



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (HIGH STREET), PHILADELPHIA. TAKEN DOWN IN 1820.  
(See page 286.)

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### WHAT DID DOCTOR WITHERSPOON SAY?

BY REV. LOUIS F. BENSON, D.D.

#### I.

In 1843, with an imprint showing simultaneous issue in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Charleston, and London, the Rev. Thomas Smyth, of Charleston, published a now well-known book under the title, *Ecclesiastical Republicanism; or the Republicanism, Liberality and Catholicity of Presbytery, in contrast with Prelacy and Popery.*

On pages 144 and 145 of that work, the following passage occurs:

“When the declaration of independence was under debate in the continental congress, doubts and forebodings were whispered through that hall. The houses hesitated, wavered, and, for a while, the liberty and slavery of the nation appeared to hang in an even scale. It was then an aged patriarch arose, a venerable and stately form; his head white with the frost of years. Every eye went to him with the quickness of thought, and remained with the fixedness of the polar star. He cast on the assembly a look of inexpressible interest and unconquerable determination; while on his visage, the hue of age was lost in the flush of a burning patriotism, that fired his cheek. ‘There is,’ said he, when he saw the house wavering, ‘There is a tide in the affairs of men—a nick of time. We perceive it now before us. To hesitate, is to consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument upon your table, which insures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning, by

every pen in the house. He that will not respond to its accents, and strain every nerve to carry into effect its provisions, is unworthy the name of a freeman. For my own part, of property I have some—of reputation, more. That reputation is staked, that property is *pledged*, on the issue of this contest. And although these gray hairs must soon descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather they should descend thither by the hands of the public executioner, than desert, at this crisis, the sacred cause of my country.' Who was it that uttered this memorable speech,—potent in turning the scales of the nation's destiny, and worthy to be preserved in the same imperishable record in which is registered the not more eloquent speech ascribed to John Adams, on the same sublime occasion? 'It was John Witherspoon—at that day the most distinguished presbyterian minister west of the Atlantic ocean—the father of the presbyterian church in the United States.'''

Dr. Smyth prints this passage under single quotation marks. At the end is an asterisk referring to a footnote, which reads: “\*Rev. J. M. Krebs.” The description of the scene and the report of Dr. Witherspoon's speech are thus made to rest upon Dr. Krebs' authority.

After some search we have found the passage thus quoted by Dr. Smyth on pages 24 and 25 of a pamphlet entitled *Merciful Rebukes. A Sermon preached in the Rutgers Street Church, New York, on Friday, May 14, 1841, on occasion of the National Fast recommended by the President of the United States; and repeated in the same Church on the Sabbath Evening following. By John M. Krebs, Pastor of the Church. New York: Jonathan Leavitt, 14 John Street; . . . 1841.* Where Dr. Smyth's quotation reads, “The houses hesitated,” Dr. Krebs had, “The House hesitated;” and there are variances in capitalization, etc. Otherwise the passage in Smyth's book is a correct transcription of that in Krebs' sermon.

The “incident” thus put in circulation by Dr. Krebs has done duty in many sermons and books extolling the services of Presbyterianism to America. The late Dr. William P. Breed, of Philadelphia, made widespread use of it in his addresses in behalf of the fund for erecting a statue of Witherspoon, and incorporated it in his *Presbyterians and the Revolution* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication

[1876]]<sup>1</sup> as "The words of the Rev. Dr. John M. Krebs of New York."<sup>2</sup> And quotations from the speech as given by Krebs are inscribed on the Witherspoon statues at Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, and at Washington.

But a reference to the sermon shows that the passage is not Dr. Krebs' writing at all and does not rest on his authority. It is given within double quotation marks, and introduced with the words: "Bear with me further in this digression, while I give you an incident furnished by another hand." Whose hand it was, we are not informed. It was obviously the gesticulating hand of an orator of the "highfalutin" type. Dr. Krebs (it is only too plain) was not personally familiar with the history of the Declaration of Independence. And he does not seem to have stopped to look it up on his own account. He wished orator-wise to magnify the Presbyterian influences on securing American liberty: he found a flashy "incident," in some source he avoids identifying, that suited his purpose, and he quoted it without inquiry as to its veracity.

