

# Redeeming the Fathers of America

---

## John Witherspoon

As a young person Witherspoon worked diligently to gain the knowledge which would serve to advance his position in ministry, business, the education system, and political arena, and now was about to impact the biggest step in your career. Should he consider giving it all up? Would you give it all up? What if he, you, or I were offered a sweeter deal, one which placed us in a position of royalty in our home town? Should we consider staying and rising to unimaginable social status or should we leave it all behind for an uncertain life in a foreign land? This is exactly what happened to founder John Witherspoon. But why you may ask? Who was this man that he would be offered such high social stature in his homeland of Scotland?



Witherspoon was a distinguished minister and a patriot at the time of the Revolution. In addition, John Witherspoon, one whose lineage can be traced back to the Rev. John Knox.

John Witherspoon was born at Yester Parish, Gifford, Scotland on February 5, 1722. His father, being a minister at Yester Parish, encouraged young Witherspoon to begin reading the bible at age 4. John's father provided him with more than adequate education at the Haddington Public School, where young Witherspoon achieved a reputation for being studious, quick to understand concepts, and prudent in decision making.

Upon receiving a sound foundation in academics, John was sent to the University of Edinburgh at age 13, where he continued to improve in literary pursuits and earned a Doctorate of Divinity at the age of 16. His father pressed him to enter the ministry, but John hesitated until he was age 21. He was invited to minister at Yester, instead he accepted an invitation at a

parish in west Scotland called Beith. The entire congregation accepted him, he was ordained and settled there.

John was well prepared to follow in his father's footsteps, to pursue the ministry, literature, writing, and public discourse. But he was struggling with the direction for his life. This is not unusual when there is a call upon one's life, for the enemy of our souls tries to discourage us from embarking on our destiny. Instead of running away, John sought the counsel of God through time in the bible, quiet meditation, and prayer. It was here that he found strength and instruction. It may have started with preaching from the pulpit, but it would become much more than he or his father could have imagined.

John Witherspoon was as much a patriot as he was a minister. His love of county stirred his curiosity and on January 17, 1746, he joined several others who were observing the Battle of Falkirk. Suspected of being spies, this led to the arrest and imprisonment of Witherspoon and the spectators. I encourage you to study the events that followed where this group was locked in a castle tower and their subsequent attempts to escape. Some did escape, but Witherspoon remained behind, confined for about two years before being transported to the town of Paisley. He ministered to the congregation here until later emigrating to America.

Witherspoon was raised under orthodox Calvinism and exposure to the Reformation or what was known as the Scottish Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was responsible for a revolution in philosophy and the sciences. However, this led some to question the validity of the holy scriptures. It was during this period when Witherspoon became a rising star among the ministers of Great Britain. Some thought that the Church should focus on the abstract rights of the personal conscience. However, Witherspoon found himself more aligned with a communal focus on the enduring reality of universal laws.

Rev. John Witherspoon married Elizabeth Montgomery on September 2, 1748 and went on to have nine children, unfortunately four died before reaching their tenth birthday.

As a young minister, John Witherspoon was deeply dedicated to the education of his Presbyterian parish, which led him to becoming active in church government. It was during this

time that his reputation as a writer brought him notice. He composed lively and humorous essays on religious issues of the day. Some even gained him notoriety in the colonies of America.

The year was 1764 when Witherspoon's two-volume collection of sermons, were published in London. Things were going well for his ministry in Scotland. About two years later the Reverend Samuel Finley, fifth president of the College of New Jersey passed away on July 17, 1766. The search for a replacement was not found among candidates in the colonies. So, the trustees of the college invited John Witherspoon to consider becoming the college's sixth president.

Richard Stockton and Benjamin Rush, who was a student at the College of New Jersey, made several attempts to gain Witherspoon's interest in accepting the position. Even though Reverend Witherspoon had achieved a level of comfort and success, he began to consider the offers set before him. His wife, however, was not interested in leaving their home in Scotland. To make his decision more difficult, Witherspoon was approached by a relation of the family, a man of considerable fortune. This man offered to make the reverend his heir, provided he would remain in Scotland.

