



The Library Company OF PHILADELPHIA

JOHN DICKINSON AND THE MAKING OF THE CONSTITUTION, 1776–1788

Library Company of Philadelphia Seminar Series

Led by Dr. Jane E. Calvert

Convenes 5:30-7:00 p.m. EST on Wednesday, October 21, November 4, and November 18

Description

This seminar will consider the innovative contributions of John Dickinson to the creation of the United States Constitution. Dickinson was the only leading figure to contribute substantially at every domestic phase of the American Founding, beginning with the Stamp Act resistance. Considered the spokesman for the American cause before independence was declared, Dickinson also played a key role during the Constitutional era. This seminar will consider his work at three key moments: the Confederation period, with the Articles of Confederation (1776) and the Annapolis Convention (1786) that met to consider the shortcomings of the Articles as ratified; the ensuing Federal Convention (1787); and the debate over ratification (1788). We will study and discuss his drafts, notes, and essays, along with selected secondary source readings, to understand his contributions and reflect on both what he offered and what his colleagues rejected.

There is a chicken-and-egg problem when it comes to discussing Dickinson: His papers have never been fully collected and there is a lack of general knowledge about his life and work. This deficit of knowledge is also a main cause of his papers never having been collected. Now, as we believe we have a full picture of the Founding and history of political thought has fallen out of vogue among historians, it is all the more challenging to convince historians and the public that a significant figure has been overlooked. Yet those who have spent time with Dickinson's works come away believing that his contributions were both significant and distinct enough that our understanding of the Founding is impoverished without them.

The John Dickinson Writings Project (JDP) is producing *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson*, to be published in an estimated 11 print volumes by the University of Delaware Press, and a digital edition by the University of Virginia. The readings for the sessions, provided in a Course Reader, have been selected from the corpus of Dickinson's writings collected and transcribed by the JDP. Currently, the JDP staff is working on Volume Two (1759–1763), so these later materials have only been minimally processed and most do not yet have annotations.

More readings have been provided than are assigned. And, of course, all assignments are voluntary. But the more participants read, the more they will learn from the discussion. Participants are encouraged especially to read the recommended secondary sources for Session I, as they will provide background and answer initial questions. That way, we will be able to spend more time in the session on the topic at hand rather than on background.

Each session will be led by Dr. Jane Calvert, along with an expert guest in each era. We will begin with a few remarks and discussion between the leaders, followed by an open forum for questions and observations by the participants.



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Seminar Leader

[Jane E. Calvert](#) is founding director and chief editor of the [John Dickinson Writings Project](#) and associate professor of history at the University of Kentucky. Her publications on Dickinson include [Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson](#) (Cambridge, 2009), Volume One of [The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson](#) (U. Del. Press, 2020), and articles on various aspects of his thought. She is currently writing a biography of him with funding from the State of Delaware and a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Public Scholars grant. The JDP is funded by the NEH, National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the State of Delaware, the Harry and Lynde Bradley Foundation, the William Nelson Cromwell Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, the Library Company of Philadelphia, among others. Follow on Twitter [@The_JDProject](#) and Facebook, [The John Dickinson Writings Project](#)

Guests

[Liz Covart](#) is the Digital Projects Editor for the [Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture](#) at the College of William & Mary, where she hosts the podcast [Ben Franklin's World](#). She is currently working on a book project entitled, *America's Forgotten Constitution: The Articles of Confederation*.

[John Kaminski](#) is the founding director of the [Center for the Study of the American Constitution](#) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He co-edited 32 volumes of [The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution](#) (State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

[Jack N. Rakove](#) is emeritus W. R. Coe Professor of History and American studies at Stanford University. His work [Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution](#) (Knopf, 1996) won the Pulitzer Prize in History.

Readings

All assigned primary source readings are in the Course Reader, available for registrants, except where noted. Secondary source readings are available on [Hightail](#).

☞ indicates priority reading

Session I: The Confederation

Wed., October 21

With Liz Covart

Assigned Reading:

- ☞ Chronology of the Life of John Dickinson
Notes the Articles of Confederation
- ☞ "Hints of a Confederation," esp. religion clause on p. 7
Draft of the Articles of Confederation (skim text in Reader; see [images of manuscript](#) at HSP)
- ☞ Josiah Bartlett Copy Dickinson Draft of the Articles of Confederation
[Articles of Confederation as ratified \(1781\)](#)
- ☞ Report of the Annapolis Convention (1786)



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Recommended Secondary Sources ([available on Hightail](#))

- ☞ Brief biography of John Dickinson
- ☞ Jane E. Calvert, “The Friendly Jurisprudence and Early Feminism of John Dickinson,” in *Great Christian Jurists in American History* ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 133–59.
- ☞ Jane E. Calvert, “Myth-Making and Myth-Breaking in the Historiography on John Dickinson,” *The Journal of the Early Republic* vol. 34, no. 3 (2014): 467–80.
- ☞ Jane E. Calvert, “Liberty without Tumult: Understanding the Politics of John Dickinson,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* vol. 131, no. 3 (2007): 233–62.
- Jane E. Calvert, “An Expansive Conception of Rights: The Abolitionism of John Dickinson,” in *When in the Course of Human Events: 1776 in America and Beyond* ed. William R. Jordan (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018), 21–54.

Session II: The Federal Convention

Wed., November 4

With Jack Rakove

Assigned Reading:

- ☞ Chronology of the Life of John Dickinson, review May 29–Sept. 15, 1787
A Fragment on the Confederation of the American States
- ☞ Notes from the Federal Convention: prioritize docs. 8–10, 13, 15, 19, 21–23, 25, 27–29

Recommended Secondary Sources ([available on Hightail](#))

- ☞ James H. Hutson, “John Dickinson at the Federal Constitutional Convention,” *The William & Mary Quarterly* vol. 40, no. 2 (1983), 256–82. [to p.262; transcriptions of notes are inaccurate in places]
- Robert G. Natelson, “The Constitutional Contributions of John Dickinson,” *Penn State Law Review* vol. 108, no. 2 (2003), 415–77.

Session III: Ratification of the Constitution

Wed., November 18

With John Kaminski

Assigned:

- ☞ *Fabius Letters* (1788), prioritize nos. I–IV (docs. 30–33), and VIII–XI (docs. 37–38)

Recommended Secondary Sources ([available on Hightail](#))

- ☞ Susan McWilliams, “Finding Foundings: The Case of Fabius,” *Polity* vol. 47, no. 4 (2015): 542–49.
- Gregory Stephen Ahern, “The Spirit of American Constitutionalism: John Dickinson’s Fabius Letters.” *Humanitas* 11, no. 2 (1998): 57–76.