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THE HISTORIC BUILDINGS OF AMERICA.

BY BENSON J. LOSSING, LL.D.

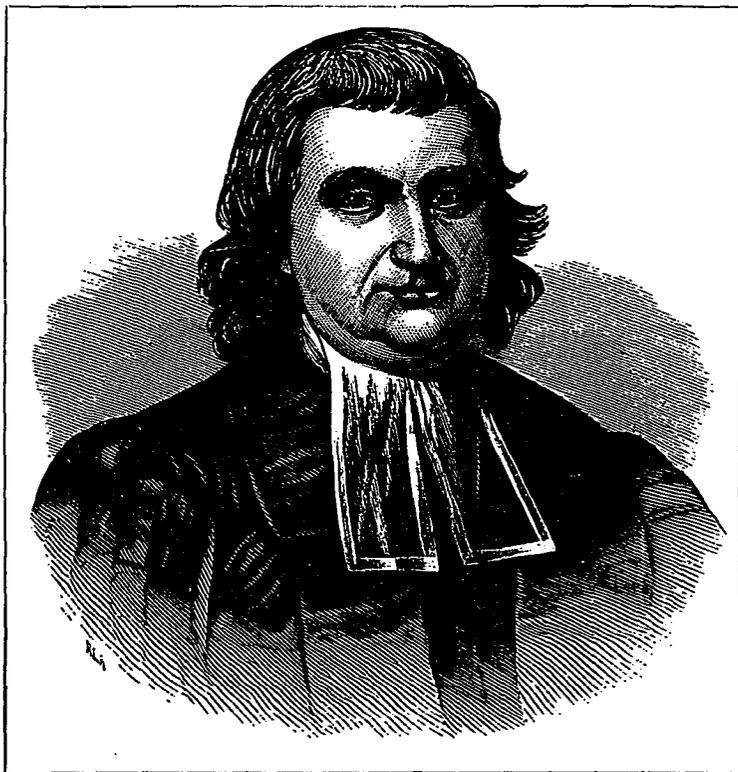


NASSAU HALL, COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY, PRINCETON.

## MEMORABLE FACTS IN THE LIVES OF MEMORABLE AMERICANS.

BY SIR ROM DE CAMDEN.

## IV. JOHN WITHERSPOON, D.D., LL.D., THE DIVINE, THE AUTHOR, THE COLLEGE PRESIDENT, AND THE PATRIOT STATESMAN.



JOHN WITHERSPOON.

NINETY-NINE years ago, in the Pennsylvania State House, since better known as "Independence Hall," in the City of Philadelphia, was convened the most remarkable legislative assembly in the historic annals of the world—called together the year before, from all the diversified walks of life, but few of the members having had even the most limited experience in public affairs, the Continental Congress ranks below no legislative body that has ever been assembled. The patriot members, representing the patriot masses of the several Colonies, had, in obedience to the call

of duty, left their accustomed avocations, sacrificed their pecuniary interests, disregarded all selfish considerations, and had met in Congress with a single object and aim, that of promoting the true interests of their respective Colonies and of "the United Colonies." They fully realized the responsibilities they had accepted, and comprehended the vast labor they had undertaken, and holding in check their ardent sympathy with the excitement of the times, in the calm, dignified manner of veteran senators, and with a marvelous degree of good sense, sound judgment, and far-

seeing wisdom, regulated the extensive, complex and peculiarly perplexing affairs of the inchoate Nation. We can scarcely make ourselves realize the difficulties that beset the Congress of 1775-76, in legislating for "the Thirteen United Colonies" during the period from the commencement of the War to the Declaration of Independence, while the country was in the anomalous condition of transition from Dependent Colonies to Independent States. The nearer we approach to such a realization, the more we shall marvel at the sagacity, and the more we shall revere the memory, of the Continental Congressmen.

Reader, will you, in imagination, go back with me ninety-nine years, and accompany me into the sacred edifice where this Congress is in session? We instinctively pause at the threshold, with a feeling akin to awe, ere we venture within the hallowed portals, into the august assembly. And once within, we silently scan the "Memorable Americans," one by one, and note the well-known features of the noble President, John Hancock; his colleagues Samuel and John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, Charles Carroll, Benjamin Franklin, and the rest of the grand galaxy of patriot stars.

