

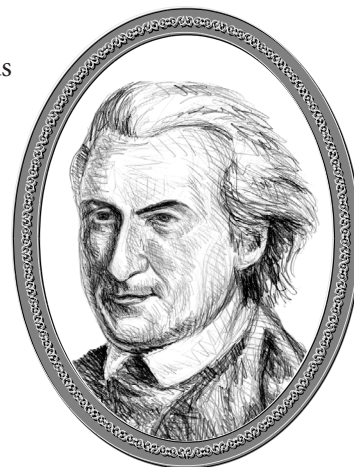
JOHN DICKINSON (1732–1808)

My dear countrymen, rouse yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over your heads.

—John Dickinson, 1767



The carriage making its way down the streets of Philadelphia was carrying John Dickinson out of history. It was the morning of July 4, 1776, and the respected lawyer and “Penman of the Revolution” had decided to depart the city so that he would not be present at the day’s session of the Continental Congress. On this day, Dickinson knew, the Congress would approve the Declaration of Independence. It was the kind of radical step of which the conservative and cautious Dickinson disapproved. Though he had been for a decade one of the foremost essayists of American liberty, he still hoped that the colonies would work out their differences with Great Britain. Dickinson’s choice to leave meant that his name would largely be forgotten by posterity.



Background

John Dickinson was born on November 8, 1732, in Talbot County, Maryland. His family moved to Dover, Delaware, in 1740. There his parents raised young Dickinson in the Quaker tradition. After completing a classical education in Delaware, he studied law in London from 1753–1757. When he returned to the American colonies, he established a law practice in Philadelphia.

As a resident of both Delaware and Pennsylvania, Dickinson served in office in both colonies. He was elected to the Delaware Assembly in 1760. Two years later, he was chosen a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly.

“Penman of the American Revolution”

As tensions with Britain increased in the 1760s, Dickinson became an articulate defender of the liberties of Americans. He took the lead in penning the colonists’ objections to the Stamp Act of 1765. That year he wrote a pamphlet, *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies*. In this essay he urged Americans to boycott British merchants in order to force repeal of the Act.

In 1767–1768, Dickinson authored the *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. These essays appeared first separately in newspapers and were then published as a single pamphlet. In the *Letters*, Dickinson argued that British economic policies toward the colonies were reducing Americans to slavery. “My dear country men,” he intoned in his second letter, “rouse yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over your heads.”

But Dickinson also urged prudence. “We cannot act with too much caution in our disputes,” Dickinson advised. He hoped that a settlement with Britain could be achieved if Americans united in petitioning the crown and Parliament for redress. The *Letters* were reprinted and read throughout the colonies and abroad: Benjamin Franklin, serving as a colonial agent in Britain, had them reprinted in London.

“The Liberty Song”

The *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* earned Dickinson the reputation as the foremost essayist of American liberty. Around this time, Dickinson also wrote the first American patriot song, “The Liberty Song.” Borrowing an English tune, he composed lyrics that reflected the spirit of his *Farmer Letters*: “In Freedom we’re born and in Freedom we’ll live/Our purses are ready/Steady, friends, steady/Not as slaves, but as Freemen our money we’ll give.” In the final stanza of the song, Dickinson counseled his fellow Americans that “by uniting we stand, by dividing we fall.”

In 1770, Dickinson was again elected to the Pennsylvania legislature. The following year he penned a “Petition to the King” on behalf of the legislature. Dickinson continued to believe that American grievances with the mother country could be resolved peacefully. In 1774, he chaired the Philadelphia Committee of Correspondence. Later that year, he was chosen by Pennsylvania as a member of the Continental Congress.

Independence

In 1775, Dickinson recognized that war was upon the colonies. Still, he hoped that America and Britain could work out their differences. In *Declaration of the Causes of Taking Up Arms* (1775), Dickinson wrote that Americans “have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great Britain, and establishing independent states.” For the Congress, he also drafted what became known as “the Olive Branch Petition.” In it, he pleaded with the king to respect the rights of the colonists. He also expressed his desire for “a happy and permanent reconciliation.”

In the summer of 1776, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia to consider the issue of independence. Dickinson objected to the strong wording of Thomas Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence. When it became clear that Congress would approve the Declaration, Dickinson left Philadelphia. He could not consent to this fateful step, but he also refused to undermine his countrymen by voting against the measure.

Once independence had been declared, however, Dickinson dropped his objections. He helped draft the Articles of Confederation, the first form of government for the newly independent nation. Many credit Dickinson with coining the term, “the United States of America,” which opens the Articles. Dickinson served in the Pennsylvania militia during the early years of the Revolution. He then returned to his estate in Delaware.

In 1781, Dickinson became governor of Delaware. Returning to Philadelphia the following year, he was elected governor of Pennsylvania. Dickinson thus was governor of both states at the same time for a two-month period. In 1783, he was asked to lend his name to a new college in Pennsylvania. Dickinson described the school as a “bulwark of liberty.” This phrase became the motto of Dickinson College.

The Constitutional Convention

In 1786, Dickinson chaired the Annapolis Convention, a meeting of five states that called for revisions to the Articles of Confederation. Many prominent Americans, including Dickinson, believed that the central government had to be strengthened. In 1787, Dickinson headed Delaware’s delegation to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

At Philadelphia, Dickinson quickly concluded that the Articles had to be replaced completely. But Dickinson distrusted any ideas that broke with English and colonial traditions. Always a practical man, he counseled his fellow delegates to rely on the tried and

true when creating political institutions. “Experience must be our only guide,” Dickinson advised. “Reason may mislead us.” Illness prevented Dickinson from taking a greater role at the Convention, and caused him to be absent the day the Constitution was signed.

During the ratification debates, Dickinson composed a series of essays, the *Letters of Fabius*, in support of the Constitution. The *Letters* were widely published in the spring of 1788 throughout the country. Like the more famous *The Federalist Papers*, they did much to win support for the Constitution. Echoing his words on the floor of the Convention, Dickinson advised that the Constitution ought to be tested before it was amended: “A little experience will cast more light upon the subject than a multitude of debates.”

Retirement and Death

Dickinson spent the last two decades of his life farming at his home in Wilmington, Delaware. He continued to follow politics, siding with the Jeffersonian-Republicans. He advocated a plan of gradual abolition of slavery in his state. On February 14, 1808, Dickinson died. Though still esteemed by his contemporaries at the time of his death, the renown of the “Penman of the Revolution” would slowly fade over time.



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Dickinson not attend the Continental Congress on the day that the Declaration of Independence was adopted?
2. What role did Dickinson play in the shaping of the Constitution?
3. What were the *Letters of Fabius*?

Critical Thinking Questions

4. Why does Dickinson deserve the title, “Penman of the Revolution”?
5. William Pierce, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention from Georgia, predicted that Dickinson “will ever be considered one of the most important characters in the United States.” Why do you think Dickinson has largely been overlooked by history?