

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

Richard Stockton - New Jersey

Richard Stockton, the son of a wealthy landowner, was born in Princeton, New Jersey on October 1, 1730, the eldest of eight children. His early education was at the Nottingham Academy in Maryland before graduating from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) in Newark in 1748. He was admitted to the bar in 1754, and later received the degree of Sergeant-at-Law, the highest law degree obtainable in 1763. During that time, he became an eminent lawyer with one of the largest practices in the colonies.

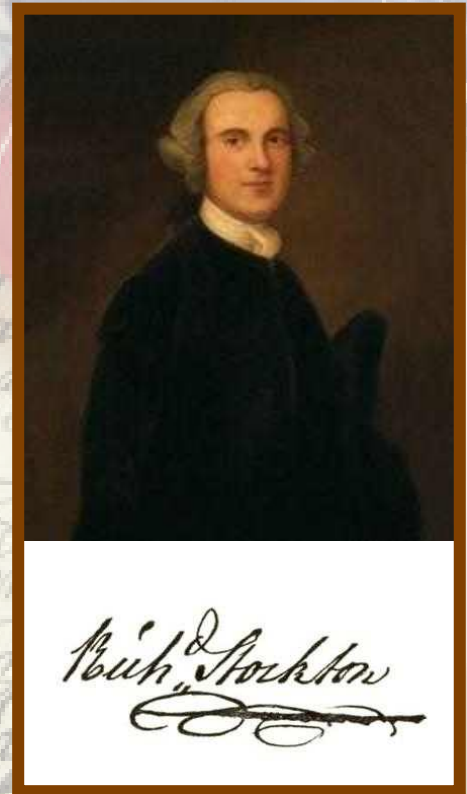
In 1764, he became the Grand Master of the first chartered Masonic Lodge (St. John No. 1 in Princeton). A year later he was appointed to the Royal Council of New Jersey, a position he would keep until a colonial government was formed.

Shortly after the repeal of the Stamp Act in March 1766, he left on what would become a fifteen-month journey to the British Isles. While there he attended the Queen's birthday ball, was presented to King George III, and later had the honor of giving a speech to the King acknowledging the repeal of the Stamp Act.

While in the Isles, he had the good fortune to escape an early death on two occasions, once when he fought off a thief with his small sword in Scotland, and again when he luckily missed a ship to Ireland that sunk with all aboard drowning.

His biggest achievement in Scotland, as a trustee of the College of New Jersey, with the help of his future son-in-law Benjamin Rush, then a medical student in Edinburgh, was recruiting Reverend John Witherspoon to come to America and be the president of the College of New Jersey.

Stockton was initially a moderate concerning relations between the colonies and England, and in 1774 sent to Lord Dartmouth, Secretary for the Colonies, a plan of self-government in America, independent of Parliament, but owing allegiance to the Crown. He warned Lord Dartmouth that if something of the sort was not done, that an awful war was inevitable. On the failure of this attempt to broker a resolution to the American/British governing differences, he resigned his royal appointments, and was then elected to the Continental Congress in June 1776.



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On July 1, 1776, Stockton and his good friend Rev. Witherspoon arrived in Philadelphia as John Adams was finishing his speech in support of independence. He asked Adams to repeat what they had missed, which Adams reluctantly did at the urging of Edward Rutledge, who said "only Adams had the facts at his command." Stockton, after silently listening to Adams, and then to others, pro and con, rose to give an energetic speech in favor of independence at the close of the debate.

After voting for independence on July 4th, and signing the Declaration on August 2nd, later refusing the governorship and his election as Chief Justice in New Jersey, so that he could remain in Congress, he along with George Clymer of Pennsylvania were sent on a two month journey to inspect the northern army in upstate New York to determine the needs of army, to contract for provisions and to report back to Congress. Those needs included a severe lack of shoes, socks, breeches, etc. By the way, Clymer and Stockton were two of but a few signers to view first hand, the conditions the soldiers were enduring.

When the British invaded New Jersey in November, Stockton did rush home to move his family some 30 miles from Princeton. However, the Loyalists found him on November 30th, and dragged him from bed, he being only clad with a nightshirt and breeches, and marched him to a British jail, first in Perth Amboy and then to New York where he was put into irons, and starved for the next five weeks. He was given a parole after a signing a statement that he would not participate in the war effort.

His health ruined, he returned home to find that it had been occupied by General Cornwallis, but had been plundered of all his livestock, his furniture, apparel, and his renowned library burned. He did slowly regain his health and returned to his law practice, but developed cancer of the lip and throat, which caused him severe pain until he died on February 28, 1781, a man who gave his all for his country.

