



# Principle Approach Education

## THE EDUCATION OF JAMES MADISON: A MODEL FOR TODAY

by Mary-Elaine Swanson

*Title Education of James Madison: A Model for Today, by Mary-Elaine Swanson, The Hoffman Center, Selma, Alabama (1991), Chapter I, and Excerpts from Chapters II & III*

### THE HOME: THE FIRST FOUNDATION OF COLONIAL EDUCATION

One of the most encouraging developments in America today is that parents are once again taking active charge of their children's education and frequently are choosing to educate them at home, particularly during the early years. Whether they realize it or not, they are returning to the prevailing custom in colonial America. It is true that in those pioneering days, families often had no other choice, but they also seemed to have understood the importance of the first impressions of childhood and the necessity of planting the seeds of Christian knowledge and virtue as early as possible in young minds. They had a deep sense of their responsibility as parents to nurture their children spiritually as well as intellectually and materially. Dr. John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian pastor and president of the College of New Jersey when Madison studied there, wrote in his *Letters on the Education of Children* that "a parent should rejoice in his children, as they are the gift of a gracious God; should put his trust in the care of an indulgent Providence for the preservation of his offspring, as well as himself; should be supremely desirous that they may be in due time, the heirs of eternal life .... This happy qualification of parental tenderness, will have a powerful influence in preventing mistakes in the conduct of education. It will be the most powerful of all incitements to duty . . ." <sup>1</sup> With regard to the importance of first impressions, he pointed out that "What we see every day has a constant and powerful influence on our temper and carriage." <sup>2</sup>

Although Witherspoon was a Scotsman and new to the colonies when Madison was a student in his Moral Philosophy classes, his ideas on the importance of parental influence and teaching were also at the heart of colonial education.

### The Colonial Educational Triad

The education of James Madison, which began in the home, was not unique; rather, it embodied all three parts of what might be called the colonial educational triad: early schooling in the home and a



small local school, private tutoring in preparation for college, and ongoing self-education beginning in the family library. Most of Madison's contemporaries had access to at least one of these components: home schooling or education in a small school, usually run by a clergyman. Many also had access to self-education through their own home library or one belonging to a friend and through the purchase of books. Some (like Madison), whose parents were more affluent, also had private tutoring in preparation for college. Those who went on to a higher education generally studied in an American institution, although some were sent to England to study at Oxford or Cambridge or, if they were destined to follow the law, at the Middle Temple in London. Those who went to American colleges like Harvard, William and Mary, or the College of New Jersey were sure to get an education grounded in Christian values since these institutions were started primarily to train young men for the ministry. Thus a college education reinforced training received at home, in small schools, and by tutors (most of whom also were ministers). Such was the education of James Madison.

### **The Influence of Home and Church**

Born March 16, 1751 at the home of his mother's parents in King George County, Virginia, Madison grew up, however, in the rolling hill country of Orange County in a house he later named Montpelier. He was the eldest son of a prosperous Virginia plantation owner (also named James Madison) and Nelly Conway Madison, the daughter of a low-country planter. The future champion of religious liberty was baptized into the Church of England, the official state church of Virginia, as were the six other Madison children that followed.

They grew up in the self-contained world of the southern plantation. Living a considerable distance from their nearest neighbors drove families like the Madisons to develop their own educational system within the family or through tutors brought in to teach the children or to run a small school on the plantation. Each family was free to pursue its own educational program. Thus plantation life fostered educational diversity.

On the other hand, the local Church was the hub of plantation life. Once a week, it united families that were spread out over many miles and who otherwise might seldom meet. The Madison family's church, where James Madison, Sr. was a vestryman, was located some seven miles away. Here young Jemmy, as he was called, met other families who lived in the vicinity including several relatives. At the Madison's Brick Church, the minister not only instructed his congregation in the tenets of their faith, but also read official notices from the government. Here friendships between neighboring families were formed and often courtships began. Although James Madison's religious education did not begin at Brick Church, here it was reinforced.

