

Penning a Legacy. By: Patricia Hudson, American History, Jan/Feb98, Vol. 32, Issue 6

Imprisoned and vilified for his religious views, William Penn, a member of the Society of Friends, sought to, establish a colony in the New World where people of all faiths could live in mutual harmony.

ON A CHILL WINTER DAY in 1668, 24-year-old William Penn paced back and forth in a cramped chamber in the Tower of London. Arrested for blasphemy after publishing a pamphlet that questioned the doctrine of the Trinity, Penn was being held in close confinement. The Bishop of London had decreed that if Penn didn't recant publicly he would remain imprisoned for the rest of his life. Penn's reply was unequivocal: "My prison shall be my grave before I will budge a jot, for I owe my conscience to no mortal man."

WILLIAM PENN WAS born on October 14, 1644, just a stone's throw from the Tower where he would one day be a prisoner. His father, William, Sr., was an ambitious naval officer who rose to the rank of admiral. Knighted by King Charles II, the elder Penn formed a friendship with the royal family that would play a major role in his son's future.

The Penn family's next-door neighbor on Tower Hill was the diarist Samuel Pepys, who noted in his journal that Admiral Penn was "a merry fellow and pretty good-natured and sings very bawdy songs." Pepys also recorded instances of William, Jr., playing cards with his father, going to the theater, and carelessly leaving his sword in a hired coach and then racing across London to retrieve it.

One incident from Penn's youth foreshadowed his later preoccupation with religious matters--at 17 William was expelled from Oxford University for daring to criticize certain Church of England rituals. Appalled, Admiral Penn packed his overly serious son off to France, hoping that he would grow more worldly amid the glitter of Paris.

When William returned to England after two years abroad, Pepys described him as "a most modish person, grown a fine gentleman, but [having] a great deal, if not too much, of the vanity of the French garb and affected manner of speech and gait." The admiral, well-pleased with his fashionable son, sent William to Ireland to attend to family business, but it was there, in 1667, that the younger Penn embraced the Quaker faith.



PHOTOS (COLOR): Granted the colony of Pennsylvania in 1680, Penn (above) arrived there in 1682. Anxious for peace within his extensive domain, Penn was one of the few colonizers from that era who recognized the prior land claims of local Indians. Through a treaty with the Leni Lenape (right), Penn in effect purchased the land that he had already been given by the king.

The Society of Friends -- dubbed Quakers by their enemies because they admonished listeners to "tremble at the word of the Lord" -- had been founded in 1647 by George Fox, a weaver's son-turned-preacher who spoke of the Inner Light and believed that there was "that of God in every man." According to Fox, all people, regardless of their status here on earth, are equal in God's eyes. It was a challenge directed at the very heart of England's class-conscious society, and though all religious dissenters were subject to fines and imprisonments, the establishment singled out Quakers with particular ferocity.

When Penn again returned to London, his family was aghast at the change in him. Not only did young William insist on attending the outlawed Quaker meetings, he also ignored common courtesy by refusing to take off his hat in the presence of his "betters," just one of several methods Friends used to illustrate their belief in equality. In the eyes of acquaintances and family, William had betrayed not only the religious principles of the Church of England but also his social class. Noted Pepys in his diary: "Mr. Will Penn, who is lately come over from Ireland, is a Quaker . . . or some very melancholy thing."

Better educated than most of the early Friends, Penn quickly became one of their most outspoken advocates, taking part in public debates and writing pamphlets that he published at his own expense. One respected London minister, enraged by the conversion of two female members of his congregation to Quakerism, stated that he would "rather lose them to a bawdy house than a Quaker meeting" and then went on to denounce the group's theology.

When Penn responded to the attack in print, the pamphlet became the talk of the city and led to his imprisonment in the Tower. "Hath got me W. Pen's book against the Trinity," Pepys wrote. "I find it so well writ, as I think it too good for him ever to have writ it-and it is a serious sort of book, and not fit for everybody to read."

Despite the threat of life imprisonment, the cold confines of the Tower failed to dampen Penn's crusading spirit. He spent his time there writing a rough draft of *No Cross, No Crown*, one of his most enduring works. After nine months in custody, William was released, perhaps in part as a favor to Admiral Penn, who had loaned the cash-hungry King Charles II a great deal of money over the years.

In 1672, William married Gulielma Maria Springett. During their more than 21 years of marriage, the couple became the parents of seven children. Family responsibilities, however, did not keep Penn from again risking imprisonment by speaking at Friends' meetings, writing political and religious pamphlets, and refusing to take an oath of allegiance.

By the late 1670s, after more than a decade of clashes with the nation's authorities, Penn had grown pessimistic about the likelihood of religious and civil reforms in England and so turned his thoughts to the New World. Although the colonies were heavily populated with dissenters from England, many colonial authorities exercised no more tolerance for Quakers than their English counterparts. In Puritan-controlled Boston, for example, two Quaker women were hanged when they refused to stop preaching in public.

