

# Letters From a Pennsylvania Farmer

Voices of dissent over Parliament's growing authority upon the colonies in America were heard long before the colonists' actual act of independence.

One of those voices was that of John Dickenson. A preeminent Philadelphia lawyer, Dickenson was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature in 1762 where he was active in protesting British policies. Attending the Stamp Act Congress in 1765, he advocated commercial retaliation. Dickenson's writings entitled Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer were published in newspapers in 1767 and 1768.

Though conciliatory in tone, his Letters made clear that Britain's policies were wrong and deprived the colonies of their lawful rights. Ultimately, Letters from a Farmer urge united action on the part of the colonists.

The letter that appears here is the very first Letter in his series. It appears in the Boston Chronicle of December 21, 1767. As it happens, this is also the very first issue published by the Chronicle. While the actual year does not appear on the newspaper's masthead, note "Vol. 1 and No. 1" at each of its sides.

Dickenson's first Letter illustrates perfectly the author's moderate and reasoned approach while at the same time recommending concerted action. Here Dickenson discusses Parliament's suspension of the New York Assembly following the legislature's refusal to comply with Britain's recently-enacted Quartering Act.

Dickenson went on to become a member of the Continental Congress, agreeing to the necessity of armed resistance. Later he helped draft the Articles of Confederation, and was an active participant in the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

Dickenson wrote 13 letters in all, published as a pamphlet that went through at least ten editions. His Letters had a significant impact on political thought not only in America but also in England.

# Letters From a Pennsylvania Farmer

## The Text Version

My Dear Countrymen,

I am a farmer, settled after a variety of fortunes near 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; my employment in my own affairs is easy; and with a contented, grateful mind . . . I am completing the number of days allotted to me by divine goodness.

Being generally master of my time, I spend a good deal of it in a library, which I think the most valuable part of my small estate; and being acquainted with two or three gentlemen of abilities and learning who honor me with their friendship, I have acquired, I believe, a greater share of knowledge in history and the laws and constitution of my country than is generally attained by men of my class, many of them not being so fortunate as I have been in the opportunities of getting information.

From infancy I was taught to love humanity and liberty. Inquiry and experience have since confirmed my reverence for the lessons then given me by convincing me more fully of their truth and excellence. Benevolence toward mankind excites wishes for their welfare, and such wishes endear the means of fulfilling them. These can be found in liberty only, and therefore her sacred cause ought to be espoused by every man, on every occasion, to the utmost of his power. As a charitable but poor person does not withhold his mite because he cannot relieve all the distresses of the miserable,

so should not any honest man suppress his sentiments concerning freedom, however small their influence is likely to be. Perhaps he may "touch some wheel" that will have an effect greater than he could reasonably expect.

These being my sentiments, I am encouraged to offer to you, my countrymen, my thoughts on some late transactions that appear to me to be of the utmost importance to you. Conscious of my defects, I have waited some time in expectation of seeing the subject treated by persons much better qualified for the task; but being therein disappointed, and apprehensive that longer delays will be injurious, I venture at length to request the attention of the public, pray that these lines may be read with the same zeal for the happiness of British America with which they were written.

With a good deal of surprise I have observed that little notice has been taken of an act of Parliament, as injurious in its principle to the liberties of these colonies as the Stamp Act was: I mean the act for suspending the legislation of New York.

The assembly of that government complied with a former act of Parliament, requiring certain provisions to be made for the troops in America, in every particular, I think, except the articles of salt, pepper, and vinegar. In my opinion they acted imprudently, considering all circumstances, in not complying so far as would have given satisfaction as several colonies did. But my dislike of their conduct in that instance has not blinded me so much that I cannot plainly perceive that they have been punished in a manner pernicious to American freedom and justly alarming to all the colonies.

