

Skinner, Thomas Harvey ^[1]

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Skinner, Thomas Harvey

by Jaquelin Drane Nash, 1994

7 Mar. 1791–1 Feb. 1871

Thomas Harvey Skinner, Presbyterian clergyman and founder of [Union Theological Seminary](#) ^[2], was born at Harveys Neck, [Perquimans County](#) ^[3], the seventh of thirteen children. His father, Joshua, was a [Quaker](#) ^[4], while his mother, Martha Ann Blount Skinner, from a prominent [Chowan County](#) ^[5] family, was an Episcopalian. After their marriage they became Baptists.

Skinner's education was begun under tutors on his father's plantation, with his brothers and sisters. He later attended Edenton Academy and entered the junior class at the [College of New Jersey](#) ^[6] in 1807. After he was graduated second in his class, he went to live with the family of an older brother, [Joseph Blount Skinner](#) ^[7], to study law under his brother's direction.

Due to the coincidence of the arrival of a gifted itinerant missionary just after the death by drowning of Skinner's beloved younger brother, the young man underwent a strong spiritual transformation. He returned to college, joined the Presbyterian church, and began his studies in theology. He also studied under Henry Kollock in Savannah, Ga., and John McDowell in Elizabethtown, N.J.

Licensed to preach by the presbytery at Morristown on 16 Dec. 1812, he soon was invited to be copastor of a church in Philadelphia. Less than three years later, however, the presbytery dismissed him from this first charge because of a youthful zeal that overstepped the bounds of prudence. (He later described his preaching as "Positive, unpliant, authoritative, heedless of its bearing on my position.")

In December 1816 he was called to another Philadelphia church, a seemingly backward step in his career, but some seventy parishioners from his first charge chose to follow him there. Due to his and their combined efforts, a new church was built. In 1823 Williams College awarded him the doctor of divinity degree. Skinner soon became known as an outstanding preacher. In 1828 he was called to a church in Boston. Finding the climate too rigorous for his increasingly poor health, he returned to his former charge in Philadelphia. In 1832 he was appointed to the chair of sacred theology at the [Theological Seminary at Andover](#) ^[8]. The year 1835 was an important one in Skinner's life: he became pastor of the Mercer Street church in New York—a new church where he remained for thirteen years. It was also in 1835 that he met with a group of interested persons to discuss the founding of a seminary in New York. He was named to the board of directors of the proposed institution and held that seat for the rest of his life.

In 1842 he was appointed to the chair of sacred rhetoric at the new Union Theological Seminary, the first to hold that post. His \$2,000 salary was subscribed by three loyal members of his congregation. In 1848 he resigned as pastor of the Mercer Street church to become the seminary's Davenport Professor of Sacred Rhetoric, Pastoral Theology, and Church Government, a position in which he remained active until his death. Through his and his former parishioners' influence, the new seminary flourished. In 1848 Skinner was also one of the cofounders of the [Evangelical Alliance](#) ^[9].

His career spanned a period of unrest in the Presbyterian church, and he belonged to a group that became known as the New School. He was considered to be an eloquent preacher, a dedicated and able teacher, and one of the foremost sacred orators of his day. A contemporary called him "that Chesterfield of a teacher, old Dr. Skinner, so sweet in his exterior and a St. John at his soul."

He was twice married. His first wife, Emily Montgomery, bore him four children: Maria, Thomas Harvey, Jr., Caroline, and Martha Ann. By his second marriage to Frances Davenport, he was the father of Helen, James D., Frances, and Mary D. His son Thomas became professor of polemic and didactic theology at [McCormick Theological Seminary](#) ^[10], Chicago, in 1881; by his gifts and zeal he enlarged the seminary plant and built the Church of the Covenant.

Four portraits of Skinner are known to have been painted: an oil by S. F. B. Morse in the [Museum of Fine Arts](#) ^[11], Boston; another oil attributed to Morse at the [Presbyterian Historical Society](#) ^[12], Philadelphia; a miniature by Daniel Dickinson, owned by a descendant; and an oil painted by Thomas Sully, present location unknown.

Following his death at age eighty, Skinner's funeral was held at the Church of the Covenant, his own students acting as

pallbearers. He was buried in the Marble Cemetery, Second Street, New York.

Skinner was the author of *Aids to Preaching and Hearing*^[13] (1839); *Religion of the Bible*^[14] (1839); *Hints to Christians* (1841); *Religious Liberty: A Discourse* (1841); and *Discussions in Theology*^[15] (1868). In addition, he translated and edited a number of works, published religious tracts and occasional sermons, and contributed to the leading church periodicals of his day.

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Additional Resources:

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