Having experienced firsthand the horrors of forced religious conformity, Penn dreamed of showing the world that peaceful coexistence among diverse religious groups was possible and that a single, state-supported religion was not only unnecessary but undesirable. "There can be no reason to persecute any man in this world about anything that belongs to the next," he wrote.

When Admiral Penn died without collecting the money owed to him by the king, William saw a way to make his dream a reality. In 1680, he petitioned King Charles for a grant of land in America to retire the debt. Acceding to his request, the king conferred upon Penn an enormous tract of land, the largest that had ever been granted to an individual. William proposed calling the colony New Wales, it being "a pretty hilly country," but King Charles insisted on calling it "Pennsylvania"--Penn's Woods--in honor of his old friend, the admiral.

At the age of 36, Penn suddenly faced the enormous task of designing a government from scratch. The constitution he created, with its provisions for religious freedom, extensive voting rights, and penal reform, was remarkably enlightened by seventeenth-century standards. Despite the vast power it conferred on him as proprietor, Penn had been careful to leave "to myself and successors no power of doing mischief, that the will of one man may not hinder the good of an whole country"

Before he set sail for Pennsylvania himself, Penn appointed three commissioners and charged them with establishing the new colony. While William saw nothing wrong with Europeans settling in the New World, he was among the few colonizers of his time who recognized the prior claims of the indigenous people. Thus, he gave the commissioners a letter, dated October 18, 1681, addressed to the people of the Lenni Lenape tribe who inhabited his proprietorship.

The letter stated that King Charles had granted him "a great province; but I desire to enjoy it with your love and consent, that we may always live together as neighbours and friends, else what would the great God say to us, who hath made us not to devour and destroy one another but to live soberly and kindly together in the world?"

When he finally arrived in the colony in October 1682, Penn made a treaty with the Indians, in effect purchasing the land he had already been given by the king. Truly wishing to live in peace, he tried to be fair in his dealings with the Lenni Lenape, unmindful that they--like their Delaware kinsmen who "sold" Manhattan Island to Peter Minuit--did not understand the concept of exclusive ownership of the land and believed that the white men simply sought to share its use.

Penn had intended to settle permanently in Pennsylvania, but within two years a boundary dispute with neighboring Maryland required him to return to London, where a web of troubles awaited him. As a result, nearly 16 years passed before he again set foot in his colony. During his long absence, the colonists had grown resentful of his authority, and in 1701, less than two years after his second voyage to Pennsylvania, a disillusioned Penn sailed back to England, never to return. All told, he spent less than five years in America.

From his return to England until his death 16 years later, Penn continually struggled to stave off financial disaster. Never an astute businessman, he discovered, to his horror, that his trusted business manager had defrauded him, leaving him deeply in debt. At the age of 63, Penn was sent to a debtor's prison. Marveled one friend, "The more he is pressed, the more he rises. He seems of a spirit to bear and rub through difficulties." Before long, concerned friends raised enough money to satisfy his creditors.

Prior to his death in 1718 at the age of 73, Penn attempted to sell Pennsylvania back to the Crown, hoping to forge at least a modicum of financial security for his six surviving children. In making the offer, Penn sought to extract a promise from the English Crown that the colony's laws and civil rights would be preserved. But while the negotiations were still in progress, Penn suffered a debilitating stroke, and the transaction was never completed. Penn's descendants thus retained control of the colony until the American Revolution.

Despite imprisonment, vilification, and financial ruin, Penn had labored unceasingly to establish the principle of religious freedom in both his homeland and in America. He espoused such "modern" concepts as civil rights, participatory government, interracial brotherhood, and international peace.

Yet, despite the rich legacy that the founder of the colony of Pennsylvania left to Americans, William Penn remains a shadowy figure in our popular consciousness. For most people, his name conjures up little more than a vague picture that is remarkably similar to the bland, beaming face that adorns boxes of Quaker Oats cereal. The reality, however, was quite different; Penn was an extremely complex individual, whose life was filled with triumph and tragedy and was marked by startling contrasts.

In 1984, more than 300 years after the founding of Pennsylvania, the United States Congress posthumously granted Penn U.S. citizenship. "In the history of this Nation," the proclamation read, "there has been a small number of men and women whose contributions to its traditions of freedom, justice, and individual rights have accorded them a special place of honor . . . and to whom all Americans owe a lasting debt." The man who pursued his "Holy Experiment" on the shores of the New World was, indeed, one of those men.

PHOTO (COLOR): "Penn's Vision" by Violet Oakley, a mural in the Pennsylvania state capitol building in Harrisburg, captures the spirit of William Penn's "Holy Experiment," his dream of a land in the New World where all religions could coexist.

PHOTO (COLOR): Penn left Pennsylvania in 1684 and did not return for almost 16 years, when he was accompanied by his second wife, Hanna (above), and children from his first marriage. The family settled into Pennsbury, their new home in bucks County, but Penn found it necessary to sail back to England after less than two years; he never saw Pennsylvania again.

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