

Bradley Jackson:

Dr. Jane Calvert. Welcome to Higher Ed Now. We are so pleased to have you as our guest today.

Jane Calvert:

I'm really excited to be here.

Bradley Jackson:

You are a member of ACTA's National Commission on American History and Civic Education, and we are extremely proud to have you serving on this committee of August Scholars and public intellectuals. I would like to begin our discussion today with the importance of history. What led you to the study of American history in general and of the founding era in particular?

Jane Calvert:

If you don't mind a little biography. I attended a Quaker school for college and it was very far left. I was a little bit mystified by what I found there. I'd grown up in a household with lots of politics. My father was a political theory professor, I was a little bit mystified at what I found there. And then my first job right after college was working at an education project for a neoconservative public policy think tank. I went from one extreme to the other. From that I had a lot of questions, questions about how American government worked with the people, how the people viewed the government, what they expected from the government, how they interacted with one another in particular, why people were treating each other so badly and so suspicious of one another. In order to answer those questions, I decided the best thing to do was to go back to our founding era and before and see what people were thinking of as our country was founded.

And actually at first thought I would just stay in the colonial period. I was going to religion and politics in colonial Pennsylvania, and I had actually no intention of working on the founding era. In fact, I thought I really couldn't possibly have anything to contribute to so much scholarship that had already been done on the era. And yet the deeper I got into my research and my dissertation, it seemed like all roads pointed to the revolution and founding era. And I happened upon John Dickinson and that's how I ended up where I am now.

Bradley Jackson:

That's very interesting. History used to be required at all schools across the nation it seems, although today ACTA's What Will They Learn project has found that fewer than 20% of US colleges and universities require a course in American history or governance for students to graduate. And this is one of the topics that our National Commission on American History and Civic Education is taking up is this dearth in American history education. And I'm wondering if you could say for us, why is it important for all students, even those who don't major in history to study American history while they're in college?

Jane Calvert:

You're absolutely right about the dearth of history in particular, in civic education in general. And I saw that personally, I taught primarily at two institutions over the course of my career. Shortly after I arrived at both of them, they abolished their general education requirements and with it any history requirements. This was really troubling. History departments were left to make our case to uninterested 18 to 21 year olds why they should be taking our courses. When in all fairness, a lot of students come out of high school not particularly liking history, they might not have had very good history teachers and

they were forced to memorize names and dates, which very few people enjoy. It is vitally important that all students have at least basic history of our own government, our own political culture and social history and some cultural history. And without it, we are a nation impoverished and we cannot possibly move forward.

The pitch I always made to students who were either taking my classes because they were somehow forced to, maybe it was the only thing that fit into their schedule back when requirements were still a thing and they found themselves forced to take a survey class or something. What I would say to them is, as an individual, if you suddenly woke up one day and you didn't know who your parents were, you didn't know what medications you needed, you didn't know anything about yourself, how would you move forward into the future? The truth is you really wouldn't know what to do. You can't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been. It's no different with a people. And as a people, we have to understand where we came from to know where we're going. And in particular in America, we are unique among most nations for not being bound together by race, by ethnicity, by religion, by anything but principles and ideals. These were codified during the founding era. And without knowing that we can't possibly make meaningful reforms in the future in order to try to realize those ideals.

Bradley Jackson:

That's all very interesting. Quick follow up on that. You mentioned in the course of your answer just now that a lot of students come into university with this vision of history as the memorization of dates and names, as though the purpose of history is to create a timeline and be able to put things on it. But as anyone who has studied history thoroughly at the collegiate level knows that's not really what the study of history is and those aren't the skills, that's not the knowledge that study grants you. I wonder if you could just say a few words about what student should understand the study of history to be rather than simply the dry memorization of dates and names.

Jane Calvert:

Of course, names and dates are very important. I like to describe it as the skeleton. You have to have the skeleton in order to hang the meat on it, the flesh. If you don't know anything about history as frankly I didn't. When I went to graduate school, I was not a history major as an undergraduate. And when I went to graduate school, I really was the proverbial blank slate. I had to remediate myself, get myself up to speed. And I did that by making timelines to get the most important events and the big eras and then plug things into those. And then when I did my reading of philosophers and politicians, then I knew where to fit them in to understand them. History then is not only memorizing names, dates, you have to know them to a certain extent, but then after that it is the interpretation of the so-called facts and I say so-called facts because you very quickly realize that not many real facts are known.

