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John Witherspoon: President and Patriot

December 29, 2022



Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

A Princeton University president, teacher, preacher, politician, Declaration of Independence signatory, and a slave owner. As an early American patriot, John Witherspoon has been the center some recent controversy as a statue of him may be removed from historic Princeton University library grounds.

In this episode, Kevin reads from his article written for “Princetonians for Free Speech” and reflects on his life as a whole, including his status as land owner and what his motives were for also owning one slave.

Transcript

Reading Zen's salutations and hope you had a Merry Christmas as is Kevin DeYoung. You're listening to Life and Books and Everything. One last post, one last podcast that is before the New Year.

And this one is on John Witherspoon. Maybe needs just a little bit of introduction. I have a special interest in Witherspoon.

I have a special interest in Witherspoon. I have a special interest in Witherspoon. Doctor will work on him and reading everything he's written and hoping to write a biography of him someday.

So through a few mutual contacts, I was put in touch with a group called Princetonians for free speech who are advocating to keep up this statue and they ask this group ask if I would write an historical piece on the accomplishments and the work of Witherspoon. And most importantly for their concerns at Princeton to try to put into context his views on slavery and the fact that he owned two slaves. So this is an article that I wrote about 3000 words a little more than that on Princetonians for free speech on their website and you can find it there.

It's entitled John Witherspoon President and Patriot. For now, the John Witherspoon statue stands in its prominent place outside Firestone Library at Princeton University. I

say for now because some students, including 300 graduate students who signed a petition initiated by graduate students and a faculty member in the philosophy department, are adamant that this statue should be removed.

At one level the debate is about public symbols and what degree statues and names memorializing the past must meet all the moral standards of the present. Not surprisingly some have insisted that Witherspoon has to go arguing that Princeton's sixth president was a slave owner who lectured and voted against the abolition of slavery. Despite listening sessions for faculty, students, staff and alumni on a proposal to remove or replace the statue, little attention has been given, at least in public that we can see, to the actual history.

We need to understand why John Witherspoon has been memorialized in the first place, both as a rescuer of a university that was floundering before he invigorated it during his quarter century as president and as a courageous leader of the American Revolution. And then second we need to understand what Witherspoon believed and what he did about slavery. In completing my PhD in John Witherspoon at the University of Leicester in 2019 I studied historical evidence that tells a more balanced and often more positive story than what one hears from Witherspoon's detractors.

It can fairly be stated that Witherspoon owned two slaves and did not advocate immediate emancipation. But as I explained below drawing in part on new historical work in my own archival research, these bare facts did not tell the whole story. Not the whole story about Witherspoon the president and patriot, nor the whole story about how Witherspoon related to slaves and free blacks, what he believed about slavery and what he hoped America as a related to slavery would be like in the future.

A brief biography. John Witherspoon was born on February 5, 1723 in the Scottish village of Gifford, 25 miles east of Edinburgh. In 1739 he defended his Latin dissertation on the immortality of the mind and graduated from the University of Edinburgh.

Continuing at Edinburgh he studied divinity being instructed in the new Enlightenment ideas coming out of Europe and in traditional Presbyterian theology. Witherspoon served two churches as a minister in the Scottish Kirk. His first church was in Beeth, a small agricultural village in western Scotland.

Witherspoon's 12 years in Beeth, 1745 to 1757, were fruitful and eventful. In 1746 Witherspoon led a group of militia volunteers from Beeth intent on fighting for King George II against the Jacobite uprising. Although Witherspoon was not engaged in any military conflict, he was captured and imprisoned for a short time in Dune Castle.

In 1748 he married Elizabeth Montgomery, the daughter of Robert Montgomery of Craighouse, one of the prominent families in the parish. Together John and Elizabeth had ten children, seven of whom preceded them in death. Witherspoon's second pastorate

was in Paisley, 1757 to 1768, a growing manufacturing town on the outskirts of Glasgow.

He was a popular preacher in his church and Paisley had to be expanded to 1300 seats to accommodate the growing congregation. During Witherspoon's ministry in Scotland he was asked to preach at important venues. He published more than a dozen books on theological topics and ecclesiastical controversies, and he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of St. Andrews.

In 1766 representatives of the College of New Jersey later Princeton University urged that the Paisley pastor should become its next president. Although Witherspoon initially declined because of his wife's reticence to travel across the ocean and move to America, he later changed his mind, I guess she changed her mind as well, and agreed to the college's second round of entreaties. Witherspoon and his family landed in Philadelphia on August 17, 1768.

He was 45. When Witherspoon arrived it was not at all certain that Princeton, at that time a primitive backwater compared to Glasgow, would survive. After a string of presidents who died early in their ten years the college was low on students, low on teachers, and low on money.

