

Thomas Hunter, the Man

Who was Hunter College's namesake?

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"I have always believed that the visits of men who have made their mark in the world become object lessons to the young and ambitious." These words were written ninety-nine years ago in the autobiography of Dr. Thomas Hunter. The inspiration he speaks of can be found in the man who wrote them, the man who gave our school its name.

The stern and wise face of the bearded aristocrat belonged to a man respected and feared by politicians and bankers alike. That man set the foundation of public education in New York City. As was the case with many founders of America's great institutions, this man came from anything but privilege.

Born in 1830 in the town of Ardglass, Ireland, Thomas Hunter grew up in a place hardly touched by the industrial age. Having lost his mother at an early age, he was raised by his father, who adhered to the whip-method of discipline, but instilled in his boy the value of learning.

At age twelve, he was sent to an Episcopal parish. It was there that this future-educator formed the opinion of schoolmasters to be "horrors;" he described his "[e]xperience of them to be brutes; that they flogged for the mere pleasure of inflicting pain, that some of them were like demons...and the others half idiots."

But despite his painful schooling, the boy had always maintained an unshakable sense of justice. In response to being called impertinent by a teacher after insisting he had answered a question accurately, he defiantly said, "If it be impertinent to ask

justice then I am impertinent."

It was with this sense of justice that at age 18 he wrote a polemic against the monarchical British Empire, which had established the Church of England in his home country of Ireland. His brazen republican spirit was from a young age averse to tyranny, but after being cast as "treasonous" he was forced to escape to the United States.

In 1850, Hunter landed on the shores of New York. Nearly penniless, he was intent on seeking any type of employment. Destiny led him to the occupation he once damned; he was hired as a drawing teacher at "Ward School no. 35."

No. 35 was one of only a few public grammar schools at the time. The students were mostly poor children of immigrants with meager prospects of a successful future. After just six years of teaching such "rabble," Thomas Hunter distinguished himself as a master educator. Though youthful in age, his bearing was poised, patient and wise. The students he taught regarded him with an awe that blended subordinate fear with paternal respect.

He served as a teacher until 1856, when this upwardly mobile 26-year-old man sought the position of principal. His fate was in the hands of the political bosses of The Know-Nothing Party. Known for their outward bigotry, especially toward immigrants, Hunter knew his chances were slim and that his future in education, and America, may soon end. Describing his fear of not getting the principal position and of his only other prospect being in Australia, he said, "tears welled up in my eyes, for I loved America; I loved it before I ever saw it. It was the land of my choice."

But with the backing of influential educators and trustees, Thomas Hunter was unanimously elected to become the principal of the largest and best public school in New York.

As principal, he challenged many of the conventions formerly established. The greatest of these was in regards to discipline. The "Ratan," as it was called, was a long, thick medal rod thought to be an indispensable tool for governing a class. But Hunter had always felt the practice to be shameful and would implement it discreetly, as if to hide the dark underside of the teaching profession. Once, while discussing the subject of maintaining order in the classroom, Hunter admitted, "regretfully I do" use corporal punishment. But "boys under able teachers never, or very rarely, need corporal punishment. Punishment is usually inflicted to sustain the authority of weak or unwise teachers."

And so he set out to abolish this "relic of barbarism." He devised a method of moral discipline, with detention, suspension and expulsion as consequences for insubordination. Thereafter he declared, "I no longer punish, that those who violated written laws punish themselves".

As an ardent supporter of public education, Hunter was fond of comparing his grammar school to West Point, for the latter "protects us from external corruption," but the former from those "internal." So inspired, the thousands of students who passed through his halls grew to become leaders of industry, government, and culture.

Hunter's achievement at No. 35, as great as it was, was only the precursor for what he will always be remembered for.

Until the latter part of 19th century, New York City had no free academy for girls above age 12. The "Normal School" was created as a publicly financed high school intended to teach girls the art of teaching. Graduates were to be entrusted with the education of the future, and were thus expected to uphold the highest standards.

Although he was first only recruited to help establish the new Normal School, Thomas Hunter was eventually given the reins as principal. In that role, he set the standard of what a full education entails as well as the methods used to achieve that purpose. Although during the first three years of establishment the school was located in a dingy 14th street building, the permanent building was constructed on 68th street in 1873, where the elegant gothic edifice stands to this day.

Perhaps few of his students appreciated the man while in his care, but Thomas Hunter was always cherished and loved by his students long after they earned their degrees. During his lifetime he influenced two generations of teachers and students, and many more after his death.

Through the span of more than a century the Normal School expanded its scope and aims. In 1914, the school adopted the name Hunter College in honor of its founder.

The legacy of Thomas Hunter lives on in every student who passes through the halls of Hunter College. It is on his foundation that the pillars of our school stand. It is an inspiration to know that the roots of this school stems from the greatness of a poor immigrant boy, who in the span of his lifetime, gave so much to the future.