Even without such inquiry Dr. Krebs might well have distrusted his source. Its description of the scene is theatrical and on the face of it fictitious. The "aged patriarch" who is made its center was actually in middle life. As for "his head white with the frost of years," there is no evidence that he had as yet put off the wig he had hitherto worn.<sup>3</sup> As for his contemplating a speedy descent into the sepulchre, the fact is that some fifteen years later we find him not only contemplating but effecting a second marriage. But he was not "the father of the Presbyterian Church in the United States."

Dr. Krebs very possibly intended that his sermon should serve an occasion and be forgotten. Unhappily he was induced to print it. And it is quite in "the way history is written" that he should thereafter be regarded as a source and authority, and that the "incident" he had fathered

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<sup>1</sup> Pp. 165, 166.

<sup>2</sup> P. 165.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Sprague's Annals*, Vol. ii, p. 297.

should range with the ascertained facts of American history.

So much then for "J. M. Krebs" as an authority for the part Witherspoon played in declaring independence and for the text of the speech Witherspoon made in connection therewith. It does not necessarily follow that the unnamed orator's version of Witherspoon's speech is fabricated or manipulated by him, but it does follow that we cannot receive it from an unidentified witness whose testimony is in other respects untrustworthy.

## II.

In 1846 John S. Littell, of Germantown, published his edition of Graydon's *Memoirs of a Life, chiefly passed in Pennsylvania*, under a new title: *Memoirs of his own time, with reminiscences of the men and events of the Revolution*. By Alexander Graydon. Edited by John Stockton Littell (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston). As a footnote to a passage in which Graydon had recorded his impressions of Dr. Witherspoon, Mr. Littell inserted a brief summary of Witherspoon's career, credited to "*Ency. Amer.*," and followed by another excerpt reading as follows:

"On the morning of our national birth-day, the fourth of July, 1776, when the Declaration of American Independence was made—when the Committee, previously appointed to draft that instrument, made their report through their Chairman, THOMAS JEFFERSON—and by whom it was read, the House paused—hesitated. That instrument, they saw, cut them off even from the mercy of Great Britain. They saw with prophetic vision all the horrors of a sanguinary war—carnage and desolation passed in swift review before them. They saw the prospect of having riveted still more closely upon their already chafed and bleeding limbs the chains of slavery. The House seemed to waver—silence, deep and solemn silence, reigned throughout the hall of the spacious Capitol. Every countenance indicated that deep meditation was at work; and the solemn resolutions were calling for double energy. At this fearful crisis, when the very destiny of the country seemed to be suspended upon the action of a moment, the silence, the painful silence was broken. An aged patriarch arose—a venerable and stately form, his head white with the frosts of many years. He cast on the assembly a look of inexpressible interest and unconquerable determination; while on his visage the hue of age was lost as burning patriotism fired his

cheek. 'There is,' said he, 'a tide in the affairs of men, a nick of time. We perceive it now before us. That noble instrument upon your table, which ensures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning, by every pen in the house. He who will not respond to its accents and strain every nerve to carry into effect its provisions, is unworthy the name of a freeman. Although these gray hairs must descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather they should descend thither by the hand of the public executioner, than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country.' The patriarch sat down, and forthwith the Declaration was signed by every member present. Who was that venerable patriarch? It was JOHN WITHERSPOON, of New Jersey, a distinguished Minister of the Presbyterian Church, a lineal descendant of JOHN KNOX, the great Scotch Reformer.—*Speech of the Rev. S. S. Templeton.*—ED.'"<sup>4</sup>

As to the text of Witherspoon's speech given in this excerpt, the only very marked difference from that contained in the excerpt in Krebs' sermon is in the omission of the words: "For my part, of property I have some,—of reputation more. That reputation is staked, that property is pledged on the issue of this contest. And"— As these words constitute the most familiar passage in the traditional text of Witherspoon's speech, it follows that Templeton did not fabricate that text, but was quoting from some earlier version, perhaps the very one contained in Krebs' sermon.

