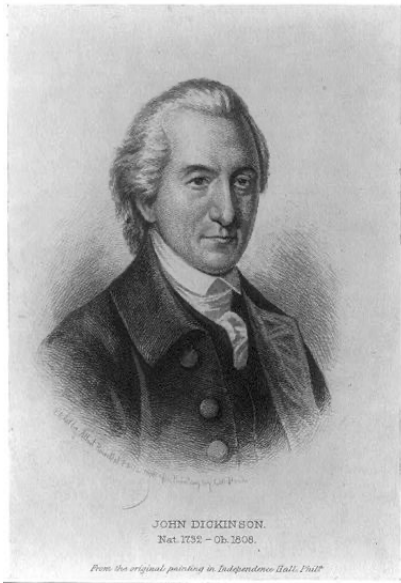


John Dickinson

John Dickinson (November 2, 1732 - February 14, 1808) was a Pennsylvania delegate to the First Continental Congress from 1774-1776 and from Delaware in 1779. Dickinson is known as the "Penman of the Revolution" for his powerful and eloquent writings urging resistance to unjust British tax policies. This is particularly clear in his writing of "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania," which was written between 1767 and 1768, and the "Declaration of the Causes of Taking Up Arms" he wrote as a member of the Continental Congress in 1776.

Dickinson was a prominent Founder who served on the committee that drafted the Model Treaty, was one of the signers of the Continental Association as well as the Articles of Confederation, and was also a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. At the end of the Convention he did not personally sign the Constitution but he did authorize George Read to do so for him.^[1] His illustrious career was also marked by service as President of Delaware in 1781, and President of Pennsylvania from 1782-1785.^[2]

Founding Fathers



John Dickinson

State	Pennsylvania
Religion	<u>Quaker</u>
Founding Documents	<u>Articles of Confederation</u> , <u>United States Constitution</u>

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Early life

John Dickinson was born in Maryland, on the November 2nd, 1732. He was the eldest son by a second marriage of Samuel Dickinson, Esq., who, some years after his birth, removed to his estate near Dover, in Delaware, and filled the office of first judge of the court of common pleas. His mother, Mary Cadwalader, was a descendant from one of the earliest settlers of Pennsylvania.

After having studied law under John Moland, Esq., of Philadelphia, he went to England, where he remained for three years at the Temple in London. On his return he established himself in the practice of the law in Philadelphia, where his abilities and acquirements procured for him eminent success.

Early career

His first appearance in public life was in the year 1764, as a member of the assembly of Pennsylvania. A controversy which existed between that assembly and the proprietors, founded on a claim by the latter to have their estates exempted from taxation, occasioned the first display of his abilities and eloquence as a statesman. A proposition having been made to petition the king for a change of the government of the province, Mr. Dickinson, on the 24th of May, delivered an elaborate speech in opposition to it. Believing the measure to be fraught with rashness and danger, that the remedy bore no proportion to the existing evil, and that it was calculated to involve the province in a disastrous conflict with a superior power, he exerted himself to prevent its adoption. The aggressions of the British parliament, which finally involved the country in war, did not commence until the 24th of March of that year; but in this preliminary controversy, we can observe the cautious policy for which Mr. Dickinson's conduct was distinguished throughout his public career.

Stamp Act Congress

On the 11th of September, 1765, he was appointed a delegate to a general congress, which assembled at New York in October, and was the author of the resolutions of that body, promulgating their hostility to the measures of Great Britain, and the principles which they considered as inherent in their system of government, and to which they ever after strenuously adhered. During this year he commenced his compositions against the aggressions of England, which were continued with vigor and striking effect, until the close of the conflict.

While a member of congress, the first production of his pen appears to have been a pamphlet published that year, entitled, " The Late Regulations respecting the British Colonies on the continent of America, considered in a Letter from a Gentleman in Philadelphia to his Friend in London," in which, with great spirit and elegance of style, as well as force of argument, he exhibited the impolicy of the ministerial measures, both as they related to a profitable intercourse between the mother country and her colonies, and in reference to the discontents which would inevitably be produced by her illegal and oppressive exactions.

