

THE REV. ROBERT THORNTON, D.D.

"An enthusiast for education"

Written for the Dr. Robert Thornton Public School

Walter Jackson

1975

ROBERT HILL THORNTON

- born 1806 in Calder near Edinburgh, Scotland. Died 1875 in Oshawa. From 1833 - 1875 minister in Whitby Township (42 years).

Robert Thornton's father was a crofter (a tenant farmer) and an elder in the Secession Church. The Secession Church had broken off from the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian). This Church emphasized that the Church must be a missionary society. It was strongly reform minded towards the community but conservative in attitude towards the Church. His older brother was connected with a school for boys. While preparing for University, Robert Thornton did some teaching in that school which created an interest in education which was to last all his life.

He attended the University of Edinburgh and the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Then he took Theology in the Secessionist Church College in Glasgow. There were calls for ministers to go overseas. The people in the new distant wild country of Upper Canada, were making strong requests for ministers. Robert Thornton was one who volunteered to go to Canada. He was set apart as a minister by the Scottish Church in 1833. The boat trip by sailing ship to the New World took seven weeks. Nowadays emigrants come directly to Canada; in those days it was easier to go to the United States and then come north. He arrived in New York in July, 1833, with his Scottish bride, Margaret Thompson. From New York he went north to Lake Ontario and crossed to Cobourg. On arrival there he surveyed the surrounding area. The settlers in the Township of Whitby, then part of the Home District, presented a call (i.e., asked him to be their minister), which he accepted. In October, 1833, at the age of 27, he began his life's work as a minister in Whitby Township.

Presbyterian services had been held from time to time by the Rev. ~~John~~ ^{W.} Jenkins, the minister in Markham. Robert Thornton began the first regular services. There was a log Church already built by the Baptists on the Kingston Road (Now No. 2 Highway). For two years the services were held in this building. The Cairn at the K.Mart marks the site of the old Church. When the Cairn was built in 1933 (the centenary of the first service), it was east of its present position. It was located almost on Kendalwood Road. When the road was put in to serve the K.Mart, the Cairn was moved to its present site.

There were about 25 families who signed the call for the young minister. They were mostly farmers; the majority lived to the north, some near the present village of Columbus. Many of them had been Secessionist Church members in Scotland. Before 1830 many of the settlers had come from the Northern United States. There was a sprinkling of British and German settlers, some of these former soldiers in the campaigns of 1794 and 1812. After 1825, settlers began to come in waves from Great Britain; first from Scotland and England and a few years later from Ireland. Most of the Presbyterians came from Scotland and Ireland.

Robert Thornton was called as minister of the new settlers. The American settlers had their own churches. There was the Baptist Church which the Presbyterians first used and a Congregationalist Church, which was formed in Whitby. The Methodists had wandering ministers taking services and by 1835 Whitby Township was a regular Church which shared a Methodist minister (i.e., a circuit with a minister who was called a 'circuit rider'). The Church of England had a minister in Whitby Township, who built a Church also in 1835 near Columbus, then called "English Corners". From this Church new congregations were organized in Oshawa (St. Georges) and Port Whitby (St. Johns). Although Robert Thornton was not the first minister in Whitby Township, he was the first minister to establish a permanent congregation. Many years later (in 1861) this Church divided into two congregations, one in each town; St. Andrews in Oshawa and St. Andrews in Whitby. From this congregation other congregations were formed in Toronto, Pickering, Dunbarton, Columbus, Claremont, Newtonville, and no one knows how many more. Much of this was done before railways and before regular stage-coach runs when the only built-up road was the Kingston Road, which is now Highway No. 2.

Robert Thornton wrote "we went out into the field of labour literally 'not knowing whether we went' or where to find a friendly home or heart to welcome us, or desiring our services. Our congregations were slowly formed, by first seeking out, with unwearied toil and amid innumerable obstacles, in many cases, the people dwelling solitary in the woods. We had then constant cause to admire all the way by which the Lord our God led us, both from place to place, and in the location of the few first ministers."

He saw himself as the Township minister. The present Town of Whitby was still farm land. The present Town of Oshawa had one store. The major community, and it was only a hamlet, located on No. 2 Highway (i.e., the Kingston Road) was at the present Anderson Street. Here was a store and the one and only Township Post Office. Peter Perry, a few years later, set up a store at what is now the Four Corners of Whitby and gradually the centre of business moved to Perry's Corners. Edward Skae set up a store at the four corners of Oshawa and Skae's Corners became a hamlet. At this time the major settlements were along the waterfront. Port Whitby, then called "Windsor Bay" had an excellent harbour and soon became a shipping point for lumber and grain. A hamlet in "the back settlement" grew up at Columbus, then called "English Corners". Brooklin, further back, first called 'Winchester' was still bush country. Robert Thornton was minister to people who were establishing farms in the bush. He expected the people to come to a central church in the township. Thornton's Corners was more or less central.

A second congregation was set up near the Darlington Townline which developed into the Columbus Church. He organized other congregations which other ministers took over but he remained minister of the second congregation at Columbus until sickness forced him to resign this second charge in 1856. He was minister of the Columbus Church for twenty-two years as well as minister of the Church at Thornton's Corners.

When he was sent to Canada, he went as a missionary... "whenever you settle your labours are not to be confined to your own congregation but you are to preach as often as possible at stations in the vicinity". Through most of his forty years as a minister in the Thornton's Road area, he considered himself a missionary. He made frequent tours of the surrounding area trying to establish and maintain contact with the new settlements. An elder from Clarke Township told how Mr. Thornton preached a sermon which stirred up the people to cut down the trees and draw in the logs to build their first Church. He worked over a wide area; "his ministrations were extended for fifty miles along the lakeshore and northwards as far as there were settlers". He made his most concentrated effort in Pickering, Reach and Whitby Townships. In his later years he served on the Home Missions Committee of the Canadian Church. Home Missions was his life-long concern.