One last attempt by Benjamin Rush convinced John Witherspoon of the desperate need for a man of his knowledge and character. Rev. Witherspoon accepted the offer and in 1768 he arrived in America where he was inaugurated president of the college. This impetus was exactly what the struggling campus needed and resulted in an immediate increase in the number of students attending.

The fame of John Witherspoon's theological discourses, literary achievements, and superintendency began to change the entire atmosphere at the college. Where the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) had barely survived through private donations from a small group of investors, it now gained the generosity of other colonies including Massachusetts and Virginia.

Dr. Witherspoon's assessment of the curriculum found many a student ill-prepared for university studies. As a result, he extensively revised the curriculum and resources as the College's sixth president. He also relied upon the former relationship with the College of William and Mary, where he was invited to provide itinerant preaching. As with other small campuses the staff was modest and required Witherspoon to teach moral philosophy, divinity, rhetoric, history, and French. The campus benefited greatly from the Christian liberal arts and the appointment of a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy.

In addition to Witherspoon's involvement in the Scottish Enlightenment, the college offered John Locke's concepts of liberty, the natural rights of man, and representative democracy. It was these types of courses and committed instructors that made such campuses as Princeton the once great institutions they were.

Many of our early nation's early leaders attended Princeton, including James Madison. Madison entered the college under Witherspoon and thought so highly of Witherspoon that he stayed on to become the first of the college's graduate students.

In conclusion Dr. John Witherspoon so impacted the lives of the colonies that nine of the twenty-five college graduates at the 1787 Constitutional Convention were from Princeton, while four were from Yale, and three from Harvard. Madison along with other Princeton graduates under Witherspoon helped to shape the formation of the Constitution itself. Other prominent leaders of the country included; Aaron Burr, Philip Freneau, William Bradford, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, 37 judges (three of whom became justices of the Supreme Court, 10 Cabinet officers, 12 members of the Continental Congress, 28 U.S. senators, and 49 U.S. congressmen. When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America met in 1789, 52 of the 188 delegates had studied under Witherspoon.

Witherspoon believed that a college would be "very imperfect" if it did not teach students "*taste, propriety, and accuracy in that language with they must speak and write all their life.*" This orientation to life beyond the classroom is evident in the graduate program that Witherspoon established, a program of studies intended not just to prepare students for the

tradition scholarly professions, but to “fit young Gentlemen for serving their Country in public Station.

When questioned about reports coming out of the British Parliament Dr. Witherspoon responded, “*false reports will die much sooner than they can be killed.*”

Dr. Witherspoon served on congressional committees including the following:

- a) To prepare a seal for the Treasury and the Navy.
- b) The Board of War dated October of 1778 that John Witherspoon and William Henry Drayton be added to the committee consisting of Gouverneur Morris, Richard Henry Lee, and Samuel Adams to prepare instructions for Dr. Franklin who was Plenipotentiary (Ambassador) of the United States at the Court of France.
- c) A Council of War to advise the Rhode Island Legislature on finance and articles of clothing
- d) The Committee of Finance
- e) As a delegate from Rhode Island to ratify the Articles of Confederation and perpetual union between the states of New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

John Adams described Witherspoon in the following manner; “*Dr. Witherspoon enters with great spirit into the American cause. He seems as hearty a friend as any of the natives, an animated Son of Liberty.*”

On the day Thomas Paine was being considered for the Committee of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Witherspoon objected with such fervor that it caught the attention of others in congress. He stated that Paine wrote pieces against the American cause, then later changed his mind when the tide of popular opinion shifted. I deeply appreciate this founder for his convictions.

**This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America**

### **References:**

- 1) The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D. L.L.D. Late President of the College at Princeton, New Jersey, 1803
- 2) University Magazine, Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D. LL. D.

- 3) Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Vol III-Fifth Series, Belknap-Hazard Papers Part II., 1877
- 4) Journals of the Continental Congress 774-1789, Volume XII 1778, September 2-December 31
- 5) The Works of John Adams Vol II, 1850