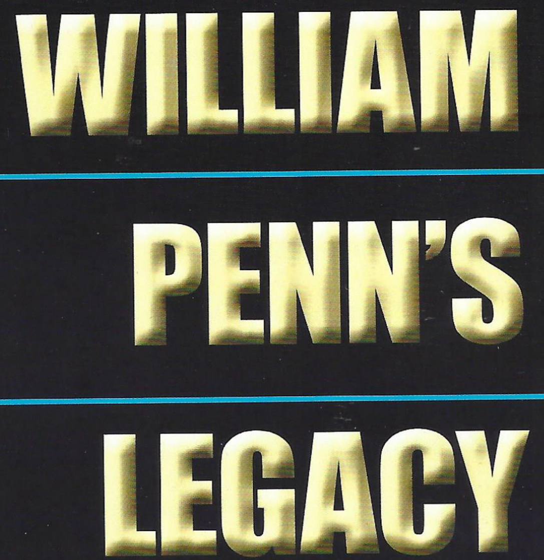


WILLIAM PENN'S LEGACY

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL DIVERSITY

William C. Kashatus

Immortalized in bronze by Alexander Milne Calder (1846–1923), William Penn surveys his City of Brotherly Love from high atop Philadelphia City Hall. The colossal statue, towering thirty-seven feet high and weighing twenty-seven tons, was cast by the Tacony Iron and Metal Works over a three-year period, beginning in 1889. It was raised in fourteen pieces to the top of the tower on November 28, 1894. The tip of the statue's hat is 548 feet above street level. To explore and commemorate Penn and his vision, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission is observing "William Penn's Legacy: Religious and Spiritual Diversity" as its annual theme for 2011.

