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SKETCHES

OF

THE LIVES OF THE SIGNERS

OF THE

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE,

INTENDED PRINCIPALLY

FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS.

BY N. DWIGHT.

New-York :

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197

SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW-YORK, ss.

BE IT REMEMBERED, That on the twenty-second day of April, A.D. 1830, in the fifty-fourth year of the Independence of the United States of America, J. & J. HARPER, of the said District, have deposited in this office the title of a Book, the right whereof they claim as proprietors, in the words following, to wit:

“Sketches of the Lives of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, intended principally for the use of Schools. By N. Dwight.”

In conformity to the act of the Congress of the United States, entitled “An act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts, and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned.” And also to the act, entitled, “An act supplementary to an act, entitled an act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts, and books to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned, and extending the benefits thereof to the arts of designing, engraving, and etching historical and other prints.”

FREDERICK I. BETTS,
Clerk of the Southern District of New-York.

JOHN WITHERSPOON.

THIS venerable gentleman, who was eminently distinguished for his piety, learning, and a strong and powerful mind, as a divine, a president of a seminary of learning, and a statesman; and whose name stands enrolled among those who signed the Declaration of American Independence, was born at Yester, a parish in the vicinity of Edinburgh, in Scotland, on the fifth day of February, 1722. He was lineally descended from the celebrated John Knox, the great and intrepid leader of the Reformation in Scotland. His father was a respectable minister in the church of Scotland, settled in the parish of Yester; and was much respected and beloved by the people of his pastoral charge. He, as might have been expected from such a father, bestowed much care and watchful attention upon the early instruction of his son, to pre-occupy his infant mind with moral and religious impressions, before it should be engrossed with those of an opposite character. Being convinced that it is much easier, by beginning right, to impress the infant mind with right principles, as fast as it opens to receive them, and thus shut out wrong ones, than it is to eradicate the latter, after they have obtained admission through neglect. And he was not disappointed. It was his early wish that his son might be fitted for the gospel ministry; and he was gratified in eventually realizing the object of his wishes. For this care and wisdom of his father, in choice of the object for which he wished to educate his son, and the fidelity with which he attended to its accomplishment, Doctor Witherspoon felt, and often expressed a pious gratitude towards his venerable parent.

At an early age he was placed at the public school in Haddington, where he soon was distinguished for his assiduous application to study, for his superior native powers of mind, and uncommon attainments in learning. Nor was he less distinguished for a discriminating power and quickness of perception, which comprehended whatever subject engaged his attention. With such native talents, thus faithfully improved, he was prepared for an early transfer from the preparatory academic school to the higher seminary, where he was to finish his literary course; qualified to commence his professional studies. He was removed from Haddington

school to the university of Edinburgh, at fourteen years of age. There great credit was awarded him, for his diligence and attainments in the various branches of learning, taught in that eminent seat of science ; and at an early stage of his theological studies, he gave indications of talents in sacred criticism, which characterized him in all his future life. He prosecuted his professional course in the theological hall at the university, and left it at twenty-one years of age, a licensed preacher of the gospel.

Such was the esteem in which he was held in the place of his nativity that the people of his father's parish, invited him to settle with them as an assistant minister with him, stipulating for the right to succeed him in the charge after his father's decease. But having received another invitation from the west of Scotland, to settle in the parish of Beith, he gave the latter his preference ; and was ordained there, with the universal approbation of that congregation. In Beith he labored faithfully in the ministry several years, enjoying the esteem and affections of a grateful and attentive people.

When the battle of Falkirk was fought, he with several others had the curiosity to be present, that they might witness the contest. Although they were near the scene of action, they took no part in the contest ; but, after the victory was decided in favor of the rebels, these persons paid rather a dear price for gratifying their curiosity. They were taken prisoners, and confined in the castle of Doune. Several of them effected an escape at a great risk of their lives. One lost his life in consequence of the attempt ; but Doctor Witherspoon seeing the disaster of his companion in the attempt, being the last of the number, concluded to remain till regularly liberated.

