

The WPA Life Histories Collection

[Oliver Johnson, D.D.]

Project #3613

W. W. Dixon

Winnsboro, S. C. OLIVER JOHNSON, D. D.

(White) 72 YEARS OLD

Doctor Oliver Johnson, pastor of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church at Winnsboro, South Carolina, is one of the outstanding ministers of his denomination in the South and a prominent citizen of the Piedmont section of South Carolina. He is 6 feet tall and weighs 185 pounds. By his dignity and force of strong personality, he attracts attention in any assemblage of people. He is easily approached in conversation; is a good listener and a better talker. He is fond of children and possesses the confidence and affectionate regard of all classes of society in Winnsboro and Fairfield County. He and his family reside in the large manse of the A. R. P. Church on West Liberty Street, in the town of Winnsboro.

"My father was Henry McKinney Johnson. His ancestor was one of the pilgrims who came over on the Mayflower to America in 1620. He was a descendant of William Brewster. My mother, Mary Eliza Bouchillon, was descended from the Bouchillons that came with the Huguenots from France and made the settlement in Abbeville County known as Bordeaux. I was born at Bordeaux, Abbeville County, July 30, 1866.

"My father was a farmer. He bought a home in the small college town of Due West and moved our family there in 1873. I received my primary schooling in the preparatory department of the college. Mrs. Louisa Galloway was my first primary teacher in the rudiments of how to spell, read, and write.

"Doctor Wm. Moffatt Grier had been elected president of Erskine College in 1871. As I reflect upon that era, the task confronting us must have been a difficult one. The South was suffering from the ravages of a devastating war. The people from whom the college expected its patronage and financial support were impoverished and disheartened. Again, the burden of reconstruction was upon them. At that time, Doctor Grier was a young man twenty-eight years old. He had served in the Confederate Army, a member of the 6th Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers. He was wounded at Williamsburg and taken prisoner and exchanged in 1862. But he really seemed born and called of God to the service of Erskine College for this particular period.

"The old endowment was gone, and there were no effective plans for a new one. The question of Mordicai to Esther suggests itself here: 'Who knowest whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'

"Doctor Grier soon proved himself preeminently qualified for the position. His worth became known far outside the bounds of his own denomination, and he was generally accepted as an exponent of the highest and best Christian culture in the South. Under his wise administration and guidance, the college extended its influence and attained a place of recognized prominence among the institutions of higher learning in this country. Doctor Grier was great as a teacher of mental and moral science. As president, he was tactful, resourceful, and unstinting in toil and reared a fair superstructure on the foundation laid by the great and good men who preceded him. He has been described as gentle, firm, considerate, and just. He relied on appeals to his student's sense of honor rather than the naked hand of discipline, and rarely did his students fail him.

"His Sabbath afternoon sermons, preached in the Due West pulpit, are ever to be remembered. They have left their impression upon me, while some of his words in the classroom have been forgotten. It was under such environment that my literary education was conducted and my mental and moral nature was developed.

"I gained three medals while at Erskine College. I won the first one for being the best all around pupil in the preparatory department; the second, for being the best declaimer in my freshman year; and the third, for being the best essayist in my senior year. I was graduated at Erskine in 1888, a few days

prior to my twenty-second birthday.

"Before leaving the subject of the college, I will relate how one of the legends that used to interest the student body has since become authenticated history. The legend was that Ebenezer Erskine, for whom Erskine College is named, was born six months after his mother's funeral and interment. The explanation of this legend came about recently, when Dr. H. T. Patterson, a Columbia banker, presented the Erskine Theological Seminary with an old copy of Erskine's sermons, printed in the year 1728.

"A startling memoir penned on the flyleaf of the volume describes Mrs. Henry Erskine's death and interment and her subsequent revival by the act of a grave robber. The cryptic thief in this instance, however, played a benevolent role. Providentially his ghoulish act restored Mrs. Erskine to life, saved Ebenezer, her unborn son, and altered Presbyterian church history.

"Ebenezer Erskine, through this amazing incident, was literally projected from the grave to establish the Seceder Church, out of which grew the Associate Reformed Presbyterian denomination and Erskine College. Mrs. Erskine was a victim of epilepsy, according to the story, and suffered from nervous disorders, lapsing into unconsciousness at times for hours. So her seeming death at Dryburgh, erwickshire was deemed real. A short time after her interment in the family vault, the church sexton, remembering a costly ring that had been left on her finger, secured secret access to the vault. After opening the coffin and failing to loosen the ring from her swollen finger, the sexton attempted to sever the joint with a knife. The blood and the shock from the knife wound stirred life in the supposed dead body, and Mrs. Erskine arose from the crypt and walked the short distance home.

"As Mrs. Erskine approached the house, her husband, hearing footsteps, exclaimed: 'If I didn't know my Margaret was dead, I'd say that was her footstep on yonder walk.' Henry Erskine was quite correct, for his wife, miraculously, had returned alive. Six months afterward, she gave birth to Ebenezer Erskine. This son, on attaining manhood, disagreed with the teachings of the Scotch Church and led dissenters in forming the Seceder Church at Gairney Bridge, near Kinross, Scotland, on December 6, 1738.

"In the fall of 1888, I began teaching school at Lewisville, Chester County. It was a school supported by subscriptions from individuals in the community. The hours were from 8 a. m. until 4 p.m., with an hour's intermission for lunch and recreation. It was not a graded school. My pupils ranged in age from six to twenty-two years old. It was a pretty laborious job but not an uninteresting one nor a profitless one to me in after life.

"I taught this school for three years, until I entered the Theological Seminary at Princeton, New Jersey, in 1891. I remained at Princeton three years, taking the full course in Theology and obtaining my degree in May, 1894.