The committee of correspondence of the legislature of Barbadoes, in a letter to their agent in London, remonstrating against the English system of taxation, took occasion to compare their loyal submission "with the rebellious opposition given to authority by their fellow subjects in the northern colonies." Mr. Dickinson took fire at the ignominious epithet so contumeliously cast upon his countrymen, and, in an admirable letter addressed to the Barbadoes committee, printed with the signature of a North American, in 1766, repelled the accusation, and, with his usual force and animation, vindicated the conduct of his fellow citizens.

But the work which most extensively spread his reputation, was the celebrated Farmer's Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies, which were published in 1767, and consisted of twelve letters. Few productions have ever been attended with more signal effect, or procured for their author more extensive fame. His object in writing them was to arouse the attention of his country to the illegality of British taxation, and to the necessity of adopting rigorous measures to induce the mother country to retrace her steps of oppression. Distinguished for purity of diction and elegance of composition, they richly merit the applause which has been bestowed upon them. In a style of great vigor, animation, and simplicity, he portrayed the unconstitutionality of the conduct of Great Britain, the imminent peril to American liberty which existed, and the fatal consequences of a supine acquiescence in ministerial measures, more fatal as precedents than by the immediate calamities they were calculated to produce. The Farmer's Letters were read with intense interest, and produced the effect not merely of enlightening the public mind, but of exciting the feelings of the people to a determination not to submit to the oppressive exactions of the mother country.

Avoiding all violence of expression and of doctrine, and repelling the idea of forcible opposition, they breathe a spirit of firm independence, an ardent love of liberty, and an unconquerable resolution to yield to any sacrifice rather than tamely submit to despotism. Mr. Dickinson was reluctant to encourage acts of hostility to the mother country, and accordingly we find that peaceful opposition was all that he then contemplated. Although he subsequently united ardently in the military operations of the colonies, yet the principles which he inculcated in the Farmer's Letters, of moderation in all the measures of opposition, seem to have followed him throughout the contest, and to have occasioned that opposition to the declaration of independence, which it will be proper hereafter more fully to describe. The idea of separation from the mother country was to him revolting, and he therefore urged his countrymen to a peaceful but firm resistance to the ambitious schemes of enlarging the power of Great Britain. He enlightened the public mind, aroused the feelings, and was finally carried forward by the current which he had so powerfully contributed to set in motion. An allusion to his principles seems necessary, fully to comprehend his character and the motives by which he was influenced. At all times active and energetic in his opposition to the measures of Great Britain, he did not unite in sentiment with the majority of his patriotic associates, in those daring measures which gave so decided a cast to the revolution. In enlightening the people, and in exciting their feelings, he was a prominent leader. It was only the boldest measures that he struggled to retard, but when once adopted, no man was more fearless or animated in urging them to a successful termination.

The author of the Farmer's Letters received the most flattering commendations. At a meeting of the inhabitants of Boston, at Faneuil Hall, it was resolved that the thanks of the town should be given to him, and Dr. Church, John Hancock, Samuel Adams, Dr. Joseph Warren, the hero of Bunker Hill, and John Roe, were appointed a committee to prepare and publish a letter of thanks. A highly complimentary letter was accordingly published, in which, after paying a tribute of respect to the author, they say that, "to such eminent worth and virtue, the inhabitants of the town of Boston, the

capital of the province of Massachusetts Bay, in full town meeting assembled, egress their gratitude. Though such superior merit must assuredly, in the closest recess, enjoy the divine satisfaction of having served, and possibly saved this people; though veiled from our view, you modestly shun the deserved applause of millions; permit us to intrude upon your retirement, and salute the Farmer as the friend of Americans, and the common benefactor of mankind." The answer of the Farmer was published in the Boston Gazette. An edition of the Letters was published in 1769, in Virginia, with a preface written by Richard Henry Lee, and in May, 1768, Dr. Franklin caused them to be republished in London, with a preface from his own elegant pen, urging them upon the attention of the public. In 1769, they were translated into French and published at Paris.

