent protection. His main preoccupation during the harvest season, therefore, was to experiment with the reaper in the fields. Often he left the house at three or four in the morning to test the machine in varied circumstances. Although his brothers did not always accept his suggestions for improvements, many of his experiments contributed to the positive success of the machine. His work devising fingers that would not clog and a high divider point that separated tangled grass


31 Mary Ann McCormick to Nettie F. McCormick, September 1, 1858.
was used to great advantage. The harvest season also afforded McCormick an opportunity to mix business with pleasure by trips to the Southern fields. In 1856, 1857, and 1859, he traveled with his wife and children to Virginia to work on improvements, set up Southern sales and visit with friends and relatives.

He would come back from his trips refreshed and ready to attack his letter writing crusade again. He completed the factory's yearly cycle by haunting agents to collect for the reapers and send the money in to the company. He would often remind the agents how much the company needed money to purchase supplies, and urged them to do their part in the matter. The winter season also gave him time to extend, expand and regulate agencies for the coming year. He paid the expenses of prospective agents to come to Chicago for an interview and if they were suitable, sent them off into new territories in which they would propagate the use of the reaper. He encouraged agents to expand operations and hire new men.

---


He paid scant attention to agents' complaints of other McCormick agents selling in their territories. In most cases he was lenient in permitting this as long as machines were sold. He did not want territorial lines to be too firmly drawn. Should an agent be slack, he had no qualms about sending in another agent to take over. To get the job done and to sell machines was his prime concern. In addition to regulating agencies for the coming year, McCormick attended to the purchasing of supplies, the settling of freight rates, the managing of factory hands and to other aspects of the factory cycle. These activities overlapped each other and before he knew it, it was spring again and time to begin anew his sales campaign.

The rhythm of the factory cycle remained constant through the years. Yet each year had features to distinguish it from the previous year. The financial derangement that is associated with the "Panic of 1857" caused variations in the general pattern of events. The farmers of the Northwest, who were a major source of McCormick Company income, were hurt when the Crimean War, which had stimulated the demand for grain, ended in the spring of 1856. Within the following year also,

the land and railroad speculations in which so many of them had engaged began to collapse as a part of a spreading general depression. These economic failings, which culminated in mass bank failures in the fall of 1857 and lingered until the opening of the Civil War, had definite repercussions on the McCormick reaper factory.

In the months before the New York banks closed in October, 1857, William McCormick had warnings that the economy was faltering. As early as January, agents complained of arduous collecting tours that yielded little currency. Sales were slow in March, April and May and agents reported that farmers were either reluctant to go into debt or preferred to invest in land and reap by hand. McCormick feared that the agents would not be able to sell all the machines produced. In addition some agents were not remitting the reaper money to the company but using it for purposes of speculation. The first instance of this came to McCormick's attention in September, 1856. Moses T. Hand of Peoria County, Illinois, and Henry J. Heaton of Tazewell County, Illinois, agents for McCormick, had engaged a pair of young men to

sell reapers for them. These young men invested heavily in pork and grain with the money from the sale of the reapers. Being unexperienced in the ways of the market they went bankrupt, and Heaton and Hand appealed to McCormick to force payment. 37

McCormick's sense of honesty was greatly offended by both the agents and their sub-agents. He considered the young men's behavior as "mean and swindling," and on a par with "thieving." Yet he was equally as angry with Heaton and Hand for not seeing that their employees "had succeeded long before they had failed." He hoped that this disgrace would teach them to "look sharply and constantly after the business." 38 A law suit ensued to bring the case to settlement.

Similar cases multiplied during 1857 and 1858. 39 McCormick reacted strongly against this since such speculation not only deprived the company of its profits but also kept his agents from devoting their full attention to selling reapers. In each case of misappropriation of funds, McCormick wrote to the offending agents charging


39 The firms of N.W. Jones, Scott County, Ill., A.M. Dickey, Racine, Wis., Chester Weed, Iowa City, Ia., and H.S. Gripping Co., were among those who misappropriated the C.H. McCormick Company's funds.
them with their guilt and demanding restitution. His language was plain and forceful and the arguments he used often had a moral tone to them. "You have shamefully betrayed the trust which I had bestowed upon you," he wrote to one dishonest agent who had done away with several thousand dollars and whom he considered a "miserable scamp." He would ask the offenders to consider what their standing in the community would be should they be exposed, and at one time reminded a guilty agent that an Eternity stood before him. McCormick preferred to use coaxing rather than take the cases to the law courts. He worked out a division of payments to enable the indebted agents to pay over a long term. Sometimes he charged 10% interest for the use of the company money or requested that the agents mortgage their property.

In spite of these signs of economic failing, McCormick still had cause for optimism. He himself engaged in some profitable real estate speculation and gained 1 3/4% interest on loaning money in the tight money market. He too used company money for his investments but had Cyrus McCormick's full approval. In July, contrary to his fears, all


41 W.S. McCormick to E. Tranel, June 17, 1858, C.B., #12, p. 548.

42 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 14, 1857; April 7, 1857.
machines had been sold and he estimated he could have sold more than were produced.\textsuperscript{43} That same month, he and Cyrus McCormick accepted the first prize for the McCormick reaper at the United States Trial of Machines at Syracuse, New York. Though he secretly considered the trial a "humbug," even ex-President Franklin Pierce was present and such recognition was therefore no small matter.\textsuperscript{44} When William McCormick returned to Chicago in September he was in high spirits and noted that in spite of financial storms raging elsewhere, Garden City was holding out exceedingly well.\textsuperscript{45}

The failure of the New York banks during the second week of October must have put a temporary halt to his optimism, for when the New York banks closed, Chicago also succumbed.\textsuperscript{46} The McCormick Company did most of its banking with the Importers and Traders Bank of New York City, and bore the brunt of its failure. Agents who were to send their remittances to the company in the form of drafts from this bank sought in vain for a place to purchase these drafts.

\textsuperscript{43}W.S. McCormick to "Dear Sir," July 26, 1857, C.B. \#8, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{44}W.S. McCormick to J.B. McCormick, August 25, 1857, C.B. \#8, p. 563.

\textsuperscript{45}W.S. McCormick to J. Grigsby, September 18, 1857.

Although it was only a short time before the New York banks resumed business, the damage had been done, and the country settled into a period of recession.

The year following the Panic was a grim one for William McCormick and the reaper company. Currency went into hiding. Wheat and pork prices fell so low that farmers refused to sell.\textsuperscript{47} William McCormick realized that with farmers hesitant to buy reapers under these circumstances, he would have to compromise his usual business methods if the company were to survive. He believed that farmers were fundamentally honest and thought a good farmer's promissory note was far better than a machine standing unsold.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, in time of stress, he relented in his customary aversion to selling on credit. However, he advised his agents to take necessary precautions—to make sure that the farmer would be good for payment, and to be firm in collecting at the appointed time. It would not do, he warned, to sell on time and not collect when the note was due. Nor would it do to permit the customers to cry "hard times" if it was unwarranted. If the customer could not pay, McCormick

\textsuperscript{47}H.D. Jewett to C.H. McCormick and Company, January 9, 1858.

suggested that the agent secure a mortgage on the farm. On the other hand, he preferred that the agents refrain from suing the debtors but advised them that "a little indulgence makes friends and out of our friends we make capital in effecting sales." Thus by giving enough leniency to insure sales and by tempering this with certain precautions, William McCormick was able to steer the company through the depression years.