Conspicuous, even as he sits quietly in this grand Congress,<sup>1</sup> we see a man of commanding presence,<sup>2</sup> though of but medium stature, his bright, intellectual eyes ever open to the best interests of the land he has so thoroughly adopted as his own that his fair Scotch complexion, clearly defined Scotch features and unmistakable Scotch accent, combined, though they prove his Scotch nativity, cannot induce us to regard him in any other light than as a true American. We readily identify him, without noticing his clerical garb.<sup>3</sup> And

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Witherspoon was a member of the Congress from 1776 to 1782, inclusive, except for a portion of 1780; about the close of 1779, he resigned his seat "from a conviction of his inability to sustain the burden of expense incident to holding it, as well as from a desire to give his particular attention to the revival of the College." The urgent and unanimous demand of the people soon compelled him to return to this important sphere of duty, where he continued to serve faithfully until the close of 1782, when he positively refused longer to absent himself from his College.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. Ashbel Green said of him: "He had more of the quality called *presence* than any other individual with whom the writer has ever had intercourse, Washington excepted."

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. Sprague says: "During the whole period in which he was occupied in civil life, he never laid aside his

now, having identified Dr. Witherspoon, let us look well at him—he will bear the closest scrutiny—physically, mentally, morally, no defect can we detect—view him as we please and when we please, and, in every light and always, he is the same upright, honest, God-fearing (never man-fearing) man—a perfect specimen of the best sort of Scottish Presbyterians, than whom better men to become American freemen have never sought these shores.

As before noted, Dr. Witherspoon is of medium stature; his large head and well-proportioned limbs relieve the tendency to corpulency, while his fine forehead, bright eyes, and, indeed, his features as a harmonious whole, impress us with a strong conviction that New Jersey has made a wise selection in appointing him a representative, and a no less strong conviction that he will prove himself the peer of the patriot giants of the Congress. While gravity is clearly its characteristic, there is a benignity of expression that makes his countenance a pleasant study. He has laid aside the clerical full-bottomed wig; his hair is full and he wears it long, confined at the extremity of the back locks by an artificial curl or buckle. He has journeyed nearly five months into his fifty-fifth year, and, though not appearing younger, he has the look of robust health.

But it is the 2d of July, and the routine business having been disposed of while we have been studying Dr. Witherspoon's *physique*, President Hancock interrupts our agreeable study by announcing that the hour has arrived for the Congress to proceed to the Order of the Day. Among the representatives, there are some good, true patriots who oppose the immediate adoption of the Resolution and Declaration of Independence, the main avowed ground of their opposition being that the time has not arrived for so bold, decided, and irrevocable a step as the Declaration of Independence from the British Government. There are others who are timidly halting between these and the brave champions of the great and momentous measure. John Adams is the acknowledged

ministerial character, but always appeared in every relation as became an ambassador of God. \*\*\* Nor would he consent, like some other clerical members of Congress, to change, in any particular, the dress which distinguished his order; wishing not only to remember, but to make others remember, that he was a minister of God in a sacred as well as in a civil sense."



TUSCULUM, THE RESIDENCE OF DR. WITHERSPOON.

leader of the more advanced party, and we listen with wrapt attention to his powerful speech in favor of the immediate adoption of the Resolution and Declaration. Others speak for and against, and now John Witherspoon deliberately arises—all eyes are turned towards him, the most profound silence reigns for a moment, and then he commences in slow, deliberate, measured syllables, while all listen with almost breathless intentness, for all know, though it is his first speech in this Hall, that one of the mighty champions of liberty is speaking; as he proceeds, his words flow faster, his features speak the intensity of his feelings, his countenance is all aglow, nay, blazes with enthusiasm; the excitement of his auditors cannot be described as he pauses a moment and points to the Declaration upon the Secretary's table, ere his powerful voice, having attained its full volume, bursts forth in tones of thunder:

“That noble instrument on your table should be subscribed this very morning by every pen in this house! He that will not respond to its accents, and strain every nerve to carry into effect its provisions, is unworthy the name of freeman. For my own part, of property I have some, of reputation more. That reputation is staked, that property pledged, on the issue of this contest. And although these gray hairs must soon descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather they should descend thither by the hands of the public executioner than desert, at this crisis, the sacred cause of my country.”