The Whitby congregation developed very quickly. He was called as minister in 1833. The congregation met in a log Church which was used for many different kinds of meetings. By 1835 his congregation had bought land and begun to build a brick church. The few churches that had been built in the surrounding townships were frame or log. The Anglican Church at Columbus, built about the same time, was log. This was the first 'better' Church in the area. A manse was built and before 1840 there was a school built. Robert Thornton's nephew, John Thornton, was the school teacher. This was an amazing achievement in such a short time....land, brick church, manse and school. Around the church a cemetery developed. All that is left today at Thornton's Corners is the cemetery and the name. Many of the pioneers are buried in what was the old churchyard. St. Johns, Port Whitby, was opened almost ten years later in 1846.

After such an enthusiastic beginning, things got worse. We like to think that long ago everyone was good, everyone went to Church and everyone was just waiting for the Church to open. None of these ideas are true. In fact, most people did not attend church. They worked hard, played hard, and drank hard, and died young.

Some of the few who were interested in Church did not want a reformer. Robert Thornton all his life tried to improve the community. There were those who thought a minister should keep to religion. Presbyterian churches of different kinds were opened, taking away some of his congregation. During the MacKenzie rebellion in 1837, Robert Thornton was thought to be a rebel sympathizer. There is a story of troops being stationed outside his home. For these and other reasons, many of his original congregation left. He was able to say, "at the first communion there were 76 members, ten years later there were only six or seven of these still with the congregation". Some of the originals became part of Mr. Thornton's second congregation at Columbus. Others moved to the growing towns and cities.

People lived differently in those days. Before buses and railways and when roads were poor the rivers and lakes were the favoured highways. Robert Thornton, of necessity, did much of his wide travelling on the trails, travelling by horseback. Before T.V., movies and

radio, speeches and meetings were a favourite form of entertainment. Robert Thornton was in demand as a speaker, often for reform causes. The difference between the present and the past can be seen in the way one student prepared for the new school year.... "I got a quire of paper and a bunch of quills and practiced making capitals for a day". The present roads were mostly trails. The first roads were the Kingston Road, running east and west; the two-Rod Road (Harmony Road), going north into the back settlement and later the Plank Road (No. 12 Highway) from Windsor Bay (Port Whitby) to Port Perry.

Even though Robert Thornton was disappointed in the way things went, he stayed with his Whitby congregation. He wrote some years later "after a long and trying ordeal from political agitations and commercial depression, from many local difficulties and opposition, our older congregations are now advancing rapidly". Perhaps he stayed in Whitby because he felt this was the centre of his missionary work. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his arrival in Whitby in 1858, his congregation had 'a night' for him and his family. They said, "you have declined many offers of advancement and worldly profit that would have taken you from us.....It is not often that a congregation is favoured with the continued ministrations of one pastor for so long a period, and our lot is to us a cause of gratitude and thankfulness...." He was then 52 years of age.

As the communities grew and ministers came to take over some of the work he pioneered, he was able to concentrate on the work closer to home. For some years he took three services on Sunday. In the morning the service was in the Brick Church in Whitby (Thornton's Corners). In the afternoon he went to Columbus or further north to Reach Township. In the evening he preached either in the 'Free Church' in Whitby or in Oshawa. Today in a car this would make a pleasant Sunday drive. It was a long way to travel each Sunday on horseback.

As part of his church work he was active in church administrative meetings held in his area and in Canada West (Ontario). These are called Presbyteries and Synods. He was either Chairman or Secretary (Moderator and Clerk) for most of his ministry. When his denomination united with another Presbyterian denomination in 1861, to form the Canada Presbyterian Church, he was chairman of the meeting and declared the new church established. To honour his work in the church and in education, Princeton University, the Presbyterian College in the United States, gave him a Doctor of Divinity degree (D.D.) "He was an acknowledged leader in his Church".

With the organization of the Canada Presbyterian Church, the old Secessionist congregation at Thornton's Corners was divided. The part that lived in the town of Whitby joined with the Free Church congregation there. Those living in Oshawa built a new church on Simcoe Street. We now know this new church as St. Andrews United Church. For two years Robert Thornton was minister of both Whitby and Oshawa and the Brick Church at Thornton's Corners that had served the community for twenty-five years was closed. The cemetery continued to be used by the Presbyterians in Whitby and Oshawa and

later became known as Union Cemetery, used by both communities and by people of all faiths.

In 1864 the Whitby and Oshawa congregations were separated. Whitby called a new minister and Robert Thornton remained as minister of Oshawa. The last ten years of his life were a happier, quieter time. Both Columbus and Whitby had ministers of their own which cut down on his travelling. He served on the Home Missions Committee, his first love, and he served as secretary (clerk) of the Presbytery of Ontario and rarely missed a meeting. He had the love and respect of his new congregation (St. Andrew's, Oshawa) and he saw the acceptance of universal free education for all children.

In the community Robert Thornton was a Reformer. He was a leader in the Temperance Movement and fought for better Sunday observance. He had as a goal a library in every community and an education for every child.

When Robert Thornton arrived in Whitby it was part of 'the wild West!....a frontier community. It was a hard-drinking, anything goes community. Whiskey was sold by the gallon....25 cents a gallon was considered expensive! By 1840 the new settlers began to battle the dangers they saw in drunkenness. Robert Thornton was a leader in this fight. The first demonstration, a march from Oshawa to Whitby, was organized in his home at Thornton's Corners. The Sons of Temperance soon had halls in every town. Robert Thornton was very active with 'The Sons' movement, speaking in surrounding townships and counties for Temperance. One Oshawa old-timer (Samual Pedlar) wrote that the rally of the Sons of Temperance held in Oshawa in 1852, which included senators and congressmen from the United States "was the most memorable assemblage of prominent men ever witnessed in this part of Canada".