After attending faithfully to the duties of his ministry at Beith for several years, he was transferred to the large manufacturing town of Paisley. He resided there, ministering to an affectionate people, and enjoying the respect and esteem of the surrounding country ; when an application was made to him to come to America, and take the presidency of the college of New Jersey. While he resided in Paisley he was invited to Dublin, in Ireland ; to Dundee, in Scotland, and to Rotterdam, in Holland ; to take the pastoral charge of a large congregation in each of those places, besides the application from the board of directors of New Jersey College. But he declined them all. To the latter he was invited in 1766, by an unanimous vote of the trustees of the institution, and was

informed of it by Richard Stockton, Esq. who was then in London. The trustees addressed a letter to Mr. Stockton, requesting him to visit Paisley, and personally inform Doctor Witherspoon of their request, and solicit his acceptance of the appointment. Little did either of them anticipate at that time, that they would become colleague members of the American congress, and act together in declaring the independence of the American colonies, and setting their names, side by side, on the instrument by which that act was proclaimed to the world. Yet that event occurred in ten years from that date. Doctor Witherspoon declined this application for two seasons. There were considerations respecting the then existing condition of the college, which decided him to give a negative reply to the application. But Mrs. Witherspoon felt an unwillingness to leave the land of her nativity, and the residence of her connections, and this strengthened and confirmed his decision at that time. Happily, however, both of these impediments in the way of his acceptance were removed, at a subsequent and no very distant period. Despairing of obtaining him, the trustees, about two months previous to their being informed by Mr. Stockton, that the obstacles to Doctor Witherspoon's acceptance were removed, had made choice of Doctor Samuel Blair; but they immediately re-elected Doctor Witherspoon; and Doctor Blair, on being informed that Doctor Witherspoon would now accept, immediately tendered his resignation. By that noble act of generosity and disinterestedness of Doctor Blair, the trustees were relieved from a perplexing embarrassment, and the services of Doctor Witherspoon were secured to the seminary, to the great gratification of its friends and patrons.

Doctor Witherspoon arrived at Princeton in August, 1768, accompanied by his family. On his arrival being announced, a special meeting of the board of trustees was called, which met on the seventeenth day of that month, and inaugurated him as president of Princeton College. For some time previous to his arrival, the reputation of that college, once justly high, had been on the wane. His entering on his office as president marked a new era in its prosperity. His reputation had been widely diffused before he left Scotland, and had given rise to high anticipations in this country. On his arrival, and taking upon himself the charge of presiding over its interests, the effect in the country to revive its prosperity, was almost immediately beneficial. The number of students who sought instruction in that college increased rapidly. He brought

with him, and incorporated in the system of instruction, now revised, all the recent improvements that had taken place in the older seminaries of Great Britain, so far as was practicable in that comparatively feeble and infant institution. Indeed his acceptance of the presidency of Princeton College, conferred an important benefit on the cause of literature and science in America. Immediately after he entered on the duties of his office, the party feuds and dissensions that had existed in the board of trustees, by his influence and prudence speedily subsided. The funds of the college, which were in a low condition, and still sinking, were in a short time augmented by the active exertions made use of in various parts of the country; and the province of New Jersey, which had done nothing for the benefit of the institution previously to that time, was induced to lend some aid in promoting its prosperity. But his learning and his judicious and advantageous system of managing the establishment, were not among the greatest advantages resulting from the accession of Doctor Witherspoon to the presidency. Although the study of theology had occupied much of his time and attention, that he might be thoroughly furnished for a faithful discharge of the duties of his pastoral office, yet he was far from limiting his reading to works on theology. Sensible that a knowledge of every valuable science would contribute and enlarge the sphere of his usefulness to mankind, he applied himself to other branches of science, and became possessed of a knowledge of almost every subject embraced in the circle of the sciences. He was well informed respecting the grounds of the controversy between Great Britain and her American colonies; and early after his arrival in this country, became a decided advocate of the latter. Hence, when the college of Princeton was broken up by the incursions of the enemy, the citizens of New Jersey turned their attention to him to represent them in the general congress. By an election to a seat in that council of the nation, he was called to exercise his talents on a new theatre, where the variety of his learning and the vigorous powers of his mind were so happily displayed as to gather fresh lustre to his already extended reputation.

