

By the bootstraps

■ Thornwell rose from humble origins to become noted minister, educator.

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In the early 1820s, when James Henley Thornwell was 9 years old, he lost his father. The family had no money to educate him, but three neighbors recognized his high intelligence and sponsored his education.

He first attended Cheraw Academy and two years later entered the junior class of South Carolina College.

At age 19 Thornwell graduated at the top of his class. One of his sponsors, William H.

Robbins, was a lawyer and hoped that Thornwell would return to the Pee Dee and practice law. Instead, Thornwell returned to Cheraw Academy to teach.

Soon Thornwell was at Andover Theological Seminary planning to be a Presbyterian minister. He didn't like the theology taught at



Nearby history

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Andover and withdrew. He then went to Harvard to study oriental languages.

When he returned to South Carolina he secured an appointment as minister of the Presbyterian Church in Lancaster (its first), Old Waxhaw Presbyterian and Six Mile Presbyterian, each receiving a third of his time. To get to his appointments Thornwell rode a fleet and spirited horse he called Red Rover.

About Red Rover, a member of Thornwell's congregation remarked: "It gave our pastor the appearance of being a little fast." In fact, everyone was afraid of the horse except its owner. His bride, Nancy White Witherspoon, persuaded him to give up the horse, but it was written that Thornwell "always bought the best editions of books; wore clothing of the finest texture; was fond of fine horses; and smoked always the best brands."

Others would add that he was a brilliant man and a gifted orator. Two years after moving to Lancaster he was at South Carolina College as a professor of philosophy.

He resigned three years later to serve a Presbyterian church in Columbia but soon added the post of professor at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Columbia.

He was equally gifted in the classroom and in the pulpit. In 1846 three colleges gave him honorary doctorates.

Thornwell was elected president of South Carolina College in 1853. He was also the youngest man to ever serve as moderator of the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Thornwell's ideas were controversial. He believed that the Bible justified slavery and that the Southern states were prosperous because of slavery. After two years of difficulty with the faculty and trustees, Thornwell resigned the presidency of South Carolina College to again teach at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

To widen his platform, Thornwell also edited the Southern Quarterly Review, a prestigious journal of the time. He soon became known as the "Calhoun of the Church" and was considered its leading spokesman in the Southern states.

The Rev. Thornwell died in 1862 but the Thornwell name did not die. It was attached to Thornwell Orphanage in Clinton. Also, his son, the Rev. James H. Thornwell Jr., served the Presbyterian congregations of Unity in Fort Mill and Ebenezer near Rock Hill from 1882 to 1907. He preached at the two churches on alternate Sundays.

A parishioner said of Thornwell Jr. that he "had the happy art of easily making acquaintances with strangers and mingling freely and pleasantly with all classes of people. He had a ready wit and was an interesting talker."

In 1891 Davidson College conferred an honorary doctor of divinity degree on the Rev. Thornwell. Records show that during his 25 years as pastor of Unity and Ebenezer, he received 1,001 members into the two churches. Thornwell died Dec. 30, 1907.

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