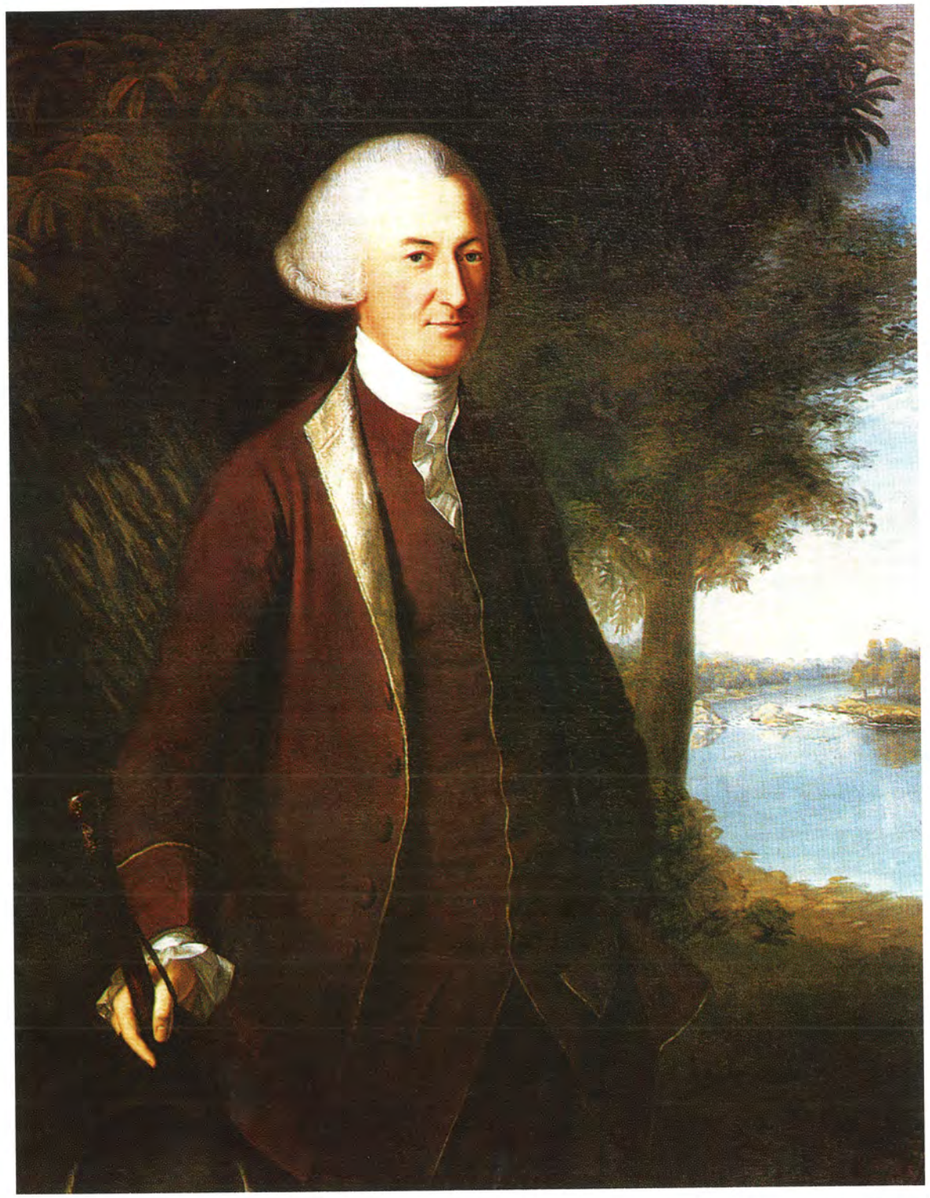

Portrait of John Dickinson by Charles Willson Peale, 1770. Peale's original commission for a portrait of Dickinson, ordered by a Marylander living in London, came with a request for American scenery in the background. Hence we see here the falls of the Schuylkill River along with native plants and flowers. During the 18th and early 19th centuries the falls of the Schuylkill River, four miles upstream from its once marshy confluence with the Delaware River, was the most famous natural attraction in the vicinity of Philadelphia, where its roar could be heard when the wind blew from the northwest. Boats could be guided thorugh the rocky hazards of the falls by skilled pilots. The original painting is in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Delaware's John Dickinson: The Constant Watchman of Liberty

A joint effort of the Friends of the John Dickinson Mansion,
the Delaware Department of State, and
the Delaware Heritage Commission,
published in commemoration of
the 250th Anniversary of the publication of
a work crucial to the cause of American independence,
Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the
Inhabitants of the British Colonies,
by John Dickinson.

John Sweeney, Editor

2018

DELAWARE PUBLIC ARCHIVES

The Writings of John Dickinson

One of the ironies of American history is that the man tagged by historians as the "Penman of the Revolution" has not been very well read. John Dickinson's writings have been overlooked not because of his style or content. They just simply have not been available.

How can we understand him if we cannot read him? Here is a man who wrote more state papers during the Revolution than anyone and who produced some of the most persuasive arguments for liberty ever written, and yet interested students either do not know they exist or cannot find them. This is a key reason Dickinson's reputation as a Founding Father is not as high as it should be.

