

# HANNAH PENN

## PENNSYLVANIA'S FIRST WOMAN GOVERNOR

by William C. Kashatus

ON OCTOBER 1, 1712, William Penn (1644–1718) and his second wife Hannah Callowhill Penn (1671–1726) left their large country house at Ruscombe, near Reading, England, and made their way to Bristol, located along the southwest coast. Theirs was a bittersweet journey.

Just four months earlier, Penn had convinced the Crown to purchase the proprietary rights to Pennsylvania, his beloved—and beleaguered colony in the New World, which had become a financial drain, as well as a source of political controversy. Having recently collected an inaugural installment payment of one thousand pounds, Penn was relieved that he would finally be rid of the troublesome colony in four years.

Hannah Penn, on the other hand, faced the sorrowful duty of settling her recently deceased parents' estate. As an only child, she was the natural legatee, responsible for executing their last will and testament. Hannah had been carefully cultivated by her father, a wealthy merchant, to manage the family's business affairs. She was remarkably astute in financial matters, an area in which her husband was greatly lacking.

Her business sense kept Penn from further compounding his shaky financial situation during the protracted and bitter struggle with his one-time financial agent, Philip Ford (about 1631–1702), and Ford's heirs over the proprietary rights to Pennsylvania. As a sign of his gratitude for her loyalty, Penn revised his will, leaving the colony to Hannah and her children. William Jr., Penn's eldest son from his first marriage and his natural heir, was given only the family's Irish estate, Macroom Castle.

At the age of sixty-eight, Penn was twenty-seven years older than Hannah. Little did either of them realize that the responsibility for the Pennsylvania proprietorship would be placed squarely on her shoulders within the next few days. He suffered a severe stroke on October 4 that left him partially paralyzed and mentally incapacitated. Although he would make a considerable recovery over the next few months, Penn remained an invalid, and his physicians insisted that his wife keep all business matters from him.







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William Penn's Marriage to Hannah Callowhill at Bristol, England, in 1696, from a photograph of the original painting in Friend's House, London. The Penns had a traditional Quaker wedding.

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She would also have to assume the responsibility for governing the colony in her husband's name during a critical period of Pennsylvania's history.

Although she did not hold the formal title of governor, Hannah Penn served as Pennsylvania's acting proprietor and head of government from October 1712 until her death in December 1726. Residing in England throughout that period, her only visual knowledge of Pennsylvania came from her stay there with William Penn from December 1699 to September 1701. Working with a series of lieutenant governors (also styled deputy governors), she was successful in upholding peaceable relations with the Indians, preventing the outbreak of civil war between Pennsylvania and Maryland over an ongoing boundary dispute, and lessening the political dissension that

once existed in the colonial Assembly.

At the same time, she thwarted attempts by her stepchildren and a son-in-law to lay claim to the province, and prevented Penn's eldest surviving—and highly irresponsible—son, William Penn Jr. (1681–1820), from taking his place as head of the family. In the process, she remained true to the trust vested in her by her “dear husband.”

Born at Bristol, England, on February 11, 1671, Hannah was the daughter of Thomas and Hannah Hollister Callowhill. Of the couple's nine children, she was the only one to survive to adulthood. As an only child, Hannah received special attention from her parents. Thomas Callowhill, a prosperous linen merchant, trained his daughter in commercial practices and accounting, while her mother cultivated in her the social and religious attitudes prevalent among early Quakers. High among these was a belief in the equality of women—both inside and outside of the household.

By the age of twenty-four, when William Penn began to court her, Hannah, who was considered an “old maid” by the standards of her time, had developed a

remarkable business acumen and a talent for homemaking. She proved to be a fine match for Penn, in spite of the fact that he was twice her age and a widower with three grown children. Plagued by financial troubles, Penn was, by the age of fifty-two, the absentee landlord of a colony across the Atlantic that simmered in political turmoil. Many settlers refused to pay quitrents to him, and Penn was losing money on his investment. The Assembly was wrought with political dissension, the elected representatives in the lower house, the House of Representatives, trying to usurp the lawmaking powers from the upper house, the Provincial Council. In the midst of these struggles, British monarchs William and Mary took control of the government, believing that Penn tolerated too much illegal trade with the French and was in correspondence with allies of the deposed King James II. But the Crown's appointee replacing Penn was driven out by the colony's contentious Quakers and, in 1694, governing power was restored to Penn. Realizing his administrative shortcomings, as well as his ignorance in matters of personal finance, Penn found a helpmate in Hannah.



