

John Dickinson (November 13, [O.S. November 2] 1732 – February 14, 1808), a [Founding Father of the United States](#), was an attorney and politician from [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania](#), and [Wilmington, Delaware](#).

Dickinson was known as the "**Penman of the Revolution**" for his twelve [Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania](#), published individually in 1767 and 1768, and he also wrote "[The Liberty Song](#)" in 1768.

As a member of the [First Continental Congress](#), where he signed the [Continental Association](#), Dickinson drafted most of the 1774 [Petition to the King](#), and then, as a member of the [Second Continental Congress](#), he wrote the 1775 [Olive Branch Petition](#). Both of these attempts to negotiate with King [George III of Great Britain](#) failed. Dickinson also reworked [Thomas Jefferson](#)'s language to write the final draft of the 1775 [Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms](#).

While in Congress, Dickinson served on the committee that wrote the [Model Treaty](#), a template for seeking alliances with foreign countries, but he opposed independence from Great Britain. He either abstained or was absent from the vote on the [Declaration of Independence](#) and refused to sign the document after its passage. Nevertheless, Dickinson wrote the first draft of the 1776–1777 [Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union](#) and served as a militia officer during the [Revolution](#). He later was elected president of the [1786 Annapolis Convention](#), which called for the [Constitutional Convention of 1787](#), and as a delegate from [Delaware](#), he [signed the United States Constitution](#).

One of the wealthiest men in the [British American colonies](#), Dickinson served as [president of Delaware](#) (1781–1783) and [president of Pennsylvania](#) (1782–1785). Upon Dickinson's death, President Thomas Jefferson referred to Dickinson as, "(a)mong the first of the advocates for the rights of his country when assailed by Great Britain" and called him "one of the great worthies of the revolution."^[1]

Together with his wife [Mary Norris Dickinson](#), he is the namesake of [Dickinson College](#), [Penn State Dickinson Law](#), and the Dickinson Complex at the [University of Delaware](#). [John Dickinson High School](#) in [Wilmington, Delaware](#) was dedicated in his honor in 1959.

Dickinson was born at *Alabama*, his family's tobacco plantation near the village of [Trappe](#) in [Talbot County, Province of Maryland](#).^[2] He was the great-grandson of Walter Dickinson who came from England as an indentured servant to the [Colony of Virginia](#) in 1654 and, having joined the [Society of Friends](#), came with several co-religionists to Talbot County

on the eastern shore of the [Chesapeake Bay](#) in 1659. There, with 400 acres (1.6 km²) on the banks of the [Choptank River](#), Walter began a plantation, *Croisadore*, meaning "cross of gold." Walter also bought 800 acres (3.2 km²) on [St. Jones Neck](#) in what became [Kent County, Delaware](#).

[3]

Croisadore passed through Walter's son, William, to his grandson, Samuel, the father of John Dickinson. Each generation increased the landholdings so that Samuel inherited 2,500 acres (1,000 ha) on five farms in three Maryland counties; over his lifetime he increased that to 9,000 acres (3,600 ha). He also bought the Kent County property from his cousin and expanded it to about 3,000 acres (1,200 ha), stretching along the [St. Jones River](#) from [Dover](#) to the [Delaware Bay](#). There he began another plantation and called it [Poplar Hall](#). These plantations were large, profitable agricultural enterprises worked by [slave labor](#), until 1777 when John Dickinson freed the enslaved of Poplar Hall.[4]

Samuel Dickinson married Judith Troth (1689–1729) on April 11, 1710. They had nine children; William, Walter, Samuel, Elizabeth, Henry, Elizabeth "Betsy", Rebecca, and Rachel. The three eldest sons died of [smallpox](#) while in London seeking their education. Widowed with two young children, Henry and Betsy, Samuel married Mary Cadwalader in 1731. She was the daughter of Martha Jones, the granddaughter of Dr. [Thomas Wynne](#), and the prominent [Quaker](#) John Cadwalader, who was the grandfather of General [John Cadwalader](#) of [Philadelphia](#). Their sons, John, Thomas, and [Philemon](#) were born in the next few years.

For three generations the Dickinson family had been members of the Third Haven Friends Meeting in Talbot County, and the Cadwaladers were members of the Meeting in Philadelphia. But in 1739, John Dickinson's half-sister, Betsy, was married in an [Anglican](#) church to Charles Goldsborough in what was called a "disorderly marriage" by the Meeting. The couple would be the grandparents of [Maryland Governor Charles Goldsborough](#).