Young Jemmy Madison's education in religion and in reading, writing, and arithmetic, began at home under his grandmother, Frances Taylor Madison. She was a devout Christian and had provided the family's parish church with part of its communion plate. Religion also played an important role in the life of her son, James Madison, Sr., whose library of 85 books contained mostly works of a religious nature with a sprinkling of medical tomes. Among religious books, there were, in addition to The Holy Bible,



the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, and *The Life of Man in the Soul of God*. Undoubtedly, Jemmy early learned the importance of religion from his father and from his first teacher, Grandmother Madison. (That his mother, to whom Jemmy became devoted, did not superintend his lessons may have been because she was in poor health during his childhood.)

Like his mother, Jemmy was not robust. Suffering frequent illnesses that confined him at home, he early became fond of reading and study and may well have begun to delve into these books at an early age. Despite his delicate constitution, and his love of reading, he also loved to walk and ride about the plantation. He had a boy's curiosity about the animals that lived there and wanted to learn the names and habits of the different birds. (Years later, he tried to find out how far north the Cardinals ranged.)<sup>3</sup>

He enjoyed walking through what was then virgin forest. There were hickory trees, chestnuts and poplars, beautiful white oaks and Spanish oaks. The beauties of nature with which he was surrounded encouraged his inquisitive mind to develop powers of observation while the tranquility of rural life fostered a reflective spirit in one already predisposed by nature to introspection.

### Self-Education Through The Spectator

Grandmother Madison, who had contributed some of the religious books to the Madison library, also sent to London for an eight-volume collection of the famous literary periodical, *The Spectator*, which Jemmy began to read when he was about 11 or 12 years old.

Like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, Madison's taste and style of writing were much influenced by Joseph Addison's famous periodical. Issued daily for some 500 numbers, it featured a single theme in each and commented satirically, and often brilliantly, on the men and mores of the time. The elegant but lucid style soon gained for *The Spectator* as many readers in English (and colonial) coffeehouses as in fashionable drawing rooms.

What is of particular interest to the Christian educator is the deliberately educational thrust of the periodical. It aimed to reform manners and suppress the use of profanity, to advance the cause of "truth, innocence, honor and virtue, as the chief ornaments of life." It also aimed to disseminate useful knowledge in an entertaining manner and to improve the literary tastes of its readers by giving them models of the best writing of the time. Although the last issue of *The Spectator* appeared in 1713, its back numbers continued to be read and discussed avidly in the colonies for many years."<sup>4</sup>

So impressed was the mature Madison by his recollection of the many virtues of *The Spectator* as a teaching tool that he sent a copy to his 11-year-old nephew, Richard D. Cutts. The following extracts from Madison's letter to his nephew, (written on January 4, 1829), show what he had gleaned from his early efforts at self-education through reading *The Spectator*.

When I was at an age which will soon be yours, a book fell into my hands which I read, as I believe, with particular advantage . . . The work I speak of is *The Spectator*, well known by that title. It had several authors, at the head of them Mr. Addison.



“Addison was of the first rank among the fine writers of the age,” Madison explained to his nephew, “and has given a definition of what he showed himself to be an example. ‘Fine writing,’ he says, ‘consists of sentiments that are natural, without being obvious;’ to which adding the remark of [Jonathan] Swift, another celebrated author of the same period, making a good style to consist ‘of proper words in their proper places,’ a definition is formed, which will merit your recollection when you become qualified, as I hope you will one day be, to employ your pen for the benefit of others, and for your own gratification.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Jemmy’s Studies Under a Scottish Schoolmaster**

When Jemmy was 12 years old, his father enrolled him in a small school some 70 miles away on the plantation of a Rev. Robert Innes. The children boarded with Rev. Innes and the school was run by Donald Robertson, a Scottish schoolmaster educated at Aberdeen and Edinburgh and a licensed preacher of the Gospel. Here Jemmy began to study Latin, Greek and French as well as algebra, geometry, geography and literature. (A knowledge of Greek was considered necessary in order to read the New Testament and was required for entry into college.) In later years James Madison described his teacher as “a man of extensive learning, and a distinguished teacher.” In this small-school setting, Jemmy doubtless received the attention he needed which, together with his natural abilities, enabled him to make rapid progress.