This probability is strengthened when we turn to the description of the scene and occasion as given in the Templeton excerpt. Its similarity to that in the Krebs excerpt can hardly be accidental. We still have with us the aged patriarch with the white hair, on whose visage the hue of age was lost in the flush of patriotism. The occasion is the same—the moment of suspense at which the decision to sign the Declaration wavers. And the eyes of the whole house are still riveted on the aged patriarch, though not here maintaining "the fixedness of the polar star."

But there are some new features also in the Templeton de-

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<sup>4</sup> Edition of 1846, pp. 307, 308. There was a Samuel S. Templeton in the Presbyterian ministry; born in West Virginia, April 12, 1812; graduated by Jefferson College; pastor in Ohio and elsewhere; died in Mississippi, December 1, 1850.

scription. The "spacious Capitol" is a fresh touch. And the scene has now a fixed date. It is the fourth of July, and at the close of Witherspoon's speech the Declaration is forthwith "signed by every member present."

It is these new features that seem to give "Templeton" away completely. They show that he did not know the history of the Declaration and that he could not have been quoting from any historical source. If Witherspoon spoke at all on the fourth of July, he could not have made the speech alleged, because the independence of the colonies had been declared on the second once for all.

The actual course of events was like this:

On *Monday, July 1st*, Congress resolved itself into a committee of the whole "to take into consideration the resolution respecting independency," which had been postponed from June 7th. The debate thereupon continued during the day; John Adams being the principal speaker for, and John Dickinson against, the resolution. The resolution was finally adopted and ordered reported to Congress. The final vote was postponed till the next day.

On *Tuesday, July 2d*, Congress adopted the resolution reported by the committee on the whole, declaring the independence of the American colonies from the British crown. "I am apt to believe that" ["the second Day of July 1776"] "will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival,"<sup>5</sup> wrote John Adams to his wife on the third. On the same day Congress resolved itself into a committee of the whole to consider the draft of the Declaration.

On *Wednesday, July 3d*, the consideration of the draft was continued in committee of the whole.

On *Thursday, July 4th* the consideration of the draft was continued until it was agreed upon in committee of the whole, reported to Congress, again read, and agreed to by that body, with the amendments as made during the consideration. It

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<sup>5</sup> From the original Ms., in John H. Hazelton, *The Declaration of Independence: its History*. New York, 1906, p. 168.

was thus not independence nor the declaration of it that was settled on the fourth, but only the substance and form of its embodiment. According to Jefferson the Declaration was also signed on the fourth by all the delegates present except Dickinson. According to McKean it was signed on that day by nobody. The *Journal of Congress* is silent. The latest historian of the Declaration is of the opinion that Jefferson is mistaken.\*

It appears from this record that the statements in the Templeton excerpt that on July 4th there came a great crisis in the issue of American independence, that Witherspoon met the crisis by uttering the speech quoted, and that at its conclusion the Declaration was at once signed, are pure fabrications; the debate on the resolution respecting independency having been completed on the first, and independence having been declared on the second.

We are left then to July 1st (and the early part of the 2nd, before the final vote was taken) as the only occasion on which Witherspoon could have pled for independence. But his speech as quoted by Templeton (and Krebs) is more than a plea for independence. It is at the same time a plea to adopt and sign the written Declaration "on the Table." And the record shows that the consideration of the draft of the Declaration was not entered upon till after the declaration of independence on the morning of the 2nd July. It follows therefore that whatever Witherspoon's part may have been in the debate of July 1st, his speech as quoted by Templeton and Krebs is no more appropriate to the situation on the 1st than to that on the 4th of July.

