Mr. Edwin Wolf, 2nd was the 1967 Lecturer at the Dinner of the Friends of John Dickinson Mansion, Inc., which marked the 235th anniversary of Dickinson's birth, November 2, 1732.

Nationally and internationally known as a brilliant historian and bibliographer, Mr. Wolf directs the activities of The Library Company of Philadelphia as its Librarian. Founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1731, the organization holds many of the precious papers and letters of the "Penman of the Revolution."

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JOHN DICKINSON

FORGOTTEN PATRIOT

By Edwin Wolf, 2nd

In 1782 John Dickinson's handsome mansion on the north side of Chestnut between Sixth and Seventh Streets in Philadelphia was rented to the Chevalier de la Luzerne. The owner was temporarily out-of-town, serving as the chief executive of a state to the south. Ten years before, Dickinson had spent almost £4,000 to improve and enlarge the house for which he had originally paid the same amount. Before the Revolution, that can only be described as a whale of a lot of money. With the latest in exterior woodwork, decorative plastering and rich panelling, it was, with the houses of John Cadwalader and Samuel Powel, among the most elegant in the city at a time when the aura of grandeur crowned Philadelphia's streets.

Against that background, La Luzerne planned such a fête as had not been seen in the Quaker City since Major André, during the British occupation, had acted as theatrical manager and stage designer for the Meschianza. The architectural and landscaping arrangements for the occasion were executed by the French officer L'Enfant, who later was to lay out in a sea of mud the plans for a Federal city. Negotiations for a peace treaty with Great Britain were then in progress. As a gesture to enhance Franco-American relations during that critical diplomatic period, the French minister chose to entertain in

celebration of the recent birth of Louis-Joseph, Dauphin of France. He was fortunate for at that particular moment Rochambeau had asked Washington to meet with him in Philadelphia, and so the party was to be graced by the presence of America's greatest hero.

The distinguished physician and patriot, Dr. Benjamin Rush, was invited, went, and wrote a long letter describing the entertainment. He told of thirty cooks borrowed from the French Army, of the ladies of the city getting up as early as four in the morning to get their hair dressed so great was the demand for "the gentlemen of the comb," of a crowd of ten thousand who gathered outside to see the guests and peek at the festivities, of the hugh dancing room which was built for the day, and of the fireworks. "Here we saw the world in miniature," he wrote, all the people of consequence in the city, all the officers of the government, ladies and gentlemen of the most ancient as well as most modern families, lawyers, doctors, ministers of the various churches, professors of the college, and, as Dr. Rush described them, "painters and musicians, poets and philosophers, and men who were never moved by beauty or harmony or by rhyme or reason."

Dickinson, Hero Among Heroes

HE CONTINUED:

> "Here were to be seen heroes and patriots in close conversation with each other. Washington and Dickenson held several dialogues together. Here were to be seen men conversing with each other who appeared in all the different stages of the American war. Dickenson and Morris frequently reclined together against the same pillar. Here were to be seen statesmen and warriors from the opposite ends of the continent talking of the history of the war in their respective states. . . ."

The purpose of this prologue is merely to set the stage, as it were, to show John Dickinson at the age of fifty as a hero among heroes, a peer among peers. He was not, moreover, at the end of his career. The following year he was to become President of the Supreme Council of Pennsylvania, and five years later he was to represent Delaware as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. What is it that has made John Dickinson the least known of all major American figures of the Revolutionary and Federal periods?

Ask any schoolboy who Washington was, or Franklin, or John Adams, or Jefferson, and you will get an answer of sorts. Ask him who John Dickinson was, and he will reply in the vernacular of today, "Who he?" Yet, as the author of *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania,* he enjoyed an international reputation at the time second only, among Americans, to Franklin. So great was the impact of this able pamphlet in support of the liberties of the colonies that its author became a hero. The *Letters* were reprinted in newspapers throughout British America. Seven separate editions of it appeared in 1768, and two more and a French translation the following year. Franklin supplied a preface to John Almon's London printing. On March 17, 1768, a Town Meeting at Faneuil Hall in Boston voted, "That the THANKS of the Town be given to the ingenious AUTHOR of a course of Letters published at Philadelphia, and in this place, signed, A FARMER; wherein the rights of the American subjects are clearly stated, and fully vindicated. Dr. Benjamin Church, John Hancock, Esq; Mr. Samuel Adams, Dr. Joseph Warren, and John Rowe, Esq; were appointed a committee to prepare and publish a letter of thanks accordingly. A note in the *Pennsylvania Gazette,* which reprinted the Boston resolution, read: *"This is the FIRST honor of the kind that ever was conferred by a city on any person in America."*