In such a frontier community, a day of rest meant little or nothing. People worked long hours seven days a week, and sometimes they worked until the job was done. Sunday observance, a day of rest, meant that families could have some time together. It meant a six-day working week, working sixty to seventy working hours a week. This was considered a big forward step. It meant time to read, time to develop the mind, time to spend on timeless values. Robert Thornton has been credited with doing the most towards Sunday observance in Ontario County.

Robert Thornton is remembered today for his work in education. As part of that work he fought for libraries in every district. An old minister wrote that he explained to meetings of young people how to get a library of their own for their own advancement. He is given credit for "the excellent system of school section libraries established by the township about 1854". The libraries throughout the old "Canada West" that had the most books and were also close at hand were not the Public Libraries or the school libraries as we would expect but the church libraries. For many years each congrega-

tion was required to report the number of books in their library.

In education in Ontario County, Robert Thornton was the outstanding leader. "By his lectures and writings he aroused great interest in education. He published several useful school books, notably the 'Instructive Reader'." From about 1840 until his death in 1875 he held office in the Boards of Education. It is likely that his first job was as ^{Inspector} ~~Inspector~~ of Schools in 1839.

When he first arrived in Whitby there were only two or three schools in the Township. The teaching was done by anyone who was willing and who also could read and write. His congregation not only built a church but also a school. They went to Scotland to get a qualified teacher in John Thornton. In 1841, the schools became "Common Schools" with a grant from the government. When the first school commissioners were appointed, Rev. R. H. Thornton was one so appointed. In 1846, under Egerton Ryerson, the Common Schools were organized into a school system with local Superintendents.

From that time he served as Superintendent of Schools in Whitby Township, and later when East Whitby Township was formed, as Superintendent of schools there. When Robert Thornton was appointed Township Superintendent by the Ontario County Council, there were five basic issues....."a central school (for Oshawa), secondary education, a head teacher, education for all, and some way of paying for these". He struggled with these issues until 1871, a few years before his death.

Robert Thornton fought for education for all. In 1846 in Toronto, where the opportunity was greatest, the attendance at school was less than one quarter of the children of school age. About half the children were being educated. Parents who sent their children to school had to pay extra taxes. The children of bankers and lawyers would be educated but not so frequently the children of the poor. The reformers asked for a school tax on all property to pay for schooling for the poor. The other side suggested making the schools compete for students, thus getting better teachers, and exempt the very poor from school taxes. There were those who suggested that students would always appreciate schools more if they had to make some personal sacrifice. Unfortunately this would mean for large families an extra tax for each child attending school. A property tax with education for every child, won out. While Robert Thornton was Superintendent in 1862, education for all was introduced in East Whitby Township.

Dr. T. Kaiser quoted the School Board Treasurer's Report for 1861. The Board spent \$1,022.92. This amount paid all the salaries for changes in the school, the fuel to heat the schools, and equipment. Robert Thornton as Superintendent received \$10 for expenses. The cost of education has grown and grown.

Such a small amount of money to spend on schools meant poor buildings and scarcity of equipment. There were no pencils, pens, or paper given out. Robert Thornton had to struggle to get maps for the

High Schools. He struggled to get and keep good teachers. When there were more students than the Oshawa schools could hold, they used the Sons of Temperance Hall for classrooms until new schools could be built. When there wasn't a useable reader, he wrote one himself. Always there was too little money and too much to be done. In 1870, almost at the end of Robert Thornton's time as Superintendent of Education, the assessment for educational purposes in East Whitby Township, including Oshawa, was \$443.10. This would not pay for one caretaker for one month today. "Whatever might be the discouragements, I felt ever impelled onwards....", Robert Thornton wrote.

A Secondary School was needed. After a student completed the fourth book (grade 8) he had to leave the county to go to High School. A Grammar School was organized in Whitby in 1846. Robert Thornton was one of the first trustees. His son, Robert Junior, was one of the early students. The first Grammar School building was built in 1849.

Robert Thornton gave as his aim in education to train.... "not only the teachers of Ontario, but the professors of the Colleges, enlightened judges, large-hearted legislators, and Christian ministers". How well he succeeded can be seen in the report from about 1875. "The Whitby Grammar School has sent to the University more students than any other High School in the Province. Almost half of the successful candidates for Third Class Teachers' Certificates come from this school".

The Superintendent of Education not only worked with school programs and equipment but with teachers as well. When East Whitby and Whitby were separated, the teachers in Whitby Township made a presentation to Robert Thornton and said, "we would sincerely thank you for the friendly advice, ready sympathy, and kind encouragement so frankly and affectionately bestowed". The Chairman of the meeting, Wm. McCabe, then Principal of the Whitby Grammar School, became influential as President of an insurance company. The Secretary, J.H. Greenwood, ^{was sent to} ~~went~~ to England and became a cabinet minister in the British Government, and was made Viscount Greenwood. We can never know how much Dr. Thornton's encouragement meant to the young people who began their careers as teachers in Whitby and East Whitby Township.

During Dr. Thornton's time many schools were built. This was the time of the little red school house. The old log or frame schools were replaced with brick. One such school is to be seen on Bloor Street just west of Oshawa. It was built in 1873. Sinclair School has a new addition but the old school is still there, built in 1874. Until 1970 there was a two-room yellow brick school north of Camp Samac, built in 1867. There was a school at Thornton's Corners, near the present Thornton Community Centre which used to be a two-room school house. The red school house on Thicksen Road was built in 1880, after Dr. Thornton's time. There was a two-room school house in Columbus, School Section 6, built in. The first

meeting to set up the County of Ontario in 1852, apparently was held in the Brick School House which was on Dufferin Street in Port Whitby. Most of these schools, if they are still standing, are now used for other purposes. In their time and in Dr. Thornton's, they represented a great advance.