What now was Witherspoon's part in relation to the "great debate" on July 1st? In the debate proper he seems to have had no part by reason of absence. But at the close of the debate, and before the motion was put, he with other

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\* *Ibid.*, p. 203. Bancroft states as an ascertained fact: "The declaration was not signed by the members of congress on the day on which it was agreed to. *History of the United States of America*, ed. 1890, Vol. IV, p. 452.



New Jersey delegates arrived, and took their seats in Congress. For what then happened, we are dependent upon the recollection of John Adams:

(1) Extract from his *Autobiography*:<sup>7</sup>

“Before the final Question was put the new Delegates from New Jersey came in and M<sup>r</sup> Stockton, ~~one of them~~ a very respectable Character expressed a great desire to hear the Arguments. All was Silence: No one would speak: all Eyes were turned upon me. M<sup>r</sup> Edward But-  
 ledge came to me and said, <sup>laughing</sup> ^ Nobody will speak but you, upon this Subject. You have all the Topicks so ready, that you must satisfy the Gentlemen from New Jersey. I answered him laughing, that it had so much the Air of exhibiting like an Actor or Gladiator for the Entertainment of the Audience, that I was ashamed to repeat what I had said Twenty times before, and I thought nothing new could be advanced by me. The New Jersey Gentlemen however still insisting on hearing at least a Recapitulation of the Arguments and no other Gentleman being willing to speak, I Summed up the Reasons Objections and Answers, in as concise a manner, as I could, till at length the Jersey Gentlemen said they were fully satisfied and ready for the Question, which was then put and determined in the Affirmative M<sup>r</sup> Jay M<sup>r</sup> Duane and M<sup>r</sup> William Livingston of New Jersey were not present. But they all acquiesced in the Declaration and steadily supported it ever afterwards.”

(2) Extract from a letter to Mercy Warren, dated, Quincy, August 7, 1807:<sup>8</sup>

“In the previous multiplied debates which we had upon the subject of Independence, the Delegates from New Jersey had voted against us, their Constituents were informed of it and recalled them and sent us a new sett on purpose to vote for Independence. Among those were Chief Justice Stockton and Dr. Witherspoon. In a [the] morning when Congress met we expected the question would be put and carried without any further Debate; because we knew we had a Majority and thought that argument had been exhausted on both sides as indeed it was, for nothing new was ever afterwards advanced on either side. But the Jersey Delegates appearing for the first time, desired that the question might be discussed. We observed to them that the Question was so public and had been so long disputed in Pamphlets News Papers and every Fireside, that they could not be uninformed and must have made

<sup>7</sup> From the original Ms., in Hazelton, pp. 158, 159.

<sup>8</sup> From the original Ms., in Hazelton, pp. 159, 160.

up their minds. They said it was true they had not been inattentive to what had been passing abroad, but they had not heard the arguments in Congress, and did not incline to give their opinions until they should hear the sentiments of Members there. Judge Stockton was most particularly importunate, till the members began to say let the Gentlemen be gratif'd and the Eyes of the assembly were turned upon me and several other of them said come M<sup>r</sup> Adams you have had the subject at heart longer than any of us, and you must recapitulate the arguments. I was somewhat confused at this personal application to me and would have been very glad to be excused; . . .

"I wish someone had remembered the speech, for it is almost the only one I ever made that I wish was literally preserved. The Delegates of New Jersey declared themselves perfectly satisfied . . . 'Que n'ai je recu le Genie et L'Eloquence des celebres orateurs d'Athens et de Rome' . . . are all the true words of my speech that have ever appeared in Print."

If these recollections are correct, it would seem that the debate was finished, and the issue settled practically before Dr. Witherspoon's arrival. And to Adams' memory it is Stockton and not Witherspoon who is the mouthpiece and representative of New Jersey. It is suggestive that in the draft of the *Autobiography* Stockton's name was at first written alone; that of Witherspoon being inserted as an after-thought.