The company fared well under his guidance. Its production level stayed around four thousand machines. Sales were normal in 1858 but fell slightly in 1859. To make up for the drop in sales in the Northwest, McCormick stressed sales in the South where the depression existed to a lesser degree. Collections, however, were poor and buying on credit became the order of the day. The price of the reaper remained at $150 at Cyrus McCormick's wish, although William McCormick considered lowering the price by $25. Operating costs decreased somewhat for McCormick. He could purchase pig iron for prices between $22 and $27 a ton in 1858, whereas in 1854 he had to pay $40 a ton. In December,

---


1857, he hired an Irishman to work as night watchman for $9.00 for the seven night week. Two years earlier he had paid $10.50 a week for the same job.\(^{52}\)

For all this—supervising the company and steering it through the depression years—William made it well known to Cyrus McCormick that he expected "more than a salary."\(^{53}\) He valued his work at a rate higher than the $3000 which he had been receiving since 1854. He also wanted extra money to engage in real estate speculation that was so profitable. For cash, McCormick cast about for loans from friends, borrowed from the company, and even made serious attempts to sell Walnut Grove. In November, 1859, Cyrus McCormick granted his request for greater remuneration. Upon contract with Cyrus McCormick, both he and Leander received one quarter of the annual net profits. In addition, William McCormick received a salary of $6000 a year.\(^{54}\) Perhaps the law suits that Cyrus McCormick was involved in with John H. Manny, Seymour and Morgan, and Obed Hussy were the reasons why Cyrus McCormick waited so long to give his brother a share in the business. McCormick furnished valuable


testimony regarding the development of the reaper. If he were a partner in the business, such testimony would be weakened. His questioners never accepted the fact that he was a disinterested witness, yet, legally, they could never attribute him with a financial share of the company. It was September of 1858 when Cyrus McCormick closed his unsuccessful case with Hussy and gave up trying to secure sole patent rights on the reaper that would subject all reaper companies to him. At the close of that same year, William McCormick received a quarter share in the business. Even then he did not consider himself a true partner in the business because he did not have to furnish an annual capital investment. Upon signing this contract with his brother, William McCormick became one of the wealthiest men in Chicago. In a year in which four thousand machines were sold profits would amount to approximately $300,000. From this he would earn $81,000.


56 W.S. McCormick to T. Berry, January 24, 1860, C.B. #29, p. 443, 444.

57 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 14, 1856.
Thus William McCormick was a rich man and would not have it otherwise. Yet he realized he paid a price for his fortune. He ate only what the doctor advised—tea, eggs, toast and milk, and stayed in bed for days at a time nursing his stomach and nervous ailment. His wife, Mary Ann, stood by fearing that one of his acute attacks of dyspepsia would take him from her. As she applied mustard packs to relieve his congestion, she tried to picture what life would be without him but was unable even to imagine it. No longer was her husband a robust gentleman farmer. Sometimes even while William McCormick considered selling his old farm to finance his speculations, he nostalgically longed to escape to it. He felt at times a great desire to be released from "scolding agents" and business pressures—

58 W.S. McCormick to Dr. George B. Wood, October 18, 19, 1859; November 3, 1859. On November 3, W.S. McCormick wrote regarding his diet, "Great as is the self denial, I mean to abide by your decision." W.S. McCormick to Thornton Berry, June 20, 1857, C.B. #7, p. 466. He wrote, "Too much confinement and close application to business had somewhat impaired my nervous system and I doubt not a Farmer's life would not suit me better on the sense of health."

59 Mary Ann McCormick to Nettie McCormick, January 17, 1859, July 9, 1858.
to be head over a Virginia farm, not over a reaper factory that represented a yearly investment of thousands of dollars, and "to make cider by the barrel under the tree." When he journeyed to the old homestead of Walnut Grove in the summer of 1859, he looked hard at objects he had once seen every day. They were familiar and strange at the same time—the globe that Cyrus had made as a boy, his father's desk, the double framed picture of him and Cyrus when they were young. Leaving his home, he went to the cemetery next to the church he had attended all through his childhood. While his own sons, Robert and Willie, played on the tombstones, he stood among the weeds and said silent prayers for his mother and father, deceased sister and brother, and in a melancholy mood reflected on the past. But it was the past. No more were such thoughts desires for the present. No more were they hopes for the future. They were simply reflections on a good past.

60 W.S. McCormick to J.B. McCormick, March 18, 1859. McCormick wrote, "My highest aspiration is to be myself again—head over a Farm—beyond the reach of scolding agents. If there is any 'purgatory on earth,' I think I have had my share of it in filling my present position."


For the present and the future there would be nothing else but Chicago. Money was a reason. There was no comparison between what he would make as a farmer and what he could make in industry. His children were a reason. They were nearing an age when they were forming associations which they would not want to break. But it was more than these. It had something to do with the challenge of selling four thousand machines; with providing a machine with which farmers would be happy; with getting bargain rates for iron; with making an easy profit on an investment; with the respect in the eyes of agents, factory hands, and Chicago business men; with coming home solidly tired after a day's work. There could be no other life for him.

63 W.S. McCormick to James Shields, October 5, 1858. In regard to Walnut Grove, McCormick wrote, "I should love to make it my home again if pecuniary interest were not in the way."
Chapter IV

War and Gold

On a hot sultry day in June, 1856, Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina and Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts harangued each other about the Brooks-Sumner beating that took place the preceding month. William McCormick was in Washington at the time and took his family to see the nation's lawmakers in action. From the Senate gallery they watched this quarrel symptomatic of the growing tensions between North and South. Normally, McCormick had little time for things political. But the explosive events of 1856 and the ever increasing inter-relationship of political and economic affairs caused McCormick to develop an interest in politics for the first time in his life.

The presidential campaign of 1856 sparked McCormick's concern for national events, especially

1W.S. McCormick to H.A. Blakesly, June 14, 1856, Cyrus Hall McCormick Papers file, The McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis. Unless otherwise indicated, all manuscript items cited in this chapter are in the Cyrus Hall McCormick Papers file in the McCormick Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

as Southern elements declared that the election of a "Black Republican" would cause them to secede from the Union. McCormick hoped that the "good sense and patriotism" of people in both the North and South would prevent such a catastrophe as dissolution of the nation or Civil War. Demonstrating his conception of "good sense," McCormick supported the Democratic party candidate, James Buchanan, for president. McCormick's Virginia background, his abhorrence of abolitionism, and the influence of his brother who was active in Democratic Party affairs put him in the ranks of the Democrats. Furthermore, he believed that the bonds of the Democratic party could hold the strained nation together. This was an important consideration for him whose reaper trade reached both South and North. To promote Buchanan and reapers, he held out promises to his agents of good times ahead if Buchanan should win, and disavowed to Southern agents any connection with the abolitionism that was strong in Chicago. McCormick was

3W.S. McCormick to J. Meyer, October 1, 1856, C.B. #3, p. 471.


not so serious about the election that he could not joke about it. To a bachelor agent for whom he was endeavoring to find a "nice old maid" to warm him up on winter evenings, he humorously affirmed his hope that the agent would marry, but that Buchanan would remain a bachelor since, if elected, "Old Buck" would have enough responsibilities without having a new wife. When Buchanan won, McCormick was greatly pleased. He confidently informed Southern agents that Illinois, which went in favor of Buchanan, stood with the South in giving a rebuke to "Fremont Sermons," "Sharps Rifles," and "Bleeding Kansas." He predicted that the next four years would banish the issues dividing North and South and that there would be good times ahead for the reaper business.

These predictions did not come true. The Northwestern reaper trade suffered from the financial depression that followed the Panic of 1857, and McCormick decided to stress sales in the South where economic conditions were better. To promote Southern trade, McCormick sent

---


a free reaper to his father-in-law in Fancy Hill, Virginia, and several reapers at cost to friends in Virginia, hoping their neighbors would see and buy. He created new agencies in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Missouri. He spent the harvest of 1859 in the Virginia fields experimenting on an improvement which would facilitate the cutting of the soft-bladed Southern grasses which were very different from the stiff prairie stalks.

McCormick's usual letter-writing campaign was directed almost entirely toward Southern agents. By the spring of 1861, McCormick estimated that customers in the South who had purchased reapers on credit owed him approximately $75,000. The nation's pending fall from unity, therefore, represented a serious threat to the McCormicks. They thus tried actively to use their influence to prevent such a catastrophe.

10 W.S. McCormick to T. Berry, Staunton, Va., June 8, 1858, C.B. #12, p. 237. J.G. Hamilton to W.S. McCormick, October 23, 1858.


