

American Minute with Bill Federer

"A Republic must either reserve its Virtue or lose its Liberty" - Rev. John Witherspoon, Signer of Declaration of Independence

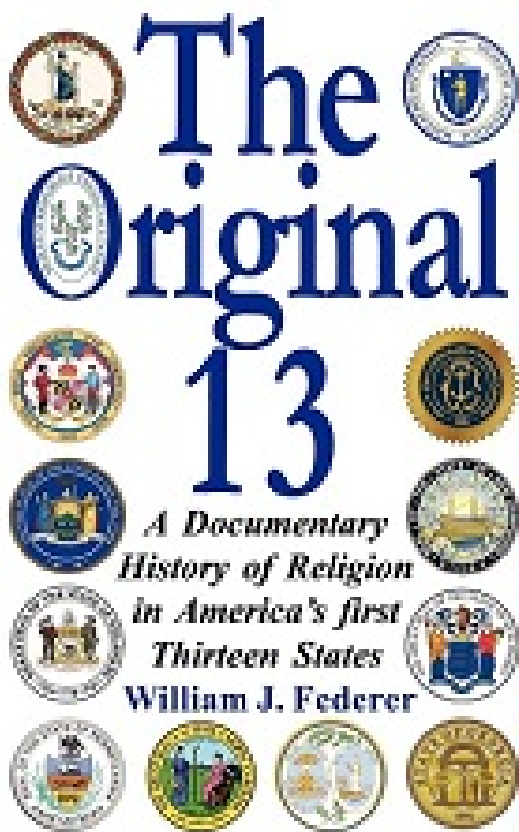
John Witherspoon was a colonial pastor who signed the Declaration of Independence.

He was born in **Scotland** on February 5, 1723.

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[The Original 13-A
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A descendant of Protestant Reformer **John Knox, Witherspoon** was educated at the **University of Edinburgh, Scotland**, and afterwards served as a **Presbyterian pastor**.

His writings brought him to the attention of the trustees of the **College of New Jersey**, who sent

Benjamin Rush and **Richard Stockton** to **Scotland** to persuade him and his wife, **Elizabeth**, to come to the American colonies.

Benjamin Rush and **Richard Stockton** later joined **John Witherspoon** in signing the **Declaration of**

Independence.

Sailing to America in 1768, **John Witherspoon** became the President of the **College of New Jersey**, which was later renamed **Princeton University**.



There, **Witherspoon** taught 12 members of the Continental Congress, and 9 of the 55 writers of the U.S. Constitution, including **James Madison**.



Witherspoon's other **Princeton students** included:

- 1 U.S. Vice-President,
- 3 Supreme Court Justices,
- 10 Cabinet Members,
- 13 Governors,
- 28 U.S. Senators,
- 49 U.S. Congressmen,
- 37 judges, and
- 114 ministers.



John Witherspoon was elected as a delegate from **New Jersey** to the **Continental Congress**.

He declared:

"Gentlemen, **New Jersey** is ready to **vote for independence** ... The country is not only ripe for independence, but we are in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it!"

On note, is that **John Witherspoon**, a **clergyman**, signed the **Declaration of Independence**.

Clergymen were often **the most educated individuals** in their communities.

Whereas most **Church of England ministers** held **allegiance to the King** and left for England when the Revolution began, **patriot pastors** supported the American cause.



Pastors preached on the topics of:

- self-government;
- government from the consent of the govern;
- purpose of government to secure God-given rights;
- rights of conscience;
- equality before the law;
- freedom to speech;
- freedom to assemble;
- freedom of press;
- self-defense;
- the right to possess and bear arms;
- no taxation without representation; and
- trial by a jury of peers, rather than a partisan, king appointed judge.



President Calvin Coolidge

acknowledged in his address at the 150th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, in Philadelphia, July 5, 1926:

"The principles of human

relationship which went into the **Declaration of Independence** ... are found in the **texts**, the **sermons**, and the **writings** of the early colonial **clergy** who were earnestly undertaking to instruct their congregations in the great mystery of how to live.

