

Archives and Special Collections

Dickinson College

Carlisle, PA

COLLECTION REGISTER

Name: **Dickinson, John (1732-1808)** **MC 2001.13**

Material: Papers (1762-1807)

Volume: 0.25 linear feet (1 Document Box)

Donation: Gift of Boyd Lee Spahr

Usage: These materials have been donated without restrictions on usage.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John Dickinson was born on November 2, 1732 (November 13 new calendar), to Samuel (1689-1760) and Mary Cadwalader Dickinson (c. 1700-1776). The family moved to an estate near Dover, Delaware, where John and his younger brother, Philemon (1739-1809), were educated by tutors. John Dickinson continued his education by studying law, first in Philadelphia with former king's attorney John Moland, and then in the Middle Temple, in London's Inns of Court. In 1757, he returned to Philadelphia and began to practice law.

Dickinson's skill as a lawyer prompted his election to the Assembly of the Lower Counties (Delaware) in October 1760. He became speaker of the house the following year. Two years later he represented Philadelphia County in the Pennsylvania legislature. In 1765, Dickinson took a leading role in the resistance against the Stamp Act, publishing several writings such as *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies* and serving as de facto leader of the Stamp Act Congress in New York.

From 1766 through 1769 he did not serve in the Pennsylvania Assembly. After the British passed the Townshend Acts in 1767, he published *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (1767-1768) serially in the newspapers, which propelled him to international fame as the spokesman for the American cause. In addition to the celebrity Dickinson achieved for his popular *Farmer's Letters*, he was reelected to the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1770. On July 19 of that same year, he married Mary Norris, daughter of former Speaker of the Assembly, Isaac Norris II.

Until the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Dickinson worked toward reconciliation with Britain. During before and during his membership in the First Continental Congress in October 1774, Dickinson authored the first *Petition to the King* and the *Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec, To the Inhabitants of the Colonies*, and the Declaration of Rights and List of Grievances. On July 23, 1775, Dickinson was elected chairman of the Committee of Safety and Defense. He also was commissioned as a colonel in the First Philadelphia Battalion of Associators. In 1775, he served as a representative to the Second Continental Congress, writing a second *Petition to the King*, known as the Olive Branch Petition, and the *Declaration of the*

Causes of Taking Up Arms. In June 1776, Dickinson chaired the committee that drafted the *Articles of Confederation*. Dickinson then refused to vote on or sign the *Declaration of Independence*, as he still hoped for reconciliation with Britain. He joined his regiment near Elizabethtown, New Jersey.

In the fall, Dickinson returned to Philadelphia where he was reelected to the Assembly. But when the radical members refused to consider amending the new flawed state constitution that did not protect religious or political dissenters and allowed them to target Quakers for persecution, Dickinson resigned his seat. As the radicals charged him with being an enemy of the state, Dickinson enlisted in the Delaware militia as a private, where he served under Washington at the Battle of Brandywine. In the fall of 1777, he was promoted to brigadier-general, but he never acted on the commission.

In 1779, Dickinson represented Delaware in Congress, and he worked to secure American fishing rights off the coast of Nova Scotia and peace with Britain. He was then unanimously elected president of the Supreme Executive Council of Delaware in 1781. After a year in the position, during which time he achieved many reforms in Delaware, he was elected to the same office in Pennsylvania, which he held for three terms. In 1786, he served as president of the Annapolis Convention that met to amend the Articles of Confederation. He represented Delaware in the 1787 Convention that wrote the United States Constitution, a document that he actively supported with his publication of the *Fabius Letters* in 1788.

Dickinson's final public office was president of the Delaware Constitutional Convention from 1791 to 1792. After that, although he was put forward several more times for public office, he remained a private citizen, leading protest groups, writing political pamphlets, and acting as advisor to leading politicians, including Senator George Logan of Pennsylvania, Attorney General Caesar A. Rodney, and President Thomas Jefferson. He died in Wilmington, Delaware on February 14, 1808.

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

The John Dickinson Papers contain correspondence and legal papers reflecting Dickinson's legal and political careers. The collection is contained in one document box and is divided into two series: Correspondence, and Legal and Financial Materials. This collection of papers was acquired and donated to Dickinson College by Boyd Lee Spahr.

The Correspondence series is comprised mainly of letters sent by John Dickinson to such prominent individuals in Delaware and Pennsylvania politics as James Wilson, Caesar Rodney, and Benjamin Rush. These letters, dated 1762 to 1807, range in topic from military matters to the issues facing the newly-established Dickinson College. Also included in the series are two letters received by Dickinson, and a letter written by William Bingham to Benjamin Rush. The letters are arranged accordingly as Letters Sent and Letters Received by Dickinson, and then arranged chronologically; the Bingham letter to Rush is housed at the end of the series.

The Legal and Financial series contains both personal financial papers and papers related to Dickinson's public duties, particularly to his duties as president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. The items within this series are arranged chronologically.

COLLECTION INVENTORY

BOX 1 - MC 2001.13

CORRESPONDENCE

Dickinson, John – Letters Sent

- Folder 01) To George Reed – June 4, 1762
To Baynton and Wharton – May 6, 1769
To Cadwalader and Samuel Cadwalader Morris – Nov. 30, 1771
[Copy of original in another's hand]
To Samuel Cadwalader Morris – May 4, 1774
To General Charles Lee – July 25, 1776
To James Wilson – July 26, 1776
- Folder 02) To Caesar Rodney – May 21, 1779
To General Nathanael Greene – Aug. 20, 1779
To General Nathanael Greene – Nov. 24, 1781
To the Speaker of the General Assembly – Nov. 8, 1784
To John Lukens – May 17, 1785
To George Read – Dec. 16, 1785
- Folder 03) To Benjamin Rush – Feb. 27, 1786
To Jasper Yates – June 27, 1787
To Benjamin Rush – Aug. 9, 1787
To Benjamin Rush – Oct. 21, 1790
To Benjamin Rush – Oct. 4, 1792
To Benjamin Rush – Dec. 29, 1796
- Folder 04) To Benjamin Rush – Apr. 15, 1797
To Benjamin Rush – Sep. 30, 1797
To Benjamin Rush – Oct. 17, 1797
To Benjamin Rush – Nov. 6, 1797
To Benjamin Rush – Aug. 10, 1803
To Caesar Augustus Rodney – Nov. 16, 1807

Dickinson, John – Letters Received

- Folder 05) From Charles Nisbet – Dec. 18, 1784
From John Erskine – Mar. 31, 1785

William Bingham – Letters Sent

- Folder 06) To Benjamin Rush – Jan. 1, 1784

LEGAL AND FINANCIAL

- Folder 07) Receipt issued by John Dickinson to Cadwalader and Samuel Cadwalader Morris – July 28, 1772
- Folder 08) Order on David Rittenhouse, Treasurer of the Assembly, for payment for construction of Triumphal Arch – Mar. 8, 1784
- Folder 09) Order on David Rittenhouse, Treasurer of the Assembly, for grant to the American Philosophical Society – Mar. 21, 1784
- Folder 10) Order for the salary of Francis Hopkinson – Mar. 23, 1785
- Folder 11) Resolution of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania – May 5, 1785

This collection register was prepared by LeAnn Fawver, July 2001, and Jane E. Calvert, March 2018.