The Disputed Authorship of The Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms, 1775

It is generally understood that the function of the historian is to select, analyze, synthesize, narrate, or otherwise present the results of his researches among the documentary materials of history. It is also generally understood that the historical editor has as his function the accurate and authentic presentation of the texts of the documents themselves, sometimes selectively and sometimes comprehensively; and that, ideally, it is the editor’s responsibility to annotate his documents at least sufficiently to enable them to be clearly understood in their character as texts. These appear to be easily separable, complementary functions. Yet, because the historian is concerned with matters of proportion, style, continuity and integration, it is not always possible for him to discuss even the salient aspects of the most important documents investigated by him. He may allude to a question of disputed authorship and he may refer the reader to the best edited texts, but, generally speaking, he has neither time nor space to do more as he passes on to the attainment of his immediate object. The editor of texts, on the other hand, cannot hope to present all of the essential information needed to understand his documents, for this would amount to a complete duplication of the historian’s work. If he attempted this, assuming it to be possible, he would face one of two alternatives: he would present a thin bridge of documentary text running along the top of a mighty buttress of scholarly annotation; or, he would never achieve the end of his task. Both courses have been followed and both have brought distress to historian and editor alike.

Because the functions of historian and editor are not, in fact, easily separable and are often as duplicative as they are complementary, some exceedingly important matters of historical fact are
left indeterminate. Such facts float about on the dead sea of unassimilated history like derelicts that present navigational hazards to all. It is the purpose of this essay to attempt the removal of at least one such derelict from the waters of American history and to raise by inference the even more important question whether such salvage operations belong properly to the historian or to the editor. A chronological account of the history of this particular derelict, showing the damages and aberrations suffered by both historians and editors as they have encountered it, will, perhaps, be the more enlightening approach.

The summer of 1775 provides an excellent historical laboratory for those interested in the art and mystery of semantics. Both the gentlemen of the Congress in Philadelphia and Governor Gage in Boston justified their conflicting courses by appealing to the idea of liberty and government under law. To one it was evidence of an ancient devotion to freedom when ministers declared, as one did to a Philadelphia congregation that included John Adams, "Behold, your God will come with a vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you." To General Gage it was a "profanation of terms, and of ideas" when the name of God was "introduced in the pulpits to excite and justify devastation and massacre." While hope of conciliation diminished, each appealed to the law of reason the more insistently as mounting passions put reason to flight. The wielders of constituted authority in Whitehall were outraged when their lawful acts were labelled tyranny. Those who echoed Franklin's "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God" were singularly angry when called rebels. Unwilling to remain dependent or to assert independence, rebelling but rejecting the odium of rebels, clamoring for peace but arming for war, the American colonists in 1775 moved swiftly beyond the point where reconciliation was possible. The battle during the summer of 1775 was a battle of words, and the noise of musketry at Lexington and Concord was merely the opening exchange of a great campaign of the rhetoricians. Its strategy was intercontinental and its tactics included close in-fighting in the halls.

1 Charles F. Adams, ed., Familiar Letters of John Adams and his wife, Abigail Adams, during the Revolution (New York, 1876), 65.
2 Proclamation of Thomas Gage, June 12, 1775; Almon's Remembrancer (London, 1775), I, 90–92.
of Congress. Its weapons were selected with care, though not always drawn from the arsenals of truth or historical accuracy. On the one side, the fallen patriots of Lexington were the murdered victims of an unprovoked assault; on the other, they were "incendiaries and traitors," who "from behind walls and lurking holes, attacked a detachment of the King's troops, who . . . made use of their arms only in their own defence." Such verbal weapons, unlike the muskets at Lexington, were not aimed at an identifiable enemy, but were directed at the opinions of the onlooking world. The Second Continental Congress contained some master hands at this kind of warfare. Thomas Jefferson, as John Adams immediately recognized, was one of them.

That his mastery was recognized at once is made evident not only by the remembered testimony of Adams, but also by the rapidity with which Congress made use of the talents of Jefferson's pen. A young man of thirty-two who had written only A Summary View of the Rights of British America and the then unpublished Reply to Lord North's Proposal, Jefferson was thrown into the front line of the Battle of the Pens within a week of his arrival in Philadelphia. In May and June the Continental Congress had organized an army, appointed a commander in chief, set about establishing a treasury, and made a tentative step toward the formation of a perpetual union, but its chief business during this time was in the area of forensics: the drafting of a Petition to the King, a Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms, a Letter to the Assembly of Jamaica, an Address to the People of Ireland, an Appeal to the Inhabitants of Canada, and an Address to the People of Great Britain. These were the major weapons of the Americans in this warfare of words.

John Adams, impatient to the point of exasperation with all of this scratching of quills upon paper and worn out, as he expressed it, "with scribbling for my bread and my liberty," was scornful of "the fidgets, the whims, the caprice, the vanity, the superstition, the inability" of those who thought petitions and addresses would make American liberties secure. Years later, he admitted to Thomas

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{E. C. Burnett, ed., Letters of Members of the Continental Congress (Washington, 1921–1936), I, 130, 157–159.}
Jefferson that he had been wrong. "I really know not," he replied in 1813 to Jefferson's inquiry about the authorship of certain state documents in 1774 and 1775, "who was the compositor of any one of the petitions or addresses you enumerate. Nay, farther, I am certain I never did know. . . . They all appeared to me, in the circumstances of the country, like children's play at marbles or push-pin, or, rather, like misses in their teens emulating each other in their pearls, their bracelets, their diamond pins and Brussels lace. . . . I was in a great error, no doubt, and am ashamed to confess it, for those things were necessary to give popularity to our cause, both at home and abroad; and, to show my stupidity in a stronger light, the reputation of any one of those compositions has been a more splendid distinction than any aristocratical star or garter in the escutcheon of every man who has enjoyed it." How much of this was contrived compliment to Jefferson we cannot certainly know. But the opinion of historians seems to be in agreement on two of Adams' points: that his own thoughts and cares at the opening of the conflict, as he himself stated, "were nearly monopolized by the theory of our rights and wrongs, by measures for the defence of the country, and the means of governing ourselves"; and that the petitions and addresses were indeed necessary to give popularity to the cause.