With very little money and very little to work with, Robert Thornton accomplished much in the pioneering of schools in our area. He gave the credit to his faith in education... "the vast importance of education". The difficulties would have 'repressed the zeal and clogged the energies of anyone less untiring than an educational enthusiast". This was a time of religious revivals and camp meetings. It was a time when the 'better people' made fun of religious enthusiasm. "Some of my friends have regarded me as somewhat of an enthusiast in the matter of education". He was willing to accept the name and the implied put down.....an enthusiast for education!

Robert Thornton touched many young peoples lives. His influence was felt with many who became leaders in their fields. It would be easy to suggest that anyone who grew up in Whitby, East Whitby or Oshawa would have known Dr. Thornton and would have come under his influence, but that would be a great exaggeration. We know that there were people in the Dunbarton-Claremont area who told how Dr. Thornton had encouraged them and helped them with their education, and we know that there were young people in his own congregation whose lives he influenced.

William and David Ormiston were brothers who grew up on a farm north-east of Oshawa. Because at that time there were no high schools in the township, the older brother William lived for a year with the Thornton family. This enabled Dr. Thornton to help him prepare for University. William Ormiston became one of the outstanding ministers of his time. For some years he had a large Church in New York City. The younger brother, David, became a lawyer and was active in the town and in the church in Whitby. William Smith was a young lad when Dr. Thornton was his minister but his influence was part of the Smith home. William Smith grew up to become the Hon. Wm. Smith, P.C. (Privy Counsellor) for almost twenty years a Member of Parliament for this area. Dr. T. Kaiser, who was a leading doctor in Oshawa and became Mayor of Oshawa and briefly an M.P., grew up under Dr. Thornton's ministry. J.W. Bengough, who drew many of the cartoons that are reprinted in our history books, grew up in Whitby and his family went to the Presbyterian Church. He ran his own magazine in Toronto and "was an ardent church-goer and prohibitionist". John M. King was the young minister who succeeded Dr. Thornton as minister of Columbus, and worked under his care. John King became Principal of Manitoba College. A son-in-law, Thomas Kirkland, who married Jane Thornton, the eldest daughter, became Principal of the Toronto Normal School and was a leader in developing Ontario's School System. A son, Robert Thornton, Jr., became a minister holding churches in Montreal, Glasgow, Scotland, and London, England. Several other young men of his congregations became ministers, among them were Albert Ormiston; E.W. Panton; John Dunbar; Jas. Tweedie. There were those who taught in the schools:

Sillert

J. McBrien became Superintendent of Education in Ontario County and helped for some thirty years to shape the local school system. A. Marling was a principal of Whitby Grammar School and an elder in the Whitby Church, who became Inspector of High Schools for Ontario.

In 1875, Robert Thornton died, aged 68, in Oshawa. He had been minister of the Whitby congregation from 1833 to 1861. From 1861 to 1864 he had been minister of both the Whitby and Oshawa congregations. From 1864 to his death he had been minister of St. Andrews, Oshawa. At the time of his death he was one of the examiners for the Board of Education. His congregation wore black armbands to show their grief and loss and the schools and stores in the Village of Oshawa closed the day of his funeral. His congregation wrote that they had lost "their father" in the faith, a strange compliment to pay an old Secessionist minister.

Robert Thornton lived through a time of change. The community was moving from the wild west of the frontier of Upper Canada to the settled law-abiding farms of old Ontario. He began his work in Canada when William the Fourth was King and saw the acceptance of the new order and new morality of Queen Victoria's reign. We are living in such a time of change. The new hymns of our day emphasize that 'joy is like the rain; that 'life is a dance'; 'they'll know us by our love'. The new morality is almost an "ode to joy". "Involve-ment" is a favourite word. The older people who think in terms of work and service and sacrifice don't seem to understand the new morality, the new freedom. It was so in Robert Thornton's time. He was part of the wave of the 'new freedom', the 'new morality' of his time. The opportunity for education was a part of that new freedom.

The Dr. Robert Thornton Public School is named after him. There was a school at Thornton's Corners apparently built by 1840. J.K. Ross says that it was a brick school. If it was brick, it must have been the first so built in the County. From that time there was always a school at Thornton's Corners. For many years this was the school for School Section No. 5, East Whitby Township. A two-room school-house was built some years later. In 1952, Oshawa annexed the area. The old two-roomed school was condemned. A new school "Woodcrest" was built and the students living in the annexed area attended the new school. In 1954, a new school was built in East Whitby Township to serve the south-west area of the Township including those in the Township who had attended the old Thornton's Corners School. This school was in Township School Area No. 3, (TSA3), replacing the old smaller School Sections. In October, 1954, the Home and School Association held a contest to 'name the school'. The name "Dr. Robert Thornton Public School" was chosen as the official name. The school was completed in December and officially opened in September, 1955. This new school is located within walking distance of the Cairn which marks the beginnings of Robert Thornton's ministry in Whitby Township, and carries his name, Dr. Robert Thornton Public School.

If you were asked 'why was this school called after a minister', how would you answer?

Robert Thornton, 1806 - 1875
ordained as a Presbyterian minister - 1833

- 1833 - came as a missionary to Canada
called to the Whitby Township Congregation
- 1835 - a Brick Church began at Thornton's Corners
- 1835 - a Log Church built near Columbus
- Presbyterian School built near Thornton's Corners,
1839, became a Common School (Public School) in 1841.

He was a pioneer missionary travelling through all the surrounding area. As a result of his work, churches were built in Toronto, Dunbarton, Claremont, Columbus, Brooklin, and other communities.

He was very active as a Churchman, holding major offices in his Church, including a term as Moderator of the U.P. Church. (United Presbyterian).

After serving 25 years in Whitby, Princeton University (U.S.A. Presbyterian) honoured him with a D.D. degree.

In 1862 a new Church was built in the Village of Oshawa. This is now "St. Andrew's United Church". A brick Church was built in Whitby on Colborne Street. These two town churches replaced the Township Church at Thornton's Corners.

Robert Thornton was a reformer, active in the Temperance Movement and for Sunday Observance. He worked for libraries and schools, believing that education was the way of Christian advance.

