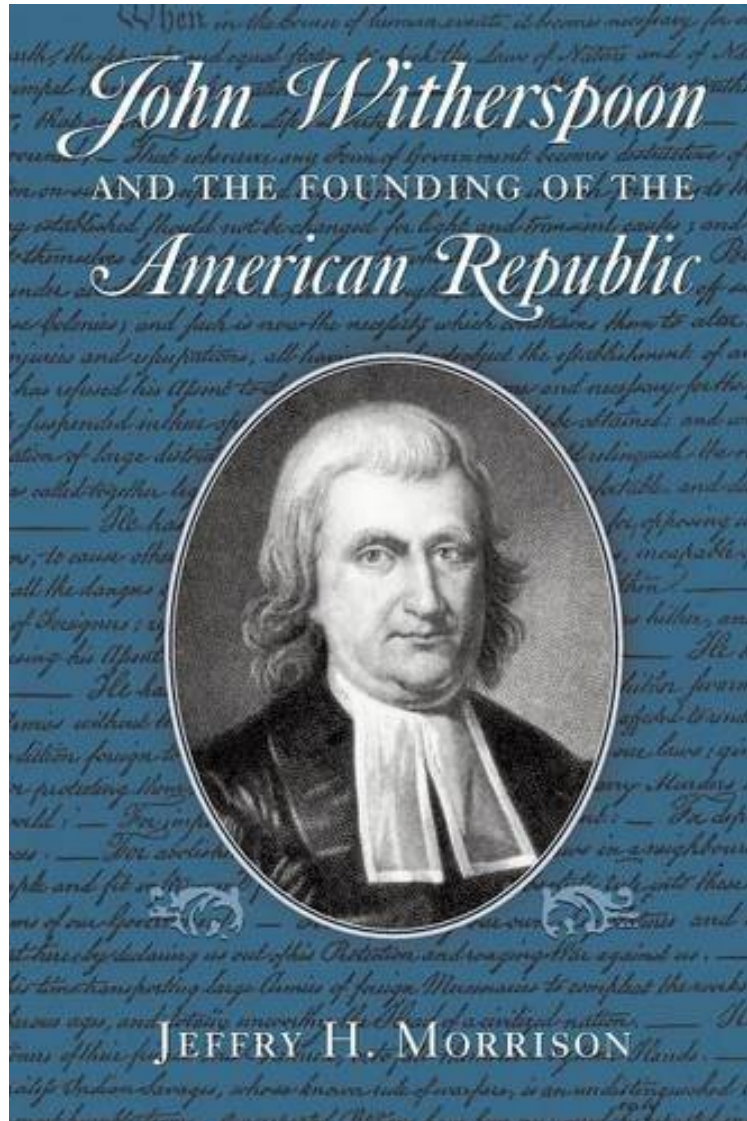


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John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic

Jeffrey H. Morrison

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Jeffrey H. Morrison : John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Customer EXCELLENT LEARNED A LOT FROM THIS BOOK 23 of 23 people found the following review helpful. A significant book on a neglected founder By B. C.