They preached **equality** because they believed in the **fatherhood of God** and the **brotherhood of man**. They justified **freedom** by the text that we are **all created in the divine image**, all partakers of the divine spirit ...

Placing every man on a plane where he acknowledged no superiors, where **no one possessed any right to rule over him**, he must inevitably **choose his own rulers** through a system of **self-government** ...

In those days **such doctrines** would scarcely have been permitted to flourish and spread **in any other country** ...

In order that they might have **freedom to express these thoughts** and opportunity to put them into action, **whole congregations** with their **pastors** had migrated to the colonies ..."

Coolidge added:

"Rev. Thomas Hooker of Connecticut as early as 1638, when he said in a sermon before the General Court that:

'The foundation of authority is laid in the **free consent of the people** ... The **choice of public magistrates** belongs unto **the people** by God's own allowance.'

This doctrine found wide acceptance among the **nonconformist clergy** who later made up the **Congregational Church**.

... The great apostle of this movement was the



Rev. John Wise
of Massachusetts.

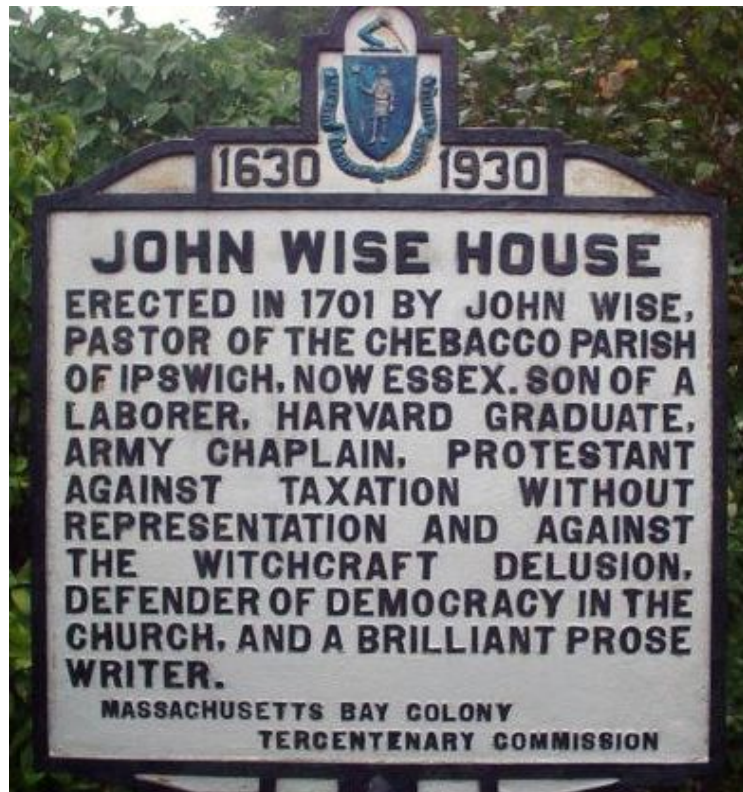
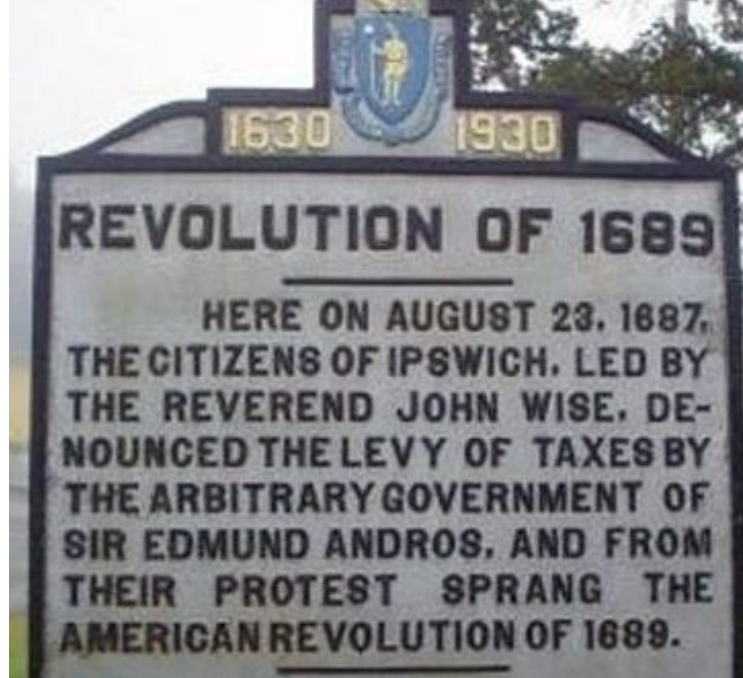
He was one of the leaders of the revolt against the royal governor Andros in 1687, for which he suffered imprisonment ...