PHOTO BY GEORGE WIDMAN/GEORGE WIDMAN PHOTOGRAPHY LLC

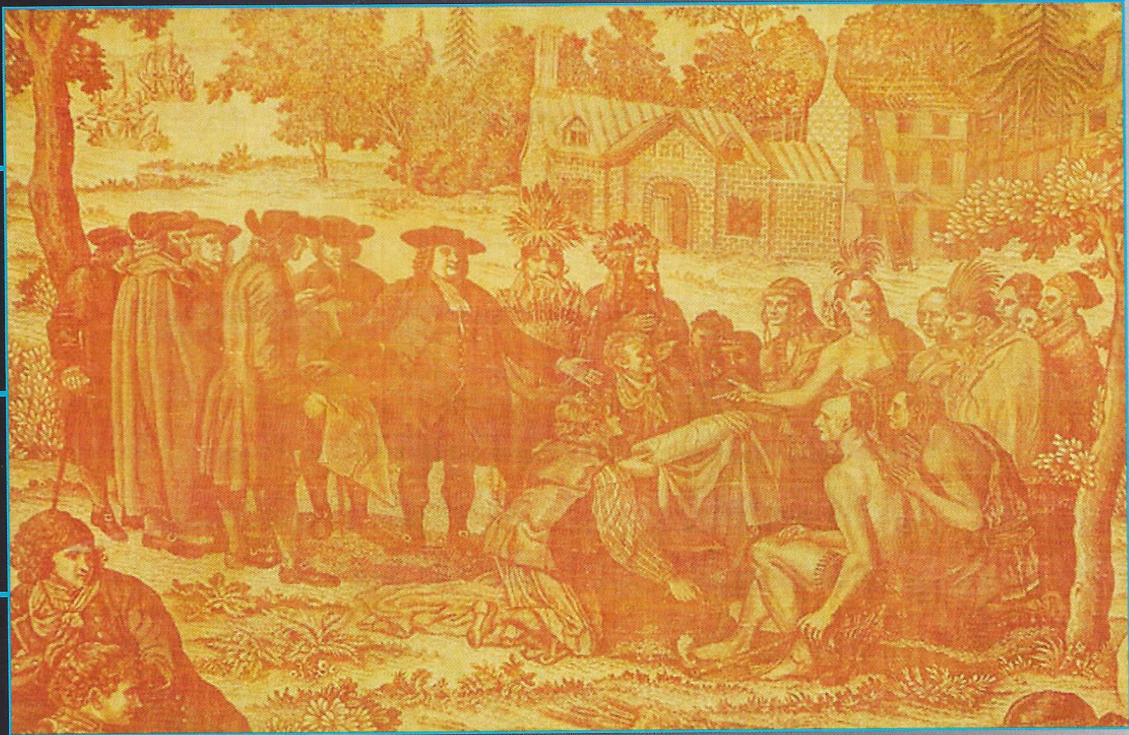


PHOTO BY RICK ECHELMEYER

According to tradition, Martha Dandridge Custis Washington (1731–1802) centered a square of fabric printed with the image of the proprietor's treaty with the Indians on a patchwork quilt about 1785.

Alexander Milne Calder's bronze statue of William Penn atop Philadelphia City Hall surveys the founder's beloved Holy Experiment fashioned out of the ideals of his Quaker faith. In a seventeenth-century world conditioned by violence, religious persecution, and arbitrary authority, Penn established an unusual colony dedicated to the principles of religious toleration, participatory government, and brotherly love.

Such a utopian society had never been attempted in the annals of human history, and its success was reflected by the religious and spiritual diversity that became Pennsylvania's defining characteristic. Penn's belief that "no people can be truly happy if abridged of the freedom of their consciences" attracted to his colony not only Quakers who had been persecuted in England, but Protestants, Catholics, and Jews from a dozen different lands, all of whom had suffered because of restrictions on their religious beliefs.

PENNSYLVANIA CAPITOL PRESERVATION COMMITTEE

The granting of the Charter to William Penn by King Charles II (above) was immortalized by artist Violet Oakley (1874–1961) in one of thirteen murals she painted for the Governor's Reception Room in the Pennsylvania State Capitol. *Penn's Vision* (facing page) is part of the series.

Settlers worshipped in churches, homes, even storehouses, until they could build a house of worship. In the capital city of Philadelphia alone, Quakers, Anglicans, Catholics, Jews, Baptists, Scots-Irish Presbyterians, and Germans of several different sects lived harmoniously together, enjoying equality one with another. Many of the congregations they established exist today and serve as an enduring tribute to Penn's legacy of religious and spiritual diversity.

On March 4, 1681, King Charles II of England granted William Penn forty-five thousand acres in the New World in payment for a debt of 16,000 pounds the Crown owed his father, an admiral in the British Navy. It was a shrewd move. In one fell swoop the king not only managed to satisfy the outstanding debt, but he also hoped to rid his country of the troublesome Quakers, a detested religious sect that constantly challenged the policies of the Anglican Church.

Founded in 1652, the Religious Society of Friends, commonly called Friends or Quakers, believed an individual's relationship with God was direct and personal. Quakers traveled throughout the British Isles and continental Europe preaching the spirit of God was present in everyone and that there was no need for religious rituals, a formal clergy, and compulsory religious observances. While they considered their beliefs little more than "primitive Christianity," their faith and practice undermined the dogma and

> **"'Tis a clear and just thing, I believe, to establish such a holy experiment, for God who has given it to me through many a great trial will bless and make it the seed of a nation."**