12 W.S. McCormick to D. Zimmerman, August 10, 1860, C.B. #33, pp. 405-409.

Cyrus McCormick was more active in the pre-war peace movement but William McCormick did his share. William McCormick supported Douglas, even though personally favoring John C. Breckinridge, in the 1860 presidential campaign. McCormick calculated that Douglas would have a better chance in Illinois and would therefore work to Abraham Lincoln's disadvantage. Upon Lincoln's election and South Carolina's secession, William McCormick immediately took a "peace at any price" stand. "First the Union as it is, if possible by peace and compromise—but in any event peace, and no war, even if that peace is attainable by a separation," he impetuously declared. Compromise, however, was his first choice. He circulated petitions for the Crittenden amendments, and tried to bring Republicans around to a stand "against coercion and for compromise." He attended Conservative meetings and rallies and regretted he did not put five reapers

---

14 Cf. Hutchinson, II, 41-54.
15 W.S. McCormick to J. Campbell, August 18, 1860, C.B. #33, p. 606. McCormick said, "Expect to vote for Douglas though not my choice by a good deal."
18 Mary Ann McCormick to Nettie F. McCormick, February 17, 1861.
drawn by "elegant horses" and all the factory employees in the Conservative parade on Washington's birthday to proclaim openly the McCormicks' stand for peace and compromise. The McCormicks' leadership in the anti-war movement especially through Cyrus McCormick's recently organized newspaper, the Chicago Times, brought the wrath of a rival Republican newspaper, the Chicago Tribune. The Tribune branded the McCormicks as "secessionists." William McCormick came to the defense of the family name by a public letter in which he emphasized the good that the McCormicks had wrought in the Northwest and the obvious disadvantage that division of the nation would bring to the company, thus disavowing any advocacy of secession.

While William McCormick labored in the months before Fort Sumter to preserve peace and a public image of McCormick loyalty in the Northwest, he also worked to preserve the costly friendship of Southern agents and customers. "We are not secessionists by a good deal but we are for the South having her rights," he informed one agent. "Republicanism has cooled down

---

19 W.S. McCormick to T. Berry, February 23, 1861, C.B. #39, pp. 165, 166.
20 Chicago Tribune, February 12, 1861.
considerably here," he reassured another. He sent copies of the Chicago Times to his Southern friends so that they could see clearly the McCormick stand and copies of the Tribune article so that Southerners would know what "Devils" the McCormicks had to put up with in the name of peace. After Fort Sumter he wrote that he could no longer take a stand against belligerent action even though he could not condone it. In states' rights fashion, he maintained he would be loyal to his adopted state of Illinois. From there he would watch the "tragic spectacle."

For him the war was indeed a tragic spectacle and throughout its duration he entertained few hopes for a happy ending. His Democratic leanings and his pre-war stand for compromise automatically put him at odds with the Republican Administration. He predicted that Lincoln's government would bring "nothing except ruinous waste of life and property...perhaps disruption of states North and South." He interpreted the lack

---


26 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 19, 1862.
of enthusiasm at Chicago's recruitment meetings and the Union Army's indecisive military campaigns as signs of possible "disgraceful failure."\(^{27}\) Being from Virginia, he did not underestimate Southern prowess and readily believed the report of an employee who had just returned from Kentucky that the Rebels would never give up their cause.\(^{28}\) He envisioned a postwar situation wherein thousands of Northern soldiers would return home "dissatisfied, misused and deceived" after fighting unsuccessfully, and thereafter be stirred by a "Jacobin" leader in "reign of terror" fired by Abolitionist hatred.\(^{29}\)

McCormick considered the Radical Republicans to be potentially dangerous. He stood at variance with their war aim of freeing the slaves, and held the "Union and the Constitution" to be the only legitimate war goals.\(^{30}\) Radical demands for vigorous prosecution of the war made him feel that their sole aim was to "gratify their infernal malignant passions."\(^{31}\) He denounced their

\(^{27}\) W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, January 19, 1863.  
\(^{28}\) W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 14, 1862.  
\(^{29}\) W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 1, 1863.  
\(^{30}\) W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 5, 1862.  
war time controls as detriments to freedom of speech.32 The clash of radical and conservative opinion was bitter in Chicago as Joseph Medill of the Tribune freely applied charges of "treason," and in return Wilber Storey of the Times, which he had bought from Cyrus McCormick, came forth with vituperous counter charges. People were so stirred up that McCormick expected war and anarchy to break out in the city. "Men may kill one another for opinion's sake," he worried.33

As much as McCormick feared that the Radical Republicans would get the upper hand, he did not take a public stand against them. His participation in politics was confined to applauding the Democratic Congressional victories in 1862 and watching with interest the speeches of such Democratic leaders as New York Governor Horatio Seymour and Ohio's Clement L. Vallandigham.34 Rather than fight against the Radicals, he preferred to "swallow all their prescriptions however poisonous," and to be known solely as a "reaper man of very modest

---

32 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, September 27, 1862; March 29, 1863.
33 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, September 28, 1862; November 9, 1862; November 9, 1862.
34 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 19, 1862, April 15, 1863; January 4, 1863; January 19, 1863.
McCormick, having already lost his Southern trade, could reap no direct gain by joining an anti-war faction, and thus found it expedient to resume his pre-war disinterest in active politics. Besides, unexpected financial gains during the war years kept him too busy to do much politicking.

McCormick's pessimistic attitude toward the outcome of the war was precisely the reason why he was so successful in wartime business. Lacking confidence in a government headed by Republicans, he therefore distrusted the currency it issued and made a fortune by a simple formula of investing before expected inflation. In the months after Fort Sumter, William McCormick was apprehensive about possible disruption of the economic order but had no idea of the financial revolution ahead. Currency tightened as the New York banks, in addition to carrying on their usual operations with the nation's businessmen, assumed the load of lending money to a bankrupt Government that needed funds to wage war. The banks could only carry their double load because the Government spent quickly the money it borrowed and this money found its way back to the New York banks very rapidly. The Trent Affair upset this delicate cycle. Businessmen, William McCormick

---

35 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, April 15, 1863, October 5, 1862.
among them, did not believe that the Government could wage war both with England and with the South, and withdrew their funds from the New York banks for safekeeping in the event of national disaster. After a certain point, the banks were unable to make payment, and were forced to suspend specie payments. The Federal Government at the opening of 1862 had nowhere to secure funds to carry on its war.

The Federal Government solved this problem by the passage of the Legal-Tender Act of February 25, 1862. By this and two subsequent acts on July 11 and March 3, 1862, the government issued its own currency with which it could pay its debts. Once this currency was in circulation it became legal tender for all debts except tariff duties. It could not be redeemed for specie until a later but then unknown date. At their issue, the government notes were on a par value with gold. Once in circulation, the value of these notes--

36 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, December 24, 1861. He wrote, "If war with Europe I suppose New York would secure its specie and I would rather move my part than have them do it."


38 January 1, 1879.
commonly called greenbacks—fluctuated at rates depending upon the chances of government redemption. If the government stability was threatened, the value of the greenbacks on the basis of gold would fall. If the government appeared secure, the value of the greenbacks would rise. The outcome of military battles was the chief agent in currency fluctuation. Political and economic news also raised and lowered greenback values.\textsuperscript{39}

By the new currency, the Federal Government entered into the very heart of the nation's economic life.

Almost immediately, the greenbacks became a major concern for William McCormick. They presented many difficulties to him. He was accustomed to transacting business with bank notes normally redeemable for gold at any time. When the greenbacks came out, he had to reorientate himself to using a currency that had a constantly changing value. He therefore had to spend much time studying the political and economic situation in order to discover which way and how far the greenbacks would go.\textsuperscript{40}

From its issuance, McCormick was suspicious of the fiat money. When good harvests and rising prices enriched

\textsuperscript{39} Mitchell, pp. 199-210.

