

250th Year Look Back

**THE NEW BRUNSWICK
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY'S
CONNECTION TO RUTGERS**

By John W. Coakley, ThD

[Editor's Note: The New Brunswick Theological Seminary is a unique and remarkable institution that, in its early years, rescued Rutgers from extinction. This article about the seminary and its close ties to Rutgers University is particularly timely since this year is the 250th anniversary of the founding of Rutgers University.]

John W. Coakley, ThD, spoke about "The Theological Institution of Queen's College: A Brief History of the New Brunswick Seminary" at the May 1, 2015 meeting of the RWJMS Retired Faculty Association. He is the L. Russell Feakes Memorial Professor of Church History, New Brunswick Theological Seminary and the author of the recently published book, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, an Illustrated History, 1784-2014. The article shown below is an abridged version of his presentation at the RWJMS RFA meeting.]

The New Brunswick Theological Seminary has been in existence since 1784 in close co-existence with the college and university that came to be called Rutgers. Within the last two years, the Seminary has come to the attention of (continued on the following page)

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the university in a new way. In a complicated land transaction that was finalized just three years ago, the seminary gave up a bit more than half of the land it had occupied since the middle of the 19th century in New Brunswick, and, as a consequence, all but one of the old seminary buildings, a total of ten buildings, have been razed. In much of the space that's been vacated, two large and impressive Rutgers buildings are going up. And near this new construction, the seminary has itself built a new building, smaller but impressive in its own way, on the remaining portion of its former tract of land.

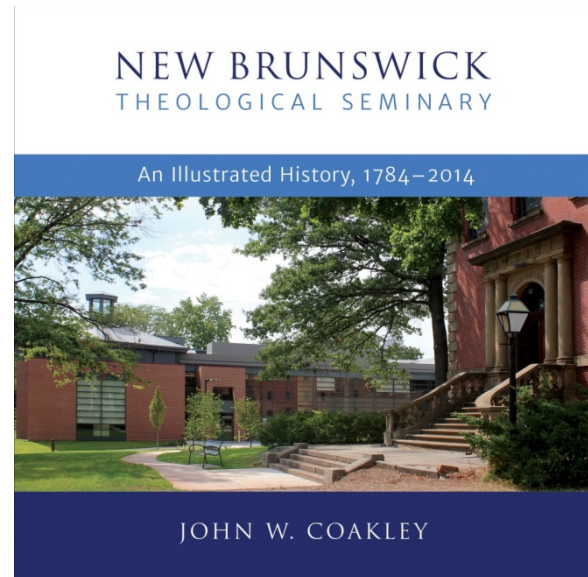
All of this is quite striking and, if you have been on the College Avenue campus recently, it will have been hard for you to miss it.

Here, by way of framing these recent developments, I will trace some of the history of the New Brunswick Seminary, in relation to the institution that was originally Queen's College and then became Rutgers College and eventually Rutgers University. In their formative years, we'll see, not only did the college and seminary occupy the same space; they also shared an institutional structure and, in broad terms, a mission. Now, by contrast, they could hardly be more separate in structure and mission. Yet the seminary remains a physical presence on College Avenue – and in this sense continues to be *in*, if no longer quite *of*, the university.

The Formation of the New Brunswick Seminary

The seminary came into being, some 231 years ago, to educate clergy for the religious denomination then known as the Reformed Dutch Church (and since 1867 as the Reformed Church in America).

The Reformed Dutch Church had established itself on American soil in the early seventeenth (continued on the following page)



This is the cover of the recently published book by Dr. Coakley showing the new building of the Seminary on the left and the Sage Library on the right.

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century, in the area first governed by the Dutch, and it slowly grew during the century and a half of the American colonial period. It was made up of Dutch-speaking people who settled in Manhattan, further north along the Hudson, on Long Island and in the valleys of the Hackensack, Passaic and Raritan rivers in New Jersey. During most of the colonial period, even after the British government had displaced the Dutch, the church remained subordinate to the mother church, which was the national church of the Netherlands, and (with occasional exceptions) its American ministers were required to receive their education and ordination in the old country.

