



“we had a great deal of trouble and hardships in our first settling”

Memoir of Robert Witherspoon

A Scots-Irish family settles in South Carolina in the 1730s.

While most emigrants from Ireland, Scotland, and England travelled to Pennsylvania, the family of James Witherspoon joined the several thousand emigrants from Ireland who settled in South Carolina in the 1730s. The family was Scots-Irish; Witherspoon’s parents were among the thousands of Scot Presbyterians who had fled economic hardship in Scotland several decades earlier. In 1731, the family took an enticing package

offered to the Scots-Irish by the English governor of South Carolina — land, money, tools, and provisions for a year — to settle in the Carolina backcountry. With the family was six-year-old Robert, who wrote a memoir of the experience half a century later in 1780, eight years before he died at his plantation.

We went on ship-board the 14th Sept and lay wind bound in the Lough at Belfast [Ireland] 14 days. On the second day of our sail my grandmother died and was interred in the raging Ocean which was an afflicting sight to her offspring. We were sorely tossed at sea with storms which caused our ship to spring a leak — our pumps were kept incessantly at work day and night for many days.

Our mariners seemed many times at their wits ends but it pleased God to bring us all safe to land about the first of Dec. Three weeks before christmas we landed in Charleston. . . . There were four of us children David Robt. John and Sarah. Sarah died in Charleston and was the first person burried at the Scotch Meeting House Graveyard. . . . The inhabitants were very kind and we remained in town until after Christmas.

We were then put on board an open boat with tools and a years provision and one still mill for each family. They allowed each person over sixteen one ax, a broad ax, one narrow hoe. Our provisions consisted of indian corn, rice, wheaten flour, beef[,] pork, rum and salt we were much distressed in this part of our passage as it was the dead of winter and we were exposed to the inclemency of the weather day and night and what added to the grief of all pious persons on board was the Atheistical blasphemous mouths of our patrons they brought us up as far as Potatoo Ferry on Black River, about twenty miles from Georgetown and turned us on shore where we lay in Samuel Commander’s barn for some time while the boat wrought her way up as far as the king’s tree with the goods and provision — which was the first time a boat ever came up so high. Whilst we lay at Mr. Commanders, our men came up to build dirt houses or rather like potato houses to take their families to. They brought some few horses with them. Through what help they could get from the few inhabitants in order to carry children and other necessaries up, as the woods were full of water and the frosts most severe, it was very severe on women and children. We set out that morning the last of January some got no further that day than M^r M^c Donald’s some got as far as Mr Plowdens some to James Armstrongs and some to uncle Wm James’ their little cabins were as full that night as they could hold and the next day every one made their way best they could to their own place. . . .

On the first of Feb 1735, when we came to the Bluff three miles below the King's Tree my mother and us children were still in expectation that we were coming to an agreeable place — but when we arrived and found nothing but a wilderness, and instead of a comfortable home, no other than a very mean dirt house our spirits quite sank and to add to our trouble Our pilot that we had with us from uncle Wm. James left us when he came in sight of the place. Father gave us all the comfort he could, by telling us that we would get all these trees cut down and in a short time there would be plenty of inhabitants so that we could see from house to house. Whilst we were talking our fire that we brought from Ox swamp went out. Father had heard that up the River swamp was the King's tree although there was no path neither did he know the distance, yet he followed up the swamp, until he came to the branch and by that means he found Roger Gordon's place. We all watched him as far as we could see for the trees and then returned to our dolorous hut, never expecting to see him, nor any human being again. After some time he returned and brought fire and we were somewhat comforted. As evening came on the wolves began to howl on all sides we then feared being devoured by wild beasts, having neither gun nor dog, not even [a] door to our house — how be it we set to work and gathered fuel and made a good fire and so passed the first night.

The next day being a clear warm morning we began to stir about — about mid-day there was a cloud in the South-west attended with high wind thunder and lightening — the rain quickly penetrating through the poles that formed the roof brought down the sand that covered it over in such quantities it seemed to threaten to cover us alive. The lightening flash with the claps of thunder were awful and lasted a good space of time. I do not remember to have ever seen a more severe gust than that was. I believe we all sincerely wished ourselves again at Belfast. This fright was soon over and the evening closed and it cleared up warm and comfortable. The boat that brought up the goods arrived at the Kingstree. The people were much oppressed in bringing their things as there was no horse there, they were obliged to toil hard, as they had no other way but to car[r] them on their back. The goods consisted of their bed-clothing chests provision tools post &c. [etc. At that time there were no roads every family had to travel the best they could, which was double distance to some for their only guides were swamps and branches. After a time the men got sufficient knowledge of the woods as to blaze paths, so the people learned to follow blazes from place to place.