\textsuperscript{40} W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 19, 1862. He wrote, "Never paid attention to the currency question before--now circumstances demand much study of it which I have been doing."
the farmer and enabled him to pay old and new reaper debts, McCormick, instead of being pleased, was alarmed. By the turn of 1863, he reported that currency was coming in at a record of $13,000 for one day. By the end of the month he calculated that $141,500 came in whereas two years earlier the total for the same month amounted to only $90,000. Inflation, however, had depreciated the currency and McCormick feared that shortly all the money that the company was receiving would be worthless. Furthermore, the greenback currency was enabling farmers to pay off old debts in money of less value than that existing when they had contracted the debts. In dismay, McCormick declared to Cyrus McCormick that the Legal-Tender Law enabled the debtor "to pay his honest debts with scraps of paper," and wrote that these were times when "creditors were seen running away from their debtors and debtors were pursuing them in triumph and paying them without mercy." When money began to pour in, McCormick’s first impulse was to convert it into commodities which had an intrinsic value, such as building materials, land and gold. The gold market was an attractive place to invest surplus

41 W. S. McCormick to C. H. McCormick, January 4, 1863; February 15, 1863.

money. Gold was safe, it required no care and could easily be converted into real estate or inventory. Moreover, McCormick observed that the relationship between the gold market and the greenbacks manifested unmistakable occasions for profit. After a short while, he could see that dents in government prestige, primarily through inconclusive military battles, brought decline in greenback values. If greenback values were low, gold values in terms of greenbacks were high. McCormick determined to enter the gold market before the price of gold would rise. Before Cyrus McCormick left for Europe, he had given William McCormick power of attorney over the company and William McCormick could do with company funds as he saw fit.\(^{43}\)

Although William McCormick had this general power, he preferred to have Cyrus McCormick's approval in specific investments. He quickly discovered that this was not easy to attain. Cyrus McCormick, noting the instability of the times, was reluctant to permit his homebound brother to make large investments. William McCormick waited for the inventor's approval in June, 1862, as McClellan's inactive Peninsular Campaign gave impetus to the slowly rising gold market.\(^{44}\) When July came and he still had no


\(^{44}\)Mitchell, p. 213.
word from Cyrus McCormick, he wrote indignantly to him, "I am surprized at your inaction in your financial matters." He could restrain himself no longer. McClellan's retreat to Harrison's Landing, Lincoln's call for more volunteer forces and the passage of the Second Legal-Tender Act, which put the government further into debt, were driving the price of gold still higher. Quick action was imperative and William McCormick decided to buy gold regardless of his brother's feelings. He spent $58,275 on gold at greenback prices that ranged between $112 and $120 for $100 worth of gold.

For the remainder of the year, William McCormick chafed at receiving Cyrus McCormick's approval of his gold speculations (and his concurrent real estate investments). After Stonewall Jackson's victory at Harper's Ferry and Lincoln's apparent concessions to the Radicals with the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, William McCormick warned his reticent partner of the possible coming of a "stump tail storm that will eclipse all former stump tails." Cyrus McCormick remained indifferent. In

45W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, July 20, 1862.
46Mitchell, p. 214.
47W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, July 9, 1862; July 20, 1862.
October when the Administration lost ground by Demo­
cratic Congressional victories, he cautioned Cyrus
McCormick against being caught "breeches clear down," and begged Cyrus McCormick to authorize him to put out "planks" to save their "sinking ship." The year closed with gold at $125, and still no approbation from Cyrus McCormick.

The progress of the pending Legal-Tender Act exerted a dominating influence in January and February, 1863, in raising the price of gold. Early in January, William McCormick bought a sizable purchase of gold at $134. Cyrus McCormick came through with his approval one month later, but at least he was relenting. When this came, William McCormick buttressed his urgings for Cyrus McCormick's consent by reminding his reticent brother that should he have waited to purchase the gold until his approval had come, he would have had to pay a price higher by $20 to $25. "Though not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet," he proclaimed to Cyrus McCormick in an air of self satisfaction, "my predictions are being fulfilled." Cypress McCormick could

---

48 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 12, 1862; October 10, 1862.
49 Mitchell, p. 217.
50 Ibid.
not help but agree. By May he had given full assent to William McCormick's gold investments.

Though momentarily pleased with his paper profits, William McCormick did not rest easy. Gold prices fluctuated constantly and McCormick debated between buying and selling, and about which was the better investment, gold or real estate. Between March and August, 1863, there was a revival in the Administration's credit and gold prices fell in correspondence. During March the passage of the National Banking Act, the Supplementary Internal Revenue Act and the $900,000,000 Loan Act put the United States Treasury on firm ground, and the price of gold slid to $133.\textsuperscript{52} McCormick worried then about his investments but was happy to report "nobody hurt" at the end of the month when gold bounced back to $143. In April, when Charleston was proving a "hard nut to crack," he was reassured that gold was a good investment.\textsuperscript{53} When Federal victories at Vicksburg, Gettysburg and Port Hudson brought gold prices down again, he could not resist buying $50,000 worth at the lower price before leaving in August for a vacation in the north woods of Minnesota.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} Mitchell, p. 217.

\textsuperscript{53} W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, April 11, 1863.

\textsuperscript{54} L.J. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, August 20, 1863.
This was William McCormick's last investment in the gold market. In the winter of 1863-1864, circumstances so occurred that he determined to sell his gold, in spite of a renewed upward rise in price. Leander McCormick, who had returned from Europe, refused to permit William McCormick to make any further investments with his share of the profits. Cyrus McCormick was demanding that he be paid in gold his share of the profits that he had not collected while in Europe. William McCormick had this tied up in real estate but could get cash to repay part of this by selling the gold. In addition, indignant congressmen agitated to stop the dealing in gold because they thought speculators were responsible for forcing the price of gold up for their own selfish ends, and thus making government currency look bad. McCormick feared they would put a tax on gold and did not like the idea. Gold bore no interest and, in spite of its rise, was not nearly as lucrative as his real estate investments. These developments brought William McCormick to sell both his and Leander McCormick's share of the gold. He sold it at $157 and thus made a substantial currency profit considering

55 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, January 24, 1864.
56 Mitchell, p. 223.
58 Ibid.
he had bought the gold at prices ranging between $112 and $134.

For several months McCormick somewhat regretted his sale and considered getting back into the gold market. The Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, was trying desperately to stop gold speculation because it made the Government currency appear depreciated. His final effort was a bill to banish the gold market altogether. The Gold Bill only made speculation more rampant. When prices were hovering in the area of $190 pending its passage on June 17, 1864, William McCormick was again tempted to buy gold. He decided against it, however, and probably watched with some misgivings when, after the speedy repeal of the Gold Bill, the price of gold climbed to a peak of $285 on July 10, 1864, when Confederate General Jubal Early was within ten miles of Washington. Nevertheless, William McCormick had his real estate investments, which were on a more solid foundation, to compensate for speculative profits from the gold market. After gold passed this peak period, William McCormick manifested little interest in it.

---

59 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 6, 1864.
60 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, June 8, 1864.
61 Mitchell, pp. 231, 234.
Throughout the duration of the war, McCormick never forgot his Virginia background and that the war was conducted by the Republican Administration. He resented the violation of Southern soil upon which his Confederate brother-in-law, Lucian Grigsby, was twice wounded. He sneered at the "Northern patriotism" that slaughtered Southern women and children. He was annoyed when Illinois Republican Governor Richard Yates called for contributions for a Soldiers' Home and for artificial limbs. He was offended at the new income tax, and when putting in an order for peach brandy, let it be known that he did not expect to pay the newly introduced whisky tax. But although McCormick questioned the necessity of war and its hardships, he never hoped for the downfall of the Union. Federal defeats which caused a rise in gold prices brought him profit, but he had nothing to do with causing the defeats themselves. He gambled in gold, not in order to fluctuate the market and make government greenbacks look bad, but because the market fluctuated. As a part of a large group

---

63 W. S. McCormick to C. H. McCormick, July 12, 1863; November 22, 1863.
64 W. S. McCormick to C. H. McCormick, March 6, 1864.
speculating in gold, he did not feel individual responsibility for contributing to a loss of confidence in government currency.

The currency depreciated enough to enable him to profit but not enough to bring him ruin. Because the greenbacks stayed in this middle ground, McCormick's pessimism worked to his advantage. Nor was his pessimism a surface feeling. It was grounded in his Southern background and his Democratic affiliations. It was further enhanced by the delay of the Union Army to turn the tide toward victory and by the state of war weariness that existed in the Northwest. This pessimism pushed him who was ordinarily cautious to take risks on the grounds that there would be inflation, and enabled him to profit when the expected inflation occurred.
Chapter V

Reaping the Revolutions

The times were revolutionary and McCormick knew it. The Civil War itself was a major revolution in which nationalism triumphed over sectionalism. William McCormick opposed its more radical ends and particularly the means by which it was carried out on the battle field and in the political arena. There were countless other revolutions within this giant revolution. William McCormick guided the family revolution in which the McCormick wealth became the McCormick fortune. He experienced the commercial revolution that so affected his company. And for practically one year, he stood in apprehension of the greatest of personal revolutions—his own death.

William McCormick had little faith in the Republican Administration but boundless faith in the city of Chicago.