Dickinson himself published two volumes of his writings in 1801. The Pennsylvania Historical Society attempted to collect and publish Dickinson's works in 1807. It managed to publish one volume and then stopped. Today, the most readily available work is *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania.* That is fitting. It is his most famous and most influential work.

However, his letters and smaller but important political essays are hard to come by. For years, scholars and students of Dickinson have called on colleges and institutions to put the Penman's works before the public.

That is finally happening. Under the editorship of Dr. Jane E. Calvert, the Dickinson Writings Project has been collecting, editing and annotating the complete works of John Dickinson. Publication will begin soon. For more information contact the project at ***http://dickinsonproject.rch.uky.edu/***.

In the meantime, here is a list of Dickinson's major writings as compiled by the Dickinson Writings Project:

A Speech, Delivered in the House of Assembly of the Province of Pennsylvania, May 24th, 1764

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On occasion of a petition, drawn up by order, and then under consideration, of the House; praying His Majesty for a change of the government of this province. Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1764.

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. Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1765.

"Petition to the King from the Stamp Act Congress." *Proceedings of the Congress at New-York,* 1765.

"The Declaration of Rights adopted by the Stamp Act Congress." *Proceedings of the Congress at New-York.* Annapolis, 1766.

An Address to the Committee of Correspondence in Barbados. Occasioned by a late letter from them to their agent in London. By a North-American. Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1766.

"Letters from a farmer in Pennsylvania, to the inhabitants of the British colonies." *Pennsylvania Gazette,* December 3, 1767—February 8, 1768.

"Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America." *Pennsylvania Journal; and the Weekly Advertiser,* May 25, June 1, June 8, June 15, 1774.

An Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great-Britain over the Colonies in America; with the resolves of the committee for the province of Pennsylvania, and their instructions to their representatives in Assembly. Philadelphia: William and Thomas Bradford, 1774.

"Bill of Rights [and] a List of Grievances." *Extracts from the Votes and Proceedings of the American Continental Congress.* Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1774.

"To the Inhabitants of the Colonies." *Extracts from the Votes and Proceedings of the American Continental Congress.* Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1774.

"The Petition of the Grand American Continental Congress to the King's Most Excellent Majesty." *Extracts from the Votes and Proceedings of the American Continental Congress.* Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1774.

A Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec. Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1774.

The Humble Petition of the Twelve United Colonies, by their Delegates in Congress, to the King [Olive Branch Petition]. Philadelphia: William and Thomas Bradford, 1775.

A Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North-America, Now Met in Congress at Philadelphia, Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking Up Arms. Philadelphia: William and Thomas Bradford, 1775.

Essay on a Frame of Government for Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: James Humphreys, Jr., 1776.

The Letters of Fabius, in 1788, on the Federal Constitution; and in 1797, on the Present Situation of Public Affairs. Wilmington, DE: From the office of the *Delaware Gazette,* 1797.

Ode, on the French Revolution. Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin Bache, 1798.

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A Caution; or, Reflections on the Present Contest between France and Great-Britain. Philadelphia: Benj. Franklin Bache, 1798.

An Address on the Past, Present and Eventual Relations of the United States to France. New York: T. and J. Swords, 1803.

A John Dickinson Chronology

1732

John Dickinson is born on Nov. 13 in Talbot County, Maryland, the first son of Samuel and Mary Dickinson.

1741

The Dickinson family moves to the present site of the Dickinson Plantation in Kent County, Delaware.

1750

At age 18, Dickinson moves to Philadelphia to study law under the prominent attorney, John Moland.

1753-1757

John continues his law studies at the Middle Temple, Inns of Court, in London.

1757

He returns to Philadelphia to practice law.

1759

Dickinson is elected to the assembly of the Lower Three Counties, as Delaware was then known.

1760

Samuel Dickinson dies.

John Dickinson is elected speaker of the assembly of the Lower Three Counties.

1762

He is elected to fill in a vacant seat in Pennsylvania Assembly in a special election.

1764

He is re-elected to Pennsylvania assembly.

Dickinson breaks with two powerful assembly leaders, Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Galloway, over their push to make Pennsylvania a royal colony. Dickinson's speech is reprinted in pamphlet form, leading to a war of words between Dickinson and Galloway. Dickinson would remain on cool terms with Franklin and an enemy of Galloway's. Dickinson warns against the dangers of royal power.

1765

Parliament passes the Stamp Act. Dickinson leads the protest in Pennsylvania. He attends the Stamp Act Congress and writes *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies Considered*, which urges repeal of the Stamp Act.

1766

The Stamp Act is repealed.

1767

Parliament passes the Townshend Duties, a set of taxes and laws aimed at increasing revenue and limiting American commerce.

Dickinson writes *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. It becomes a huge success and is reprinted in every colony. It has particular success in Boston, where it influences the Massachusetts assembly to send a Circular Letter to all of the colonies.

1770

Dickinson marries Mary Norris, daughter of a wealthy and prominent Philadelphia Quaker family. They will have five children, two of whom, Sally and Maria, will live to adulthood.

The Boston Massacre occurs when Boston civilians clash with British soldiers. Five civilians die.

Parliament repeals all of the Townshend Duties expect one, a tax on tea.

1773

On Dec. 16, Boston residents, masquerading as Mohawks, board the ships carrying tea and throw 342 chests into the harbor.