All kinds of things are in dispute. Doing history is very much like an investigator of a crime scene. That's what historians do in the archives, we investigate. And then further, writing history is very much like an attorney going to court, you have to make a case and you have to use evidence. Doing history is this interpretive and persuasive process whereby historians marshal evidence presented to one another and debate it. And whoever comes out with the most persuasive analysis and an argument based on this factual evidence wins, at least until something new comes along, more evidence or a better interpretation, and we have to revisit and step aside and let something new go forward. That's the process of doing history. And all historians are engaging with historians of the past. We're engaging with historians we've never met who might be writing in another part of the country to say nothing of another time period entirely. And some historians are very lucky and they have a really long moment

where their interpretation prevails. Everyone needs to inevitably and variably graciously step aside and let history advance as new discoveries, new interpretations come to the fore.

Bradley Jackson:

That makes a lot of sense. Thank you. You were referring earlier to the status of America as a creedal nation in the sense of sharing common political principles relating to liberalism, democracy, a certain republicanism and how the study of, especially the founding era is a study of these ideas. But today we are living through an era of great polarization and falling social trust and it seems as though colleges and universities should have some role in reversing these trends. But what is that role and can civic education be a part of helping us escape some of these difficulties today?

Jane Calvert:

Frankly, I think it's our only hope. Sometimes I wonder if it's too late, but that is our only hope. If we're going to stay a democracy, the ordinary people have to be educated enough to understand the basic functionings of the government and basic way to behave in our society and our polity. And by that I mean engaged and able to have debates over crucial issues with reliable facts at their disposal. And this goes to not just history, but the whole liberal arts endeavor. All of liberal arts education is civic education. The way Michael Walzer has stated it as training for citizenship. And everything you're taking in addition to history, maybe history, I would argue it might be the most important thing, but certainly also political theory and the hard sciences and romance languages or any languages so that you have a whole panoply of subjects that will help you learn not so much what to think but how to think.

And I don't mean to suggest either that individuals must go to a liberal arts college or any college, ideally this education begins in high school. I think since not everybody could or should go on to college, a certain degree of this needs to be happening in high school where we have enough knowledge to be able to go out and evaluate information that comes our way and find more of what we need to know and then have productive, thoughtful, civil discussions with other citizens about what is the best way going forward. Without these tools we had, we have misinformation, we have conspiracy theories, we have apathy. We will not survive as a people unless we have some counter to these really detrimental forces.

Bradley Jackson:

Such important words. Thank you. Let's turn back to your own academic work a little bit. As academics, all of us specialize, and your special area of study is the life and thought of the founder, John Dickinson. Could you please tell our listeners who may not know of Dickinson a bit about why he's important for students of the founding? And I'll just mention quickly that you have a wonderful book called Quaker Constitutionalism and The Political Thought of John Dickinson for people who want even more on this, but could you give us just the thumbnail sketch?

Jane Calvert:

Sure. Nobody should feel embarrassed at this point if they have not heard much about Dickinson. My biography that just came out in October, Penman of the Founding is the first complete and accurate biography of him, they can pick that up as well. That might be, in some senses, a better first place to start about Dickinson rather than Quaker Constitutionalism, but I hope they move on to that next. John Dickinson was, in short, America's first celebrity. He was the leader of the resistance to Britain before the Declaration of Independence, and without question, the most powerful and influential individual before the Declaration of Independence. And then afterwards, he actually refused to vote on or sign the

declaration for a number of reasons, the most easy to grasp of which is that he just didn't think that we were ready for independence. And he was actually right about many of the things he worried would happen if we declared independence prematurely.

But he nevertheless had raised a battalion and immediately joined it to fight the British. When he returned from the front, he continued in the rest of his life to support the American cause. Over the course of his career, he wrote more for the founding than any other individual. He held more public offices and made more seminal contributions at every phase of the founding, and it's just really quite staggering to see all that he did.

And after he returned from the front, he served in the Pennsylvania government, he served in Congress. He actually was president of first Delaware and then Pennsylvania for a while simultaneously. He was the chairman of the Annapolis Convention that met to amend the Articles of Confederation. Then he was a really important figure at the Federal Congress. And finally he was the president of the Delaware Constitutional Convention and finished up by serving in the Delaware Legislature, but then in retirement, he continued to write pamphlets and lead citizens groups and serve as advisor to Thomas Jefferson in an informal capacity and write legislation for Delaware, Pennsylvania, and the United States.