This church's situation changed, in the years surrounding the American Revolution. It was in 1768 that, after long hesitation and struggle, the church in the Netherlands finally gave its blessing to the Dutch-Americans to create their own church governance, and to educate and ordain their own clergy. The new American embodiment of the Reformed Dutch Church that thus came into being adopted a constitution then in 1772, which included a provision that its General Synod would elect "professors" to educate students for the ministry, in accordance with the Dutch Church's Calvinist standards of belief (to which the American Dutch remained devoted). Then in 1784 – after a delay caused by the war – the Synod elected the first such professor, John Henry Livingston, a member of a prominent New York merchant family who had taken his doctorate in theology at the University of Utrecht.

The election of Livingston in 1784 created, in effect, a theological faculty. To be sure, it was a faculty that consisted then of only one person, but it was later to grow and become what we know as the New Brunswick Theological Seminary – which, if we date it from the election of Livingston, stands as the oldest seminary in America.

At first, however there was no *school* in the usual sense of the word. Livingston taught his students in his own home in New York City, where he continued to serve as a minister in the Collegiate Reformed Church (the same church that, in the twentieth century, would be the church of, for instance, Norman Vincent Peale, and is still a thriving church today.)

The Reformed Dutch Church did intend to create a school - to set it up "around" the professor, so to speak - but for a long while nobody could quite decide *where* the school was going to be. There were many possibilities. New Brunswick was always considered one of these – for Queen's College had been founded in 1766 by ministers and elders of the Reformed Dutch Church, and the framers of its earliest extant charter (1771) had specifically envisioned it as, in part anyway, a place where "young men of suitable abilities may be instructed in divinity, preparing them for the ministry," presumably especially in the Reformed Dutch Church. But in the early years there was no money to establish the theological school at Queen's; and perhaps more importantly, the Reformed Dutch Church itself was ambivalent about New Brunswick as the right place for it. For though there were several Reformed Church ministers and elders in this area who were keen on having the seminary here, New Brunswick was at the extreme southern limit of the Dutch culture area for that era – an area that extended north to Albany and east to the tip of Long Island – and other towns, such as Hackensack and New York City itself (though the predominantly rural Dutch-Americans held it suspect for its temptations), were much more centrally located. Furthermore, Albany and Schenectady, though far to the north, pressed their own claim as thriving towns where the Reformed Dutch churches were strong. And so for more than two decades, amid continuing debate over the merit of this town or that, the matter of location remained unresolved and Livingston remained in New York City.

The "Theological Institution" and the Restoration of Rutgers

What finally brought the seminary to New Brunswick, however, was a matter not so much of merit as of need. For Queen's College had a rocky time in its early years and was, as you may know, actually out of commission from 1794 until 1807; there were simply not the resources to maintain an academic program. But its trustees continued to meet and in 1807 they made a bargain with the General Synod of the Reformed Dutch Church whereby the Synod endorsed the trustees' intention to "revive" the college and the trustees agreed to assist in raising funds for the theological "professorate," on the understanding that the professor would now relocate to Queen's, in an effort to (continued on the following page)

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“combine” the college’s “literary interests with a decided support to evangelical truth.” It was understood that the professor himself would be “nominated and chosen by the General Synod” (which meant the first incumbent would be Livingston, who still held the office), and that the “theological institution” thus created would have its own board of “superintendents,” accountable to the Synod, rather than to the trustees themselves. This agreement came to be known as the “Covenant,” and though in details it was repeatedly revised, it remained in effect for sixty years. By its terms, the trustees renounced control of the “Theological Institution in Queen’s College,” as the covenant termed it, as a price for bringing it to New Brunswick. But the trustees achieved their aim: money was raised, Livingston arrived in New Brunswick in 1810 and took up his duties as both professor of theology (on the basis of the funds raised for that purpose) and president of Queen’s College (by separate arrangement, at the expense of the trustees), and the college, now including the “theological Institution,” reopened permanently. And though its two parts – the “theological” part and the “literary,” i.e., undergraduate, part – had different structures of accountability, Queen’s was indeed formally a single institution.

The fundraising that the new covenant encouraged also made possible the construction of a building, the one we identify today as “Old Queen’s,” which was designed by a New York architect named John McComb Jr., (who also designed New York City Hall), and opened its doors in 1811. It was shared by the seminary and the college until 1856. The middle section of the building contained the library and classrooms, not only for the college, but also for the seminary and the preparatory school (today known as Rutgers Prep), and professors and their families lived in the wings of the building.

The Course of the “Covenant”

The seminary, as part of Queen’s, thrived in its first few years. Comprising only one professor (i.e., Livingston) in 1810, it added two more by 1825 and had a student body of eighteen. (The seminary’s average annual enrollment through the nineteenth century was approximately thirty.)