Around the same time that he published his Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, he also produced The Liberty Song.^[3]

Mr. Dickinson was, in 1774, a member of a committee from the several counties of Pennsylvania, convened for the purpose of giving instructions to the assembly, by whom delegates to congress were to be chosen. He prepared a series of resolutions and a letter of instruction, which, amidst the numerous acts of a similar description in the several colonies, attracted peculiar attention, by their precise and determinate manner, as well as by the merit of being the most formal and complete exposition of the rights of the colonies, and of their grievances, which had then been published. After having been reported by the committee without objection, they were so far modified as to separate the argumentative part from the rest, but the whole were ordered to be published,—the former as an "Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great Britain over the Colonies in America." The committee unanimously agreed "that their thanks should be given from the chair to John Dickinson, for the great assistance they have received from the laudable application of his eminent abilities to the service of his country in the above performance." In his reply to this tribute of respect, which was communicated to him formally from the chair, he very modestly observed,—"The mere accident of meeting with particular books, and conversing with particular men, led me into the train of sentiments, which the committee are pleased to think just; and others with the like opportunities of information would much better have deserved to receive the thanks they now generously give."

Continental Congress

Mr. Dickinson took his seat in congress as a deputy from Pennsylvania, on the 17th of October, 1774, and immediately became engaged in the composition of the addresses of that body, which shed so much lustre on its proceedings, and now constitute no small portion of its fame. A dignified and elegant appeal to the inhabitants of Quebec, designed to enlist them in the common cause of the defence of their rights, emanated from his pen. But it was the petition to the king which won the highest admiration, on both sides of the Atlantic, and which will remain an imperishable monument to the glory of its author, and of the assembly of which he was a member, so long as fervid and manly eloquence, and chaste and elegant composition, shall be appreciated. Containing a clear exposition of the grounds of complaint, communicated in a respectful manner, it breathes a spirit of uncompromising freedom, and was calculated to strike deep into the heart, if any thing short of adulation could reach it, of him to whom it was addressed. However vain may have been the idea of awakening the king to a sense of the wrongs which, under his immaculate authority were committed, the eloquent composition of Dickinson reached other hearts, and rallied to the support of the sacred cause in which he had so earnestly embarked, a host of advocates whose applause and benedictions cheered the votaries of freedom in the gloomiest hours of their tribulations. He was not originally a

member of the committee appointed to perform the delicate and important duty of framing an address from an assembly, which professed to be composed of loyal subjects, to their distant monarch, but it consisted of Mr. Henry, Mr. Lee, J. Adams, Johnson, and Rutledge. It was appointed on the first of October, and Mr. Dickinson's enemies having succeeded in retarding his election to congress, he did not take his seat until the 17th. Mr. Henry actually prepared and reported an address which, not according with the views of congress, "was recommitted, and Mr. Dickinson was on the 21st added to the committee, and on the 24th reported the petition which was adopted. In patriotism Patrick Henry and John Dickinson resembled each other, but in many respects they bore the most decided contrast. Mr. Henry was an orator of incomparable powers; impetuous, undisciplined, and ready not only to support the boldest measures, but eager to rush onward in the revolutionary career, looking to nothing short of independence, and affecting no respect for a monarch whose authority he could not brook. Mr. Dickinson, equally devoted to his country, looked with habitual respect upon the mother country and her king, and until the irrevocable step was taken by the declaration of independence, considered the restoration of harmony between the two countries, based upon the security of the rights of the colonies, as the consummation of sound policy and enlightened patriotism. With extensive stores of learning, and a highly polished intellect, were associated that caution, and perhaps hesitancy, which induced him to avoid rashness as one of the greatest errors that could be committed, and to deprecate the breaking of the ranks of peaceful opposition, by the chivalrous spirits, who, perhaps, stirred up by his own eloquent compositions, sounded in his ears the war-notes of revolution, as the only remedy for the grievances which he had so inimitably portrayed. Mr. Henry's draught, besides being defective in point of composition, was filled with asperities which did not comport with the conciliatory disposition of congress.

