

John Piersol McCaskey

By Dolores Parsil

John Piersol McCaskey was born 181 years ago, in 1837, on a farm to the east of Lancaster. He, his parents, and six siblings lived in a log house, one of the oldest in Lancaster County. He walked a half mile to and from a one-room school house for his elementary education. That walk through a forest of trees hundreds of years old instilled a love of nature in the young boy, a love he felt all his life.

When he was 12, McCaskey came into the city of Lancaster to attend school here. Why did he come to Lancaster? Because there were only two high schools in the entire state of Pennsylvania, and one of them was in Lancaster.

McCaskey was an excellent student. He became a teacher in the Boys' High School in 1855. He was also a principal there and retired from Boys' High in 1906. He was well-loved by his students. He wanted to help his "pupils" develop good character as well as learn very much about lots of things. He advocated for students to learn not just reading, writing, and arithmetic but also music, art, physical education, nature study, and astronomy. Mr. McCaskey loved music so much that he campaigned for and got music education in the public schools. Everyone should know music, he thought!

McCaskey and his wife, Ellen, lived at 304 West King Street. They had seven children. Most of them attended Lancaster High School. McCaskey and his children walked to school; it was just a block away. They would all come home at noon for a two-hour lunch break and then go back to school from 2 until 5 p.m.

In 1906, McCaskey was elected mayor of Lancaster, and he served until 1910. He helped design the seal and the flag for the city. You can still see this seal around the



John Piersol McCaskey
Photo: McCaskey Alumni Association website

city: at the police station on an outside wall, on municipal vehicles, on some manhole covers, and in the center of Lancaster's flag.

McCaskey was also an editor of the *Pennsylvania School Journal*, a magazine for educators. In this journal, McCaskey published articles about Arbor Day and nature to convince educators and even the governor of Pennsylvania that our state should celebrate Arbor Day. Arbor Day was begun in Nebraska in 1872, but the custom spread slowly into other states. In October 1884, McCaskey led the first Arbor Day celebration in the state of Pennsylvania, and he did it at Boys' and Girls' High School!

For many years after that, students at the Lancaster high school and elementary schools celebrated Arbor Day twice a year, each spring and fall. Mr. McCaskey led the planting ceremony which took place in the morning. The children then went home to plant trees at their homes. If their yards were already well-planted, Mr. McCaskey encouraged them to keep going: "Plant over the fence, in the yard of someone else!" Imagine that!

When school resumed at 2, students, teachers, and visitors attended a two and a half-hour long program of music, poetry readings, and speeches. Students performed orchestral and choral music and gave readings about nature. Speeches were given by very important dignitaries. Sometimes, the speakers talked about the benefits of all that tree planting. What are some of those benefits? Trees provide refreshing breezes and shade to make homes and cities cooler. They absorb carbon dioxide and exchange it for oxygen, making the air healthier for us to breathe. Forests and wooded hillsides prevent soil from eroding and regulate the water flow into streams and rivers. Trees also help prevent flooding, and they protect us from cold winter winds and snowdrifts.

Mr. McCaskey understood the vital importance of trees and gave Pennsylvania the gift of Arbor Day. By the time Mr. McCaskey retired, he, his colleagues, and the students of Lancaster had planted 9,000 trees in the city! A few of those trees are still standing today!

Mr. McCaskey lived until he was almost 98 years old. He died in 1935 and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery. He was a good man who believed strongly in public education and who loved nature.