Not only was the issue settled before Witherspoon's arrival, but before the debate itself, in the mind of Mr. Adams, who was its chief figure. In a letter written on the very day of the debate, he said: \*

"Your favour by the Post this morning gave me much pleasure, but the generous and unanimous vote of your Convention, gave me much more. It was brought into Congress this morning just as we were entering on the great debate. That debate took up most of the day, but it was an idle mispence of time, for nothing was said, but what had been repeated and hackneyed in that Room before an hundred times for six months past. In the Committee of the whole the question was carried in the affirmative, and reported to the House.—A Collony desired it to be postponed until tomorrow, then it will pass by a great Majority, perhaps with almost unanimity; Yet I cannot promise this, because one or two Gentlemen may possibly be found who will vote point blank

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\* From the original Ms., in Hazelton, pp. 160, 161.

against the known and declared sense of their Constituents. Maryland however, I have the pleasure to inform you, behaved well.—Paca, generously and nobly . . .”

And, later, in his *Autobiography*, he said:<sup>10</sup>

“The Subject had been in Contemplation for more than a Year and frequent discussions had been had concerning it. At one time and another, all the Arguments for it and against it had been exhausted and were become familiar. I expected no more would be said in public but that the question would be put and decided. M<sup>r</sup>. Dickinson however was determined to bear his Testimony against it with more formality. . . . He conducted the debate, not only with great ingenuity and Eloquence, but with equal Politeness and Candour: and was answered in the same Spirit.”

If we accept Mr. Adams’ testimony, the only conclusion seems to be that Dr. Witherspoon arrived in Congress too late to influence the course of the debate on July 1st, but not necessarily too late for any justification or explanation he felt called upon to make as to his personal feelings and intention; but that he could not have spoken on that (or any other known) occasion in the terms of the speech attributed to him.

### III.

In *The Presbyterian* (Philadelphia) for Saturday, September 21, 1867, appeared a communication signed “W. P. V.,” in which the writer says, *inter alia*:

“Dr. Witherspoon . . . was present at the momentous debate upon the adoption of the Declaration of Independence; and tradition says that he took a decided part on that occasion. The writer well remembers hearing the somewhat noted but eccentric Hooper Cumming, who was orator of the day at Morristown, New Jersey, on the 4th of July, 1824, relate a telling speech, ascribed to Witherspoon, and which, it was said, brought the house to an instant decision. I reproduce it from memory. ‘Mr. President,’ said he, ‘there is a tide in the affairs of men—a nick of time. We see it now. That noble instrument lying on the table—which should insure immortality to its author—should be subscribed this day, by every hand in this house. To draw back, or even to hesitate, is to consent to slavery. I know not how others may

<sup>10</sup> Hazelton, p. 157.

feel; but for myself, let me say—of property, I have some; of reputation, more. On the issue of this contest that reputation is staked, that property is pledged. And though these gray hairs must soon descend to the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather they should go thither by the hand of the public executioner, than to desert, at this crisis, the sacred cause of my country.' The writer has sought in vain for any other record of this history than the one in his memory, until he found one in the *Presbyterian Almanac* of our Board for 1860, p. 47.<sup>11</sup> Since then, he has heard, it is related in a book by Dr. Thomas Smyth, entitled 'Ecclesiastical Republicanism,' published by R. Carter, 1843, pp. 144, 145, in which it is credited to Dr. J. M. Krebs, of New York city.'"

We may perhaps presume that Cumming's speech was committed to print and that the Witherspoon passage at least was memorized by "W. P. V." Otherwise it would be hard to account for the latter's recollection of so much of its substance after forty three years. And, if printed, Cumming's speech may well have been directly or indirectly the source of the text of Witherspoon's remarks as quoted by Krebs and Templeton. It is at all events the earliest source to which the alleged speech of Dr. Witherspoon and its thrilling setting has so far been traced. The date is 1824, and the authority is an "eccentric" Fourth of July orator.

