

## A Fountain of Pure Sunbeams: The Exemplary Life of the Rev. Alexander Dobbin

By Ben Franks

### INTRODUCTION

Every year, millions of tourists travel to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania—the site of one of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War and the place where President Abraham Lincoln gave one of the most famous speeches in U.S. history: the Gettysburg address. A few minutes away from the battlefield, just inside the boundaries of the town of Gettysburg, sits a large stone house which is currently run as a colonial tavern and B&B. The property is called the Dobbin House Tavern, named after the man who built the house in 1776: the Rev. Alexander Dobbin.

Though his name is little known today, Rev. Dobbin was truly exemplary. Over the course of his more than 30 years of ministry, Dobbin served as a pioneer missionary to the Scots-Irish community of the American frontier, pastored several churches in the area, played an active role in the courts of the church, presided over a large family and extensive farm, opened the first classical school west of the Susquehanna river, ran a theological seminary, and helped to establish the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Each of these roles provides a fascinating window into his character, but his primary identity was always centered around his work as a minister and it is that role which will receive attention in this paper.

Dobbin was an exemplary man in both senses of the word: both in being an illustrative example of various changes and trends which took place in America (and American church life) in the late 18th century, and in being an inspiring example of faithful and fruitful ministry for Christians today. Although Gettysburg was the scene of his life's work, his story began far across the Atlantic on the banks of the River Foyle in Ireland.

### HIS SCOTS-IRISH UPRISING

#### *Dobbin's Early Life and Education*

Alexander Dobbin was born in Londonderry (one of the largest cities in northern Ireland) on February 4th, 1742. While he was born Irish, his heritage was staunchly Scottish.<sup>1</sup> His father was a Scottish sailor named John Dobbin, who taught his family the practices and beliefs of his native Covenanter Scottish Presbyterianism. Alexander exhibited a strong interest in religious matters from a young age and had a reputation for true piety. His father observed this and encouraged his son to pursue studies that would prepare him for gospel ministry one day. By seventeen, Dobbin had decided to devote himself to the pursuit of the ministry.

His first step was to undertake a thorough study of Latin and Greek as mastery of the classics was considered the foundation for all academic studies and professions. He studied the classics in his native city of Londonderry until he was 21.<sup>2</sup> In 1764, he moved to his ancestral homeland to take up literary and theological studies at the University of Glasgow.<sup>3</sup> He spent the next

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1. Dobbin was part of the Scots-Irish community which would strongly influence both Ireland and America in the centuries to come. The term "Scots-Irish" is inherently somewhat loose and has engendered extensive discussion. A window into this scholarly debate can be found in Patrick Fitzgerald, "The Scotch-Irish & the Eighteenth-Century Irish Diaspora." *History Ireland* 7, no. 3 (Autumn 1999).

2. As one historian points out: "At a time when free public education simply did not exist, and grammar schools charged fees, one can only guess that the Dobbins made a considerable sacrifice to see that their son obtained a good education." Walter L. Powell, *The Alexander Dobbin House in Gettysburg: a Short History* (Gettysburg, PA: Ten Roads Publishing, 2009), p. 4.

3. A flavor of the education Dobbin would have received can be

seven years in his studies, combining his coursework at the university with additional studies under the ministers of the Reformed Presbytery in Scotland in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. These long years of academic pursuits would prepare him well for the many years he would spend as both a pastor and a teacher in his later ministry. He finished his theological studies sometime in 1771 at the age of 29.

The year 1772 was an eventful year for Dobbin. After 12 years of schooling and preparation he was licensed, married, and ordained in the span of a mere six weeks. His wife was named Isabella Gamble, a 21-year-old from the other side of Northern Ireland whom he married sometime in July of 1772. It was on July 6th, 1772 that he was licensed by the Reformed Presbytery of Ireland. Just over a month later, on August 20th, 1772, Alexander Dobbin became the Rev. Alexander Dobbin when he was ordained for the gospel ministry by the Reformed

Presbytery of Ireland at their meeting in Conlig, Ireland. Dobbin was 30 years old, newly married, newly ordained, and eager to step into the life of ministry that he had been pursuing since he was 17.

