

JOHN WITHERSPOON REMEMBERED

by Tom Cox

Most Presbyterians know the name John Witherspoon, and the better informed probably realize that this Presbyterian minister was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. But his claim to fame rests on far more than just that.

When Horace Walpole rose from his seat in the House of Commons to report on the “extraordinary proceedings” taking place in Britain’s North American colonies and announced: “There is no use crying about the matter. Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson, and that is the end of it,” it was Witherspoon to whom he was referring. While George Washington and Thomas Jefferson still wavered, Witherspoon had supported independence. And when delegates to the Continental Congress hesitated to sign a document as radical as the Declaration of Independence, Witherspoon turned the tide. This lineal descendant of Scotland’s fiery preacher-patriot John Knox, rose to proclaim: “There is a tide in the affairs of men. We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument [the Declaration of Independence] should be subscribed this very morning by every pen in this house! For my own part, of property I have some, of reputation more. That reputation is staked, that property is pledged on the issue of the contest. And although these gray hairs must soon descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country.” One after another, his listeners rose to affix their signatures to the document.

Witherspoon was more than just a leading advocate of American independence. He was an educator of the first rank. As president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), he taught and influenced a host of important Americans. Marie Cormier provides the details in *Desert Thistle*, the organ of the St. Andrews Society of Las Vegas:

John Witherspoon, who taught at Princeton University, was known for preaching his “common sense” in addition to Scottish Philosophy. He is probably the most influential teacher in the entire history of American education. Students in his class included 1 President (James Madison); 1 Vice President (Aaron Burr); 3 Supreme Court justices; 5 Cabinet members; 12 state governors; 21 U.S. senators; 19 U.S. representatives; 56 state legislators; 6 signers of the Declaration of Independence; 9 delegates to the Constitutional Convention; 31 Revolutionary Army officers; and more than 100 ministers. . . .

What a record!

Yet Witherspoon was not alone. Presbyterians throughout the colonies championed independence. Indeed, one authority claims, when General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, all the colonels in the Revolutionary Army but one were Presbyterian elders and more than half the soldiers and officers in Washington’s army were Presbyterians. It is a record in which present-day Presbyterians can take pride.