

The Remarkable Life and Legacy of Colonel James Skinner (Sikandar Sahib): An Anglo-Indian Soldier in Northern India

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Abstract

This paper explores the life and accomplishments of Colonel James Skinner, a notable figure in northern India during the early nineteenth century. Born into an Anglo-Indian community, Skinner's unique heritage and experiences shaped his journey as a military commander, Patron of the arts, and influential figure in British colonial India.

The paper delves into Skinner's early life, where his mixed parentage and upbringing fueled his desire for military glory and a strong sense of honour. Despite facing challenges due to his Indian heritage, Skinner found his calling as a soldier of fortune, serving under prominent Maratha princes and participating in significant campaigns against figures like George Thomas. The complexities of the Anglo-Indian officers serving in the Maratha army are explored as conflicts between Indian powers and the British East India Company arose. Skinner's loyalty to his princely employer and his mixed ancestry led to his suspension, but he later aligned with the British Army under Lord Lake's command.

Skinner's Horse, the renowned cavalry regiment he raised, gained fame for their expertise with horses and weapons. Skinner's exceptional leadership and care for his men created a formidable fighting unit and earned him recognition and respect in northern India. His achievements and patronage of the arts, including Persian manuscripts and commissioned paintings, demonstrate his deep connection to Indian culture. Despite his contributions and military prowess, Skinner faced limitations due to his mixed race, which prevented him from receiving the highest honors for his achievements. Nevertheless, he left a lasting legacy, with several areas named after him and his children, such as Sikandarpura, Alakhpura, and Enipura.

Keywords: James Skinner, Sikandar Sahib, Anglo-Indian soldier, East India Company's Army, Skinner's Horse, St. James Church, Dhana Colonel Skinner's Farm, Yellow Boys, Cultural bridge, Durbar, Persian manuscripts, Patron of the arts, Maratha army, Sikandarpura, British Indian Army, Multicultural lifestyle, Artistic patronage, Ghulam Ali Khan, Military glory.

The Anglo-Indian soldier James Skinner (1778-1841) was a notable figure in northern India in the early nineteenth century. He belonged to an Anglo-Indian community.¹ James Skinner was born in India in 1778, the son of an Indian (Rajput) mother and a British father, Hercules Skinner, who served as a captain in the East India Company's Army and the regiment had been stationed in Bengal, first at Barrackpur and then at Calcutta.² His mother committed suicide when James Skinner was twelve years old. She was a Rajput lady and felt a deep dishonour that her Scottish husband should send their daughters

away to school, and James never forgot the motive and manner of her death, which, for him, embodied the Rajput's high ideals.³ The violent argument that took place between James Skinner's parents had a profound impact on his life. His mother's stories of Rajput heroes gave him the desire for military glory and a strong sense of honour, but his father's common sense apprenticed him to a printer despite his mother's efforts to instil in him a desire for military glory. He ran away from his printing job,⁴ but the British would not commission him because his mother was Indian. His mixed ancestry prevented him from finding work with the East India Company in his younger years, despite the fact that he wanted to follow in his father's profession and become an officer in the company.⁵ Because at the end of the eighteenth century, the East Company had started leaving the Anglo-Indians from the company's services. At seventeen, he joined Northern India's most powerful Maharajah Army. The majority of the senior officers in that Army was British. He was given the rank of ensign.⁶ He embarked on a professional life as a soldier of fortune and quickly established a name for himself as a brave commander serving under the Maratha prince Maharaja Scindia (Daulat Rao Scindia) of Gwalior,⁷ where he served under French officers de Boigne and later his successor Perron, both senior officers in the Scindhia's Army.⁸ He participated in the Maratha campaign against the Irishman George Thomas, who controlled a large part of modern Haryana. In the final struggle against George Thomas, which took place at Hansi (today a part of district Hisar), Thomas gave consent to hand over the Hansi fort to the Marathas.⁹