If the British Parliament has a legal authority to issue an order that we shall furnish a single article for the troops here and compel obedience to that order, they have the same right to issue an order for us supply those troops with arms, clothes, and every necessary, and to compel obedience to that order also; in short, to lay any burdens they please upon us. What is this but taxing us at a certain sum and leaving us only the manner of raising it? How is this mode more tolerable than the Stamp Act? Would that act have appeared more pleasing to Americans if, being ordered thereby to raise the sum total of the taxes, the mighty privilege had been left to them of saying how much should be paid for an instrument of writing on paper, and how much for another on parchment?

An act of Parliament commanding us to do a certain thing, if it has any validity, is a tax upon us for the expense that accrues in complying with it, and for this reason, I believe, every colony on the continent that chose to give a mark of their respect for Great Britain, in complying with the act relating to the troops, cautiously avoided the mention of that act, lest their conduct should be attributed to its supposed obligation.

The matter being thus stated, the assembly of New York either had or had no right to refuse submission to that act. If they had, and I imagine no American will say they had not, then the Parliament had no right to compel them to execute it. If they had not that right, they had no right to punish them for not executing it; and therefore had no right to suspend their legislation, which is a punishment. In fact, if the people of New York cannot be legally taxed but by their own representatives, they cannot be legally deprived of the privilege of legislation, only for insisting on that exclusive privilege of taxation. If they may be legally deprived in such a case of the privilege of legislation, why may they not, with equal reason, be deprived of every other privilege? Or why may not every colony be treated in the same manner, when any of them shall dare to deny their assent to any impositions that shall be directed? Or what signifies the repeal of the Stamp Act, if these colonies are to lose their other privileges by not tamely surrendering that of taxation?

There is one consideration arising from the suspension which is not generally attended to but shows its importance very clearly. It was not necessary that this suspension should be caused by an act of Parliament. The Crown might have restrained the governor of New York even from calling the assembly together, by its prerogative in the royal governments. This step, I suppose, would have been taken if the conduct of the assembly of New York had been regarded as an act of disobedience to the Crown alone. But it is regarded as an act of "disobedience to the authority of the British legislature." This gives the suspension a consequence vastly more affecting. It is a parliamentary assertion of the supreme authority of the British legislature over these colonies in the point of taxation; and it is intended to compel New York into a submission to that authority. It seems therefore to me as much a violation of the liberty of the people of that province, and consequently of all these colonies, as if the Parliament had sent a number of regiments to be quartered upon them, till they should comply.

For it is evident that the suspension meant as a compulsion; and the method of compelling is totally indifferent. It is indeed probable that the sight of red coats and the hearing of drums would have been most alarming, because people are generally more influenced by their eyes and ears than by their reason. But whoever seriously considers the matter must perceive that a dreadful stroke is aimed at the liberty of these colonies. I say of these colonies; for the cause of one is the cause of all. If the Parliament may lawfully deprive New York of any of her rights, it may deprive any or all the other colonies of their rights; and nothing can possibly so much encourage such attempts as a mutual inattention to the interest of each other. To divide and thus to destroy is the first political maxim in attacking those who are powerful by their union. He certainly is not a wise man who folds his arms and reposes himself at home, seeing with unconcern the flames that have invaded his neighbor's house without using any endeavors to extinguish them. When Mr. Hampden's ship-money cause for 3s. 4d. was tried, all the people of England, with anxious expectations, interested themselves in the important decision; and when the slightest point touching the freedom of one colony is agitated, I earnestly wish that all the rest may with equal ardor support their sister. Very much may be said on this subject, but I hope more at present is unnecessary.

With concern I have observed that two assemblies of this province have sat and adjourned without taking any notice of this act. It may perhaps be asked: What would have been proper for them to do? I am by no means fond of inflammatory measures. I detest them. I should be sorry that anything should be done which might justly displease our sovereign or our mother country. But a firm, modest exertion of a free spirit should never be wanting on public occasions. It appears to me that it would have been sufficient for the assembly to have ordered our agents to represent to the King's ministers their sense of the suspending act and to pray for its repeal. Thus we should have borne our testimony against it; and might therefore reasonably expect that on a like occasion we might receive the same assistance from the other colonies.

Small things grow great by concord.