His works were reprinted in 1772 and have been declared to have been nothing less than a **textbook of liberty** for our Revolutionary fathers ...

... That these ideas were prevalent in Virginia is further revealed by the **Declaration of Rights**, which was prepared by **George Mason** and presented to the general assembly on May 27, 1776.

This document asserted **popular sovereignty** and **inherent natural rights**, but confined the doctrine of **equality** to the assertion that '**All men are created equally free and independent.**'

It can scarcely be imagined that **Jefferson** was unacquainted with what had been done in his own

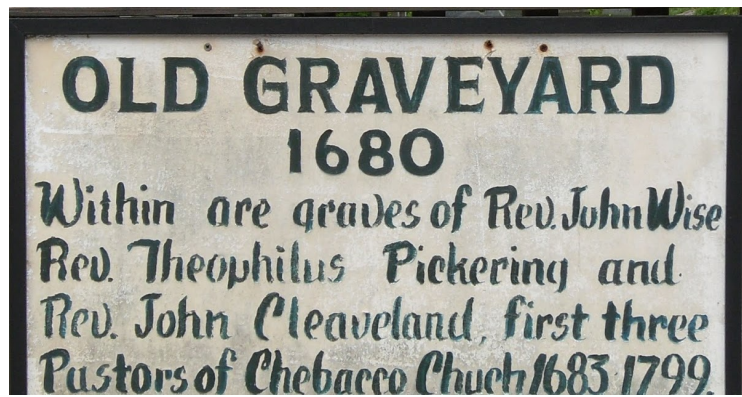


Commonwealth of Virginia when he took up the task of drafting the **Declaration of Independence ...**"

Coolidge
continued:

"These thoughts can very largely be traced back to what **Rev. John Wise** was writing

in 1710. He said ... '**Democracy is Christ's government in church and state.**'



Here was the doctrine of **equality, popular sovereignty,** and the substance of the theory of **inalienable rights** clearly asserted by **Wise** at the opening of the eighteenth century, just as we have the principle of the consent of the governed stated by **Hooker** as early as 1638.

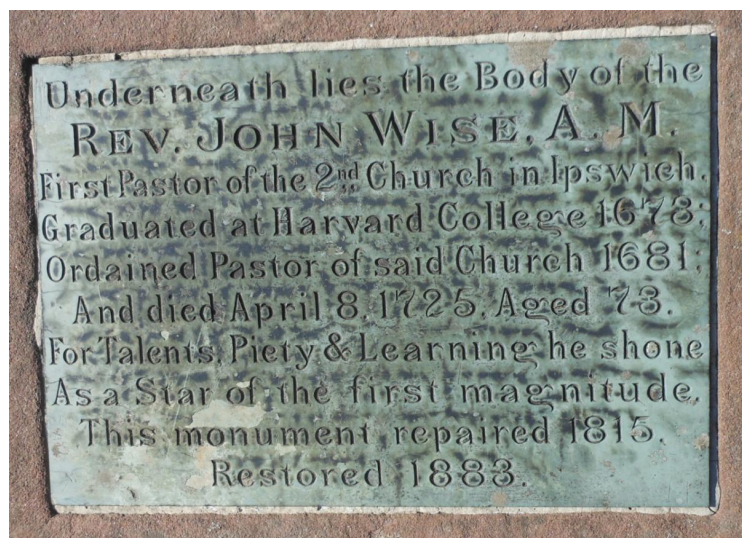
When we take all these circumstances into consideration, it is but natural that the first paragraph of the **Declaration of Independence** should open with a reference to **Nature's God** and should close in the final paragraphs with an appeal to the **Supreme Judge of the world** and an assertion of a firm reliance on **Divine Providence ...**"

Coolidge
concluded:

"In its main feature the **Declaration of Independence** is a great **spiritual document ...**

Equality, liberty, popular

sovereignty, the rights of man - these are not elements which we can see and touch ... They have their source



and their roots in the **religious convictions** ...

