

John Witherspoon (1723-1794)



Key Designation: “The Shaper of those who Shaped America”
(Perhaps the most influential man in early America)

Key Background Information:

- ◆ Reading the Bible by age 4
- ◆ Born in Scotland to an Irish Presbyterian Minister who was a strong biblical preacher
- ◆ Became a Scottish Presbyterian minister as well
- ◆ 1776- the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence
- ◆ lost two sons in the Revolutionary War

Key Events:

- ◆ May 17, 1776- Led the Continental Congress to declare the first National Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer
- ◆ Help draft the Articles of Confederation
- ◆ President from 1768-1794 of what became known as Princeton
- ◆ Known as a true evangelical opponent of the moderate party
- ◆ 1789- led a movement to abolish slavery

Key Ideas:

- ◆ Strongly supported the Revolutionary War
- ◆ Believed strongly in natural law revealing public ethics and morality for government officials. But moral law is more fully explicated in the Christian faith.
- ◆ Believed the Christian faith, and Christians should dominate public policy and leadership positions. With this in mind, he served in Congress from June 1776 to 1782
- ◆ Strongly believed in an educated ministry, which led him to sacrifice personally and financially to rebuild “The College of New Jersey” (Princeton) after the Revolutionary War.
- ◆ Advocate of “Scottish Commonsense Realism” as a basic philosophy.

Key Work:

- ◆ 1776- The sermon "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men" becomes one of the clarion calls for the Revolution, and results in his election to the Continental Congress, where he was appointed Chaplain by its President John Hancock.

Key Results

- ◆ Had a part in the education of numerous founding Fathers, including James Madison, William Bradford, and Aaron Burr. Others include: 49 United States Congressmen, 37 Judges, 28 U.S. Senators, 12 members of the Continental Congress, 10 Cabinet officers, 3 Supreme Court Justices, and 1 President
- ◆ Will help draft the first formal government for the United States in the Articles of Confederation.