

# WITHERSPOON.

PROCEEDINGS AND ADDRESSES

AT THE

LAYING OF THE CORNER-STONE

AND AT THE

UNVEILING OF THE STATUE OF

JOHN WITHERSPOON,

IN FAIRMOUNT PARK, PHILADELPHIA.

COMPILED BY THE

REV. WM. P. BREED, D.D.

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of years to come will attract the attention and evoke the admiration of the millions who will pass in their carriage and on foot along that beautiful Lansdowne drive.

DISCOURSE OF DR. PLUMER.

The whole enterprise received a most fitting climax in the services of Sabbath evening, the 22d of October, when, in the West Spruce Street Presbyterian church, the Rev. W. S. Plumer, D. D., LL.D., of Columbia, S. C., delivered, by request of the Centennial Committee of the General Assembly, in the presence of a large and intelligent congregation, the following eloquent discourse upon the life and writings of Dr. Witherspoon.

JOHN WITHERSPOON, D. D., LL.D., HIS LIFE, TIMES,  
WRITINGS AND SERVICES.

“Most men live and die unknown beyond a narrow circle. Their memory soon fades from earth; but if in this life they walked with God, their record is on high, and in the best sense they shall be held in everlasting remembrance.

“A smaller portion of mankind are of low and vicious tastes and habits. They are the tenants of the abodes of infamy and wretchedness. They are led on till they fall into the worst vices and crimes. For fame they have infamy. They have notoriety, but it is with disgrace. Their names rot. They are covered with ignominy.

“A still smaller part of the human family rise high in personal worth and accomplishments, in usefulness and honor. They are by Providence favored with good opportunities, and they embrace them. Their names are enrolled among the good, the wise and the great.

“Such men are helpful to each other. Like the stars, they are often seen in constellations. The example of one draws many. This remark is illustrated through the eighteenth century. It was ushered in by bright lights, though some of them were great blessings, while others were not. Literature then greatly revived. In many places a marvelous spirit prevailed. Both truth and error, both virtue and vice, had giants for their defence. Addison, born 1672, Pope, born 1688, and their friends and contemporaries, mightily stirred the British mind in the early part of the last century. At the same time, Voltaire, born 1694, Rousseau and Diderot, both born 1712, and their allies, were preparing to shake continental Europe. On the other hand, Turgot in France, born 1727, and Necker in Switzerland, born 1732, gave to the world new and wondrous views and thoughts on finance and the best modes of making a nation great. Still later Mirabeau, born 1749, and Napoleon Bonaparte, born 1769, were rising up to move the world, one with his eloquence, the other with his military genius. If we return to England, we see Johnson, born 1709, early giving token that a man of pro-

digious powers had come into the world. Lord Chatham, born 1708, Edmund Burke, born 1718, Charles James Fox, born 1749, William Pitt, born 1759, and several of their contemporaries, would have made great any age or country. Nor was distinction confined to the Old World. The British colonies shared largely in like honors. In 1706 was born Benjamin Franklin; in 1732, George Washington; in 1735, John Adams; in 1743, Thomas Jefferson; in 1750, James Madison; in 1755, John Marshall; in 1757, Alexander Hamilton; and in 1758, James Monroe—all of them illustrious and some of them peerless.

“The same century and people were remarkable for many fine specimens of eloquence. George Whitefield, born in 1714, Samuel Davies, born 1724, James Waddel, born (in Ireland) 1739, Patrick Henry, born 1736, and Lord Erskine, born 1750, wielded a power that would have been felt in any age. These estimates are not extravagant. When Patrick Henry heard Waddel preach on the creation, he said, ‘When I was listening to that man, it seemed to me that he could have made a world.’ Of Henry’s eloquence, Jefferson said it was ‘bold, grand and overwhelming. . . . He gave examples of eloquence such as had probably never been excelled.’ Of Franklin, Turgot said, ‘*Eripuit cœlo fulmen, sceptrumque tyrannis.*’ Lord Chatham spoke of Franklin as ‘one whom all Europe held in high estimation for his knowledge and

wisdom, and ranked with our Boyles and Newtons—who was an honor not only to the English nation, but to human nature.’