He resumes his seat, amid almost painful silence that seems to act like an intensifying reflector, throwing out in strong light his burning words.

The vote is had, the result announced—the Committee of the Whole rises, and its chairman reports that the Resolution has received the assent of *nine* of the Colonies. At last the spell is broken, and members breathe more freely, while the House prepares for the formal vote—it is taken, and *twelve* Colonies are recorded in the affirmative—the New York delegation having refrained from voting in consequence of a doubt of their right to commit their constituents in the absence of any indication of their will in the premises.<sup>1</sup>

And now, the Resolution having been finally adopted, the Nation being born,<sup>2</sup> there is no happier man in the Hall than the patriot divine. He fully realizes that the infant Republic has a baptism of fire and blood to pass through ere it can fairly start forward upon a career of prosperity and beneficence—yet is he happy, because he believes in the God of Mercy and of Justice, and his Faith forbids fear, or even doubt, as to the issue of a contest between right and liberty on the one hand, and wrong and oppression on the other. But, reader, let us retire now from the Hall, and, while the Congress is discussing the Declaration, we cannot be better employed than in looking back over the earlier life of Dr. Witherspoon.

About fourteen miles east of Edinburgh, Scotland, in the parish of Yester, on the 5th of February, 1722, John Witherspoon was born. His

<sup>1</sup> See page 496 of this MONTHLY.

<sup>2</sup> QUERY—Should not the 2d of July, rather than the 4th, be celebrated as our Nation's Birthday?

father was the Rev. James Witherspoon, the able and faithful pastor of Yester, and his mother was a lineal descendant of the intrepid Reformer, John Knox. I cannot coincide with those who regard a man's ancestry as of no moment, and I confess to me it was interesting to learn that John Witherspoon's male ancestors for more than two hundred years had been ministers of the Gospel, and that at the head of that line was that wonderful man, John Knox. He might have become good and great, had his forefathers been of the worst and meanest, but I can better comprehend the characteristics of his later life, when I know that he came of a cultured and Godly race.

His highly intelligent and pious mother gave John his first lessons in worldly learning, while, after the manner of the Scotch mothers, with special care she laid in his mind and heart the foundation of true wisdom from the oracles of God. His intellect was wonderfully bright and quick to expand under careful training, and at an early age he was entered as a pupil in the public school of Haddington, where his progress was so rapid that at fourteen he was admitted to the University of Edinburgh. His record here was honorable to both head and heart, his scholarship second to none, and his deportment perfect.

At about twenty-one years of age, having graduated with distinction, he was licensed to preach. He declined an invitation to become the assistant and successor to his father in the important parish of Yester, and accepted the populous parish of Beith, in the West of Scotland, where his labors, covering twelve years, not only won him the sincere love and esteem of his people, but were signally blessed. During his stay there he experienced a singular and disagreeable episode, in 1746. The British Empire was at that time in ferment with the attempts of the Pretender to secure the throne; led by curiosity, he went to witness the battle of Falkirk, where the disastrous defeat of the Royal army left the rebels masters of the territory; Mr. Witherspoon and some other spectators, suspecting no danger, were made prisoners and imured in the Castle of Doune. Some of his fellow-prisoners succeeded in effecting their escape from the castle; he was invited and at first determined to join in the attempt, but second thought resulted in his awaiting regular release. He was detained in all about a fortnight.

In 1757, Mr. Witherspoon was called to the pas-

toral charge of the "Low Church" in the large and flourishing town of Paisley; the Presbytery of Paisley refusing its consent to the call, the Church appealed, according to Presbyterian law, to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, which, after a patient hearing of the case, decided against the Presbytery, and Mr. Witherspoon was installed during that year in his new charge, where he remained until 1768, when he left his native land for the American shores.