In New York a week later on the anniversary of the repeal of the Stamp Act, the Friends of Constitutional Liberty and Trade met at the nearly adjoining Jones's and Bardin's Taverns to dine, wine and toast. Among the twenty-one toasts drunk on that occasion, which was spent according to a contemporary account "in Harmony, Cheerfulness, and a pleasing Flow of social Affections" (and, one can believe, of liquor, too), was one to "The ingenious and patriotic Author of the Farmer's Letters." An engraving of Dickinson was made for the enterprising bookseller Robert Bell lauding "The Patriotic American Farmer . . . who with Attic Eloquence and Roman Spirit hath

Asserted, The Liberties of the BRITISH Colonies in America." A doggerel verse was added to the praise:

> 'Tis nobly done, to Stem Taxations Rage,
> And raise, the thoughts of a degenrate Age,
> For Happiness, and Joy, from Freedom Spring;
> But Life in Bondage, is a worthless Thing.

This should be almost enough evidence to contravert the statement made by Vernon L. Parrington that, however Dickinson's writings may have appealed to Whiggish lawyers, "it is inconceivable that they should have appealed to the rank and file of Americans."

"Penman of the Revolution"

THE TONE of denigration is one that has so far prevailed with regard to Dickinson. As long ago as 1891 Charles J. Stillé—in the preface to his pioneer biography of the Pennsylvania Farmer—could regret that Dickinson had never been the subject of an elaborate biography prepared by a friendly hand. Three-quarters of a century later it is possible to say that there has been no major biography written since Stillé to incorporate into it the accumulation of unpublished information which has piled up since his day. Perhaps, stimulated by Stillé's enthusiasm, Moses Coit Tyler in his seminal *Literary History of the American Revolution* dubbed Dickinson the "penman of the Revolution," a soubriquet which appears nowhere in his biography in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Yet, it is one to which he has a just claim, for Dickinson wrote in part or in whole many of the major documents approved by the Continental Congress.

Let us look for a moment at his role as the "penman of the Revolution." Popularly speaking, the American Revolution is said to have begun with the opposition to the Stamp Act in 1765. When news of the passage of that act reached America, John Dickinson was a well-established and successful lawyer of thirty-two. He had read law in Philadelphia under John Moland and then spent several years of further study at the Middle Temple in London. In 1760 he was elected to the Assembly of the Lower Counties (Delaware was not so officially designated until 1776) and became its speaker. Dickinson

might be termed a chronic bi-statual. In 1762, he was back in Pennsylvania where the citizens of Philadelphia chose him one of their representatives to the legislature. The complicated political story of the struggle between the Proprietors of the Penn family and the Assembly is not here pertinent. Suffice it to say, that Dickinson found himself in the middle and failed of re-election in 1764.

Yet, when the troubles came in the form of new revenue acts designed to tax the colonies, Dickinson was turned to as the best and most lucid authority on the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation. In October, 1765, he was sent as one of the Pennsylvania delegates to the Stamp Act Congress which convened in New York. With them went a set of Resolutions the first draft of which survives in Dickinson's autograph. He wrote such phrases as: "it is inseparably essential to a free Constitution of Government, that all internal Taxes be levied upon the People *with their consent,*" and "that the levying Taxes upon the Inhabitants of this Province *in any other Manner,* being mainfestly subversive of public Liberty, must of necessary Consequence be utterly destructive of public Happiness." In essence, this first statement of Dickinson, prepared for the provincial Assembly, became the meat of the Resolutions of the Stamp Act Congress, which, too, he drafted. In all, there survive three or four manuscripts written for this purpose by Dickinson. It is almost inconceivable that no detailed study of them has been made, save for a few pages in David L. Jacobson's excellent monograph, *John Dickinson and the Revolution in Pennsylvania.* Representing the first action taken by any group of colonies against the repressive acts of Parliament, the Stamp Act Resolutions constitute one of the most important documents of American history. Had a Virginian written them, the draft would have a place of honor in the Capitol at Williamsburg and a wealth of articles would have acclaimed it.