He was a member of the first Board of Education (1841). He was Superintendent of Schools for Whitby Township and later East Whitby Township. He wrote "The Instructive Reader" for use in Canada West (Ontario) Schools. The school built at Thornton's Corners was one of the first schools in Whitby Township. He was a Trustee for the first High School, "The Whitby Grammar School", founded in 1846. From 1840 to his death in 1875, he held office in the school boards. For most of this time he was Superintendent of Schools.

He saw second churches built out of his congregation at Thornton's Corners, in Columbus, in Whitby, in Oshawa. He saw second churches built in congregations he pioneered: Toronto, Dunbarton, Newtonville, etc.

He saw the School System grow from small beginnings to become by 1870 one of the best in Ontario.

S O U R C E S

Information about the early development of Whitby Township

- J.E. Farewell - Early Settlement and Progress of Ontario
County
- W.H. Higgins - The Life and Time of Joseph Gould
The Ontario County Atlas, 1877

Information about Dr. R. Thornton is found in...

- Wm. Woods - Past Years in Pickering
- T.E. Kaiser - Historical Sketches of Oshawa
- J.E. Farewell's book noted above.

There is information about the people of Oshawa in -

- D.S. Hoig - Reminiscences and Recollections
- J.D. Ross - Education in Oshawa

These books are available in the Whitby and Oshawa Libraries

Other information has come from Knox and Emmanuel College Libraries, from the Archives of the United Church, and of St. Andrews United Church, Oshawa. Some of the information comes from magazines and newspapers of the time. The Pedlar Papers in the Oshawa Library, has information about the people and the growth of the community.

WHITBY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

(note that Whitby means Whitby Township until about 1860)

The Secessionist Church (Presbyterian)

- 1833 Rev. Robert Thornton
- 1834-46 - Three Point Charge
(Whitby, Columbus, Pickering Township)
- 1846 - Two point Charge
(Whitby, Columbus)
- 1847 - The denominational name is changed

The United Presbyterian Church

- 1847-56 - Rev. Robert Thornton (Two Point Charge)
(Whitby, Columbus)
- 1856-61 - One Point Charge
(Whitby (Thornton's Corners))

The Free Church (Presbyterian)

- 1851 - Three point Charge
(Ashburn, Utica and Whitby)
- 1852-56 - Rev. J. Finlay
- 1857-60 - Rev. T. Lowry

1861 Union of U.P. and Free Churches The Canada Presbyterian Church

- 1861-64 - Rev. R.H. Thornton, D.D. (Two Point Charge)
(Whitby and Oshawa)
- 1864 - Whitby and Oshawa became separate charges, with
Dr. R. Thornton going to Oshawa
- 1865-69 - Rev. J.R. Scott
- 1870-74 - Rev. W.D. Ballantyne
- 1875 - Dr. Robt. Thornton dies in Oshawa

The Church of Scotland (Presbyterian)

- 1841-47 - Rev. James Lambie (Three Point Charge)
(Pickering Township, Whitby Township, Brougham)
- 1860-71 - Rev. K. MacLennan
- 1872-74 - Rev. J. Fraser

1875 - Union of Canada Presbyterian Church and Church of
Scotland

Appendix 1

The Pioneer School House

It was a log building. The logs were not even hewn nor the corners square. It was about 16 feet x 12 feet. On one side were the long low windows, common in those days; on the other, a large open fire-place and a mud chimney. The floor was made of rough plank; the roof was clapboarded; the seats were hewn logs, supported by round pieces of wood driven into augur holes on the under side. The desks for the pupils were in keeping with the other appointments of this hall of learning. They were simply a long shelf on the window side of the building - a rough-board resting on stakes driven into the log in a slanting direction. Maps there were none; neither was there a black board: and a few pieces of slate without frames were the only facilities for the children's exercises. Mavor's Spelling Book, an English Reader and Walking-game's Arithmetic were the principal text books used.

The children were remarkably quiet and obedient, and the best of order was maintained, without resorting to any corporal punishment. In the winter-time the building was kept comfortable by the large fire place, fuel for which was supplied by the pupils in turn. Through the mists of the intervening years, I can still see a little group of children sitting around the brightly burning maple log, earnestly at work with their studies and listening attentively to every word of instruction offered by the teacher.
(Patrick Downey from Guelph) Quoted by J.G. Hodgins, Education in Upper Canada, Vol. IV. p.316.

School Boy Games in Whitby about 1855

Cricket was also a favourite game but it was not aggressive enough. Football and shinny---especially on the ice, where the Town and the Bay met every Saturday for a whole days conflict----afforded more and better opportunities for personal encounters and were more popular games. The goals were a mile apart, and I never knew of a goal being scored by either side. Golf, croquet, and similar sports were unknown but would have been scorned as too insipid. But we played One-old-cat and Two-old-cat---predecessors of baseball. Prisoner's base gave fine opportunities for running and wrestling and had many devotees. Don't think that the boys were any rougher than in any other school, but in the glorious old days rough and tumble was usually preferred to more sedate and lady-like games.

(George H. Ham, Reminiscences of a Raconteur, p.3)

Note: - the front porch on St. John's Church, Port Whitby, was added as a memorial to George Ham.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada

1875-79 - Rev. R. Chambers
1879-1914 - Rev. J. Abraham

Rev. Robt. Thornton was minister of churches in Whitby and East Whitby Townships until his death in 1875.

Buildings

- 1835 Red Brick Church at Thornton's Corners
- 1835 Log Church, Harmony Road (Columbus)
- 1842 Frame Church (C.of S.) near Woolco (Thickson Rd.)
- 1847 Frame Church at Columbus
- 1859 Brick Church (C.of S.) Byron Street (Whitby)
- 1862 Brick Church (Canada Pres.) Simcoe Street, (Oshawa)
- 1869 Brick Church (Canada Pres.) Colborne St. (Whitby)
- 1873 Brick Church, Columbus

The Dr. Thornton Memorial Cairn

This cairn is the tribute of a grateful community to the work of Dr. Thornton, not only for the Church for which and in which he laboured, but to his work as an educationist, as a temperance reformer, and as a citizen of the Oshawa district, and the Dominion of Canada.