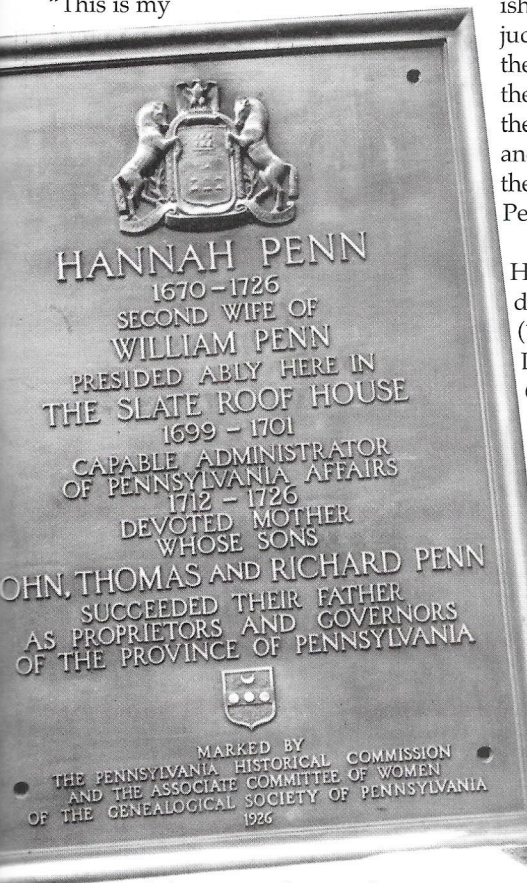


Philadelphia-born John Hesselius (1728–1788), a Rococo-style artist, painted a portrait entitled Mrs. William Penn. A charcoal sketch of her husband William Penn (facing



Although she did not possess the striking beauty of his first wife, Gulielma Springett Penn, who had died in 1694, Hannah was an attractive woman whose serenity imparted an undeniable dignity and gracefulness. No doubt the widower realized he was, at best, a questionable suitor. Age had robbed him of his robust figure, but he could offer prominence and stature—and, possibly in the future, wealth. Their courtship was brief. Penn vigorously pursued Hannah, who was less convinced of her feelings for him than he was about her.

"This is my



tions established by royal agents, which Penn had personally pledged to support. Smuggling and piracy were common until the Lords Commissioners of Trade launched an investigation. The Assembly also challenged Markham by refusing to grant funds for the defense of neighboring New York, another promise Penn had made to the Crown, unless Markham agreed to a new constitution greatly expanding their powers. As deputy governor, Markham did not possess the authority to do so, but in Penn's absence he drafted a constitution that greatly diminished his own powers to decide on fiscal, judicial, and commercial matters without the consent of the Provincial Council. At the same time he granted the Assembly the right to initiate legislation and to meet and adjourn whenever it pleased. All of these problems made it necessary for Penn to return to his colony.

On September 3, 1699, William and Hannah Penn, accompanied by his daughter by his first marriage Letitia (1678-1745) and his secretary James Logan (1674-1751), boarded the ship *Canterbury* and set sail for Pennsylvania. The voyage consumed three months, although the salty food, inadequate water, and the fear of pirates made it seem even longer



for Hannah, who was pregnant with their first child. Fierce winds blew the ship back from the American coast and delayed their arrival at Chester, until November 30. A few days later, the Penns moved by barge upriver to Philadelphia, where they were welcomed by Edward Shippen, the city's first mayor, and Samuel Carpenter, a wealthy merchant. Carpenter arranged to have the couple lodge at his spacious mansion, the Slate Roof House, where on January 28, 1700, Hannah gave birth to a son, John, the only member of the Penn family born in America. In April, Penn moved his family to Pennsbury, his six thousand-acre country estate on the Delaware River, twenty-four miles north of Philadelphia, where he con-

tinued to transact the business of government, meeting with Native Americans and colonial dignitaries.

Penn tried valiantly to bring the many political factions in his colony to some kind of unity. But the contentiousness of his Quaker brethren, led by David Lloyd (1656-1731), the leader of the Assembly's more radical elements, made his efforts fruitless. Compounding his problems were an ongoing dispute over the southern border of his colony adjoining Maryland with Charles Calvert, the third Lord Baltimore, and an attempt by the Assembly to extort a number of concessions from him. When he learned in early 1701 from friends in England that his colonial charter was, once again, in jeopardy as Parliament was considering a bill to eliminate all colonial proprietorships, Penn knew he needed to return to England to resolve the issue.