1774

In retaliation to the Boston Tea Party, Parliament passes a series of laws designed to punish Massachusetts and the other colonies until the East India Company is paid damages. The British call these laws the Coercive Acts. The Americans call them the Intolerable Acts.

Dickinson becomes chairman of the Philadelphia Committee of Correspondence.

Several colonies, including Pennsylvania, call for a continental meeting to protest the Intolerable Acts.

Dickinson is elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly and appointed as delegate to the First Continental Congress; He writes *An address to the Inhabitants of Quebec*, an attempt to persuade Canadians to join the lower colonies in protest.

1775

The battle of Lexington and Concord is fought on April 18.

His mother, Mary Cadwalader Dickinson, dies.

Dickinson is selected as a Pennsylvania representative to Second Continental Congress in May.

On June 17, the British army attacks American forces at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Dickinson emerges as the leading moderate in the congress. He writes the "Olive Branch Petition," which proposes a cease fire in exchange for recognition of American rights and an end to the Intolerable Acts. He joins Thomas Jefferson in writing the *Declaration on causes and Necessity of taking up arms*, a justification of the colonies' militant actions.

King George III refuses to consider the "Olive Branch Petition."

1776

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* is published January 9.

On June 7, Richard Henry Lee proposes that Congress declare the colonies free and independent.

Dickinson writes the first draft of the Articles of Confederation.

He argues for delay one last time on July 1. The final vote for independence is held July 2. Dickinson stays away, recognizing his negative vote would jeopardize unity at the time of war. He joins his militia unit in New Jersey, across the river from the invading British army.

1777

The Delaware Assembly appoints Dickinson

as a delegate to the Continental Congress. He declines.

1779

Delaware appoints him to Congress. He accepts.

1780

He is elected to the Delaware Assembly.

1781

Tories attack and damage Poplar Hall. He returns to Delaware to oversee repairs. While in the state, politicians place his name in nomination to the state senate. He is then elected President of Delaware

1782

While still serving as president of Delaware, he is elected President of Pennsylvania.

1786

He leads Delaware delegates at the Annapolis Convention, where he is elected chairman. He works closely with James Madison and Alexander Hamilton to bring about a bigger, wider-ranging convention in Philadelphia the next year.

1787

He is a delegate from Delaware at the Constitutional Convention.

1788

He writes the nine letters signed "Fabius." The letters defend and endorse the Constitution.

1792

He is elected to the Delaware Assembly. He leads the Delaware Constitutional Convention.

1793

He resigns his senatorial seat. This signals the end of his political career.

1801

Dickinson publishes two volumes of his collected works on politics.

1803

Mary Dickinson dies.

1804

Poplar Hall burns. Dickinson takes up residence in a new home at Eighth and Market Streets in Wilmington

1808

John Dickinson dies.

The Dramatic Backstory of a Quiet Little Masterpiece

By John Sweeney

Sooner or later, classic books take on a life of their own. Unfortunately, it is a predictably solitary life on a bookshelf. There they sit, unopened and unread. We may speak of such books in hushed tones, but they did not become classics by sneaking into a library without anyone noticing. It usually happens the other way. They come into life roaring, alternately exciting, inspiring, infuriating or outraging readers.

Sometimes, their very publication becomes a political event.

All of that was true of John Dickinson's masterpiece, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania.* While its author spoke in civil, reasonable tones, the *Farmer* helped pave the way for a revolution.

Of course, every political event comes with a backstory. And the backstory to *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* is one full of intrigue, conflict, and a yearning for freedom. It also involves a transoceanic struggle for power.

This backstory began in London in 1766 when Benjamin Franklin appeared before a committee of Parliament. His job was to assure a receptive audience that Americans would not object to the right kind of tax. The wrong kind of tax is what caused the fuss over the 1765 Stamp Act.[1]

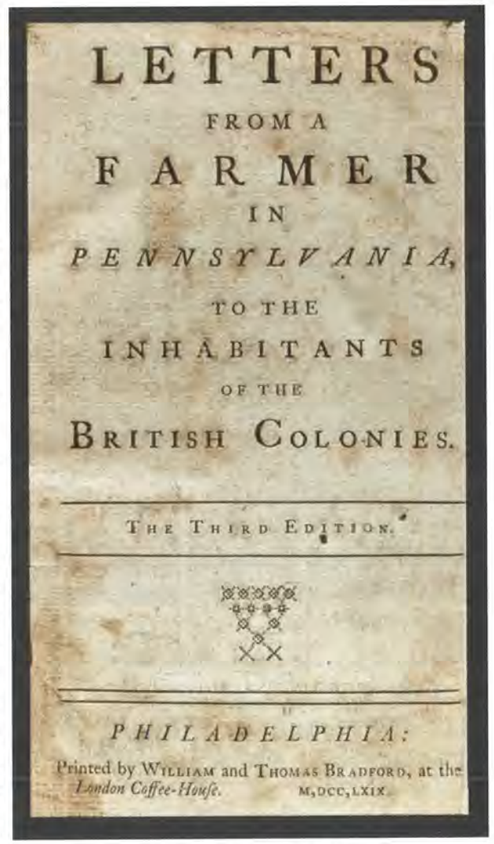
That fuss included protests, petitions, boycotts, riots, property destruction, and beatings. Mobs seized and tormented Americans picked to be Stamp Act agents. Some were dragged through the streets. They were told to recant or suffer the consequences. The mobs even attacked Franklin's house in Philadelphia, putting his wife in danger and compelling her to rush their daughter off to safety in New Jersey. A group of tradesmen loyal to Franklin, the White Oaks, came to his wife's rescue, guarded the house, and prevented Philadelphia from suffering the same mob violence Boston did.[2]