1 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, December 11, 1862. He wrote, "I see signs of a storm—a commercial revolution... in the North." W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormich, March 6, 1863. Here he said, "In these revolutionary times so much depends on 'prompt action and judgement.'" W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 29, 1863. He wrote, "Must run risks and act under pressure in this state of revolution." Unless otherwise indicated all manuscript items in this chapter are from the Cyrus Hall McCormick Papers file and located in the McCormick Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
"Chicago must be a success if any city in this country," he wrote to his brother.² He judged its location on the shores of Lake Michigan and far from the ravages of war to be excellent. With his finger on the city's economic pulse he watched with interest as pork packers flocked to the city, a major sign Chicago was pulling out of the economic recession that had begun in 1857.³ McCormick demonstrated his faith through works and reaped a rich reward. In addition to his gold purchases, he invested much of the sudden and unusual influx of currency that came into the company in late 1862 in Chicago real estate. When that supply of money was exhausted, he borrowed money to invest, expecting to pay his debts with the inflated currency that would later come in as payment for reapers.⁴ So great were William McCormick's investments that by the end of the war the McCormick real estate assets exceeded those of their reaper company.⁵

Because of the real estate holdings that brought huge returns

²W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 4, 1863.


⁴W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, May 31, 1863; July 9, 1863; November 23, 1863; December, 1863. In December, 1863, McCormick was in debt $220,000 at 7% per annum. He called this plan "designedly contracting indebtedness."

⁵C.H. McCormick Estimate of Assets, August 1, 1865, Special collection File.
in rents, the McCormick wealth became the McCormick fortune.

When the Civil War broke out, William McCormick was far from a novice in matters of Chicago real estate. His first years in the city had witnessed a fantastic increase in Chicago land values. 6 Like many citizens who had money to invest, McCormick had speculated in land. His pre-war land holdings and profits had been respectable. In 1856, he had boasted of a $4500 gain from the sale of a house which he had built just one year earlier. 7 In 1857, he had sold for about $13,000 each three houses which he had built for only $5000 each. 8 For himself he had built "the finest home in Yankeedom" on Rush Street which was in the North Side in the most fashionable residential districts of the city. He had lived there for two years before building an even larger home complete with gymnasium on the North Side's Huron Street. He had then rented his Rush Street house for $1000 a year. The economic recession following the Panic of 1857 had crippled many who

---

6 Homer Hoyt, One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago: The Relationship of the Growth of Chicago to the Rise in its Land Values, 1830-1933 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1933), pp. 69, 70, 77, 78. Hoyt maintains that between 1842 and 1856, land values increased eighty fold, most of the increase being between 1851 and 1856.


had gone into debt and could not pay their mortgages. This had only given McCormick incentive to take advantage of lower land and building costs, for unlike many investors, he had had in the reaper business a source of liquid capital and good credit. He had sought to borrow money to build and to improve his holdings. Rents which were formerly $1000 had fallen to $650 but, though he had been forced to curtail his buying and building through lack of funds, he was far from discouraged. When the war brought new life into Chicago's economy, William McCormick was well schooled in its real estate situation. When greenbacks flooded the company, real estate was the most logical place for him to put this new currency of uncertain value.

Desire for security, speculation and rent revenues were the three chief reasons why McCormick engaged so heavily in the real estate business during the Civil War.

10 Hoyt, pp. 74, 75.


12 Prior to the War, McCormick bought and built houses on Huron Street numbered 351, 353, 355, 296; on Rush Street numbered 138, 133; on Erie Street, 328; on Indiana Street, 314. With his brother-in-law, Hugh Adams, he owned stores on Kinzie Street numbered 187½, 193, 195, 199, 199½, 201, and a store on Market Street. After his death the McCormick heirs received for the year 1866 $11,998 in rents. C.A. Spring, Jr., Real Estate File, 1866, 1867.
His first purchases in late 1862 were motivated primarily by his plan to convert the greenbacks into something of tangible value. Being cautious by nature, he wanted to split the risk in case his gold investments would fail. At first he feared that no one would take the greenbacks and was pleasantly surprised when the wily Scottish financier, George Smith, manifested faith in them by accepting McCormick's bid to buy a lot from him and pay for it in greenbacks over a period of eighteen months. He thus discovered that real estate had a distinct advantage over gold because one could buy on credit and pay later with inflated currency. McCormick's experience in land dealing in 1856 and 1857 led him to believe that a similar real estate boom would occur during the war years. In this he was disappointed. Land values did not rise at such rates that he could gain substantial profits by buying and selling. Nevertheless, rents rose with inflation and the pressing demands for store space. McCormick's rent incomes made holding his real estate many

---

13 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, July 9, 1862; September 24, 1862.


15 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, February 21, 1864. He wrote, "The tendency of everything but real estate is up." W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, February 28, 1864. He said, "Real estate has not advanced like I thought it would."

16 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 4, 1863. He wrote, "Best men and capital are here and coming here--there are not stores to do the business."
times more profitable in terms of the present and the future.

The heart of McCormick's operations was in the area where the Chicago River flows eastward into Lake Michigan. Lake Street running parallel with the River and Clark Street going across the River figured prominently in his purchases. Both were choice business streets and characteristically McCormick bought in areas representing the least risk. Lake Street was then the acknowledged business center.\(^{17}\) On this street McCormick bought all stores and lots in the block between Michigan and Wabash Avenues which ran north and south. Prices then ranged from $119,000 for a group of three stores several years old to $40,000 for the lot and the building of a new store. The renters of McCormick's Lake Street stores were primarily wholesalers of dry goods and crockery, and paid him annual rents of $8700. By 1866, the McCormicks were receiving yearly $59,250 in rents from their Lake Street stores alone.\(^{18}\)

McCormick did equally well on Clark Street. This was an ideal location because the Clark Street bridge over the Chicago River was a major thoroughfare connecting North and South Chicago. Here the insurance companies gathered and the McCormicks did well in rents. On the south side of the bridge, McCormick purchased five buildings until he owned

---

\(^{17}\)Hoyt, p. 65.

\(^{18}\)W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 1, 1863; March 29, 1863, July 10, 1863; February 7, 1864. On Lake Street the McCormicks owned numbers 4, 6, 8, 34, 36, 38, 40, 19, 21. C.A. Spring, Jr., Real Estate File, 1866, 1867.
the entire Clark Street block between Lake Street and South Water Street (today called Wacker Drive). On the northeast corner of South Water and Clark, McCormick bought another five story brick building. On the north side of the Clark Street bridge, McCormick went into the hotel business. He bought what was called the Foster House for $50,000, repaired it, refurnished it with "first rate" walnut beds with hair mattresses, and renamed it the "Revere House." He advertised it widely among his agents who might be traveling through Chicago, and by April, 1865, he had received a healthy return of $20,000 on his investment. The next year the Revere House yielded $2000 more than this, and the following year a further increase of $2000. Thus in three years the hotel was easily paid for and bringing in clear profit.

William McCormick also invested in farm lands and spent much time investigating good locations, proximity to railroads, fertility of soil and potential and actual improvements. He accumulated 11,000 acres located primarily in Illinois but also had lands in Iowa, Minnesota, Indiana and Michigan. He paid approximately $20 an acre for these lands and sometimes

---

19 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 1, 1863. C.A. Spring, Jr., Real Estate File, 1866, 1867. On Clark Street, McCormicks owned numbers 93, 95, 97, 101; on South Water, 142 and 144.

paid for them in reaper notes instead of cash.²¹ His returns in rents netted him about three per cent on his costs, and often, in addition, he received a share of the farm products.²² These he turned over to his brother-in-law, Hugh Adams, whom he had set up in a commission and wholesale grocery business in 1857.²³ At that time, McCormick did not encourage taking produce in lieu of cash for reapers, preferring to buy rather than barter. When currency was in an uncertain state in 1863, McCormick was more willing to receive farm products as partial rent payments.²⁴

Cyrus McCormick exerted a restraining influence over William McCormick's real estate ventures, as he had done over his gold speculations. Shortly after Cyrus McCormick had arrived in England, he consulted Junius P. Morgan and Charles Francis Adams on the economic situation in America. They both


advised caution, and Cyrus McCormick relayed the message to William McCormick. "Keep in sight of land at all times," he warned. Cyrus McCormick wrote of the possibility of the currency appreciating, in which case William McCormick would have to pay his debts with money of greater value than that with which he had contracted them. On the other hand, Cyrus McCormick proposed, there could be a repudiation of the government debts, making the currency worthless, and causing creditors to demand to be paid in gold.24 Cyrus McCormick was in tune with most of the businessmen of the time. The easy terms on which men could secure loans and the relatively static real estate values indicated that men were unwilling to put forth a large outlay of cash until times were more certain.25 Unlike many business men, William McCormick preferred to spend money on hand rather than to have money in the bank.26 By late 1863, after Vicksburg and Gettysburg, men became bolder and Chicago underwent a flourish of building activity.27 By this time, however, William McCormick was completing his buying and building.

