

# STORIES of New Jersey

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## JOHN WITHERSPOON



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Among the signers of the Declaration of Independence were many jurists, a number of merchants and landowners, and a scattering of doctors. In this company John Witherspoon of New Jersey was unique. He was the only minister and educator, president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University); moreover, he had been here for only eight years.

Witherspoon's entire life had been a preparation for the part he was to play in founding the Republic. He was born in the parish of Yester, village of Gifford, near Edinburgh, Scotland, the first of six children. The date of his birth is not known, but he was baptized on February 10, 1723. His father, James, was minister of the parish and his male ancestors as far back as he knew had been Presbyterian ministers.

John's mother undertook his elementary education, and it is said that at the age of four he was able to read the Bible and soon after to repeat nearly all of the New Testament. His formal education commenced at the grammar school in Haddington, four miles from his home, where he walked each day. At 13 he was ready for the university, but this was considered only moderately remarkable in those days.

At the University of Edinburgh he took the conventional course and received the Master of Arts degree when he was 16. He remained for four years more to complete his preparation for the ministry and received his license to preach in 1743. Two years later he was ordained and became minister at Beith in Ayrshire, Scotland, at an annual wage of what would now be about \$90 together with 79 bolls of meal and a farm of 31 acres.

The new minister had been at his post for hardly a year when he had his first taste of political struggle. Charles Edward Stuart was making a bid for the throne of England on the basis of his hereditary right. Witherspoon promptly raised a company of militia "in defense of our only rightful, and lawful Sovereign, King George," but was told that its services were not needed. He dismissed the company and with his beadle acting as sword-bearer went on to the impending battle of Falkirk. He arrived there just in time to be a spectator of Charles' last victory. The two were arrested on suspicion and thrown into jail.

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His companions made their escape, but Witherspoon remained and was released soon after. The experience resulted in a nervous disorder which afflicted him for the rest of his life. To forestall or mask the dizzy spells to which he was subject, particularly when under stress, he was compelled to cultivate a quiet, calm, deliberate manner.

The next 20 years he spent as a Presbyterian minister at Paisley, Scotland. His searching mind and his devotion to the cause of the people led him to take an active part in church councils. He was a member of the General Assembly, the governing body of the church. The lucid, direct style of his writings on church politics during this period reveal his ability to popularize his subject by presenting his arguments in simple, telling language.

He had become the outstanding leader in the Popular Party of the church, which opposed the patronage system. The Moderate Party favored the practice of allowing the patron, the chief financial supporter of the church in each parish, to appoint the minister. Often soldiers had to force the unwilling people to accept the minister of the patron's choice.

Witherspoon attacked this procedure furiously, but the Moderates won. In the end, however, the people triumphed; by the time Witherspoon left Scotland for America, more than 100,000 persons had deserted the Moderate-controlled churches and had established 1,200 churches of their own.

Witherspoon had become the hero of popular Presbyterianism throughout the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that the trustees of the College of New Jersey voted unanimously to break a tradition that covered the first five presidents to invite the famous Scotsman to become the first foreign president of this American institution.

Witherspoon declined the first invitation in 1767 because of his wife's reluctance to leave their native land, but by the next year she had reconciled herself to the move, and when the invitation was renewed he accepted.

After 12 weeks at sea Witherspoon with his wife and their five surviving children of ten landed at Philadelphia on August 7, 1768. His reputation had preceded him. The election of a foreign president to the college had caused some stir; and there had just been published an edition of his most celebrated work, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, a biting satire written during his fight with the Moderates. Consequently there was something of a welcome arranged for his arrival, and he found himself lionized during his stay in Philadelphia.

He took up his duties at Princeton five days later, and the students staged an impromptu welcome--every window in Nassau Hall, which housed the entire college at that time, was illuminated with tallow candles.

Witherspoon was described at this time as heavily built and of medium stature, with blue eyes under thick brows, high cheekbones, a prominent nose and a mobile mouth. His face, "grave in repose but lit by gleams of humor when he talked, was strongly modelled and somewhat heavy, but not stern or severe; character was stamped in every feature. He had that indefinable quality called presence. His voice was disappointing and he spoke with a very marked Scottish accent."

Within a few weeks of his arrival he had improved the curriculum of the grammar school to prepare students for the seminary and had reduced the tuition fees so that sons of poorer families could attend. Soon afterward he established graduate courses.

Witherspoon traveled from New Hampshire to Georgia during the next few years collecting money and gaining a first-hand knowledge of the colonies, their development, their needs and their complaints against the measures of the king. It was an intensive course in Americanization, and he emerged from it thoroughly

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ly convinced that the colonies' quarrel with England was completely justified.