#### *Scots-Irish Presbyterians in America*

His ministry was to take place not in Ireland or Scotland, but amongst the Scots-Irish community in the New World.<sup>4</sup> Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland had been making their way to the American colonies for nearly a century at this point,<sup>5</sup> and they brought their Bibles, their Psalm books, and their *Westminster Standards* with them. Because of the organic nature of this emigration (and the fractured nature of Presbyterianism in the Scottish homeland), American Presbyterianism was far from a tidy affair. Many Scots-Irish settlers were happy to associate with the American stream of Presbyterianism which grew out of the missionary labors of Francis Makemie (1658–1708) and the establishment of the first American Presbytery in Philadelphia in 1706.<sup>6</sup> But others felt greater loyalties to the denominational distinctives of the churches they had left back in their native Scotland or Ireland.

The two main Presbyterian groups which existed outside of the established Church of Scotland were the Reformed Presbyterians (known commonly as the Covenanters)<sup>7</sup> and the Associate Presbyterians (known commonly as the Seceders).<sup>8</sup> Settlers with ties to one or other of these groups often sought to maintain their distinctive identity in the New World. Practically speaking, this meant that most Covenanter and Seceder Presbyterians operated without full-time ministers and were dependent on the Presbyteries of Scotland and Ireland for the few ministers they did have. Accordingly, these settlers organized themselves into “societies” which gathered for prayer, fellowship, and (when a minister was available) preaching. Periodic “communion seasons” (a common practice in Scottish Presbyterianism) took on renewed significance in the American context as it provided a rare opportunity for both Christian connection and preaching.<sup>9</sup>

For many years, the only Covenanter minister in America was a Scotsman named John Cuthbertson (1718–1791). He spent the first year of his ministry amongst the Presbyterians of Northern Ireland, but seeing the great need in America, he asked the Reformed Presbytery of Scotland to send him as a missionary to labor among the Scots-Irish societies in the colonies. He landed in New Castle, Delaware in August of 1751 and made his way to Pennsylvania—an area where many Scots-Irish pioneers had decided to settle.<sup>10</sup> Cuthbertson

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found by studying the divinity professors who taught at the University of Glasgow at the time. H.M.B. Reid, *The Divinity Professors in the University of Glasgow: 1640–1903* (Glasgow, UK: Maclehose, Jackson & Co., 1923), pp. 243–285.

4. This was not entirely uncommon at the time, as one source notes: “The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of Ulster would become an important resource for American Presbyterianism, since more of the American church’s founders came from Northern Ireland than from Scotland.” D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2007), p. 19.

5. Records show that more than 150,000 Scots-Irish made their way to America in the decade leading up to the Revolutionary War alone. Powell, *The Alexander Dobbin House in Gettysburg*, p. 5.

6. The details of this fascinating story can be found in many histories of Presbyterianism. See for example, Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country*, 15–32; and S. Donald Fortson III, *The Presbyterian Story: Origins & Progress of a Reformed Tradition* (Presbyterian Lay Committee, 2013), pp. 130–132.

7. A full account of the early history of the Covenanters can be found in W.M. Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007).

8. A full account of the early history of the Seceders can be found in Robert Lathan, *History of the Associate Reformed Synod of the South: 1782–1882* (Harrisburg, PA: Washburn Press, 1882). For a scholarly account of the theological distinctives of the Seceders, see William Vandoodewaard, *The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition: Atonement, Saving Faith, and the Gospel Offer in Scotland (1718–1799)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

9. One history describes the worship of these settlers this way: “Their public religious services lasted four or five hours, and on communion days, often from seven to nine hours, with an intermission of fifteen minutes for lunch.” W. Taylor, *History of Cumberland and Adams Counties Pennsylvania* (Chicago: IL, Warner Beers & Co., 1886), p. 245.

