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A Fuller Measure of Witherspoon on Slavery

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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 of 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 adds new information to his December 2022 article regarding Witherspoon's estate at the end of his life.

Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations. This is Kevin Deung and you're listening to Life and Books and Everything. I wanted to read one more article that I've written on this John Witherspoon statue controversy at Princeton.

No, this is not my life's calling. I don't plan on writing on this again. But since there was some new historical evidence that I was able to look at did want to write a follow-up piece to the earlier article I did in December.

This one again is on the website Princetonians for Free Speech and it's entitled A Fuller Measure of Witherspoon on Slavery. As of the online publication of this essay, Princeton University is still deciding what to do with Witherspoon. The Council of the Princeton University Committee on Naming is forming its recommendation in response to the petition initiated in May 2022 to remove from its place of honor and Firestone Library Plaza between East Pine Hall and the Chapel the statue of John Witherspoon, 1723, 1794.

Princeton's sixth president who led the then College of New Jersey from 1768 until his death 26 years later. This statue commissioned by the Princeton University Board of Trustees was dedicated in 2001. The initiators of the petition have cited as reasons for the statue's removal, their beliefs that Witherspoon "participated actively in the enslavement of human beings and used his scholarly gifts to defend the practice." One

opponent of the proposed removal of Witherspoon statues submitted that the petitioners have "a tragic misunderstanding of the full measure of Witherspoon on slavery." In this present essay, I present new evidence on the duration and nature of Witherspoon's ownership of slaves.

I also briefly note Witherspoon's connections to other evangelical Christians active in the abolition movement. By reviewing these facts, some of them not mentioned before in any of the secondary literature, I hope to present a fuller measure of Witherspoon on slavery. In December 2022, I wrote an article opposing removal of the Witherspoon statue.

Among the salient aspects of Witherspoon, this piece explored where his outstanding service to Princeton is courageous participation with the founders of our nation as a signer of the Declaration of Independence, his foundational leadership in the Presbyterian Church, and yes, the sad fact that he had owned slaves. This article generated a fair amount of attention, much of it negative. For many people, any defense of Witherspoon is tantamount to defending slavery itself.

Of course, that was not the purpose of my article. We all wish slavery had not been present at the American founding, and we all lament that so many great men from that era could not see their own moral inconsistencies, or in some cases, egregious hypocrisy. At the same time, it behooves us as critical thinkers, and simply as fellow human beings, to try to understand people from the past in their own context and on their own terms.

In Witherspoon's case, this doesn't mean we justify slavery, but it does mean we must not accept the quick and misleading summary that says nothing more than "Witherspoon don't slaves and voted against abolition." As I showed in my previous article, Witherspoon baptized a runaway slave in Scotland, taught free blacks at Princeton, believed no man had the right to take away the liberty of another based on a superior power, and longed for the final abolition of slavery in America. As chairman of the New Jersey Committee, considering abolition, Witherspoon did not oppose abolition, rather he believed that laws were already in place to ensure the decent treatment of slaves and to encourage voluntary manumission, and that slavery would soon die out in America. It was, of course, wrong in this last conclusion, but most colonial leaders shared the same assumption.

They did not know Eli Whitney's cotton gin, invented in 1793, would revolutionize the cotton industry and vastly increase the demand for slave labor in the south. New evidence on Witherspoon's slave ownership. But I don't need to repeat the facts and arguments from my previous article.

What I want to do next in this article is present new information about evidence of Witherspoon's slaveholding information, I've not seen mentioned in any of the secondary

literature or included on the Princeton in Slavery Project website. There are two direct pieces of evidence showing that Witherspoon owns slaves. One, the New Jersey tax ratables, and two, the listing of his possessions at the end of his life.

Each one merits careful attention. Let's start with the first piece of evidence. The tax ratables.

The New Jersey State Archives holds the tax ratables for colonial New Jersey. These are, as the name suggests, records about property and other goods and the taxes levied on these possessions. At the end of 2022, I asked the State Archives if they could send me the relevant tax ratables for the Western precinct of Somerset County, where Witherspoon's country estate to Sculum was located.

At that time, they hadn't finished scanning all the documents, so I was only able to see enough of the ratables to confirm that the first record of Witherspoon owning a slave shows up in 1780, and that by 1784, he had two slaves. Within the past week, the excellent archivists in Trenton finished scanning the rest of the relevant documents and sent them to me. Here's what they show.

In 1785 and 1786, Witherspoon had two slaves. There was no record for 1787, but there are records for 1788, 1789, 1790, 1791, 1792, 1793, and 1794 when Witherspoon died. In each year, they list Witherspoon as owning zero slaves.

After Witherspoon's death, his wife Anne is mentioned in the tax ratables. No slaves are mentioned in her possession either. If you read the article online, you can see a simplified table of information drawn from the tax ratables, where I list the owner of the property, either John or then after his death, his wife Anne, the date for the ratables, the acres of arable land, and the number of slaves.

