

Colton, Simeon ^[1]

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by Charlesanna L. Fox, 1979

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Simeon Colton, minister and educator, the son of Jabez and Mary Baldwin Colton, was born at Somers, Conn. After his graduation from Yale in 1806, he became pastor of the Congregational church at Palmer, Mass. He was married in 1812 to Lucretia Colton ^[2], who died in 1821.

Although he was an ordained minister, Colton devoted most of his life not to the ministry but to education. He was principal of the Monson and Amherst academies in Massachusetts before he moved to Fayetteville ^[3] in 1832 to be principal of the newly established Donaldson Academy and Manual Labor School on Hay Street. This academy, partially endowed by the Donaldson family, drew its students from the whole southeastern section of the state, and ten of the first sixteen trustees were residents of seven counties other than Cumberland ^[4]. The curriculum was comparable to that of the Presbyterian classical schools, and old-fashioned discipline prevailed. The school was not for incorrigible or dissolute boys but for the education of youth of good habits in preparation for additional schooling at universities. The manual labor system was found to be impractical and was abandoned in a few years, when funds for necessary equipment could not be found.

In 1836 the trustees of the academy requested aid from the state literary fund ^[5], primarily on the grounds that the academy was preparing teachers for the common schools. The academy needed a library, science equipment (Colton's special desire), and manual arts equipment. The committees in both houses of the legislature replied that the literary fund would, of necessity, be used only for free and common schools.

Colton was considered an excellent teacher, learned in many subjects and especially so in the sciences. The trustees reported to the state legislature that they had "opened under the superintendence of an able, efficient and experienced Instructor." The remarkable success of the school was interrupted in 1838 when Colton was discovered to be the author of an anonymous pamphlet, consisting of six letters signed by "Presbyteros," of which the church disapproved. Colton was called before Fayetteville Presbytery in 1839 to answer charges about its offensiveness and the mischief it had caused. He denied the right of the presbytery to question him. No decision was made concerning the accusations; because of the esteem in which the author was held and because he and others considered that he had been prejudged, the presbytery preferred to refer the matter to a larger body.

The Synod of North Carolina agreed to hear the case, and the synod minutes of 10–12 Oct. 1839 record the proceedings. After the officers of Fayetteville Presbytery presented the facts, Colton was asked to speak in his defense; he declined to make a formal statement, stating instead his opinion that there was irregularity in the mode of proceeding, that the charge was not supported by the evidence, and that the process placed a restriction on liberty of speech and press. Members of the synod voted unanimously to sustain the charges against him. The minutes included the requirement that he make a full confession of guilt before he be restored to good standing.

Colton gave notice that he would appeal to the general assembly and obtained leave of absence for the rest of the meeting of the synod. On the last day, 12 Oct., however, he asked leave to appear before the synod and read a paper he had prepared. He stated that he had written the pamphlet under the "full conviction that I was doing my duty. It was written, without the least intention of wounding the feelings of my brethren, of doing harm to the cause of religion, or to the interests of the church. . . . Since Synod have viewed this in a different light, I do now, in this public manner . . . sincerely and cordially ask their forgiveness. . . . And, while I reserve to myself the right of private opinion, and of expressing that opinion, I do promise, that it shall be done in such manner as comports with the spirit of the gospel." The synod accepted his statement and united in prayers of thanksgiving.

During this period the Old School-New School division in the Presbyterian church ^[6] was causing differences of opinion concerning church organization, ritual, and doctrine. Colton was opposed to the action of the 1837 general assembly in voting out many of the presbyteries in the west, charging them with irregularity in church government. Since he was of New England and Congregational church background, he no doubt saw church discipline from a point of view other than that of the members of Fayetteville Presbytery. The relationship with the presbytery and synod show that, in spite of differences of opinion, he was held in high esteem and in affection.

In 1846, Colton left Fayetteville to become president of a college in Clinton, Miss. After two years he returned to North Carolina to be principal of the Cumberland Academy at Summerville near present-day Lillington. His second wife, Susan Chapman of Connecticut, whom he had married in 1823, died in 1850 while he was at Summerville. She was the mother of his children: Alexander ^[7], James Hooper ^[8], Henry E. ^[9], Jane, and Susan Maria. Women of the Presbyterian church contributed funds for a monument to her memory.

Colton's diary covering the years 1851–61 expresses gratitude at finding three companions in marriage who shared his interests and work and who were compatible in every way. His 1851 courtship of Mrs. Catherine Fuller, widow of Thomas Fuller, and his marriage to her in December of that year are described.

The Coltons moved in August 1854 to Asheboro, where he was principal of the Male Academy until the war closed its doors. Mrs. Colton assisted with instruction at the Female Academy. Both were recognized as outstanding teachers by the people of Asheboro and had the reputation of being so strict as to hold the students in awe. Here again Colton combined the ministry with education, for he was the second minister of the Asheboro Presbyterian Church, organized in 1850, serving from 1854 to 1862. He apparently retired from all active service in 1862 at the age of seventy-seven. Mrs. Colton continued as principal of the Female Academy until 1867.

Colton's diary ^[10] reveals a man of many talents devoted to the Christian faith, which sustained him through all discouragements. To his adopted state he gave twenty-eight years of unselfish, conscientious, and able service. His education exceeded that of most of the adults in the communities in which he lived in North Carolina, but he contributed through his teaching to the preparation of leadership for another generation. He was a great supporter of The University of North Carolina ^[11], from which his son James Hooper was graduated in 1855. Faced with indifference, sham, feuds, poverty, unkept promises, and despair, he daily turned to his diary to express his reliance on his faith as a source of strength. On one occasion he commented: "I have commenced school this day with two pupils and I think it is doubtful whether I shall have any more from town during the session. Some do not like my government. They want their children to do well, but to be indulged in every humor."

For several months in 1840, Colton acted as agent of the board of internal improvement in soliciting subscriptions for the Fayetteville and Western Railroad. This service meant travel in some sixteen counties west of Fayetteville that might be touched by the railroad. His report to the board of 10 June 1840 not only covers the results of the solicitations but also provides a comprehensive summary of the values of an east-west railroad in the state. Although his well-organized report proposed immediate action, the board delayed a decision; it was ten years before the railroad was approved.

Colton left a lasting impression wherever he lived. In July 1854, as he was preparing to move to Asheboro, friends in Monson, Mass., among them E. W. Storrs, Charles Merriam, and William Grosvenor, sent him one hundred dollars for expenses so that he could attend the semicentennial anniversary of Monson Academy. While he was there, Merriam asked him to sit for a portrait to be hung at the academy.

Colton was buried at Summerville beside his second wife, Susan. The Cornelius Harnett Chapter of the DAR erected a monument at the grave.

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