Richards Among the American Founding Fathers, it is unlikely that there is a man more influential and yet less well known and studied than Dr. John Witherspoon. Prof. Morrison seeks to help correct this neglect in this brief volume. Dr. John Witherspoon was a Scottish Presbyterian minister who came to America in the late 1760s to become the President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), where he played an active and influential role in American politics, religion and education in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. He was the only minister to sign both the Declaration of Independence and to ratify the Constitution. He was probably Madison's most influential teacher, and, despite his staunch Christian orthodoxy, appears to have enjoyed universally high regard by the other founders, even those such as Franklin and Jefferson who had little use for Biblical Christianity. This book gives an excellent account of a number of interesting aspects of Witherspoon's life and thought. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the importance of Witherspoon's career in America, including excerpts referring to him from the writings of many of his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic. It discusses the significance of his religious alignment, which was orthodox, Reformed, Biblical, Presbyterian Christianity, and how Witherspoon's stature in the colonies influenced the major role that Presbyterians played in the independence movement (King George III called the American Revolution the "Presbyterian rebellion"). The chapter closes by discussing some reasons why Witherspoon has been largely ignored by scholars, such as a scarcity of surviving material, and the fact that most modern scholars will feel very uncomfortable being reminded of a prominent Christian minister who played such an active and influential role in early American politics and who saw no distinction between his religious and his political activities (Witherspoon always insisted on wearing his clerical robes when he attended the Continental Congress). Chapter 2 examines Witherspoon's religious views, and especially the role that he saw religion playing in the new United States. Witherspoon believed in political freedom of conscience, following the framers of the Westminster Confession, who say that "God alone is lord of the conscience." Nevertheless, he also shared the view common to the founders, that liberty, virtue and faith were equally indispensable in the foundation of a happy society. Witherspoon wrote that "Statesmen may plan and speculate for liberty, but it is religion and morality alone, which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand." Despite his belief in personal religious liberty, Witherspoon could write that "those who are vested with civil authority ought also, with much care, to promote religion and good morals among all under their government" and that "Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction." Chapter 3 discusses Witherspoon's influence as an educator, and the central place that education had in his day, when its importance for the prosperity and happiness of a nation was viewed as second only to religion. It examines his moral and philosophical teachings, which were drawn largely from Scottish common sense philosophy, and tended strongly toward pragmatism, which became a hallmark not only of early American politics, but also of American life and culture in general. Chapter 4 considers Witherspoon's role in the American revolution, in terms of both his activities and his theological and philosophical views of liberty and resistance theory. Witherspoon saw little or no distinction between religious and civil tyranny. As a result, his idea of revolution was founded on John Calvin's right of resistance outlined in the Institutes of the Christian Religion, but was also influenced heavily by Locke's generalization of Calvin's idea to civil resistance. Chapter 5 investigates Witherspoon's activity surrounding the development of the founding documents, including his vocal role at the Continental Congress and his advocacy of a strong and lasting union of the states. It discusses parallels between Witherspoon's writings and The Federalist Papers, his positions on economic questions, and his active role in the formation of the national Presbyterian Church in the United States and the drafting of the Presbyterian Constitution in 1787. In this context, Morrison discusses many of the parallels between the U.S. federal government and Presbyterian government, and he talks about Witherspoon's view of the very limited role that the federal government ought to play (he considered that the scope of the federal government was so limited that a permanent federal city was not a question of pressing importance). The sixth and final chapter of Morrison's book explores Witherspoon's relation to early American political thinking. It compares his ideas with those of other founders, and it looks at his influence on thinkers such as Madison. In particular, one idea central to Witherspoon's thought that was shared by many of the founders and influential in the framing of the Constitution was the Calvinistic idea of the sinfulness of human nature. The final chapter also considers the influence of various political theorists in early American politics, and discusses the strong pragmatic and empirical spirit that characterized the political views of Witherspoon and the other founders. If, as Morrison writes, "perhaps more than any other single founder, Witherspoon embodied all of the major intellectual and social elements behind the American founding", it is only to be hoped that we may soon have available a thorough biography of this "forgotten founder" to go along with Morrison's fine volume covering his political and social importance. However, in this oppressive age of political correctness, it is doubtful that a conservative Presbyterian minister will receive too much attention, however influential he may have been. This is an excellent book, and Morrison's rigorous scholarship is consistently obvious in the thorough footnotes (nearly 100 pages of the brief 220 page volume are devoted to appendices, footnotes, bibliography, and index). If you are serious about understanding the early development of the United States, this book will not disappoint you.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.
Who????????????? By Movie Maven Excellent biography of an historical figure who has not been adequately recognized for his contributions to this nation's development. If you have any interest in the political and religious

philosophical roots of America, you should read Morrison's book. This is a well-researched, yet pleasurable book to read. It reveals Witherspoon to be a guiding beacon for many of the American Founders. If for no other reason, read this book to see the names and numbers of men that Witherspoon taught, mentored, and influenced in both political and spiritual matters. Despite the fact that two statues of Witherspoon stand in the United States, Witherspoon should be better-known by the American people. I believe Morrison's book, over time, can remedy that shortcoming.

Jeffrey H. Morrison offers readers the first comprehensive look at the political thought and career of John Witherspoon, a Scottish Presbyterian minister and one of America's most influential and overlooked founding fathers. Witherspoon was an active member of the Continental Congress and was the only clergyman both to sign the Declaration of Independence and to ratify the federal Constitution. During his tenure as president of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, Witherspoon became a mentor to James Madison and influenced many leaders and thinkers of the founding period. He was uniquely positioned at the crossroads of politics, religion, and education during the crucial first decades of the new republic. Morrison locates Witherspoon in the context of early American political thought and charts the various influences on his thinking. This impressive work of scholarship offers a broad treatment of Witherspoon's constitutionalism, including his contributions to the mediating institutions of religion and education, and to political institutions from the colonial through the early federal periods. This book will be appreciated by anyone with an interest in American political history and thought and in the relation of religion to American politics.

"Jeffrey Morrison's brief, excellent new book, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, both testifies to and partly redresses the neglect Witherspoon has suffered. Witherspoon was a formidable intellectual and political leader whose role in the affairs of colonial and early republican America deserves wider recognition."