

Letters from a Farmer

John Dickinson, a Philadelphia lawyer and wealthy landowner, wrote twelve "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania: to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies" began to appear in the Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser on December 2, 1767, under the simple pseudonym 'a Farmer.'

Using constitutional argument laced with political economy, Dickinson sought to persuade everyone who read his words, on either side of the Atlantic, of both the economic folly and the unconstitutionality of ignoring the rights of Englishmen living in the American Colonies.

The letters first appeared in the newspapers over a period of ten weeks in late 1767 and early 1768.



Letter One (December 2, 1767) introduced the small, fictional farmer, with a few servants and a small amount of investments, and then launched into an attack on the threat to the New York legislature, warning the other colonies that without unity of resistance to such efforts, all may fall separately.

Letter Two (December 7, 1767) took to task the Revenue Act as unconstitutional. "The Farmer" went on to argue for free trade and the end of taxes on goods that the colonies are not allowed to manufacture and must import from the homeland.

Letter Three (December 14, 1767) appealed strongly for a peaceful and dignified settlement of arguments between colonies and Crown, and displayed Dickinson's respect for order which marked all of his opinion in years to come.

Letter Four (December 21, 1767) discussed taxes and the right to representation before any taxes - internal or external - were to be levied.

Letter Five (December 28, 1767) asked why there was this sudden departure from the traditional since taxes were now being passed for the sole task of raising revenue from the colonies. "The Farmer" blamed those who had proposed them for alienating the affections of the Kings' subjects.

Letter Six (January 4, 1768) remarked upon the ways that "all artful rulers" extend their power unconstitutionally and warned the colonies to be ever vigilant of what future actions from the Parliament might mean.

Letter Seven (January 11, 1768) reiterated that although taxes may be small and the burden tolerable in business terms, the precedent is the fatal danger that makes the colonists, in effect, slaves.

Letter Eight (January 18, 1768) reinforced the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation, especially concerning the way that the government spends the money raised, quite possibly in ways not helpful, or even dangerous, to those who pay them.

L E T T E R S

F R O M

A F A R M E R.

L E T T E R I,

My Dear Countrymen,

I AM a FARMER, settled, after a variety of fortunes, near the banks of the river *Delaware*, in the province of *Pennsylvania*. I received a liberal education, and have been engaged in the busy scenes of life: but am now convinced, that a man may be as happy without bustle as with it. My farm is small, my servants are few, and good; I have a little money at interest; I wish for no more; my employment in my own affairs is easy; and with a contented grateful mind, I am compleating the number of days allotted to me by Divine Goodness.

Being master of my time, I spend a good deal of it in a library, which I think the most valuable part of my small estate; and
being

Letter Nine (January 25, 1768) lectured fellow colonists on the vital need for local representation and firmly established assemblies.

Letter Ten (February 1, 1768) was another warning, this time against the dangers of the current hostile atmosphere in the British Parliament and the logical progression of tyranny (citing Ireland), after precedent has been set and allowed to stand.

Letter Eleven (February 8, 1768) again dealt with precedent, and said that new unconstitutional designs of government must be recognized and halted immediately, before they become entrenched.

Letter Twelve (February 15, 1768) wound up the series with the common sense argument that all colonies and legislatures must be united in opposition to all attempts to install unconstitutional precedent, even though all interests may not be individually served.

Click the link to view the letters and/or hear an audio reading of each: <https://tinyurl.com/u3n8uyp9>

The letters were quickly published in pamphlet form, reprinted in almost all colonial newspapers, and read widely across the colonies and in Britain.

There is little doubt that the flood of petitions and calls for boycotts on imported goods up and down the colonies owed much to these letters. Perhaps most importantly, the concept of unity started to take root.

Dickinson himself blamed the New England colonies for escalating affairs to undignified violence and held the fleeting opinion later that Boston had brought its troubles on itself.

Nevertheless, the eventual result was the calling of the Continental Congress and the unity of purpose that John Dickinson had advocated, though certainly not in the directions that he had argued in his letters and would continue to argue at the Congress. (John Osborne, Dickinson University)

John Dickinson

John Dickinson was born in Talbot County, Maryland on November 2, 1732. The family - father Samuel Dickinson, his second wife, Mary Cadwalader of Philadelphia, and assorted step-brothers and sisters - moved to an estate in Delaware a few years after. There the children enjoyed the privileged upbringing and private education of the landed elite.

At eighteen, John Dickinson became a law student in the Philadelphia offices of John Moland. In 1753, he traveled to London to study at the Middle Temple. Here he absorbed the particularly English legal attitude of entitlement to protection of ancient rights against new methods of arbitrary rule that had dominated the previous century in British legal and political affairs.

This experience and his voracious capacity for study, together with the natural conservatism of his background, marked his overwhelming interest in the relationship between politics and history and foretold his remarkable life of public service that was to come.

He extended his stay in London till 1757, and upon returning home, settled in Philadelphia and began a successful law practice. He also entered politics, serving in the Pennsylvania Assembly.

He distinguished himself by siding with the Proprietary party against the faction led by Benjamin Franklin that sought to turn Pennsylvania from a Penn family governed commonwealth to a colony immediately under Royal control.

The bitter debate of 1764 saw the eloquent and stubborn young Dickinson stand his ground on the simple conservative principle that change might bring more oppressive government and that the chance could not be taken. He lost the debate and his seat in the Assembly.

He gained admiration for his principles, however, and he was soon chosen to represent Pennsylvania at the Stamp Act Congress in New York in October, 1765.