As I just mentioned, after the 1786 record, all the rest show no indication of slave ownership. As you can see, Witherspoon did not own slaves, at least as the county assessor counted things. For most of the years, he lived at Tusculum.

He moved from the college proper to Tusculum a mile away in 1779. We don't know how he acquired a slave in 1780. Did he purchase the enslaved person? Had the enslaved person already been working the property? Was the enslaved person assigned to him by the college? Nor do we know what changed in 1788 or 1787? Were the two slaves sent elsewhere? Did they die? Were they emancipated? These are questions that probably cannot be answered.

What we do know is that according to these records, Witherspoon owned one and then two slaves over the course of seven years. There was another fascinating discovery in the tax ratables. In 1792, 93, and 94, there was listed for the first time another Witherspoon, spelled "weather spoon" as John's name also was.

With the designation "capital letter N" in 1792, then "ne" 1793, and then "neg" 1794, "neg" being the designation for Negro. The person's marked "neg" and the "weather spoon" wasn't the only one. Always shared a last name with the landowner and were likely servants or slaves who had been recently freed or slaves who had been given property on their way to full emancipation.

This African-American "weather spoon" the first name is spelled differently each year but it is something like "forten" owned cattle and was listed as a householder. The presence of a black man with the surname "weather spoon" is an important discovery. We don't know if "forten" was a new slave bought in 1792 because John "weather spoon" went blind in both eyes in 1791 and needed new assistance or it might be that a new slave or two came to John upon his marriage to Anne in 1791 were given then a household of their own and worked for the "weather spoons" until John's death in 1794.

Anne "weather spoon"'s first husband came from a slave-holding family in York County, Pennsylvania, perhaps the man "forten" and his wife, came with Anne and that's why the two slaves counted at the time of "weather spoon's death" included the curious reference to "until they are 28 years of age" 28 being the age at which those born into slavery were set free under Pennsylvania law or it could be that in 1787 or 1788 "weather spoon" gave his two slaves their own portion of the estate such that the assessor no longer counted them as slaves in his possession. Perhaps Somerset County only began to designate Negroes in the tax rateables beginning in 1792. After 1794, presumably when the widow Anne would have needed help the most, there is no mention of the "nigro-weather spoon" suggesting that he was free to go where he pleased and he left.

"Last will and testament" This still leaves us with the fact that two slaves are listed among "weather spoon's assets" at the time of his death. The slaves are nowhere mentioned in "weather spoon's "last will and testament" The will, drawn up on September 15, 1794 and modified on November 11, only stipulates who is to receive portions of his settled estate. No specific possessions are enumerated until after "weather spoon's death" when on November 28, two appraisers list his possessions and provide a value for every item.

This is where two slaves are mentioned. We can't be sure how to reconcile the appraisers mentioning of two slaves at the time of "weather spoon's death" with the listing of "no slaves" according to the tax rateables of the same year. There must have been some arrangement which rendered the status of the "nigro-weather spoon" ambiguous.

The most likely explanation is that "weather spoon" gave his slaves either in 1787-1788 or, upon receiving two slaves through a second marriage, a share of his estate that they might be prepared in due course to live in full freedom on their own. We know from

"weather spoon's lectures on moral "philosophy" and from his work on the New Jersey committee mentioned earlier that "weather spoon" was in favor of abolition but that he also believed that moving too quickly could be dangerous for society and "make slaves free to their own ruin." He was, in other words, a consistent proponent of gradual abolition. How should we put all these pieces together? My best guess is that two slaves, husband and wife perhaps, came with Anne Dil in her marriage to John Witherspoon that they were considered "weather spoon's assets" by the assessors executing his will but that the slaves were in another sense free persons and were listed as such in the tax record.

The reference to 28 years of age in Witherspoon's will gives credence to the suggestion that the slaves would be free from all obligations at 28 years old at the latest in keeping with this 1780 Pennsylvania statute. Two black persons came as a part of Anne's property. It seems they were treated as free "nigros" in their own household but also had some sort of agreement willingly or unwillingly we don't know to remain as servants so long as John was alive and needed assistance.

In 1795 Anne had 494 acres in her possession but this went down to 211 acres the following year so she did not continue to maintain their estate on the same scale. Witherspoon and the Presbyterian Church's statement on slavery. The best example of Witherspoon's thought on slavery and how to end it probably comes from the statement made by the Synod of New York and in Philadelphia i.e. the Presbyterian Church in 1787 and later reiterated in 1794.

We should not forget just how revered Witherspoon was among his fellow Presbyterians. He was appointed to almost every important committee in the early years of the National Presbyterian Church. He drew up many of the church's foundational documents and was given the honor of preaching the opening sermon at the first General Assembly in 1789.