But during those same years, the undergraduate part of the college languished again. In 1816, it once more ceased operation, and did not resume until 1825. (At the Seminary we like to remember that this was a moment when we, as the college’s “theological institution,” had the role of keeping Rutgers alive!) Then when the “literary institution,” that is, the undergraduate school, reopened in 1825, it did so, once again, on the basis of the covenant with the General Synod, and thus on the basis of its connection with the seminary. Now the covenant was revised, and this time, it did more than simply enable the trustees to keep the college open. For now the Synod committed the faculty of the seminary to provide most of the humanities instruction in the college as a regular part of their duties, and furthermore stipulated that one of them (Philip Milledoler, the professor of “didactic and polemic theology,”) would serve additionally as president – all at the expense of the church, in order to allow the college to, as it were, get its feet on the ground. The year 1825 (in which, incidentally, the college was, at Milledoler’s suggestion, renamed for Henry Rutgers in hope of the latter’s benevolence) really does mark the rejuvenation of Queen’s college and the decisive firming of the foundation on which its eventual phenomenal growth would be based.

Meanwhile, the Reformed Church and the college remained in the Covenant, until 1867. The covenant then had its ups and downs. Shortly after the revision of 1825, voices in the Reformed Church General Synod began to grumble at how much time their professors had to spend teaching undergraduates, giving inadequate attention to the seminary students in consequence; and at least one member of the seminary faculty, Alexander McClelland, was on record as declining to take up his duties in the college. Eventually these complaints became so insistent, and in the meantime the college itself strengthened so considerably in its own right, that in 1839 and then in 1840 the covenant was renegotiated: the seminary faculty would no longer have to produce the college’s president (the first Rutgers president from outside the theological faculty being Abraham Hasbrouck, a layman from Kingston, New York, chosen in 1840), the theological professors’ duties in the college were (continued on the following page)

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considerably reduced (though not eliminated), and the Synod stated its confidence that the college was competent to deal with its own affairs. And indeed from around that moment, to the historian looking back, the college begins to appear as the stronger institution of the two. From that point, at any rate, the college and seminary led increasingly separate institutional lives. Eventually, in 1867, the covenant was officially closed. This was during the Rutgers Presidency of William H. Campbell (who himself had first come to New Brunswick as a professor at the seminary), when Rutgers, having been named the land-grant college of New Jersey and thus the recipient of Federal funds under the Morrill Act, was beginning its trek toward becoming a state university.

A Campus for the Seminary

The seminary continued to share quarters with the college in “Old Queen’s” until the mid-1850s. But then the school began to acquire its own space. It was William Campbell, so the story goes, who met his theological students in his classroom in Old Queen’s one day in 1854 and said to them that they shouldn’t have to stand sharing the space with the college. They should “have a meeting.” They should “make protests.” They should “get the Synod or the Collegiate Church in New York or somebody to build them a theological hall for the sole use of the Seminary.”

The students duly brought the matter up with the seminary’s superintendents. The time was ripe; the Reformed Dutch Church had a certain kind of upper middle class élan in those years and part of the appeal of having its own building was not just the practical question of space and where students would learn and where faculty would live and so forth, but also the idea that its seminary should be a distinguished institution that could hold its head high among the theological schools of the land - and it was indeed to stand for a few decades as a first-rank theological school. At any rate, the land was purchased very quickly and it was, in large part, the land that the seminary has held until recently - that is, the tract between what is now Seminary Place and what is now Bishop Place on the south and north and College Avenue and George Street on the west and east. This was

an area that in the 1850s was not in the middle of Rutgers at all but was at the edge of the city.

The first building of the new seminary campus, Hertzog Hall, was dedicated in 1856, and by 1885 it stood in the middle of an impressive row of structures that faced the college buildings across what is now the Neilson campus of Rutgers but was then mostly still empty ground. All of those nineteenth-century seminary buildings have now been razed, except for one, Gardner L. Sage Library (1875), the remarkable work of the eclectic German-American architect Dietlef Linau, which stands adjacent to the seminary’s new and yet unnamed structure at the west end of Seminary Place.



Interior of the Gardner A. Sage Library of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary
Photo Credit: Saed Hindash for *The Star-Ledger*

The seminary then remained on its nineteenth-century campus - though to be sure some buildings were replaced, and some added, over time - for over a century and a half, until 2014.