He had, just before this, published a pamphlet seeking support among English merchants to repeal the Stamp and Sugar Acts as a restraint of trade.

At the meeting, he drafted the resolution of the Congress. When this action made no impact on government policy, he began in December, 1768, to publish in the Pennsylvania Chronicle his famous Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies, under the pseudonym 'A Farmer.'

Twelve in all, the letters made a masterful argument based upon the contradiction the Acts posed to traditional English liberties and were widely read, admired, and digested on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the writings hinted at an ultimate recourse of resistance, they reflected overall the hesitation to employ extra-constitutional measures, a hesitation that Dickinson would display through much of his later career.

The actions of the New England colonies, however, soon moved events beyond the possibility of reconciliation. Dickinson blamed the radicals in Boston for this escalation and the end of any hope of constitutional solution.

In the July 1774 meetings to organize a new congress, Dickinson drafted three resolutions which retained hope that outright rebellion could still be avoided.

At the same time, he worked to prepare the defenses of Philadelphia and took command of the first battalion of the city's new militia regiment.

At the second Continental Congress, he wrote the Petition to the King, which appealed again for peaceful resolution.

When the Crown rejected this approach, the pressures for revolution became unstoppable and brought Dickinson to his famous refusal to vote for or sign the Declaration of Independence. The timing was wrong, he said, to declare war on the greatest power in the world without even a system of government to bind together the various colonies in their constitutionality or even their defense.

He did abstain from the final vote, however, so that the Pennsylvania vote would be for independence and therefore the colonies would adopt the Declaration unanimously. He also led the committee to draft the Articles of Confederation.

With the war now joined, Dickinson first took up his post as colonel and then resigned his commission over what he saw were a series of affronts that his stand in Congress had brought on. Though the actual case is not clear, many accounts have him serving as a private soldier, notably at the Battle of Brandywine.

He also suffered financially; the British burned the family's Philadelphia estate, and Tories or bandits caused extensive damage to his Delaware properties. This caused some economy, including the manumission of his slaves.

In 1779, he returned to the Continental Congress and in 1781 was elected president of Delaware. The next year he resigned that post to be elected president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, returning to Philadelphia and the radical turmoil in that state.

In 1786, Dickinson joined James Madison in a convention at Annapolis to revise the Articles of Confederation. Dickinson was elected president of the gathering, and a brief session soon adjourned in favor of a larger such meeting to be held in Philadelphia.

From May to September, 1787, Dickinson sat with other delegates in what is now known as the Constitutional Convention. His contributions to the debates centered mainly upon the election of and powers for the federal presidency.

Under the name 'Fabius,' he wrote nine succinct essays urging the ratification of the new constitution while warning against the gathering of too much power in the hand of the national government.

Following the success of ratification in both Delaware and Pennsylvania before the end of 1787, Dickinson essentially retired from political participation, ironically never holding any office under the new constitution he had so much helped into being.

He still wrote, however. In 1798, with the French Revolution losing so many of its initial backers in the United States, he wrote a second series of 'Fabius Letters,' this time rather uncharacteristically defending friendly relations with France.

He felt France was one nation to which the United States owed victory in its War of Independence, the later excesses of the Paris Revolution notwithstanding.

He also moved into line with Thomas Jefferson and those who resisted a strong central power for the federal capital.

In 1803, he despaired of France, newly imperial and under the sway of Bonaparte, and wrote An Address on the Past, Present, and Eventual Relations of the United States to France in which he dubbed that nation now a threat to United States interests.

In July, 1770, Dickinson had married Mary Norris, the daughter of Isaac Norris, then president of the Philadelphia Assembly. Mary Dickinson shared with fortitude the vicissitudes of the following decades.

The couple had five children, though only two daughters, Sarah and Maria, survived infancy. The family lived quietly in their townhouse in Wilmington, Delaware. John Dickinson died there on February 14, 1808. President Jefferson expressed his sorrow, and both houses of Congress resolved to wear black armbands in mourning. He was buried in the cemetery of the Friends Meeting House in Wilmington.

Dickinson University

A grammar school founded in Carlisle in 1773 served as the foundation for what would become Dickinson College. Chartered in 1783 by Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a prominent Philadelphia physician, Dickinson was the first college established in the new United States of America.

At his core, Rush believed in freedom—freedom of thought and freedom of action. And he believed fully in America's potential for unprecedented achievement. But Rush also believed that the American Revolution did not end when the muskets stopped sounding; that, he felt, was only the beginning.

Now that America had fought for its liberties, Americans needed to maintain a nation worthy of those liberties.

Rush knew that America could only live up to its own expectations if it was a country built of an educated citizenry. So seven years after he met with other members of the Continental Congress to add his signature to the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush signed the charter of a new college on what was then the American frontier.

To further his educational enterprise, Rush asked that Dickinson - known widely as the 'Penman of the Revolution' and the governor of Pennsylvania - lend his support and his name to the college that was being established in the western frontier of his state.

Dickinson was easily convinced, and together he and Rush set about the task of devising a seal for the college. The image they created - featuring a liberty cap, a telescope and an open Bible - remains the official college seal today.

It represents a mission that has been ingrained in Dickinson College for more than two centuries: to offer students a useful and progressive education in the arts and sciences - an education grounded in a strong sense of civic duty to become citizen-leaders.



On September 9, 1783, a struggling grammar school in Carlisle was transformed into Dickinson College. Less than a week earlier, the Treaty of Paris had officially ended the Revolution and guaranteed international recognition of the United States of America.

All here is from Dickinson University; the initial summary on the Letters is by John Osborne, Dickinson University

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young