

John Witherspoon: Preacher and Patriot

by Raymond Frey

Of all of the important founding fathers, perhaps the least remembered is John Witherspoon. It is puzzling why this should be the case. During the Revolutionary period, Witherspoon was President of Princeton University, an outspoken leader of the Somerset County, New Jersey Committee of Correspondence, signer of both the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, and a member of the Continental Congress.

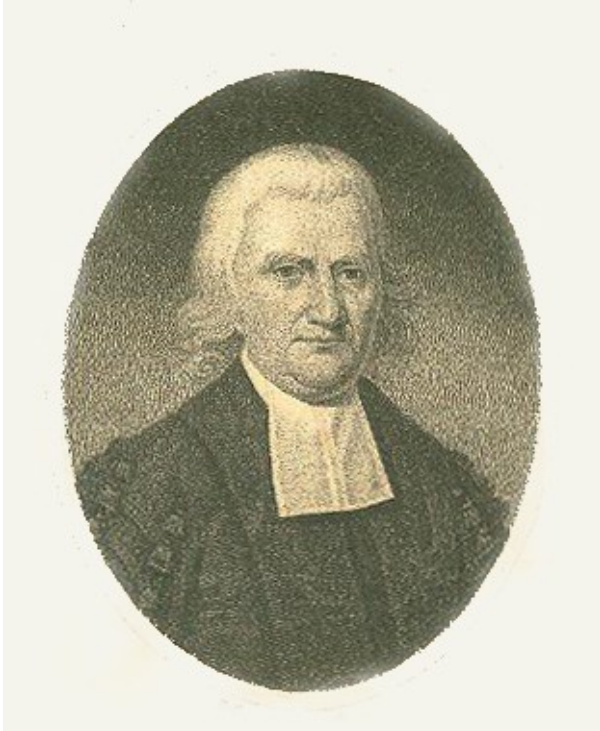
In a standard text, *Forgotten Leaders of the Revolution*, published in 1955, Witherspoon is not mentioned, even though he was highly regarded by his contemporaries. A few years after his death in 1794, Witherspoon was eulogized by Benjamin Rush, a fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence and founder of Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, as “a man of great and luminous mind.” Rush predicted that “his work will probably preserve his name to the end of time.” And yet in historian Jeffrey Morrison’s excellent biography of Witherspoon, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (2005), the first chapter is titled “Forgotten Founder.”

John Witherspoon was born on February 5, 1722 in Yester, East Lothian, Scotland. His father was minister of the local church and was said to be a well-educated man. He loved to read French Calvinistic sermons, filled with their passionate and strong religious convictions, translate them into English, and deliver them from his pulpit. Witherspoon’s mother, Anne Walker Witherspoon, was described as “a woman of more than ordinary force of character, well-educated and deeply spiritual in her nature.” It is clear that Witherspoon’s love of liberty, devotion to duty, and lofty conceptions of personal conduct were due to the influence of his mother (Woods, 1906). When he was four years old, his mother would read to him from the Bible (Stohlman, 1976). As a young man, Witherspoon attended a first-rate private preparatory school in

Haddington, Scotland, where he studied English, the classics, mathematics, Latin, Greek, and French. It is not clear that at this point if he was intent on becoming a minister like his father.

University of Edinburgh

At the age of 14, Witherspoon enrolled at the University of Edinburgh, quickly becoming an outstanding student. Graduating with a master’s degree in 1739 at the age of 16, he stayed at Edinburgh for four more years. Apparently during this time he finally decided on a career in the clergy. He could have studied for three years and then become licensed to preach, but being only 19 years old, he may have been advised that he was too young to lead a church. After four years of study at Edinburgh, Witherspoon entered divinity school in 1743. He spent the next two years as a “licensed practitioner,” as apprentice preachers were called. When he completed his apprenticeship, Witherspoon was installed as minister of the parish church of Beith, Scotland (Collins, 1925).



Reverend Witherspoon worked hard as a minister. Every Sunday, he gave a lecture on a passage from the Bible, followed by two sermons, each an hour or more in length. He would spend hours in study and preparation. Townspeople noted the candles burning in his study long into the night. In those days, a minister was responsible for all of the religious instruction of his congregation. Witherspoon also traveled many miles on foot or horseback to attend to the spiritual needs of his parishioners. During this time, Witherspoon married Elizabeth Montgomery. She bore him ten children, of which only five would survive to adulthood (Tait, 2001).

As Witherspoon became active in church government, his reputation as a theologian and intellectual began to rise. It was said "his writings and sermons betray strength and sincerity of conviction" and were "profound, timely, and well-argued." He also wrote lively and humorous essays on the religious issues of the day. One essay in particular, a satire about the Scottish clergy, was widely read in America. In 1764, Witherspoon collected his sermons into a

two-volume work that was published in London. That year, the University of Aberdeen granted him the degree of Doctor of Divinity (Woods, 1906).