### **Jemmy’s Reading and His Notebooks**

Some of the books young Jemmy is believed to have studied during his five years under Robertson’s tutelage were Justinian’s *Institutes*, Montaigne’s *Essays*, John Locke’s *Essay on the Human Understanding*, Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of Laws*, Smollett’s *History of England* and *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis.

He also began to keep notebooks on his studies in which there are references to astronomy, the writings of Locke, Fontenelle, Plato and Euclid. Keeping notebooks was an important component of colonial education. Our Founding Fathers kept many notebooks and journals—not only during their school days, but throughout their lives. The teachers of the young knew the value of notebooks as an educational tool. John Adams once explained to his son, John Quincy, the importance of keeping a notebook, remarking that: “One contracts a Fondness for Writing by Use. We learn to write readily and what is of more importance, we think, and improve our Judgments, by committing our Thoughts to paper.”<sup>6</sup>

Donald Robertson apparently inspired Jemmy to work hard on his Latin which he mastered so well that in later years he corrected English translations of Latin works written by the great jurists of the Law of Nations: Grotius, Vattel and Puffendorf.

### **Rev. Thomas Martin—Tutor and Friend**

When he was 16 years old, his father placed Jemmy’s education in the care of Rev. Thomas Martin, a young man of twenty-five from a Scotch-Irish family who had just come from New Jersey to be the rector of the Madison’s parish church.



Rev. Martin came to live in the Madison home and tutored Jemmy and his brothers, Francis, 14, and Ambrose, 12. (He may also have taught seven-year old Nelly.) He probably took special pains with Jemmy who, as the eldest son, would be the first of the boys to enter college. After three years under his tutelage, it was judged that Jemmy was ready for this step.

### Choosing a College

It was probably quite surprising to his neighbors to learn that the elder James Madison had decided to send his son to the College of New Jersey. Why did he not send him to the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg in their own colony of Virginia? Here were enrolled the sons of many prosperous plantation owners. Furthermore, it was an Anglican institution, whereas young Jemmy was bound for a Presbyterian College in another colony.

But it was this Presbyterian college that Jemmy's tutor had enthusiastically recommended to the Madisons. Although an Anglican minister and rector of the Madisons' parish church, the 25-year-old Rev. Martin, who had graduated from Princeton in 1764, extolled the virtues of its curriculum and doubtless also discussed the great learning and religious orthodoxy of its new president, the learned Scottish divine, Dr. John Witherspoon. That an Anglican minister would sing the praises of a Presbyterian College is not as strange as it might at first appear, because the prevailing theology of both Anglican and Presbyterian churches at this period was the same, i.e., Calvinistic. So, James Madison, Sr., a sincere Anglican, apparently saw nothing extraordinary in choosing the College of New Jersey for his eldest son. Besides, his boy had already benefitted greatly from his attendance at the school run by Donald Robertson, another Scottish Presbyterian.

It is also possible that the elder Madison had heard rumors concerning unorthodox religious views of some of the professors at William and Mary at this time and of lax discipline and was anxious that his son not come under any such harmful influences. He may also have been concerned about the rumored unhealthiness of the tidewater country around Williamsburg, particularly as his son had been reared in the fine mountain air of the Virginia Piedmont. Whatever his reasons, James Madison, Sr. decided upon Princeton.

### STUDENT DAYS AT THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

On a fine summer day in 1769, the 18-year-old Jemmy Madison left his family's plantation to go to college three hundred miles away in New Jersey. The trip took upwards of two weeks, and it was his first long trip away from home. He and his tutor, Rev. Martin and Martin's brother, Alexander, made the journey on horseback, accompanied by Sawney, one of the Madison family's most trusted blacks.

They probably took the route that ran through the low country to Fredericksburg, then on the Annapolis, New Castle, and Philadelphia, then the largest city in America with a population of some 25,000 souls.



After leaving Philadelphia, Madison's party crossed the Delaware and jemmy must have begun to be impatient to see the tall tower that Rev. Martin said crowned Nassau Hall, the large stone building whose four floors housed the college. Here were classrooms, student dorms, dining hall, library—and the chapel where the students and faculty worshipped together every morning and heard Dr. Witherspoon preach on a passage of Scripture.