As president Witherspoon was responsible for recruiting students, disciplining them, and sometimes boarding them. He was also charged with raising funds, furnishing the library, doing private tutoring and teaching, regular courses on history, eloquence, divinity, and moral philosophy. Witherspoon earned the reputation as a man of great energy, a fine teacher and a firm disciplinarian.

His leadership ensured Princeton's survival and established it as one of the most important institutions in the new country. In the 1770s Witherspoon turned his attention increasingly to political matters, with John Adams once referring to Princeton's president as "an animated son of liberty". On May 17, 1776 Witherspoon preached one of the most significant sermons in American history, a message based on Psalm 76:10 entitled "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men".

As partly an exploration of the colony's right to revolt, the sermon is widely regarded as helping to prepare the way for the decisive move for independence later that summer. In July Witherspoon etched his name in history as the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. In the ensuing years Witherspoon marshaled all of his energies and all the men and resources of Princeton to support the revolution.

Witherspoon was so tied to the Patriot cause that the wig politician Horace Walpole famously remarked, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian Parson". Likewise, in the 1779 letter, Adam Ferguson wrote to Alexander Carlisle, both classmates of Witherspoons at Edinburgh, "We have 1200 miles of territory in length occupied by about 3 million people of which there are about 1,500,000 with Johnny Witherspoons at their

head against us". Witherspoon's support for independence did not come without significant cost.

During the war, the college was shut down, students were dispersed, and Witherspoon had to flee Princeton for fear of British troops. Presbyterian ministers were particularly hated by the British for their outspoken defense of the revolution. At the Second Battle of Trenton, John Rosebrueg, a graduate of Princeton, an ordained Presbyterian minister in the first-ever casualty among U.S. chaplains, was killed by Hessian troops under command of a British officer when they mistook Rosebrueg for Witherspoon.

Witherspoon returned to the college after the Battle of Princeton. The president found that buildings had suffered extensive damage library books had been used for kindling, and many of his personal belongings have been confiscated or destroyed. "Old Witherspoon has not escaped their fury", a congressman wrote to Thomas Jefferson.

Most painfully, Witherspoon's son, James, was killed on October 4, 1777 at the Battle of Germantown. It is hard to overstate Witherspoon's influence as one of our most quintessential, if often forgotten, founders. He was well respected and often sought out for advice by the likes of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin.

James Madison stayed on an extra year Princeton to sit under Witherspoon's personal instruction. Besides the declaration, Witherspoon also signed the Articles of Confederation, helped New Jersey ratify the Constitution, served in the state legislature, and participated in 126 committees during his six years in the Continental Congress. At various points, he served on the Committee of Finances, the Committee to confer with George Washington on the military crisis and the procurement of supplies, the Secret Committee charged with executing the war effort and on the all-important board of war.

Having learned French at a young age, Witherspoon also translated for French dignitaries visiting America. Furthermore, he personally taught a generation of educators, legislators, and statesmen in the New Republic. A list of his Princeton students includes 12 members of the Continental Congress, 5 delegates to the Constitutional Convention, 1 U.S. President James Madison, 1 Vice President Aaron Burr, 49 representatives, 28 senators, 3 Supreme Court justices, 8 district judges, 1 Secretary of State, 3 attorneys general, and 2 foreign ministers.

In the last decade of his life, Witherspoon turned over many of his duties at Princeton to his son-in-law Samuel Stanhope Smith. Witherspoon continued to preach almost every Sunday to the congregation at Princeton until his eyesight began to fail. After losing his first wife in 1789, Witherspoon married Ann Dill, a much younger widow in 1791.

They had two daughters together before Witherspoon died at his country home, Tusculum, on November 15, 1794, having served as Princeton's President for more than

a quarter century. Witherspoon and slavery is often said that Witherspoon's relationship to slavery was complicated. I suppose that's true, and so far as most human beings are complicated, especially as they relate to the contested moral issues of their age.

At the same time, Witherspoon's views on slavery were fairly straightforward. He believed that bringing people into slavery was wrong, except as a punishment for crimes, that abolition should be sought after and prayed for, that slaves and black people should be treated with decency and dignity, that immediate abolition on a personal and national scale would likely do more harm than good, and that slavery would soon disappear in America. In all these views and in his personal practice Witherspoon was typical of many educated men in Britain and in America, and more enlightened than several of our most famous founders.

The Case of James Montgomery. In spring of 1756, Robert Sheddon of Scottish Town B.E.E. was caught up in a now famous case involving a runaway slave known as James Montgomery. Years earlier, Sheddon had purchased Montgomery, who came to Scotland under the name Shankar, from Captain Joseph Hawkins in Virginia.