On July 17, 1766, the Reverend Samuel Finley, fifth president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) died in Philadelphia. In November of that year, a special meeting was called by the college trustees to select their sixth president. From its founding and well into the twentieth century, Princeton's president had to be a Presbyterian clergyman. They also had to be a person of "physical and moral robustness" and "that he be of unquestioned piety, preferably of reputation as an author, and possessed of as broad culture and wide scholarship as the age produced." Among the Presbyterians of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, there did not seem to be such a person available (Collins, 1925).

Although it was not known whether Witherspoon was even interested in the job, the trustees went ahead and offered him a salary of £200, use of the president's house, a garden, land for pasture, and firewood. They then commissioned Richard Stockton, a wealthy New Jersey lawyer and Princeton graduate who was in London at the time, to visit Witherspoon in Scotland. Stockton was to explain to him that by accepting the position, "he could be of untold service to religion and learning in America" (Stohlman, 1976). Witherspoon was willing to accept, but his wife was not. Perhaps weary after bearing ten children and losing five, she did not want to relocate across the Atlantic. John Witherspoon wrote to the trustees, declining the presidency (Thorpe, 1946).

But the trustees would not give up. Benjamin Rush asked Witherspoon to reconsider. "Your talents have been in some measure buried," he wrote, "but at Princeton they will be called into action, and the evening of your life will be much more effulgent than your brightest meridian days have been" (Kimball, 2006). Richard Stockton also implored John and

Elizabeth to change their minds. “The Trustees will meet and immediately reelect you,” Stockton wrote, “and there is not the least doubt it will be unanimous.” To attempt to win over Elizabeth, Stockton told John: “You’ll please tell Mrs. Witherspoon if she comes to Princeton both Mrs. Stockton and I will take great pleasure in endeavoring to make the place agreeable to her, and I doubt not that she will soon like America full well as she does Scotland.” Comforted by these words, Elizabeth soon changed her mind (Butterfield, 2003).

Arrival In Philadelphia

The Witherspools arrived in Philadelphia in August 1768. A few days later, Princeton’s new president crossed the Delaware River to New Jersey, where a huge welcome awaited him. The entire student body met Witherspoon a mile out of town and escorted him to campus. They were not only welcoming a new leader for Princeton; many felt Witherspoon would soon become the new leader of the Presbyterian Church in America.

John Witherspoon soon established himself as an outstanding university president. He improved the curriculum, introduced the study of Hebrew and French, as well as civil government, politics, and international law. He raised huge sums of money for the school, which had been nearly bankrupt when he arrived. He traveled throughout New England and the South to solicit donations. The trustees were overjoyed. Under Witherspoon’s leadership, Princeton became the center of the debate over religious freedom in America. In one sense, the American Revolution was a religious revolution as well. Presbyterian Calvinism of the type that Witherspoon preached was completely at odds with Anglicanism. Had the revolution not taken place, it was quite certain that King George would have established a wing of the Church of England as the official church in

America, complete with bishops and widespread persecution of all other denominations. Indeed, when war came, the king called it “The Presbyterian Rebellion.” Being a Presbyterian institution, Princeton and its new president were seen as a catalyst for the conflict to come.

Clouds of War

After the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, the clouds of war gathered quickly. In New Jersey, “Committees of Correspondence” which were actually revolutionary organizations, formed to discuss the overthrow of the royal government. John Witherspoon played a leading role in organizing a revolutionary government in New Jersey. Their first objective was removal of William Franklin, the royal governor. The Somerset County Committee of Correspondence met at Millstone, about ten miles from Princeton, on July 4, 1774, with Witherspoon in attendance. Seventeen days later, county committees of correspondence met in New Brunswick. Witherspoon led the Somerset delegation. They quickly drew up a series of resolutions. The influence of Witherspoon is clearly evident—the resolutions were nearly identical to those in his 1774 essay “Thoughts on American Liberty.” John Adams, stopping at Princeton on his way back to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in the fall of 1774, recorded in his diary that “Doctor Witherspoon enters with great spirit into the American cause. He seems as hearty as a Friend as any of the Natives—an animated son of liberty” (Morrison, 2005).

Committed to Independence

By the spring of 1776, Witherspoon was passionately committed to independence. On April 18, he convened a committee of county delegates to discuss matters that “greatly concerned the Province.” At that meeting he gave a lengthy speech to convince

New Jerseyans to oppose “the extravagant demands of Great Britain” On June 21, Witherspoon and other members of the provincial legislature had Governor Franklin arrested. Witherspoon’s role was much like a prosecuting attorney, asking the governor questions. Franklin refused to answer, claiming that this “court” had no legal authority. Franklin was sent to Hartford, Connecticut and placed under house arrest (Morrison, 2005).

