

'Skinner's War': Lexington Presbyterians vs. Their Pastor

By James Graham Leyburn

IN MARCH 1840, the minister of Lexington Presbyterian Church, W. M. Cunningham, resigned. In August the session received a letter from a Scottish minister, the Reverend John Skinner, D.D., asking permission to preach in Lexington. Since he held degrees from the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow and came with high recommendations from his last congregation in Scotland, the Lexington session invited Dr. Skinner to preach. Skinner's last Scottish church had presented him with a gold watch "as a parting token of their enduring love," and he was praised for "his talented exertions in the cause of Religious Liberty." We do not know why he wished to migrate to the United States.

He made a good impression on the Lexingtonians. Negotiations took their leisurely course, but a call was issued to Dr. Skinner in 1841 and in October of that year he was installed as pastor.

His first years as minister were highly successful, to judge from progress in the church. Membership

increased so greatly that six new elders had to be elected. It was Dr. Skinner who led the congregation in its decision to construct the new church building on Main Street. He was remarkably efficient in overseeing the financial affairs of the



church: not only was his own salary oversubscribed, but he interested the members in contributing to mission work and other benevolences. Dr. Skinner took very seriously his duties as pastor. In 1843 he divided the congregation into nine districts, and assigned specific elders to take spiritual oversight of each district.

He read out from the pulpit a list of the homes he intended to visit during the week; and he also announced the amount of last week's collection. One Sunday morning he announced that one of the church members, whom he named, had given "6¼ cents to convert the world."

FOR SIX YEARS the session records betray no hint that Dr. Skinner was losing support among his people. The church's report to Presbytery in 1845 lauded him for his diligence in preaching, visiting the sick, attending the weekly prayer meeting, encouraging benevolences, and guiding church organizations. But on August 18, 1847, a letter was read to the session, signed by John B. Lyle and seven other members of the church, stating that an increasing number of people were dissatisfied with Dr. Skinner both as preacher and as pastor. His sermons were generally regarded as too coldly theological, and his dealing with people lacked human warmth and "spirituality." Several members of the session shared these critical opinions, and apparently they hoped that by letting Dr. Skinner



The church building we know today was built during Dr. Skinner's pastorate

know that he did not please many people, he would quietly seek other pastures.

Skinner immediately offered to resign his pastoral charge “on the ground of a letter addressed to him, by eight gentlemen of the congregation.” It is obvious, however, that he expected Presbytery forthwith to refuse his resignation, to support him wholeheartedly, and to inform his critics of their presumptuousness. The session was represented at the meeting of Presbytery by Major J. T. L. Preston, who was called upon at the meeting to amplify the charges in the letter. So began the epochal

Skinner case — sometimes called the “Skinner War” — which resulted in a trial before Presbytery, the minutes of which cover 332 pages, and which culminated in appeal to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. During the months of the controversy Lexington hummed like a hive of angry bees; language became vituperative and tempers frayed. Lexington Presbyterians seemed to be reliving ancient Scottish history with its long record of feuding.

The intricacies of the controversy before the church courts are too complex to recount here. What is of greater interest is Dr. Skinner's reaction to the Lexingtonians. Major Preston explained to the Presbytery the growing discontent with Dr. Skinner's long, theoretical sermons, with his pulpit manner and his grating voice when he elevated it, with his foreign mannerisms, with his urgency in promoting benevolent causes of the church, with his failure during pastoral visits to inquire into the spiritual life of the members while questioning their knowledge of the catechism. This bill of particulars seemed to arouse the fury of Dr. Skinner, who clearly felt that his dignity had been affronted.

From that point on, the offending Scotsman threw tactfulness to the

winds. First he published a pamphlet naming his “enemies” and charging them with all sorts of un-Christian behavior. The persons Skinner named then published a paid notice in the *Lexington Gazette*, with copies in Richmond, Washington and New York papers, defending themselves and asserting that Skinner's pamphlet “contains statements absolutely untrue, and insinuations and misrepresentations, both slanderous and unfounded.” Skinner then vented his outrage by indiscriminate attack. He fulminated against a Presbyterian professor at Washington College for having preached in the Episcopal church. He accused some of his elders of reading a church paper, the *Christian Observer*, which he considered unorthodox. He further excoriated them for favoring revivals and emotionalism, which he abhorred.

The young ladies of his congregation drew his most concentrated attack. He suspected it was they who were made restless by his sermons — and the reason, he said, was easy to discover. They found too attractive “the fascination of sin and the engrossing of the soul . . . with the novelties of the fashions, the luxuries, the attractions of the gay assembly, and the easy descent from the Ball room . . . down to the abysses of infamy and death.” He asserted that to him nothing was more odious than to witness a young lady entering “the House of God, on a Sabbath morning, with such a bundle of robes and ribbons, and meretricious

James Graham Leyburn, whose Rockbridge roots were strong, was Washington and Lee's academic dean from 1947 to 1955 and professor of sociology until 1972. He earned his Ph.D. from Yale University, where he taught for 22 years before coming to Lexington. His signal achievement was the “Leyburn Plan,” which set W&L's course

to becoming a nationally recognized teaching college. He wrote the entertaining introduction to W&L's 1976 reprint of Henry Boley's *Lexington in Old Virginia*, which should be on every Rockbridge coffee table.

This *Anecdote* is adapted from a presentation he made in 1972 to the Rockbridge Historical Society.

flowers, and strange stuffings, so nicely pinned and padded about her person, as to indicate that she must have spent at least two solid hours in her toilette, rather than on her knees preparing herself to find the services of her minister to be sweet rather than tedious to her soul.

In denouncing the sin of dancing he even attacked an Episcopal vestryman, Colonel Francis H. Smith, superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute, for promoting and serving as patron of the Annual Ball at VMI. How could Colonel Smith reconcile his piety with such sinfulness? Dr. Skinner said:

I have trembled for my young ladies, who were members of the Church, being seduced into an attendance at that Ball, by the tempting and flattering urgency of the young men, who to all their attractions of person and manner, add the additional one of the gay soldier's uniform. I have gone to town, with a palpitating heart, [the morning] after the ball was over, fearing lest that the first tidings that might greet my ear might be, 'Sir, a member of your

Church was at the ball last night.' The Ball is opposed to the religious feelings of the whole religious community. And I have been surprised that in a matter of this sort, Colonel Smith should expose himself to the odium of the religious public.

Even the older ladies of his church came in for criticism. "We have had a Ladies Working Society connected with this church for the last four to five years," he said. True, their efforts had purchased the lots on which the new church and new manse were built; "but I have had so many misgivings about it at times and the policy of the church having wheels within wheels, as well as extra wheels, — and so often have been called to vindicate my Church from the slander of its being under 'Petticoat Government.'"

After months of hearings the Presbytery, by a vote of 20 to 4, accepted the resignation of Dr. Skinner from the Lexington pastorate, and suspended him from the ministry. Skinner appealed to the General Assembly of the Church, which

upheld the severing of pastoral relations with the Lexington church, but not Skinner's suspension from the ministry. The irascible Scotsman forthwith shook the dust of Lexington from his feet. The Presbytery dismissed him to the Presbytery of Newton [Massachusetts?]. He eventually settled in Canada where he died in 1864.



ONE OF THE greatest possible blessings came to the Lexington congregation in the successor to Dr. Skinner. In 1848 William S. White, beloved pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Charlottesville, accepted the call to Lexington. Dr. White had the gift of kindly sympathy and understanding, an easy and gracious manner with all sorts and conditions of men; and thus his nineteen-year ministry restored peace and harmony to the distraught Lexington congregation.