Jefferson appeared in the Continental Congress for the first time on June 21, 1775, bearing credentials from the Virginia Convention. Two days later, after the entire Massachusetts delegation and many other members had escorted Generals "Washington, Lee, and Schuyler, a little way on their journey to the American camp before Boston," the Congress appointed a committee of five "to draw up a declaration, to be published by General Washington, upon his arrival. . . ." It was needless for the resolution to state the title or purpose of the Declaration: all understood its purport to be what Adams had said, "to give popularity to the cause." The members of the committee were John Rutledge of South Carolina, William Liv-

---


6 Adams, Familiar Letters, 70.

ingston of New Jersey, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, John Jay of New York and Thomas Johnson of Maryland. On the following day, June 24, the committee reported the draft of a Declaration said to have been written by John Rutledge. No copy of this draft is known to be in existence. Obviously, the committee worked under pressure in order to contrive a Declaration speedily, as was necessary if it were to be read by General Washington “on his arrival at the camp before Boston.” With the General more than twenty-four hours on the road, Congress, nevertheless, was not to be hurried. The Rutledge draft was debated on Saturday, the 24th, continued for “farther consideration” on the 26th, and, after more debate, was recommitted. At the same time John Dickinson and Thomas Jefferson were added to the committee. Then followed a real delay of almost two weeks, marked by something less than unanimity in the committee. Not until July 6, after General Washington had arrived at Cambridge, did the committee report. Its draft was debated paragraph by paragraph and approved forthwith. While Congress had stipulated in its original resolution that the Declaration was to be “published” by General Washington at the American camp, the first publication or printing actually occurred in Philadelphia on July 10, before the copy had been placed in Washington’s hands. The Pennsylvania Packet of July 10, the Pennsylvania Journal of July 12, and the Postscript of the Pennsylvania Gazette of July 12 carried identical authenticated copies of the Declaration. Almost immediately William and Thomas Bradford in Philadelphia brought out a pamphlet edition under the title A Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North-America, now Met in General Congress at Philadelphia, Setting [sic] forth the Causes and Necessity of their Taking up Arms. Printers in New York, Newport, Providence, Watertown, Portsmouth and elsewhere reprinted the Declaration. A London edition appeared and was promptly attacked by the ministerial party writers. Though Washington was punctilious in executing the desires of Congress on such occasions, surviving General Orders contain no mention of the Declaration. It was not published by the Commander in Chief on arrival, but was read to the troops by the president of Harvard, “after which there were

8 Charles Evans, American Bibliography, 1639-1820 (Chicago, 1903-1934), V, Nos. 14544–14550.
huzzas by the army, and a pertinent prayer to which the army shouted a loud Amen. Then, while a cannon was fired from the fort, and a standard was flourished in the air, the soldiers were told how their names, unsullied, would be transmitted to the latest catalogue of fame.”

Probably no one of the troops who acclaimed the Declaration and its dramatic phrases knew or even thought about the circumstances surrounding its authorship. It was a document carrying the authority of Congress. Its arguments were clear and readily understood, for they repeated what had been said so often in and out of legislative halls. Its whole purport was reduced to a single sentence in a letter written by a “gentleman at New-York, to his friend at Edinburgh” on the very day that Jefferson arrived in Congress: “It is a gross calumny to say, that we are aiming at independency, for our political principles are the same that raised the House of Hanover to the throne; and were your ministers to adopt these principles, we would immediately lay down our arms.” An argument so universally felt among the patriots in 1775 as to be almost hackneyed nevertheless gave rise to conflicting claims of authorship. Apparently, the first public statement was that made in 1801 by John Dickinson in the two-volume edition of his writings. That work includes the Declaration of July, 1775, along with several other petitions and addresses prefaced by this statement: “The following . . . have always been ascribed to the pen of Mr. Dickinson.” The President of the United States, who along with his entire cabinet, was a subscriber to these two volumes, apparently made no public comment upon Dickinson’s assertion. Although Thomas Jefferson and Dickinson then entered upon an intimate correspondence for the first time, neither of them referred to The Political Writings of John Dickinson. But Jefferson must have hoped that history would reveal the true story of the difficulties of authorship encountered by the committee in June and July.


10 The letter was dated June 21, 1775. Quoted in M. W. Willard, ed., Letters on the American Revolution, 1774-1776 (Boston, 1925), 138; for a similar letter, see ibid., 176.

11 The Political Writings of John Dickinson (Wilmington, 1801), I, [1]; the Declaration of Causes is in ibid., 31-43. Although the title page does not indicate that these volumes were edited by Dickinson, it is certain that he supervised and approved them. Paul Leicester Ford, Writings of John Dickinson (Philadelphia, 1895), I, x, xiii.
July, 1775, for there are evidences that he had already privately set down his own version.