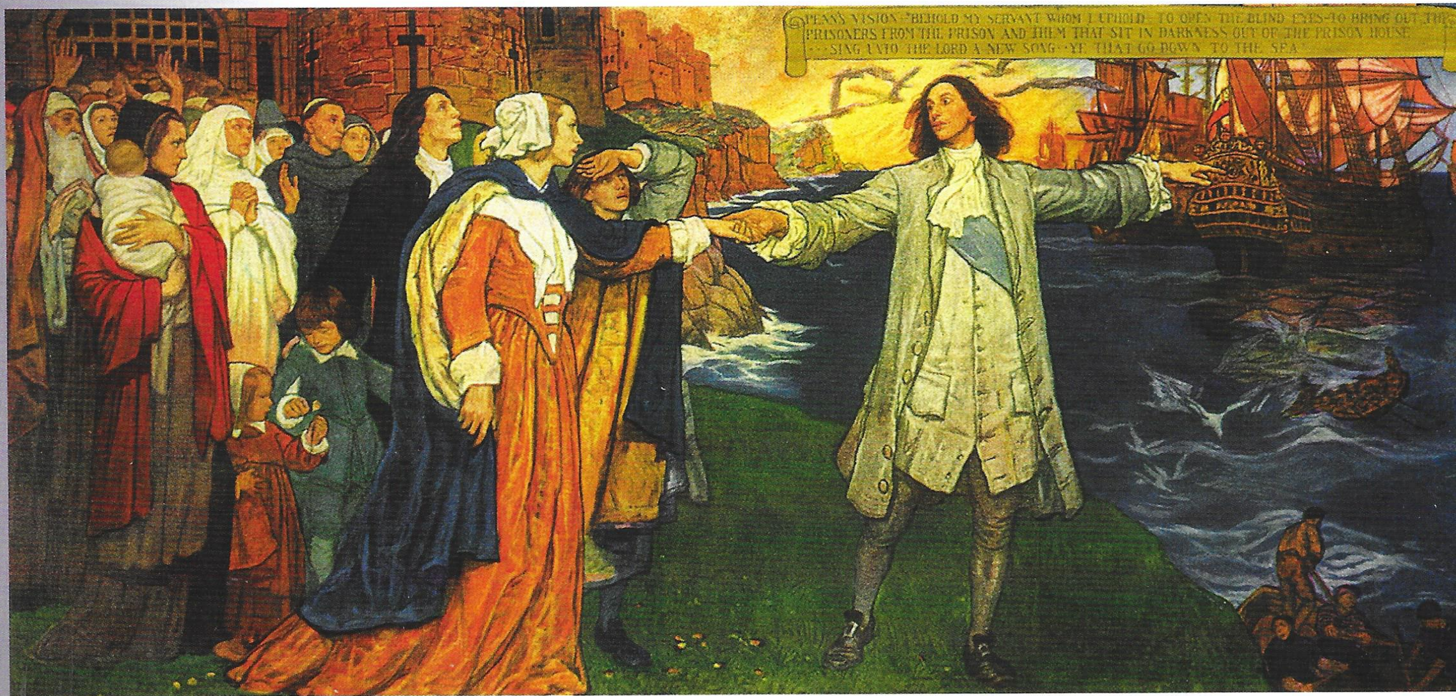
rituals of most traditional European churches, which became increasingly threatened by the sect.

In addition, Quakers rejected all aspects of traditional English society. They consciously disregarded expressions of social class distinction from deferring to authority figures by doffing one's hat to ostentatious displays of wealth. Their abhorrence of physical violence led them to embrace an unconditional adherence to pacifism, even in a time of war when national security required military service. Instead, the principles of equality, simplicity, and pacifism guided their daily lives. Attired in plain black, gray, and white clothes, Quakers viewed civil disobedience as a matter of religious faith, presenting a serious threat to England's social hierarchy and order.

Many Englishmen accused the Friends of disloyalty to the Crown as well as to the Church of England. As a result, the British Parliament enacted a series of repressive religious measures known as the Clarendon Code. The strictures elevated Anglicanism to "established church" status and declared all other religious observances to be "non-conformist" and, hence, illegal. Unwilling to compromise their beliefs, as many as 13,000 Quakers were persecuted, and more than 450 died as a result of severe imprisonment or torture.