Franklin eventually got the message. While in London, he had completely misread the American reaction to the tax act. He opposed it at first, but then, seeing its passage as inevitable, wangled an appointment for his good friend and political ally John Hughes to be the Stamp Act

agent for Pennsylvania and Delaware. The appointment not only meant good money for Hughes, but patronage jobs for Franklin's political machine in the Pennsylvania assembly.[3]

Hughes would regret his friend's benevolence. He would be forced under threat to renounce the appointment in both states. In London, Franklin recanted his earlier support. He now correctly read the public temperament in the colonies and worked feverishly to get the Stamp Act repealed.

That is why he told Parliament the Stamp Act was the wrong kind of tax. It was an internal tax, a small sum attached to paper products of all types—contracts, newspapers, deeds, calendars, diplomas and so on. Each purchase was an obvious and irritating reminder of Parliament's intrusion. Franklin said the colonists would be more likely to accept an external tax, such as tariffs put on goods before they reach the consumer. In other words, they would pay the taxes if they did not see them. Franklin had rehearsed his testimony with British cabinet ministers eager to persuade reluctant members of Parliament to repeal the act. The rioting in some colonies was so violent that the ministers feared revolution. They wanted the Stamp Act repealed as much as Franklin did.[4]


LETTERS
FROM A
FARMER
IN
PENNSYLVANIA,
TO THE
INHABITANTS
OF THE
BRITISH COLONIES.

THE THIRD EDITION.

PHILADELPHIA:
Printed by WILLIAM and THOMAS BRADFORD, at the London Coffee-House. M,DCC,LXIX.

A 1769 Third Edition of Dickinson's Letter from a Farmer in Pennsylvania.

However, after listening to the American's testimony on the difference between internal and external taxes, one Member of Parliament questioned Franklin. He looked at the petitions against the Stamp Act from the various colonies. He picked Pennsylvania's petition. This, he said, says Pennsylvania objects to all taxes imposed by Parliament, not just internal taxes.

Franklin was in London as Pennsylvania's agent, or lobbyist. He dismissed the statement, saying that if Pennsylvania says all taxes, it means only internal taxes.[5]

Franklin was wrong again.

Pennsylvania actually did mean all taxes. The statement was written by John Dickinson, Franklin's opponent in the Pennsylvania assembly. Dickinson was one of the first Americans to oppose the Stamp Act. In fact, he had warned years before that something like this was coming. Few believed him. In 1764, Dickinson opposed Franklin's plan to make Pennsylvania a royal colony like Virginia. Franklin and the politicians he led, the Assembly party, wanted the king to take ownership away from the Penn family. Dickinson objected. William Penn's Charter of Liberties of 1701 guaranteed Pennsylvanians more freedom than the royal colonies enjoyed, he argued. Dickinson said the king and his ministers could not be trusted. The assembly did not

listen to him. Instead, the members sent Franklin to London to seek the king's takeover of the colony.[6]

While Franklin dawdled in London waiting for a hearing, Parliament proved Dickinson right. In 1765 Parliament passed a law taxing paper, legal documents, books, newspapers, and a host of other everyday items. Parliament also passed laws cracking down on smuggling and making it harder for the accused to get a jury trial. The Pennsylvania Assembly was slow to react to the Stamp Act. Franklin's party dominated the vote. Dickinson, however, was unrelenting. He persuaded his fellow Pennsylvania Assembly members to oppose the Stamp Act. He also wrote the declaration opposing it at a gathering of other colony representatives in New York – the Stamp Act Congress.[7]

Dickinson would later write one of the most powerful pamphlets against the Stamp Act and other efforts by Parliament to raise revenue.

The official protests from the colonies as well as the unofficial riots, threats and commercial boycotts convinced the king's ministers that the Stamp Act had to go. Part of the repeal effort was to put Franklin on the stand. The American was convincing. Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766 even though many members scoffed at the idea that there was a difference between internal and external taxes. The most important scoffer was Charles Townshend, later Chancellor of the Exchequer. Townshend would use that very argument to serve up more taxes for the Americans. Along the way, he set in motion events that we now see led to the War for Independence.[8]

Once again, the clear, strong voice opposing him belonged to John Dickinson.

When Parliament scrapped the Stamp Act, it also passed a little-noticed but ominous law called the Declaratory Act. In it, Parliament proclaimed the right to make all laws affecting the British Empire. All of the king's subjects had to obey those laws. No exceptions.[9]

The Americans celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act paid little heed to the Declaratory Act. Nor did they listen to Townshend when he promised to revisit the revenue issue.