Meanwhile, Mr. Witherspoon had become known as a writer of singular power as early as 1753; in 1756, his "Essay on Justification" gained him high rank as a theological writer, while his "Essays on Important Subjects," including his "Treatise on Regeneration," published in 1764, won him great reputation far beyond the bounds of his own country, and during this year the University of Aberdeen recognized his merits as a theologian by conferring upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity.<sup>1</sup>

The extent of his reputation can be judged from the fact that, within a short time, he received pressing calls from a church in Dublin, Ireland; from one in Rotterdam, Holland; from one in Dundee, Scotland, and from the Princeton College, in the Colony of New Jersey. The last was in the year 1766, and was sent to him by the hands of Richard Stockton, a member of the Corporation of the College, then in England. He declined all the church calls, and at first refused to accept that to Princeton—the main cause of his refusal is stated to have been his wife's unwillingness to come to America. But, upon the call being repeated and urged, he at last, having secured his wife's consent, accepted the Presidency of Princeton.

Dr. Witherspoon was inaugurated as President of Princeton College on the 17th of August, 1768. His arrival had been the occasion of intense rejoicing, not only at Princeton, but throughout and beyond the Province, not only in the Presbyterian Church but among Evangelical Christians generally. And this general rejoicing was soon seen to be not in the least extravagant—Princeton College was, of course, directly the largest gainer, but the cause of liberal education throughout the American Colonies was sensibly benefited by his intelligent

<sup>1</sup> In 1785, Yale College conferred on Dr. Witherspoon the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

administration of the duties of his office, and the vast improvements he introduced in the matter and manner of instruction. According to Dr. Sprague, Dr. Witherspoon is entitled to the distinguished credit of having, among his wise innovations, introduced the method of teaching by lecture, which, Dr. Sprague says, "seems previously to have been unknown to our American Colleges." "He actually delivered lectures on four different subjects—namely, Eloquence and Composition, Taste and Criticism; Moral Philosophy; Chronology and History; and Divinity. Though it was impossible that he should go very much in detail into these several subjects, yet they were all handled in a luminous and able manner, and showed at once the versatility and the industry of the lecturer." When he had come over, he had brought with him three hundred choice works as a donation to the library of the College, and his friends in England and Scotland sent many more to him for the same library. It was also through his efforts that the College secured the famous Rittenhouse Orrery or Planetarium,<sup>1</sup> besides an excellent philosophical apparatus from England. And indeed, the intelligent and well-directed zeal of the new President were felt in every department of the College. Not the least in importance, among the many tangible advantages the Doctor brought to the College, was an immediate improvement in its financial condition, which had been in a very depressed state for some months.

But, while faithful and indefatigable in the discharge of every duty as President, Dr. Witherspoon never forgot that he was a minister of the Gospel. He held the office of Pastor of the Church of Princeton during his entire Presidency.

Soon after his entrance upon the Presidency, the dispute which had been kept up for years, with much feeling on both sides, between the Colonies and the British Government, began rapidly to assume a dark, threatening aspect. Dr. Witherspoon early became convinced that the Colonies were in the right, and were but seeking to maintain their legal and just rights, and to preserve their liberty as British subjects—and thus convinced, he did not hesitate to assume the responsibility of declaring himself warmly and unequivocally on the side of the Colonies. So thoroughly American were his views, and so marked his boldness in avowing

them upon every proper opportunity, that he, early in the controversy, won the implicit confidence of the patriotic Americans. This confidence, with the high regard entertained of his scholarship, and of his clear and luminous judgment, made him an acknowledged leader in the councils of the New Jersey patriots.

The Continental Congress had set apart the 17th of May, 1776, as a day of fasting and prayer. On this occasion, Dr. Witherspoon preached a sermon on "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men;" this sermon was published and dedicated "To John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress." Viewing the questions of the day from the American standpoint, in this sermon the Doctor gave a masterly discussion of the whole subject, strongly arraiging the aggressors and defending the Colonies.