It would seem that the first statement made by Jefferson was that written on the verso of the last page of what has generally been referred to as his second draft of the Declaration. We do not know when he wrote this endorsement. A plausible guess is the year 1783. In that year he had his first approximation of leisure, and in that year, also, he certainly went over many of his early Revolutionary documents, including the Declaration of Independence, making copies of some, endorsing others, and jotting down brief commentaries on still others. It is possible, of course, that he may have written this particular memo about the Declaration at or about the time it was drafted, for Jefferson often made "notes taken on the spot," but of this we cannot say more than that it is a possibility. Here then, is his comment in part, possibly made in 1775, probably in 1783, almost certainly before Dickinson's statement in 1801:

"... June 24. a draught was reported. June 26. being disliked, it was recommitted & Mr. Dickinson & T. Jefferson added to the committee. The latter being desired by the commee to draw up a new one, he prepared this paper. On a meeting of the commee, J. Dickinson objected that it was too harsh, wanted softening, &c. whereupon the commee desired him to retouch it, which he did in the form which they reported July 6, which was adopted by Congress." This, it will be noted, says nothing about the Rutledge draft, except that it was reported and disliked. Whether Jefferson used that draft as the basis for his own or made an entirely new start is a question that can be answered only by the improbable event of the discovery of the Rutledge copy. We do know, however, what another member of the committee, Governor Livingston, thought of both the Rutledge and Jefferson drafts. Writing to William Alexander (Lord Stirling) on July 4, 1775, Livingston declared, "Both [drafts] had the faults common to our Southern gentlemen. Much fault-finding and declamation, with little sense or dignity. They seem to think a reiteration of tyranny, despotism, bloody, &c., all that is needed to unite us at home and convince the bribed voters of [the] North of the justice of

12 Both the rough draft and the fair copy are in the Jefferson Papers in the Library of Congress.
This tells much about Livingston's attitude toward Southern members of Congress, but it adds nothing to the question of disputed authorship.

Jefferson's initial statement that Dickinson "retouched" his own draft would have spared historians and editors of documents much travail if he had let well enough alone. Unhappily he did not do so. The much longer history of the authorship of the Declaration that he wrote in his autobiography in 1821 is even more flatly contradictory of the earlier statement. This 1821 account is in greater detail and includes an incident respecting John Jay and William Livingston that reveals much concerning the jealousy of those who had some claim to authorship of Revolutionary state papers, though it need not be quoted in full. "I prepared a draught of the Declrn committed to us," Jefferson wrote. "It was too strong for Mr. Dickinson. He still retained the hope of reconciliation with the mother country, and was unwilling it should be lessened by offensive statements. He was so honest a man, & so able a one that he was greatly indulged even by those who could not feel his scruples. We therefore requested him to take the paper and put it into a form he could approve. He did so, preparing an entire new statement, and preserving of the former one only the last 4. paragraphs & half of the preceding one. We approved & reported it to Congress who accepted it."

On this statement, written nearly half a century after the event by the seventy-eight-year-old statesman, rests a whole fabric of historical commentary of the next century. Jefferson's memory of details of the early days of the Revolution was, on the whole, remarkably accurate and was supported by his meticulously arranged personal archives in the form of correspondence, memoranda, and extensive files of documents, together with one of the finest libraries to be found in America. All of these supporting evidences he used assiduously. If he were in doubt on a given detail, or if supporting evidence could not be found in his papers or among his books, he not infrequently would address letters to John Adams or others of his Revolutionary compatriots asking for verifying facts. On no point in such investigations was he more attentive to accuracy or more generous

13 *Journals of the Continental Congress, II, 128.*
in ascribing credit to others than on the question of authorship. He could bear with comparative equanimity the untruths hurled at him by political opponents, but, with one exception, the charge that seemed to anger him most among all those that were made against him throughout his career was that preferred by Luther Martin concerning his integrity as an author. Plainly, authorship was a matter that meant much to Jefferson. The attention that he gave to style; the laborious effort to achieve an appropriate means of expression, whether it was the familiar epistolary style fit for personal correspondence or the forensic or elevated style needed for state documents; the careful preservation and docketing of his personal papers; his anger with John Marshall for his notorious carelessness in respect to claims of authorship; his words of caution to William Wirt on the need of accuracy in such matters—all betrayed the sentiments of an author who took pride in his own work and was generous in yielding a similar claim to others. No neophyte in his first encounter with an editor’s blue pencil could have suffered more anguish over the mutilation of his carefully wrought phrases than Jefferson experienced when the Declaration of Independence was excised by the Congress. We may imagine, then, what were his feelings when the first notable task of authorship assigned to him by Congress resulted in a paper that denied him any claim to distinctive authorship.

Perhaps his feelings on this occasion may explain the discrepancy between the two accounts that he has given us. In the one account, he informs us that Dickinson merely retouched his own draft; in the other, that Dickinson wrote “an entire new statement,” retaining only the last four and a half paragraphs of the Jefferson draft. Here, let us note, the claims of authorship were shared but not obscured: each was clearly identifiable, each stood on its own base, each could be conveniently ascribed to its sole and indisputable author. Sole authorship was preferable, but if joint authorship were inevitable, it was better that the respective claims be clearly apportioned.

