John McNeese was born in New York City. Both his father, William McNeese, and his mother, Mary Beechman, were from Scotland.

Little is known of John's childhood and youth. His parents died during his early years, and he was taken into the home of a Dr. Stafford of Baltimore. It is evident that he received a good education, but details concerning his schooling are not available. He entered service in the Union Army in 1861 and was honorably discharged with the rank of corporal in 1865.

In 1866 McNeese went to Menard County, Texas, where he established himself in the mercantile and cattle business. In 1872 he was elected District Clerk of the County, but a year later he came to Louisiana. This was the day of the itinerant writing and singing school in the rural districts of the South. McNeese was a good singer and a skilled penman, and he is known to have opened one of these schools in 1873 at Hickory Flat near Oberlin. While thus engaged, he boarded at the home of William Bilbo, and in 1876 he married Susan Bilbo, daughter of William.

Shortly after their marriage, McNeese and his wife moved to Lake Charles where he taught in private schools and began the study of law in the office of Judge G.A. Fournet. In 1886 he enrolled in Tulane Law School, and a year later he received his degree. Returning to Lake Charles, he practiced law briefly, but soon returned to school work. In 1888 he was elected superintendent of public education for the Parish of Calcasieu.

Calcasieu Parish at this time included not only its present area but also that from which later have been carved the parishes of Allen, Beauregard, and Jefferson Davis. Public schools were mostly non-existent, not only in Calcasieu but throughout Louisiana except in New Orleans. When McNeese set to work to build a parish system of schools he was doing what others were doing, or trying to do, at about the same time in other parts of the state. Significance lies in the fact that he did some things earlier than most others and, over-all, did many things better than was usually the case elsewhere in the state.

During the twenty-five years of his superintendency a great deal of progress was made in the development of public education in Calcasieu Parish. This was due in part to the outstanding wisdom and ability of John McNeese as chief architect and builder of the school system. The time was propitious in that Louisiana was emerging from the destruction brought by the Civil War and its aftermath. Also of importance was the coming to the parish at this time of large numbers of people from the states of Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, and Indiana. They brought with them a zeal for public education that made possible much of the accomplishment of the administration of McNeese. The influence of these newcomers was especially notable in Lake Charles, Jennings, Welsh, Iowa, and Vinton, as well as in nearby rural areas.

At the beginning of his superintendency, McNeese found a few poorly trained teachers in one-room schools, teaching terms of six months or less, at salaries of $25.00 to $30.00 a month. Immediately he began to advocate consolidation into larger school units with wagonette routes to serve them.

McNeese continually sought the improvement of the qualifications of his teachers. Most of them had no college training, and some lacked a good secondary education. He organized teacher institutes and summer normal courses. For these he did some of the work of instruction and also secured the services of notable leaders such as J.E. Keeny. Salary increases were made available to teachers who took advantage of the opportunities thus offered.

Teacher examinations were inaugurated by McNeese as a
part of his work. State teacher certificates were not then in
vogue and candidates for teaching positions had to be
certified, if at all, on the basis of local requirements. On the
locally made tests, the higher the score made by the applicant
the higher would be his pay.

Even in the day of John McNeese a superintendent could
so involve himself in clerical work that he had time for little
else. This McNeese refused to do. Persuading the school
board to provide him with a clerical assistant for the office,
he spent his time largely in traveling over the parish visiting
schools, instructing and encouraging teachers, and talking to
influential citizens in the cause of improving public
education.

Under his leadership taxes were voted, school buildings
were constructed, pupil enrollment was greatly increased,
teacher qualifications were improved, and public interest in
education was brought to a high level. Starting in 1888 with
almost nothing in the way of public schools, McNeese could
view with pride a well-respected system of elementary and
high schools at the end of his quarter-century of service in
the superintendency. Louisiana has had many fine
superintendents of public education in her parishes and cities,
but it is to be doubted that any deserves to be ranked above
John McNeese. Truly, he was the great pioneer educator of
Calcasieu Parish and of Southwest Louisiana. His example
and the challenge of his accomplishments did much to set a
pattern by which benefit has come to other parts of the state.

In 1913 McNeese retired from the superintendency to
enjoy his family and his home, on Eleventh Street at Hodges,
in Lake Charles. In addition to his wife there were seven
children, one of whom, Oswald W. McNeese, was to become
Adjutant-General of Louisiana. The life of retirement was
short for John McNeese, as he died on June 2, 1914.

The fine schools of Lake Charles, of Calcasieu Parish, and
of southwest Louisiana are in significant degree monuments
to the memory of McNeese and his work. Fittingly, the
capstone of public education in that part of the state,
McNeese State College, honorably bears his name.

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