He was called by the citizens of New Jersey, to assist them in framing a new constitution of government for that state, in 1776. And when he appeared in that body, and exhibited his knowledge of legislative science, those present who had made politics the object of their principal researches, were not a little surprised at the readiness and intelligence

with which he investigated every subject which was discussed in that convention.

He was chosen a delegate to the general congress, on the twenty-first of June, 1776, by the provincial congress of New Jersey; and he took his seat in that body, a few days before the fourth of July, the memorable birth day of the American nation. He had deliberated on the great question which was then to be settled forever, in domestic retirement; and when he was introduced, to take a part in the discussions of congress, on that important subject, he at once gave evidence of his preparation.

Before his election, he had taken an active and decided part in the conventions, and revolutionary committees of New Jersey; and had manifested his superior qualifications to conduct the interests of the state in a higher station.

The maturity and decision of his judgment, on the great question of the independence of this nation, is shown in the laconic reply he gave to a remark made by a distinguished member of congress; "That the people were not ripe for a Declaration of Independence," Doctor Witherspoon observed, "In my judgment, sir, we are not only ripe, but rotting."

Doctor Witherspoon was continued a representative of New Jersey, in congress, during the years 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779, 1781, and 1782. He was so constantly attentive to his duties, that it was a very unusual fact that he was absent from his seat, during the whole period of his appointment, for a single day. And he regarded the importance of sustaining his ministerial character in such a prominent point of view, that he never consented to substitute his clerical dress, for another more consonant with civil employment. This was done by some ministers who were also members of that body. But he considered it correct for himself, always to appear, wherever he might be, and however employed, in the insignia of his professional character, and strictly adhered to his views of propriety. It is proper in this place to remark, that he never, during his civil employments, lost sight of his ministerial duties, but embraced every opportunity that presented, for preaching the gospel to his fellow men.

It is deemed needless to specify particularly the various services, which he rendered as a member of congress. It is well known, that most of the important business transacted in that body, was submitted to special committees, to investigate, and report their views to the house. The superior intelligence of Doctor Witherspoon on all the great subjects to

be decided by congress, presented him as a member pre-eminently qualified to be placed on most committees of great responsibility. His services were incessant, and unremitted; and they were also of immense advantage to the cause of the country's liberty and independence.

He took a firm stand in opposition to the ruinous system of emitting a paper currency, after its excess had caused a considerable depreciation in its value. In communicating his views on that subject, which he maintained consistently to the end, he astonished his contemporaries by the extent of his financial knowledge, and minute and particular acquaintance with that intricate science. He also opposed the wasteful system which had been adopted, for supplying the continental army, by allowing a commission to the contractors, on all the moneys they paid out, instead of the system of forming special contracts, which he advocated, and which has since been adopted.

In debating, his usual practice was to listen attentively to the remarks of others; take minutes of what he wished to notice particularly; compose his speech; commit it to memory, which he did with much facility; and when he appeared on the floor, he began with an exordium, in which he disposed of what had just been delivered, and then proceeded with his prepared speech, with so much regularity in noticing the several points brought forward in the course of the debate, in such regular order, and with so much force of argument, as both surprised and delighted those who heard him. His mind was quick in apprehending, and his memory powerful in retaining, what he read or heard. It was so much so, that his common method of preparing for the desk was, to compose his sermon, read it over three times only, leave his manuscript at home, and go and address his audience from memory.