Leaving *Croisadore* to elder son Henry Dickinson, Samuel moved to Poplar Hall, where he had already taken a leading role in the community as judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Kent County. The move also placed Mary nearer her Philadelphia relations. Poplar Hall was situated on an artificially straightened section of the St. Jones River. There was plenty of activity delivering the necessities and shipping the agricultural products produced. Much of this product was wheat that along with other wheat from the

region, was milled into a "superfine" flour.^{[5]:39} Most people at this plantation were servants and slaves of the Dickinsons.

Dickinson was educated at home by his parents and by recent immigrants employed for that purpose. Among them was the Presbyterian minister [Francis Alison](#), who later established [New London Academy](#) in [Chester County, Pennsylvania](#).^[6] Most important was his tutor, William Killen, who became a lifelong friend and who later became [Delaware's](#) first [chief justice and chancellor](#). Dickinson was precocious and energetic and in spite of his love of Poplar Hall, and his family was drawn to [Philadelphia](#).

At age 18, Dickinson began studying law under [John Moland](#) in Philadelphia. While there, he became friends with fellow students [George Read](#), [Samuel Wharton](#), and others. In 1753, he went to London for three years of study at the [Middle Temple](#). He spent those years studying the works of [Edward Coke](#) and [Francis Bacon](#) at the [Inns of Court](#), following in the footsteps of his lifelong friend, Pennsylvania Attorney General [Benjamin Chew](#),^[7] and in 1757 was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar beginning his career as barrister and solicitor.

In protest to the [Townshend Acts](#), Dickinson published *[Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania](#)*, which were first published in the *[Pennsylvania Chronicle](#)*. Dickinson's letters were reprinted by numerous other newspapers, and they emerged among the most influential American political documents prior to the [American Revolution](#). Dickinson argued that the [British Parliament](#) had the right to regulate commerce but lacked the right to levy duties for revenue. Dickinson further warned that if the colonies acquiesced to the Townshend Acts, Parliament would lay further taxes on the colonies in the future.^[8] After publishing these letters, he was elected in 1768 to the [American Philosophical Society](#) as a member.^[9]

On July 19, 1770, Dickinson married [Mary Norris](#), known as Polly, a prominent and well educated 30-year-old woman in Philadelphia with a substantial holding of real estate and personal property, including a 1,500 volume library, one of the largest in the colonies at the time, who had been operating her family's estate, Fair Hill, for several years by herself with some support from her sister. She was the daughter of wealthy Philadelphia [Quaker](#) and Speaker of the [Pennsylvania General Assembly](#) [Isaac Norris](#) and Sarah Logan, the daughter of [James Logan](#).

^[10] She was also cousin to the Quaker poet [Hannah Griffitts](#). Dickinson and Norris had five children, but only two survived to adulthood: Sarah Norris

"Sally" Dickinson and Maria Mary Dickinson. Dickinson never formally joined the Quaker Meeting because, as he explained, he believed in the "lawfulness of defensive war". He and Norris were married in a civil ceremony.

In Philadelphia, they lived at Fair Hill near the present-day [Germantown neighborhood](#) in Philadelphia, which they modernized through their combined wealth. Meanwhile, Dickinson built an elegant mansion on [Chestnut Street](#), but never lived there because the mansion was confiscated and turned into a hospital during his 1776–77 absence in Delaware.^[12] It then became the residence of the [French ambassador](#) and then the residence of Dickinson's brother, Philemon Dickinson. On October 4, 1777, Fair Hill was burned by the [British](#) during the [Battle of Germantown](#). While in Philadelphia as [state president](#), Dickinson lived at the confiscated mansion of [Joseph Galloway](#) at Sixth and [Market Streets](#), which is now the State Presidential Mansion.

Dickinson lived at Poplar Hall for extended periods from 1776 to 1777 and from 1781 to 1782. In August 1781, Poplar Hall was sacked by [Loyalists](#) and was badly burned in 1804. It is now owned by the state of [Delaware](#) and is open to the public.^[13] In 1785, following his service as president of Pennsylvania, Dickinson lived in [Wilmington, Delaware](#), and built a mansion at the northwest corner of 8th and Market Streets in [Center City Philadelphia](#).