Townshend had little choice. Since the French and Indian War ended in 1763, Great Britain found itself saddled with an enormous debt, a vast new territory to guard, and a sluggish economy. Despite this, the king and his ministers also decided not to reduce the size of the army in North America. Some historians speculate that the decision to keep thousands of redcoats in the colonies had more to do with government patronage than with colonial security. Bringing home too many officers and enlisted men would have swollen the ranks of pensioners among the officers and the unemployed among the enlisted men. The extra cost could be paid by the people the army protected – the colonists. However, other historians claim the real reason has never been determined.[10]

Great Britain's economic relationship with its colonies was simple. The colonies existed to provide wealth for the mother country. Britain's navigation laws were designed to ensure the flow of raw goods to England and finished products from England to the New World. Therefore, manufacturing was forbidden in the colonies. Goods had to be shipped in British ships through British ports. Trade between the colonies and foreign countries was strictly controlled.[11] The colonies were not allowed to print currency. This limited their economic growth. How could they buy goods and pay bills without a currency? All of this had one practical effect: corruption. The British ministers reckoned that corruption – smuggling by the colonists and bribe taking by crown officials – cost the treasury an enormous amount each year. Parliament repeatedly

A bound copy of the first edition of John Dickinson's Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania sit on a desk in the John Dickinson Mansion (photo by Dick Carter).

attempted reforms. It expanded the number of trials without juries. It allowed greater use of searches without probable cause. It issued arbitrary judgments against suspected smugglers. And it urged the Royal Navy to track smugglers and seize their ships. Tensions between the British government and the colonies in North America kept rising.[12]

Finally, Townshend had to deal with another problem the Americans did not recognize. Parliament wanted revenge. Its members deeply resented repealing the Stamp Act. They resented the mobs and the bullying of agents. They resented the gleeful response from the colonies when the act was repealed. In other words, they wanted to show the colonists that Parliament was in charge.[13]

The Townshend Acts arrived in 1767. Charles Townshend pushed through five laws that would make the Americans pay their share of the bill. They faced severe penalties if they tried to fight it. Townshend was attempting to solve a multitude of problems with one set of laws.[14] The chief goal, as Townshend and his allies saw it, was to regain control of the colonies. Deep in the tax bill was a provision to pay the colonies' governors, judges and other officials directly from London. It would end the one power the "mini-Parliaments," or assemblies, had over the royally appointed governors and judges. Until then, the assemblies could simply hold up the governor's pay if he refused to cooperate.[15]

The Townshend Acts also expanded the availability of writs of assistances, the general search warrants that only judges could squelch – judges now in the pay of the crown.

The first of these laws was the New York Restraining Act of 1767. Great Britain demanded the colonies support the army stationed in their midst. The Quartering Act of 1765 required colonies provide shelter for the soldiers in public buildings like halls and churches, food for the

men and their horses, and other supplies like hay, candles and cider. Most colonies reluctantly obeyed. Pennsylvania was the only colony to quickly and fully comply. New York, however, refused. Because of its location, New York had the most soldiers. Its assembly declared the bills too high. Therefore, it refused to pay. The Restraining Act simply closed the New York assembly until it paid. Actually, New York relented and paid before word of the law arrived to America. But the point was made. Parliament had no regard for the Americans' local assemblies.[16]

Another of the Townshend Acts, the Revenue Act of 1767, placed taxes on items like glass, lead, paint, paper and tea. The Americans could only buy these items directly from England, so the tax was added before it reached the consumer. Thus, it was considered an external tax. This act also gave customs officials increased power to search private property for smuggled goods.[17] Another bill was the Commissioners of Customs Act. This increased the number of inspectors. They began conducting raids on private property. The Indemnity Act of 1767 eliminated taxes on tea imported into Great Britain. The bill was a bailout for the struggling British East India Company. It was designed to reduce the cost of the tea sold in America, thus cutting down on the use of smuggled tea.[18]

The final law was the Vice Admiralty Court Act. It was enacted, not by Parliament, but by the Commissioners of the Treasury, with the king's approval. It came in 1768, after Townshend had died suddenly. It increased the number of the admiralty courts. The advantage to the crown was that these courts did not use juries. Too many local juries refused to convict their fellow colonists in smuggling cases. Now crown officials would decide the fate of the accused.[19]

Parliament had come roaring back. The Americans had no choice but to submit.

For a time it looked like Parliament was right. The Americans were quiet. There was some grumbling, but no marching in the streets, no mobs, and the colonial legislatures were mum.

Then, on Dec. 3, 1767, a short essay appeared in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. It was signed "A Farmer."[20]

It changed everything.

The world would soon know "A Farmer" was John Dickinson. Over the next 12 weeks, his "*Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*" would wake the colonists from their slumber. He challenged the Americans to reject Parliament's actions. In a reasonable and civil voice, he quietly dismantled the argument behind the Townshend Acts. He destroyed the claim that there is a difference between internal and external taxes. More important, he insisted that Parliament had no right to tax the colonials.[21] The colonists enjoyed the same rights as all Englishmen. They could only be taxed by their own representatives. Dickinson acknowledged Parliament had the right to set trade laws and regulate commerce. But Parliament had no right to tax Americans because the Americans were not represented in Parliament.[22]

The *Farmer's Letters* became America's first bestseller. It eventually appeared in 19 of the 23 newspapers then printing in the colonies. It quickly became a pamphlet repeatedly reprinted in North America and in Europe. The Farmer, even before his identity was revealed, was toasted in every colony and hailed as a friend of liberty.[23]

The Letters were clear, to the point, and powerfully argued.