The details of its internal history during that long period are beyond the scope of this brief article. (Its place in the *theological* landscape of twentieth century Protestantism - often perceived in Reformed Church circles as a “liberal” place - may be of interest to some readers, whom I invite to have a look at my *Illustrated History*.) But suffice it to say that though its relationship to the Reformed Church in America has undergone changes in recent years - the institutional tie between the two becoming somewhat looser - and though the student body has broadened to become very diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and (continued on the following page)

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denominational affiliation - the seminary still pursues, in the midst of the Rutgers campus, its mission to prepare students for Christian ministry.

The Seminary and the University In the Post-Covenant Era

With the demise of the covenant in 1867, the college and the seminary became fully separate institutions. Yet many interconnections remained.

Well into the twentieth century, for instance, Rutgers continued to be the college of choice for Reformed Church students from New York and New Jersey destined for the ministry, who then stayed on to do their graduate work at the seminary. Rutgers students themselves, moreover, were always among the residents in Hertzog Hall, and - indeed to the present moment - many a Rutgers undergraduate has spent time studying in Sage Library.

There have also been, well past the era of the covenant, notable figures who have had strong ties to both institutions at once. One of these was Rutgers' first professor of art history, John C. Van Dyke (1861-1931), who doubled for several decades as the beloved librarian of the seminary, and breadth of whose scholarly interests is still discernible in the Sage Library collection. But without doubt the most prominent of these figures was W.H.S. Demarest (1853-1956), who in certain sense incarnated the very spirit of both schools in the early twentieth century. A graduate of the college (1883) and the seminary (1888), he had grown up on the seminary campus as the son of a seminary faculty member, David D. Demarest (who was himself a graduate of both institutions). In 1901 after serving as a Reformed Church minister in Hudson Valley towns for thirteen years in a couple of towns up the Hudson Valley, W.H.S. Demarest became professor of Church History at the seminary. But after five years of service, he resigned in 1906 upon being chosen as president of the college, in which position he remained until 1924, presiding over a period of significant growth for Rutgers that saw the founding of Douglass College and considerable expansion of the College Avenue campus. And then, on retirement from Rutgers, he returned to the seminary again, serving as *its* president until

1934! Indeed In his years as Rutgers president, he walked down the street to the seminary to serve on the seminary's Board of Superintendents; and throughout his long life, well after his years in office, he remained active in the affairs of Rutgers as well.

Many informal connections still persist between the seminary and the college and the University. But these are significantly fewer, and less substantial, than in Demarest's day. Institutionally the two schools remain rigorously separate. And here it is important to point out the uniqueness of Rutgers' relationship to its own religious past. For there are many presently non-sectarian American universities that had religious connections in their formative years and have not lost their ties to the theological institutions that were part of their earlier history: Harvard, Yale, and Chicago come to mind in particular, in which the theological faculties have evolved within their universities as "divinity schools," fully a part of the larger life of those universities but also still engaged in preparing religious leaders and, in varying ways, preserving a sense of themselves as communities of faith. I personally wish this could have been the case as well with Rutgers and its ancient "theological institution," and as a faculty member at the seminary, being surrounded by the many resources of the University, I am acutely aware of the opportunities being missed, indeed perhaps on both sides. But of course the fundamental reason why the Seminary has not evolved as the "Rutgers Divinity School" is that whereas those other universities are *private* universities, Rutgers has become a *public* one, a *state* university that is. (In fact, as the university's then chief counsel told me a few years ago, Rutgers and the seminary are the *only* two American institutions in this situation - i.e., Rutgers is the only state university that originated as a religious institution and is still accompanied by a theological school to which it was once connected.) And thus for all the good will that has existed, and continues to exist, between persons in our respective institutions, the principle of separation between church and state (a principle which, let it be clear, I affirm) keeps us institutionally separate, with, in that sense, the figurative distance between us not decreasing but perhaps even increasing over time.

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And so the figurative distance between the university and the seminary - the institutional separateness - remains. And yet the *literal* distance - the geographical separation - remains slight; the seminary is still surrounded by the university. And in some sense, all the way back to its medieval origins, the concept of the "university" has always been in part geographical, denoting the sometimes complex community of teachers and students in a given place. And in that sense, institutionally separate though it remains, the seminary will continue to have a place in the life of the university, as it is lived from day to day. Relationships continue, to which your kind invitation to me to be with you today bears witness. Let us hope that, based in those relationships a sense of community that transcends the institutional boundaries may still thrive. ■