One may easily imagine that young Jemmy experienced mixed emotions of excitement and trepidation as he arrived at the beehive of intellectual activity that was now to be his home. Although he was the eldest child he had always been shy around strangers. Now he was about to meet some 100 other young men whom he had never met before. He had to get used to the bell that wakened the students at 5 a.m. It rang out again at 6 a.m. for chapel services which were held every morning. Here the redoubtable president of the College, Dr. John Witherspoon, preached on some passage from the Bible. After chapel, there was an hour for study. Only after this did the boys get their breakfast, which was followed by recitation at 9:00 a.m. Here the teacher of a class not only questioned the students, but they had an opportunity to question him. After recitation, more study followed until 1 p.m., when dinner was served. Madison enjoyed some free time until 3 o'clock when there was another recitation, followed by more study. The students met again for prayers when the bell rang at 5 p.m. At this service, they customarily sang selections from the psalms. A light supper was served at 7 p.m. By 9 o'clock all students were expected to be in their rooms, either studying or in bed.

Soon after settling in at the College, jemmy wrote the following note to his tutor (the first surviving letter by Madison). It was apparently sent to the New Jersey address of Rev. Martin's widowed mother whom he was visiting. It shows the adult style of writing which the teen-age Madison had already learned.

Nassau-Hall, August 10<sup>th</sup> 69

Revd. Sir,

I am not a little affected at hearing of your misfortunes, but cannot but hope the cure may be so far accomplished as to render your journey not inconvenient. Your kind Advice and friendly cautions are a favour that shall be always gratefully remembered, & I must beg leave to assure you that my happiness, which you and your brother so ardently wish for, will be greatly augmented by both your enjoyments of the like blessing.

I have been as particular to my father as I thought necessary for the time, as I send him an account of the Institution &c &c of the College wrote by [the Rev.] Mr. [Samuel] Blair formerly elected President of this place . . .

The near approach of Examination occasions a surprising application to study on all sides, and I think it very fortunate that I entered College immediately after my arrival . . . it will make my future studies somewhat easier; and I have, by that means, read over more than half Horace, and made myself pretty well acquainted with prosody, both which will be almost neglected the two succeeding years.



The very large Packet of Letter for Carolina, I am afraid, will be incomodious to your brother on so long a journey, to whom I desire my compliments may be presented & conclude with my earnest request for a continuance of both your friendships, and sincere wishes for your recovery, and an agreeable journey to your whole Company.

I am, Sir, your obligd friend & HI. [humble] Servant]

James Madison

P. S. Sawney tells me that your Mother and Brothers are determined to accompany you to Virginia. My friendship and regard for you entitle them to my esteem, and assure them that, with the greatest sincerity I wish, after a pleasant journey, they may find Virginia capable of giving them great happiness. J. M.<sup>7</sup>

Madison does not say what the misfortune was that had befallen his tutor, but it is clear that he values Rev. Martin as a friend as well as a teacher.

Madison took an examination in the summer of 1769 which enabled him to dispense with the freshman year at the college. Freshman students studied Greek and Latin, devoting time to the study of Horace and Cicero's *Orations*, as well as the Greek testament and the works of other classic authors. Sophomores continued their study of the classic languages, devoting study to Homer in particular. They also began to study the sciences, logic, rhetoric and mathematics as well as giving time to geography. During the next year they continued studying mathematics and science and began to study moral philosophy, metaphysics and history. Those studying for the ministry also took Hebrew. Written and oral composition in both Latin and English were emphasized during the last year. Seniors also studied the Bible, the arts and sciences, and perfected their knowledge of Greek and Latin classics.