The Moderate Colonist

BUT this was just the beginning of Dickinson's career on a national scale. We have spoken of the famous *Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania,* but before passing them by again, it seems appropriate

to quote an estimate of their worth from the other side of the Atlantic. The *Cambridge History of American Literature* states, concerning them: "What Dickinson did and did with effective skill was to present in attractive literary form the best of what had already been said and thought on behalf of the colonial claims. . . . Too patriotic to submit without protest, and too thoughtful to rebel, he voiced more successfully, perhaps than any other American publicist of his day, the sober second-thought of the great body of colonists who were ready to carry resistance to any point short of separation and war." As Jacobson so incisively put it, "Whatever the defects of indecisiveness or vagueness in Dickinson's argument noted by later critics, they were not seen until well after 1768, and no suggestion that the tone was overly moderate or obsequious toward the King was made in that year."

In the spring of 1768, when Philadelphians were debating the adoption of a non-importation agreement, the leaders who argued in favor of it were Charles Thomson, later Secretary of Congress, and Dickinson. "The ministry, having divested us of Property . . . are proceeding to erect over us a despotic Government, and to rule us as Slaves," Dickinson declaimed to a public meeting, which, in spite of his eloquence and trenchant arguments, was not then willing to go as far in the way of passive resistance as was Dickinson. He even wrote a popular song, known and sung widely through the colonies as "The Liberty Song." It hardly has the ring of today's "We Shall Overcome,"

> 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.

Yet, John Adams, who later scorned Dickinson, praised it for "cultivating the sensations of freedom."

Let us skip quickly to the meeting of the First Continental Congress for this began the critical period of Dickinson's life, the period which should have brought him glory and did, in fact, doom him to limbo in the popular mind. Due to the influence of the conservative Joseph Galloway, Dickinson was not at first elected a delegate by the Pennsylvania Assembly. However, the radical Whigs won the election on October 1, 1774, and two weeks later, when the new Assembly met, they added Dickinson to the list of delegates to Congress from Pennsylvania. Perhaps, the picture of Dickinson then as painted by John Adams is the most interesting, for Adams' later hostility may be at the root of the general low esteem in which he has been held. The influential New England historian Bancroft called Dickinson a "timid apathetic spirit."

When John Adams first met him on August 31, 1774, he was struck by his appearance of poor health: "He is a Shadow—tall, but slender as a Reed—pale as ashes." After dining with the squire of Fair Hill two weeks later, he commented, "Mr. Dickinson is a very modest Man, and very ingenious, as well as agreable. He has an excellent Heart, and the Cause of his Country lies near it." He noted that the result of the October elections "will make a great Weight in favor of the American Cause." So far, so good. Immediately upon Dickinson's appointment to Congress he was put to work to do what his fellow delegates thought him best equipped to do—write. An Address to the King had been decided upon and a committee appointed to write one. When the committee's draft was rejected, Dickinson was promptly added to the group and the writing of a new version was turned over to him.

Beleaguered Author

His autograph draft, full of corrections and interlineations, has survived. Much controversy, even during his lifetime, arose about his role in the writing of that significant paper. John Marshall in his *Life of Washington* stated that it was generally believed to have been written by Richard Henry Lee. Dickinson was indignant, and in 1804 wrote to his cousin Dr. George Logan, then a senator from Pennsylvania, that he had permitted the document to appear in a collected edition of his writings. "I must be guilty of the greatest baseness," he raged, "if for my credit, I knowingly permitted writings which I had not composed to be publicly imputed to me, without positive and public contradiction of the imputation. This contradiction I never have made, and never shall make, conscious as I am that *every one of those writings was composed by me.*"

