

*Penman of the Founding: A Biography of John Dickinson, Jane Calvert*

If you doubt this “quirky fame” of history, that truly influential people often disappear down the black hole, you should read this biography. I didn’t even know Dickinson’s name, and yet he is deservedly in the pantheon with Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, and Adams. Instead of writing mythical and hagiographical material, modern authors keep their subjects at a respectful (hopefully objective) distance. Calvert maintains this distance, but doesn’t hide her warranted respect for and esteem of her subject. Typical of modern, serious nonfiction, this work is highly researched with voluminous notes and references.

Basics. Dickinson was a prominent member of the Second Continental Congress, but refused to sign the Declaration of Independence. Dickinson was elected president of the Annapolis convention to revise the Articles of Confederation. Finally, Dickinson was instrumental in formulating the Great Compromise which enabled the Constitution itself.

An aside. I was forced to exit the book and do some study to make sense of the Pennsylvania-Delaware history. How could Dickinson be “governor” of both “colonies” at once? I had no idea that the 3 counties that comprise Delaware had once been part of Pennsylvania, and not in “ancient” history. Over the 18th century, Pennsylvania had increasingly allowed these colonies “independence.” Eventually, there were 2 legislatures. Delaware only formally and legally separated from Pennsylvania in 1776.

Dickinson was a political moderate, often mediating a central position between opposing forces, in this case loyalists and revolutionaries. A modern cannot make sense of Dickinson without understanding his Quaker influences. Dickinson was not drawn to organized religion, and consequently never joined the Quakers. Do moderns understand that Quakers were centuries ahead of America on several fronts? In this case, equality of the sexes. Dickinson’s Quaker mother was educated and prodigiously intellectual, discussing, arguing with, and mentoring her prodigy.

Enabled by his family’s wealth, Dickinson went to England for two years and studied law, and was eventually called to England’s bar before returning to the colonies. Calvert posits that Dickinson was both more educated and more influential in the independence movement than any other founder. She takes nothing away from and does not intend to minimize the intellects of Jefferson or Madison. Rather, she shows that Dickinson was an even greater force, but that he “disappeared from history” for reasons we will mention. Dickinson’s *Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer* made him a celebrity, a rock

star who suffered the fate of all celebrities—loss of privacy as well as clinging and demanding fans. He was the revolutionary era's greatest celebrity.

Calvert quotes Dickinson extensively. Reading these quotes gives the reader the feeling that he or she is reading a logical, rational, and towering intellect.

Quaker influence. Multitudes can relate to being "turned off by religion." But Dickinson did not "throw the baby out with the bath water." Rather, he was deeply drawn to Quaker principles, but separated these from Quakerism itself. Dickinson represented the poor, destitute, widows, and blacks in court. He was naturally drawn to defend the underdog—pro bono, always. But his rejection of Quaker's extreme pacifism caused him to distance himself from actually joining the Quakers.

Quaker influence. In his 1776 draft of the Articles of Confederation, Dickinson used "persons" instead of "man." Quakers, of course, stood for equality of the sexes. His "intellectual and social circles" as a founder were mixed gender. Women continued to influence him and widen his perspective. Centuries ahead of his era.

Quaker influence. Dickinson inherited slaves from his father. Quakers initially would have advocated humane treatment of slaves. As the 1700s progressed, they became increasingly uncomfortable with slavery itself. In 1776, Quakers demanded that all members free of slaves. It would take too long to make even a cursory accounting of all the efforts Dickinson made to treat blacks humanely. One example. He bought family members himself to keep their families from being separated. He also bought slaves to keep them from being sold out of state. Dickinson initially freed some slaves in 1777, but freed all of his unconditionally in 1786. Centuries ahead of his era.

A brief aside. The State of Delaware website on Poplar Hall, the John Dickinson estate, mentions only that Dickinson was a slave holder while defending American civil rights against England. The writer makes no mention of Dickinson's Herculean efforts on behalf blacks in general and slaves in particular. I.e., the Delaware site cherry picks data, separating facts from context, and consequently skews Dickinson's life and reputation. Moderns bask in the opposite error of 19th Century's "Manifest Destiny."

Quaker influence. Because Quakers were absolute pacifists, they refused to organize a Pennsylvania militia, even for defense. This seemed irrational to Dickinson—"extreme" pacifism prevented his full embrace of Quakers. With his Quaker influence, Dickinson could embrace "defense," but not "offense."

He believed close to what we would call a "just war." It is for this reason that he refused to sign the Declaration of Independence. (Dickinson did volunteer and formed a militia for the American war effort.) Calvert argues that Dickinson, far more than any other founder, formulated the climate that led to the Second Continental Congress. It should be no surprise to learn that Dickinson authored the Olive Branch Petition. He took what we would now call a stance of "civil disobedience." Sure, Parliament and the King are manifestly trampling on the English Constitution, but that doesn't mean you start a war and kill people over it. Colonists should disobey the Stamp Act and take the consequences. Civil Disobedience. Centuries ahead of his era.

Calvert believes it is the fallout from the refusal to sign the Declaration, as much as any other reason, that Dickinson disappeared from history. He refused to take sides. He wasn't a Loyalist, and he wasn't a Sam Adams radical. Most Americans have little idea the atrocities committed by both Britains and Americans in the Revolution. He was a constitutional moderate. The founders and the era eventually forgot about him as he wasn't a "fiery radical."

Reading *Penman of the Founding* is not "light weekend reading." Perhaps Franklin explained Dickinson's disappearance from history best: "Compromisers may not make great heroes, but they do make great democracies." In building the American myth, perhaps Dickinson was not hero material. But our polarized public square could use a towering moderate now. John Dickinson, where are you?