

# Redeeming the Fathers of America

## John Dickinson, Delaware 1732-1808

Some have described John Dickinson as reserved and shy, and due to the absence of his face on the portrait of the signing of the Constitution, that he preferred to work quietly in the background of our nation's politics. This would leave us with a very limited perspective of his life and impact on the founding of this great nation. One could also express his unwillingness to enter the impending violent conflict that awaited the colonies, citing his Quaker roots as justification. Although he was initially hesitant to do so, this might leave the impression that meekness is weakness. I trust this writing will address any presuppositions that his Quaker heritage influenced.



John Dickinson's lineage can be traced back to the early 1600's where his ancestor Charles Dickinson had three sons, all Quakers. Nathaniel Dickinson emigrated from England to Massachusetts around 1630 and was followed by Charles' sons who arrived in Virginia in 1654. Although uncertain of their relation, each suffered similar persecutions and the threat of imprisonment for being non-conformists. The families were accomplished, self-reliant, and independent, serving their communities as attorneys, judges, military servicemen, politicians, and successful land owners and farmers. They offered their skills and talents to society, but most of all they loved the simple and relaxing lifestyle that farming provided them.<sup>1</sup>

John Dickinson was born on November 8, 1732, to a wealthy Quaker family at the large Crosia-dore' Plantation in Talbot County, Maryland. His parents, Samuel and Mary Cadwalader Dickinson (his second wife) moved the family to Dover, Delaware around 1740. John had two brothers, Thomas who died, and Philemon. His early education appears more than sufficient as

his family's wealth afforded him a tutor by the name of Killen. Mr. Killen inspired a love for the classics in young Dickinson. Killen would later be admitted to the bar, and become Chief Justice and Chancellor of Delaware.<sup>2</sup>

At age 18, Dickinson's father deemed him mature and assigned him to read law with former king's attorney John Moland, Esq. of Pennsylvania. Moland was trained at the prestigious Middle Temple in London and among his students were George Read, later Chief Justice of Delaware, Samuel Wharton, and others professionals. Dickinson followed his mentor's footsteps by attending the Middle Temple from 1753-1757. Upon his return to the colonies, he established a law practice in Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup>

His years at the Middle Temple and his family's wealth quickly thrust him into the political process of his day. During these years of law practice Dickinson took to the study of constitutional history. The combination of the two disciplines of study would produce a level of knowledge and skill which was exemplary in his writings.

Dickinson was raised among generations of the Quaker faith and we see many of his decisions rooted in its teachings. Family members attended Quaker meetings, yet history does not record him being a member of the Society of Friends.

After the death of his father in 1760, John Dickinson served as a member of the Assembly of the Lower Counties, and in that year became its speaker. In 1762, he served in both Delaware and Pennsylvania assemblies. We may question how could he serve in both colonies? This makes sense when we consider these two colonies shared the same royal Governor leading up to the Revolution. The Pennsylvania Assembly elected Dickinson to serve as a member from the city of Philadelphia. Being a humble man, Dickinson thought he had little chance to gain such a noteworthy position, but once elected proved just how qualified and devoted he was to the cause of liberty.

When the assembly convened, a discourse was taken up by Dickinson, Franklin, and Galloway, addressing the issue of Proprietary government. This is not the first-time the subject was addressed in a colonial assembly, yet it was considered radical to do so. Proprietary government is one in which the colonist finds land and then seeks the king's permission to own

or use the land. The challenges these three men raised about the fundamental structure of such government and its abuses would continue to negatively impact the colonies. Dickinson proved his ability to wax eloquent, but he initially opposed the petition against the King.

Items on that petition addressed whether the crown should force colonial support for expenses incurred by foreign military conflicts, the challenge of local authority to appropriate and collect taxes, and whether the colonies could establish their own militias to protect and enforce local interests. Case in point, local militias could be used to protect the Indians against British agents who were seeking to defraud them of their lands.

Consider the massive land acquisition the Proprietary government was controlling under the Pennsylvania Charter of 1681. As the Royal Governor, their primary responsibility was to take care of mother England. The less money invested in the land and its people, the more money that could be sent back to England. It is estimated that the original Penn land grant exceeded 35,000,000 acres.

We can almost feel the frustration that founders like Dickinson had in understanding and defending the people's rights and individual liberties. For Dickinson the tension between fighting for humanity and liberty and that of being conscientious would arise as members of the Convention proposed direct resolutions against England. Although he had distanced himself from the strictest of Quaker doctrine, he fell back on his roots as a non-conformist to England's governance and resulted in his losing favor with his colleagues.

One of Dickinson's strongest opponents in 1764 was Dr. Benjamin Franklin. Franklin saw Dickinson as a worthy political sparring partner, as one well suited for "iron sharpening iron." Some have described these two as the greatest political philosophers of their time. As noted earlier, Franklin took the battle against the Proprietary government while Dickinson chose to defend it. This is what caused a loss of popularity for Mr. Dickinson.

A crucial question is often not whether an existing system is bad, but is the proposed system any better? Are we replacing one tyrant or tyrannical system for another? As our founders weighed such questions, they had to realize that taking the side that looks safe or more secure was not always the case.

