

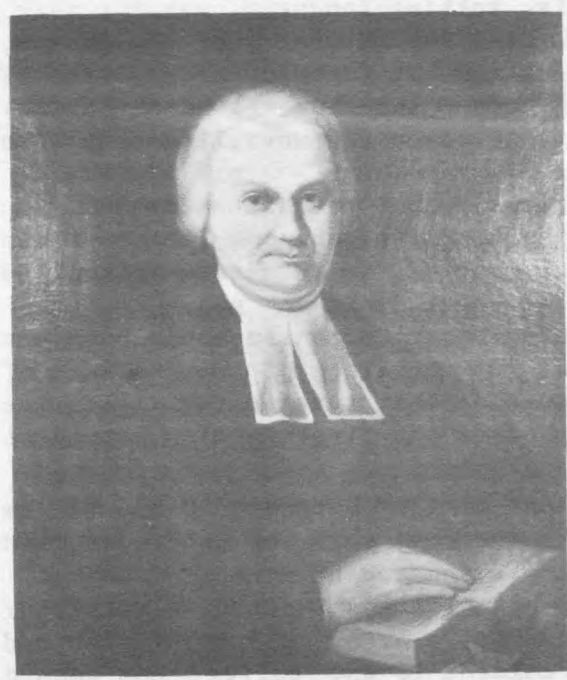
STORIES of New Jersey

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44 Chestnut Street, Newark, New Jersey

JOHN WITHERSPOON



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Among the signers of the Declaration of Independence were many jurists, a number of merchants and landowners, and a scattering of doctors. In this company John Witherspoon of New Jersey was unique. He was the only minister and educator, president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University); moreover, he had been here for only eight years.

Witherspoon's entire life had been a preparation for the part he was to play in founding the Republic. He was born in the parish of Yester, village of Gifford, near Edinburgh, Scotland, the first of six children. The date of his birth is not known, but he was baptized on February 10, 1723. His father, James, was minister of the parish and his male ancestors as far back as he knew had been Presbyterian ministers.

John's mother undertook his elementary education, and it is said that at the age of four he was able to read the Bible and soon after to repeat nearly all of the New Testament. His formal education commenced at the grammar school in Haddington, four miles from his home, where he walked each day. At 13 he was ready for the university, but this was considered only moderately remarkable in those days.

At the University of Edinburgh he took the conventional course and received the Master of Arts degree when he was 16. He remained for four years more to complete his preparation for the ministry and received his license to preach in 1743. Two years later he was ordained and became minister at Beith in Ayrshire, Scotland, at an annual wage of what would now be about \$90 together with 79 bolls of meal and a farm of 31 acres.

The new minister had been at his post for hardly a year when he had his first taste of political struggle. Charles Edward Stuart was making a bid for the throne of England on the basis of his hereditary right. Witherspoon promptly raised a company of militia "in defense of our only rightful, and lawful Sovereign, King George," but was told that its services were not needed. He dismissed the company and with his beadle acting as sword-bearer went on to the impending battle of Falkirk. He arrived there just in time to be a spectator of Charles' last victory. The two were arrested on suspicion and thrown into jail.