As events became more serious, the Continental Congress declared May 17, 1776 as a day of national fasting and prayer. Witherspoon was asked to deliver an appropriate sermon. Speaking directly to the issues, he criticized the British for their unwillingness to compromise on taxation—the main issue: “For every shilling they gained by taxes they would lose ten in the way of trade. For a trifling addition for the sum of public money to be applied or wasted my ministers of state, they would lose ten times the quality distributed among useful manufacturers, the strength and glory of the state. I think this has sometimes been compared to the difference between the draughts or spiritous liquors to intoxicate the head or weaken the stomach, and the cool refreshing food to give soundness, health and vigour to every member of the body” (Coray, 1966: 226.). Witherspoon’s sermon, “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Man,” is considered by many scholars to be one of the most important speeches in American colonial history. It was widely applauded in the American colonies, but Witherspoon was branded a rebel and a traitor in England.

Witherspoon was now one of the most important and outspoken proponents of liberty. “When he was told that America was not ripe for independence, Witherspoon was said to have answered, ‘In my judgment, sir, we are not only ripe but rotting.’” In late June 1776, New Jersey’s Provincial Congress elected Witherspoon and four others to represent the colony at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. He

worked to assure passage of the Resolution for Independence on July 2, and took part in the revision of Thomas Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence. Witherspoon objected to calling King George a “tyrant” as did John Adams.

Unfortunately, we have no record of his thoughts on Jefferson’s passage on slavery, omitted in the final draft. Like Jefferson, Witherspoon was a slave owner. At the time of his death in 1794, his estate included two slaves, valued at one hundred dollars each. However, four years before his death, Witherspoon chaired a committee on abolition that proposed gradual emancipation.

As war came, John Witherspoon had many worries. His two older sons were in the Continental Army. The British occupied New York, and Washington’s army was in a hasty retreat across New Jersey. On November 29, 1776, he announced to the student body at Princeton that the British were near; they needed to quickly pack their belongings and flee to safety. He loaded his wife and a few possessions in a wagon and set out on horseback for the safety of Pennsylvania. One week later, the British occupied Princeton. The soldiers made barracks out of Nassau Hall, the library, dormitories, and classrooms. The basement of Nassau Hall became a prison and stable.

On January 3, 1777, the British soldiers occupying the campus were attacked by Washington’s army in what became known as the Battle of Princeton. Some men tried to hide in Nassau Hall and were fired upon by American artillery. After their victory, American soldiers occupied the campus, doing even more damage—ripping up wood floors and doors for firewood, dismantling the organ in the chapel, and destroying library books. Later Nassau Hall was converted into a hospital.

Continental Congress

During this difficult time for Princeton, Witherspoon had to leave the leadership of the campus to others. Elected to the Continental Congress in 1776, he would be reelected three more times. Witherspoon would play a major part in some of the most important decisions of the new American government. The first task was the creation of a blueprint for a new constitutional government. Witherspoon was very interested in the Articles of Confederation. He was especially concerned with the rights of states like New Jersey against the larger and wealthier adjacent states of New York and Pennsylvania, whom he feared would use their larger populations to outvote smaller states.

But perhaps Witherspoon's greatest service to his country was his participation in the Committee of Secret Correspondence, later known as the Committee for Foreign Affairs. Even in 1776, Congress knew that the chances of victory were slim without foreign assistance. All eyes turned to the French, but they were reluctant to back the Americans unless they had a reasonable chance of winning. Fortunately for the Americans, Witherspoon could fluently write and speak French. He wrote a letter to the French agent in Europe, informing him that Benjamin Franklin would be arriving shortly to negotiate a "treaty of alliance." With the American victory at Saratoga, the French were convinced and joined the war. One historian remarked that "Witherspoon's part in securing the treaties of 1778 with France, without which the cause of the Revolutionists might have been lost, is one of his greatest contributions to the nation" (Thorp, 1946: 81).

As the war drew to a close, Witherspoon resigned his seat in Congress to give more attention to the rebuilding of the war-ravaged Princeton campus. Although he was no longer president, (his son-in law, Samuel S. Smith, D.D., succeeded him) Witherspoon remained very involved in the administration of the college. He would regularly teach a class and preach in

the chapel on Sundays. But he now spent the majority of his time on his farm, just north of the village.

One reason John Witherspoon is a "forgotten founder" is that a large body of personal correspondence written during his years in America has not survived. Although we can only guess about his influence in forging the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, his many essays and sermons, published widely in both American and European newspapers, reveal a man who was deeply committed to the idea of religious liberty. As the only member of the clergy in Congress at that critical time of our nation's beginning, John Witherspoon's strong and outspoken conviction to liberty of conscience, shared by many of the founders, became a cornerstone of individual rights. It is therefore no accident that the very first amendment to the Constitution to be ratified, and its very first sentences—guarantee and preserve freedom of worship in America.

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