Historians have evidently shared Jefferson’s feelings, if such they were. Unlike Dickinson, Jefferson did not bring out a collection of his writings during his lifetime. The first publication of his papers and correspondence, edited by Thomas Jefferson Randolph and published in 1829, significantly does not include The Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms, although it does include
the draft resolution which was published as *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, the Declaration of Independence, and other state papers known to have been written by Jefferson. It includes also the statement made by Jefferson in his autobiography in 1821 that Dickinson had drafted an “entire new statement” and had appended the last four and a half paragraphs of Jefferson’s draft.  

But this was enough, and historians and biographers, having at hand only the remembered comment written late in life, promptly gave evidence of their faith in Jefferson’s memory. George Tucker, in his *Life of Thomas Jefferson* published in 1837, was the first, but by no means the most distinguished, of those in the long procession. After paraphrasing the statement made by Jefferson in 1821, Tucker proceeded to quote the latter part of the Declaration of Causes, thus offering “the part furnished by Mr. Jefferson . . . as a specimen of his sentiments and diction at that time.” But here, since Tucker was the first to apply Jefferson’s statement, a nice problem arose. Just where did “the part furnished by Mr. Jefferson”—that is, the last four and a half paragraphs—begin? It was an easy task to tick off the last four paragraphs, since all of the early printings are surprisingly uniform in paragraph indentation. But just what did Jefferson mean to include by the imprecise phrase “& half of the preceding one”? There is no known document in the Jefferson papers explaining precisely where in the fifth paragraph from the end Dickinson’s authorship ceases and Jefferson’s begins. Fortunately, however, that rather long paragraph contains one excellent sentence which stands out strikingly and which indeed epitomizes the whole intent of the Declaration. It reads: “We are reduced to the alternative of choosing an unconditional submission to the tyranny of irritable ministers, or resistance by force.” This vigorous expression, happily, has the added advantage of occurring almost exactly in the middle of the paragraph in question. Tucker may possibly have hesitated over the nice problem, but the fact is that he made an arbitrary decision when he selected as the beginning of the last part of the Declaration a sentence so clearly Jeffersonian in “sentiments and diction.” His decision and Jefferson’s statement made from memory have been honored

---


with a fidelity rather unusual among historians in this country whose critical faculties have been so well developed. The list of those who have accepted both is a long one and includes such names as Henry S. Randall, James Parton, George Bancroft, William MacDonald, Claude Bowers, Marie Kimball, Bernard Mayo and Samuel Eliot Morison.

The acceptance of Jefferson's statement led Tucker and some of his successors to see in these last four and a half paragraphs some evidences of Jeffersonian "sentiments and diction" which might not otherwise have been observed. In leading off with this train of observation, Tucker was fairly restrained, at least by comparison with some of those who followed him. "It is not unworthy of notice," he observed, "that the above extract, adopted from Mr. Jefferson's draught, is precisely that part of Mr. Dickinson's paper which annalists have commonly quoted. It probably owed this distinction not wholly to its intrinsic superiority, but in part also to its harmonizing better with the issue of the contest." What the intrinsic superiority consisted of or how these paragraphs achieved a better harmony with the issues at hand than the others that preceded them, Tucker does not explain. Henry S. Randall, whose three-volume *Life of Thomas Jefferson* appeared in 1858, did not hesitate to adumbrate Tucker's insight into the merits of these last four and a half paragraphs. "That production," he said of the Declaration, "was one of the most popular ones ever issued by Congress. It was read amid thundering huzzas in every market place, and amid fervent prayers in nearly every pulpit in the Colonies. The commanders read it at the head of our armies. . . . It was quoted again and again admiringly in history. It will not probably be denied that this celebrated production owed most of its popularity to the 'last four paragraphs and half of the preceding one.' It would have been a very ordinary affair without these. This was the only part the admire historians quoted."  

James Parton, whose popular *Life of Thomas Jefferson* was published in 1874, suggested that "If the reader will turn to the document, he will easily discover the precise point where Dickinson's labored statement ends, and Jefferson's glowing utterance begins."  

To illustrate this contrast, Parton selected two sentences from the text of the Declaration, the one tending to show the awkwardness of Dickinson's phraseology and the other to raise the question why the mild Dickinson permitted Jefferson to make a thinly veiled threat of independence at the end of the document. His selections would have been happier if they had been applied in reverse order.

It is needless to trace the development of this theme through all its involutions and adumbrations. One or two examples drawn from more recent sources will suffice. Claude G. Bowers, in his *Young Jefferson, 1743–1789*, in addition to agreeing that Dickinson found in Jefferson's draft "some of the raw-meat facts offensive"; that Dickinson's draft was "less a modification than an entirely new creation"; and that "the part retained from Jefferson's draft was the most spirited part of the whole," discovered a hitherto unknown claimant to authorship in the person of John Jay. He concluded, however, that whether Dickinson "actually wrote the new draft as is generally agreed, or it was written by John Jay as others say, does not matter. . . ." Thus does Mr. Bowers diffidently dispose of one of the most interesting contributions to the theme since George Bancroft, with perhaps equal documentary support, divided the quintultimate paragraph one sentence earlier than Tucker had. Saul K. Padover, in *The Complete Jefferson* (1943), William MacDonald in the 1920 and earlier editions of his *Documentary Source Book of American History*, Bernard Mayo in *Jefferson Himself* (1942), Marie Kimball in *Jefferson: The Road to Glory* (1943)—all accept the last four and a half paragraphs as being Jefferson's, or perceive in them a boldness and eloquence which provide strong contrast to the awkwardness and timidity of the other parts of the Declaration. Even Edward Channing, in the third volume of his *History of the United States*, felt that Dickinson's draft "represented the opinions of the


majority, but was not phrased in the vigorous language that Jefferson had selected.” But Channing, although he accepted the prevalent view that Jefferson was more radical in his expressions than Dickinson, nevertheless knew about the most important discovery made since Jefferson’s drafts came to light and referred his readers to the "Massachusetts Historical Society’s Proceedings for October, 1890, and the books cited therein." The books cited therein were actually one pamphlet: George H. Moore’s *Suum Cuique: John Dickinson, the Author of the Declaration on Taking Up Arms in 1775.*