Prices were high and he did not care to begin any new projects. Thus he had anticipated the rise, and had profited by paying cheaper building costs and by having buildings ready to rent when the demand was great. In spite of Cyrus McCormick's admonitions, William McCormick had gone ahead and taken the risks when the time was right. Since Cyrus McCormick received one-half of the profits from his brother's investments, it was fortunate for him that William McCormick had acted on his premonitions. William McCormick had indeed been the faithful steward who multiplied the talents that the master had given him. At the end of the war, the McCormicks were the largest landlords in Chicago.\footnote{28} Because of William McCormick, the McCormick name was known not only for reapers but for real estate. The family's rent income towered in the area of $95,000 annually and its property was valued at over one million dollars.\footnote{29} Because of William McCormick, the McCormicks held a fortune.

\footnote{28}W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 14, 1865. He wrote, "There is not a landlord in Chicago that has done half as much at renting as we." \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, October 8, 1863, May 20, 1864, July 21, 1864.

William McCormick felt himself being swept into a commercial revolution. Although the war did not completely transform the McCormick Works so that one could say it underwent a revolution in the full sense of the term, nevertheless, no aspect of it remained unchanged during the war years. Furthermore, there were inaugurated business methods and principles into the McCormick business and every business that spelled the weakening of extreme individualism in the nation's economic life. Thus for the first time, William McCormick experienced both the union of labor and management, and had to deal with Federal Income Tax, patent combinations and price fixing. Embryonic beginnings of these commonplaces of later American business existed in McCormick's day and he found himself encountering them directly.

The war affected the factors of production in various degrees. The number of machines manufactured remained around five thousand machines in 1861 and 1862. In planning for 1863, William McCormick cut production by eight hundred machines because he feared that the shipping difficulties on the Mississippi, the currency situation and the possibility of all the farm hands going to war, would leave few to be interested in buying reaping machines. Although McCormick raised production numbers for 1864, drought and
poor crops left unsold about two thousand old and new model machines.  

The theory that the war depleted farm labor and thus created a demand for farm machinery was a fallacy in regard to the McCormick Company's business.  

McCormick's production costs rose with inflation. In 1862 he had profited by buying heavily building supplies on the hunch that there would be inflation. Tin, white lead, nails, zinc and pig and bar iron filled the factory yard to overflowing. He purchased approximately 11,000 tons of pig iron at prices between $25 and $26 a ton. The following year it was only necessary for him to buy about 500 tons, but by then prices had gone up to $45 or $46 a ton. His profit through money saved in that particular year was considerable. In the following years he had to buy high, but his reaper prices also rose. In 1864 he estimated that a $35,000 outlay would gross $175,000. Frequent strikes in the factory raised McCormick's labor costs. He had to give two wage increases in the spring of 1862 and one in the fall. He

---

31 Emerson D. Fite, Social and Industrial Conditions in the North during the Civil War (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1910), pp. 6, 7, makes this claim. Also Hoyt, p. 81.  
32 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, August 3, 1862; November 9, 1862; November 23, 1862; July 19, 1863.  
33 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, December 12, 1864.
also permitted some wage increases in 1863 and 1864. Because of inflation there was little real wage gain and McCormick noticed that, compared with other costs, labor was low. The vast majority of his agents still received under $50 a month for selling and servicing reapers. In the wartime situation, labor became more difficult to manage. Strikes, previously non-existent at the factory, became a regular occurrence. To keep the labor situation in hand, William and Leander McCormick attended a foundry-owners meeting and with the group resolved to keep all wage increases under $2.00 a day. Besides demanding wage increases, labor was becoming more independent in other ways. William McCormick complained that men in the foundry refused to work for a certain foreman; that workmen left to go to war or to escape the draft; and that mechanics left to work for the government at better pay. McCormick was also dissatisfied with the office workers who were demanding better salaries but, from his viewpoint, were doing poorer work. Thus, while William McCormick was guiding the factory


35 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 15, 1863; December 12, 1864; December 16, 1864.

36 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, March 15, 1862; September 28, 1862; March 1, 1864; April 8, 1864; January 24, 1864. Leander McCormick to C.H. McCormick, December 6, 1863.

37 Chicago Tribune, March 15, 1863.

38 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, January 24, 1864; April 8, 1863; November 22, 1863; February 22, 1863; February 28, 1864.
through the war years, labor as a force began to stir within it.

Along with wage increases, the newly inaugurated Federal Income Tax was an additional business cost that momentarily unsettled McCormick. Since he was at odds with the Administration, he viewed with alarm this and other attempts to finance the war. During the passage of the Internal Revenue Bill of 1861 of which the Income Tax Law was a part, McCormick stood denouncing the entire bill as "one big excess" governed by the all-encompassing law of "military necessity." However, he especially deplored the income tax ruling. After this was passed, it necessitated that McCormick draw up an accurate account of assets and liabilities. He fretted over making such an assessment and pondered as to how he could achieve one that would be an "honorable compromise" between duty to the law and expediency to the company. After seeking counsel from various persons, he concluded that since so little was known about this new taxation, nobody could make a completely accurate account.39

When the assessors came around, McCormick found to his surprise that they were pleasant people and was happy to discover that they did not require an oath. Nevertheless,

---

they put him through what he considered a "severe ordeal."

The law required that three per cent be paid on gross sales and three per cent on gross profits. The former was not difficult to determine but the latter was a different matter. Since farmers continued to buy on credit, much of the profit was in the form of unpaid reaper notes, the future value of which was uncertain, considering the state of the currency. A friend had advised McCormick to keep to the gold standard and take the benefit of the doubt in determining the value of the reaper notes. In the presence of the assessors McCormick argued that fifty cents on the dollar was a fair estimate considering "risks of agents, men gone to war, depreciation and the increased disposition in these times in men not to deal and pay fairly." 40 At this rate, he judged, the income tax for himself and his brothers combined should come to $3000. The assessors did not accept such a liberal discount in the value of the notes. He began to think then that criticism would be leveled against the company should he shirk on income tax, and reconciled himself to paying the amount the assessors asked. The first income tax bill that he paid in the name of himself and his brothers amounted to $6000. 41


41 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, May 31, 1863; June 7, 1863; July 12, 1863; July 19, 1863.
As McCormick's costs became less manageable, he took the lead in attempts to assure a return through fixing prices. Rising costs brought competitors together at his call early in 1864. At this and subsequent meetings, McCormick urged that not only should the reaper makers raise their prices but that they should also produce fewer machines. On the former point, there was unity of opinion and the reaper producers raised prices to $100 over pre-war figures. On the latter point, he made little headway and for him the price increase was little good if the supply were greater than the demand. In the late spring of 1865, McCormick found himself with two thousand machines on hand that were left over from previous seasons. He suspected that other reaper makers were in the same straits and that possibly they would lower the mutual price in order to entice farmers to buy. With this fear as his self-justification, McCormick decided to get the edge upon his competitors and lower his price by $50. The other irate makers met in Cleveland in June, 1865, and reluctantly decided to follow suit.42

McCormick united with fellow manufacturers in another instance but, as in the case of setting prices, such cooperation was forced by circumstances. Thus convenience

42 W.S. McCormick to Dayton S. Morgan, December 22, 1864. W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, January 31, 1865; April 6, 1865; April 13, 1865; April 22, 1865. Hutchinson, II, 95.
rather than honor was the guiding principle. In 1863, William McCormick saw clearly that the McCormick Mower had fallen a great deal behind the other leading mowers. His machine was rigid and had one wheel while those of his competitors had two wheels and utilized a flexible hinged-bar frame. All the makers of the hinged-bar machine had joined into a giant pool, excluding the McCormicks, and had bought all conceivable patents to the machine.\textsuperscript{43}

McCormick had a choice of either paying the Pool for the use of its patents or devising an entirely new machine. To solve the problem temporarily, he opened negotiations with Cyrenus Wheeler, a leader in the organization of the Pool, Moses G. Hubbard, and Ephraim Ball, members of the Pool.\textsuperscript{44} Because Hubbard's price was the cheapest, McCormick made a contract with him for the use of the Hubbard patents for one year at $5 a machine.\textsuperscript{45} When the year was over, the McCormicks had an option to purchase the Hubbard patents outright which McCormick did, not because he wanted to make further use of the patents but because he wanted to eliminate their competition.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Cf. Hutchinson, II, 370-379.