Alas, poor Dickinson! He only recently received full credit for what he had done. Thomas Jefferson, who was not even in Philadelphia at the time, sent an account of Patrick Henry's participation in the Address to William Wirt, then collecting material for a memoir of the Virginia patriot. Somewhat later, in 1813, John Adams reminisced for the benefit of Jefferson. He had the advantage of having been on the committee charged with drafting the Address, but the disadvantage of a bad memory. The first draft and all the essentials were put together by Lee, he told Jefferson, and "it might be embellished and seasoned Afterward with some of Mr. Dickinson's piety; but I know not that it was." Richard Henry Lee's grandson produced hearsay evidence and offered the matter of style to show that Lee had written it. The recent editor of the *Diary of John Adams* noted that Dickinson "claimed" to have composed it, and the late Bernhard Knollenberg stated that no evidence remained to show how the drafts differed—the first draft had been rejected—and to what extent, if any, Dickinson was responsible for the changes. A few years ago I found in the Dickinson Papers of The Library Company Henry's draft and Dickinson's version. Later Lee's draft turned up at the University of Virginia. It can now be stated that the preliminary sketches of Henry and Lee bear little resemblance to the approved text, and that Dickinson's Address is almost word for word the approved text.

Alas, poor Dickinson! His role in the even more important Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms, which a committee was ordered to prepare by Congress in June, 1775, was the subject of even more controversy. It had been included in the 1801 edition of Dickinson's writings. In 1821 Jefferson wrote that he had prepared a draft of the Declaration, but it was too strong for Dickinson who "still retained the hope of reconciliation with the mother country, and was unwilling it should be lessened by offensive statements." Jefferson continued, patting Dickinson patiently on the head, "He was so honest a man, and so able a one that he was greatly indulged even by those who could not feel his scruples." Consequently, the Virginian recalled, Dickinson prepared an entirely new statement, preserving only the last few paragraphs of the first draft. Opinion veered during the ensuing century from giving the whole to Jefferson to giving the whole to Dickinson. Julian P. Boyd, in his meticulous edition of the Jefferson Papers, has produced all the available evidence and described which of the two men did what in a scholarly editorial note too long and too complicated to summarize here. Suffice it to say, that Jefferson wrote a preliminary draft and a fair copy, the latter of which Dickinson used as the basis for his version. Far more important, however, is Dr. Boyd's appraisal that "Dickinson helped to make it both a more suitable and a more inflammatory Declaration." The belief that the differences and the debate in the committee were caused by Jefferson's radicalism opposed to Dickinson's conservatism is simply not valid.

John Adams, Antagonist

LET us return to John Adams. During the year he spent among his fellow radicals in Massachusetts between the first and second Congress, his earlier opinion of Dickinson had undergone a radical change. In a letter to James Warren, written in July, 1775, which had been captured by the British and widely reprinted, he referred to Dickinson as "A certain great Fortune and piddling Genius [who] has given a silly Cast to our whole Doings." When Adams passed Dickinson on his way to the State House on September 16, Dickinson cut him dead. So began a feud which reflected personal animus as much as political disagreement. Adams recorded in his diary with considerable gusto Benjamin Rush's account of the growing popular dissatisfaction with Dickinson's considered hesitation. The more he argued in favor of seeking another avenue toward reconciliation the more he opened himself to criticism. He was able to convince Congress in 1775 to send off a final Address to the King, the Olive Branch petition, which Dickinson also wrote. But he could not stop the inevitable move for independence.

By 1776, the Pennsylvania Farmer had given up hope of a reconciliation. However, he was not ready, and he believed the colonies were not ready, for independence. In the lengthly justification of his actions during the Revolution written for the newspapers during the political campaign in Pennsylvania in 1783, Dickinson stressed

the point that he never opposed independence; he opposed a public declaration in June and July of 1776 because he was convinced the timing was wrong. When the first vote was taken on independence on July 1, Pennsylvania and South Carolina cast negative votes; Delaware was split; and New York abstained. On the next day South Carolina switched; Caesar Rodney arrived to break the Delaware tie; New York went along; and John Dickinson and Robert Morris abstained from voting, permitting Pennsylvania to go for the motion three to two. Dickinson's action on July 2 is not what destroyed his reputation, but his subsequent refusal to sign the Declaration did.

