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Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

John Dickinson ²⁷

It is always a hard matter to condense a comprehensive biography into a ten minute speech. Especially is this the case when the subject is but little known; when, in addition, the author has great faith in his subject, and would fain convince others the task becomes a most difficult one. To prove how powerful a person was John Dickinson in the great drama of the Revolution would require a mass of evidence, which, while conclusive, could not but be tiresome. A very brief glance therefore at his character, as a statesman and as a man is all that can be expected.

It seems to be a law of nature that men are affected most by what is most directly presented to them; and History, for no exception to the rule. The Commander who leads the forlorn hope is a hero, and History sings his praises; but none of the man who

planned the attack - who saw the opportunity, to others hopeless, and was quick to seize it - the man who was the brain and heart of the movement, but too often fails to receive his reward. The crowd gaze at the puppet show, and stare and admire, and tell others of the wonderful figures, seemingly endowed with life; but no one thinks of the man behind the scenes, who pulled the strings which set the show in motion.

John Dickinson may to a certain degree, be likened to those men who have been the main springs of great movements to whom so much is due, yet to whom so little credit is given. Certainly no one occupied a more conspicuous position in the stormy times preceding the declaration of Independence; no one was more instrumental in bringing about the final rupture. It is impossible to read the "Letters from a Farmer" without being

convinced of the great weight they
 must have had on the feelings
 and thought of the time. And the
 Resolution of Thanks, voted by
 the Citizens of Boston to the vigor-
 ous author of certain patriotic
 letters, subscribed "A Farmer,"
 ending with "permit us to intrude
 upon your privacy and salute
 the farmer as the friend of Amer-
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 of mankind" is convincing proof.
 Nor are there wanting other and
 and many testimonials to the
 prominence of the position held
 by Dickinson. It was out of
 reference to him alone that the
 second petition to the King, of
 which he was the author, was
 consented to. Above all, it was
 to him alone that Pennsylvania
 cast her lot with the other
 Colonies. The Preliminary
 Contest was against the Decla-
 ration by a vote of four to three
 Dickinson, though personally
 opposed to it, absented himself
 from the hall on the final vote,
 and permitted Pa to cast

Her voice for Independence,
 But it was through no lack of
 Patriotism that Dickinson was
 opposed to the Declaration. He
 believed that the time had not
 yet come; that in the condition
 of affairs, at home and abroad,
 the declaration was simple
 madness - and looked at in the
 light of reason, it was madness.
 In his own words, "It was not till
 things had deliberately been muddled
 firm, at home, and abroad that
 America should advance and
 assume her position among
 the nations of the world." But
 when the Declaration had been
 signed he was the first to cast
 his lot with America, organize
 his regiment and accompany
 it to the field. And that the
 people appreciated his motives,
 and that their confidence in him
 was unshaken, was shown by
 his election to the Executive Office
 in 1782, after one of the most bitter
 political contests ever fought
 in Pennsylvania.

Dickinson, like many great men, failed because he failed to grasp the opportunity when presented to him. Had he espoused the Declaration as actively as he opposed it, his name would have been enrolled with Adams and Jefferson. But he failed to seize the tide at its flood, and it left him to comparative obscurity. No one had been more instrumental in firing the train; but he had miscalculated the rapidity of the spark, and the explosion found him unprepared. He was a statesman in every thing but state-craft - but another name for state-intrigue. Had he been more of the politician, and less of the statesman, his fame would have been greater. For he was a statesman in so far as he had strong convictions and was willing to abide by their result; he was not a politician, for he acted on principle, not expediency. He was too honest to turn his sails, to catch what he firmly believed was only the passing breeze; that it proved

to the hurricane which swept
the British from the coast was
an error of the judgement, not
the sympathies; and he dearly
paid the penalty by seeing others
come to fame in the gale which
he had been chiefly instrumental
in conjuring. He had helped
sow the seed; but rather than
cut the grain prematurely, he
would let others garner the harvest.
And history, forgetting what he
did, has passed him by for what
he failed to do. Forgetting that
he called the people to action, it
has neglected him for failing
to take advantage of their activity.

But if Dickinson's public life
was unfortunate, his private life
displayed all those qualities for
which he was conspicuous. No
one has written a complete biog-
raphy of Dickinson. But to any one
who will read between the lines,
his *Letters*, collected and pub-
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epilation of facts, In the introduction to the "Letters from A Farmer" he says: "I am a farmer, settled, after a variety of fortunes, on 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; and with a contented, grateful mind, undisturbed by worldly hopes or fears, relating to myself, I am enjoying the remainder of days allotted to me by Divine goodness"

This is about as good an index as we have to Dickinson's private life; we could wish for no better. But every line of his writings bears witness to the honor, the uprightness, the nobleness and the evenness of temper which must have distinguished him.

Dickinson was distinguished, too, as well for his intellectual as

for his moral qualities. Some men
there are whose very goodness makes
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the greater part of it in my library,
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information". That Dickinson
was possessed of vast and

accurate knowledge there can be no doubt; every line of his writings shows it. In intellect and culture he was second to none. And it should be a matter of pride to us to day, that the founder of our alma mater, if not the greatest statesman, was at least the greatest scholar of his time.