Unless the faith of the American in these **religious convictions** is to endure, the principles of our **Declaration** will perish. We cannot continue to enjoy the result if we neglect and abandon the cause ...

If anyone wishes to deny their truth ... the only direction in which he can proceed ... is ... **backward** toward the time when there was **no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people** ...

... The duly authorized **expression of the will of the people** has a **divine sanction** ...



The ultimate sanction of law rests on the **righteous authority** of the **Almighty** ...

It was in the contemplation of **these truths** that the fathers made their **Declaration** and adopted their **Constitution** ...

Their intellectual life centered around the **meeting-house**. They were intent upon **religious worship** ... While scantily provided with other literature, there was a wide acquaintance with the **Scriptures** ..."

President Coolidge continued:

"We live in an age of science and of abounding accumulation of material

things. These did not create the Declaration. Our Declaration created them.

The things of the spirit come first.

Unless we cling to that, all our material prosperity, overwhelming though it may appear, will turn to a barren sceptre in our grasp ... **We must not sink into a pagan materialism.**

We must cultivate the **reverence** which they had for the things that are **holy**. We must follow the **spiritual** and **moral** leadership which they showed.

We must keep replenished, that they may glow with a more compelling flame, **the altar fires** before which they **worshipped."**



Because of the activism of **Rev. John Wise**, his hometown of **Ipswich, Massachusetts**, calls itself "**The Birthplace of American Independence.**"

Through his wife, **John Wise** was a great-uncle of **John Adams**.

Rev. John Wise stated in a sermon at Chebacco Parish of Ipswich (Essex), circa 1700:

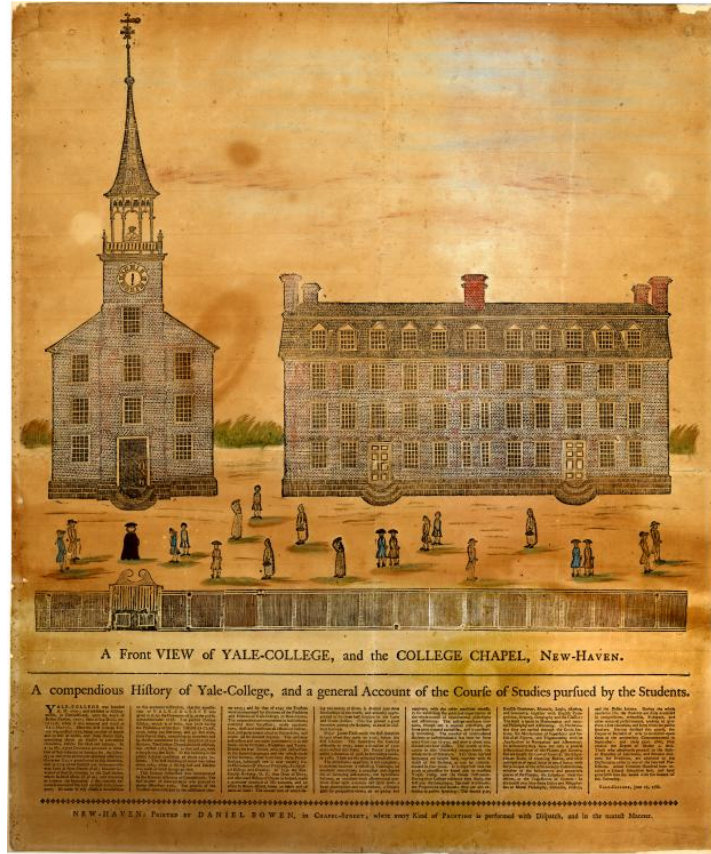
“The first human subject and original of civil power is **the people** ... and when they are **free**, they may set up what species of government they please. **The end of all good government** is ... the good of **every man** in all his **rights, his life, liberty, estate.**”

