

Letter to Farmers in Pennsylvania: John Dickinson Writes to the Paxton Boys

One of “Pennsylvania Farmer” John Dickinson’s earliest public documents, recently processed by the John Dickinson Writings Project, is titled “Letter to the Inhabitants of the Frontiers on their intended Expedition ag[ains]t the Indians under the Protection of the Gov[ernmen]t.”¹ Dickinson wrote this seventeen-page draft to convince the Paxton Boys, who had recently slaughtered a group of peaceful Conestoga Indians, not to do the same to the Moravian Indians in protective custody in Philadelphia. Although “hidden” in plain view in the Delaware Public Archives, this document has not surfaced in past attempts to publish Dickinson’s writings, nor is it included in John R. Dunbar’s *The Paxton Papers* (1957). Though undated, the content of the missive indicates that it was written no earlier than January 6, 1764, and that it may have been a response to the Paxtonians’ *Declaration and Remonstrance*, read in assembly on February 17. The letter does not appear to have been published.

When he wrote, Dickinson was a member of the assembly, sympathetic to Quaker interests, and actively involved in managing the crisis moving from the frontier toward Philadelphia. His letter highlights the difficulties Quakers faced in balancing their political ideals with the realities of governing people who did not share their commitment to pacifism and friendship with the Indians. Specifically, it shows how Dickinson, as a non-Quaker, used means that Quakers politically and theologically could not in order to realize their hopes that “the Disturbances might more easily be quieted than by harsher Methods.”²

Dickinson’s aim was to avoid further bloodshed by using the most tactical arguments possible, even if doing so involved a degree of disingenuousness. Whereas other writings surrounding the episode denounced the Paxtonians and enlisted evidence to show that their murderous ways were contrary to the law—natural, civil, and divine—Dickinson took a unique

¹ Box 6, folder 1, John Dickinson Letters Collection, Small Manuscript Collection, Delaware Public Archives, Dover, DE. The John Dickinson Writings Project (JDP) is collecting and will publish all of Dickinson’s writings on public affairs. Quotes from the document are rendered here according to JDP’s transcription policy: abbreviations are expanded with brackets, deletions are struck-through, and insertions are in curly braces.

² *Pennsylvania Archives*, ed. Samuel Hazard et al. (Philadelphia and Harrisburg, PA, 1852–1935), 8th ser., 7:5,554.

approach: in temperate language he sympathized, praised, and reasoned with the Paxton Boys, appealing to their self-interest to persuade them to abandon their plan. Presenting himself as a “sincere Friend,” he explained that his “Heart weeps Blood, for the dear Relations You have lost by [the Indians’] Savage Barbarity.” The Indians, meanwhile, he described as “poor miserable despicable, ~~yellow Ragamuffins,~~ {Wretches}.” Dickinson proclaimed, “Your Zeal is Noble,” and gave his readers a most un-Quakerly assurance that were the Indians’ guilt certain, “my Arm shall give the first Stroke—I will be the foremost Man among You.” But, he queried, “are You not mistaken in this Point?”

Knowing that arguing on behalf of the “Savages” would be counter-productive, Dickinson devoted relatively little time to “their Friendship & Faithfulness to the English” or to the fact they “have been baptizd in the name of the Blessed Trinity.” Nor did he dwell on the violent behavior of the Paxtonians, except to remind them gently that Joshua did not kill the Gibeonites and that the Paxton Boys’ plan was “contrary to the Laws of our Country.” He focused instead on the negative consequences for them: never-ending war, more killing of whites, and the loss of liberty they would suffer should the English seize on the Paxtonians’ actions as an excuse to establish a military presence in Pennsylvania.

After the *Declaration and Remonstrance*, the assembly desired a meeting with the frontiersmen, believing that “their Discontents are founded upon false or mistaken Facts.”³ The meeting did not take place, and Dickinson may have planned his letter as a substitute. To an audience deeply hostile to the government, he styled himself “no Gov[ernment]t Man” as he explained the assembly’s position. He assured them the assembly was truly representative, “chosen by Us {& sent from every Part of the Province}.” Furthermore, it was responsive: “they feel your Misfortunes in the most tender Manner; & are contriving every Method of making You secure & happy.” As proof, he pointed out that the assembly recently voted to raise a thousand men at the cost of £50,000. Naturally, Dickinson omitted the fact that the assembly was pressured to these votes by the governor of New York and General Thomas Gage. But in acknowledgment of the Paxtonians’ hardships, the assembly had agreed to “generously ~~exempt~~ {discharge} our unhappy Brethren on the Frontiers from bearing any share of the Load.”

³ Ibid.

Yet, though he cajoled and placated the Paxtonians, Assemblyman Dickinson was not as sympathetic as he pretended to be. He fully intended to bring “to Justice the Perpetrators and Abettors of the said inhuman and illegal Act.”⁴ He had already worked with Governor Penn to “strengthen his Honour’s Hands” and raise money for a military force, and he co-authored a bill “for preventing Tumults and Riotous Assemblies and for the more speedy and effectual punishing the Rioters.”⁵ Read in context of the assembly’s official actions, Dickinson’s letter gives us an alternate view of how it hoped to preempt the crisis on the frontier.

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⁴ Ibid., 8th ser., 6:5,500.

⁵ Ibid., 8th ser., 7:5,537–38.