A trustee of the West Jersey colony, Penn began to see the New World as a possible haven from the religious persecution of the Old World. In 1680, he petitioned the Crown for a North American colony where he hoped to establish a "holy experiment." But what exactly did he mean by that term? Was Penn embarking on a trial that suggested a scientific experiment and, if so, was he experimenting with self-government, religious liberty, and pacifism? Or was he referring to a religious experience dedicated to the free worship of God by any faith whatsoever?

There are indications that Penn intended to do both. Certainly he believed that his colony, although granted by King Charles II, was a blessing from God. "'Tis a clear and just thing, I believe, to establish such a holy experiment," Penn wrote to one prospective colonist, "for God who has given it to me through many a great trial will bless and make it the seed of a nation." Accordingly, Penn intended to establish an asylum for those who had suffered persecution for their



PENNSYLVANIA CAPITOL PRESERVATION COMMIT

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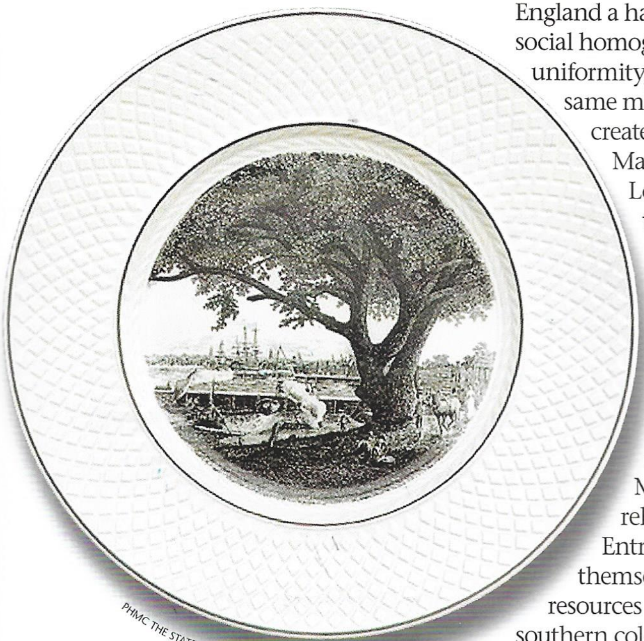
William Penn, as imagined in the early twentieth century, has been portrayed as a beneficent colonizer through the years.

religious convictions, regardless of faith. In this sense, his holy experiment was a religious experience grounded in an unshakable belief in toleration and clearly unique among colonies.

The Puritans, who established New England a half century earlier, emphasized social homogeneity and religious uniformity, excluding those not of the same mind. Roman Catholics tried to create religious toleration in Maryland under the leadership of Lord Cecil Calvert in 1654, but they were overthrown in 1689 when the Glorious Revolution of William and Mary prevailed in England. Three years later, in 1692, the Maryland Assembly established the Church of England as the official religion of the colony and Maryland's experiment with religious toleration ended.

Entrepreneurs seeking to enrich themselves by exploiting the natural resources of the land settled the southern colonies of Virginia and the Carolinas. Although they came from a variety of faiths, religion was a secondary concern for them.



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The site of Penn's meeting with the Indians was commemorated on a number of household objects.

Penn's vision was more inclusive than any of these colonies and it was inextricably tied to his desire to create a society where people of differing faiths would not only enjoy the freedom to worship as they wished but to participate actively in a government that guaranteed that right.

"Government, like clocks, go from the motion men give them," opined Penn in his First Frame of Government, written in 1682. "And as governments are made and moved by men, so by them they are ruined, too. Let men be good and the government cannot be bad. If government becomes ill, good men will cure it." This positive view of human nature, so different from those of the Puritans, Catholics, and Anglicans who preceded the Quakers to North America, formed the structure of Penn's government.

Pennsylvania's first constitution organized the government into three parts: the governor, who was Penn acting as the proprietor of the colony, or a deputy in his absence; a seventy-two member Provincial Council; and a General Assembly with two hundred members. While the proprietor held his office by heredity, the council and the assembly were elected by the freemen of the colony. Freedom of elections was expressly ensured and the right to vote was extended to virtually all free inhabitants, regardless of whether or not they were landholders.

