



MENTOR TO A NATION

A cursive signature in brown ink, which appears to read "John Witherspoon".

Some scholars and historians have called

JOHN WITHERSPOON

the forgotten Founding Father, and a closer look at his contributions to a fledgling nation makes it surprising that his name is not more well-known. A renowned educator and statesman, Witherspoon, a mentor to many, also has been called “THE MAN WHO TAUGHT THE MEN WHO SHAPED AMERICA.”

by NANCY COOPER

“He is as high a Son of Liberty, as any man in America.”

—John Adams on John Witherspoon, 1774



Born in East Lothian, Scotland, in 1722 or 1723, Witherspoon was the son of a minister of the Church of Scotland. At that time, members of the clergy were the most educated members of society, and the young Witherspoon was no exception: He earned a masters of divinity degree from Edinburgh University in 1743 and an honorary doctorate of divinity from the University of

St. Andrews in 1764. His sermons and

other writings were highly circulated in Europe, and his popularity did not go unnoticed in the Colonies. He caught the attention of the faculty of the struggling College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. In 1766 officials from the school traveled to Scotland to offer him the post of president, but his wife, Elizabeth, was reluctant to make the ocean crossing. She said leaving home “would be as a sentence of death to her.”

The school did not give up its pursuit of Witherspoon. Benjamin Rush, then a medical student at Edinburgh, finally convinced Elizabeth to reconsider. Two years later, Witherspoon arrived via the brigantine *Peggy* with his wife, three sons and two daughters. He carried with him 300 books as a gift to the college’s library.

Transforming a College

Upon arriving at the college, Witherspoon confronted two challenges. The college’s finances were in such poor shape that it was on the brink of bankruptcy, and there was a sharp decline in enrollment from the Southern Colonies. Students also came to the school inadequately prepared for a rigorous curriculum and weak in basic areas like grammar and composition.

In his efforts to bring financial stability to the school, Witherspoon set out on a series of fundraising trips from Boston to South Carolina. He collected a contribution of 50 gold guineas from his friend George Washington, and he encouraged James Madison’s parents to send their son (class of 1771) to the school. Through his travels, sermons and public speaking, Witherspoon became known throughout the Colonies as an educator and supporter of the cause

of liberty. The school flourished as well. Within two years, it was on firm financial footing.

Witherspoon also transformed the school into an intellectual powerhouse. He added a professor of mathematics and philosophy, introduced English grammar and composition, and instituted a strict daily regimen for students. He was thought to be the first to use the Latin term “campus” as he described the college’s pastoral setting.

Leading the Debate

Witherspoon began his civic career by presiding over the Somerset County, N.J., Committee on Correspondence from 1775 to 1776. From there, he went on to serve in the Provincial Congress of New Jersey in 1776. He was a fierce political activist, and under his leadership, the college helped foment the revolution. “In 1776, when the question of secession was hotly debated and one delegate argued that the country was not yet ‘ripe’ for independence, Witherspoon shot back, ‘In my judgment the country is not only ripe for the measure, but in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it,’” writes Roger Kimball in a 2006 *New Criterion* essay, “The Forgotten Founder: John Witherspoon.”

In January 1777, the college was only three miles away from the Battle of Princeton, in which Washington claimed victory and revived the Patriots’ chances. About 200 British troops took refuge in Princeton University’s Nassau Hall



“Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776,” oil on canvas by John Trumbull. John Witherspoon was the only clergyman and college president to sign the document.



after being driven from Princeton Battlefield by the Continental Army. There's still a dent in the wall of Nassau Hall left by a cannonball.

Witherspoon was a member of the Continental Congress from 1776 to 1782 and served on more than 100 committees, including the important


War Board and Committee on Finance. He also signed the Declaration of Independence, the only clergyman and college president to do so.

Witherspoon taught hundreds of students who directly shaped the landscape of the new America, including 114 ministers, 13 university presidents in eight states, nine cabinet members, 21 senators, 39 congressmen and three Supreme Court justices. Six graduates became members of the Continental Congress and 12 became governors.

Although Witherspoon did not attend the Constitutional Convention, five of the 55 members of the convention were Princeton graduates. Witherspoon taught one president (James Madison) and one vice president (Aaron Burr) at Princeton. In 1777, 52 of the 177 known ministers in America were former students of Witherspoon. He also had a hand in restructuring the newly independent Presbyterian Church in 1789.

'Among the Brightest Lights'

Witherspoon's first wife, Elizabeth, died in 1789. In 1791, he married 24-year-old widow Anne Dill, and they had two daughters. He died in Tusculum, N.J. (now a suburb of Princeton), on November 15, 1794.

His name lives on in the John Witherspoon DAR Chapter, Bloomington, Minn., established in 1934, and statues honoring Witherspoon stand in Princeton and Washington, D.C. The headquarters of the United Presbyterian Church is located in the Witherspoon Building in Philadelphia. His gravestone reads: "Affable, charming and agreeable in private conversation, and a man of extraordinary skill in the public affairs of the church ... He shone for a long time among the brightest lights both of education and of the Church." 

An organization dedicated to history has recently made some.

The current climate of historical illiteracy in America is disheartening, but not hopeless. Through the Center for Advancing America's Heritage, the Sons of the American Revolution is keeping patriotism alive. With the completion of our new genealogical library in Louisville, Kentucky that houses over 58,000 items - including family histories, state genealogy materials, federal censuses, Revolutionary War pension applications and CD collections, we're making great strides. But more is yet to come. To find out, visit us at www.sar.org.



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