### **A Letter to His Father**

That autumn Jemmy gave his father a detailed account of the College commencement exercises. He mentioned the names of two well-known patriots to whom the College gave honorary doctorates. He also mentioned Samuel Stanhope Smith, a young scholar Who was to become his tutor and later his lifelong friend. Smith became a minister and the founder of Hampden-Sidney College in Virginia, then a distinguished professor of natural history at the College of New Jersey and, finally, president of the College in 1795. In his letter, dated September 30, 1769, and beginning "Honored Sir," young Madison wrote,

On Wednesday last, we had the annual commencement. Eighteen young men took their Bachelor's degrees, and a considerable number their Masters Degrees; the Degree of Doctor of Law was bestowed on Mr. Dickenson, the Farmer [a reference to John Dickinson, whose eloquent utters from a Pennsylvania Fanner concerning the debates with England over colonial rights had been widely read] and Mr. [Joseph] Galloway, the Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, a distinguishing mark of Honour, as there never



was any of that kind done before in America. The Commencement began at 10 o’Clock, when the President walked first into the Church, a Board of Trustees following, and behind them those that were to take their Master’s Degrees, and last of all, those that were to take their first Degrees; After a short Prayer by the President, the Head Oration, which is always given to the greatest scholar by the President & Tutors, was pronounced in Latin by Mr. Samuel [Stanhope] Smith son of a Presbyterian Minister in Pennsylvania. Then followed the other Orations, Disputes and Dialogues, distributed each according to his merit, and last of all was pronounced the Valedictory Oration by Mr. John Henry [later delegate to the Continental Congress, a United States Senator, and a governor of Maryland] son of a Gentleman in Maryland. This is given by the greatest Orator. We have a very great Assembly of People, a considerable number of whom came from New York.

Jemmy also thought his father would like to know about the business matters concerning the college and told him that the trustees had appointed a Mr. Caldwell, who was a Presbyterian minister to take a trip through three southern colonies as far as Georgia in order to solicit donations for the College Fund to be used to add books to the college library and to “provide an apparatus of mathematical and Philosophical Instruments & likewise to support Professors which would be a great addition to the advantages of this College.” He told his father that Doctor Witherspoon was to take a trip to Virginia for the same purposes “and perhaps to form some acquaintance to induce Gentlemen to send their sons to this College.”<sup>8</sup>

His letter continued with expressions of concern for “the great drought” that was then going on in Virginia. He promised his father that he would practice frugality in his expenditures because the elder Madison had suffered financial losses connected with the dry weather. Jemmy also expressed concern for his mother’s health and hoped that “Doctor Shore’s skill will effectually banish the cause of her late indisposition.”<sup>9</sup>

The letter concluded with assurance to his father that he would write “as often as opportunity and any thing worthy of your attention shall occur.” Jemmy signed himself “your Affectionate Son, James Madison.”<sup>10</sup>

### **President Witherspoon’s Political Sympathies**

In addition to the honorary degrees bestowed on Dickinson and Galloway, the College also gave one to John Hancock, another hero of the opposition to England’s attempt to tax the colonies without their consent. Ever since June of 1768, when he was arrested and his sloop, aptly named *Liberty*, was seized by the British on a charge of smuggling goods ashore in defiance of the Townshend Acts, Hancock had become a hero throughout the colonies.

The awarding of these honorary degrees, the first of their kind to be given in America, showed the political sympathies of President Witherspoon and the Trustees. President Witherspoon, although a Scot, felt a deep concern for his adopted country and inspired a spirit of patriotism in the students. Jemmy must have



felt a sense of excitement at the commencement ceremony which came in that politically charged year of 1769. England's first attempt to impose an internal tax without the consent of the colonial legislatures by means of a Stamp Tax had occurred just six years earlier. The Act had aroused such fierce resistance in the colonies that it had been revoked a year later (1756) only to be followed in 1769 by the Townshend Acts imposing new taxes. Soon these were followed by a series of Royal Instructions that revealed a plan for the Crown to pay the salaries of colonial governors, judges and attorneys. No longer would they be paid by the colonial assemblies as heretofore. By this means it was intended to transfer the loyalty of the colonial officials from their own people to the Royal Government in London. It was also planned to arrest the "ringleaders" of the protest against Great Britain's taxation (i.e., Samuel Adams and John Hancock) and send them to England for trial.