Simultaneously, the British East India Company attempted to seize control of this area; consequently, the conflict between the Marathas and the company was inevitable. James was one of the few Anglo-Indian officers who served in the Maratha army, and their circumstances were particularly difficult. The great independent potentates of those years were constantly at war among themselves, and the young Skinner, given an ample chance to prove himself, rose quickly to Captain's rank. His accomplishments were widely recognised in the north, and when the Maharajah abruptly fired his non-Indian officers, the British Army commander moved swiftly to enlist Skinner's assistance. These Englishmen were forced to leave the Maratha army in 1803 as a result of their decision not to battle their own countrymen. When war broke out between Scindia and the British, he made up his mind to remain loyal to Scindia, but he got suspended because his father was a British citizen.¹⁰ They afterwards enlisted with Lord Lake's English Company army and engaged in a number of their fights.

Lord Lake, the British Commander-in-Chief, invited him to raise a regiment of irregular cavalry, an invitation which he refused twice, accepting only when Scindia was out of the war so that he would not have to draw his sword against his prince. Then he vowed to make Skinner's Horse the best corps in India, and one exploit followed another. Before joining the British Army, he raised an 'irregular cavalry' and founded the Skinner's Horse Regiment in 1803, which became known as Skinner's Horse."¹¹ Due to the colour of their uniforms, the cavalry regiment Skinner's Horse, popularly known as the Yellow Boys, made him famous.¹² They were renowned for their expertise with horses and with weapons. Later, it rose to prominence as one of the British Indian Army's most well-known cavalry regiments. Skinner and his Yellow Boys became famous. But when peace came, it was the old story. He was neither British nor Indian, and he had to start from the bottom for the third time. The first Anglo-Afghan war was fought by this regiment while it was a member of the company army (1839-1842).



Figure 1- Colonel James Skinner in *Tazkirat al-Umara*; Ghulam Ali Khan; c. 1840; Watercolour and body colour on paper; British Library. Source: - *The British Library MS Viewer* (bl.uk)

Superbly disciplined, trained, and famous for their passionate devotion to Skinner and his ideals, Skinner's Horse earned a formidable reputation for bravery and success. Skinner's care of his men—the intimate solicitude of a father for his sons welded them into the finest fighting unit in India. As the years passed, the regiment's size varied, but whatever its size, it accomplished miracles, and its battles against formidable odds make breathless reading.

From 1809 to 1814, James Skinner's troops of Indian cavalry, the core of the renowned Skinner's Horse, were under British command. In 1818, Skinner was amply compensated for his loyal services, enabling him to buy a townhouse in Delhi, a sizable jagir yielding Rs. 20,000 a year in Hansi (Haryana), and a few nearby villages.¹³ Skinner had constructed his home in Hansi.¹⁴ In addition to the well-known St. James Church and his adjoining Haveli in Delhi, he also built other buildings in and around Hansi.¹⁵

Colonel James Skinner led a life that was entirely unique to himself, which was particularly impressive considering how young he was. He is remembered as a daring soldier, a significant and welcoming presence in Delhi and Hansi, and as a kind of Anglo-Indian warrior prince, and his reputation is well deserved. He presided over the court, hosted enormous parties, commanded large armies, and entertained his dinner guests with music and dancing girls. Colonel James Skinner's extraordinary life is depicted in this personal artwork of him riding in an open carriage on his estate. Skinner's interest in memorials - using art as a record of events, people, and places - is evident in the portraits of the listed employees working on his estate. For example, he gave paintings of musicians and dancers to his dinner guests, who amused them. James also enjoyed painting.¹⁶ He lived his life as though were a king. Apart

from that, he was really interested in writing. He has written numerous works in Persian and lived as a Mughal. William Dalrymple called him a ‘White Mughal’.¹⁷