“And what shall be said of Washington? The strength of his character is found in its symmetry, propriety and high moral principles. He felt exquisitely, but his passions never dictated a single measure of his life. Jefferson’s testimony is clear and has been accepted by mankind. Of Washington he says, ‘His integrity was the most pure, his justice the most inflexible, I have ever known, no motives of interest or consanguinity, of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision.’ Lord Brougham says, ‘It will be the duty of the historian and the sage, in all ages, to omit no occasion of commemorating this illustrious man, and until time shall be no more will a test of the progress which our race has made in wisdom and virtue be derived from the veneration paid to the immortal name of Washington.’

“In such times, and with such contemporaries, there was born in Haddingtonshire, Scotland, February 5, 1722, John Witherspoon, the son of a pious, faithful, scholarly minister of the gospel, and a lineal descendant of John Knox of blessed memory.

“At an early age he was sent to school at Haddington. Here his good habits, quick conception and rapid progress gave assurance that one day he should fill a large space in the eye of mankind.

From fourteen to twenty-one years of age he attended the University of Edinburgh. In each class he was respectable; in the divinity class he displayed much soundness of criticism and remarkable precision of thought.

“Leaving the university, he was invited to be the assistant and successor of his honored father, but he preferred to go to the West of Scotland, and was pleasantly settled in the parish of Beith. Ere long he was called to the town of Paisley. Here both his usefulness and his reputation rapidly increased. His fame went abroad, and he was soon invited to Rotterdam in the Low Countries, to Dublin in Ireland, and to Dundee in Scotland. All these proposals he declined. He was soon after chosen President of the College of New Jersey, at Princeton. At first he declined, but on a renewal of the invitation he accepted, and reached America in August, 1768, in the forty-seventh year of his age. His predecessors in office were eminent ministers of the gospel—Jonathan Dickinson, Aaron Burr, Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Davies and Samuel Findley, all names that cannot be mentioned without profound respect.

“In the old country Dr. Witherspoon had established a high reputation. This followed him to America, and gave him great advantage in his labors for the college, in promotion of whose interests he went South as far as Virginia and North as far as Massachusetts. His scholarship

was sound and varied. His administrative talents were uncommon. His whole bearing was well suited to inspire confidence and esteem from all classes.

“ But the troublous times of the American Revolution were approaching. Conflict with the mother-country was imminent. Soon the world beheld an amazing spectacle—thirteen colonies with a thousand miles of unprotected coast, and containing less than three millions of souls, arrayed in war against the tremendous power of the British empire. For a season the college was closed, and in 1776, Dr. Witherspoon, at the age of fifty-four, took his seat in the Continental Congress, and with his compatriots signed the Declaration of Independence. For seven years he held this post. His exact knowledge of parliamentary usages, his native wit, his ready apprehension, his moral heroism and his profound acquaintance with human nature and constitutional law commanded universal respect. His courage was indomitable. No sad reverses or disasters, no timidity or faithlessness in others, could damp his ardor or blench his purpose. As an adviser he had few equals. On public affairs time showed his counsels to be excellent. On questions of the commissariat, finance and the public credit, on the proper conduct of the war and like matters, his judgment was outspoken, unfaltering and very safe.

“ When the Constitution of the United States was

framed, Dr. Witherspoon's wisdom bore an honorable part. But at no time did he pretermit the character or duties of a minister of God's word, preaching whenever he had opportunity.

"The war being closed and the form of government settled, Dr. Witherspoon bent his energies to the reviving of the college—no easy task in those days of want and poverty. The heraldry of colleges is registered and read only in their Alumni. A few of these—Madison among the number—were coming prominently into notice. But one swallow does not make a summer, and a few students cannot give a college renown. Dr. Witherspoon was also a laborious preacher of the gospel. For these things he laid aside almost all other pursuits.