This privately printed pamphlet, issued in New York in 1890 as an extension of the paper read by Moore before the New-York Historical Society in 1882, announced a really significant discovery—the complete manuscript draft by John Dickinson of the Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms. This eight-page manuscript draft, which indubitably was a text of the Declaration and was in Dickinson’s handwriting, exhibited in Moore’s excellent heliotype reproductions all the labored excisions, alterations, and marginalia employed by an author engaged in composing a document. In view of these obvious criteria, Moore concluded in his usual vigorous style that “No person but the author himself ever had any hand in the preparation of this document. It is in the handwriting of John Dickinson, and these corrections, additions, interlineations, revisions, in number, extent, position and character, forbid the supposition that he copied any portion of this paper from a draft by Mr. Jefferson, or any other person. It is the original first draft of the whole, and the proof of it is in no portion of the whole more conspicuous and certain than in the ‘last four paragraphs and half of the preceding one’ claimed as his own by Mr. Jefferson . . . and accorded to him without doubt or hesitation ever since.”

Now George Bancroft, whose acceptance of the Jeffersonian claim to authorship Moore had challenged with “becoming reverence” if not with trepidation, was about to bring out “The Author’s Last Revision” of the *History of the United States of America.* Before the pages were finally revised, Moore showed to Bancroft the original

22 Edward Channing, *History of the United States* (New York, 1905–1925), III, 162–163. The passage that Channing selected for quotation was not a happy choice if it were intended to support this observation.

23 George H. Moore, *John Dickinson, the Author of the Declaration on Taking Up Arms in 1775* (New York, 1890), 23.
Dickinson manuscript that he had discovered. Completely convinced, the aged historian forsook his earlier error—and, unfortunately but heartily, embraced another. “Through the good offices of G. H. Moore,” he wrote in a footnote, “I have examined the original manuscript. It is from the first line to the last, with all the amendments, in the handwriting of Dickinson, and precludes the idea that the close was drawn by any hand but his own.”

Moore’s discovery of the manuscript draft in Dickinson’s handwriting, though it led him, Bancroft, and Stillé to arrive at unwarranted conclusions, actually provided little evidence for a study of the problem of authorship of the Declaration that had not existed and been publicly available since 1775. True, it was a rough copy, interlined, scored out and filled with marginal additions, but, once these apparent evidences of original composition were isolated and set aside, what was left was the full text of the Declaration almost as it appears in the Philadelphia newspapers of July, 1775, in contemporary pamphlets, and in all official, semi-official, and private printings of the document from that day to this. The chief basis for a study of the problem of authorship is that afforded by a close comparison of texts by Jefferson and Dickinson in respect to their total content, their structure, and their phraseology. This procedure was not followed by Moore, Bancroft, or Stillé. Forgetting the fox, they chased the hounds, overlooking the obvious fact known to anyone familiar with Dickinson’s labored compositions that the venerated statesman could scarcely compose a casual letter, to say nothing of a state paper, without resorting to two, three, or even more drafts, sometimes permitting each succeeding one to grow more and more complex in its interlineations, crosshatchings, marginalia, and substitutions until at last a fair copy of an unencumbered text could be achieved. Thus it becomes pertinent to ask a question that Moore, Bancroft, and Stillé apparently did not ask: What was the state of the draft discovered by Moore? Was it the first, second, or even the third state? Although it has the appearance at first glance of being a rough composition draft and was almost certainly Dickinson’s last draft (since its unencumbered text generally agrees with that

24 Bancroft (New York, 1891), IV, 237. In the text Bancroft made an even more sweeping assertion: “the author from the first word to the last was Dickinson.”

25 C. J. Stillé, Life and Times of John Dickinson (Philadelphia, 1891), 161, and Appendix IV.
adopted by Congress), Dickinson's known habit of making one or several rough drafts before arriving at a finished text should have caused some hesitation on the part of Moore and others before they leapt to the conclusion that this was an authentic composition draft. No other state of Dickinson's draft of the Declaration has been found and the most that can be said of the manuscript discovered by Moore, therefore, is: (1) it is unquestionably a genuine text in the handwriting of Dickinson; (2) it may have been a second or even third state of Dickinson's effort to "retouch" the Jefferson draft; and (3) it is almost certainly the last text made by Dickinson, though he may possibly have made a fair copy for presentation to the committee and to Congress. But the assertion, so stoutly made by Moore and reasserted by Bancroft and Stillé, that Dickinson was the sole author of the Declaration "from the first word to the last" has no other support than the proposition that this draft was an original composition because of its interlineations, additions, and marginalia—or, to put it in other words, that an obviously rough draft should be equated with an original composition draft.

