

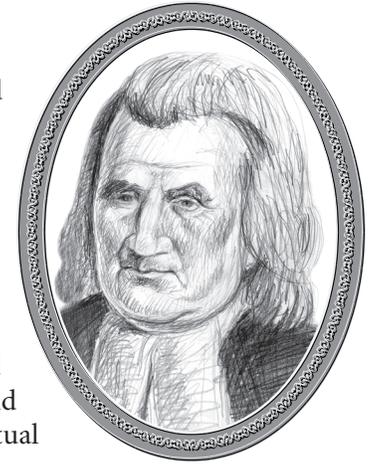
JOHN WITHERSPOON (1723–1794)

I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation,
that the cause in which America is now in arms,
is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature.

—John Witherspoon, 1776



He was a father figure to America’s Founding Fathers. A renowned theologian from Scotland, John Witherspoon educated many young men who became prominent leaders of the Founding generation. He went on to embrace the revolutionary cause. He signed the Declaration of Independence, participated in the Continental Congress, and served in positions of influence in New Jersey state government. Yet Witherspoon’s greatest legacy remains that of educator. Dozens of his students went on to leadership positions in the emerging United States. He had challenged them in their youth to read widely and think deeply about theology, economics, natural science, and political philosophy. By so doing, Witherspoon provided intellectual training in the battle for individual liberty.



Background

John Witherspoon was born in Gifford, Scotland, in 1723. His father served as the Presbyterian minister for the parish, and Witherspoon eventually followed in his footsteps. He received a Master of Arts degree from the University of Edinburgh and attended divinity school. At age twenty, he took a position at a parish in Beith, Scotland. For the next twenty years, he worked diligently and wrote widely admired theological works.

Witherspoon developed a positive reputation and a persuasive speaking style. Six feet tall, with bushy eyebrows, a prominent nose, and large ears, he was a formidable presence in his Scottish parish. Dr. Benjamin Rush, an American living in Scotland at the time, described Witherspoon’s sermons as “loaded with good sense and adorned with elegance and beauty.” Witherspoon memorized his sermons. He never carried notes to the pulpit, but his delivery did not seem rigid or rehearsed. He refrained from using dramatic gestures or elaborate language. Instead, his well-reasoned arguments conveyed his message and increased his renown.

President of the College of New Jersey

Witherspoon’s reputation as a theologian spread. In 1766, the College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton University) proposed that he leave Scotland and become the college’s sixth president. He considered the opportunity. His wife, however, hesitated because of the treacherous transatlantic journey. Dr. Rush, a graduate of the College, convinced Witherspoon and his wife to move. In August of 1768, they arrived in Princeton with their five children and more than three hundred books.

A small colonial college, the College of New Jersey was ailing. It urgently needed funds to keep its doors open. Enrollment was low. The curriculum and instruction needed improvement. Incoming students were poorly prepared for college. As the lead instructor, college president, and fund-raiser, Witherspoon shouldered all of these challenges.

Fund-raising proved difficult. In the 1770s, conflict with Great Britain was intensifying, and many colonists wanted to hold on to their money. But Witherspoon was persuasive. He traveled extensively, preaching and soliciting contributions. Those who heard him speak described him as “a profound theologian . . . a universal scholar acquainted with human nature; a grave, dignified, solemn speaker.” His trips to New York, Boston, and Virginia were successes. Contributions increased.

Enrollment presented a different challenge. To attract students, Witherspoon added to the curriculum. The college changed its exclusive focus on spiritual studies. Under Witherspoon, the college offered more comprehensive courses. He expanded the library to include contemporary philosophical writings. He did not limit students’ exposure to new ideas. Instead, he encouraged them to read various perspectives. He preferred to allow reason and faith to guide their opinions. As a result of these changes, enrollment increased steadily. The graduating class of 1768 had only eleven students, but there were twenty-nine in the class of 1773.

The founders of the college wanted to educate men who would be “ornaments of the State as well as the Church.” Witherspoon himself taught one president (James Madison) and one vice president (Aaron Burr). He also instructed nine cabinet officers, twenty-one senators, thirty-nine congressmen, three justices of the Supreme Court, and twelve state governors. Five of the fifty-five members of the Constitutional Convention were his former students. Witherspoon’s impact on the ministry of the Presbyterian Church was also significant. Of the one hundred seventy-seven ministers in America in 1777, fifty-two of them had been Witherspoon’s students.

With the Revolutionary War unfolding on its doorstep, the College of New Jersey suffered. Most students left to fight. Witherspoon was forced to shut down the school. He assisted in the safe evacuation of the students in November of 1776. During the war, both British and American troops at one time or another used the college’s buildings as barracks and hospital facilities. American troops even fired into the college’s main building, Nassau Hall, during the Battle of Princeton in January 1777. Their hope was to persuade the British troops camped inside to surrender. After the war, Witherspoon worked to restore the college’s appearance, reputation, and finances. He served as its president until his death in 1794.

Service to the Colonies

Over a period of years, Witherspoon gradually became an ardent supporter of revolution. He joined his state’s Committees of Correspondence and Safety in 1774. Once the war began, he represented New Jersey in the Continental Congress from 1776–1782. In 1776, when a fellow delegate questioned whether or not the colonies were ripe for independence, Witherspoon replied, “Sir, in my judgment, the country is not only ripe for the measure, but we are in danger of rotting for want of it.” Witherspoon was the only active clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. He was liked for his sense of humor and pleasant personality and respected for his intellect. Witherspoon served on more than one hundred congressional committees during his six years in office. Following the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Witherspoon supported ratification at the New Jersey convention.

Witherspoon was a traditional Christian who was firmly committed to religious liberty. He feared that the Anglican Church would send a resident bishop to America who could then encroach on religious liberties. He also did not hesitate to address

political issues from the pulpit. In his “Dominion of Providence” sermon in the spring of 1776, Witherspoon declared that “the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature.”

Witherspoon signed the Declaration of Independence, shepherded the College of New Jersey for three decades, and championed political and religious liberty. His most significant legacy, however, has been handed down through the work of his students. Witherspoon helped nurture a generation of revolutionary thinkers and religious leaders. Their efforts, in turn, produced the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. John Witherspoon ought to be remembered, in the words of John Adams, “as high a Son of Liberty as any Man in America.”



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What were the characteristics of Witherspoon’s speaking style?
2. What changes did Witherspoon make in the curriculum of the College of New Jersey?
3. What national and state offices did Witherspoon hold during his career in public service?

Critical Thinking Questions

4. What is the significance of Witherspoon’s role in educating members of the Founding generation?
5. John Adams declared that Witherspoon ought to be remembered “as high a Son of Liberty as any Man in America.” Do you agree?