To avert further trouble in the colony, Penn replaced Markham as deputy governor with Andrew Hamilton (?-1703), the former governor of West Jersey. He also yielded to the popular will and restructured his government. Under a new constitution, the Charter of Privileges, the Assembly, now consisting of only the House of Representatives, would draft legislation, while the governor would approve or veto it. The governor's council, although allowed to continue as a powerful appointive advisory board, was neither described nor authorized by the Charter of Privileges. Penn had surrendered his authority to make the law, accepting a lesser role of acting, through his appointed deputy (or lieutenant) governors, to suggest or prohibit certain legislation. Penn charged these appointees with protecting not only his interests but also those of the Crown. Believing that he had addressed the popular discontent in his colony, he returned to England in September 1701.

Upon their arrival in England in December, Hannah, pregnant with their second child, Thomas, went directly to Bristol where she stayed with her parents, and Penn traveled to London to address his mounting difficulties. For a full decade

*A marker (above, left) documents Hannah Penn's Philadelphia residence (above). William Penn rented the Slate Roof House from 1699 to 1701, which was the seat of government until 1704. Located at Second Street, bounded by Chestnut and Walnut Streets, and Norris Alley (now Sansom Street), the building was demolished in 1867.*

eight letter to thy fourth since I saw thee," Penn wrote, slightly annoyed during the first year of their courtship. Having received no response within the next few days, the Quaker statesman softened his approach, suggesting that Hannah "mend the pace" with which she replied to his letters. The couple was married on March 5, 1696, a month before Penn's eldest son and heir, Springett, died.

Hannah quickly assumed the responsibility for managing the household at Penn's estate, Worminghurst, and assisted him in financial matters as well. Still, he continued to be troubled by the persistent expenditures of his colony and the errors of his deputy governor, William Markham (1635-1704). Markham failed to enforce the Navigation Acts and customs regula-






he would struggle with a succession of political, financial, and personal problems. He feared for his proprietorship because of disgruntled royal agents in the colony, who continued to submit their complaints to London about his inept administration. Financial problems constantly nagged him.

Years earlier Penn, wanting to protect his family from losing Pennsylvania if he were convicted of treason, sold the colony to his financial advisor, Philip Ford. According to their arrangement, Ford would lease the colony back to Penn, who would pay him interest in the form of acreage. The agreement allowed Ford to avoid a tax obligation and Penn to considerably lessen the risk of having his family's inheritance confiscated. Shortly before he died, Ford—concerned about his own poor health and financial future—insisted that Penn sign a new lease that increased the sum that would come to him. Penn signed the agreement without reading it. Failing to note that the document was craftily worded, Penn transferred the title to his colony to Ford and also gave an extensive power of attorney to him. In 1701, Penn was caught in a legal battle with Ford's widow, who insisted that unless he paid his outstanding debt, she would sell Pennsylvania for the benefit of her heirs.

Compounding his financial misfortune were family problems. Letitia Penn was engaged to William Aubrey (?–1731), a London merchant, who demanded a hefty marriage settlement of two thousand pounds. Unable to meet Aubrey's demand,

Penn attempted to persuade his future son-in-law to accept a land grant instead. Aubrey refused, and forced him to sign a note for the sum and pay ten percent in interest yearly. After Letitia married Aubrey, in 1702, Hannah assumed the responsibility for paying the dowry through the funds that came from Pennsylvania. It was a duty she did not relish, considering her new son-in-law a "muck-

  
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worm," or money-grubber. In addition, William Penn Jr., the founder's eldest son and heir, refused to accept any personal or family responsibility. Instead of relocating to the colony to assist in the administration of the proprietorship, "Billy" preferred to remain in London, where he

enjoyed the recklessness of a libertine, while his wife lived at Worminghurst, his father's residence. The dissolute Billy greatly disappointed Penn and his extravagant spending only worsened his father's financial circumstances.

When his deputy governor Andrew Hamilton died in 1703, Penn had had enough. He had become disillusioned with his colony and initiated a decade-long process to sell the proprietary rights to Pennsylvania to the Crown. He even revised his will so Hannah would retain only the most valuable land and distribute it for her children and relieve them of any responsibility for the government by directing his trustees to complete the sale if it had not already occurred before his death.