As there was no deficiency of men prepared and anxious to press the revolutionary car on to its goal, it was fortunate for the country that congress possessed one man of the peculiar constitution of John Dickinson; for through his instrumentality, whilst they were rushing with a patriotic impetuosity into the midst of a sanguinary revolution, and their country was rapidly bursting its fetters and rising into national existence; their cause was invested with a dignity, moderation, and firmness; their motives were exhibited in a condition of purity; and the holy principles of civil liberty, which they were struggling to sustain, were promulgated to the world with a force and clearness, which commanded the respect of the civilized world, and have commended the conflict to the nations of the earth as an example which has been gazed at with admiration, and on several occasions followed with ardor.

With the view of making another effort to arrest the progress of oppression, Mr. Dickinson urged the propriety of presenting a second petition to the king; but it was warmly opposed in congress as altogether futile; the determination to persist in error being as manifest as the discontent it had produced. The confidence he had inspired, and his deservedly great influence, enabled him, however, to accomplish his object; and the second petition to the king, written by him, ranks with its predecessor in usefulness to the cause, as well as in the peculiar merits of the composition. The highest encomiums were bestowed upon them, and it is believed that they powerfully contributed to draw upon congress the celebrated panegyric of Lord Chatham, in which, after alluding to the writings of antiquity, and the patriotism of Greece and Rome, he gave to that body a preference over the assemblies of the master states of the world. The literature of the revolution is a proud field for an American to contemplate. Filled with noble sentiments, lofty patriotism, untainted virtue, and a wisdom which seems to combine all that is essential for the protection of human freedom, there is a rich vein of eloquence irrigating the teeming soil, which the proudest and most cultivated nations of the earth might exult to call their own.

One of the most eloquent and soul-stirring productions of Mr. Dickinson's pen, was the declaration of congress of July 6, 1775, setting forth the causes and necessity of their taking up arms, which was proclaimed at the head of the several divisions of the army. He appears, when writing this admirable composition, to have been excited to a pitch of enthusiasm, not surpassed by the most chivalrous of the revolutionary patriots ; and to have uttered his eloquent invectives against despotism, with a spirit prophetic of the glorious result. "We are reduced," said he, "to the alternative of choosing an unconditional submission to the tyranny of irritated ministers or resistance by force. The latter is our choice. We have counted the cost of this contest, and find nothing so dreadful as voluntary slavery. Honor, justice, and humanity, forbid us tamely to surrender that freedom which we received from our gallant ancestors, and which our innocent posterity have a right to receive from us. We cannot endure the infamy and guilt of resigning succeeding generations to that wretchedness which inevitably awaits them, if we basely entail hereditary bondage upon them."

Allusion has already been made to the conciliatory views of Mr. Dickinson, and to his repugnance to a final separation from Great Britain. In producing a measure of the vast importance of the declaration of independence, it was to have been expected that a great difference of opinion respecting its propriety should exist. Accordingly, we find that members of congress became converts to the measure at various periods, and that several whose patriotism was unquestionable, and whose opposition to the despotism of Great Britain had been distinguished by brilliant exertions and extensive sacrifices, refused to cooperate in its adoption. John Dickinson was the most conspicuous of them. Believing that it was at least premature; that the country was not prepared to sustain it; that it would interfere with foreign alliances, since nations hostile to Great Britain would not be likely to advocate the American cause, when their hostility to Great Britain was gratified by the severance of the British empire ; and that dissensions might spring up among the colonies, unless some provision was made for the settlement of their controversies before "they lost sight of that tribunal, which had hitherto been the umpire of all their differences," he exerted himself to retard its adoption. But it was in vain. His own eloquent compositions had sunk too deeply into the hearts of the people, and their feelings were aroused to too high a pitch of indignation at the conduct of Great Britain, to falter in their march to national independence. A majority of the Pennsylvania delegation were opposed to the declaration; but on the 4th of July, Mr. Dickinson and another member, Mr. Morris, thought fit so far to withdraw their opposition, as, by their absence, to leave a majority of one in its favor.