Penn's understanding of religious freedom cannot be confused with the modern definition of the term, which ensures civil liberties to all, regardless of faith. There were exceptions in Penn's colony. Although the Frame of Government guaranteed the freedom to worship, voting and office holding were restricted to most Christians, those who professed a belief in Jesus Christ as "the Son of God and the Savior of the World." Accordingly, Jews were free to worship in colonial Pennsylvania, but were not enfranchised. Settling in Philadelphia, Jews held their religious services in private homes until they established the Mikveh Israel congregation in 1740.

By that time there were Jews living in Reading, Lancaster, and Easton as well. Penn also denied Catholics the right to vote or hold political office, believing they would defer to the dictates of the pope in Rome, a foreign power. Nevertheless, Catholics were attracted to Pennsylvania, especially after 1692 when Maryland established Anglicanism as the official religion and punished priests and lay members for conducting worship services. Relocating to Philadelphia, Catholics worshipped in private homes until 1733 when St. Joseph's Church was established near Fourth and Walnut Streets. Restrictive measures against Catholics and Jews continued after 1701 when Penn issued a new constitution, the Charter of Privileges, even though it included a provision for the liberty of conscience to all who believed in God.

Native Americans also presented a dilemma for Penn. Since the principle of brotherly love was at the heart of his holy experiment, he was determined to treat the Indians as friends. He speculated that the Lenni Lenape, the Delaware Indian tribe which inhabited the land, were "of the Jewish race," or "of the stock of the Ten Tribes" of Israel and as such were children of God and entitled to love and respect. Penn expressed these intentions to the Indians in a letter before sailing to his new province. "The king of the country where I live has given me a great province," he wrote. "But I desire to enjoy it with your love and consent that we may always live together as neighbors and friends." While Penn recognized the Indians' right as legal owners of the land granted to him by King Charles II, he did insist that they give their con-

Thomas Penn (1701–1775) commissioned Benjamin West (1738–1820) to depict his father's celebrated meeting with the Native Americans. *Penn's Treaty with the Indians* (1771–1772) not only became an icon of religious and civil liberties, but it also spawned a host of engravings and lithographs.

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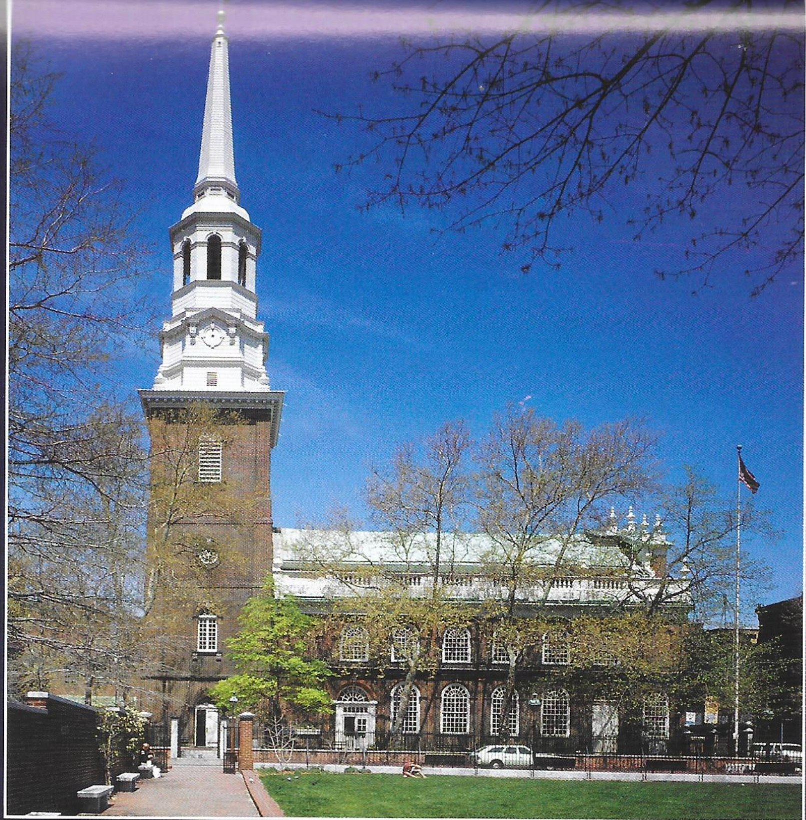