While he was a member of congress, he acted a conspicuous part, in the board of war, and the board of finance. He was also one of a commission, appointed by congress, on a request from New York and New Hampshire, to repair to Vermont, and adjust, if practicable, the disputes which had arisen between the settlers on the Green Mountains; the jurisdiction over which was claimed by both of these states, and disallowed by the settlers. The duty assigned him he performed; but it was without the desired result; nor was it finally settled until Vermont was acknowledged as an independent state, and became united to the confederacy.

Doctor Witherspoon voluntarily retired from congress at

the close of the year 1779, although he was again called upon to renew his important labors in that assembly. At the time of his retirement, he applied himself to the object of reviving the institution over which he presided, which had fallen into decay during the British invasion of New Jersey. The more active part of recommencing the course of instruction was committed to his son-in-law, Vice President Smith; while he sought some relaxation in a retirement to his own country-seat, about a mile from the college. But the influence of his name and character, in connection with the college, was not withdrawn, but continued to be felt with a benign effect, on its reviving prosperity; and its former reputation was soon restored.

Soon after the preliminaries of peace were settled between the United States and Great Britain, in 1783, on the urgent request of the trustees of that college, but contrary to his own judgment, he crossed the Atlantic to England, to try to obtain funds in behalf of that seminary, in the country from which this had but just then been severed for ever; and while the feeling of resentment was still warm in England on that account. He predicted that the enterprise would probably prove unsuccessful: and thus it did in fact prove. He obtained but little more than sufficient to defray the expenses of the visit. On this excursion he was absent about nine months. On his return to New Jersey, he immediately entered upon his retirement, in which he spent the remainder of his life, as far as was consistent with the duties he was required to perform to the college, by reason of his office of president, and those belonging to his ministerial profession.

If Doctor Witherspoon is viewed as a composer of sermons, he must be placed among the first rank of orthodox divines, in this or any other country. His printed sermons published in his works, in four vols. 8vo. are alone sufficient to confirm this opinion. But the public voice has already decided this as his character. And it is believed that no judicious person, who reads his works, will dissent from the judgment of the public in this particular.

His manner in the pulpit was grave, solemn, and deeply impressive. He engaged the attention of his audience at the beginning of his sermon, and it was continued unabated to the end. He was for some years occasionally subject to spasmodic convulsion fits, which were supposed to be of the apoplectic kind; and these were connected with a peculiar nervous susceptibility and a dizziness, which were wont to

be produced if he yielded to that ardency of manner, which his natural warmth of feeling strongly urged him. But having been subject to that calamity from an early period of his life he found it indispensable to his own safety, to adopt a grave solemn manner of delivery, in his public addresses, and carefully to discipline his natural ardor into a more safe and moderate manner. It was difficult to hear him without being both instructed and benefitted by his discourses. He possessed a strength of thought, and a force of expression, happily adapted to usefulness in a preacher of the gospel, rarely equalled, and still more rarely surpassed.

About two years before his decease he lost his eyesight. But this affliction did not make him relinquish his ministerial duties. After he was unable to see his own way, he was often conducted into the pulpit by the hand of another, both at home and abroad. And when there, standing in the presence of 'Him, who is the God of the sanctuary, with his own eyes shut in perpetual darkness, and precluded from the light of the sun, he presented to the beholders, one of the most impressive scenes imaginable. A venerable minister of the gospel, more than seventy years of age, himself blind, addressing to an assembly of accountable beings, the message of their Creator and Judge, concerning the most weighty subjects that can be imagined with a feeling of deep and tender concern for their welfare, with unabated earnestness, and with the grave solemnity of one who stood on the verge of eternity, hastening to finish his work, and preparing to give an account of his stewardship. If any combination of circumstances could produce salutary impressions on the heart, we might naturally look for them in a case like that just mentioned.