10. David M. Carson, *Transplanted to America: a Popular History of the American Covenanters to 1871* (Pittsburg, PA: Crown & Covenant Publications), p. 6.

had a long and fruitful ministry. He took in all of the Covenanter societies as part of his pastoral charge and travelled constantly from one place to the next to marry, bury, baptize, and preach to countless communities. As one biography records:

He endured many hardships as a pioneer missionary. According to his diary, during the thirty-nine years he was engaged in active service, he preached on two thousand four hundred and fifty-two days; baptized one thousand eight hundred and six children, married two hundred and forty couples; rode on horseback seventy thousand miles or nearly equal to three times around the world. And this travelling was done in those days when there were no roads or bridges. Blazed trees marked the pathway, and horse and rider swam the swollen streams. He rode through the unbroken forests, past the lair of the wild beast and the wigwam of the savage; under the hot sun, through the pelting rain or drifting snow, and often without the necessities of life.<sup>11</sup>

After twenty years of lonely ministry, it became clear that Cuthbertson needed help and that the Covenanter societies needed full-time ministers. William Brown, an elder in the American colonies, was sent as a commissioner to seek out additional ministers from the Reformed Presbytery of Ireland. He was authorized to offer support of 50–60 pounds per year and was specifically instructed to try and convince the Rev. Matthew Linn (1731–1800) to return with him to America.<sup>12</sup> Linn agreed, and the Presbytery ordained Alexander Dobbin to serve as the second minister to go with Linn as a missionary to the Covenanter societies of the American frontier.

#### HIS AMERICAN MINISTRY

Linn and Dobbin sailed together from Londonderry and arrived in New Castle, Delaware on December 13th, 1773. They joined John Cuthbertson in Pennsylvania, and since there was now a plurality of ministers, they were able at long last to form a regional body to oversee the American Covenanter churches. The Reformed Presbytery of America was formally constituted at Paxtang, Pennsylvania on March 10th, 1774 with Cuthbertson, Linn, and Dobbin as its ministers. Cuthbertson continued his itinerant ministry throughout the region and Linn was given the charge of several congregations in Eastern Pennsylvania. At 32, Dobbin was given charge of the Rock Creek Church near what would one day become the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

#### *Dobbin in the Congregation*

The Rock Creek Church was nearly the same age as Dobbin himself, having been organized in 1743 as a Covenanter society for the Scots-Irish community who lived between Rock Creek and Marsh Creek. In the early days, the Rock Creek Church met in the woods along the riverbank. Their early “tent” (as they called it) was described as being: “simply a stand in the woods with a shelter overhead, a board braced against a tree on which to lay the Bible and the psalm book, and rude seats in front of the congregation over whom there was no covering but the sky.”<sup>13</sup> By the time Dobbin arrived and was installed as the pastor, the congregation had built a log meeting house near Rock Creek about a mile away from where Gettysburg would soon stand. In 1804, the congregation built: “a substantial brick structure, of good size, finished in the old style, with high-backed pews, brick-paved aisles, high pulpit and huge sounding-board.”<sup>14</sup> It was the first house of worship to be built in the town of Gettysburg. The Rock Creek Church served as the base for Rev. Dobbin’s ministry in America and was described as being: “probably the most important and influential Covenanter church in America” at the time of the American Revolution.<sup>15</sup> Dobbin proved himself to be a gifted and respected preacher. One of his friends and former students recounts that:

As an interesting and instructive Preacher, Mr. Dobbin was held in high estimation. His mode of preaching was, in some sense, extemporaneous. I do not mean by this that his sermons or lectures were not studied and well-digested; but they were not read, neither were they written out and committed to memory. His method was to make a brief analysis of his subject, and, after mature reflection, to trust to his feelings in the delivery for the appropriate language. The matter of his sermons was

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11. Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 478–479. Glasgow also tells us that: “As was too frequently the custom in those days, however, he indulged occasionally too freely in the glass, and at one time he was suspended for four weeks for intemperance, and received a rebuke from the Presbytery.” Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, p.479.