"Having reached the age of seventy, he found his bodily infirmities much increased. More than two years before his death he was blind and otherwise a sufferer. But his patience, fortitude and cheerfulness never forsook him. Pain and weakness could not extinguish his ardor. He worked on to the very last. It was an affecting sight when this venerable man was led into the pulpit, and there lifted to heaven his sightless eyeballs in fervent addresses to the throne of grace in behalf of sinful men, and poured out his heart in solemn appeals to his dying fellow-men in behalf of the claims of God. Through life he preached from memory. One or two readings of his written dis-

courses, even by another person, put him in full possession of the contents of his manuscript. He enjoyed the full exercise of his mental powers to the day of his death. He departed this life November 15, 1794, in the seventy-third year of his age.

“The writings of Dr. Witherspoon are very various, both in subject and in style.

“1. His theological writings consist of sermons, essays and lectures. There are forty-seven sermons in which are discussed nearly all the leading or vital truths of Christianity, with many kindred matters. Then we have his essay on justification, covering forty-eight pages, and his practical treatise on regeneration, covering one hundred and sixty-three pages. Then we have his seventeen lectures on divinity. These are quite short, averaging less than seven pages each. Then we have his inquiry into the Scripture-meaning of charity. Of all these writings no one piece is so full and complete as that on regeneration. That on justification is next in order. But if one will allow for their length, several of the sermons are as worthy of attention as any of his works. All his theological writings are remarkable for perspicuity, soundness, earnestness, a just moderation and practicalness. It is risking nothing to say that they have had a very powerful influence in moulding and establishing the views of large numbers of theologians in all countries where the English language is spoken.

This remark is especially true of Ireland, Scotland and North America. It would be a great contribution to our popular theological literature if this land could be well supplied with Witherspoon on regeneration. Will not some one furnish means to do it?

“2. Dr. Witherspoon’s writings on moral matters must not be passed without notice. Of these the most prominent and important are a serious inquiry into the nature and effects of the stage, lectures on moral philosophy and letters on marriage. In all these are found much close thinking, an excellent judgment and sound speech that cannot be condemned. The piece on the stage was occasioned by the production of the play called ‘Douglas,’ written by a minister of the Church of Scotland. Dr. Witherspoon’s views on this subject are both calm and spirited. The essay is easily understood; it shows sufficient learning; it is fair and cogent. The lectures on moral philosophy are the most unfinished of all Dr. Witherspoon’s works. He wholly refused to publish them himself, but after his death his students loudly called for them. In them are many good things, but their appearance has not increased their author’s reputation. It is very doubtful, as a question of morality, whether it is ever right to give to the world writings whose author was known to be averse to their publication. And every production is the worse for not receiving the final revision of the author for the press.

“3. Then we have Dr. Witherspoon’s views on many matters respecting public affairs and the political questions of his times. These are all worthy of perusal. Those who control the financial affairs of this country might be both startled and profited by a careful examination of Dr. Witherspoon’s essay on money. He was an independent thinker, and freely gave his views on most of the questions which arrested the attention of Americans during their great struggle for independence. Some of his essays for the periodical press, no less than some of his speeches in Congress, are well adapted to make the thoughtful think.

“4. Then we have Dr. Witherspoon’s humorous productions. Some of these are still read with avidity. They are so racy and so spirited that one can hardly find anything better suited to sharpen his wits. The most keen, pungent and highly finished of these productions bears the title of *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*. The irony is very cutting, the sarcasm is very biting, and the ridicule is overwhelming. In the eighteenth century very few things so stirred Scotland as these caustic productions. The celebrated Bishop Warburton mentioned them ‘with particular approbation, and expressed his wish that the Church of England had such a corrector.’ The history of a corporation of servants has in it a rich vein of pure wit hardly less amusing and perhaps more instructive than “Gulliver’s Travels,” by Swift. The recantation

of Benjamin Towne is another production of the same class.

“Dr. Witherspoon’s wit was very uncommon. He was always ready. Whilst crossing the ocean the ship in which he sailed was overtaken by a violent storm. Officers, crew and passengers supposed their end had come. An old sailor, whom Dr. Witherspoon had often and severely reprov’d for his shocking profaneness, during the storm came to the man of God and began to talk piously. At length he said, ‘If we never see land, I hope we are all going to the same place.’ Instantly Dr. Witherspoon replied, ‘I hope we are not.’

