

STORIES of New Jersey

ly convinced that the colonies' quarrel with England was completely justified.

It became John Witherspoon's special function to rally New Jersey and the Presbyterians of the country and to guide them along the path which was to lead to the Revolution. Through his preaching and teaching he succeeded. One British commentator said: "He poisons the minds of his young students, and through them the continent."

It was poison that the president of the College of New Jersey dispensed--the kind of poison that destroys oppression. It was a positive and unswerving belief in freedom and democracy.

On June 6, 1774, at a meeting in Freehold Witherspoon was made one of the nine members of the Committee of Correspondence of Somerset County. On July 21 all the county committees met at New Brunswick to elect delegates to the Continental Congress. Although the minutes of that meeting have not been preserved, it appears certain that Witherspoon and the others from Somerset exercised a decisive influence. The resolutions of the New Brunswick meeting covering loyalty to the King, opposition to taxation without representation and other points follow quite closely the phraseology of the program and policies outlined in advance by the Somerset committee.

With New Jersey's work done for the moment, Witherspoon's attention turned to the impending Continental Congress, and he set down his ideas in an essay, *Thoughts on American Liberty*. Democracy, he pointed out, was quite impossible unless Congress really represented the people of America. Consequently, he thought it wrong for some of the colonies to allow their assemblies to elect the congressional representatives. He felt that the primary object of the coming Congress would be to unite the colonies, to make them one body for the defense of all and to assure the people of Great Britain that the American people would not submit to oppression voluntarily.

He was still loyal to the King, did not believe in separation from England and did not urge violent measures. The following year Witherspoon became chairman of the Somerset Committee of Correspondence, and soon after was elected to the provincial congress which met at Burlington in June 1776. By now he was an open advocate of complete independence. The Somerset delegation voted throughout the proceedings as one man to abolish the last vestiges of royal government in New Jersey and to set up in its place the people's own democratic forms. Their views were adopted, and Witherspoon was appointed to the committee to arrange for the arrest of William Franklin, New Jersey's royal governor.

Together with four other New Jersey men--Richard Stockton, Abraham Clark, Francis Hopkinson and John Hart--who had been in the vanguard of the movement for separation from England, Witherspoon was elected to the Continental Congress. Though in the colonies for only eight years, Witherspoon could feel that he was in part at least responsible for this moment of action. The delegates arrived in Philadelphia Friday, June 28, 1776, at a most crucial moment in the affairs of the colonies: the debate on separation was almost completed and Congress was about to adopt a resolution of independence. The draft of the resolution was read and was ordered held over until Monday. On Monday action was postponed again so that the New Jersey delegation could review the proceedings it had missed. Perhaps it was during the ensuing discussion that a remark attributed to Witherspoon was made. An opponent of separation declared that "the people are not ripe for a Declaration of Independence," to which Witherspoon replied, "In my judgement, sir, we are not only ripe, but rotting."

There is also a tradition that it was Witherspoon who made the "nick of time" speech which weighted the balance of a divided Congress in favor of separation. "There is a tide in the affairs of men--a nick of time," the speaker