

**NEW YORK TIMES**

# ***The Founding Father Who Sought a Last-Minute Deal to Avert the Revolution***

Recently discovered documents reveal a back-channel attempt by a leader of the Continental Congress to make peace. (He did not succeed.)

Letters written by John Dickinson, a member of the Continental Congress, displayed in Cambridge, Mass. Credit...Lauren O'Neil for The New York Times

By [Sarah Lyall](#)

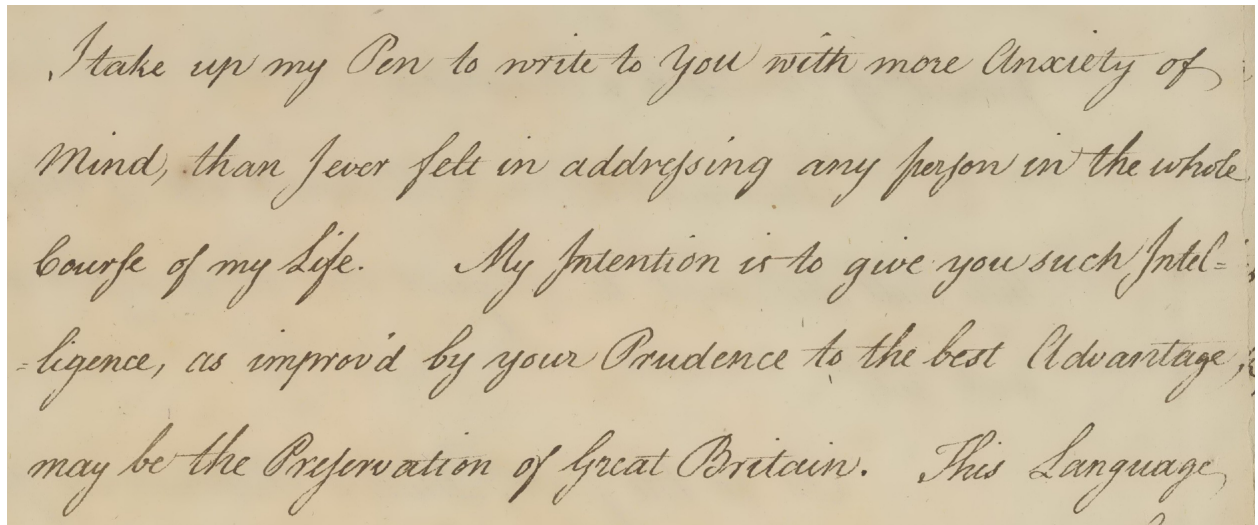
June 30, 2026

As the American colonies hurtled closer to revolution in the chaotic, bellicose summer of 1775, one of the founding fathers made a last-ditch, back-channel attempt to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

“I take up my Pen to write to you with more Anxiety of Mind, than I ever felt in addressing any person in the whole Course of my Life,” he wrote in a letter on Aug. 5 to [David Barclay Jr.](#), a prominent British merchant who often acted as a conduit to British policymakers. He added: “This is the last Attempt, that will be made for Peace.”

The 25-page letter and three companion documents — a second letter, written that autumn, and two versions of a proposed Parliamentary bill intended to satisfy the demands of both sides — were crafted by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania. A leader of the First Continental Congress in 1774, and the second the following year, he was the author of many of the revolutionary period’s most important documents. Among other things, he wrote the first draft of the 1776 Articles of Confederation, the country’s first national constitution.

[Dickinson’s letters](#) glimpse an effort to peaceably avert the Revolutionary War.



I take up my Pen to write to you with more Anxiety of Mind, than I ever felt in addressing any person in the whole Course of my Life. My Intention is to give you such Intelligence, as improv'd by your Prudence to the best Advantage, may be the Preservation of Great Britain. This Language

His overtures to Barclay were unknown to historians until recently.