\textsuperscript{44} W.S. McCormick to C. Wheeler, Nixon and Company, Alliance, Ohio, November 5, 1864, C.B. #75, p. 862. W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, December 8, 1865; December 26, 1865. W.S. McCormick to E. Ball, October 5, 1864, C.B. #75, p. 192.

\textsuperscript{45} W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, December 31, 1864; February 22, 1865.

\textsuperscript{46} C.A. Spring, Jr. to C.H. McCormick, August 22, 1865; August 30, 1865.
Simultaneously, William McCormick set about having a mower invented that the company could manufacture without paying tribute to anyone. He hired a man at $5 a day to tabulate all existing mower patents, and authorized Leander McCormick and an assistant to construct a machine that would steer clear of all patents except those which were scheduled to expire that year. William McCormick was confident that this machine would not only escape any patent infringements but also would be superior to all others.

In the meantime, Cyrus McCormick, then back in the United States, hired lobbyists to prevent Congress from extending the Pool's key patents that were due to expire. This would not be advantageous per se because it would also enable McCormick's competitors outside the Pool to use the patents. Nevertheless, it served as a powerful bargaining weapon which William McCormick used when he called a meeting with two of the most prominent men in the Pool, Cyrenus Wheeler and Cornelius Aultman. During the meeting Wheeler and Aultman had to admit to William McCormick that it would be best for them to make an arrangement with the McCormicks—most likely one whereby the McCormicks would withdraw their opposition to the Pool's patent extension cases in return for free use of the mower patents.47

47 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, February 16, 1865; March 9, 1865; March 14, 1865; April 25, 1865.
Despite this promising beginning, William McCormick's plan backfired. Wheeler and Aultman failed to make such a generous concession and Leander McCormick's machine did not work. McCormick found himself at the hands of the Combination and wrote to Cyrus McCormick that it would be "hard to defy" it.\textsuperscript{48} He thereupon made a contract to pay the Pool approximately $30,000 annually for five years' usage of the mower patents. At the same time, he gained $5000 by promising to withdraw the McCormick's opposition to the Pool's patent extension cases.\textsuperscript{49} Cyrus McCormick was not as willing to give in as was his more conventional brother. The upshot of the case was that William McCormick fell ill and little in the way of payments were made that year. Leander McCormick protested Cyrus McCormick's intentions to ignore the contract, but to no avail. The mower combination brought it to court, and if William McCormick had lived until the final decision in the Supreme Court in 1872, he would have seen that it was possible to defy the combination—if one had the determination of Cyrus McCormick.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, April 6, 1865.


\textsuperscript{50} Hutchinson, II, 379-392.
During the mower case, Leander and Cyrus McCormick came to an open disagreement that steadily grew as the years passed, and resulted in Leander McCormick's withdrawal from the company and his publishing claims that Robert McCormick, not Cyrus McCormick, had invented the reaper. The vitriolic arguments that occurred then did not occur while William McCormick lived. He acted as a leaven to preserve peace in his family, and strongly believed that business should not interfere with family harmony. Although he was not always in agreement with Cyrus McCormick, he refused to permit business matters to affect his personal regard for his brothers. However, when Leander and Cyrus McCormick disagreed, they did not as easily bypass personal enmity. Leander returned from Europe declaring it was the "worst blunder" of his life, and in his subsequent but slight correspondence he let his discord with Cyrus McCormick show. William McCormick did his best to soothe ruffled

---

53 L.J. McCormick to J.B. McCormick, April 7, 1863.
54 L.J. McCormick memo, March 8, 1863. He wrote, "C.H. has given orders as to work on raker which I and all concerned think all wrong." L.J. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, November 22, 1863. Here he wrote, "You say to Wm. that L. answered your questions vaguely and I can't remember what I said." L.J. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, December 9, 1863. He wrote, "You complain that I neglect to write you but I have not pretended to be a correspondent."
feelings and to prevent his brothers from carrying on a long distance quarrel. When the brothers drew up a new contract in 1864, which made William and Leander McCormick full partners in the business each contributing one-quarter of the company's working capital and each becoming liable for the company's losses, William McCormick guided his brothers to settle all differences in a fairminded spirit. He turned over all articles of dispute to an outside arbitrator.

While unwilling to quarrel over the conduct of the family business, William McCormick increasingly worried about it. Hesitant to accept responsibility, he assumed more than his share. The burden of his multitudinous duties weighed heavily upon him. He worried about how he could handle all that was given him to do, and often enumerated for Cyrus McCormick all that was entrusted to his care. The burden seemed greater because he bore it alone. He

55 L.J. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, August 8, 1863. He wrote, "In letter to Wm. you speak of the cruel treatment which has been meted out to you and a vast deal of complaint some of which I had intended to have replied to but Wm. has taken the letter and let it 'go.'"


57 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, July 9, 1862. Before Cyrus McCormick left for Europe, William McCormick wrote, "Think it better if you give up your trip. If not, intimate to me whether you desire me to exercise my judgement on every question. I would not do such a thing and I prefer I should not have to assume responsibilities for you."
felt bereft of support when his brothers sailed for Europe at the opening of the war. His business associates lent little assistance to him, nor did he have time to help others. "Bankers who know most do not see fit to enlighten others," he complained, "just as it is not our interest to talk gold up as long as we are interested." In this era of economic individualism, each man stood alone.

Nor did the Presbyterian elders of the North Presbyterian Church of which he was a member minister support of friendship. Formerly McCormick's church associations formed the hub of his rather limited social life. After the war had begun he could not even find one elder to whom he could turn. Ministers and members were aflame with the fires of Abolitionism, and their wholesale condemnation of the South aroused McCormick's Southern sensibilities. He deplored the mixture of religion and politics and in disgust he declared that "the religion of these times bends to suit the prejudices, the fanaticism and the bad temper of its votaries." He longed to have his congregation pray for deliverance from war, but only heard prayers for the "universal destruction of Southern men, women, and children."

---

58 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 5, 1862.
59 W.S. McCormick to J.B. McCormick, October 3, 1862.
60 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, November 22, 1863.
Almost from the onset of the war, he felt like leaving the church and, after a year of internal conflict and a thorough examination of his conscience to determine that it was not religious skepticism that caused him to find nothing in his church, he ended his affiliation. He who had felt a "duty and a pleasure" in going to church from his earliest days, deeply felt the loss of this religious influence in his own life and in that of his family.  

Thus McCormick traveled over the slippery ground almost alone. As the war entered into its final phase, William McCormick was no longer willing to tempt fortune. When young Marshall Field, whom he assessed as having superior business acumen, proposed that the McCormicks enter into the dry good business with him, William McCormick turned him away. When an opportunity beckoned to purchase an excellent lot on Lake Street close to his other property, he declined. During 1864 he occasionally thought of

---

61W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, October 3, 1862; October 5, 1862; February 15, 1863; November 22, 1863.


63C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.H. McCormick, November 20, 1865.
investing in either gold or real estate but decided against it. Inflationary costs were a major reason why McCormick declined to take further business risks. In addition to economic considerations, there were other reasons for his reluctance. By this time he worried much more about taking care of what he already had. In extreme moments, he even wished himself free of business cares. Again he looked with longing toward his father's ideal of the "good life." He wondered why he continually sought more of the world's possessions than could satisfy simple desires.  

Despite such feelings, McCormick continued working until poor health forced him to stop. His old malady of dyspepsia returned in serious proportions in January, 1865. He then grew apprehensive that this would be his final illness. By summer he was too infirm to work. In a frantic effort to find relief he went from cure to cure. His cousin, "J.B." McCormick, recommended a remedy utilizing electricity which William McCormick used to no avail. A friend suggested a hydropathic doctor in New York and

---

64 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, February 28, 1864. He wrote, "To be sure of enough to satisfy ordinary wants is important but beyond that why should we be slaves? What is duty in these respects, to ourselves and to our families, is a serious question."