At that first assembly there were 188 ministers present, 97 of whom were from Princeton, 52 of those being Witherspoon's former pupils. Given his stature as senior statesmen and as the personal mentor for over a quarter of the commissioners the statement on slavery in 1787 undoubtedly reflected Witherspoon's own beliefs and may have been drafted by him. Here in full is the statement on slavery adopted by the Presbyterian Church in 1787.

It's a few paragraphs but is worth hearing in its entirety. The Synod of New York and Philadelphia do highly approve of the general principles in favor of universal liberty that prevail in America and the interest which many of the states have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery. Yet inasmuch as men introduced into a servile state to a participation of all the privileges of civil society without a proper education and without previous habits of industry may be in many respects dangerous to the community.

Therefore they earnestly recommend it to all the members belonging to their

communion to give those persons who are at present held in servitude such good education as may prepare them for the better enjoyment of freedom. And they moreover recommend that matters wherever they find servants disposed to make a proper improvement of the privilege would give them some share of property to being with or grant them sufficient time and sufficient means of procuring by industry their own liberty at a moderate rate that they may thereby be brought into society with those habits of industry that may render them useful citizens. And finally they recommend it to all the people under their care to use the most prudent measures consistent with the interest and the state of civil society in parts where they live to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery in America.

This long statement may give us the fullest and clearest explanation of Witherspoon's views on slavery and abolition. He did not think men should be forced into slavery but once already enslaved he did not think immediate emancipation would be good for society or good for both slaves. He believed slaves should be educated and treated humanely.

He favored abolition but gradually and eventually. Toward that end Witherspoon encouraged masters to give slaves a share of property thus allowing them to be better prepared for freedom. It seems that Witherspoon likely practiced what he preached by making Fortin Witherspoon a householder of his own and giving him the opportunity to be fully emancipated which he appears to have been shortly after Witherspoon's death.

Witherspoon John Newton and William Wilberforce. Many Americans know of John Newton 1725 to 1807 or if they don't know of Newton directly they've heard his famous hymn Amazing Grace from 1773. What many may not know is that Newton was before his conversion to Christianity a participant in the Atlantic slave trade.

First serving on a slave ship in 1745 and continuing work on slave ships and investing in the slave trade for many years. Although Newton was awakened to God and his sin in 1748 he wrote in 1764 that he was not "a believer in the false sense of the word till a considerable time afterwards." In 1764 Newton began service as an Anglican clergyman. He moved to a church in London in 1780 eventually becoming one of the leading evangelical ministers of his day.

In 1787 Newton published his thoughts upon the African slave trade in which he confessed his own complicity in the slave trade and called for its abolition. Newton was one of the most important influences in the life of William Wilberforce 1759 1833 the acclaimed British leader who committed his life to the abolition of the slave trade. Following an evangelical conversion in 1785 the young MP member of parliament doubted that he should remain in politics.

Wilberforce sought out Newton for counsel who urged him to continue saying quote he was to serve God where he was. While it would be too much to claim that Witherspoon

was a pivotal influence in the lives of Newton and Wilberforce it is worth noting that the three evangelicals were connected at various points. In 1791 the College of New Jersey under Witherspoon's leadership conferred an honorary degree upon Newton.

No doubt the school sensed a spiritual connection with Newton but the degree also suggests implicit support for Newton's role in opposing the slave trade. Both Newton and Wilberforce commended Witherspoon's theological writings especially his treatise on regeneration 1764. Newton said it was the best book he had read on the subject while Wilberforce for his part recommended the book often gave it away to friends and penned a complimentary essay in 1823 for a new edition of the work.

If Witherspoon had been seen as a friend of slavery and an enemy of abolition in his own time it is unlikely that Newton and Wilberforce would have thought of him so highly and praised his work so unreservedly conclusion. In all of this we can still wish that Witherspoon had moved more quickly to free slaves in his own life or made the case for final abolition with more urgency. Indeed New Jersey would become the last northern estate to abolish slavery doing only so in 1866 a year after the Civil War ended.

But considering the totality of his teaching and his personal example in the issue of slavery we ought to question any assessment that makes Witherspoon out to be someone deeply enmeshed in slavery throughout his life or in favor of the indefinite perpetuation of slavery. There is little doubt that Witherspoon was more enlightened on the issue of slavery than many of his generation and less personally complicit in the evils of slavery than men like Jefferson, Madison, Washington, Franklin and many of our country's most celebrated founders. Witherspoon was respected in his day as a great theologian, an exemplary college president and quote an animated son of liberty whose leadership and sacrifice did much to advance the cause of the American Revolution and to establish the governing principles of the New Republic.

Even on the issue of slavery though compromised by our standards he showed himself to be moving in the right direction and called others to do the same. Witherspoon's legacy deserves to be commemorated by the Scottish, by Americans, by Presbyterians and yes by Princetonians too.

(dramatic music)