“On occasion of meeting a celebrated wit, Dr. Witherspoon accidentally struck his head against a tall mantel-piece, when he said, ‘My head rings.’ ‘It rings, does it?’ said the other. ‘Yes,’ said Witherspoon. ‘That is because it is empty,’ said the wit. Dr. Witherspoon said, ‘Does not yours ring when it is struck?’ The answer was, ‘No.’ ‘That,’ said Witherspoon, ‘is because it is cracked.’

“In a foot-note to his essay on justification Dr. Witherspoon has in a few words fully disposed of Hume’s theory of virtue. True, that subtle and elegant writer had laid himself very liable to contempt by putting wit, genius, health, cleanliness, taper legs and broad shoulders among the virtues. Such men deserve the scorn of serious and good thinkers.

“Dr. Witherspoon must have had great power as a teacher over his pupils. His influence, felt once, was felt for life. Perhaps this continent has produced no man more able in debate than the late William B. Giles, once governor of Virginia. He graduated at Princeton in the class of 1781. Forty-six years after this he thus spoke in the legislature of Virginia :

““It happened to be my fortune in early life to be placed under the care of the late celebrated Dr. Witherspoon, of Princeton College. The doctor, although highly learned, was as much celebrated for the simplicity and elegance of his style and for the brevity of his orations as for the extent and solidity of his erudition. He lectured the class of which I was a member upon eloquence and criticism, and I was always delighted with the exercises in that branch of science. Amidst all the refinement of the doctor’s learning he retained much of the provincial brogue of his native town. He generally approached his class with great familiarity with, “How do ye do, lads?” To which the reply was, “Braly, sir; braly.” He commenced his lecture in the simple style of conversation :

“““Lads, if it should fall to the lot of any of ye, as it may do, to appear upon the theatre of public life, let me impress upon your minds two rules of oratory that are never to be departed from upon any occasion whatever : Ne’er do ye speak unless

ye ha' something to say; and when ye are done, be sure to leave off."'

"If any pronounce these rules to be insufferably irksome, let him find better. The want of adherence to them is the secret of many failures in our day.

"Most of Dr. Witherspoon's writings fall under some one of the foregoing classes, but some of them are so peculiar as not to be easily classified. On these time forbids us to dwell.

"One thing remarkable in most of his writings is their freshness. They never grow stale. One might instance those fine discourses on 'The trial of religious truth by its moral influence,' or 'The charge of sedition and faction against good men, specially faithful ministers, considered and accounted for,' or on 'The nature and extent of visible religion.'

"Of course the services of Dr. Witherspoon were great. As an educator, as a patriot, as a writer, as a safe and profound thinker on topics of public interest, and, above all, as a theologian and preacher, he did great things for the age and the world in which he lived. Perhaps his influence was never greater than at present. Through him many are what they are without knowing that by his means they have been brought to their present line of thought and action. He moulded the minds of those who swayed thousands. It seems highly probable that soon a new and complete edition of

his works will be called for, and will be read with profit and avidity. A man of any force of mind, if familiar with Dr. Witherspoon's writings, could easily consign to merited disgrace not a few of the foolish notions now more or less popular with the masses and with the demagogues of the country.

“Those who revere his memory, therefore, do well and wisely in erecting a public monument which shall tell to the coming generations that if they lack a model to form them to virtue and renown they may study the life, examine the writings and copy the example of John Witherspoon.

“In view of the past, the present and the future, we Americans are bound to think of all the way the Lord our God has led us as a people, and learn to trust the Most High in the darkest hour.

“Savage and barbarous people often speak of their ancestors, but civilized nations are mightily swayed by the memory of their forefathers. When their deeds have been heroic and virtuous, a just regard to them greatly conduces to the public good. When men are both great and good, their power ought to be immense. Men seldom have wise regard to their posterity unless they can look back with admiration on at least some of those from whom they claim descent. In the example of many of the contemporaries of Dr. Witherspoon we see much that was wise, patient and valiant. Let us honor by imitating their virtues. They have left us a rich inheritance. They braved great perils,

they bore great hardships, they practiced severe industry, they subdued the soil to the ploughshare, they reared a lasting monument to their good name in the institutions they left us. Let us, like them, be just to all men, and let us fear none but the Father of nations and of men.