#### IV.

In 1906 the Rev. David Walker Woods, Jr., published *John Witherspoon* (Fleming H. Revell Company), a biography in which the second chapter of the fourth section of the part dealing with "The American Period" is entitled "The Declaration of Independence" (pp. 209-218).

In this chapter appears the following passage:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The excerpt in *The Presbyterian Family Almanac* for 1860 purports to be the production of "A writer in the *True Witness* under the signature of Turretin," and is perhaps hardly worthy of attention. The description of the incident of July 4, 1776, is even less true to fact than those already quoted. The text of Witherspoon's alleged speech is altered and abridged, and at the end the following addition is made: "Though beset with difficulties and dangers—though we may perish on the scaffold, it must be signed. God is for us; we must succeed."

<sup>12</sup> Pp. 215,218.

“On the day of the entrance of the New Jersey delegation into Independence Hall, as it has ever since been called, the postponed resolution came up for consideration. A further postponement was suggested so that the newly arrived members might learn the arguments that had been made upon the question.<sup>12</sup> Witherspoon brushed aside this plea,<sup>13</sup> declaring that the subject was not new, he needed no more time, nor further instructions; he was ready to vote at once.<sup>14</sup> It was decided, however, to postpone the vote until Monday, the 1<sup>st</sup> of July.<sup>15</sup> On that day, after a Sabbath whose peace had probably been irksome to some of the eager members, the men upon whose decision rested such momentous consequences, which they fully appreciated, assembled again in the hall. The president of the Congress, John Hancock, stated the order of the day, and the Secretary, Charles Thompson (*sic*), read once more the resolution for independence. ‘For a moment,’ it is said, ‘there was profound silence.’ Then John Adams rose in his place.<sup>16</sup> The hush of that little assembly was so intense as to be almost painful to the overstrained men, but it was followed by a speech, remembered for its impetuosity and power, which seemed to carry everything before it, declaring that ‘independence was the first wish and the last instruction of the communities they represented.’ John Dickinson, celebrated as the author of ‘Letters of a Pennsylvania Farmer,’ fulfilled his promise to the Assembly of Pennsylvania, although he overlooked the popular feeling expressed in conventions and mass meetings, and spoke at length against the resolution. His patriotism and devotion to the American cause were never questioned, but when he said the country was not ripe for it, Witherspoon broke in<sup>17</sup> upon the speaker, exclaiming, ‘Not ripe, sir! In my judgment we are not only ripe but rotting. Almost every colony has dropped from its parent stem<sup>18</sup> and your own province needs no more sunshine to mature it.’ The debate continued. On Tuesday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July the Continental Congress finally voted to sever the con-

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<sup>12</sup> But no “postponement” was involved in taking time to inform the New Jersey delegates.

<sup>13</sup> But it was the New Jersey delegates themselves who asked to hear the arguments recapitulated before the vote was taken.

<sup>14</sup> But there is no evidence that Witherspoon said these things.

<sup>15</sup> But the day of which the author has been speaking was already Monday, July 1st. The debate had been postponed to that day on June 10th. And the postponement made on that day after the debate was the postponement of the final vote of Congress itself on the resolution until Tuesday the second.

<sup>16</sup> But according to Adams it was Dickinson who wanted debate and began it: Adams rising to reply to him.

<sup>17</sup> But Witherspoon could not have been present.