As a writer, Doctor Witherspoon possessed a great versatility of talent, which he could successfully apply to any subject he chose to handle. His talent for wit and satire was almost unrivalled; a weapon which he knew how to apply with irresistible force against an antagonist. Perhaps these remarks were never more fully verified, than in his "Ecclesiastical Characteristics." He could on a proper occasion, exercise his pen with the ease and graceful pleasantry of Addison.

He possessed a gigantic mind; he wrote and published on many subjects; and on each he gave the impress of his powerful intellect.

His essay on the "nature, value, and uses of money," is acknowledged as one of the best that ever appeared in this country,

and produced a happy influence on the minds of the community, on that intricate subject. Indeed, he never composed an essay for publication, without he had something important to communicate; and he never published his views, without producing a good effect on the minds of his readers.

His "Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage," evinces a thorough acquaintance with the subject, a minute investigation of its influence and consequences on society, and a deep and intimate knowledge of the human heart.

But among his works, those on theological subjects held the pre-eminence. And of these, may be selected, as among the happiest of his efforts, his essay on "justification by free grace, through Jesus Christ;" and on "the nature, and necessity of regeneration;" and that on "the importance of truth in religion," or "the connection that subsists between sound principle and a holy practice." These several productions are not surpassed by any writings on those subjects, hitherto published in the English language.

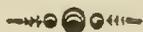
As a manager in civil and ecclesiastical politics, he was eminently skilful, wise, and successful. This he evinced before he left his native country, in the controversy between "moderate," and "orthodox" parties, into which that branch of the Scottish church was divided; and which called forth the "Ecclesiastical Characteristics," before mentioned. Although for a time he was in the minority, by his address and prudent management, without resorting to any unworthy or improper measures, he succeeded in obtaining the majority to co-operate with him, and in securing a complete triumph of the cause which he believed to be just; in which belief many of the wisest and most upright ministers and dignitaries of the English church, fully concurred. In the presbyterian church of the United States, his character and influence were justly held in high respect and estimation. In their judicatories he was eminently useful, by his knowledge of the general subjects which came before them, by his acquaintance with the correct rules of conducting them, and the facility with which he disentangled the intricacies and embarrassments, with which they were sometimes encumbered. "He was clear and conclusive in reasoning; and from a peculiar soundness of judgment and a habit of business, skillful in conducting every discussion to the most speedy and decisive termination." And when he was taken away

by death, it might have been said with truth, that a great man had fallen.

At length, bodily infirmities, which had been creeping upon him for years, and gradually undermining his constitution, attacked him with an accumulated force, which was increased by the loss of his sight. His regular bodily exercise was, by this affliction, necessarily greatly diminished, by reason of which his health suffered; and it was apparent that his useful life was fast approaching to a close. He endured his sufferings with a patience and cheerfulness becoming the character of a Christian minister, when called to exemplify the gospel he had preached to others, in the closing scene of life. He was released from his labors, trials, and sufferings, on the fifteenth day of November, 1794, in the seventy-third year of his age.

Doctor Witherspoon was twice married. His first wife was a Scottish lady, a Miss Montgomery, to whom he was united in early life. She was a pious, benevolent, exemplary Christian.

His posterity, (all by his first marriage,) consisted of three sons and two daughters. Ann, the eldest, was married to the Reverend Samuel Stanhope Smith, his successor in the presidency of the college. Frances was married to Doctor David Ramsey, of Charleston, South Carolina, the historian of the American revolution. Her interesting memoirs, written by her husband, have been extensively read and admired by the pious, throughout the United States.



FRANCIS HOPKINSON.

FRANCIS HOPKINSON was born at Philadelphia, in the year 1737. His parents were English people of respectable standing in their native country, whence they emigrated while young, and settled in Philadelphia. His mother's name was Johnson, a niece of the then Bishop of Worcester. Mr. Hopkinson and his wife appear to have been well educated; and to have been connected with literary and polite society in England; and they maintained a corresponding standing in Philadelphia.

Mr. Thomas Hopkinson, the father of Francis, was the