Penman of the Founding: A Biography of John Dickinson
Jane E. Calvert
Oxford University Press, 2024
448 pages, plus notes and index, 23 color images
ISBN: 978-0197541692
DOI: 10.14713/njs.v11i2.403

This is the first extended scholarly biography of John Dickinson (1732-1808). It was written by Jane E. Calvert, the editor of the complicated modern project to publish his scattered and unorganized papers. Despite the major role he played in the runup to the American Revolution, Dickinson has escaped the attention given others characterized as "founders." Characterized here as the "penman" of the Revolution, he authored numerous "letters" and key documents between 1765 and 1776. But he abstained from voting on and did not sign the Declaration of Independence resulting in his being denigrated at the time and most often ignored since. Calvert correctly argues that this is unfair and unfortunate because of subsequent actions that involved him in politics and offices in several states, through the Revolution and into era of New Republic. The book provides real insight into the complicated choices facing Quakers and their "fellow travelers" in the Revolution. It is also relevant to New Jersey history through what it has to say about his younger brother Philemon Dickinson (1739-1809), the most important militia officer in the state during the war. The similarities and differences between siblings are important. Calvert argues that John has been wrongly forgotten by history, while this reviewer thinks that Philomen deserves more recognition than he has ever received.

Both brothers were born in Maryland into a wealthy Quaker family with extensive property (and slaves) in Delaware and Pennsylvania. They were the children of Samuel Dickinson a planter, merchant, and judge, and Mary Cadwalader, who he married after the death of his first wife. Also lost were the three sons sent to England for education who died there of smallpox. John was taught at home by tutors and then spent three years as a legal apprentice in Philadelphia, where he passed

the bar. This was followed by four years at the Inns of Court in London studying law. Recognized as a barrister, he returned to Pennsylvania where he practiced law and took on apprentices (including his younger brother). He was elected to political offices in both Delaware and Pennsylvania. He opposed efforts by Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Galloway to rid Pennsylvania of its Penn proprietors and become a royal colony, because he saw this as potentially leading to the end of the protection of religious freedom for Quakers and others. In addition, Dickinson viewed efforts by Anglican minister Reverend William Bradbury Chandler of New Jersey to obtain an American bishop as a threat to the separation of church and state. He opposed British efforts to tax Americans objecting to the Stamp Act of 1765 and Townsend Acts of 1767. He most famously wrote *Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer* (1767-1768) against these British measures. He was a member of the Continental Congress delegation sent to New Jersey, with John Jay of New York and George Wythe of Virginia, in November 1775 to prevent the colony from taking a divergent position.

Most notably as a member of the Second Continental Congress, John did not vote for Independence. Influenced by Quaker beliefs he thought the action was premature and that efforts at reconciliation should be continued. Yet once the Declaration had been voted on, he briefly served as a militia officer, he and his brother marched off to Elizabethtown, New Jersey to unsuccessfully join efforts against the numerous British forces that had arrived in New York. Later, he even enlisted as a private showing his commitment to the new country. Even though John thought the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 too radical, he served as president (governor) of Pennsylvania and Delaware (for several months both simultaneously) and wrote a draft of the Articles of Confederation that was not used. After the war ended, he was a delegate from Delaware to the Annapolis Conference and then to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. He urged

ratification of the Constitution and assured constituents that the "president will be no dictator" because "He is removable and punishable for misbehavior." [362]. Delaware, of course, became the first state to ratify. During the controversies of the 1790s he opposed the Jay Treaty and supported the Jeffersonian Democrats. Through it all, Calvert sees him stubbornly maintaining his principles, as a "trimmer", a person who shifted the ballast "to protect the ship of state from capsizing … to keep it on course" [142-143].