The Honest Abstainer

OTHER MEN who had abstained at the time of the critical vote or even argued and voted against independence were willing to sign the formal document. Of Dickinson's refusal, Ezra Stiles, soon to be chosen president of Yale, wrote vehemently, "He now goes into Oblivion or a dishonorable Reminiscence with Posterity—while the Names of the rest of the Delegates subscribed to the Declaration of Independency are consigned to an honorable Immortality in the History of the United States." Not such was the opinion of Richard Hildreth, novelist, abolitionist and historian, who, understanding Dickinson's character better than most historians, characterized his act as the "noblest proof of moral courage ever shown by a public man in the history of the country." On July 4, 1776, Congress discussed measures to be taken for the defense of Pennsylvania and New Jersey from the threat of the British on Staten Island.

Within a week Dickinson was off to the wars in command of a Pennsylvania battalion!

That Dickinson did not disappear into oblivion as forecast by Stiles is evidenced by the fact that in 1779 Delaware sent him back to Congress where he drafted the instructions to the Commissioners "for treating with Great Britain." In 1781, as noted, he was elected President of the State of Delaware, and the following year President of the Executive Council of Pennsylvania. In 1786 he presided at the Annapolis Convention which recommended a Constitutional

Convention, and Delaware sent him to that convention which drew up the Constitution of the United States. Few Americans participated so fully in public life during the critical last quarter of the 18th century; few Americans have received so little recognition for their services.

Dickinson did not seek public recognition, but he was jealous of his reputation. He shrank from undue or immodest publicity. When he married Mary Norris in 1770, he wrote to the publishers of the newspapers:

> I earnestly entreat as a favor of great weight with me that you will not insert in your newspaper any other account of my marriage than this: "Last Thursday, John Dickinson, Esquire, was married to Miss Mary Norris." An account of the expressions of joy shown on the occasion will give me inexpressible pain, and very great uneasiness to a number of very worthy relations.

When Robert Edge Pine requested that Dickinson sit for him so he could be included in a picture of Congress at the time of the Declaration of Independence, Dickinson declined to do so. "The truth is," he wrote, "that, as I opposed making the Declaration of Independence at the time it was made, I cannot be guilty of so false an ambition as to seek for any share in the fame of that council." He continued:

> Enough it will be for me should my name be remembered by posterity, if it is acknowledged that I cheerfully staked everything dear to me upon the fate of my country [there were no other major figures in the Revolution who had three of their houses burned by the British], and that no measure, however contrary to my sentiments, no treatment, however unmerited, could, even in the deepest gloom of our affairs, change that determination, and that though I resigned the favors of my fellow-citizens by endeavoring, as I judged, to promote their happiness, I continued inflexibly attached to their cause.

Undeserved Oblivion

WHEN HE DIED in 1808, three Philadelphia newspapers carried an obituary notice which can only be described as scornful in its brevity, and one of them carried no announcement of his death at all.

At the end of his biography of Dickinson, Stillé printed a statement by the eminent lawyer Horace Binney complaining bitterly about Philadelphia's neglect of the memory of its great men. "She does not take, and she never has taken, satisfaction in habitually honoring her distinguished men as *her* men, as men of *her* own family," he stormed. "She has never done it in the face of the world, as Charleston has done it, as Richmond has done it, as Baltimore has done it, as New York has done it, or at least did in former times, and as Boston has done it, and would do it forever. She is more indifferent to her own sons than she is to strangers."

Delaware was not tarred by Mr. Binney's brush. You still have the opportunity of rescuing the memory of John Dickinson from undeserved oblivion. You must get the Dickinson Papers into print; you must see that a good, sound biography of him is written. Jefferson, upon receiving news of Dickinson's death, wrote that "his name will be consecrated in history as one of the great worthies of the Revolution." *It is time to make his prophecy come true.*