

# Thomas Hunter

by

Frederick Van Wyck

*Editor's Note: Mr. Van Wyck, the author of "Recollections of an Old New Yorker", in commemoration of his eighty-second birthday, submitted the accompanying article to Hunter College. It is at the request of Dean Egan that we hereby publish his article on Thomas Hunter, thus setting aside on this one occasion the traditional policy of printing only undergraduate contributions.*

DISTINGUISHED old "35" that I visited for the first time in years, at number 60 West 13th St. It looked exactly the same as when I attended school there nearly 75 years ago. Dark red brick, trimmed with brown stone with a generous center entrance for the faculty and visitors and a side entrance for the pupils. Four stories high and when it was built it was considered the finest educational building in the United States. There, among 1,100 young rascallions like myself, Thomas Hunter, the greatest disciplinarian became a teacher in 1850, and principal in 1857. He tried to make useful citizens of us, and never did a man undertake a harder job. But the results in many cases were satisfactory. Here, also, three of the most important events in the education of our citizens were inaugurated by Thomas Hunter. First

was the discontinuance of corporal punishment, and one that will never be forgotten by those who witnessed it. Second was the organization of a free high school for boys, and third, a free high school for girls. I don't think that there is any man, certainly I haven't found a record of one, that did as much for free education as did Mr. Thomas Hunter.

Every morning the entire school assembled in the large room with their teachers. The usual procedure was that Dr. Hunter read a chapter from the Bible, and the entire school repeated the Lord's Prayer and then we would sing a hymn. Then, when Dr. Hunter had made a few remarks to the pupils, the bad boys would be called to Miss Gate's room B1, where they would be rattaned. The morning I am speaking of, everything passed as usual, we were dismissed to our classrooms and started the day's routine, when at eleven o'clock the gong rang. Everyone was to go to the assembly room. This was so out of the ordinary that there was a buzz of excitement among the teachers as well as the pupils. When we were all seated, Dr. Hunter stood at his desk on the platform and to show you the control he had over the boys, he took a pin from the lapel of his coat and

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raised his right hand with the pin between his thumb and finger and said, "when this pin strikes the desk, I want every boy in this room to hear it." And the silence was such that every boy did hear it. Then Dr. Hunter said, "I have one of the saddest acts of my life to perform. I whipped two boys this morning who were not guilty." Calling out the name of a boy he told him to stand in the center aisle where every teacher and pupil could see him. "The most despicable thing in the world is a liar, and this boy is a liar. I want you all to look at him. He lied to me this morning and on his evidence I whipped these two boys." Calling the two boys he had whipped to the platform he said, "I can't undo what I have done and the only reparation I can make is to let you rattan me." And handing the rattan to one of the boys, he held out his hand. Of course they refused to rattan him. Taking the rattan he said, "Boys, you see the picture behind me? I am going to lay the rattan on the top of that picture frame where you can all see it. I never will use it again. From this moment it is up to you whether I continue as your principal or not. I shall rule you by moral suasion, and if I can't do that, I am no use as your principal. You must be the judges."

That was the first instance in which corporal punishment had been given up in any public school. And "35" was the largest public school in the world at that time. You can imagine what tremendous ability and courage this man had to do it.

The next important event was Dr. Hunter's starting the first free evening high school in America, and Hunter became its principal. This school was started in 1866. It was in this same building that the first Textile High School was held, and to Thomas Hunter must be given credit for I think three of the most important improvements in the school life. Thomas Hunter did not confine his efforts entirely to the Boy's school. He was very much interested in the girl's school and did a great deal for them, even before he became connected with the Female Normal School in 1870. From No. 35 Hunter was called to take charge of the Female Normal School, afterwards named Hunter College in his honor. It seems strange that this blue eyed, black bearded, Irish emigrant could become such a vital force in the education of the young in our city.

Think of how far we were in advance of Russia! My first visit to Russia was in 1874. There the parents never spoke to a child, they first either slapped it or gave it a kick to attract its attention. I cannot say it was cruelty, but it certainly was the habit of the peasants.

Another odd incident was that old "35" was the birthplace of the higher free education in the U. S. It is also the annex as well as the parent of the largest and most complete textile school in the world, located on 351 West 18th St., and now I find that old "35" is housing young ladies, ably presided over by Mrs. George Oakley.