### **Virginia's Opposition to the Townshend Acts**

Coming so soon after the joyous celebration in the colonies occasioned by the repeal of the Stamp Act, these new Acts and Instructions provoked even greater opposition. In the spring, before Jemmy left home for New Jersey, the Virginia House of Burgesses had sent off stern resolutions addressed to the King insisting that the right of taxation belonged to the colonial assemblies as the elected representative bodies of the colonies and warning Parliament that to take any persons from the colonies for trial in England would be a serious violation of their rights under the English Constitution.

Governor Botetourt had been so angry that he had dissolved the House of Burgesses, but its members had simply continued their meeting at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg. Here Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and other Virginia patriots had signed an agreement not to buy English goods until the hated laws were revoked.

### **The Political Sympathies of the Madisons**

Although James Madison, Sr. was not a political participant in these stirring events, his sympathies lay with the courageous actions of the Virginia House of Burgesses, and his son must have been heartened to discover, even before he arrived in Princeton, that opposition to British acts of tyranny extended beyond his own colony's borders. As he passed through Philadelphia, Jemmy may have learned, for example, that the merchants of that city, and in New York, were also entering into non-importation agreements similar to those of the Virginia patriots. The political sympathies of his family were to be strongly reinforced in Jemmy's mind by his training under Dr. Witherspoon, the new President of the College of New Jersey.

## **THE CHARACTER AND CAREER OF DR. JOHN WITHERSPOON**

### **Rebuilding an Ailing College**

On his arrival in Princeton in 1768, the year before James Madison's enrollment as a student, Dr. Witherspoon discovered that the College was in severe financial straits and could not even pay his



salary. But he soon resolved to set about raising the funds by journeying as far afield as New England. He also made a tour to the South, to which Madison referred in the letter to his father. The tours of Dr. Witherspoon and Rev. Caldwell resulted in contributions to the College of \$1,000 and also in gifts of produce which had to be shipped north from Georgia in a chartered ship. As a result of Dr. Witherspoon's fundraising activity, the College debts were soon paid off and there was even a modest surplus. The College's new president was also able to fulfill one of the purposes outlined in Madison's letter: to purchase David Rittenhouse's orrery, a piece of scientific equipment for the teaching of natural philosophy.

### **Dr. Witherspoon's Changes in the Curriculum**

Even more important than his fund-raising efforts for the College were certain changes Witherspoon made in the curriculum, which were of significant benefit to James Madison and his fellow students: He introduced new courses in history, French and oratory. As an adherent of the Scottish school of—common-sense philosophy, or realism, he introduced the ideas of Thomas Reid (1710-1796) and Francis Hutcheson to counteract the idealism of George Berkeley which he viewed as “a wild and ridiculous attempt to unsettle the principles of common sense by metaphysical reasoning, which can hardly produce anything but contempt in the generality of persons who hear it . . .”<sup>11</sup> The courses Witherspoon taught on moral philosophy reflect his conviction that the writings of these Scottish rationalists were in harmony with the Scriptures and that “the whole Scripture is perfectly agreeable to sound philosophy.”<sup>12</sup> Both Hutcheson and Reid (the latter was a parish minister for 15 years before becoming a university professor of philosophy) taught that there is a moral sense, or conscience which teaches men the difference between right and wrong and that reason itself springs from certain first principles that men are able to grasp intuitively. In this connection, Dr. Lawrence Cremin makes the important point that,

It is these first principles, abstracted into a faculty called the moral sense, that Witherspoon explicates, giving attention not only to the traditional concerns of practical divinity, i.e., duties to God, self, and other, but also in unusual measure to politics, economics and jurisprudence.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, of particular importance to Madison and his fellow students was Witherspoon's expansion of the course on moral philosophy to include “the general principles of public law and politics.” It was a decision that would be productive of remarkable results.