It became John Witherspoon's special function to rally New Jersey and the Presbyterians of the country and to guide them along the path which was to lead to the Revolution. Through his preaching and teaching he succeeded. One British commentator said: "He poisons the minds of his young students, and through them the continent."

It was poison that the president of the College of New Jersey dispensed--the kind of poison that destroys oppression. It was a positive and unswerving belief in freedom and democracy.

On June 6, 1774, at a meeting in Freehold Witherspoon was made one of the nine members of the Committee of Correspondence of Somerset County. On July 21 all the county committees met at New Brunswick to elect delegates to the Continental Congress. Although the minutes of that meeting have not been preserved, it appears certain that Witherspoon and the others from Somerset exercised a decisive influence. The resolutions of the New Brunswick meeting covering loyalty to the King, opposition to taxation without representation and other points follow quite closely the phraseology of the program and policies outlined in advance by the Somerset committee.

With New Jersey's work done for the moment, Witherspoon's attention turned to the impending Continental Congress, and he set down his ideas in an essay, *Thoughts on American Liberty*. Democracy, he pointed out, was quite impossible unless Congress really represented the people of America. Consequently, he thought it wrong for some of the colonies to allow their assemblies to elect the congressional representatives. He felt that the primary object of the coming Congress would be to unite the colonies, to make them one body for the defense of all and to assure the people of Great Britain that the American people would not submit to oppression voluntarily.

He was still loyal to the King, did not believe in separation from England and did not urge violent measures. The following year Witherspoon became chairman of the Somerset Committee of Correspondence, and soon after was elected to the provincial congress which met at Burlington in June 1776. By now he was an open advocate of complete independence. The Somerset delegation voted throughout the proceedings as one man to abolish the last vestiges of royal government in New Jersey and to set up in its place the people's own democratic forms. Their views were adopted, and Witherspoon was appointed to the committee to arrange for the arrest of William Franklin, New Jersey's royal governor.

Together with four other New Jersey men--Richard Stockton, Abraham Clark, Francis Hopkinson and John Hart--who had been in the vanguard of the movement for separation from England, Witherspoon was elected to the Continental Congress. Though in the colonies for only eight years, Witherspoon could feel that he was in part at least responsible for this moment of action. The delegates arrived in Philadelphia Friday, June 28, 1776, at a most crucial moment in the affairs of the colonies: the debate on separation was almost completed and Congress was about to adopt a resolution of independence. The draft of the resolution was read and was ordered held over until Monday. On Monday action was postponed again so that the New Jersey delegation could review the proceedings it had missed. Perhaps it was during the ensuing discussion that a remark attributed to Witherspoon was made. An opponent of separation declared that "the people are not ripe for a Declaration of Independence," to which Witherspoon replied, "In my judgement, sir, we are not only ripe, but rotting."

There is also a tradition that it was Witherspoon who made the "nick of time" speech which weighted the balance of a divided Congress in favor of separation. "There is a tide in the affairs of men--a nick of time," the speaker

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declared. "We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to consent to slavery." The resolution of independence was passed July 2.

The war forced the College of New Jersey to close, and though it opened at intervals during the hostilities it functioned only in a desultory manner. Witherspoon was able to give his whole attention to governmental matters for the balance of his term in Congress and served on several important committees. His final act as a Congressman was to draft the proclamation of thanksgiving celebrating the successful course of the Revolution.

Back in Princeton in 1782 after his term in Congress, Witherspoon began his task of educating men to be capable of strengthening and extending the democratic principles which he preached. The business of administering the affairs of the college became increasingly difficult. In not very many years he was blind as the result of an accident suffered on an unsuccessful money-raising trip to Europe in 1784. Though he had to give up his favorite sport of horse-back riding, he continued lecturing to his classes in history, Hebrew, French and literature. In his country home, "Tusculum," which still stands about a mile outside of Princeton, he often interviewed prospective students, all of whom had to be examined by him.

Until almost the month he died, blind and suffering from dropsy, he attended meetings of his board of trustees and sessions of New Jersey's General Assembly, though in the latter years, because of his infirmity, no additional duties were laid upon him.

Until the very last moment he remained alert. On a Saturday evening, November 15, 1794, he was sitting in his chair in the study at "Tusculum" waiting for Doctor Smith, vice president of the college. The latest newspaper that he had at home was being read to him, but he insisted on having a still later edition sent for. His wife left the room for a short while, and when she returned, Witherspoon was dead. The errand boy had taken too long; the old, blind man never heard the very latest news.