The writings of Colonel James Skinner in Persian were of a high calibre. Unbelievably, James Skinner left behind a sizable collection of Persian-language manuscripts, all of which were copies of texts that he had written in that language. The collection of the British Library contains a number of books published by him, including *Kitab-i-Tashrih al-aqvam* (1825), which is an account of the Indian castes and is accompanied with individual and descriptive portraits of the subjects and features 120 paintings.¹⁸ This book was written in the Persian language in the Nastaliq style. It has coloured miniatures of the finest quality, which depict practitioners of various professions and ranging from grave diggers and elephant drivers to rulers and holy men.¹⁹ He compiled *Tazkirat al-umara*, also known as “Biographies of the Nobles,” which was published in 1830 by Skinner. This book comprised the family biographies of princely families that resided in the Sikh and Rajput regions, in addition to thirty-nine portraits of those families’ contemporary representatives.²⁰ It appears that he commissioned them one at a time, one after the other, in order to give his chosen recipients a harmonious gift. These manuscripts are executed to a standard comparable to that of the finest manuscripts produced during this period, and they provide a portrait of Indian society that spans from beggars to maharajas, Sikhs to Rajputs. In addition, these manuscripts detail the history of the various communities that make up Indian society.²¹

Between 1825 and 1828, he gave Ghulam Ali Khan the commission to paint several different pictures, most notably three watercolours.²² The first depicts his cavalry regiment at Hansi in 1827-28,²³ while the second and third portray his recently erected St. James Church in Delhi in 1836. These paintings not only functioned as documentation but also as a means of demonstrating Skinner’s place in Delhi society as a noble landowner and an officer of a distinguished rank in the military.

Skinner may have stopped serving an Indian power, but he never lost his deep affection for the Mughal court and modelled his life after the norms of the local society in which he lived. He lived in princely style and preferred to be called by his Moghul title, Nasir-ud-Daula.²⁴ Even though he was raised in a Christian environment, most of his spouses and mistresses belonged to the Hindu and Muslim faiths. Not only did he build a church in Delhi, but he also established a mosque and a Hindu temple there.²⁵ Most of his children seem to have been brought up as Christians, but some converted to Islam.²⁶

He kept a keen interest in Indian culture and played a significant role as a patron of the arts, producing several artworks depicting his life and achievements. Because Skinner was so ingrained in his culture, he chose Persian to write his two volumes. He was thought to be more fluent in his mother tongue, than English.

Few subsequent generations of Indian warriors and politicians were fans of such a multicultural way of life. Even though the British elevated Skinner to colonel and made him a CB near the end of his life, Skinner was aware that his mixed race had prevented him from receiving the highest honours for his military superiority and leadership.

Col. James Skinner is depicted travelling in his carriage at his estate in Dhana in a painting by Indian artist Ghulam Ali Khan from the year 1828 that is on display at the National Army Museum of London. The painting was commissioned by James Skinner. Additionally, the fortification can be seen in the background.