Many of the founders, or their wives, were **children of ministers or deacons.**

Many graduated from institutions founded as **seminaries** to train **clergy** and **missionaries.**

Numerous **founders** were both **political leaders** and, at some time in their career, **chaplains, ministers or preachers**, such as:

- Abraham Baldwin (Georgia);
- Lyman Hall (Georgia);
- John Peter Muhlenberg (Pennsylvania);
- Frederick Muhlenberg (Pennsylvania)
- Robert Treat Paine (Massachusetts);

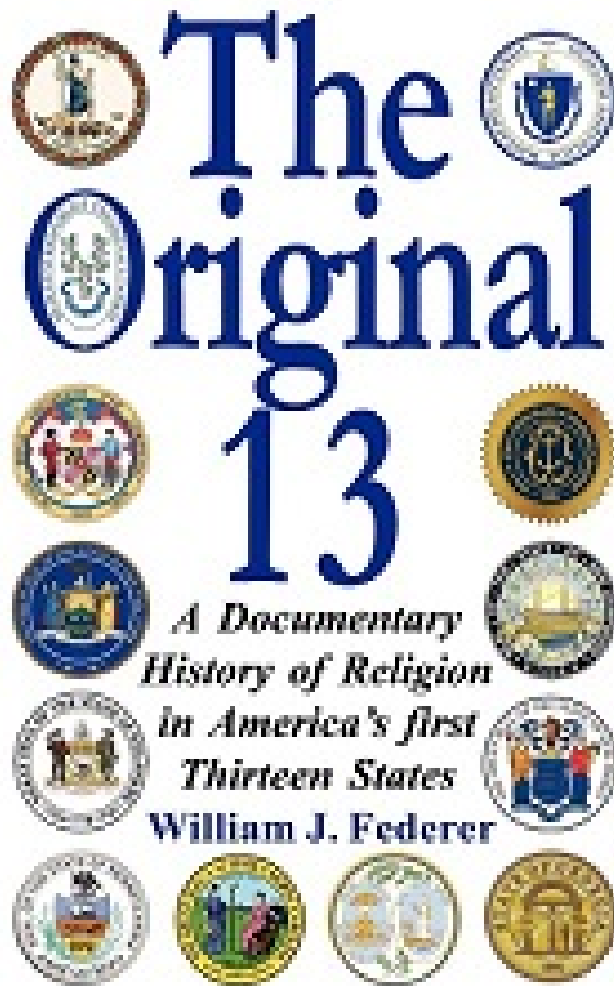


- Jonathan Trumbull (Connecticut);
- Hugh Williamson (North Carolina);

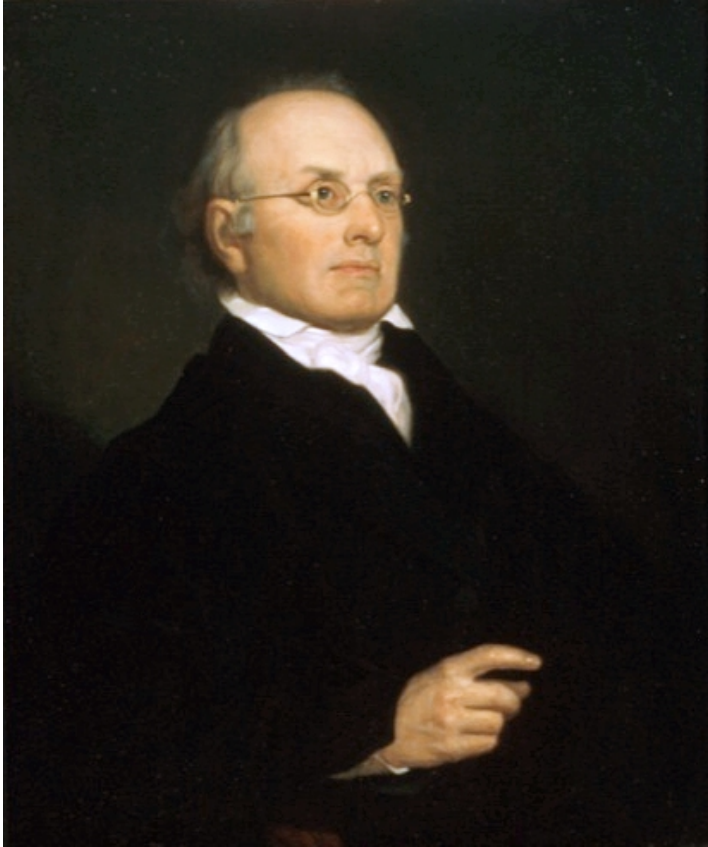
Many founders supported **Bible organizations, societies for the propagation of the faith, and abolitionist societies.**