Philemon Dickinson, called "Phil" by his brother, was educated at the College of Philadelphia (now the University Pennsylvania) graduating in 1759 as a member of the third class. Afterwards he studied law in Philadelphia with his brother, but unlike John he never practiced. He moved to New Jersey in 1767 where he acquired and maintained property and had homes in Bellville and Trenton. He was a delegate to the New Jersey Provincial Congress in 1776, which wrote the state's first Constitution. During the war he was the highest-ranking militia officer in the state (appointed a Brigadier General in 1775, and Major General in 1777), and he played an active role in numerous military actions both large and small including the battles of Monmouth and Springfield. At one point Philemon represented Delaware in the Continental Congress. After the Revolution he served as a senator from New Jersey (1790-1793), replacing William Paterson who had resigned to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Both brothers were steeped in Quaker beliefs, but neither was a formal member of a Friends Meeting. John was comfortable with neither the restrictions on dress and speech, nor formal religious organizations. They were not pacifists as they believed in "defensive" wars and took up arms during the Revolution. Both brothers married Quaker women John - Mary (Polly) Norris, daughter of wealthy Isaac Norris speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly. Philemon first married Mary Cadwalader then, after she died, her sister Rebecca Cadwalader, New Jersey cousins. Their

wives were members of Quaker meetings and well educated, as was their mother Mary Cadwalader Dickinson. Calvert emphasizes the impact of this on John Dickinson who would have gone further than others of his time in according rights to women. Upon their deaths both men were buried in Quaker cemeteries – John in the Friends Burial Ground in Wilmington, Delaware, Phil in Trenton, New Jersey.

As was true for many who lived through the Revolution, the war was costly for these patriot families. John's house in Philadelphia was taken by Patriots for use as a hospital, the Fair Hill, Pennsylvania home Polly inherited was burned by the British, Poplar Hall the family home in Delaware was plundered by Loyalists. Philemon's house in Trenton was occupied and damaged by Hessians during the battle there. Amid it all they kept in contact. When John and Polly married Phil joined their small civil ceremony in July 1770 (they were not married as was tradition during a Quaker meeting once she acquiesced to his objections to that formality). When their mother died in 1776 John and his family attended her burial in New Jersey. When John and Polly worried about that would happen to their daughters if they died, they asked Phil to be the guardian.

While keeping in touch and sharing opinions about the Revolution the brothers disagreed most notably on slavery. Several times John bought slave women and their children, at their request, to prevent them being separated. Over time he was increasingly uncomfortable with the institution, and moved to free his slaves, first a few at a time then in 1786 all of them. He said it cost him between £10,000 and £8,000 [346-347]. Philemon did not support abolition and objected when his brother pushed him on the subject [385]. John disapproved when Phil, like others in the 1790s, began speculating in land and stocks. Support for education was important for both John and Polly. They donated money to the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) and provided financial support for what became Dickinson College (named for them).

The book extensively traces John's life as illustrated by the eleven-page chronology at the beginning. It offers insight into the stands various Quakers took, their beliefs and actions, and uses this to analyze the positions that he maintained. While recounting his education and studies in England, and his legal practice afterwards, it provides insight into both. The complicated politics of the time, especially in Pennsylvania and Delaware, are detailed. Relations with women – from his mother, wife, to the extensive network of female friends are highlighted. This illustrates the important role of Quaker women; those discussed in the book were educated and strong. Included are discussions of slavery, and colonial relations with Native Americans. Overall, the book is well written though the number of details can occasionally overwhelm.

Authors of biographies often like or dislike their subjects. Calvert fits in the first category. While she notes times when John was rather stubbornly committed to his views, she usually defends him. At the end of the book, she argues that because of his writings against British measures, and authorship of documents in the First and Second Continental Congresses, Dickinson was more important for the writing of the Declaration of Independence than Thomas Jefferson, perhaps a step too far. While discussing his life his enemies become Calvert's as well – especially Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Galloway, and John Adams. Still in the end she does an excellent job of explaining this complicated man and his life through a difficult period of American history. And this in turn helps us understand the Revolution and some of its complexities.

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