One of the chief lessons that the present examination may be expected to set forth is that this proposition cannot be indiscriminately advanced, perhaps least of all in the case of such a meticulous reviser of his writings as Dickinson was. Both those who accepted Jefferson's statement from memory about the authorship of the last four and a half paragraphs and those who readily adopted the Moore-Bancroft-Stillé proposition could have found quite readily that, in the case of this document, the only sound basis for reconciling the two conflicting statements made by Jefferson and the statement made by Dickinson in 1801 is that afforded by a close textual analysis and by a comparison of all known copies of the Declaration.

Such an analysis became possible within two years after Moore's monograph was published. Paul Leicester Ford, in the first of his ten-volume edition of The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, issued in 1892, printed two copies of the Declaration in Jefferson's handwriting, which he labelled as "first draft" and "second draft."26 The Jefferson manuscripts had been publicly available since the middle
of the nineteenth century and the Dickinson draft since Moore first identified it in 1882; but Moore’s monograph in 1890 and Ford’s publication of the two Jefferson texts in 1892 provided historians for the first time with printed or facsimile versions of all known texts. Ford made such a comparison. In a footnote he was able to state the sound conclusion, leaving to others the task of making the exact comparison, although he did include both of Jefferson’s conflicting comments on the authorship of the Declaration. “It is evident,” Ford wrote, “from a comparison of these two drafts [in Jefferson’s handwriting], with Dickinson’s draft . . . as well as with that ultimately adopted by Congress . . . that Jefferson is mistaken in claiming the final paragraphs of that accepted as his. Dickinson has certainly embodied a few of Jefferson’s phrases and ideas, but not more so in those than in the other parts of the Declaration.”27 This, although it is substantially correct as a conclusion, lacks demonstration and requires some modification. Even so, as we have seen, some historians have continued to our own time to treat the authorship of the Declaration as if nothing had been added to the subject since Randolph first published Jefferson’s Autobiography in 1829.

But there were other warning signals. In 1905, Worthington C. Ford brought together all four texts of the Declaration, making it possible for historians to effect a comparison through an examination of one source rather than three.28 Moreover, Dickinson’s draft and the official text and Jefferson’s two copies were printed in parallel columns. Nevertheless, Worthington C. Ford did not think it necessary to refer to the question of disputed authorship, did not suggest what might be learned by a close comparison, and, without comment, reprinted the autobiographical statement of Jefferson claiming the last four and a half paragraphs. In the last sentence of a lengthy footnote on the subject, he did, however, make the statement that the two “Jefferson drafts . . . are essential to a proper understanding of the Declaration as finally accepted.”29 This scarcely advanced the state of our knowledge of the subject, but Worthington C. Ford’s assembling of the texts and his brother’s footnote conclusion were certainly closer to the mark than any of their predecessors had been.

27 Ibid., I, 463–464.
29 Ibid., II, 128 (note).
Dumas Malone, in the first of his multiple-volume biography, *Jefferson, The Virginian*, has, perhaps, come closest to a correct estimate of the various drafts of the Declaration. Indeed, he seems to be the only historian to proceed beyond the footnote written by Paul Leicester Ford in 1892. He concluded that Dickinson's real objection to the Jefferson draft was not so much to the harshness of its phrases as to its basic theory of empire; that Dickinson had incorporated parts of Jefferson's draft, employing expressions of his own which were almost if not quite as severe; that he did not achieve as logical a sequence of ideas or as smooth a literary effect; and that he begged the question of the precise authority of Parliament within the Empire, thus leaving a wider door to conciliation. Malone felt that, although Jefferson did not explicitly deny all Parliamentary authority as he had done previously, he did so by implication and "this was still too strong a dose for the farmer of Pennsylvania."\(^{30}\)

While Malone evidently had made some comparison of the various texts, it was obviously beyond the limit of his purpose, as it was beyond that of the historical editors who preceded him, to make an intensive textual analysis and comparison. Clearly, the functions of the editor and the biographer, complementary though they are, permit twilight zones to develop in which historical error is perpetuated through no fault of either profession. Yet neither can escape the responsibility of subjecting their materials to careful scrutiny, whatever their immediate objectives or limits may be.

Such a scrutiny of the documents bearing upon the disputed authorship of the Declaration involves no serious difficulty for the biographer, the historian, or the editor. Only four texts are known, but these are more than sufficient to enable us to reconstruct, with some degree of plausibility, the course of the drafting of the Declaration and to assess the conflicting claims to authorship. There was certainly one other text, not now known to be extant, but it has no relevance to the question of the conflicting claims of Jefferson and Dickinson. In the absence of the Rutledge draft, which Congress recommitted, we can only conjecture what influence it may have had over Jefferson's. William Livingston thought that both drafts were similar, yet it is very likely that Jefferson made a fresh start when the committee assigned the task of authorship to him. Of Jefferson's

two texts, the first is apparently a composition draft, being filled with deletions and interlineations and lacking both title and concluding paragraph. His second is a fair copy, transcribed from the unencumbered text of the rough draft, with the addition of a title and a concluding paragraph. The other two texts are the manuscript in Dickinson's handwriting and the final text adopted by Congress (there are some thirty-four differences between Dickinson's manuscript and the text adopted by Congress, but these are, with certain interesting exceptions, minor changes in phraseology). It is almost certain that both Jefferson and Dickinson produced an additional fair copy of the text to submit to the committee, but neither of these is known to exist and, in any case, such copies are not essential for purposes of comparison. Jefferson's fair copy and Dickinson's rough draft are the two critical texts needed.