Unearthed in late 2024 by Barclay's 85-year-old great-great-great-great-nephew, Humphrey Barclay, from a cache of family materials stored for years in his London apartment, the documents present a tantalizing picture of a road not taken — one in which the American colonists secure the rights they so urgently demand and the Revolution never takes place.

The documents' existence is being made public for the first time. Authenticated by scholars and by an antiquarian book dealer in London, they are to be unveiled in the July issue of the [William and Mary Quarterly](#), a scholarly journal focusing on early American history, along with a series of essays.

"It's hard to overstate the significance of this," said [Jonathan Gienapp](#), an associate professor of history and law at Stanford University, who co-wrote the introductory essay with Jane E. Calvert, a Dickinson scholar. "This is a very serious attempt by arguably the leading politician in America at the time to broker a peace and prevent the American Revolution from happening that we've never known about before."



Humphrey Barclay found the letters in a folder of documents he had inherited from an 18th-century ancestor. Credit...Sam Bush for The New York Times

When he first heard about the documents, Mr. Gienapp said, “I had to pick my jaw up off the floor.”

“I can’t remember the last time that something like this has happened,” he added. “We find new documents all the time, but rarely ones that change our interpretation of the events leading up to the American Revolution.”

Scholars say that in addition to providing vivid insights into the mood of the colonies and the Continental Congress in mid-1775, the documents shed new light on a dispute between Dickinson and John Adams that has been told, before now, only from Adams’s point of view. The new material, they say, might help counter [the prevailing impression spread by Adams](#) (and popularized in the musical “1776” and the 2008 HBO series “[John Adams](#)”) that Dickinson was, as Adams wrote in a letter that summer, an overhyped and cowardly “piddling genius” who steamrolled Adams’s attempts to argue for independence in the summer of 1775.

“This changes the narrative,” said Ms. Calvert, chief editor of the [John Dickinson Writings Project](#) and the author of the Dickinson biography “Penman of the Founding.”

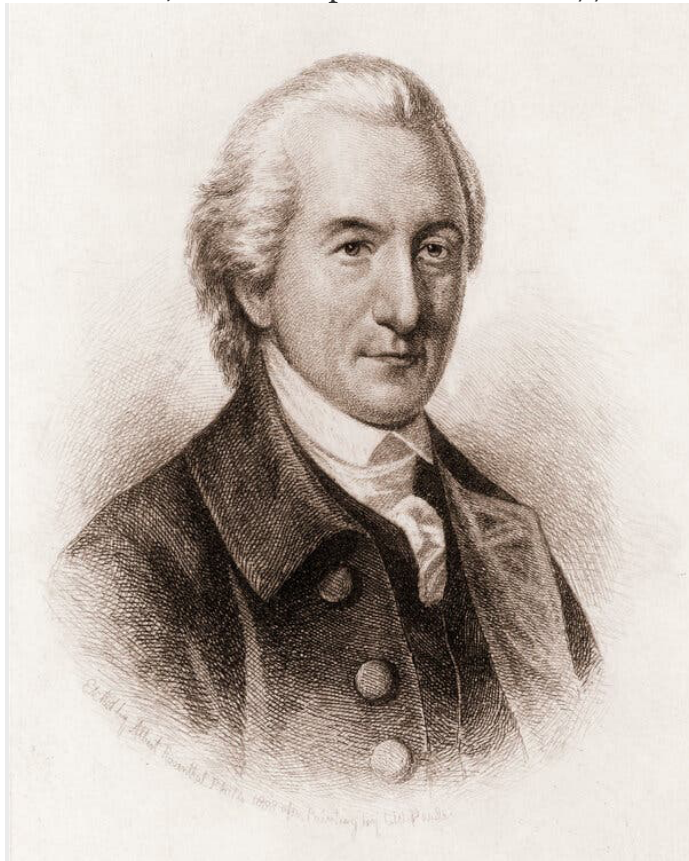
“The letter shows that independence was not openly discussed in the Continental Congress in the summer of 1775, as John Adams claimed, but rather whispered about in private. This is why this insult so caught Dickinson off guard.”