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Founded in 1695, Christ Church in Philadelphia is known as "the Nation's Church" because of the Revolutionary War era leaders who worshipped there. It was the first parish of the Church of England in Pennsylvania and the birthplace of the American Episcopal Church.

participatory government

sent to his occupation of it. He also made an official policy of his government to purchase the land from the Indians, thereby extinguishing native title before any land was patented to white settlers.

Knowing that many of his predecessors had warred with the Indians, Penn promised them fair treatment, an opportunity for a redress of their grievances and, above all, peace. To this end, he established a list of conditions for both the colonists and Quaker officials for their conduct in dealing with the Indians. Among these concessions were sharing the land, trading goods of the same quality sold in the marketplace, and trial by jury. Although the latter provision was not practical because the Indians did not understand it, the concept did indicate Penn's sincerity in dealing with them.

Penn's idealism had its limits, however. While he believed the Indians were the spiritual equals of white men, Penn did not consider them of the same intellect. "These poor people are under a dark night in things relating to religion," he wrote in a 1683 *Account of the Lenape*. He was especially put off by their worship, which consisted of animal sacrifice and dancing around a fire while singing and shouting, customs he considered "savage." Predictably, Penn refused to grant the Indians the right to vote or to hold political office in his colony.

Like Jews and Catholics, Indians did not enjoy religious freedom in the present-day sense of the term. For all his idealism, Penn was a product of his time, conditioned by the political and social conventions of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, his constitution did guarantee "religious toleration" for all inhabitants and, in this sense, was remarkably advanced for the period. It represented the first application of rights and values that were adopted by the framers of the United States Constitution a century later.

While English Quakers were the earliest settlers to take advantage of this liberal government, many other British immigrants also came to Pennsylvania seeking refuge from the religious persecution of Europe. By 1700, Welsh Friends, who had purchased a 62-square-mile manor from Penn, established several Quaker meetings of their own in southeastern Pennsylvania. In addition, some two hundred Anglicans worshipped at Christ Church in Philadelphia, and at least three Baptist congregations and one Presbyterian church existed in the colony.

The largest group of non-English immigrants before 1720 came from German-speaking principalities along

the Rhine River and from Switzerland. They were Anabaptists—Amish and Mennonites—who believed that Christians should follow the simple, peaceful ways of the first apostles. Denied the right to worship by German princes after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, these groups established congregations in Philadelphia, York, Lancaster, and Northampton Counties where they enjoyed the freedom to worship as well as economic prosperity.

News of their life in Pennsylvania circulated among their brethren in Europe, resulting in a second great wave of German denominations between 1720 and 1750. Among these groups were the Moravians, Christian missionaries who established settlements in Bethlehem and Nazareth, Northampton County, and in Lititz, Lancaster County, who actively worked to convert Native Americans to Christianity. Like the Quakers, the Moravians were pacifists and promoted gender equality. Unlike the Friends, the Moravians distrusted the nuclear family and organized their members into "choirs," residential groups segregated by age and sex that promoted unity with fellow believers in order to achieve salvation.