Looking back, with the advantage of knowing how everything turned out, it is hard to appreciate the effect of *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. No, it did not demand a revolution. No, it did not condemn the British, defame the king or urge immediate independence. If it had, no one would have read it in 1767 and 1768. Dickinson knew his audience. He tempered the

style and even the classical allusions to fit the occasion. He collected and articulated many of the thoughts his contemporaries were thinking and put them into words that they could easily share in taverns or town meetings. The essays of *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* were written as a single piece. All 12 were written before the first was published. He also wrote them to be read by a wide audience. His argument was serialized in weekly installments over a 12-week period. He organized his essays to spread out his points, to make them more accessible.[24]

By doing so, he also shaped the American argument.

"Dickinson," the historian Merrill Jensen wrote, "rescued Americans from a theoretical dilemma and he was applauded from one end of the colonies to the other."[25]

And what did Dickinson say?

He stated flatly that the distinction between an internal and external tax was chimerical. They are all taxes. The Townshend Acts imposed taxes, not duties, not trade regulations. He said the Quartering Act that led to the restrictions on the New York assembly was just a tax and because it was a tax is was illegal.[26]

Second, the taxes were unconstitutional. A free people can only be taxed by their own elected representatives. Americans were not represented in Parliament. Therefore, Parliament had no right to impose taxes on Americans.[27]

Dickinson also hit on two arguments that would reverberate throughout the revolutionary period.

He was the first writer to claim that Americans were a different people, "a free people" and they would deal with the English as one free people to another. The historian Carl Becker said Dickinson's phrase and idea became the basis for the American argument against British policy.[28] By 1776, it would be a commonplace assumption. "The assumption," Becker wrote, "was that Americans were one 'people,' the English another, and each a 'free' people." The British ministers did not think that way. They did not consider the American colonists anything but a subject people. However, Becker argues, this idea took root. Soon Samuel Adams would be addressing Americans as a separate people. Benjamin Franklin, reading both Dickinson and Adams, would begin thinking that way as well. The separation came a little closer with each step. Eventually, in the Declaration of Independence it became "When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another …"

A second point about *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* helped it fit into the popular thinking of the day. That was conspiracy theory. Bernard Bailyn, the great historian of early American politics, said Dickinson believed that certain ministers of the king conspired to subject America. This was popular among Americans who followed English Whig writers like John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. The blame would shift as the crisis unfolded. At first, a handful of ministers would be at fault. Then the blame would be tacked on to Parliament as a whole and appeals would be made to the king. Finally, as in the Declaration of Independence, the blame would be put on the king.[29]

Dickinson also placed great emphasis on unity. He said Americans could only fight back if they stuck together. He castigated the other colonies for not being outraged and protesting the restrictions against New York. After all, he said, the same thing could happen to each colony.

He wrote, "To divide, and thus to destroy, is the first political maxim in attacking those, who are powerful by their union. He certainly is not a wise man, who folds his arms, and

A nearly contemporary engraving of the 1770 Boston Massacre by Paul Revere. Though not a completely accurate depiction of the event, it was created by Revere some three weeks after the event (New York Public Library).

reposes himself at home, viewing, with unconcern, the flames that have invaded his neighbor's house, without using any endeavors to extinguish them."[30]

The *Letters* were printed in every colony, but they especially made a stir in Boston. Soon after the first installment was published. Dickinson sent a complete set to James Otis, a fervent critic of Parliament and an ally of Samuel Adams. *The Farmer* became compulsory reading in Boston. The *Letters* gave new life to the protest movement there. In February 1768, the state legislature issued a Circular Letter to all of the other colonies, asking them to protest the Townshend Acts.

The argument and the tone were similar to the *Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer.*[31]

The Circular Letter outraged the British cabinet. Lord Hillsborough, secretary for the American department, directed that the Massachusetts governor "require" the legislature to rescind the letter. The legislature did not. The governor then dissolved it. However, the protest spread to other colonies. They followed Massachusetts' lead and sent letters of protest. They too were dissolved. This led to widespread import boycotts.[32]

Customs officials pressed on with their own duties, but they were not very successful. Officials kept arguing with each other. One of their favorite targets was the Boston merchant John Hancock. His sloop *Liberty* was seized in June 1768. Crowds turned out to protest, threatened the customs officials and their homes. The officials fled to a fort in Boston Harbor. This was too much for Lord Hillsborough and the rest of the cabinet. They ordered two regiments of British soldiers into Boston to protect officers of the crown. The soldiers arrived in October. Instead of relieving tension, the military presence only increased it. Eventually, the conflict between the civilians and the soldiers led to the Boston Massacre, when redcoats opened fire on a taunting, snowball-throwing crowd.[33]

Eventually, the cabinet pulled an about face and got Parliament to repeal the Townshend duties in 1770. They kept only one of the new taxes – the tea tax. That tax was the only one making money. As the British historian Peter D.G. Thomas wrote, "The concession to the colonies was therefore a token one, removal of the other duties that had been insignificant in their revenue yield. This fateful decision was to prove the point of no return in the sequence of events leading to the American Revolution.