The vote of Pennsylvanian was thus added to those of her sister states. The signatures of some of the members, who at the time had strenuously opposed it, were subsequently affixed to it, and are transmitted to posterity as contemporaneous participators in that act of daring intrepidity. But Mr. Dickinson's name has never been associated with it, nor does it appear that he ever recanted the opinion which he had expressed of its propriety, although he not merely acquiesced in it, but engaged with his accustomed zeal and assiduity in preparing and carrying into effect the measures necessary to sustain it. However much we may regret that his name is not enrolled on that instrument, which is now the pride and the boast of every American, it would not only be uncharitable, but it would be wantonly to dim the lustre of one of the brightest of the revolutionary luminaries, to suspect the purity of his motives, or to diminish the gratitude of the country to him. Party spirit at that period was powerful, and his enemies successfully assailed him. His reelection to congress was defeated, and the public lost his services for about two years, on the theatre for which he was the best adapted. He soon, however, exhibited convincing evidence that his course with regard to the declaration of independence, did not proceed from a disposition to shield himself from danger, and that his patriotism was too ardent to be cooled by the frowns of his countrymen. John Dickinson, who had previously enjoyed high popularity among his countrymen, significantly reduced his own esteem with

his fellow countrymen by refusing to sign.^[4] He was actually at camp performing military duty, when the loss of his election to congress occurred. We have been able to glean but few particulars of his military services. It appears that he marched with his regiment to Elizabethtown to meet the enemy, and served as a private soldier in Capt. Lewis's company, when on a similar expedition to the Head of Elk. In October, 1777, he received from Mr. McKean, then president of Pennsylvania, a commission of brigadier-general; the duties of which he fulfilled in a satisfactory manner.

In April, 1779, he was unanimously elected to congress, and resumed the performance of his legislative duties with his accustomed ardor and effect. In the month of May, he wrote the address of that body to the states, upon the situation of public affairs; a production distinguished by his usual felicity of composition and warmth of patriotic feeling. The condition of the country is vividly described, and the states are urged to exertion to rescue it from the abject situation to which a depreciated paper currency, a prodigality in the expenditure of the public money, and the exhaustion of war, had reduced it.

President of Delaware and Pennsylvania

In 1780, he was elected to represent the county of Newcastle in the assembly of Delaware; and was in the same year, unanimously elected president of that state, by the two branches of the legislature. In 1782, he was elected president of the supreme executive council of Pennsylvania, which office he continued to fill until October, 1785.

John and Mary's College

The act of assembly incorporating a college to be established in the borough of Carlisle, has happily perpetuated the remembrance of his munificent patronage of learning, as well as the public sense of his exalted merit. It declares that—" In memory of the great and important services rendered to his country by his excellency John Dickinson, Esq., president of the supreme executive council, and in commemoration of his very liberal donation to the institution, the said college shall be forever hereafter called and known by the name of Dickinson College." The institution which was thus brought into existence under the auspices and by the liberality of this great man, is destined, it is hoped, to be a perpetual monument to his fame, and a perennial fountain of unadulterated knowledge and patriotism. Fortunately located near the centre of a powerful state, surrounded by ample resources for its sustenance, and accessible to all the means which give facility to education, its prosperous career is a fit subject for patriotic aspirations. Clouds, it is true, have occasionally darkened its prospects; but in the midst of its adversities, its fame, the advantages of its position, and the exertions of the friends of education, have twice raised it from a prostrate condition, and it bids fair to fulfil the benevolent and patriotic anticipations of its founder. In the selection of the locality of the institution, Mr. Dickinson appears, as in all of his other public services, to have been actuated by disinterested motives, and to have looked beyond the present time to advance the permanent good of the community. Philadelphia had been, and Wilmington was destined to be, the place of his residence. Carlisle was out of the sphere of his movements and of his influence, but being the centre of a large and growing community, in bestowing his bounty and his services, he looked beyond the time and the space in which he lived.