<sup>18</sup> But these words seem to be Jefferson’s.

nection of the American colonies from Great Britain. A committee, of which Thomas Jefferson was chairman, was appointed<sup>20</sup> to draw up a declaration embodying the decision and the reasons for it. This was brought in on the 4th<sup>21</sup> to be signed<sup>22</sup> by the delegates. Although the resolution had already been adopted there was some hesitation about signing it.<sup>23</sup> Then Witherspoon arose. One writer describing the scene calls him an aged patriarch, a term hardly applicable to a man fifty-four years of age, with twenty years of active life still before him. Although his hair was tinged with gray and his appearance one of great dignity, he could hardly be called venerable. The only clergyman in Congress, of most impressive manner and acknowledged learning, he received marked attention as he proceeded in a brief speech<sup>24</sup> of great eloquence to give his opinion. 'There is a tide in the affairs of men, a nick of time. We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument upon your table, which insures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning by every person in this house. He that will not respond to its accents and strain every nerve to carry into effect its provisions is unworthy the name of freeman.

" 'For my own part of property I have some, of reputation more. That reputation is staked, that property is pledged on the issue of this contest; and although these gray hairs must soon descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country.'

" 'The declaration was signed and the colonies finally and forever committed to independence.'"<sup>25</sup>

As an account of what happened in Congress and of Dr. Witherspoon's share in the happening, this account necessarily stands confronted by the *Journals of Congress*, and the recollections of John Adams. It occurred, however, to the present writer that this biographer, as a lineal descendant of Witherspoon, might be in the possession of family documents

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<sup>20</sup> But this committee had been appointed on June 11th.

<sup>21</sup> But it was "brought in" on June 28th, and was under debate through July 2d and 3d.

<sup>22</sup> But the "signing" then and there is very doubtful.

<sup>23</sup> But the resolution and the drafted Declaration seem to be confused here.

<sup>24</sup> But this speech could not have been delivered on the fourth.

<sup>25</sup> But while the date of signing is not clear, the colonies were committed to independence on the second, not the fourth.

bearing upon the matters under discussion. He therefore wrote the author, asking what authority he relied upon in his quotation of the text of Witherspoon's speech. To this Mr. Woods very courteously responded:

"My authority for Witherspoon's speech is tradition. I have no Mss. authority, but the tradition is so strong, going back to an almanac of 1845, and has been so frequently accepted that I felt justified in relating the incident, despite the lack of Mss. authority. It's hardly likely, indeed, that Witherspoon would have had time to write it beforehand."

### V.

What then did Dr. Witherspoon say?

The *Journals of Congress* throw no light upon that subject, and the printed memories of those who took part in the debate are equally silent.

The only evidence that the present writer has ever come upon is a passage contained in *The Life of Ashbel Green, V.D.M., begun to be written by himself in his eighty-second year and continued to his eighty-fourth. Prepared for the press at the Author's request by Joseph H. Jones* (New York: Carters, 1849). The earlier of Dr. Green's reminiscences took the form of letters, printed in a daily newspaper, and in this volume reprinted with the original dates. Under date of July 20, 1848,<sup>26</sup> he writes of Witherspoon:<sup>27</sup>

"When he took his seat in the general congress, he found that the subject under discussion, and which I believe had been continued for some days, was the immediate adoption of the declaration of independence. He observed that the principal stress of the objections to that measure, was laid on the affirmation that the country was not yet ripe for such decisive action; and that the new members, of whom several had very recently arrived, had not heard the arguments on the subject which had taken place on that floor. The doctor did not speak till near the close of the debate; but in the short speech which he ultimately made, he remarked, that although he and some other members had not heard all that had passed in that honourable body, yet that they had not wanted other and ample sources of information relative to this most

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<sup>26</sup> Probably a misprint for 1840. Dr. Green died May 19, 1848.

<sup>27</sup> Pp. 61, 62.

important subject; and that, in his judgment, the country was not only ripe for independence, but was in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it, if its declaration were longer delayed. The substance of this statement I heard from the doctor himself."