Through the energy and vision of Dr. T.E. Kaiser, of Oshawa, this memorial has been made possible. Through his personal friendship with Emmanuel Hahn, the noted Canadian sculptor, he secured the striking design for the memorial, and he organized the campaign which resulted in generous contributions pouring in from municipalities and private citizens to make his dream a reality. As one of the features of the Centennial Celebration of St. Andrew's Church, there will be a great pilgrimage to the site of the old Baptist Church, for the unveiling and dedication of this memorial.

The cairn measures fifteen feet in height, and with its location on the hilltop, will stand as a beautiful landmark for generations yet to come. It is of massive stone construction, measuring twelve feet across at the base. From its base protrudes a replica of the original log building in which Dr. Thornton first preached to the settlers of this community. Below, is the inscription tablet, bearing the following legend.....

1833---1933

Site

of Log Church

Where Began the Mission

of

Robt. H. Thornton, D.D.

Whose Pioneer Work in the Cause of Religion, Education
and Social Reform has bequeathed to a grateful people a
Century of Treasured Gifts.

"Days should speak, and multitude of years should teach wisdom"
(from St. Andrews, Oshawa, Centennial Booklet, published 1933)

The last quotation is from Job, chapter 32, verse 7.

Note; because the land on which the cairn was erected was not purchased. At the time when the farm was sold, it was necessary to move the Cairn westward to its present site.

Appendix 3

Robert Thornton as Pioneer Minister

Often in the new settler's log house, by the open fire in Winter, or in the rude barn in summer, did he proclaim with great faithfulness the unsearchable riches of the grace of God. He often cheerfully shared the single-roomed cabin of the hardy settler..... We can only wonder that one who was not overly robust, should have been able to accomplish so much.

(quoted by T.E. Kaiser, Historic Sketches, page 70)
Written by John Ratcliff, first Reeve of East Whitby Township, and County Warden in 1863, one of the men who signed the Call for Robert Thornton in 1833. There are still Ratcliffs living on the family farm.

"Having come to Upper Canada he commenced his labours on the north shore of Lake Ontario, and towards the close of 1833 accepted a call to the congregation of Whitby; but beyond Whitby his ministrations were extended for fifty miles along the lake shore, and northwards so far as there were settlers in the country. In later years his labours were chiefly confined to Oshawa and its neighbourhood. Several congregations are now flourishing in the localities where he found at first but a few scattered families, whom he helped to organise into regular charges. He was active in promoting the interests of education and the cause of temperance, and was for a time an efficient agent of the Bible Society."

Wm. Gregg, History of the Presbyterian Church (written about 1885).

"In this remote corner of the world, lacking almost all the comforts of civilized life, this educated Christian gentleman carried on his Master's work for the remainder of his life, accepting the pittance that was all the poor settlers could pay him at the time, without a murmur, although it often meant the direst of poverty for himself and his family. That he continued to accept it long after the congregation could afford to pay him well, must be rather a mortifying reflection for their successors."
St. Andrews Centennial Booklet, 1933 (page 9), written by Dr. D.S. Hoig.

..."his Godliness and his intense humanity. Having put his hand to his Master's work he never relaxed while he had strength to carry on; and no less evident was his love for his fellow men, and the constant efforts he made for his moral and intellectual uplift. His was in truth a beautiful character".
St. Andrews, Oshawa, Centennial Booklet, published 1933, page 13, written by Dr. D.S. Hoig. As a boy, Dr. Hoig attended Dr. Thornton's church services.

"For the many years that Dr. Thorntop lived on the Kingston Rd., where the Church was, before being moved into the town, his door hung on the latch; and no decent traveller was denied food or lodging; this applying more particularly to poorer travellers of his own profession. The long dining table was hardly ever without a guest; and all this on an income less than the poorest laborer gets now. He was one of the few of whom one might say that "his character was Christ-like." Dr. D.S. Hoig, "Reminiscences and Recollections", p. 70.

"East Whitby was the residence of one of the greatest, best and most useful of men the Province has produced, namely, the Rev. R.H. Thornton, a Presbyterian minister who for many years lived near the Union cemetery, Kingston Road. He was the Superintendent of Schools for the township for many years, and by his lectures and writings, aroused great interest in education. He published several useful school books, notably the "Instructive Reader." Through his influence largely the excellent system of school section libraries was established by the old Township of Whitby about 1854. He was the apostle of temperance, and through his influence many total abstinence societies were formed in this and the adjoining municipalities. He did extensive missionary work in connection with the Church in Reach and the northern townships. He was a man "of the large heart and kindly hand." (p.35).
J.E. Farewell, Early Settlement and Progress, p.35

"The congregation here (Whitby Township) have collected 25 pounds currency as stipend. They have purchased nineteen acres of land as a site for a meeting-house, a burying-ground, a manse and garden for 125 pounds; of this 50 pounds have already been paid. They have resolved to build a brick meeting-house, fifty feet by thirty-six, and have begun to take up subscriptions for it. Of the ninety-nine members reported as belonging to Whitby, thirty-six reside in the Back Station. The Back Station has built a log meeting house, 26 feet by 32 feet. It will very soon be finished. Mr. Thornton has a station in Pickering. The people there have been formed into a Church.

Wm. Gregg, History of The Presbyterian Church, page 530.
Quoting the Report of the Presbytery Visitation made in 1835.

Note: "the Back Station" became Columbus Church.

"he was the most cherished of friends and his visits to them were seasons of rich and varied enjoyment. His genial nature attached him to old and young and his stores of all kinds of knowledge furnished an intellectual feast"
John Ratcliff, quoted by Dr. T.E. Kaiser, page 71.