12. It is said of Rev. Linn (sometimes spelled “Lind”) that: “He was an eloquent speaker, and large audiences had their attention astonishingly riveted for hours, while with marked ability he unfolded the truths of the gospel.” Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 565–566.

13. Taylor, *History of Cumberland and Adams Counties Pennsylvania*, p. 245.

14. Taylor, *History of Cumberland and Adams Counties Pennsylvania*, p. 245.

15. Taylor, *History of Cumberland and Adams Counties Pennsylvania*, p. 245.

highly evangelical; and yet it was no further doctrinal than as it had an important bearing on Christian principles and a holy practice. His voice was strong and sonorous; his gesture striking and occasionally eccentric; and his manner, on the whole, highly acceptable. On Communion seasons he was especially appropriate and excellent.<sup>16</sup>

Both because of his reputation as a preacher and because of the lack of ministers in colonial America, Dobbin served as both part-time minister and regular pulpit supply for a number of congregations in addition to his duties at Rock Creek. From 1782 until his death in 1809, Dobbin served as the pastor of Lower Marsh Creek Church for half of the time. Although Lower Marsh Creek Church was a New Side church from the Seceder tradition, “yet such was the combination of gifts and graces in Mr. D.’s character, that the harmonious relations between him and his people are not known ever to have suffered the least interruption.”<sup>17</sup> He also served part time as the pastor of the Old Hill Church and regularly preached for the Dutch Reformed congregation in Conewago which was without a minister for some time.<sup>18</sup> Existing records show that he performed 216 marriages,<sup>19</sup> and, “In addition to his pastoral duties, which he discharged with most exemplary diligence and punctuality, he made several missionary tours, preaching the Gospel in more remote and destitute places.”<sup>20</sup>

Dobbin was well loved by the people to whom he ministered. He married pastoral passion and piety with a warm and winsome personality. One biographer describes him as: “a very social man, cheerful in his disposition, and his countenance continually wore a smile. He adapted himself to all company, and his intercourse was much enjoyed for his wit and good humor.”<sup>21</sup> One of his former parishioners said that: “In his intercourse with his people he was very familiar, and did not scruple to play ball with them, and mingle with them in other amusements.”<sup>22</sup>

#### *Dobbin in the Denomination*

Dobbin’s warm spirit extended to the divisions he saw within the Scots-Irish Presbyterian community of his day. The acrimonious debates which had divided the Covenanters from the Seceders in the homeland of Scotland had led to two parallel, yet distinct, bodies in the American colonies. Several attempts had been made by Rev. Cuthbertson in the 1750s and 1760s to discuss union, but the Reformed Presbytery of America and the Associate Reformed Churches in America remained divided. The source of this division was both historical and political.<sup>23</sup> However, the changing American context (and particularly the changes wrought by the American Revolution) made many of these matters seem less important to the Scots-Irish in America than they were to their Scottish cousins.<sup>24</sup>

Eager to see the Covenanter and Seceder churches united, Dobbin urged the two denominations to reconsider the possibility of union. Over a period of five years (during which ministers from both the Covenanter and Seceder churches met more than twenty times) the two bodies discussed and debated their differences. At one point, it became clear that a committee was needed to draft propositions which could form the basis for a union and Alexander Dobbin was one of the men appointed for this task. Lathan records that: “Every member of this committee was intensely anxious that the union of the two bodies be consummated at as early a day as possible. It is not asserting too much to say that they were men of more than ordinary ability.”<sup>25</sup> The fruits of their labors fulfilled all of the hopes harbored by Dobbin and the other Covenanter ministers. On November 1st, 1782, the Covenanter and Seceder churches joined together to form the Associate Reformed Church.

Having established themselves as a clearly American denomination, the new church recognized that it would need to train future ministers itself instead of relying on foreign ministers from Scotland and Ireland. Because of his reputation for both pastoral experience

16. William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit: Volume IX* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1869), p. 29.

17. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, pp. 28–29.

18. Edward Tanjore Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed church in America* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, 1859), p. 956.

19. One history concludes: “The large number shows conclusively, that for this sacred office there was no one so sought after, far and wide, as the Rev. Mr. Dobbin.” Taylor, *History of Cumberland and Adams Counties Pennsylvania*, p. 25.

20. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, p. 28.

21. Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 483.

22. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, p. 30.

23. See Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 21–51, 62–77.

24. As Lathan says: “Both Associates and Covenanters heartily approved of the course pursued by the American colonies. It is not saying too much to assert that the Covenanters had, as demonstrated by this approbation, changed to some extent their notions with respect to the duties and powers, or rather the extent of the powers, of the civil magistrate. This removed the great, and, in fact, the only barrier in the way to a union with the Associates.” Lathan, *History of the Associate Reformed Synod*, p. 167.

25. Lathan, *History of the Associate Reformed Synod*, p. 177.

and piety and for his particular expertise in the classical and biblical languages (especially Hebrew),<sup>26</sup> Dobbin was given the task of providing theological training for the newly formed church.<sup>27</sup> He was also elected to serve as a trustee (and as the chairman of the curriculum committee) for the primary Presbyterian college in the area, Dickinson College, in 1786.<sup>28</sup> Later, when it became clear that a dedicated seminary should be established to specifically serve the needs of the Associate Reformed Church which had come from the union of 1782, Dobbin was appointed to serve on the Synodical committee which oversaw the creation of the denominational seminary in New York in 1805.<sup>29</sup>

Dobbin had established himself as a mature minister and a faithful servant of the church. As one biographer recounts: “He was remarkably punctual at Church courts, where his opinion was regarded, and he was honored with the Moderatorship several times.”<sup>30</sup> Though Dobbin wore many hats during his busy life, his primary calling was as a minister of the gospel. His ministerial colleagues remembered him this way: “As a presbyter, and as a pastor, he was active, diligent and laborious; as a preacher, he was both interesting and instructive, and dwelt much and lovingly upon the doctrines of the atonement, the offices of Christ, and the work of the Mediator.”<sup>31</sup>

It is fitting, then, that his final days were a model of ministry and faith. His son, Matthew Dobbin, recalls that: “In October, about the 20th [1808], having caught a cold, and going to church in Gettysburg, he ruptured a blood vessel in his lungs by coughing, and was unable to preach any more.”<sup>32</sup> Rev. Dobbin was confined to his home in Gettysburg and his health steadily declined through the winter and spring months which followed. The Rev. Dr. Samuel Knox, one of Dobbin’s former students, wrote of Dobbin’s final hours: “I have only the remaining impression, that during his decline his mind was tranquil. My father was his physician. I recollect, upon his returning home from his last visit to Mr. Dobbin, that he remarked with emotion, that upon entering his chamber, Mr. Dobbin looked up and put out his hand and said ‘Well, doctor, you see that I am here yet, but the struggle will soon be over.’ His mind and his conversation were then peaceful and cheerful.”<sup>33</sup> Alexander Dobbin died, at the age of 67, on June 1st, 1809 and was buried in the cemetery at Lower Marsh Creek Church.

#### CONCLUSION

The humble son of a Scottish sailor had gone on to become a well-educated, well-respected, and well-loved

minister of the gospel on the American frontier. He had helped to establish Reformed Presbyterianism on American soil and had worked to heal divisions between sister churches. He pastored numerous churches, established training for new ministers, and provided warm pastoral care to everyone he met. Many years after his death, a former student remembered Dobbin with these words:

His features were always lighted up with a most loving smile, and he could not open his lips but that you felt that you were in contact with a most loving spirit. Without the semblance of anything that looked patronizing he seemed to delight especially in acts of kindness towards his younger brethren in the ministry; never losing an opportunity to perform a kind act, or drop a cheering word, which would in any way minister to their comfort or advantage. [...] You could not converse with him, even casually, without being impressed with the idea that his soul was a fountain of pure sunbeams.<sup>34</sup>

Though aspects of his life and ministry were ordinary enough, Dobbin’s ministry gives an example of the unique challenges and opportunities which faced transplanted Presbyterians in the New World. But even more than this, he is an exemplary example of faithful ministry for contemporary pastors and church members today.