The Constitution

The formation of a constitution for the United States, was a task to which Mr. Dickinson's extensive political knowledge, great abilities, and enlightened views, were peculiarly adapted. Having participated in the adoption of the articles of confederation as well as being selected as a delegate for the Annapolis Convention, he had abundant experience of their numerous deficiencies, and of the total impracticability of preserving public honor, social order, or even national existence, with their contracted powers and feeble authority, Mr. Dickinson met the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as a delegate from Delaware, with a clear conviction of the momentous duty assigned to him, and a firm determination to leave no effort untried to rescue the country from impending ruin. His exertions were not confined to the convention. The constitution, when submitted to the people for their ratification, met with violent, and in some quarters with unprincipled, opposition. Mr. Dickinson published nine letters, with the signature of Fabius, in its defence. Although he did not enter into all the details of the plan reported by the convention, nor attempt that systematic vindication of it which was performed by the "Federalist," yet the letters of Fabius are a valuable acquisition to our stock of constitutional literature, and present a conclusive chain of reasoning on many important topics which they discussed. He very properly disregarded the fear of consolidation from the operations of the federal government, and considered the guarantees of the states, furnished by the organization of the federal system, as entirely adequate to the protection of the rights of the states, and that the freedom of the people would be more likely to be placed in jeopardy by the weakness than by the strength of the federal authority.

At the Convention, Dickinson represented the state of Delaware. Other members of the Delaware delegation to the Convention were Gunning Bedford, Jr., Jacob Broom, Richard Bassett, and George Read.

Delaware Constitution

In the year 1792, he was a member of the convention which formed the constitution of Delaware, and displayed his usual activity and abilities in the performance of all the duties which the occasion required.

Later life

In the year 1797, he published another series of letters bearing the signature of Fabius, which were occasioned by the special call of congress to meet on the 25th of March. His gratitude and predilection for France, are strongly depicted in them; and although they are more than usually discursive, they are replete with liberal and generous sentiments. He professed to write from the impulse of duty, but complains that "neither my time, nor my infirmities, will permit me to be attentive to style, arrangement, or the labors of consulting former publications." Breathing an ardent desire for the extension of freedom, he seems to have viewed the exertions in France in its behalf, with admiration and high expectation; and to have looked upon the conduct of England with a jealous eye, as partaking of that description which he had devoted the prime of his life in combating.

Wilmington had been selected by him as the place of his residence, where, retired from the toil and anxieties of public life, enjoying an affluent fortune, surrounded by friends who loved him, and by books which, to him, were a constant source of consolation, he spent the concluding years of his life, dispensing among others the blessings which he enjoyed himself, and receiving in return the heartfelt tribute of popular veneration.

Death and Legacy

He died on the 14th of February, 1808, at the age of seventy-five. He was married on the 19th of July, 1770, to Mary Norris, only daughter of Isaac Norris, of Fair Hill, Philadelphia county, and had two daughters, who survive him.^[5]

See also

- [Olive Branch Petition](#)
- [Proclamation of Rebellion](#)

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2. <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000021>
3. The Cost of Liberty: The Life of John Dickinson (<https://books.google.com/books?id=RakdAwAAQBAJ&pg=PT51>)
4. John Adams (<https://books.google.com/books?id=E9TOxypjZY4C&pg=PA126>), by David McCullough; "My conduct this day, I expect, will give the finishing blow to my once great ... and now too diminished popularity."
5. The national portrait gallery of distinguished Americans ..., Volume 3 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=u1hTAAAYAAJ&pg=PA97>)

External links

- [The Life and Times of John Dickinson. 1732-1808 \(https://books.google.com/books?id=hkYSAAAAYAAJ\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=hkYSAAAAYAAJ)
- [The Writings of John Dickinson: Political writings, 1764-1774, Volume 1 \(https://books.google.com/books?id=DJBLAAAAYAAJ\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=DJBLAAAAYAAJ)
- [Works by John Dickinson - text and free audio \(https://librivox.org/author/10354\)](https://librivox.org/author/10354) - [LibriVox](#)

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