"W. P. V." had come upon this passage long before the present writer did, and made a better use of it. He had noted "that Mr. Bancroft, in the eighth volume of his elaborate and exact History of the United States, in which he professed to give an account of each one who took a part in the ever memorable debate upon the Declaration of Independence, made no allusion at all to Dr. Witherspoon. . . . When the writer saw this account of Dr. Green's, he ventured to call the attention of Mr. Bancroft to it, in a note in which he copied the whole of it, and also the speech repeated by Hooper Cumming. Mr. Bancroft promptly and courteously responded. 'The speech of Hooper Cumming,' said he, 'mixes invention with truth: but I think the statement of Green is substantially correct, and to be received. I have in my library a copy of the life of Green, but the passage escaped me. The greater my thanks to you.'"

"W. P. V." closed his communication to *The Presbyterian* by expressing his conviction that "Mr. Bancroft himself, should he ever revise his History, will no doubt take care to make the correction."<sup>28</sup>

Mr. Bancroft did "revise his History" more than once, and did make the correction. In *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the Continent. By George Bancroft. The Author's Last Revision. Volume IV. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1890*, appears on page 440 the following passage:

"Before the end of the debate rose Witherspoon of New Jersey. In a short speech he remarked that though he had not heard all the discussions in that body, yet he had not wanted ample sources of information; and that, in his judgment, the country was not only ripe for independence, but was in danger of becoming rotten for want of it, if its declaration were longer delayed."

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<sup>28</sup> *The Presbyterian*, September 21, 1867.



So much then of what Dr. Witherspoon said has passed into serious history with the authority of Bancroft's name. That authority is perhaps not all that it was, and indeed his glowing narrative of the Declaration of Independence is open to criticism at several points.

But we know the precise evidence on which Bancroft relied, and doubtless we are as free as he was to deal with that evidence and form our own conclusions.

We may on the one hand accept Dr. Green's recollections of what Dr. Witherspoon said as substantially correct. More than that Dr. Green does not claim for them after so long an interval. Dr. Green's statement of the subject of debate at Witherspoon's arrival at Congress is right if we understand it as the declaration and not the "Declaration" of independence, though apparently Green did not make the distinction. And his statement that "the doctor did not speak till near the close of the debate" is readily adjustable to Adams' recollections. When we come to Witherspoon's recollections of the substance of his own speech we have nothing to measure them by except the text of his speech as given in the Cumming-Krebs-Templeton excerpts. And it becomes at once apparent that between the two versions there is no likeness as a whole and no identity either of sentence or even of phrase. It would thus appear that if Witherspoon made the speech commonly attributed to him, he was not aware of having done so, but on the other hand was able to recall the substance of some remarks he did make that differed from the alleged speech *in toto*. The acceptance, that is to say, of the Green version involves the rejection of the Cumming version as a pure fabrication.

But we are at equal liberty to decline to receive Dr. Green's recollection of Dr. Witherspoon's recollections as sufficient evidence. Supposing that Green wrote in 1840, and not in 1848 as stated, Witherspoon had been dead for forty-six years at the date when Dr. Green recorded these recollections of his conversation. And Dr. Green himself was an old man, laid aside by reason of many infirmities, whose memory (one is entitled to say) could not be implicitly trusted in a matter

of this kind. It might no doubt be urged against this view that Dr. Green's reminiscences of other men and events written at and about the same date seem to be as clear as they are interesting. But that is not the point at the moment. The point is that we are at liberty to reject Dr. Green's testimony. But a further point is that the rejection of the Green version of what Dr. Witherspoon said does not leave a candid man free to adopt or to circulate the Cumming-Krebs-Templeton version of his speech. For it at all events there is no evidential support whatever so far revealed; but rather in its very words and substance clear proof of its entire un-  
veracity.

Apart indeed from Dr. Green's testimony what evidence is there that Witherspoon addressed the Congress at all? Rejecting it we seem to be constrained to ignoring Witherspoon's part just as Bancroft did until "W. P. V." reminded him of Dr. Green's testimony. Or if not that, the most a candid man could do would be to follow the latest historian of the Declaration in saying, "Wilson and Witherspoon also are said to have spoken."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hazelton, p. 162.