“Our ancestors were an ingenious people. From their day to the present we have had a race of remarkable inventors. Let us encourage all useful arts and contrivances.

“Our fathers put a high estimate on mental culture. In the seventeenth century they founded Harvard College, in Massachusetts, and William and Mary College, in Virginia. In the eighteenth century they established about fifty colleges and universities. In the nineteenth century we have colleges by the hundred, and most of them well deserve the name. Let us largely endow and sacredly guard these noble seats of learning.

“The growth of our country has been marked. In 1790 the whole population of the United States was but 3,927,214 souls. Now some of our single States have more. If such things engender pride, they will work our ruin. But if they make us thoughtful and prudent, they will do us good.

“Let us not be vain and frivolous, selfish and profane. How Washington reprovèd profaneness! How Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin pleaded for the worship of God in our national councils! Let us not foolishly despise such examples.

“Nor let us forget that our principles and conduct will mightily affect those who shall come after us. The next hundred years will probably confirm and establish or shake and shatter our best institutions. What we and our immediate descendants shall do will tell for ages to come. Not a social, civil or moral cause has for centuries past affected any nation whose people now mingle with ours which cause is not this day potential for good or evil in our own land. Such causes do not commonly work rapidly, but they work surely. Their results are inevitable.

“When He who made and governs the world has ends to accomplish, he can be at no loss for fit instruments. Divine prescience always provides them. Our fathers were thus fitted for their work. Let us stand in our lot, girt with truth, having faith in God, intrepidly meeting every call of duty, cultivating a sincere good-will toward all men at home and abroad, and piously leaving all issues in the hands of Him who is in fact and of right the Judge of all the earth.

“Before closing this address permit me to read two short papers. One is from an honored descendant of Dr. Witherspoon. It is dated—

“CAMDEN, S. C., June 30, 1876.

“TO REV. DR. PLUMER,

“REV. AND DEAR SIR: As the lineal descendant of that great and good man Dr. Witherspoon,

I deeply regret that I am unable to attend at the unveiling of his statue.

“His bust that we have I would gladly have taken to Philadelphia. I shall ever feel that I am an American, and deeply grateful to the great Presbyterian family of America for the great blessing vouchsafed to us through the exertions of my great-grandfather and his coadjutors. Oh that the same spirit that actuated them in the hour of their country's peril may now unite the great American family in this Centennial year, knowing no North, no South, no East, no West, but free and happy America!

“Yours, very truly,

“JOHN KNOX WITHERSPOON.’

“The other is from a source honored by all good men in our land. It has been my happiness to spend the last few days in the company of my old friend, that great and good man, Professor Joseph Henry, of the Smithsonian Institute. He has obligingly handed me the following estimate of Dr. Witherspoon :

“He had a mind of great and general powers, harmoniously developed in various directions, capable of analyzing any subject to which his attention might be directed, and of arriving at a clear conception of the fundamental principles on which it was founded. He possessed great facility in de-

ducing logical inferences from general principles, applicable to the affairs of every-day life.

“ ‘With clear conceptions of truth, he had the moral courage and literary ability to advocate it from the pulpit and the press in forcible language and with apt illustrations.

“ ‘As an example of these characteristics, I would refer to his essay on the uses and abuses of paper money, which I do not hesitate to say is one of the best expressions of the fundamental principles of the subject to be found in the English language. It was published at a time of great excitement, when the country was suffering under an unstable currency, and is especially applicable to the condition of our own times.’

“A century ago Dr. Witherspoon and our fathers were on the busy theatre of life. They are gone now. Where shall we be a hundred years hence? Certainly we shall all be in eternity. But will it be a blessed eternity? Will the world be the better for our having lived in it?”

The committee feel that it would be unpardonable to bring this statement to a close without expressing its cordial thanks to the secular press of Philadelphia for its liberality in advertising and its courtesy in noticing our efforts, and also to the *Presbyterian Banner*, of Pittsburg, the *New York Observer* and the *New York Evangelist*, and to the *Christian Instructor*, of Philadelphia, and especially

to *The Presbyterian*, of this city, for the large space allowed in its columns for the advocacy of our cause, and for the warm editorial support constantly rendered us.