Until he died in 1808, he just never stopped. The next question is invariably, why don't we know about him? And it's really a story of historiography. The trends in history basically didn't favor him, and he was written out of the narrative as a patriotic contributor very early on and never was able to make it back in part because his papers were not accessible and published the way all of the other founders papers were. The American public has a lot of ground to gap in learning about him.

Bradley Jackson:

My understanding is that you're taking some steps toward remediating the issue of Dickinson's papers. Is that correct?

Jane Calvert:

That is true. I'm trying. In 2010, I founded the John Dickinson Writings project and we are collecting and publishing everything Dickinson wrote on public affairs over the course of his life, along with selected correspondence and also everything that was written in response to what Dickinson wrote, which was just an incredible amount. We are in fact within a few days of submitting volume four for publication, which takes us up through 1769. Yet now we are also in a very precarious position. Under Biden administration policies, we were denied funding by one of the federal agencies that is historically been very reliable in funding founders editions. And now under the Trump administration, it looks uncertain as to whether the federal agencies that fund this type of project will even survive, we'll be surely in need of private funds if we want to continue.

Bradley Jackson:

If there are any philanthropists out there listening who have a great interest in the history of the American founding, you know a scholar now that you can reach out to support. Speaking of scholarship on the founding, anyone who is interested in that area knows that there's a broad misconception in our society that the founders and in particular the framers of the Constitution were somehow tolerant of slavery, in part because they did not simply ban it in the Constitution of 1787, but Dickinson among others was a committed abolitionist. Could you please say a few words about Dickinson's views on slavery and how they related to the views of other founders and framers?

Jane Calvert:

It's indisputable that most of the founders were tolerant of slavery. They didn't move to abolish it. And in their defense, all signs were pointing to slavery gradually going away. The northern states were gradually abolishing slavery, and it seemed to be the case that enough Southerners disliked the institution that they too could see the end of it. But whether that's the reason or some other reason, not many, the founders actually took a really active role in attempting to abolish slavery. Of the big seven founders of which Dickinson is one, he was really the only one who can be really properly considered a full-fledged abolitionist. He was the only one to actually free all the people he enslaved during his lifetime and also write abolition legislation for Delaware. He tried to get that passed several times and spoke out against slavery. Really, the only other figure I can think of who compares with Dickinson was John Jay, who seemed to be also very serious and committed abolitionist. Scholars of all more or less disproved any other claims about the other founders being full-fledged abolitionists to the extent that Dickinson was.

Bradley Jackson:

What were the major things standing in the way of Dickinson's success other than other founders being a bit more lukewarm on this question?

Jane Calvert:

His efforts in Delaware got nowhere, and I think it was simply because Delaware was still a slave state and people there just were simply not interested in giving up the institution. And in fact, it took Delaware until, I think it was 1901 to actually ratify the 13th Amendment. They were really not at all interested. Dickinson tried also in his personal life, he reached out to his brother, who also enslaved people. This was after, well after Dickinson had freed all of his enslaved people and he reached out to his brother, Philemon, and asked him to free his enslaved people. And we don't have the letter that Dickinson wrote to him, but we have the letter that his brother wrote back, and it's pretty stern. And he more or less tells his brother to mind his own business, says he doesn't know anything about Philemon's slaves, enslaved people.

And he just basically told his brother to leave him alone on this count. When Dickinson was asked by some Quakers if he wouldn't approach George Washington and try to persuade him to free his enslaved, Dickinson declined. And his was that he said, "George Washington is a man of great understanding, but he is in intellectual darkness on this point. He's in a mental fog." Dickinson said, "I know myself horrid infatuation of enslaving people." And I think it was just people like Washington and Jefferson who thought either Washington's freeing his enslaved people upon his death or Jefferson saying, "I'm an old man and this is not really for me. I'll leave it for younger generations." I think this betrays the confidence they had that slavery was dying out. But of course, leading figures like that set an example and their unwillingness to do so let it become entrenched. There were people who were not prepared to make that financial sacrifice that Dickinson made and did not frankly see the moral imperative of actually freeing human beings from bondage.

Bradley Jackson:

Would it be fair to see Dickinson in this light as a progenitor of the more radical abolitionist movement represented by someone like Garrison, for example?

Jane Calvert:

I think Dickinson also believed that gradual abolition, and of course Garrison was famously against gradual abolition. Dickinson, he was a Quaker fellow traveler. He was not a Quaker. He was raised a Quaker. He shared the Quakers major concerns, informed their reform movement. Dickinson founded a prison reform society. He contributed to civic education, was his big interest. He cared about the rights of women and about the lot of poor people, but he was not as radical and abolitionist as some Quakers at the time. They wanted things to happen a lot quicker than he did, and he got into trouble with some of them for that.