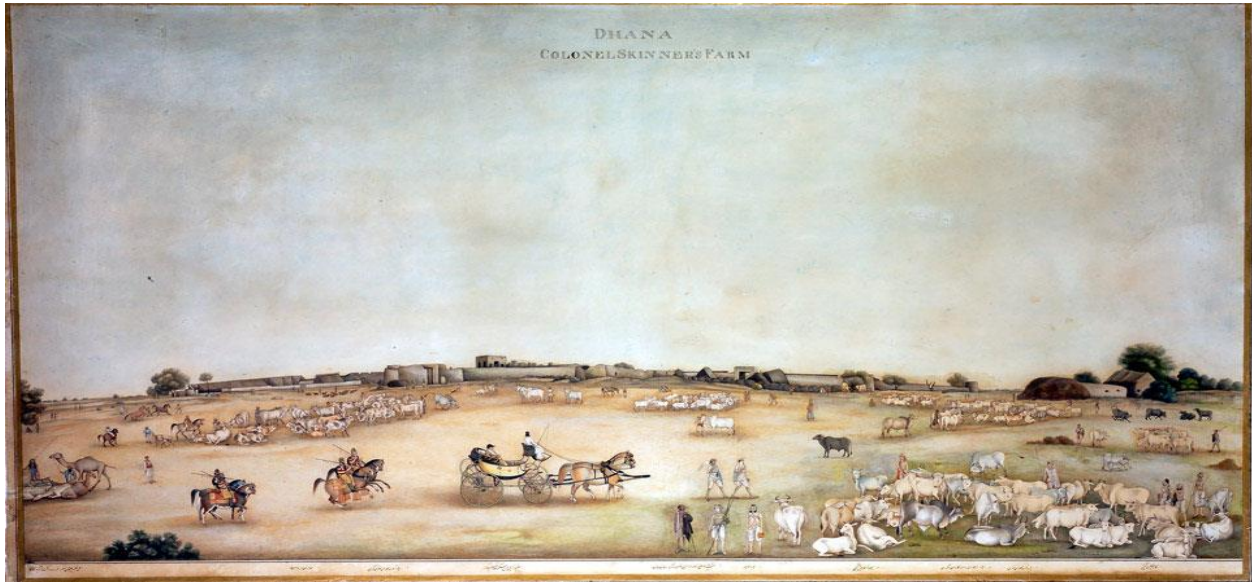


Figure 2- ‘Dhana Colonel Skinner’s Farm’, 1828²⁷

A few nearby areas were named after him and his children. For instance, Sikandarpura (after Skinner, who was formerly referred to by locals as Sikandar rather than Skinner)²⁸, Alakhpura (after his son Alex), and Enipura (after his daughter Annie).

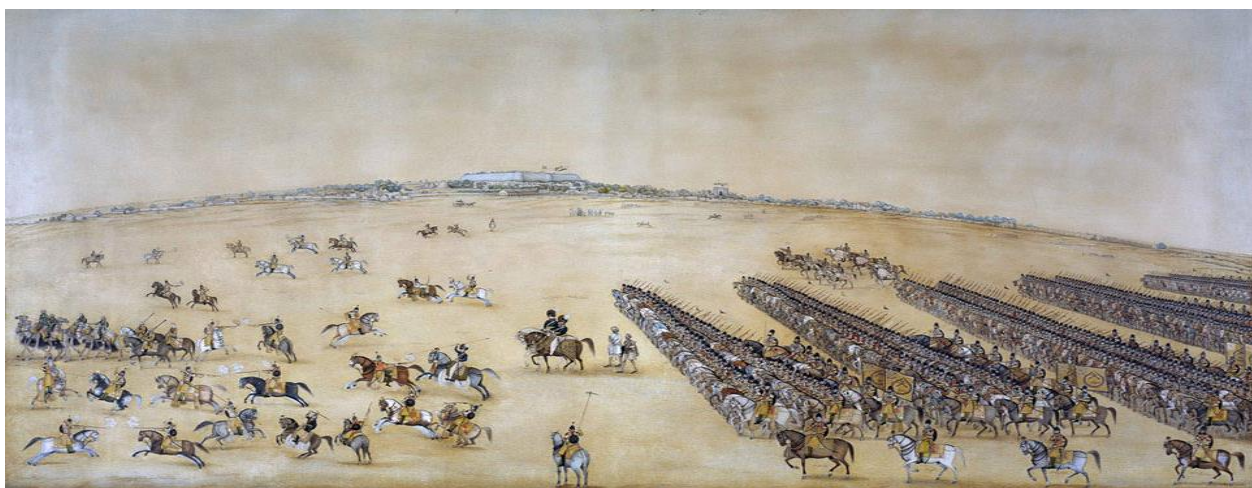


Figure 3- ‘The first Regiment of Skinner’s Horse returning from a General Review’, 1828²⁹

In the lower-left corner, it says, “The work of Ghulam Ali Khan, a painter who lived in the Caliphate of Shahjahanabad and finished this painting in the Christian year 1827.”

Skinner, who is seated in the middle to the left, is in charge of the durbar for his regiment. A durbar is a conference in which any soldier can talk to his commanding officer about anything that is bothering him. Skinner is in charge of this gathering. Skinner was purposefully recreating military and ceremonial customs from Afghanistan and the Mughal Empire when he conducted a durbar and encouraged open

communication with his soldiers and men. His men had a sense of “upward mobility” as a result of this in the service of the company.