The war having dispersed the students, and thus released him from the active duties of President of Princeton College, Dr. Witherspoon did not deem it incompatible with his clerical office to participate in the *political* assemblies of the time, and we find him a conspicuous member of the Provincial Congress of New Jersey, though he served here but eleven days—being unanimously elected on the 22d of June to represent New Jersey in the Continental Congress, then in session in Philadelphia. Here he had taken his seat but a few days before the great discussion upon the Resolution and Declaration of Independence, in which he bore a most important and honorable part, as we have seen in the earlier part of this paper. Had his record as a Patriot-Statesman begun and ended with that noble speech, it would have been glorious, and would have constituted a perfect title to enrollment among the foremost and best of "Memorable Americans." That single speech gives Dr. Witherspoon a claim to the undying admiration, gratitude, and love of all true Americans—nay, of every freeman and lover of liberty, of every name and clime, to the end of time. But his record as a Patriot-Statesman did not end with that speech.

Reader, we return now to the Hall which has won the proud title of "Independence Hall," to witness the scene which has scarcely a parallel in history—the grand scene of the 4th of July, 1776! The Congress, sitting as a Committee of the Whole, has patiently canvassed the Declaration, scrutinized each line, weighed each word, and

<sup>1</sup> See page 486 of this MONTHLY.

now reports the immortal document to the Congress with such amendments as have been deemed necessary to make it as near perfect as a human paper may hope to be. John Hancock has resumed the Chair, and with calm dignity states the question—"Shall the Declaration of Independence, as reported by the Committee of the Whole, now pass?" The roll of members is called—each responds (the exceptions are few, and these decline to vote at all) in the affirmative; when the name of the patriot divine is called, there is no ear present so dull as to mistake the emphatic "Aye!" The roll is completed—the Secretary announces the glorious Chart of Liberty adopted by a unanimous vote of all the Thirteen United Colonies, now the THIRTEEN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA—the solemn hush that has hitherto prevailed is broken by the joyful pealing of the great Bell,<sup>1</sup> which rings with a marvelously exhilarating sound as it obeys the injunction of the motto that encircles it—"Proclaim liberty throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof."

And when the names were appended to the Declaration, none was written with more hearty good-will, with more patriotic self-consecration to the work of giving living effect to its words, with more deliberate appreciation of what the signing meant, than that of

*John Witherspoon*

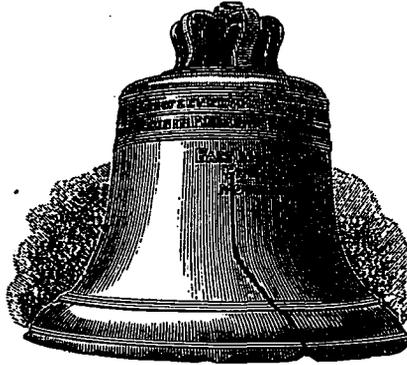
A comparison of his name as it appears on the original parchment of the Declaration, with other autographs, shows that the Doctor was more than usually careful in writing his name in this instance.

Dr. Witherspoon fully realized the fact that the Resolution of Independence, supported by the

<sup>1</sup>The Bell was not rung on the 4th; the Declaration was published on the 5th, and it was on the 8th of July that a mass meeting was held in the yard of Independence Hall, when the Declaration was read in the hearing of the people—and it was then that the Bell pealed forth the glorious message of Liberty.—EDITOR. See page 504.

admirable Declaration, but opened the door of Independence to admit the Colonies to the fields of Liberty and the workshops of National prosperity—that Resolutions and Declarations might be multiplied *ad libitum*, without any nearer approach to true Independence, unless the Congress, the Army, and the People, with honest, earnest, unflagging, unfaltering zeal, labored to achieve that Independence; he well knew that the Resolution and Declaration must be vitalized by action, or their fruit would be as valueless and bitter as the Apples of Sodom. As I have said, he believed in the God of Mercy and of Justice—he believed that God would by His Providence establish and prosper the new-born Nation, if that Nation faithfully performed its part. Strong in his faith in God, and in the Congress, the Army and the People of the American Republic, Dr. Witherspoon, throughout his successive terms in the Congress, never faltered in the discharge of any duty.

His willingness to work was equaled only by his ability, and the limit to that was never discovered while there was work to be done for the welfare of his beloved



THE OLD LIBERTY BELL.