**1775 was a pivotal year** in the accelerating snowball of events preceding the American Revolution. American colonists were taking up arms and openly defying Parliamentary authority. The Boston Tea Party of 1773 had led to the [Coercive Acts of 1774](#) — a series of

onerous laws imposed on Massachusetts — and finally to the [Battles of Lexington and Concord](#) in April 1775, the first armed conflict in what would become the Revolution.

Meeting in the summer of 1775, the [Second Continental Congress](#) searched for a peaceful resolution — still hoping to remain part of the British Empire — but prepared for war. On July 5, the Congress adopted the [Olive Branch Petition](#), written by Dickinson, a direct appeal to King George III to end “a controversy so peculiarly abhorrent to the affection of your still faithful colonists.”

Playing both angles, the next day it adopted the [Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms](#). A Dickinson rewrite of an early version by Thomas Jefferson, the document took a much more aggressive stance, laying out the colonists’ case for arming themselves, and was a precursor to the 1776 Declaration of Independence.



John DickinsonCredit...Stock Montage/Getty Images  
Image





David BarclayCredit...Sam Bush for The New York Times

Those were official documents. Dickinson's letter to Barclay was a back-channel plea reflecting Dickinson's desperate sense that time was running out and his readiness to exhaust every channel to find a resolution.

The two men had met in the 1750s, when Dickinson studied law in London. Barclay was a prominent Quaker who founded the brewery Barclay Perkins, co-founded Barclays Bank and supported emancipation. He was also a close friend of Benjamin Franklin who had [worked with Franklin](#) earlier in 1775 to find a peaceful solution to the colonial crisis.

The letter provides insights into the workings of the Second Continental Congress as it debated how to meet the moment. It's also a shot across the bow: a final plea to the British to accord the colonists their fundamental rights; a bracing account of the arms

buildup in the colonies; and a warning that if the British did not accede to their demands, the colonists would fight and win.

Enclosed with it were two drafts of a proposed Parliamentary bill — a highly unusual surreptitious effort by a colonial leader, let alone one of Dickinson's stature, to provide a concrete road map by which Parliament could end the crisis.

The language was purposely ambiguous, designed to satisfy two irreconcilable positions. "He's a talented lawyer and legal drafter," Mr. Gienapp said. "He's deliberately saying, How can I cleverly and delicately frame things so both sides can plausibly see what they want to see?"

Alas, it was too late. The letter and the draft bill are believed to have reached Barclay sometime between mid-October and late December, months after King George III [declared](#), on Aug. 23, that the colonists were in "open and avowed revolution." (The king did not even read the Olive Branch Petition when it arrived.) There is no evidence that Barclay showed Dickinson's appeal to anyone, most likely because events had already overtaken it.

Dickinson's second letter to Barclay was written over several weeks, in September and October 1775. Thrillingly for Dickinson aficionados, it contains Dickinson's contemporaneous response to the notorious insult leveled against him by John Adams in a letter that summer.

In the letter, which the British intercepted and publicized, Adams expressed frustration that Dickinson had thwarted his more radical ideas — ideas that might have led to independence — during the debates in the Second Continental Congress. Dickinson, [he wrote](#), was merely a "piddling genius whose fame has been trumpeted so loudly" and who had given "a silly Cast to our whole Doings."



The first letter, shown here, was written by a secretary and signed by Dickinson; the second was written in Dickinson's much more crabbed handwriting, with many lines crossed out and rewritten. Credit...Lauren O'Neil for The New York Times

At the time, Dickinson was perhaps the most influential member of the Congress. He had been protesting British policy in the colonies since the imposition of the hated [Stamp Act](#) in 1765; his anonymous [“Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania”](#) in 1767 and 1768 helped galvanize the colonies against imperial overreach. He believed, Ms. Calvert said, that he was on good terms with Adams.