The statement endorsed by Jefferson on the fair copy of his draft indicates that "on a meeting of the Committee" Dickinson interposed certain objections. It seems more likely, however, that Jefferson submitted this fair copy to Dickinson in private before reporting to the committee, just as he later submitted a draft of the Declaration of Independence separately to Adams and Franklin before bringing it formally to the attention of the famous Committee of Five. The two men had been added to the committee because of dissatisfaction with the Rutledge draft. Dickinson was the elder statesman. If he and Jefferson could agree, it would seem natural to suppose that the committee would the more readily accept their compromise draft. But aside from these plausible inferences, the most valid evidence of Jefferson's private consultation with Dickinson appears in the fact that his fair copy contains several corrections and three significant suggestions in the handwriting of Dickinson. The corrections by Dickinson, principally in phraseology, were either flatly rejected by Jefferson or altered to suit his own sense of rhythm and style. The three suggestions—first, to take notice of Lord Chatham's plan of conciliation and to pay tribute to his great abilities; second, to show appreciation of the "great men in Parliament and the cities and towns in England that had acknowledged the justice of the American cause"; and third, to comment upon Lord North's proposal—were apparently disregarded altogether.
Jefferson’s sensitiveness as an author and his disinclination to accept even the minor alterations in phraseology suggested by Dickinson provide the best clues to our understanding of the impasse that followed in committee. From Dickinson’s subsequent treatment of the subject we may conclude that he was far from satisfied with Jefferson’s text. Yet, probably because of the urgent need for haste and possibly out of regard for the younger man’s sensitivity, he altered only half a dozen minor phrases and put his suggestions in the form of queries. When Jefferson reported the draft to the committee and when Dickinson observed how far his advice had been disregarded, he must have been both surprised and annoyed. Others on the committee may have shared his view, but whether he was alone in opposition, as Jefferson indicates, or whether he found an ally in Livingston or others of the committee, the fact is that Dickinson was asked or was permitted to prepare another draft.

It is obvious at a glance that Dickinson, in doing so, had before him a copy of Jefferson’s text. For what he produced was an amplification and revision of the outline and structure of Jefferson’s draft. Throughout the Dickinson text—in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end—are to be found long passages copied almost verbatim from Jefferson. It is apparent, too, that, far from softening Jefferson’s words, Dickinson actually strengthened them. Stylistically, Dickinson both harmed and improved Jefferson. Jefferson’s preamble, stating the fact of usurpation of power by Parliament and of an attempt to enforce by arms what could not be done by right or law, is simple, straightforward, and direct. Dickinson’s opening sentence is extraordinarily complex and involved—a statement which the author of The Rights of Great Britain Asserted described as an “involved period, which either contains no meaning, or a meaning not founded on the principles of reason.” In respect to substance, this criticism applies equally to the drafts by Jefferson and Dickinson, but in respect to style there can be no doubt that Dickinson’s opening is much more of an “involved period” than Jefferson’s. Yet it was Dickinson who contributed the bold and quotable words which appear at the close of the Declaration and which most historians have always assumed were Jefferson’s: “Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal resources are great,

and, if necessary, foreign assistance is attainable.” This is not the
language of one who is intent upon watering down or weakening the
declaration of a just cause; it is daring and threatening, and its
rhythm and terseness admirably suited it to the purpose at hand.

In the next part of the Declaration, devoted to an explanation of
the origin of the Colonies, their establishment of “a residence for civil
& religious freedom,” their growth, and their contribution to the
wealth and power of the British Empire, Jefferson conceded that in
the past the Colonies had occasionally, “from warmth of affection,”
acquiesced in some assumptions of power by Parliament in legislating
for the Colonies. This concession is a tribute to his historical accuracy
and to his sense of justice, but forensically it was a serious admission.
Dickinson followed the maxim of the hustings: attack everything
and admit nothing. He therefore omitted the concession that
Jefferson had made. In the same part of the Declaration Dickinson
gave an apparent indication of his unwillingness to accept Jefferson’s
theory of imperial relations: that is, colonies arranged “by charters
of compact under the same common king, who thus completed their
powers of full and perfect legislation and became the link of union
between the several parts of the empire.” Dickinson changed this to
read: “societies or governments, vested with perfect legislatures,
were formed under charters from the crown, and an harmonious
intercourse was established between the colonies and the kingdom
from which they derived their origin.” Jefferson’s statement is a
more forthright assertion of the doctrine he had set forth in The
Summary View and one that was rapidly coming to be accepted in
America. Dickinson’s revision was, to say the least, ambiguous. The
term “perfect legislatures” implied substantial agreement with
Jefferson. The term “charters from the crown,” however, was incon-
sistent with a later revision made by Dickinson. At another point
Jefferson had used the phrase, “secured by charters on the part of
the crown and confirmed by acts of it’s own legislature.” Dickinson
altered this to read: charters “secured by Acts of its own Legislature
solemly confirmed by the Crown.” Both statements, by inference,
were inconsistent with Jefferson’s interpretation of the imperial
constitution, although technically Jefferson was more correct. In
conceding Parliament an authority to participate in the granting
of charters, both made some concession to Jefferson’s theory, with
Jefferson placing more emphasis upon the Crown and Dickinson placing more upon the Parliament. In short, it would seem to be too much to say that Dickinson categorically rejected Jefferson's theory of imperial relations; it appears to be closer to the truth to say that he softened Jefferson's blunt expression, partially obscuring the meaning in doing so.