Republic. The versatility of his genius seemed truly marvelous; while actively participating in the legislation of the regular sessions of the Congress, he was an invaluable member of many of the most important Committees—indeed, he invariably accepted and *performed* every duty assigned him by the Congress or its President. His clear judgment and sterling common sense caused him to be in constant demand, especially when questions of peculiar delicacy or intricacy were to be determined. But the peculiarity which most impressed his fellow-congressmen and others who came in contact with him was his unostentatious, but all-controlling Christian character; it influenced his every word and act, and without parade or display permeated his whole life, in the Congress no less than in the Church and the College. John Sanderson commences his sketch of Dr. Witherspoon's life, in his "Lives of the Signers," with these words: "No combination in the mind of man



THE WITHERSPOON MONUMENT.

forms a more certain foundation for useful virtue than that of piety and patriotism. When the love of country is tempered and guided by Christian principles, its scope of usefulness becomes proportionally more extensive." Never was this more strikingly exemplified than in the Congressional career of Dr. Witherspoon.

I cannot better close my notes of Dr. Witherspoon's Congressional life, than by quoting a short passage from Dr. Sprague's "Annals." He says: "He had great influence as a speaker, but he reserved it chiefly for great occasions. Notwithstanding he had the happiest talent at extemporaneous debate, all his more important speeches were maturely considered, and carefully written, and then delivered memoriter; and yet in a style of such perfect freedom, that no one would have suspected that he had written a word. Many of the most important State papers of the day, in relation to such intricate subjects of political economy as the emission of paper currency, the mode of supplying the army by commission, etc., were from his pen; and though he differed on some points from some of his illustrious associates, and was overruled by them, it has been remarked that he lived to see his own views, in almost every particular, justified by a mature and enlightened public sentiment. He was a leading member of various important committees, and many of the prominent measures adopted by Congress are understood to have had their origin with him. Neither his courage nor his confidence ever faltered in the darkest day; for it was sustained not only by a naturally heroic spirit, and unwavering Christian integrity, but by an undoubting conviction of the rectitude of his country's cause."

During his service in the Congress, Dr. Witherspoon availed himself of every opportunity that presented to preach the Gospel. When, at the close of 1779, he had retired from the Congress, he set himself zealously to work in reviving the College, assisted by his son-in-law, Rev. Dr. Samuel Stanhope Smith, then Vice-President and afterwards President of Princeton College. Having attained an age when rest is peculiarly grateful, especially to a man whose life has been an unusually busy one, Dr. Witherspoon left the details of the labor of reopening the College to Dr. Smith,

to whose use he also gave up the "President's house," on the college grounds, removing to Tusculum, as he had designated a neat property he owned, a short distance outside the confines of the town of Princeton. As we have seen, he was not long permitted to enjoy comparative ease, but was back in the Congress within a year after his retirement therefrom. At the close of 1782, however, he finally retired from the Congress, and once more sought the rest he so much needed, at Tusculum. But once more he was induced to leave his pleasant retreat, to undertake, against his judgment, a voyage to Great Britain, in a vain quest of funds for his beloved College; the result was, so far as his mission was concerned, a total failure, as his common sense had foreseen; and to himself it was exceedingly unfortunate, costing him the loss of one of his eyes by an accident on his return voyage.

On his return to Princeton, where he arrived just before the College Commencement of September, 1784, he was inflexible in his determination to confine himself henceforth to the discharge of his duties as President of the College and Pastor of the Church. He felt the weight of his sixty-two years, more than forty of which had been years of incessant labor—the sixteen since his settlement in America had certainly been laborious enough completely to break down a man of less indomitable will.

For ten years he continued at his post, a faithful ambassador of God. During the last two he was totally blind, having lost the sight of his remaining eye—yet he would not consent to desist from the work of his Divine Master. His memory, naturally excellent, he had sedulously cultivated, until, when sight had left him, his wonderful memory enabled him to preach with unabated clearness and force.

On the 15th of November, 1794, in his seventy-third year, he attained his rest—going calmly to sleep, to awake in glory.

NOTE.—See review of the "Centennial Book of the Signers," under the head of LITERARY AND ART MEMORANDA; also, under that of CURRENT MEMORANDA, see the communication and remarks on "The Witherspoon Monument."—EDITOR.