"I had been licensed to preach in 1893, by the second A. R. P. Presbytery in session at Due West, South Carolina. I spent that summer with the church in Atlanta, Georgia. The following year, I supplied the pulpit of the First Church, at Charlotte, North Carolina, during the summer, the regular pastor being absent for surgical treatment.

"At the seminary, I had learned that all sermons may be or should be predicated with regard to three subjects: God, man, and Christ, Christ being the mediator between God and man.

"I remember Doctor William Henry Green was the president of the faculty the time I was at Princeton. I was installed as pastor of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church at Leslie, in York County, South Carolina, October 18, 1894. I was married October 30, 1901, to Tirzah Christine Elliott of Winnsboro, South Carolina.

"In May, 1900, I bore the fraternal greetings of the A. R. P. Synod of the South to the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in session at Chicago. I was an invited speaker at the Young People's Christian Union Convention held at Winona Lake, Indiana, in July 1901. While there, I was presented with a gavel made of wood from Gairney Bridge, Scotland. Under the words 'Gairney Bridge' on the gavel is inscribed 'December, 1733,' this being the month and year that Ebenezer Erskine and his conductors met at Gairney Bridge and organized the movement which came to be known in Scotland as the 'Secession Church' and which was the progenitor in this country of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the members of which are still familiarly called 'Seceders.'

"I was elected a director of Erskine Theological Seminary in 1907 and a member of the Home Mission Board of the A. R. P Church in 1901. By invitation, I have acted as chaplain in both the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States Congress.

"I have been in the ministry 44 years and served but two pastorates; the Neely Creek Church at Leslie, 14 years, and Bethel Church at Winnsboro, 30 years.

"My paternal grandparents had thirteen children, of which my father, Henry, was the fourth child. My maternal grandparents had fifteen children, of which my mother, Mary, was the ninth child.

"My wife, though her baptismal name is 'Tirzah Christine,' has always been called 'Tiny'. To the colored population, she is affectionately known as 'Miss Tiny.' To us have been born nine children, five girls and four boys. The 30th day of October, 1938 was the 37th anniversary of our marriage.

"Contrasting public opinion now and fifty years ago, as you request, I would say first that public opinion has been aroused on the subject of public health. Fifty years ago, the people would not have approved the large sums of money now appropriated by the legislature to the State Board of Health and county boards of health.

"Take the town of Winnsboro for example. It didn't have a board of health, a sewerage system, nor a county medical office. It was regarded as an invasion of personal rights to even require vaccination of the children in a home. Individual privies were generally constructed behind merchants' stores in town, and hog pens were within the town limit. The care and sanitation of these places were left to the judgment and will of the owner of the premises.

"Then grocery stores were unsavory places. The vendor had no regard for screens over meats, molasses, and other food stuffs. Flies hummed over and lit on these commodities, but today, by a change of public opinion, rules of boards of health have been enacted, regulating the conduct of these places. The grocery store has become a 'thing of beauty' if not 'a joy forever.'

"Public opinion has been improved on the subject of paved streets and good roads. None of the streets and few of the sidewalks of the town were paved when I came to Winnsboro in 1908. In that day, transportation of heavy loads were effected by wagons and trucks. The power used was mules and horses. Frequently, teams would bog down and stall on the county roads and even on the main streets of our town. Now public opinion has advanced, since the coming of the automobile, and I believe all of our streets and sidewalks are paved or to be paved. Fifty years ago, we really had no State road system worthy of the name. Today, we have a State Highway Department, and the excellence of our State highway is commented upon by the traveling public in this and other states of the Union.

"Public opinion has demanded increased educational facilities. Large, sums of money are raised by taxation for school buildings and teachers' salaries. The individual public school teacher's salary is one hundred percent better than it was in 1888.

"You asked me about the attitude of the public mind toward lynching? In spite of the public inflammatory speeches made by some of our politicians of a decade or more ago, the tenor of which was "To hell with the law and constitution where a rapist is concerned,' I think people have become more sober-minded and are more inclined to let the law have its course in all violations of the law. I can't recall a lynching in Fairfield County in the past 30 years.

"Our county is situated between two rivers, the Wateree and Broad, with numerous streams. Its surface is rolling and hilly. Our farmers had become one crop producers in the main -cotton, cotton, cotton. There was no diversification and little rotation of crops and no thought was given to the conservation of the soil. Forests of pine were cut down to feed the furnaces of railroad locomotives. Hard woods were also destroyed for people's fireplaces in cities and towns. When lands ceased to be productive in cotton, more timber lands were demanded, and the waste went on from year to year, greatly increased by the timber merchants and sawmills.

"In spite of the voice of wisdom proceeding from Clemson College and the Department of Agriculture at Washington, as to rotation of crops and methods of soil conservation, it all was more or less unheeded until the present administration at Washington extended a helping hand to the farmer in

consideration of his submitting to the plans of farming outlined by the government. Now there are marked changes in the country as you ride through on the excellent highways the National Government has helped to build. Thirty years ago, cotton was about all you saw growing along the highways. Now one sees more corn than cotton. Legumes are everywhere, also a variety of field crops, wheat, oats, rye, and alfalfa, which were little in evidence thirty years ago. One sees more cattle, more hogs and vastly improved schoolhouses.

"As The State said in its editorial a few days ago: 'Good country dwellings do not precede intelligent farming, they come after it and as a result of it. South Carolina is learning how to farm. And if we are alive twenty years hence, we expect to see an impressive number of neat, snug, comfortable homes, as we travel the highways.' "About young people now and fifty years ago. Human nature will always, basically, be the same. Youth has more freedom now than then, but it is my firm belief that the boys and girls of today are just as good, maybe a little better, than they were in 1880. I would not exchange the comradeship of parent and child of today for that of the parent toward the child of a half century ago."