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America’s Revolution (54) – John Dickinson’s
Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania – II

Lead: In the 1700s the United States broke from England. No colony in history had done that before. This series examines America’s Revolution.

Intro: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts

Content: In his long political career, Philadelphia lawyer and Delaware planter John Dickinson demonstrated a consistent moderation that often spoke to the heart of
American popular sentiment which often reflected fatigue in the long decades of revolutionary upheaval, dispute and war. He drafted the ultimately ineffective Articles of Confederation (1776) and then joined in calls for a stronger central government, represented Delaware at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and then worked for the passage of the Constitution. In the debates on independence he held out the hope for reconciliation with Great Britain and refused to sign the Declaration, but he was not a coward. He became the only founding father to manumit or free his slaves in the years between 1776 and 1787, a dangerous and potentially destructive act of moral and political courage.

After the bitter fight over the imposition and then the repeal of the Stamp Tax, many Americans were weary over the constant conflict. Dickinson spoke into that weariness
with a gentle, but principled stand against taxation without representation. Over a two-year period beginning in 1767 he wrote *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, one of the most influential documents in American history. It was written in response to Parliament’s continued and stubborn determination to tax the colonies by the passage that year of the Townshend duties on lead, glass, paper and tea. The “Letters” were published in serial form in virtually every newspaper in America and then in a pamphlet collection on two continents.

He made it very clear that he was opposed to Parliament’s taxation scheme, that while the Houses could regulate commerce, the British Constitution absolutely forbade Parliament from taxing people to raise money, particularly if those taxed were not represented in Parliament. The problem with the “Farmer’s Letters,” as they were
almost universally known, was it their meek, submissive tone. Next time: much to do about nothing.

At the University of Richmond’s School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I’m Dan Roberts.
Resources