In this scene, Skinner and his officers meet a new recruit for the first time. The silladar system³⁰ was used by irregular cavalry units, so new recruits had to provide their own horse and equipment. In this instance, both the horse and the recruit are measured.³¹ James Skinner and William Linnaeus Gardner are credited with being the primary architects of the silladar system of cavalry in British India.³²

The fact that nearly all of the figures in the painting are labelled with their name, rank, and function using gold inscriptions is one of the details that contribute to the painting’s remarkable quality. As a result of this, it is easy to recognise Duffadar Ganga Sankar, the sole Hindu soldier who was present, as the first seated guy on the right-hand side. Sankar held the rank of cavalry sergeant during his time in the Army. A beaded necklace is draped around his neck, and a tilak, which is a holy mark, is painted in the exact middle of his forehead.



Figure 4- Colonel James Skinner was holding a Regimental Durbar 1827.³³

Skinner was the person who commissioned St. James’ Church, also called Skinner’s Church.³⁴ He made a vow while lying wounded on the battlefield that if he survived, he would construct a church as a mark of gratitude for his life’s being protected. The church’s construction began in 1826 and was finished ten years later in 1836.³⁵ It was constructed at his own expenditure of Rs 95,000. It was the oldest church in Delhi.³⁶ The grave of Skinner’s close friend William Fraser (1784–1835) can be seen in the foreground.³⁷ Fraser served as the company’s administrator and a major in Skinner’s regiment. He was a painter as well as a collector of Company artwork.³⁸ After Fraser’s murder on 22nd March 1835,³⁹ Skinner arranged for the transfer of his friend’s remains to the new church.



Figure 5- 'Exterior view of St James's Church, Delhi', 1836.⁴⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, James Skinner was a notable figure in northern India in the early nineteenth century. He was born in India to an Anglo-Indian family, with a British father and an Indian Rajput mother. Despite his mixed ancestry, Skinner desired military glory and pursued a career as a soldier. His mother's suicide deeply impacted him, instilling in him a sense of honor and a desire for military success.

Skinner faced challenges due to his mixed heritage, which prevented him from finding work with the East India Company initially. However, he joined the Maharajah Army in Northern India and quickly rose through the ranks, serving under Maratha prince Maharaja Scindia. Skinner participated in campaigns against George Thomas, an Irishman who controlled parts of modern-day Haryana. He gained recognition for his bravery and military prowess. When the conflict between the Marathas and the British East India Company became inevitable, Skinner chose to remain loyal to Scindia. However, due to his father's British citizenship, he was suspended. Eventually, Skinner joined Lord Lake's English Company army and established Skinner's Horse, a renowned cavalry regiment known for its expertise with horses and weapons.

Skinner's military achievements and his care for his men earned him a formidable reputation. He was compensated for his loyal services, allowing him to acquire property and build a townhouse in Delhi and a farm in Hansi. Skinner lived a lavish lifestyle, presiding over the court, hosting grand parties, and entertaining guests with music and dance. Beyond his military career, Skinner had a deep interest in Indian culture and the arts. He wrote numerous works in Persian, leaving behind a collection of Persian-language manuscripts. He commissioned artworks, including portraits and paintings of his cavalry regiment, his church, and his estate. Skinner embraced the Mughal court's customs and preferred to be called by his Moghul title.

Despite his accomplishments, Skinner was aware that his mixed race hindered him from receiving the highest military honors. He passed away in 1841⁴¹ and was initially buried in Hansi before being

reburied in Skinner's Church, where many of his family members also rest.⁴² Skinner's legacy continues through the active regiments, 1st and 3rd Skinner's Horse, in the Indian Army.

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27. Source: <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1956-02-27-1>
28. Pourhadi, Ibrahim V., *Op. cit.*, p. 190.
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30. Silladar was the name given to the native horseman who contracted to enter his regiment supplying his horse accoutrements stabling attendants, forage, camp equipment, clothing and weapon. Later, ammunitions and weapons were received a higher rate of pay than the regular cavalryman who was totally fed and equipped at Government expense.
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