In 1712, Penn reduced his asking price from twenty thousand pounds to the twelve thousand pounds that Queen Anne (1665–1714) was willing to pay. But when he suffered a severe stroke in October the deal was suspended. Hannah tried to revive the negotiations, but objections by her stepson Billy, who claimed the colony as part of his inheritance, and her son-in-law William Aubrey, who saw Pennsylvania as a source of income, eliminated that

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*Pennsbury Manor (above), established in 1683 in Bucks County, was the country estate and residence of the founder and his wife.*

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possibility. With her husband physically and mentally incapacitated, she assumed the governorship of the colony in his name.

Upon her husband's death, on July 18, 1718, Hannah's executrix role entered a new phase. While Penn's will identified his widow as the sole executrix of the colony only until it could be sold back to the Crown, she strengthened her power by earning the trust of government officials in Pennsylvania. Chief among them were Provincial Council members James Logan, Richard Hill, Isaac Norris, Samuel Preston, and Jonathan Dickinson. Appealing to these individuals on the pretense that she was a "poor helpless woman," Hannah secured their loyalty and assistance. Logan, in particular, was "heartedly affected" by her plight. Shortly after her appeal, Logan wrote to Hannah promising to attend to her affairs in the colony and to assume the role of a confidant. However, Hannah Penn was *not* a "poor, helpless woman," but rather a shrewd diplomat, who understood the necessity of working through recognized political channels in the colony. Without the advice and counsel of these officials, she might have fallen victim to the incompetence of Deputy Governor Charles Gookin, a wildly erratic individual whom her husband had appointed in 1709. Gookin, considered insane by many of his contemporaries, constantly warred with the Assembly, mismanaged funds, and antagonized the Provincial Assembly with threats to dissolve their sessions. With the active support of her allies, Hannah navigated the appointment of a close family friend, Sir William Keith, through the Provincial Council, and, in September 1716, he assumed the deputy governorship.

Hannah, herself, supervised the distribution of land grants in order to ensure that her husband's peaceable policy towards the Indians was respected and that trustworthy people settled in the colony. Not only was this a politically savvy decision, but a practical one that enabled her to gain income from collecting quitrents and pay off her family's heavy bills. Most of the warrants were signed by Penn himself, either before his stroke, or with Hannah's assistance afterwards.

Despite Hannah's hopes that her husband would recover, Penn's health continued to decline. Often failing to recognize the friends who visited him and not always certain of his surroundings, he lived in a state of confusion until his death on July 30, 1718. By that time Hannah had assumed more responsibility for Penn-

sylvania than the law permitted. At the same time, her authority was sanctioned not only by English custom, which favored family control of property and recognized a widow as head of the family, but also by Penn's own will.

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Penn, in accordance with his plans to return the colony to royal control, was careful to separate the land from the government in his will. He left the government of Pennsylvania in trust to two noblemen, John, Earl of Poulet, and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford. Penn relied on these two to complete the surrender of the colony to the Crown. The land, on the other hand, was to be retained by his family, specifically, Hannah's sons John, Thomas, Richard, and Dennis. Penn's eldest son Billy was left with the Irish estate that had been in the Penn family since the mid-seventeenth century, as well as the apparently meaningless title, "Proprietor of Pennsylvania." Dissatisfied with his inheritance, Billy filed suit, claiming that his father had no power to separate the government of Pennsylvania from the land and that both belonged to him under the English law's inheritance principle of primogeniture which seemed implied in Penn's 1681 Charter from King Charles II. After Billy's unexpected death, in 1720, his son, Springett, continued to challenge the will. Hannah, who brought suit against both Billy and

Springett, finally established the validity of her claim, which was upheld by the British Court of Exchequer on December 13, 1726, one week before Hannah died. Thus, although the Exchequer Court had to restate its decision again on July 4, 1727, because of Hannah's own will and the intervening marriage of her daughter, Margaret, Hannah had died with the knowledge that her children and her husband's wishes as to the lands of Pennsylvania had prevailed.

Her own sons were a source of pride for Hannah. John, the eldest, displayed good sense and an aptitude for politics. Apprenticed to a Bristol linen draper, John might have been a worthy successor to his father had he not struggled with poor health. Thomas, apprenticed to a London merchant, was proficient in business. Hannah relied on him for help to pay off debts, to placate creditors, and to arrange loans. She pampered Richard and Dennis, the two youngest sons, whom she enrolled at the finest schools in London. Both excelled in their studies and appeared to be able successors to their father.

Family responsibilities did not prevent Hannah from performing her duties as executrix. Nor were the two obligations mutually exclusive. Realizing that she was losing income from quitrents owed to the Penn estate from settlers in the Lower Counties, Hannah asked James Logan, as early as 1713, to act on the boundary dispute with Maryland. Inaccurate maps and faulty surveys caused much confusion about the dividing line between the Lower Counties and Maryland.