Other sects, such as the German Baptist Brethren and Schwenkfelders, also came to Pennsylvania to live and worship as they chose. They were not always successful in retaining members, however. Conrad Beissel (1691–1768), for example, was a mystic who broke away from the German Baptist Brethren to form the Society of Solitary Brethren. The new sect integrated monastic celibacy, religious musical composition, and highly ritualized daily activities as a means of achieving religious purity. Beissel established a religious commune at Ephrata, Lancaster County, where congregants were segregated by gender, dressed in white robes, and slept on wooden benches. (Today Ephrata Cloister is administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission as a popular destination along the Pennsylvania Trails of History.™) Most of the Germans who immigrated to the

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Moravians who settled Bethlehem in 1742 laid the cornerstone for the Central Moravian Church on April 16, 1803. It was the largest church in Pennsylvania at the time of its completion in 1806.

Ephrata Cloister, Lancaster County, established in 1732 by German settlers seeking spiritual goals rather than earthly rewards, was one of the country's earliest religious communities.

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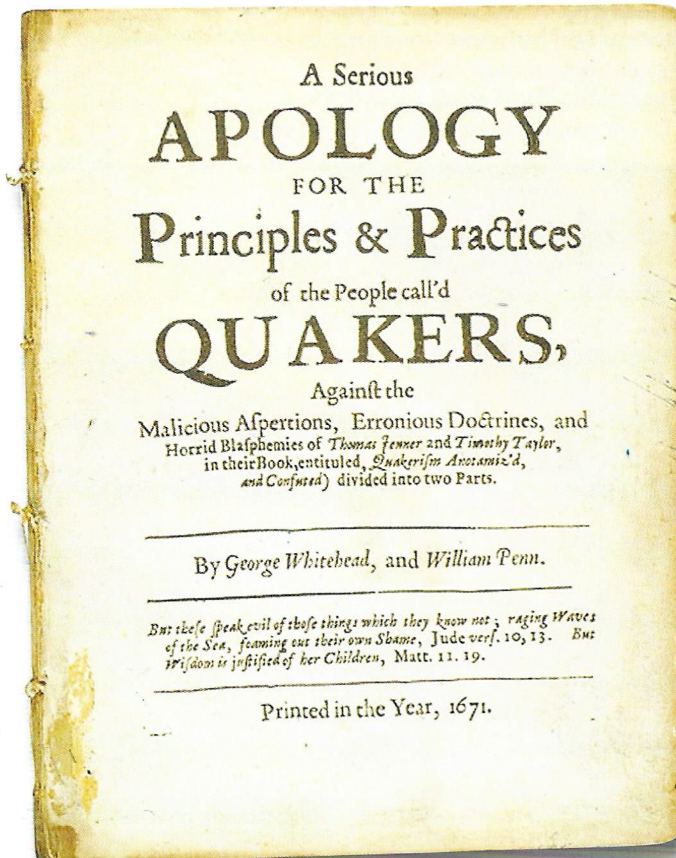
A violent storm on March 5, 1810, felled the "Treaty Elm," which had been revered by generations of Philadelphians as the site of Penn's negotiations with Native Americans in 1682. In 2010, on the bicentennial of the great elm's destruction, Haverford College Arboretum donated a descendent of the original tree which was planted in Philadelphia's Penn Treaty Park.



A Serious
APOLOGY
FOR THE
Principles & Practices
of the People call'd
QUAKERS,
Againſt the
Malicious Aſpertions, Erronious Doctrines, and
Horrid Blaſphemies of *Thomas Jenner* and *Timothy Taylor*,
in their Book, entituled, *Quakeriſm Anotamiz'd*,
and Confuted) divided into two Parts.

By *George Whitehead*, and *William Penn*.

But theſe ſpeak evil of thoſe things which they know not; raging Waves of the Sea, foaming out their own Shame, Jude verſ. 10, 13. *But Wiſdom is juſtified of her Children*, Matt. 11. 19.

Printed in the Year, 1671.

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Penn often published defenses of the Religious Society of Friends. In 1671, he and George Whitehead (1636–1723), a founder of the Quaker movement in England, collaborated on such a publication.

colony after 1750, however, belonged to more established churches. They were Lutherans and German Reformed who quickly became content to follow Quaker leadership and agreed with the Friends' unconditional adherence to pacifism. These various denominations gave Pennsylvania a strong German identity that did not exist in Europe.