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26. One of the fathers of the Associate Reformed Church, a Dr. Gray, remembered an incident: “at a meeting of their Presbytery, [when] he gave a critical analysis of one of the Psalms, extempore, in which he displayed a profound acquaintance with the original language and with the rules of criticism.” Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, p. 29.

27. Big Spring Presbytery, *History of the Big Spring Presbytery of the United Presbyterian Church and Its Territorial Predecessors, 1750–1879* (Harrisburg, PA: Patriot Publishing Company, 1879), p. 67.

28. Powell, *The Alexander Dobbin House in Gettysburg*, p. 11.

29. Big Spring Presbytery, *History of Big Spring Presbytery*, pp. 67–68.

30. Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 483.

31. Big Spring Presbytery, *History of Big Spring Presbytery*, p. 59.

32. Powell, *The Alexander Dobbin House in Gettysburg*, p. 26.

33. Powell, *The Alexander Dobbin House in Gettysburg*, p. 27.

34. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, p. 30.

## Appendix: A Timeline of Dobbin's Life

February 4, 1742	Alexander Dobbin is born in Londonderry, Ireland.
c. 1759–1764 (age 17–21)	Decides to pursue the ministry and undertakes the study of Latin and Greek in Londonderry.
1764–1771 (22–29)	Pursues literary and theological studies at the University of Glasgow and in Edinburgh.
July 6, 1772 (30)	Licensed by the Reformed Presbytery of Ireland.
July, 1772 (30)	Married his first wife, Miss Isabella Gamble (1751–1801) of County Down, Ireland.
August 20, 1772 (30)	Ordained at Conlig, Ireland to serve as a missionary to the Covenanters in America along with Matthew Linn.
December 13, 1773 (31)	Sails from Londonderry with Rev. Linn and arrives in New Castle, Delaware and travels to Pennsylvania.
March 10, 1774 (32)	Constitutes the Reformed Presbytery of America with Rev. John Cuthbertson and Rev. Linn at Paxtang, Pennsylvania and is assigned to pastor the Rock Creek congregation in Gettysburg.
1774 (32)	Dobbin purchases a 300-acre tract of land in Gettysburg, PA.
1776 (34)	Built what is now known as the Dobbin House.
November 1, 1782 (40)	Helps to unite the Associate and Covenanter churches through the formation of the Associate Reformed Church. Is given the task of training men for ministry in the new church.
September 9, 1785 (43)	Installed as the part-time minister of the Lower Marsh Creek congregation (while continuing as the full-time minister at Rock Creek).
1785 (43)	Took on the Pastoral charge of the Old Hill Church after the death of the Rev. John Murray.
1786 (44)	Elected as a trustee of Dickinson College and served as the chairman of the curriculum committee.
1788–1810 (46–67)	Ran the first classical academy west of the Susquehanna River in his home.
1791 (48)	Was appointed as one of two trustees (along with David Moore Sr.) for Adams County to erect public buildings in Gettysburg.
August 19, 1800 (58)	His first wife, Isabella Gamble, dies and is buried in the Lower Marsh Creek church graveyard.
1801 (59)	Married his second wife, Mrs. Mary (Irvin) Agnew (1753–1824) of Adams County, PA.
1801 (59)	Serves with the Synodical committee which organized a seminary for the young denomination (which was opened with a class of eight students in 1805 in New York).
April & May, 1802 (60)	Dobbin loses two of his sons, possibly to smallpox.
October, 1808 (66)	Experiences a ruptured blood vessel while traveling to preach in Gettysburg, PA.
June 1, 1809 (67)	Dies of consumption in his home in Gettysburg and is buried in the Lower Marsh Creek church graveyard.■