In his second letter to Barclay, Dickinson said he was deeply wounded at being “so severely and meanly attack’d” by Adams — especially because, he added, Adams kept his preference for revolution under wraps and publicly went along with Dickinson’s less radical approach, seeking compromise while preparing for what would in effect be a civil war within the British Empire. That position would fall out of favor in 1776, when Adams’s view prevailed and the Congress declared independence.

“My Compassion for the unhappy Province of Massachusetts Bay was so sincere & tender, that I truly regarded her Delegates as my Brothers,” Dickinson wrote in the

second letter. “I have been mistaken; for under the most silken softness of public pretensions, lurk the bitterest Resentments.”

**Barclay died in 1809.** His estate passed down through the family’s senior line, with many of his important papers kept at the family library at Bury Hill, Surrey.

When the house was sold, in 1991, Humphrey Barclay, a former TV producer specializing in sitcoms and now the heir to the Barclay archive, took possession of the remaining material.

“I didn’t inherit the house or estate, only the role of head of the family” — the official title is Chief of the House of Barclay of Mathers and Urie — “and what archives were left,” Mr. Barclay said via email.

He kept the materials at his apartment in London. He began revisiting them more frequently in recent years because “as I get older, I get more and more interested in our family’s history,” he said. In 2023, he asked Donovan Rees, head of the English books and manuscript department at [Bernard Quaritch Ltd.](#), a 179-year-old antiquarian bookseller in London, to take a look at some of the material.

It wasn’t until late the following year that he directed Mr. Rees to the Dickinson papers.

“Mr. Barclay mentioned that he had come across one more item that he thought might be of interest,” Mr. Rees said. “When he pulled the letters out I began to read, and their importance was immediately clear.”

After transcribing the documents, Mr. Rees said, he was shocked to find that the first letter appeared to be the sole reference to Dickinson’s last-minute effort at reconciliation with England. In other words, there was no evidence that anyone other than David Barclay ever knew about it.



Humphrey Barclay at his home in London. Credit...Sam Bush for The New York Times



“I thought there would be some other corroborating evidence, another copy, someone else will have taken record of this,” Mr. Rees said. “It appears not to be the case, I very quickly concluded. No matter how many sources I consulted I couldn’t find any corroborating material.”

Mr. Rees contacted Eric Nelson, a professor of government at Harvard University who specializes in early-modern European and American political thought. Mr. Nelson also happens to be a keen collector of rare books and manuscripts that he makes available to scholars. He purchased the documents after the Library of Congress failed to offer enough money, Mr. Rees said.

**To the extent Dickinson** is known today, it’s mostly because he abstained from the [vote to declare independence](#) on July 2, 1776, and did not sign the Declaration of Independence. Though he did not want revolution, he embraced it as a loyal American and fought in the Revolutionary War, first as colonel of the Philadelphia battalion he already commanded, and then as a private — the only founding father to fight as anything other than an officer, Ms. Calvert said.

He also wrote the first draft of the 1776 Articles of Confederation, signed the Constitution — he argued that it should contain language abolishing the slave trade on moral grounds — and [in 1786 freed the enslaved people on his family plantation](#).

As for Adams, his memoirs, written some 30 years after the fact, doubled down on his criticisms of Dickinson’s behavior during the Second Continental Congress and helped inform the unflattering portrayal of Dickinson in George Bancroft’s [influential 10-volume account](#) of America’s early years, written in the mid-19th century.

Neither man ever forgot the dispute. When Adams lost his bid for his second term as president, Ms. Calvert said, “he blamed the Quakers, Dickinson and Dickinson’s wife.”

**Sarah Lyall** is a writer at large for The Times, writing news, features and analysis across a wide range of sections.

A version of this article appears in print on July 2, 2026, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Letters Show Founding Father Secretly Tried to Avert a Revolt. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)