After giving Montgomery an apprenticeship in B.E.E., Sheddon was determined to sell his slave back to Hawkins for the original sale price of 56 pounds, plus 1,000 pounds of tobacco in light of Montgomery's apprenticeship. When Montgomery refused to go, Sheddon forcibly brought him to the Port of Glasgow. Montgomery escaped, but was soon captured in Edinburgh and imprisoned.

Robert Gray, procured her fiscal of the Bailey Court of Edinburgh, took up the case in defense of Montgomery, arguing in part that Sheddon's so-called slave, quote, "was instructed in the Christian religion, and was publicly baptized in the presence of the congregation in the parish Church of Beeth, and named James Montgomery Sheddon as is instructed by a certificate under the hand of John Witherspoon, Minister of the said parish." Sadly, Montgomery died imprisoned before the case could be heard before the Court of Session. Given the nature of a court case, there are two ways to view Witherspoon's public act of baptism. Robert Sheddon insisted that Witherspoon and the elders of the Church informed Montgomery that even as a Christian he would still have the duty to obey his master.

We have no record of Witherspoon accepting or denying this claim. On the other hand, Montgomery's legal counsel emphasized that as a baptized member of the Church in Beeth, Montgomery could no longer be a slave because such bondage was inconsistent with his freedom in Christ. Given the fact that Witherspoon baptized Montgomery the day before, he was to be taken to Glasgow and that Witherspoon sent him off with a certificate verifying his good Christian conduct, it seems probable that Witherspoon knew he was helping Montgomery make his case for freedom.

As Alexander Murdoch of the University of Edinburgh has pointed out, nothing in the

certificate of baptism claimed its professor was a free man, but Witherspoon's support was important. Although the Princeton and Slavery Project, which grew from a small undergraduate research seminar in 2013 into the launch of an impressive website in 2017, utilizing the work of 50 authors and 15 research assistants, cites William Harrison Taylor's important article, Faith and Slavery in the Presbyterian Diaspora several times, the project website paints a more negative picture of Witherspoon than Taylor does. The project's website suggests that Witherspoon only meant to free Montgomery from sin and had no interest in his physical freedom.

Taylor on the other hand observes that "the court also heard that Witherspoon had given Montgomery a certificate of Christian conduct, indicating an expectation that he might go free and effectively providing him with a means of achieving this." The very least did a significant that Witherspoon was willing to instruct and baptize a slave in a dispute with one of his own church members, Sheddon was a member at the church in Beeth. In fact, some have speculated that the surname Montgomery was given to the enslaved man after the maiden name of Witherspoon's wife, Elizabeth, who had been Elizabeth Montgomery. This would be another indication of the closeness of Witherspoon's relationship to the enslaved man he baptized and welcomed into membership in his church.

Private Instruction As President, Witherspoon taught "Free Black men and gained the reputation for Princeton as a place where black men could receive personal instruction." In 1774, Bristol Yama and John Kwameim, African-born slaves who had purchased their freedom a year earlier, matriculated to Princeton to be special students of the president. They were not enrolled for degrees, but they had private lessons with Witherspoon. Years later, John Chavis, a revolutionary war veteran, property owner, and free black man, saw out Witherspoon for similar instruction.

In 1792, as an older, non-traditional student, Chavis was admitted to Princeton using scholarship money from the Leslie Fund. In order to be admitted to Princeton, a student had to be tested in English grammar, orthography, punctuation, composition, geography, United States history, Latin grammar, Greek grammar, and mathematics. Chavis was already well-educated and a quick learner.

While at Princeton he received private tutoring from Witherspoon. In 1793 or 94, Chavis left Princeton likely because of Witherspoon's illness and death, and later finished his academic studies at Liberty Hall Academy, now Washington and Lee University. It was licensed to preach by the Lexington Presbytery in Virginia.

As a member of Congress, Witherspoon also sought funding for American Indian students to receive instruction at Princeton. Views on slavery. Witherspoon did not often speak explicitly to the issue of slavery, but when he did, his views were similar to other leading men of the founding generation.

For slavery is wrong, slavery will soon die out in America, immediate abolition is therefore neither wise nor necessary. In his lectures on moral philosophy, composed soon after arriving in America but published only posthumously from student notes, Witherspoon argued that while men may become slaves by their consent, or as a punishment, "it is certainly unlawful to make inroads upon others unprovoked and take away their liberty by no better right than superior power." Later, Witherspoon insisted, "some have pleaded for making slaves of the barbarous nations, that they are actually brought into a more eligible state and have more of the comforts of life than they would have in their own country. This argument may alleviate but does not justify the practice.

It cannot be called a more eligible state if less agreeable to themselves." In conclusion, Witherspoon allowed that it was not necessary to free men already in a state of slavery because this would, quote, "make them free to their own ruin." Still, quote, "it is very doubtful whether any original cause of servitude can be defended but as legal punishment for the commission of crimes." To be sure, Witherspoon was not a radical abolitionist. In his description of the state of New Jersey, he maintained that slaves were well fed and well clothed. He did not view the plight of the enslaved with urgency.