Dickinson's chief departures from the Jefferson text are the following: (1) his tribute to Pitt for his championship of the American cause and for the public declaration that the Colonies had materially assisted in winning the late war with France; (2) his elaboration of Jefferson's list of the "new legislation" of Parliament (which in Dickinson's more severe phrase becomes "the pernicious Project"); (3) the account of the contemptuous treatment accorded the petition to the Crown in 1774; (4) a reference to the address of the Lords and Commons declaring Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion; (5) the analysis of Lord North's proposal as a plan "to extort from us, at the point of the Bayonet, the unknown sums that should be sufficient to gratify, if possible to gratify, ministerial Rapacity . . ."; (6) the statement of the charge that Governor Carleton was engaged in instigating Canadians and Indians to attack the Colonies. These are all additions to Jefferson's text. Nothing of importance in the corresponding parts of Jefferson's draft is omitted by Dickinson. It will readily be seen that the most significant of these additions are precisely those that Dickinson had suggested to Jefferson and that Jefferson had been unwilling to incorporate in his text.

From this it is apparent that the impasse reached in committee between June 26 and July 6 cannot be ascribed, as has generally been done by historians and was indeed done by Jefferson himself, to the fact that Jefferson proposed a radical declaration that seemed to close the door to conciliation and that Dickinson weakened and modified this bold proclamation in order to promote harmony and attempts at reconciliation. Such an interpretation no doubt coincides with the general and valid opinion of the characters of the two men, but it does not coincide with the facts respecting the text of the Declaration. Both men expressed hope for a restoration of harmony. Both declared merely the aim of resisting violence and not of intending something else. But whereas Jefferson employed a circumlocution to express this idea, Dickinson was blunt. Jefferson's phrases were:
“We mean not in any wise to affect that union with them” and, “We did not embody a soldiery to committ aggression on them.” Dickinson’s corresponding expressions were: “We mean not to dissolve that union” and, “We have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great-Britain, and establishing independent states. . . .” When Jefferson again approached the alternative to submission, he was less blunt than Dickinson. “That necessity,” he declared, “must be hard indeed which may force upon us this desperate measure.” Dickinson’s comparable words were more suited to his bold mention of independence: “Necessity,” he declared, “has not yet driven us into that desperate measure,” the words “not yet” carrying an ominous warning. In his appeal to pro-American Whigs in England, in his elaboration of Jefferson’s arguments, in his detailed account of the suffering of Americans in Massachusetts (“wives separated from husbands, children from parents . . . etc.”), and in his closing affirmation of the justice of the American cause and of the strength of its union, Dickinson provided both a more suitable and a more inflammatory text. What Jefferson had refused to accept in Dickinson’s mild suggestions resulted not in a weaker, but in a stronger Declaration.

Thus, of the two statements made by Jefferson about the authorship of the Declaration, his first asserted less and his second more than Dickinson actually did. The Dickinson draft was more than a “retouching” of the Jefferson text, and it was much less than “an entire new statement.” It can best be described as a revision and an amplification of the Jefferson draft. The final text of the Declaration as adopted by Congress was, therefore, the result of a collaboration on the part of the two men, however unwilling each was to accept the work of the other. How Jefferson ever came to think that Dickinson had tacked four and a half paragraphs of his draft onto an entirely new statement must remain one of those inexplicable mysteries whose solution rests not in documentary sources, but in the unexplored and all but unexploorable realms of mind and memory.

In the second of his comments on the authorship of the Declaration, Jefferson declared that Dickinson “was so honest a man, and so

22 Parton, 170-171, refers to this sentence as having been written by Jefferson, and comments: “There is one word of three letters in Mr. Jefferson’s portion [of the Declaration] which I wonder the cautious Pennsylvanian did not erase. It is the word of threat italicized in this passage: ‘We mean not to dissolve that union. . . . Necessity has not yet . . . .’”
able a one that he was greatly indulged even by those who did not feel his scruples." Both in this and in the earlier statement, Jefferson implied that the committee and the Congress accepted Dickinson's draft without revision. The fact is, however, that, at some point between the completion of Dickinson's revision and the adoption of the final text by Congress, some thirty-four alterations were made. We cannot be certain how many of these were made by Dickinson himself, how many by the committee, or how many by Congress. But an analysis of these differences shows that among the deletions and additions were some which reflect a critical attitude and what might be called a more Jeffersonian point of view. Dickinson's adulatory tribute to Pitt's plan of reconciliation was deleted. An additional sentence was added from Jefferson's draft and another was altered to make it conform more closely to his text. Three sentences from Dickinson's draft were omitted. But we cannot be certain whether these alterations were made by Dickinson himself before he reported to the committee, or by the committee, or by Congress. It is even possible, though scarcely plausible, that Dickinson submitted his revision to Jefferson himself before placing it before the committee; if so, and if Dickinson's fair copy of his revision should ever be discovered, it would be interesting to observe whether Jefferson wrote any comments upon its face and what those comments were.

In the final analysis, the differences of the drafts produced by Jefferson and Dickinson, instead of revolving around polarities of radicalism and conservatism, of timidity and boldness, of weakness and strength, as Jefferson and most historians have assumed, are reduced to issues of style and methods of presentation between two of the great writers of the Revolution.

*Princeton University Library*  
Julian P. Boyd