

Reese, Thomas ^[1]

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1742–1796?

Thomas Reese, [Presbyterian](#) ^[2] minister, educator, author, and self-taught medical practitioner, was born in Pennsylvania and during his early youth moved to [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[3], N.C., with his parents. He was the son of David and Susan Polk Reese and the grandson of the Reverend David Reese, a Presbyterian minister. His brothers were George, James, Charles, and Solomon, and his one sister was named Catherine. At the proper age, Thomas enrolled in the classical school taught by [Joseph Alexander](#) ^[4] and a Mr. Benedict at the Sugar (Sugaw) Creek Presbyterian Church in Mecklenburg. Later he attended the [College of New Jersey \(Princeton\)](#) ^[5], receiving a bachelor of arts degree in 1768, and then devoted several years to an independent study of theology. After passing the necessary trials, Reese was licensed as a Presbyterian clergyman by the Presbytery of Orange in 1773 and immediately accepted a call to the Salem Church, on Black River, Sumter District, S.C.

The young minister and his family were strong supporters of the [American Revolution](#) ^[6]. His brother, George, so devoted to Thomas that he moved to Sumter District in order to live near him, became an officer in the Continental army. Unable to find a place for himself as a chaplain in the hastily organized army, and, as [Tory](#) ^[7] persecutions and British atrocities made the Black River territory unsafe for Patriots, Reese prudently moved with his family to his father's home in North Carolina. In this location he preached at Sugar Creek and at Providence Presbyterian churches, while engaging in the writing and distribution of war news summaries and patriotic handbills throughout the area, where few newspapers could be found and where there was no printing press. According to [William Henry Foote](#) ^[8], Reese "used his pen for his country" and the results were particularly effective in promoting the Revolution.

At the end of the war, the clergyman returned to Black River, where he energetically endeavored to rebuild his war-torn parish. He also eloquently expressed his views on the relationship of the people to their new government in an essay entitled *Influence of Religion on Civil Society*. This treatise, favorably compared by one critic to the noted works of Bishop William Warburton and Dean William Paley, won for the author the degree of doctor of divinity from Princeton, conferred upon a Carolinian for the first time. Reese continued to write but was financially unable to publish extensively, as his literary compositions were too scholarly to enjoy a profitable sale. However, two of his homilies were included by David Austin in *The American Preacher*—the only sermons selected from a clergyman south of Virginia. According to his contemporaries, the oratorical ability of Reese, enhanced by his grace and dignity in the pulpit, greatly added to the effectiveness of his carefully composed discourses. The minister also skillfully emphasized music to an inspiring degree in his services. In fact, a controversy within the congregation over the use of hymns written by Isaac Watts as opposed to the versions of Francis Rous was one of the reasons Reese left the Salem church in 1792 and became pastor of the Carmel and Hopewell (Keowee) churches in Pendleton District, S.C.

Throughout his ministry Reese conducted a classical school for boys, and the excellent reputation enjoyed by the institution enabled his son, Edwin, to expand the enterprise into a flourishing academy at Pendleton after his father's death. The minister was also named as a trustee of [Liberty Hall](#) ^[9] in North Carolina, along with [David Caldwell](#) ^[10], [Samuel McCorkle](#) ^[11], and others, which was a tribute to his ability as an educator. In addition to his duties in the pulpit and classroom, the clergyman also used his considerable store of self-acquired medical knowledge to relieve human suffering in his community, where medical doctors were often unavailable. This practice inspired his son, Elihu, to enter the medical profession. In 1788 Reese became a charter member of the newly organized Presbytery of South Carolina and was active in its affairs until the end of his life. In this connection, he was drawn into a controversy over the moral right of professing Christians to own and enslave other people. The minister was critical of the institution, although he did not consider it anti-Christian and owned and enslaved a number of people himself. The matter was referred to the Synod of the Carolinas for final settlement and the decision of that body was that the ownership of enslaved people was not un-Christian. When the synod met on 3 Jan. 1796 to announce its decision, it received notice of the recent death of the Reverend Thomas Reese.

In 1773 the minister married Jane Harris, daughter of Charles Harris, of Mecklenburg County. When Reese succumbed after increasingly severe attacks of hydrothorax at age fifty-four, he was survived by his wife and the following children: Edwin Tasker, Thomas Sidney, Elihu, Henry Dobson, Leah, Lydia, and Susan Polk. Ample provision for the family was made in the clergyman's will, which also specified that the money usually spent on spirituous liquors for funerals should instead be paid out of his estate to charity. Three of the sons were educated at Princeton and became professional men while the fourth was a successful planter. The children married advantageously and there are many descendants of the minister living today. Eventually, Reese's widow married a General Anderson of Pendleton. No portrait of the clergyman is known to exist.

Reese's publications include two sermons, "Death: The Christian's Gain" and "The Character of Haman," which appeared in David Austin (ed.), *The American Preacher* (4 vols., 1791–93); *Influence of Religion on Civil Society* (1788), also

published serially in *The American Museum or Universal Magazine* 7 (January–June 1790), 8 (July–December 1790), and 9 (January–June 1791); and *Steadfastness in Religion Recommended and Enforced: A Sermon* (1793).

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William Buell Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, vol. 3 (1858). <https://archive.org/details/annalsamericanp23spragoog> [13] (accessed August 7, 2014).

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Additional Resources:

McGeachy, Neill Roderick. *A history of the Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church, Mecklenburg Presbytery, Charlotte, North Carolina*. Rock Hill, S.C.: Printed by Record Print Co. 1954. <https://archive.org/details/historyofsugawcr00mcge> [14] (accessed August 7, 2014).

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