Often **overlooked by secular scholars** is that when the founders set up **state governments:**

- nine of the original state constitutions required all officeholders to be Protestant;
- three required officeholders to just be Christian;
- and one, Rhode Island, had no religious requirement, as it was thought that unscrupulous politicians would be tempted to say they believe just to be elected, and that would be hypocritical.



Since **religion** was under **states' jurisdiction**, the founders placed a **restraining order** on the power of the **Federal government** - the



First Amendment.

Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story wrote in *Commentaries on the Constitution*, 1833:

"The **whole power over the subject of religion** is left exclusively to the **State governments**, to be acted upon according to their

own sense of justice and the **State Constitutions.**"

In the **Continental Congress**, **John Witherspoon** served on **120 Congressional Committees**.



He was a **primary proponent** of the **separation of powers**, insisting that since man had a fallen, selfish, human nature, there needed to be **checks** be placed on **the power of government**.

Rev. Witherspoon explained:

"The corruption of our nature ... is the foundation-stone of the doctrine of redemption.



Nothing can be more absolutely necessary to **true religion**, than a clear conviction of **the sinfulness of our nature and state ...**"

He continued:

"Men of lax and corrupt principles take great delight in **speaking to the praise of human nature**, and extolling its dignity, without distinguishing what it was at its first creation from what it is in **its present fallen state ...**

The **evil of sin** appears from every page of ... the history of the world ...

Nothing is more plain from **Scripture** ... than that man by nature is in fact incapable of recovery without the power



of **God** specially interposed."



The same day the **Continental Congress** declared a **Day of Fasting**, May 17, 1776, **Rev. Witherspoon** told his **Princeton students**:

"If **your cause** is just, if **your principles** are pure, and if **your conduct** is prudent, **you need not fear** the multitude of opposing hosts.

He is the **best friend to American liberty**, who is most sincere and active in promoting **true and undefiled religion**, and who sets himself with the greatest firmness to **bear down profanity and immorality** of every kind.

Whoever is an avowed **enemy of God**, I scruple (hesitate) not to call him an **enemy of his country ...**"

Witherspoon added:

"It is in the **man of piety** and **inward principle**, that we may expect to find the **uncorrupted patriot**, the **useful citizen**, and the **invincible soldier ...**

God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and



establishment of both."



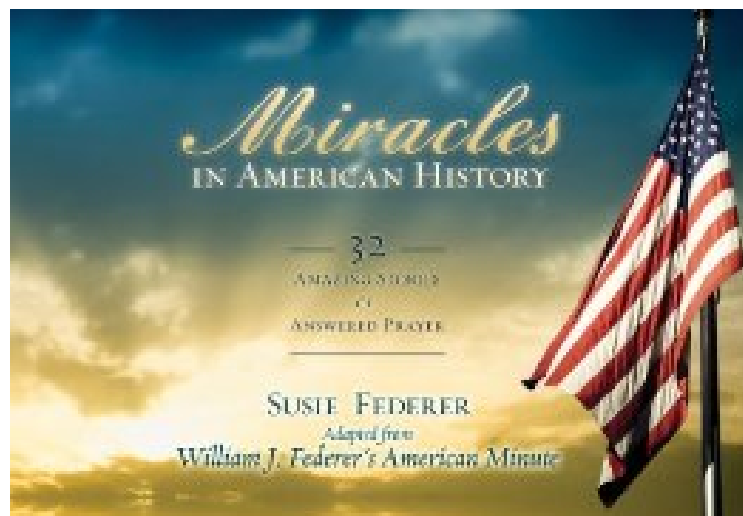
Witherspoon's sacrifice for the **patriotic cause** was personal, as he **lost two sons** in the Revolutionary War.