"Without a tea duty there would have been no Boston Tea Party and no consequent final quarrel between Britain and her colonies."[34]

This was not what John Dickinson had in mind. The "Farmer" wanted to change the way Americans viewed their freedom. He advocated a careful watch on liberty. His view – for constitutional protest but against violence – would dominate the political landscape for several years. It was what most Americans wanted to hear. Charles J. Stille, who wrote the first biography of Dickinson, said of the *Letters*, "To most Americans they became, until the beginning of the war, a genuine political text-book, and their maxims were received with absolute confidence."[35]

It is inevitable though, that from our vantage point, we would ask whether *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* deserves a prominent place in our history. Certainly, the turn of events outdistanced Dickinson's arguments for moderate protests. His masterpiece would be overtaken by another one, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense.*[36]

Pierre Marambaud, a literature professor at the University of Nice, suggests that the differences between Dickinson's essays and Paine's *Common Sense* highlight how large the gap between Great Britain and the American colonies had grown from 1767 to 1776.[37]

"How did it happen," he asks, "that in 1768, when Dickinson's *Letters* were widely read and admired in the colonies, their author's mind came to coincide with general opinion, something which was never to occur again for the rest of his life?

"During the years that followed, he did not change although the temper of his countrymen did. He could only be the champion of the popular will while moderation remained the rule in colonial protest."[38]

In 1767, the American public believed the New York Restraining Act violated their constitutional rights. They were outraged at the behavior of Parliament. They were not

demanding separation from England.

Some of Dickinson's critics, then and now, claim that his proposed solutions in the *Letters* were vague. But what was he trying to solve? Independence? If he and everyone could have seen the future, that is what he should have done. They could not. The problem he was trying to solve was something completely different. Marambaud said for Dickinson to have contemplated independence in 1767 would be for him to have contemplated civil war.[39]

Dickinson's attempt to solve the problems he and other Americans were facing made perfect sense to people in 1767. Marambaud said, "... both conservatives and radicals could endorse Dickinson's statements because most of his contemporaries, like himself, still believed in the possibility of a compromise and the avoidance of bloodshed; even radicals could hope that the London government would yield as it had already done in the Stamp Act crisis."[40]

But *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania's* importance went beyond that. It helped give shape to the American argument. It convinced Americans that they were a people.

Near the end of his long and distinguished career, the Yale historian Edmund S. Morgan wrote, "people have to learn to see themselves as a people."[41]

He added, "The ideas generated by the Stamp Act crisis were crucial to the creation of that vision among Americans of all kinds."

That vision would continue to evolve.

With John Dickinson's *"Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania,"* Americans would gain an indispensable guide.

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The Articles of Confederation: the First Federal Constitution

Richard Henry Lee of Virginia formally proposed on June 7, 1776, that Congress declare the American colonies free and independent. That led to the vote on separation and the Declaration of Independence. That wasn't all Lee asked for. His proposal also called for a unified frame of government for the colonies.

Before the crisis with Parliament, the colonies rarely cooperated. However, they started working together when they met for the First Continental Congress in 1774. Congress appointed a series of committees to run the developing war against Great Britain and a foreign policy for all 13 colonies. However, by the spring of 1776, no one believed the arrangement worked well.

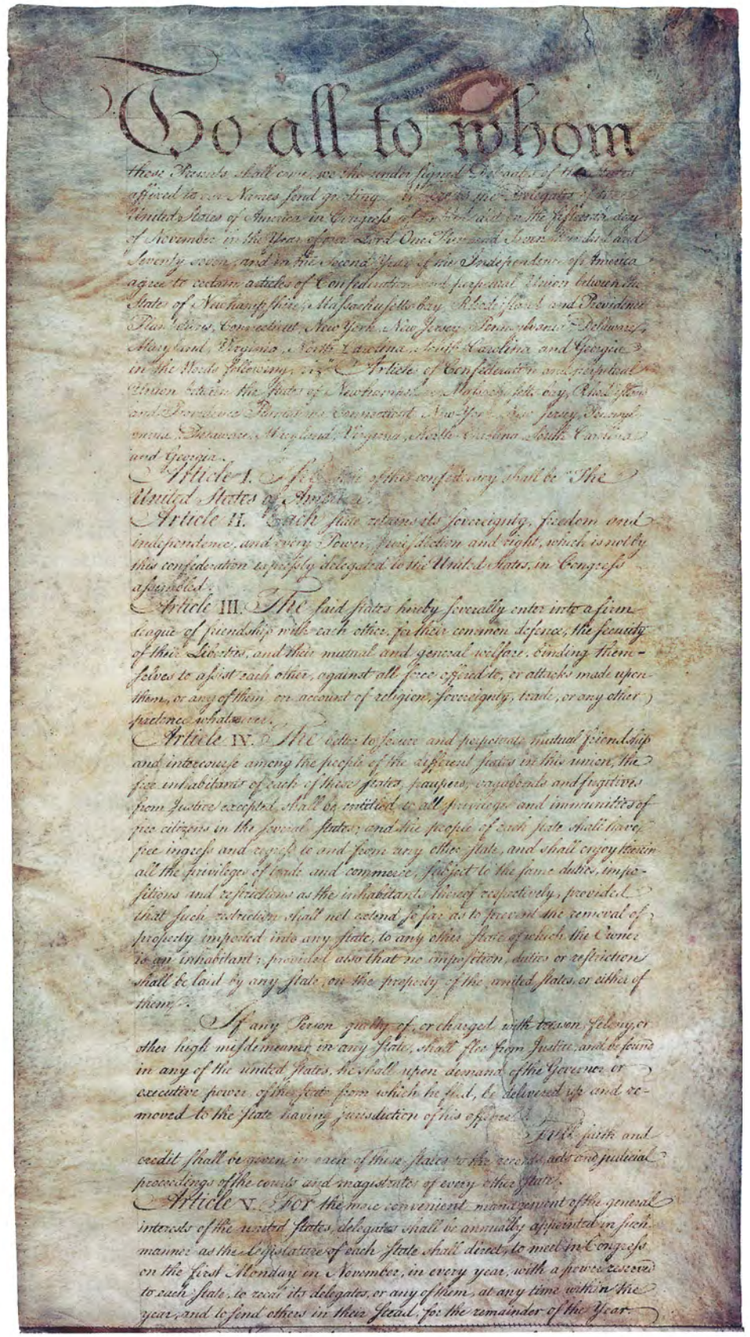
Congress thus jumped on the Lee's proposal and appointed a committee to develop such a frame of government. Each state had one vote. The committee picked John Dickinson as chairman. It fell to Dickinson to gather the opinions of all members and form them into a whole.