And yet he was glad to see that the Dutch, quote, "use their slaves and other servants with great humanity, often not scrupling white and black to eat together." It is sometimes said that Witherspoon taught and voted against abolition, but this is only true if we equate abolition with immediate emancipation. When Witherspoon, in 1790, chaired the committee concerning the possibility of abolition in New Jersey, he did not vote against abolition. He argued that sufficient laws against slavery were already in place and that slavery would soon die out.

Here's how Varnum Lansing Collins, Witherspoon's most comprehensive biographer, even though his two-volume work *President Witherspoon*, came out almost 100 years ago. Here's how he puts it. As chairman of the abolition committee, Dr. Witherspoon reported that the law already enforced for aid, the importation of slaves, except actual servants of immigrants from other states, or of transient residents, that the exploitation of slaves was likewise forbidden, the law as it stood it encouraged voluntary manumission of slaves, and that buy it moreover slaves were protected from violence.

They then offered the suggestions that New Jersey might enact a law that all slaves born after its passage should become free at a certain age, as for example, 28. But in his opinion, from the state of society in America, the privileges of the press, and the progress of the idea of universal liberty, there was little reason to believe that there would be any slaves at all in America, 28 years from that time. That's from Collins' biography.

We can question the judgment of men like Witherspoon, but we should deal fairly with the reasons for their actions. Collins concludes that Witherspoon's opinions were

"laudible but over-sanguine." Perhaps the best representation of Witherspoon's views on slavery come from his involvement not in politics, but in the church. The 1787 resolution from the Senate of New York and Philadelphia, a Senate at which Witherspoon took the lead in proposing a new form of government and discipline, approved of "the general principles in favor of universal liberty that prevail in America, and the interests which many of the states have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery." Although the Senate did not urge disciplining or separating from slave-holding churchmen and did not advocate for immediate abolition, it did encourage educating slaves, giving them a share of property and teaching them to be self-sufficient so that they might be productive free men someday.

Moreover, the Senate went on to "recommend it to all the people under their care to use the most prudent measures consistent with the interest in the state of civil society and the parts where they live to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery in America." This statement, if not written by Witherspoon himself, certainly would not have passed without his support. Two slaves. Given that Witherspoon baptized a runaway slave taught free blacks and favored eventual abolition, what do we make of the fact that Witherspoon was himself a slave owner? It appears that Witherspoon first acquired slaves after moving to his country home, Tusculum, in 1779.

Tax records from 1780 for the western precinct of Somerset County show that, out of more than 60 slaves in the precinct, Witherspoon owned one, no doubt to help farm his 500-acre estate, the largest acreage listed in the addition of the tax-rateables. Beginning with the 1784 records, Witherspoon owned two slaves, but we might wonder about the consistency of writing against slavery while later owning slaves. Witherspoon likely reasoned, as he explained in his lectures on moral philosophy, that releasing those already in slavery would make them free to their own ruin.

In his last will and testament, written in 1793 and executed upon his death in 1794, the final line lists at 200 pounds, quote, "two slaves, supposed to be worth until they are 28 years of age." The reference to 28 years of age may be a hint that Witherspoon and his wife intended to manumit their two slaves, perhaps even in the near future. Recall Witherspoon's suggestion that New Jersey enact a law that all slaves born after its passage should become free at a certain age as, for example, 28, quoting there from Collins biography. Note how this suggestion was modeled after Pennsylvania's famous 1780 Act for the gradual abolition of slavery, the first act abolishing slavery ever adopted by democratic people.

The act decreed that children born into slavery after the adoption of the act would be set free upon reaching 28 years of age. Perhaps there is another explanation for noting until 28 years of age and Witherspoon's will, but one plausible explanation is that Witherspoon did not mean for the two slaves to remain in slavery past 28 years old. Conclusion.

The purpose of this article is not to excuse John Witherspoon from statements, judgments, or actions with which we would disagree. He led an impressive and influential life but not a flawless one. And yet if the measure for memorializing men and women from the past is perfection, we won't be left with many heroes.

Note how all of us wish to be judged as whole persons by the totality of our words, deeds, relationships, and affections. Should anyone care to learn about us in the future, we can only hope that they will try to understand us on our own terms in our own context and not evaluate our life's work based on blind spots that seem clear to them, whoever hidden they were to us. Witherspoon's contributions to Princeton, to the United States are in the main worth remembering and celebrating, and if his mistakes were actually fairly enlightened for his age, then perhaps we are better served tearing down our own prejudice toward people in the past instead of tearing down statues.

[Music]

(buzzing)