

# Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

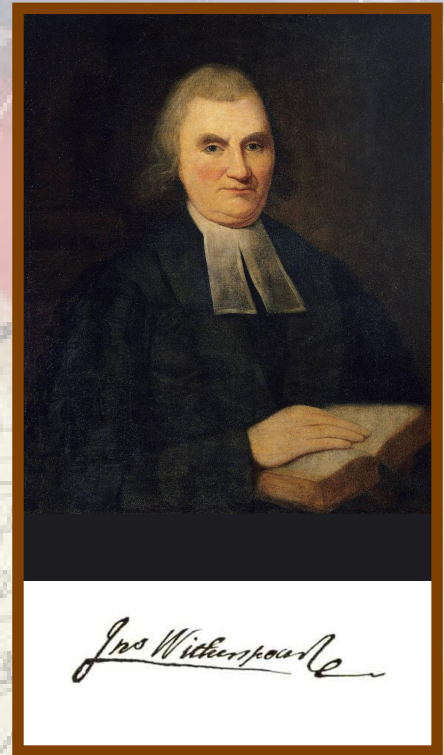
John Witherspoon - New Jersey

John Witherspoon was born on February 5, 1723 in the parish of Yester, Scotland to Rev. James Witherspoon and Anna Walker Whitherspoon, who came from a long line of clergymen. His first teacher was his mother who taught him to read by age four so that he could read from the Bible. He would later be able to recite most of the New Testament.

After entering the University of Edinburgh at age 13, he completed four years of work in three, and received a Master of Arts degree just after his 16th birthday with his thesis done in Latin. Within four years he received his Doctor of Theology and his license to preach.

In the mid-1760s, the trustees of the College of New Jersey worked to recruit Dr. Witherspoon to become the President of the college. Two such were future fellow signers, Richard Stockton and his future son-in-law, Benjamin Rush, the latter being able to seal the deal, finally, in 1768. From the Descendants of the Signers website, "The College of New Jersey bloomed under his direction. He grew the endowment fund, instituted curricular changes, and patched up the schism in the Presbyterian church."

By 1770, the students were openly advocating for the patriot cause, and, in a commencement address, Witherspoon advocated resistance to the Crown. In 1774-1775, while in the New Jersey provincial assembly, he successfully agitated for the removal and imprisonment of Royal Governor William Franklin, who was placed under house arrest in Wallingford, then in Middletown in 1776. That year, he published his speech, "Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," which inspired many colonists to be more open to independence.



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Richard Stockton - New Jersey

*Witherspoon and Stockton were appointed to the Continental Congress, arriving July 1, 1776. The following day, when a delegate who opposed ratification of the Declaration, by saying "we are not ripe for revolution," John responded, "not ripe sir, we are not only ripe for the measure but in danger of rotting for the want of it." It passed that day.*

*When the British invaded New Jersey in late 1776, he closed the college. The British, while occupying the college, burned the library and many of John's papers. In that same year, John's son James was killed in the Battle of Germantown, Pennsylvania. While still in the Congress, he aided in the reorganization of the Board of Treasury, drafted a letter of thanks to Lafayette, designed the seals for the Treasury and Navy Departments. Two years later, he reopened the college for classes in November 1778.*

*Well after the war, he was a member of the New Jersey convention that ratified the Constitution. He also made significant contributions to the newly organized national Presbyterian Church.*

*While President of College, he oversaw the education of 37 future judges (3 on the Supreme Court), 12 who served in the Continental Congress, 28 future senators, 49 congressmen, future Vice President Aaron Burr and President James Madison. Rev. Witherspoon certainly had a major impact on the early years of our republic.*

*In 1789, after his wife Elizabeth died, he returned to the New Jersey Assembly where he set the priorities of its agenda, such as the treatment of prisoners, pensions for invalids, work on the public debt, promotion of religion and morality, addressing divorce, paper money, and encouragement of manufacturing. A slaveowner, himself, he chaired a committee for the abolition of slavery in New Jersey.*

*Not long thereafter, he became blind, first in one eye, and then both, a sad way for this learned man to spend the last two years of his life. He passed on November 15, 1794 at the age of 72.*