There were other people like Warner Mifflin was someone who became very concerned to abolish slavery as immediately as possible. And Dickinson I think was more conservative in the sense he was afraid of taking rash steps that might inadvertently entrench slavery more deeply in the political fabric of the country. We can't know what kind of abolitionist Dickinson would've been if he had survived into the Antebellum period, but what I know of him, I think there's a good chance of that. But he was also a very methodical lawyer who cared very much about preserving the union, making sure that the nation stayed unified. It's an interesting counterfactual issue.

Bradley Jackson:

One of Dickinson's own major interests was civic education and how to take care of the education of the citizens who had formed this new republic and make sure that it would have longevity into the future as people understood and then believed in the principles underlying the regime. Can you say a few words about Dickinson on civic education?

Jane Calvert:

Yeah, absolutely. It was really his main interest. He had a lot of philanthropic interests, but one of them was establishing institutions for public education, and that included libraries, medical societies, and a lot of schools. He gave money for the founding of several schools in the Delaware Valley. What's most interesting to me is that there were of course lots of education endeavors. People know Benjamin Rush and of course Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. And where Dickinson differed from his friend, Benjamin Rush, for example, is that he did not subscribe to this idea of useful knowledge. Of course, useful knowledge was good and important, but there were a lot of founders who thought, "We'll have useful knowledge for the lower sorts of people, the working people, and they don't need to know anything really beyond that." And Dickinson disagreed with that.

And when he founded schools, even though the schools he was founding were generally for poor children and orphans, girls and boys, black and white, he projected just teaching them the so-called useful knowledge, rather, he wanted them to learn the classical languages so they could read documents that our country was based on, so could read the classics, read Greek and Roman history, and this was very important for Dickinson.

And when he offered money to the Quakers to found a boarding school, they in fact did not want to take his money because they wanted this more restricted education that they call guarded education. Just practical things. Whereas Dickinson wanted a liberal education. They wouldn't take his money because he wanted a commitment to liberal education. And finally they kind of came around to realizing that they wouldn't get their school if they didn't take his money. They agreed. And then Westtown School in Chester County, Pennsylvania was founded, and it still exists today. But Dickinson had a very strong commitment to civic education as really what was going to allow the greatest participation of people to prepare them for becoming citizens if they weren't already citizens, help our country not just survive, but flourish.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed. And I think that this whole conversation about Dickinson serves to highlight the fact that to learn about individual founders can help to put that whole era into new relief that one hasn't seen before. To see the era of the founding through Washington or through Madison, through Jefferson, etc, one at a time can really give you a more synoptic point of view on what that era was really about. And I hope that people check out your new biography on John Dickinson for another viewpoint on what the founding means and why it should continue to be important for people today. One last question for you today, which is besides John Dickinson, who's your favorite American founder and what should people know about him or her?

Jane Calvert:

That's a fabulous question. I'm not sure anyone has ever asked me that before. I'm not sure I have just one favorite. There are a number of people I like. I find John Jay to be really fascinating. The fact that he was a serious abolitionist is one reason. He was also very much like Dickinson, a really methodical thinker, someone who, I think he has been overlooked as probably our nation's leading diplomat. He was just so learned and made remarkable contributions. But also James Wilson, who was Dickinson's law clerk for a time, he also is so important and overlooked by a lot of people. Another is Charles Thompson, who was fascinating. Someone who really took the part of Native American groups and was this indispensable Secretary of Congress who for a time was arguably the most powerful man in the country as he controlled Congress. I would say those three would probably be my next picks for favorites if I had to choose one.

Bradley Jackson:

That's excellent. And thank you so much for bringing up these figures that are more seldom studied. John Jay people know well that he was one of the authors of Publius the Federalist Papers, but people forget that he was the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, for example, and all the others things that he did.

Jane Calvert:

Absolutely.

Bradley Jackson:

Studying all of these people is a great way to understand the founding better, to understand the values that were at issue, the difficult decisions that people had to make. And all of this informs what we today have to do. We again, have to make difficult decisions, stand by our values, stand by our principles, and make sure that we don't betray what this country means and people like you doing the work that you do, help us to understand ourselves better. And we thank you very much for what you do.

Jane Calvert:

Thank you very much.