Some men there are, as Johns Hopkins, who, suddenly becoming possessed of vast wealth and hopeless of any other means of attaining immortality found colleges or charitable institutions. Dickinson was not one of these men. But it was because he was a man of culture and refinement; because he was an educated man and could appreciate the advantages of an education that he founded the college which now bears his name. He knew that the question of liberty was far from being settled by the surrender of Yorktown. He knew that the crucial test of the Republic was yet to come. He knew that

the vexed question of a people
being able to govern themselves
must be settled by those who
should come after; and he knew
that the way enable a people
to rule themselves was to educate
them. And he acted upon his belief.

Who will say that he acted not wisely.
From the halls of "old Dickinson"
have gone forth men who have
borne well their part in the
struggle of life; men who have
had no mean part in shaping the
destiny of the nation; men who
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up and say to all the world, "this
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The end,

Philosophical Oration
Commencement 1883

Frank G. Graham

Philosophical Oration

1883

John Dickinson, 1883

by
Frank. G. Graham,

Commencement Oration of Frank G. Graham, Class of 1883
Transcribed by Christine Rosenberry, May 2002
Edited by Don Sailer, September 2009

John Dickinson

It is always a hard matter to condense a comprehensive biography into a ten minute speech. Especially is this the case when the subject is but little known; when, in addition, the author has great faith in his subject, and would fair convince others the task becomes a most difficult one. To prove how powerful a person was John Dickinson in the great drama of the Revolution could require a mass of evidence, which, while conclusive, could not but be tiresome. A very brief glance therefore at his character, as a statesman and as a man is all that can be expected. It seems to be a law of nature that men are affected most by what is most directly presented to them; and Historians are no exception to the rule. The Commander who leads the forlorn hope is a hero, and History sings his praises; but ~~no one~~ if the man who

planned the attack – who saw the opportunity, to others hopeless, and was quick to seize it – the man who was the brain and heart of the movement, but too often fails to receive his reward. The crowd gaze at the puppet show, and stare and admire, and tell others of the wonderful figures, seemingly endowed with life; but no one thinks of the man behind the scenes, who pulled the strings which set the show in motion.

John Dickinson may to a certain degree, be likened to those men who have been the mainsprings of great movements to whom so much is due, yet to whom so little credit is given. Certainly no one occupied a more conspicuous position in the stormy times preceding the declaration of Independence; no one was more instrumental in bringing about the final rapture. It is impossible to read the “Letters from a Farmer” without being

convinced of the great weight they must have had on the feeling and thought of the time. And the “Resolution of Thanks, voted by the Citizens of Boston to the ingenious author of certain patriotic letters, subscribed ‘ A farmer ’” Ending with “permit us to intrude upon your privacy and salute the Farmer as the friend of Americans and the common benefactor of mankind” is convincing prose. Nor are there wanting other and many testimonials to the prominence of the position held by Dickinson. It was out of deference to him alone that the second petition to the king, of which he was the author, was consented to. Above all, it was to him alone that Pennsylvania cast her lot [thwith] the other Colonies. The preliminary ballot was against the Declaration by a vote of four to three. Dickinson, though personally opposed to it, absented himself from the hall on the final vote, and permitted Pa to cast

her voice for Independence. But it was through no lack of patriotism that Dickinson was opposed to the Declaration. He believed that the time had not yet come; that in the condition of affairs, at home and abroad, the declaration was simple madness – and looked at in the light of reason, it was madness. In his own words, “It was not till things had deliberately been rendered firm, at home, and abroad that America should advance and assume her position among the

nations if the could.” But when the Declaration had been signed he was the first to cast his lot with America, organize his regiment and accompany it to the field. And that the people appreciated his motives, and that their confidence in him was unshaken, was shown by his election to the Executive Chair in 1782, after one of the most bitter political contests ever fought in Pennsylvania.

Dickinson, like many great men, fell because he failed to grasp the opportunity when presented to him. Had he espoused the Declaration as actively as he opposed it, his name would have been enrolled with Adams and Jefferson. But he failed to seize the tide at its flood, and its ebb bore him to comparative obscurity. ~~He~~ No one had been more instrumental in firing the train; but he had miscalculated the rapidity of the spark, and the explosion found him unprepared. He was a statesman in everything but state-craft – but another name for state-intrigue. Had he [been?] more of the politician, and less of the statesman, his fame would have been greater. For he was a statesman in so far as he had strong convictions and was willing to abide by their result; he was not a politician for he acted on principle, not expediency. He was too honest to trim his sails, to catch what he firmly believed was only the passing breeze; that it proved

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But if Dickinsons public life was unfortunate, his private life displayed all those qualities for which he was conspicuous. No one has written a complete biography of Dickinson. But to any one who will read between the lines, his $\frac{1}{2}$ writings collected and published by a Wilmington book firm in 1801 are a more convincing prose than could be any mere com-

pilation of facts. In the introduction to the “Letters from a Farmer” he says: “I am a farmer, settled, after a variety of fortunes, on 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 happy without the 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; and with a contented, grateful mind, undisturbed by wordly hopes or fears, relating to myself, I am enjoying the number of days allotted to me by Divine goodness”

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the [asked?] question of a people being able to govern themselves must be settled by those who should come after; and he knew that the way enable a people to rule themselves was to educate them. And he acted upon his belief. Who will say that he acted not wisely. From the halls of "old Dickinson" have gone forth men who have borne well their part in the struggle of life; men who have had no mean part in shaping the destiny of the nation; men who have been no dishonor the noble man who was the founder of their alma mater – that man of whom it can so truly be said, that the elements were so mixed in him that nature might stand up and say to all the world, this "was the man"

The end.
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