When peace was made with Britain, **John Witherspoon** exhorted all in his "Thanksgiving Sermon" to live for:

"... the Glory of God, the **public interest of religion** and the good of others, as **civil liberty** cannot be long preserved without **virtue**.

A **Republic** must either **preserve its virtue** or **lose its liberty**."

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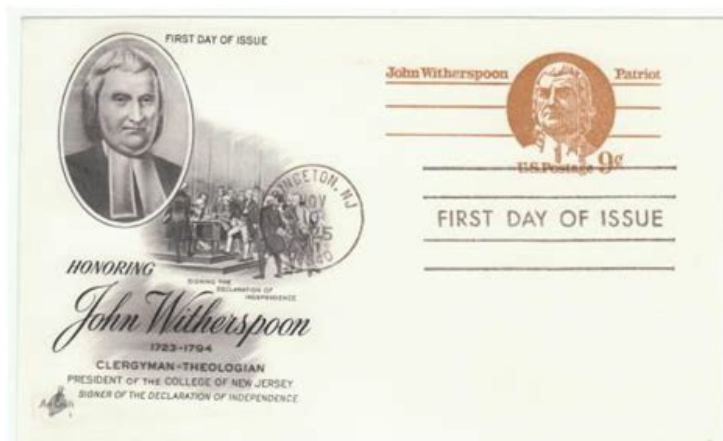
John

Witherspoon
resisted "tyranny
of conscience,"
citing:

"There is **not a single instance** in history, in which **civil liberty was lost**, and **religious liberty preserved** entire ...

If therefore we yield up our ... **property**, we at the same time deliver the **conscience** into bondage ...

Governments are to **defend** and **secure rights of conscience.**"



In his Pastoral Letter, **Rev. John Witherspoon** explained:

"Universal profligacy (immoral behavior) makes

a nation ripe for divine judgments and is the natural means of bringing them to **ruin**;

Reformation of manners is of the utmost necessity in

our present distress."

In his *Lectures on Divinity*, **Rev. John Witherspoon** stated:

"Religion is the grand concern of us all ... the **salvation of our souls** is the one thing needful."



After his wife died in 1789, **John Witherspoon** headed up a committee in the New Jersey legislature to **abolish slavery**.

John

Witherspoon died near **Princeton, New Jersey**, on **NOVEMBER 15, 1794**.

John Adams he described **Rev. Witherspoon** as:

"A true **son of liberty** ... but first, he was a **son of the Cross**."

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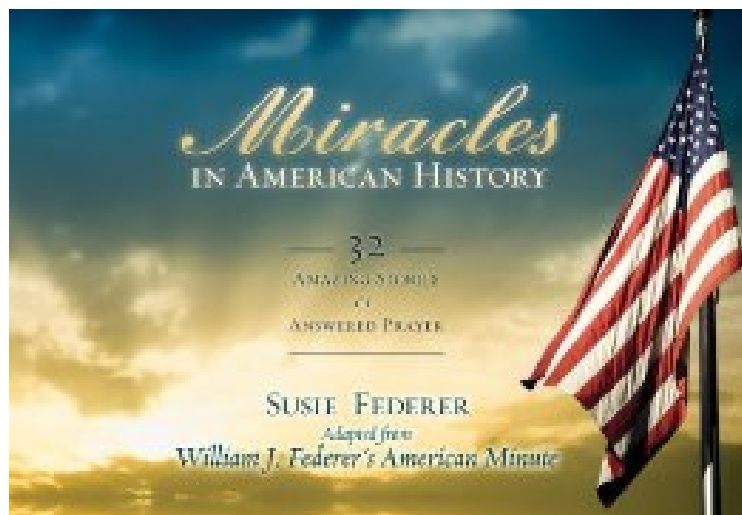
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