Mr. Dickinson continued to study constitutional law, as evidenced after the release of his writings. He published a resolution against Parliament in 1765 titled, *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America Considered*. So moved was the Pennsylvania Congress that they appointed Dickinson to draft the resolutions of that congress. In 1766, he wrote to the *Committee of Correspondence in Barbados* about similar concerns. In 1767 he published the famous *Letters from a Farmer*, which were read across the colonies and in Europe. Dickinson also penned “The Liberty Song” in 1768 to reflect the strife caused by the Townshend Act.<sup>4</sup>

To Dickinson’s credit and unlike other authors who wrote from a speculative and non-controversial posture, his understanding of constitutional law took him straight to the heart of colonial grievances. He acknowledged the sovereign’s responsibility to provide protection and security for the colonies, but chastised Parliament for the excessiveness of taxation. For example, Parliament insisted that New York colony support English troops with clothing and supplies. Is this not a tax? And if Parliament decides to tax New York for salt, pepper, paper, or parchment, could it not tax all the colonies for such items? If a colony is required to pay taxes, and the crown fails to provide protection to the colonies, should they not have the right to refuse those taxes and establish a militia to protect themselves? Dickinson and others saw this as taxation without representation. Although John knew he must confront these abuses and protect the rights and privileges of the colonists, I doubt he expected his actions would be a spark for the Revolution.

The period between 1760 and late 1780’s saw an increase in oppressive actions by Parliament, including the Currency Act, Sugar Act, Quartering Act, Stamp Act, the Townshend Act, and Boston Port Act. Keep in mind that many in the colonies saw themselves as subjects of the crown, and were just seeking fair treatment. Such was the heart of John Dickinson, he realized the potential for conflict, but negotiated for peace. Parliament’s actions caused such financial hardship and achieved the opposite effect intended, which was pressing the colonists toward rebellion.

Dickinson's colleagues praised him for defending the rights of the people, but England took great offence to this. Lord Hillsborough commanded the royal governors to silence the assembly or dissolve it, but the die had been cast. Patriots in the Pennsylvania Assembly told their governor he had no right to influence or dissolve them as representatives of the people. In 1768, the embers of liberty stirred the Assembly to write non-importation and non-exportation agreements. These agreements had extensive support by merchants in the colonies.<sup>5</sup>

British hostilities intensified against the colonies as the non-importation agreement began to impact trade with English merchant ships. In 1769, the colonial challenge resulted in duties on paper, glass, and paints being repealed by Parliament. This left the excess tax on tea, one which the colonists chose to bear due to their love for tea. England hoped that this lessening of taxes would quiet the rebellion, but soon realized it had not.

It is noteworthy that among these political tensions, time was found for romance and committed love. John Dickinson married Mary (Polly) Norris, daughter of Isaac Norris II, former speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly and one of the most powerful Quaker politicians in the colony. Their union on July 19, 1770 was treasured throughout their years and John was said to long for times of reprieve from the pressures of public service, where he could spend precious time with his wife and family.

Just prior to the Dickinson wedding, tragedy struck on March 5, 1770 at Boston's Kings Street Customs Office. Here colonial protestors assaulted officers with snowballs and ice, and fiery verbal taunting. Sadly, a chuck of ice triggered one soldier to fire his musket, which set off a chain reaction from others, leaving several colonists dead, including Black patriot Crispus Attucks. This incident only deepened the resentment of many toward the British.<sup>6</sup>

Dickinson continued to be active in the Pennsylvania legislature in 1771, but his apprehension to the engage in the conflict with Britain caused a loss of popularity, one that took years to restore. Thankfully Dickinson was surrounded by astute men and women who understood the need to fully address the British oppression.

Mr. Dickinson agreed with the course that would eventually bring the colonies into a violent confrontation with Britain. His defense of liberty he did not over shadow his defense of human rights. He believed that people had a right to their opinions, and that one should be cautious in questioning their loyalty and sincerity.

John Dickinson was marked as one of the most knowledgeable and experienced statesmen to attend the Grand Convention. In 1774, Dickinson wrote the resolves of the Committee of Pennsylvania, which shaped an essay on the constitutional power of Great Britain over the colonies. In 1775, he authored the Olive Branch Petition and the Declaration of Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms.<sup>7</sup>

John Dickinson played a critical role in the drafting of the Articles of Confederation. He also drafted many resolutions while serving in the first and second Continental Congresses, including the Resolution to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies, The Bill of Rights and a List of Grievances, the First Petition to the King, and the Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec. In 1788 he wrote the Letters to Fabius. This first series was penned to muster support for the ratification of the new United States Constitution and a second series was published in 1797, which addressed deteriorating relations with France.

The Hon. John Dickinson and founding father is considered by many to be the “Penman of the Revolution?”

### **This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America**

#### **References:**

- 1) Familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/KJ46-JCZ
- 2) Marshall, James V. *The United States Manual of Biography and History*. Philadelphia: James B. Smith & Co., 1856. Pages 143 and 144.
- 3) The Signers of the Declaration of Independence by B.J. Lossing, The Federalist Project
- 4) 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.
- 5) [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/boston\\_non\\_importation\\_1768.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/boston_non_importation_1768.asp)
- 6) <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/march-05/>.
- 7) <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.14400700/?st=gallery>.

### Additional Resources

- 8) Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry by William Wirt, 1817
- 9) Biography of Signers of the Declaration of Independence Second Edition, Vol. IV, 1828
- 10) Sanderson's Biography to the Signers to the Declaration of Independence 1876
- 11) Proprietary Government – [www.answers.com/Q/What\\_is\\_Proprietary\\_Government](http://www.answers.com/Q/What_is_Proprietary_Government)