

Rev. Dr. Robert Lowry
Professor, Minister and Composer
By Dan McDavitt

Robert Lowry was born March 12, 1826 in Philadelphia, PA. He died November 23, 1899 in Plainfield, NJ. The obituary in the *Lewisburg Journal* on Friday, December 1, 1899 was titled “Dr. Lowry Dead” with a eulogy signed by “H:” Lowry was a student at the University of Lewisburg (1848-54) and he “had already made a reputation as a preacher, and in a less wide way as a composer of church music.” As time passed his fame as preacher was outstripped by his music, and his “reputation circled the globe.”

The University was new (chartered in 1846) and classes, at first, were held in the basement of the old Baptist church (now gone) on S. 3rd Street.

While a student, Robert organized the church choir, taught music to other students, led a Bible class, and composed a farewell song for the first graduating class. Lowry was instrumental in the planting of a church in McEwensville, and preached every Sunday for two years, alternating between McEwensville and White Deer Valley.

Upon being ordained a Baptist minister, Lowry served as pastor at West Chester, PA (1854-1858), Bloomingdale Church, NY (1859-1861), and Hanson Place, Brooklyn, NY (1861-1868) where he wrote *Shall We Gather at the River?* (1864). His hymn (albeit revised) “*How Can I Keep From Singing*” (1869) has been recorded by artists from Pete Seeger to Bruce Springsteen.

With no formal music composition training, it had been Lowry’s practice to sit at his home organ, write hymns and compose music on Sunday evenings. As editor, Lowry produced and edited many hymn collections, including *Gospel Melodies* (1868), *Bright Jewels* (1869) and *Pure Gold* (1871). He composed the music to hymns written by others; working often with hymnist Fanny Crosby.

Early in 1869 Dr. Loomis, President of the University at Lewisburg (Bucknell), contacted Robert and soon the Lowrys moved to Lewisburg and settled in at 110 University Avenue. Lowry served as Professor of Rhetoric at the University and as Pastor of the new Baptist church.

The chapel of the new church was dedicated in February 1869, the entire church in June 1870. The financial report indicated the new construction had a debt of \$20,000. The *Centennial History of Bucknell University* indicates the “Rev. Dr. Robert Lowry, then Professor of Literature in the University (and beyond doubt one of the world’s great orators as well as being its leading hymn writer) ...”in his sweetly persuasive way.....asked the congregation to subscribe, then and there, half of the remaining \$20,000.” The congregation was “small and not too prosperous,” but “so moving were Dr. Lowry’s remarks that before the meeting was closed the entire \$10,000 he asked for was subscribed.”

R. J. Morgan recounts in his Special Edition of *Then Sings My Soul*, the story of the hymn *Christ Arose!* One evening during the Easter Season of 1874, Dr. Lowry “was engaged in his devotions.” He was reflecting upon Luke 24:6-8 and “going to the little pump organ in his home, Lowry soon completed what was to become one of our greatest resurrection hymns.”

Dr. Lowry left Union County in 1875 and moved to a new pastorate in Plainfield, New Jersey. *The Rise of Bucknell University* notes that Dr. Lowry was “elected Chancellor of the University upon relinquishing his professorship.” Dr. Lowry served as President of Phi Kappa Psi from 1888 to 1890. In 1894 he wrote the *Jubilee Hymn* for the 50th anniversary of the Lewisburg Baptist church. He was one of the first inductees to Bucknell’s Academy of Artistic Achievement Awards.

H, in his eulogy, summarized: Dr. Lowry’s “melodies and song’s were but the expression of the man’s heart and his character, and they attracted all men to him.”



Robert Lowry 1826 – 1899. Baptist minister, and Bucknell alumni and professor, best known as a composer of gospel hymns.



Rev. Dr. Lowry and his family lived in this house on University Ave., Lewisburg, when he taught at the University.



The new Baptist Church in Lewisburg, Rev. Dr. Lowry, pastor, c. 1869-75.