65 Mary Ann McCormick to Nettie F. McCormick, January 31, 1865. She wrote, "I fear my dear husband is going to have a serious time from nervous headaches, low spirits and general debility—about as he was some years ago—I trust it may pass off and not turn out as he apprehends."

after much debate with himself, he set out to give it a try. 67 This was fruitless, and he left New York for a health camp in Cleveland. 68 Old Charles Spring who was in the entourage of family and relatives that accompanied McCormick on his mission exclaimed in exasperation, "One moment he thinks life depends upon getting under tents, the next moment something else," and wished his employer would remain under the care of one good doctor and stop talking to hypochondriacs. 69 Spring got his wish when a restless McCormick entered the Illinois Hospital for the Insane at Jacksonville. McCormick feared his disease would go to the brain and decided to take precautions against this by placing himself under the care of Dr. Andrew McFarland, director of the hospital. McCormick did not stay in the hospital proper but in the home of Dr. McFarland. 70

Here William McCormick rested, hunted a little, and

67 W.S. McCormick to C.H. McCormick, April 13, 1865; April 19, 1865.

68 Amanda Adams to Nettie F. McCormick, August 18, 1865.

69 C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.H. McCormick, August 8, 1865.

70 C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.A. Spring, Jr., August 27, 1865. C.H. McCormick to Editor of the New York Herald, October 6, 1865, Special Report File, W.S. McCormick, Obituary Notices, 1865.
took rides in the Doctor's carriage. He visited with friends and relatives who came to Jacksonville to see him. He saw Cyrus McCormick who came from New York, stayed as long as he was able, and returned to deal with his patent suits. The country air of which William McCormick was so fond seemed to do him good. However, in the beginning of his third week there, typhoid struck the hospital. McCormick's weak constitution succumbed to this assault and he developed dysentery of a typhoid character. When confined to his room he tried to continue the business activities that were so much a part of him. He occupied his mind with plans to improve his farms and to construct a lumber yard. Often while devising these plans, he would lapse into what Spring called "religious melancholy"--a final testing of his faith and an imponderable sorrow over man's weakness.71

A great source of mental anguish in his last days was money. That he had devoted so much of his life to accumulating a fortune disturbed him. "I have no strength to write C.H.," he told Charles Spring one afternoon, "if I had, I would tell him and Leander plainly what I think

---

71 C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.H. McCormick, October 1, 1865. Spring wrote that McCormick suffered "painful doubts and fears...about the genuineness of his Faith and repentance." C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.A. Spring, Jr., September 8, 1865. Here he wrote, "As he is writing about lumber he stops and says, 'Mr. Spring, it has just occurred to me that there is one evidence that God is the Author of the Bible.'"
of money making—I see the folly in it, it is madness."  

He felt that money had only goaded him to over-work. At worst, he feared that it would ruin family harmony, and he made eleventh hour efforts to preserve the traditional spirit of family solidarity. "There should not be a difference between friends, no, not if it should cost $100 a word," he told his sister and begged her to relay the message to the absent Cyrus McCormick. As a final parting gift to his own five children, ranging in ages between six months and sixteen years, he asked his wife to give them gold rings bearing the inscription "forbear one another in love." On a second thought, he requested that she buy identical rings for all his nieces and nephews, so earnest was he to have concord prevail among his brothers and sisters and their children. For the first time in his life he regretted that he had given so little to charity even though he disliked open demonstrations of philanthropy. One of his last counsels to his brothers was that they do

72C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.H. McCormick, September 1, 1865.

73Mary Caroline Shields to C.H. McCormick, October 1, 1865.

74C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.H. McCormick, October 1, 1865. Mary Caroline Shields to C.H. McCormick, October 5, 1865. Mary Ann McCormick to Nettie F. McCormick, December 12, 1865.
good with their money but in a manner that was "all in
love—all in their closets—nothing for vain show."

On September 27, 1865, his wife and children; his
brother, Leander McCormick; his two sisters, Mary Caroline
Shields and Amanda Adams; his cousin, "J.B." McCormick;
a friend, J.G. Hamilton, and old Charles Spring gathered
to wait the final hours with him. He spoke intermittently
through the late afternoon and evening.

"What is this world's goods to me?"

"Let me die the death of the righteous and let my
last end be like His."

"Mercy, what poor sinners we all are."

"Let me see my baby."

"Oh Lord, where is the doctor?"

Death, revolution round. 75

---

75 The following contain accounts of his last days:
C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.H. McCormick, August 8, 1865; Septem-
ber 29, 1865; September 18, 1865; October 1, 1865; October
9, 1865; November 15, 1865. C.A. Spring, Sr. to C.A.
Spring, Jr., August 27, 1865; September 1, 1865; September
7, 1865; September 8, 1865. L.J. McCormick to C.H. McCormick,
October 7, 1865; November 4, 1865. Dr. Andrew McFarland to
C.A. Spring, September 30, 1865. Mary Caroline Shields to
C.H. McCormick, August 22, 1865; October 5, 1865. Mary
Caroline Shields to Nettie F. McCormick, August 28, 1865.
Mary Ann McCormick to Nettie F. McCormick, September 5,
1865. Mary Ann McCormick to C.H. McCormick, September 16,
1865, Record of a Conversation, Mrs. Emmons Blaine Papers.
C.A. Spring, Jr. to C.H. McCormick, September 28, 1865,
C.B. #84, p. 456.

W.S. McCormick died at 9:53 P.M., September 27, 1865.
He was buried at Braceland Cemetery in Chicago, Illinois,
on September 30, 1865, with a large crowd of relatives,
friends, and employees attending his funeral. (Chicago
Daily Republican, October 1, 1865.) The W.S. McCormick
heirs received $400,000 as their share of the firm, C.H.
McCormick and Brothers (C.A. Spring, Jr. to C.H. McCormick,
December 30, 1868).
What manner of man was he, this McCormick, who in his portrait has clear eyes, quiet hands, calm visage and a beard like to the fashion of the day? This man knew dedication to his work, love and devotion of family, the value of his worth and the respect of his fellows. He was a seeker for the common ground of eternal and material values; a realist who knew well the ways of the world; an opportunist who accepted what life offered; an individualist in an era of free enterprise. Unpretentious but important, William Sanderson McCormick was a strong fiber in the fabric of American life.
Provides interesting incidental information on the McCormick family and their surroundings at Rockbridge County, Virginia.


McCormick, Cyrus Hall, MSS. The McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. 2 Personal Papers Files, 1 Real Estate and Railroad File, 1 Special Collection File, 1796-1884. The personal and business correspondence, the business documents and the real estate records pertaining to the years between 1796 and 1869 were invaluable to this study.


Shields, Mary Caroline, MS. The McCormick Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. 1882, 1883. Mary Caroline McCormick Shield's reminiscences are a major source on the early life of William S. McCormick.
Books and Articles

   One of the better comprehensive annals of Chicago.

   Contains pertinent information on the McCormick and Grigsby families.

   A general survey in topical order of life in the North during the Civil War.

   Contains satisfactory narration together with numerous good illustrations and photos.

   This study is valuable for pointing out general trends in Chicago real estate although it is brief in its description of Chicago real estate during the Civil War years.

   A detailed and well documented work excellent for its presentation on the development of the reaper business but somewhat lacking in an effective portrayal of the personality of Cyrus Hall McCormick.
Contains the proceedings of farm implement trials throughout England in 1852.

The book is useful for its geographical descriptions and its accounts of the early settlers in the Valley of Virginia.

This well organized study provided insights into the political climate of the Midwest during the Civil War.

Lerner, Eugene M. "Investment Uncertainty during the Civil War: A Note on the McCormick Brothers," Journal of Economic History, XVI (March 1956), pp. 34-40. This fine article takes an integrated approach and is concerned with the inter-relationship between William McCormick's gold, real estate and inventory investments.

Henrietta Hamilton McCormick, the wife of Leander J. McCormick, has compiled McCormick genealogies in this book.

The author's character sketch of William S. McCormick is the only contemporary description of him.

The most thorough study on the topic.

Covers the geography, history and social developments of Rockbridge County, Virginia.

Herbert Kellar's essay, "Rockbridge County, Virginia, in 1835: A Study in Ante-Bellum Society," was useful to this study.


A selection of the high points of the McCormick Extension Case in the Patent Office, the Court of Claims and in Congress.


A social history topically organized around such subjects as trade, travel, banking, labor and government.


A biography of the wife of Cyrus H. McCormick.


A summary of the life of Cyrus H. McCormick and the growth of his reaper business.