

Woman deserves Pa. governor status

I am no fan of Gov. Tom Corbett. His efforts to starve and privatize public education and slash thousands of public-sector jobs while shielding the natural gas industry from reasonable taxation and sufficient health, safety and zoning regulation are unconscionable for a steward of the public trust.

That's why I found myself in uncharted waters last month when he sought to "correct history" by recognizing Hannah Penn as Pennsylvania's first female governor. Finally, I agree with Mr. Corbett on something.

For every gubernatorial election I can remember, the political pundits insisted that our fair state has never had a female governor. I never knew whether they were ignorant of Hannah Penn, who served as executrix of Pennsylvania between 1712 and 1726, or they conveniently dismissed her because she was not elected to the office. But the omission always disturbed me.

So, I felt vindicated when Gov. Corbett, as part of Women's History Month, honored Hannah's "leadership and strength of character as the first woman to lead Pennsylvania." Shortly after, the governor and his wife, Susan, unveiled a colorful portrait of Hannah Penn painted by Philadelphia artist Ellen Cooper. That portrait will

eventually be placed inside the Governor's Office alongside those of Pennsylvania's other chief executives.



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To be sure, colonial Pennsylvania had many royal governors, lieutenant governors and presidents of the Executive Council since its founding in 1681. None were elected by popular vote, though. The governor was not elected until the Constitution of 1790 went into effect.

But that does not diminish Hannah Penn's claim as Pennsylvania's first female governor. Nor does it lessen the important role she played in preserving peace in the colony at a critical point in its history.

Originally, the colony's governorship was held by Quaker founder and proprietor William Penn. Because political and family responsibilities forced him to return to England, Penn lived in the colony for only four years (1682-1684, 1699-1701). Instead, he was more of an absentee landlord who governed through a series of lieutenants.

Between Penn's two trips to the colony, his wife Gulielma Maria Springett

died, leaving him to care for their two surviving children, Letitia and William Penn Jr. Shortly after, he met Hannah Callowhill, the daughter of a wealthy Quaker merchant, who was 24 years younger than Penn. Their courtship amounted to little more than a year before they married in Bristol, England, on March 5, 1696.

Hannah proved to be a dedicated, loving spouse. Not only did she give Penn three sons who would eventually assume the proprietorship of Pennsylvania, but she possessed an exceptional mind for business that would bail him out of personal financial debt.

After Penn suffered a stroke in 1712, Hannah served as Pennsylvania's acting proprietor and head of government. Working with a series of deputy governors, she handled all of the province's official business as well as her husband's other complicated financial and legal affairs.

Her greatest achievement was preserving Penn's noble vision of peaceful relations between the diverse people of his colony. She worked hard to maintain friendly relations with the Lenape, Conestoga and Iroquois Indians by executing all treaties herself.

She prevented the outbreak of civil war between Pennsylvania and

Maryland over an ongoing boundary dispute. And she lessened the political dissension that existed in Pennsylvania's assembly by mediating the conflicts between a stubborn Quaker minority and a growing non-Quaker majority.

After Penn's death, in July 1718, Hannah thwarted attempts by a highly irresponsible stepson to lay claim to the province. In an effort to cut his stepmother and her children out of the inheritance, William Penn Jr., Penn's eldest son, mounted a legal effort to contest his father's will.

Although he died before the case was settled, his son, Springett, attempted to have the court declare the will invalid, asserting that his grandfather was mentally incompetent when he wrote it. Hannah prevailed, however, ensuring that her children received the estate.

When she died on Dec. 20, 1726, the proprietorship of Pennsylvania passed to her three sons: John, Thomas and Richard.

Two-hundred and eighty-eight years later, it's high time we put another qualified female in the governor's office. I'm sure Democratic gubernatorial candidate Allyson Schwartz would agree.

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