

John Fletcher Hurst



John Fletcher Hurst (1834-1903) was the third [president](#) (1873-1880) of Drew Theological Seminary, later Drew University.

Hurst occupied the chair of Historical Theology in Drew from 1871 until his elevation to the episcopacy in 1880. His genius as an executive under challenging conditions must not be allowed to obscure his unusual gifts as a teacher. A bookish youth, he had gone from Dickinson College to Hedding Literary Institute, Ashland, N.Y. to teach belles lettres; where John Burroughs was a pupil and Catherine LaMonte, whom he married afterward, was a faculty mate.

Advised by Dr. McClintock, he spent two years in German universities and European travel, preparing himself for a professorship. He had been a pastor seven years in Newark Conference, when in 1866 he was called back to Germany as theological tutor in the Methodist Mission Institute in Bremen, (later Frankfurt). His *History of Rationalism*, published in New York and London, had already marked him as a scholar of exceptional promise. His accurate learning, his strong faith and his ardent sympathy with his students gave him a powerful influence over the young Swiss and German preachers in the school. He was ready for Drew, and Drew for him.

President [McClintock](#), founder and mighty man of letters died in 1870. His confidential friend and colleague, Dr. Nadal, acting president, summoned the young American from Germany to join the shaken teaching corps. Dr. Nadal died within a few months, and his successor, [Randolph Sinks Foster](#), soon vacated the presidency for the episcopal bench (1872). The trustees turned to Prof. Hurst, one of the youngest on the faculty, not yet 40 years old, to take the leadership of the infant institution. He had already commended himself to the students by the richness of his erudition, the breadth of his culture, his devotion to the church, and his cordial sympathy with "the boys" and their many problems. They listened with attention to his illuminating lectures, and enjoyed even more keenly his excursions outside the subject, when he would discourse to them of his travels abroad and of the great personalities he had known in the German theological world.

A tireless walker, he was a familiar figure on all the quiet roads and byways of Morris County, and he loved nothing better than to fall in step with some like-minded student on these jaunts - an experience which a few survivors cherish to this day. In the classroom and out of it, he exalted learning and thorough scholarship, as a basic requirement of the Christian minister.

Five years of this congenial occupation had passed, when [Daniel Drew's](#) fortune was swept away in a Wall Street cyclone, and the school was left without endowment. The panicky trustees proposed to secure funds to pay salaries by mortgaging Drew Forest. But President Hurst interposed his veto. He wrote his wife: "Mine is to be the immortality, if any, of making good the money that Wall Street has swallowed up." The modest scholar was transformed into a master of finance. His plan of campaign won the support of key laymen; he was his own campaign director and traveled at large through the connection, addressing the several Annual Conferences, and drawing the picture in such appealing colors as to compel hearty cooperation. A few large gifts and many small ones within three years brought in \$311,000 of new endowment and more than replaced the \$250,000 lost by the [founder's](#) collapse.

Through it all, the indomitable president had carried on his classroom work almost uninterruptedly. His high educational ideals are reflected in the changes which were introduced in the curriculum of the seminary. The liberal arts courses, originally intended to meet the requirements of students who were inadequately prepared to take up the regular theological studies, were dropped and the theological curriculum expanded. Probably it was President Hurst's success in saving Drew, that advertised to the denomination that in him it possessed, not only a scholar of distinction, but a leader of rare wisdom and force, the kind of man "who brings things to pass," to use a Methodist phrase. He was "a coming man." His Conference showed its appreciation by electing him repeatedly to the General Conference at the head of its delegation. The General Conference of 1880 at Cincinnati elected him bishop on the first ballot. And so farewell to Drew!

But Drew men never lost interest in the little giant who was their second founder. They observed with pride his constructive work as Bishop resident, in Des Moines, Buffalo, and Washington; his founding of the Malaya Mission by appointing W.F. Oldham to Singapore; the stream of scholarly volumes broad and deep that came from his pen and from others which he directed and inspired; and finally his ambitious plan for a graduate school in Washington, D.C., an American University, which should fulfill a dream of George Washington's.

Drew men, too, read with surprise and delight the report of the sale of the "Hurst Collection," which brought under the hammer the extraordinary library which he had assembled, item by item, in the lifelong search which gave him his most exquisite pleasure, and yielded some \$60,000 to his estate. Manuscripts of Irving and Poe, incunabula, association books, works in the American Indian languages, autographed volumes from Washington's library, New England Primers, Benjamin Franklin imprints, etc., bear witness to his catholic taste and his prowess as "a Nimrod among book hunters" as he was called by Albert Osborn, Drwe '77, whose *John Fletcher Hurst - A Biography* is a painstaking record of a remarkable life in nothing more remarkable than in the nine years spent in Drew Forest.

As a youth John Hurst is described as below medium height, slender, flaxen-haired, with blue eyes which were notably large. His mouth was large and expressive. In middle life he wore a goatee which became sandy-white, like his rather thin hair, which someone has said, "looked as if he was in the habit of running his hands through it." His chief recreation, save book-hunting, was walking and mountain-climbing. With one or two boon-companions, who could talk as well as hike, he loved to take long pedestrian tours among the hills, in the Old World and in the New.

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Courtesy of the [Drew University Archives](#)