As the winter season advanced there was but a short time for preparing land for planting — but the people were strong and healthy All that could do anything wrought diligently and continued clearing and planting as long as the season would admit. So they made provisions for that year. Their beasts were few and as the range was good there was no need of feeding creatures for some time to come.

The first thing my father brought from the boat was the gun[,] one of queen Anne's mustkets[,] loaded with swawn shot. One morning while we were at breakfast a travelling opossum on his way passed the door. My mother screamed out there is a great bear we hid behind some barrels at the other end of our hut. Father got his gun and steadied it on the fork that held up the end of the hut and shot him about the hinder parts which caused poor opossum to grin and open his mouth in a frightful manner. Father having mislaid his shot could not give it a second bout, but at last ventured out and killed it with a pail.

Another thing which gave us great alarm was the Indians when they came to hunt in the spring they were great in numbers and in all places like the Egyptian locast but they were not hurtful. Besides these things we had a great deal of trouble and hardships in our first settling, but the few inhabitants were favored with health and strength. We were also much oppressed with fear on divers other accounts, especially of being massacred by the Indians, or bit by snakes, or torn by wild beasts, or of being lost and perishing in the woods, of whom there were three persons who were never found.

My uncle Robert, with his second wife and two children, Mary and John, arrived here near the last of August, 1736. He came on the fine ship called the "New-built," which was a ship of great burthen and brought a great many passengers, who chiefly came and settled here and had to travel by land from Georgetown, and instead of being furnished with provisions, etc., as we were, they had money given them

by the public. When they arrived, our second crop had been planted and was coming forward, but the season being warm and they much fatigued, many were taken sick with ague and fever, some died and some became dropsical and also died.

About August or September 1736 the people began to form into a religious society, built a church and sent to Ireland for a minister, one came whose name was Robert Herron he stayed three years and then returned to Ireland. In the Fall of 1737 my Grandfather John Witherspoon took the rose in his leg [skin infection] which occasioned a fever of which he died. He was the first person buried at the Williamsburg Meeting House which he had assisted to erect. He was a man of middle stature firm healthy constit[ut]ion somewhat bandy-legged had a fair complexion, he was well acquainted with the scriptures — had a voluability of expression in prayer and was a zealous adherent to the reformed protestant principles of the church of Scotland, he had a great aversion to episcopacy — whoever reads impartially the History of the times his younger years in Scotland may see that his prejudices were not without foundation as it was his lot to live in a time of great distress to the persecuted church in the reign of James 7th of Scotland and second of England. As he was one of those who followed field-meetings some of his kindred and himself were much harrassed by the Papists [Roman Catholics], yet notwithstanding his younger years were attended with trouble, he enjoyed great peace and tranquility in his after life. Excepting the death of my grandmother, he never knew what it was to part by death in his own family, a blessing which few have enjoyed.

About the same time, 1737, my father had a daughter, Elizabeth, that died, aged three years, born at the place called the Bluff, where we lived. . . . [Later it] pleased God — in the last awful epidemic that prevailed in Williamsburg in the year 1749 and 1750, usually called the “Great Mortality,” and which had carried off near eighty persons, many of them the principal people or heads of families — to remove by death my elder brother, David, and my sister, Jane, both in the year 1750. My father being then in a very feeble and infirm state of health and unable to attend to his own business, I left my own to take care of his. I remained with my parents until 1758, when, on the 2nd of March, I married Elizabeth Heathly, a young lady then in the eighteenth year of her age, and settled for myself four miles below King’s Tree and near the River.

I afterwards removed and settled one mile higher up the River nearer King’s Tree, in 1761, and immediately on the public road leading from that place to the Lower Bridge on Black River. Here I had a more comfortable and healthy residence, and here also, I expect to spend the remainder of my days. . . .

My honored mother departed this life on the 22nd day of January, 1777, in the seventy-second year of her age, and was the last surviving branch of the old stock of our family. Of the members of the Old stock of our family I have an opportunity of having a personal knowledge of their lives and deaths. I bear them this testimony. They were servers of God, they were well acquainted with the scriptures and were much in prayer, strict observers of the Sabbath. In a word they studied outward piety and inward purity. God blessed this settlement at first with a number of godly pious men of which I choose to set down their names. William Wilson, David Allen, Wm. Hamilton, John Porter, Wm. James, Robert Wilson, John James, James McClelland, Robert Paisley, James Bradley, John Turner, Wm. Frierson. My own father, James Witherspoon and my three uncles, David, Robert, and Gavin. These were men of great piety and indeed they were men of renown. May the glorious king and head of the ch[urch] for His own glory still ma[i]ntain and keep up men of piety and holiness as a blessing to this place and congregation to the latest posterity is the heart[felt] request of the unworthy scribe.