The third largest ethnic group to settle in Penn's colony was the Scots-Irish. They had migrated to northern Ireland in the seventeenth century as part of the English attempt to strengthen its control over that country. There they discovered that their Presbyterian beliefs caused tensions with both Irish Catholics and the Anglican Church. Those who settled in Philadelphia tended to be as somber as the Quakers, which allowed them to blend into the larger society. Other Scots-Irish immigrants settled on the western frontier and few of them were pacifist or pro-Quaker, which caused increasing difficulties with the Native Americans who inhabited the region.

Smaller numbers of English Methodists, French Huguenots, Spanish Jews, Irish Catholics, and others also immigrated to Pennsylvania where they moved between various counties and townships and learned to

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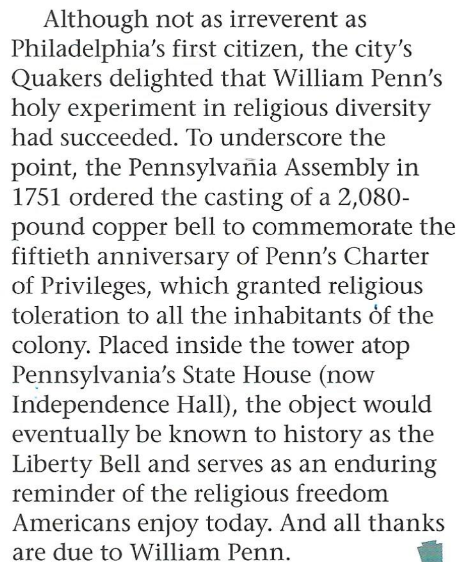
A symbol of Penn's vision, the Liberty Bell, began touring the nation in the 1880s, making a stop at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, informally known as the St. Louis World's Fair, in St. Louis, Missouri.

live with neighbors of different faiths.

By the eve of the American Revolution, when the colony's population was nearly 300,000, Pennsylvania was home to an extraordinarily diverse number of congregations, including Lutheran (142), German Reformed (126), Presbyterian (112), Quaker (64), Mennonite (64), Baptist (24), Anglican Episcopalian (24), Moravian (13), Roman Catholic (11), Methodist (7), and Jewish (2). But these churches were not as rigid in their rituals or doctrine as when they first arrived in the colony.

Pennsylvanians had learned to adjust to the religious diversity of the colony. Inspired by the reforming impulse of the First Great Awakening of the 1740s, many Protestant denominations began to de-emphasize sectarianism for a more ecumenical Christianity. Prominent Philadelphians, Benjamin Franklin for one, encouraged the movement away from such rigid sectarianism by constructing a large building at Fourth and Arch Streets in 1746. The auditorium was provided to serve "any preacher of any religious persuasion who might desire to say something to the people at Philadelphia." "Even if the Mufti [a professional jurist who interprets Muslim law] of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mohammedanism to us," Franklin insisted, "he would find a pulpit at his service."



Although not as irreverent as Philadelphia's first citizen, the city's Quakers delighted that William Penn's holy experiment in religious diversity had succeeded. To underscore the point, the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1751 ordered the casting of a 2,080-pound copper bell to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Penn's Charter of Privileges, which granted religious toleration to all the inhabitants of the colony. Placed inside the tower atop Pennsylvania's State House (now Independence Hall), the object would eventually be known to history as the Liberty Bell and serves as an enduring reminder of the religious freedom Americans enjoy today. And all thanks are due to William Penn.

William C. Kashatus, Paoli, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage. *A member of the Religious Society of Friends, he has written extensively on William Penn and the Quakers.*

Many of the images illustrating this article are drawn from the Penn Treaty Collection, given to The State Museum of Pennsylvania by the late Vivian O. and Meyer P. Potamkin of Philadelphia.

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Books about Pennsylvania's history are available for purchase at www.pabookstore.com.