### **Princeton Produces Outstanding American Statesmen**

It is surely significant that among the 478 graduates from Princeton during his tenure, at least 86 became active in civil government: one as President of the United States (Madison, of course); one as a vice-president (Aaron Burr). In addition, there were 10 cabinet officers, 21 senators, 39 congressmen, 12 governors, a Supreme Court justice (Brockholst Livingston) and an Attorney General of the United States (Madison's good friend and schoolmate from Philadelphia, William Bradford).<sup>14</sup>



It is also significant that nearly one-fifth of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, one-sixth of the delegates to the constitutional Convention, and one-fifth of the first Congress under the Constitution were graduates of the College of New Jersey.<sup>15</sup>

### **Uniting Piety with Literature**

In his literary classes Witherspoon also endeavored “to unite together piety and literature—to show their relation to, and their influence on each other and to guard against anything that may tend to separate them, and set them in opposition one to another.” There was nothing narrow about these literary studies which, as will be seen, included a number of distinguished works by French Roman Catholic authors.

In addition to a broadened and deepened college curriculum, Witherspoon also brought new life to the grammar school that was run by the College in the basement of Nassau Hall. All the students, whether in the grammar school or the college, learned the importance of the kind of diligent study that comes from a self-disciplined mind. (This was a lesson that James Madison learned well.) Witherspoon’s own interest in education ran the full spectrum from education of the very young to education of the youngsters in his grammar school and the young men in his College.”<sup>16</sup>

### **A Thorough Mastery of the English Language**

Jemmy Madison soon learned that Dr. Witherspoon believed it important that his students, whether destined for the pulpit, the bar, or other occupations, should have a thorough mastery of the English language. They must learn to express themselves with accuracy, simplicity and brevity. Here was another important lesson that Madison learned well.

On one occasion, President Witherspoon counseled his students: “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 mind two rules in 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 and leave off.”<sup>17</sup> It was advice that James Madison heeded throughout his career. Although he was one of the most frequent speakers on the floor of the Constitutional Convention, his speeches never lasted more than 10 minutes, and his thoughts were expressed with admirable clarity and brevity.

These are two qualities that are sorely needed by many young Americans today who are frequently unclear as to the point they wish to make in their essays or in ordinary conversation. Consequently their utterances are feeble and unfocused. There must be many a talented young person who is floundering not from want of innate ability, but from poor instruction and disciplining of the mind. It is too late to begin this discipline when the young person enters college. It should begin in elementary school. Unhappily, the “true or false” tests that are so often used in the elementary grades do not begin to teach children how to grapple with an idea, form a view of it, and then express that view coherently. Many times the student’s check mark is only a stab in the dark. They cannot speak coherently because they cannot write



coherently. They can not write coherently because they have not learned to think coherently. Today's high school and college students would surely benefit greatly from the rigorous but challenging teaching of a modern-day Dr. Witherspoon.

<sup>1</sup> John Witherspoon, *Letters on the Education of Children* (1797) in Verna M. Hall, compiler, *The Christian History of the American Revolution: Consider and Ponder* (San Francisco, California: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1975), p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> Irving Brant, *James Madison: The Virginia Revolutionist – 1751-1758*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941), 1:44.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience – 1607-1783*, (New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 366. He also relates (on p. 371) that young Benjamin Franklin was so impressed with a volume of *The Spectator* which he came across that he paraphrased several of the articles in order to teach himself the art of writing.

<sup>5</sup> William C. Rives, *History of the Life and Times of James Madison*, 4 vols., 1859-1868. (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 1:25-26.

<sup>6</sup> John Adams, Letter dated May 14, 1783, in *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family: 1762-1784*, edited and with an Introduction by L. H. Butterfield, Marc, Friedlaender and Mary-Jo Kline (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 349.

<sup>7</sup> William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal, eds., *The Papers of James Madison*. 1:16 March – 16 December 1779 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Cremin, p. 300.

<sup>11</sup> Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon*, cited by John Eidsmoe in *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> See Rives, 1:121. The nine delegates to the Constitutional Convention were: David Bredy, Jonathan Dayton, William Churchill Houston and William Patterson, New Jersey; Gunning Bedford, Jr., Delaware; Luther Martin, Maryland; James Madison, Virginia; William Richardson Davie and Alexander Martin, North Carolina.

<sup>13</sup> His *Letters on the Education of Children* (1797) still make profitable reading for parents today. They are available in somewhat condensed form in *The Christian History of the American Revolution*, pp. 232-245.

<sup>14</sup> Cited by Peterson in *James Madison: A Biography in His Own Words*, 1:117.