"he did more than any other man in the locality to stop the desecration of the Sabbath".
John Ratcliff, quoted by Dr. T.E. Kaiser, page 68.

"he thought it a part of his duty as a minister of the Gospel to preach temperance.....he gave the first temperance address, delivered in this section of the country and established what has since become known as the old temperance societies".
Dr. T.E. Kaiser, Historic Sketches, page 65.

THOSE SIGNING THE 'CALL' FOR ROBERT THORNTON, 1833

" Alex Armstrong, J.P.	Conc. 3, Lot 20,	1794-1837	
James Tweedie	" 3, Lot 29,	1800-1857	
Wm. Dow, Sr.	" 3, Lot 23,	1777-1855	
Alex. Balmer	" 3, Lot 20,	1801-1862	
Wm. Young	" 1, Lot 22,	1797-1880	
Wm. Anderson	" 2, Lot 22,	1800-1862	
Alex Burnett	" 2, Lot 22,	-1854	4, Lot 24
John Michael	" 5, Lot 18,	1806-1887	
Wm. Beggs	" 4, Lot 4,	1800-1857	
Thomas McGaw	" 4, Lot 2,	1793-1877	
James Sommerville	" 2, Lot 24,	-1849	2, Lot 17
Gavin Burns	" 6, Lot 3,	1804-1861	2, Lot 11
Thomas Burns	" 6, Lot 6,		
John Hislop			3, Lot 24 (?)
Wm. Karr	" 2, Lot 10,		
Adam Spears			1, Lot 17
John Watson	" 2, Lot 35,	1796-1867	
John Thompson	" 2, Lot 24,	1803-1863	
Alex Ogston		1790-1860	4, Lot 33
James Mackie		1803-1863	3, Lot 21
John Hepburn	" 6, Lot 2,	1789-1872	
John Ratcliff	" 6, Lot 6,	1814-1878	

Information originally supplied by Wm. S. Glenny, of Oshawa.ⁱⁱ

(From Samuel Pedlar - The Pedlar Papers, p.102)

The first Concession Listings are taken from Dr. Kaiser's book; the second Listings are taken from the 1848 Assessment Roll.

Robert Thornton, Conc. 2, Lot 16, 20 acres, 1848 Assessment Roll.

A Tribute from the Session of St. Andrews Church, Oshawa. (Canada Presbyterian Church)

The Session began by commenting that the Church at large owed Dr. Thornton a debt of gratitude as a Father in the Presbyterian Church in this district for nearly forty years; that the country owes him a debt of gratitude for his life-long advocacy of sobriety and education, but as a Session they are... "more concerned with his excellence as a Christian minister. His remarkable diffidence to all human applause... wise in counsel.... faithful in duty.... sound in scripture doctrine... of deep piety... ever glorying and devising plans for the furtherance of the gospel and always ready to minister to the necessities of the flock.... that our beloved Father and Pastor has after a life of noble self-denial and labour attained the Saint's everlasting rest. The Minutes of St. Andrews Church Session, Oshawa, 1875.

* * *

How A Minister Travelled in 1833

"The humbler clergymen carry a valise, with a great coat and umbrella strapped over it. Indeed, you never see an equestrian traveller leaving home for a couple of days without a valise before or behind him, for no one here is grand enough to have a servant riding after him; and as to travelling in a wagon, it is often utterly impossible, from the condition of the roads, which render wheeled conveyances insupportable. The quantity of mud which a wagon has to encounter is inconceivable."

Thomas Radcliff 'Authentic Letters from Upper Canada', published 1833.

The Durham Report

In 1838, several Church leaders gave evidence before Lord Durham on the question of Clergy Reserves. "Other clergymen giving evidence Rev. Robert Hill Thornton, minister of a Presbyterian congregation in Whitby in connection with the United Secession Church...." C.B. Sissons, 'Egerton Ryerson', page 480.

To Further Education

A public meeting in the interest of education was held in 1851 in Mr. Thornton's brick chapel, front road, (Thornton's Corners) on the third Thursday in June at 10 o'clock A.M. The writer (J.E. Farewell) attended this meeting. The Church was filled with scholars, teachers and trustees from different parts of the Township. A lecture was given by Professor Hind, of the Normal School and illustrated by chemical experiments". J.E. Farewell, Early Settlement and Progress, page 31.

Dr. R. Thornton's Family

"Dr. Thornton was greatly blessed in his family. His was a very happy Christian home. True, the King of Terrors entered it repeatedly and bore away near and dear ones. His eldest son was removed when verging on manhood and full of promise. A sweet little daughter was suddenly snatched from them by a painful accident. Not many years ago, another daughter 'woman-grown', gifted by nature - but more by grace - was called away. His wife died a year before him."

Canada Presbyterian Church Magazine, March, 1875.

Jane Thornton, who was born the year the Church was completed, (1837) married the Whitby Grammar School principal, Thomas Kirkland. Thomas Kirkland became Principal of the Toronto Normal School. Both he and Jane Thornton Kirkland are buried in the old churchyard (Union Cemetery). A son, Robert Thornton became a teacher and then became a minister, holding churches in Montreal; Glasgow, Scotland; and London, England. His son, Robert Thornton, III, was also a Presbyterian minister. E.J. Thornton went into banking and for awhile was Manager of the Dominion Bank in Whitby. (see J.E. Farewell's book).

Many of the Thornton family are buried in the family plot in the old churchyard (Union Cemetery), on the south-west side. Nearby are the graves of many of the pioneers, including Peter Perry, the founder of Whitby. *and Edward Skel founder of Canada.*

On Being Granted the D.D. Degree (Doctor of Divinity) from Princeton University....."he now ranks among the veterans of our Church. His public career has been characterized, not merely by superior talent and scholarship, but by diligent and successful evangelistic labour and unwearied exertion for the promotion of sound education and of every good work directed to the best interests of the people....this honour, which was quite unsolicited by him, took his genuine modesty by surprise. May that modesty not hinder him from contributing again to the press, that he may continue to speak to generations yet to come (the above has been sent by a very worthy man, who is anxious that it should appear in the magazine and we hope Dr. Thornton's good nature will excuse our insertion of it)".