It was an almost impossible task. Dickinson did it, however. He studied previous proposals. One, the Albany Plan of Union, went back to 1754. Another, proposed by Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania, was from 1774. A third proposal, offered by Benjamin Franklin, was only a year old. Either the colonies or Congress had rejected all three.

The colonies were jealous of their freedom and of each other. By this time, practically all of the colonies had declared their independence from Great Britain. They were reluctant to give that up.

Dickinson did his best and the committee submitted the draft in July. Dickinson's version called for a stronger central government than the newly formed states were operating under. It also gave Congress powers to deal with the borders of the states, a controversial issue that would lead to problems. Dickinson also offered an innovation. He proposed limits on the states' ability to further infringe on religious freedom. At the time, almost all states had established churches. This also would be controversial. The draft also gave each state one vote in Congress. There was no executive branch.

Congress debated the draft for a month, and then dropped it until 1777. A much weaker document finally was submitted to the states for approval. It gave Congress little power and gave


To all to whom
these Presents shall come, we the undersigned Delegates of the States
affixed to our Names send greeting. Whereas the Delegates of the
United States of America in Congress assembled on the fifteenth day
of November in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Seven hundred and
Seventy seven, and in the second Year of the Independence of America
agree to certain articles of Confederation and perpetual Union between the
States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence
Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware,
Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia
in the Words following, viz. Articles of Confederation and perpetual
Union between the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island
and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsyl-
vania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina
and Georgia.

Article I. The stile of this confederacy shall be "The
United States of America."

Article II. Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom and
independence, and every Power, Jurisdiction and right, which is not by
this confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress
assembled.

Article III. The said states hereby severally enter into a firm
league of friendship with each other, for their common defence, the security
of their Liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding them-
selves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon
them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other
pretence whatever.

Article IV. The better to secure and perpetuate mutual friendship
and intercourse among the people of the different states in this union, the
free inhabitants of each of these states, paupers, vagabonds and fugitives
from justice excepted, shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of
free citizens in the several states; and the people of each state shall have
free ingress and regress to and from any other state, and shall enjoy therein
all the privileges of trade and commerce, subject to the same duties, impo-
sitions and restrictions as the inhabitants thereof respectively, provided
that such restriction shall not extend so far as to prevent the removal of
property imported into any state, to any other state of which the Owner
is an inhabitant; provided also that no imposition, duties or restriction
shall be laid by any state, on the property of the united states, or either of
them.

If any Person guilty of, or charged with treason, felony, or
other high misdemeanor in any state, shall flee from Justice, and be found
in any of the united states, he shall upon demand of the Governor or
executive power of the state from which he fled, be delivered up and re-
moved to the state having jurisdiction of his offence.

Full faith and
credit shall be given in each of these states to the records, acts and judicial
proceedings of the courts and magistrates of every other state.

Article V. For the more convenient management of the general
interests of the united states, delegates shall be annually appointed in such
manner as the legislature of each state shall direct, to meet in Congress
on the first Monday in November, in every year, with a power reserved
to each state, to recal its delegates, or any of them, at any time within the
year, and to send others in their stead, for the remainder of the Year.

A view of a original draft of the first page of the Articles of Confederation in the collections of the U.S. National Archives.

Congress few tools to run the government. The states did not adopt the Articles of Confederation until 1781. By then, most of the fighting of the Revolutionary War was over. The articles would create an alliance of states rather than a unified nation. The failures and weaknesses of the Articles would add to the argument for the stronger national government that came out of the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

Dickinson did not take part in any of these debates. By that time, the new government in Pennsylvania had dismissed him from Congress.

Dickinson, however, was able to revisit his belief in stronger government at the Constitutional Convention. He joined with other critics of the Articles of Confederation to form a stronger, but balanced federal government.