Correspondence in Hannah Penn's hand.

Neighbours, if my brother has not heard this think you had better not mention it to him. for if there is the least spark of affection left in his Breast for her, it could only serve to make him uneasy, wch I think I have wrote her some in this your Patience, therefore with our joint best wishes for your self & your Family Comdare,  
Your very Aff: Serv:  
Hannah Penn

pray that my brother know I have recd a letter from him which I shall answer by the next ship



Consequently, the citizens did not know which proprietors to honor, the Penns or Lord Baltimore, who insisted that most of Chester County and even Philadelphia itself belonged to Maryland. After years of negotiation, Hannah, on February 17, 1724, agreed with Lord Baltimore that the "inhabitants in the disputed territory should not be disturbed by the claims of either party" and that "no surveys or grants of land be made near the boundaries." The agreement proved to be Hannah's greatest diplomatic success, earning her the respect of the inhabitants.

Hannah Penn also kept a close watch on the activities of Deputy Governor Keith, ensuring that the interests of the colonists were being observed. She maintained a steady correspondence with him, as well as with her allies in the Provincial Council, who also monitored his actions and reported back to her. She reproved Keith when he did not challenge legislation that was incompatible with English laws, to him a loathsome task since the Assembly voted on the amount of his salary. Their relationship rapidly deteriorated when Hannah discovered, in 1724, that Keith bypassed the Provincial Council and her in sending proposed colonial legislation to the Crown for approval, and surveying lands for himself without her consent. When Keith challenged Hannah's authority, in 1725, by appealing to the Assembly for a mutual alliance against the proprietorship, she had had enough. Keith was dismissed and Colonel Patrick Gordon, another Penn ally, was made the new deputy governor of Pennsylvania. She assured her friends in the Provincial Council that in "so weighty a matter as that of passing laws," she would uphold the right of the Council to be consulted. Hannah also rewarded James Logan's loyalty by retaining him as the Secretary and Clerk of the Privy Council and also as Commissioner of Property "so that he may enjoy freely all the profits and prerequisites belonging to him by reason of the office."

Hannah Penn's obligation as a mother and devoted spouse merged with her responsibilities as executrix of Pennsylvania. Shortly before her death on December 20, 1726, Hannah, with confidence, referred to the success with which she met these obligations. "For the people are safe and think themselves so," she wrote of the Pennsylvania colonists. "Their comfort is so near interwoven with mine and that my children's whole fortune, my husband's reputation, my own satisfaction and their happiness hang all in a thread together and therefore shall be carefully



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preserved by me." As a result of the founder's final wish to have the domain of his colony owned by his offspring by Hannah, Pennsylvania was governed by Hannah's sons, Thomas and Richard, until the outbreak of the American Revolution, the event that finally severed the relationship between England and the American colonies. ✦

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*Overlooking the Delaware River, Pennsbury Manor, William's Penn's country estate, in Bucks County, offers visitors a glimpse of a way of life for an English gentleman three hundred years ago. Opened in 1939, the forty-three-acre historic site recalls the beautiful house—the one the founder loved most and the one in which he spent less than four years—that architects re-created using Penn's own directions and descriptions. For informa-*

*Francis Place's charcoal portrait of Hannah Penn.*

*tion on family programs and special events, write: Pennsbury Manor, 400 Pennsbury Memorial Rd., Morrisville, PA 19067; telephone (215) 946-0400; or visit [www.pennsburymanor.org](http://www.pennsburymanor.org) on the Web. Pennsbury Manor is administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in association with the Pennsbury Society.*

*Recently published by Stackpole Books and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), **Pennsbury Manor: Pennsylvania Trail of History Guide** offers readers a glimpse of the lives of William and Hannah Penn while they occupied their country house on the banks of the Delaware River. Written by Larry E. Tise, former PHMC executive director, **Pennsbury Manor** features color photography by David J. Healy, historical maps, drawings, and paintings, as well as directions for visiting the historic site. **Pennsbury Manor: Pennsylvania Trail of History Guide** is available for \$10.00 plus \$4.00 for shipping. (Pennsylvania residents add six percent state sales tax). To order, send check or money order, made payable to the Pennsylvania Heritage Society, to: PHMC Publications Program, Commonwealth Keystone Building, Plaza Level, 400 North St., Harrisburg, PA 17120-0053. For charge and gift orders, telephone toll-free (800) 747-7790.*

#### FOR FURTHER READING

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