United Presbyterian Magazine, February, 1860.

The Way of the Pioneer

Robert Thornton wrote, "The clearings were so few and far between as scarcely to interrupt the wilderness monotony. And as for roads, with a few exceptions, they were yet in the future. The road was made merely by the cutting and partial clearing of the trees which covered its surface. To keep to these few highways, such as they were, was incompatible with the objects of the missionary and the nature of his work. We had to vent our way through forest paths and from clearing to clearing, where the only mode of locomotion was on foot. We had then not only no certain dwelling place but no certain field before us. We proceeded in quest of Presbyterian settlers, without the least direct information as to where they were to be found, or

whether we should be desired. Committing ourselves to God we just advanced where He broke up our way." -
W. Woods, Past Years in Pickering, page 36

"We went out into the field of labour, literally, 'not knowing whither we went', or where to find a friendly home or a heart to welcome us, or desiring our services. Our congregations were slowly formed, by first seeking out, with unwearied toil and amid innumerable obstacles, in many cases, the people dwelling solitary in the woods. And as we had then constant cause to admire - "all the way by which the Lord our God led us", both from place to place, and in the location of the first few ministers....."

From a Report Rev. R. Thornton Made to the Mission Board of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, quoted by the Canadian United Presbyterian Church Magazine, September, 1855

Whitby - Celebration - "Twenty-Five Years a Watchman"

The Rev. R.H. Thornton, having completed the 25th year of his pastorate of the U.P. congregations in the front of the Township of Whitby, the people of his charge becomingly resolved to celebrate the event by a social meeting.....a meeting was held in their large brick Church, situated between the towns of Oshawa and Whitby on the evening of Wednesday, the 16th of February. The audience was large, about 500, and the spirit which prevailed the meeting was truly delightful.... declarative at once of Christian brotherhood and gratitude for the enjoyment for such a lengthened period, of the pastoral services of one so highly qualified and so faithful....there were present some of the ministers from the surrounding congregations, which owed their origin in great measure to Mr. Thornton's indefatigable and efficient labours. The Rev. Messrs. Cassie of Port Hope; King, of Columbus; Scott of Perrytown; Baird of Claremont; Kennedy of Dunbarton and Wm. Mitchell, an elder from Newtonville.....!"Twenty-five years a Watchman" was the striking motto on one of the huge pyramid-like cakes that adorned the platform table.
(The United Presbyterian Church Magazine, April, 1859).

The Twenty-fifth Anniversary Presentation

"While so continuing to discharge your high duties, you have declined many offers of advancement and worldly profit, that would have taken you from us; you have made personal sacrifices for our sakes; you assisted us through early trials when it was easier to have left us to struggle without help, and our present continuance as a church is due under Providence, to your continued labors in our behalf. It is not often that a congregation is favored with the continued ministrations of one Pastor for so long a period, and our happy lot is to us a cause of gratitude and thankfulness to the Giver of all Good." Signed on behalf of the congregation.

T. E. Kaiser, Historic Sketches, page 63.
Have Times Changed?

.....!"in the matter of support for the Gospel, Canada is taking a pretty sharp turn...the reproach of stinginess and 'dollar-worship' will speedily be wiped away". U.P. Church Magazine, September 1, 1855

From the Address of the Teachers to Dr. Thornton

....."we are indebted for a system of education much superior to that of other less-favoured localities. For the patience and hope which sustained you in that, the first step of our present noble system, we return our heartfelt gratitude. We cannot estimate too highly, the perseverance which overcame the difficulties and discouragements of this period!....

From Dr. Thornton's Reply

"regarding education as including every means by which an intelligent being may be trained to knowledge and virtue, qualified for acting an honourable and respectable part in the world, and prepared for that immortal existence to which all are destined, I cannot but regard our Common and Grammar Schools as among the most valuable institutions which any civilized community can possess".
T.E. Kaiser, Historic Sketches, page 74-77.

From the Memorial Notices, ~~from~~ the Rev. A. Kennedy of Dunbarton, a friend since college days. ~~Wrote~~

....."His preaching was singularly instructive and hence was appreciated by the more thoughtful and intelligent. As might be expected, his congregations contained a large proportion of well instructed Christian men and women. The young of his flock and those far beyond its bounds received his special attention. Few excelled him as a Bible-class teacher...he would travel far to lecture to them periodically to advise them in regard to their reading and to aid them in originating a library in the locality. There are heads of families residing in the Dunbarton area who gratefully acknowledge the generous efforts of Dr. Thornton nearly forty years ago".....(written in 1875).
Quoted by W. Woods, Past Years in Pickering.

"Dr. Thornton may be regarded as the main founder of Presbyterianism in the whole region, now known as South Ontario. Far and wide did his labours extend. He was particular in keeping appointments and even to the last never shrunk from any duty assigned to him. Dr. Thornton not only was a diligent and faithful pastor but took a deep interest in the cause of education, in the Temperance Reformation, and indeed in everything connected with the social, moral, and spiritual good of the community. He did much by instruction and by personal intercourse to stimulate the young to mental and spiritual improvement. (Canada Presbyterian Church Magazine, March, 1875).

"During the earlier years of his ministry he travelled over the length and breadth of the country and was the first in various places to gather together the scattered families of Presbyterians.....in all the relations of life, domestic and public, but especially as a minister of the Gospel, scholarly, diligent, faithful and self-sacrificing. He was highly esteemed and respected by all." (the Presbyterian Church in Canada, General Assembly Minutes, 1875). This was the first General Assembly of the newly united Presbyterian Church.