

# EXPLAINING V

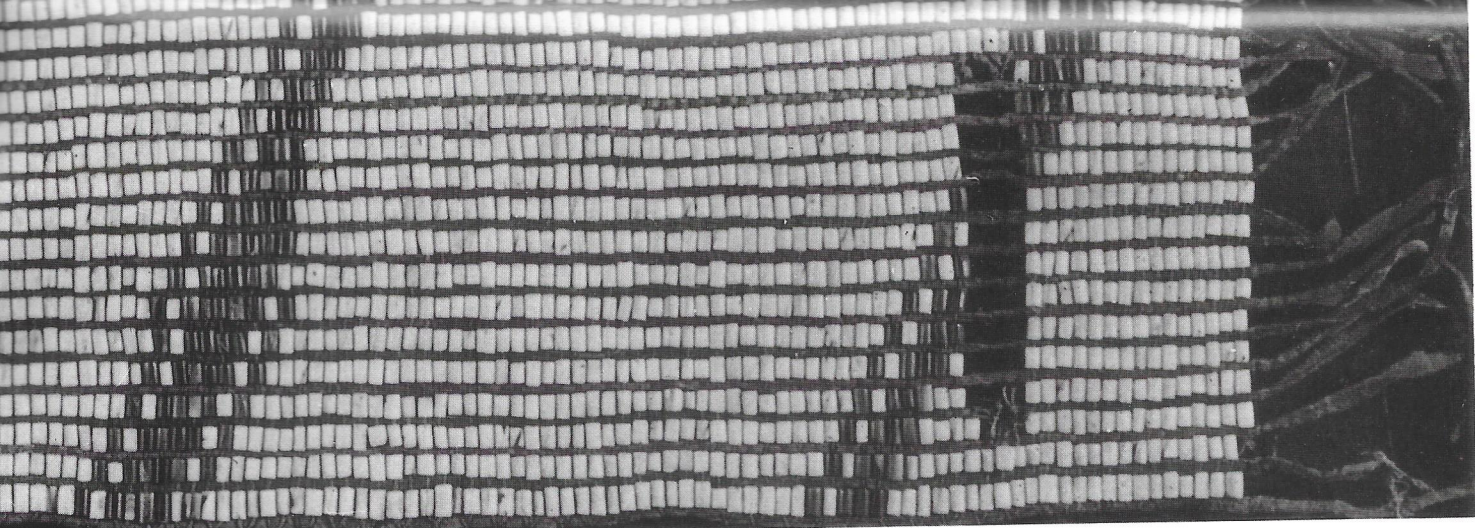
## On the 350th Anniversary of His Birth

*In his journal entry of December 29, 1667, noted seventeenth century English diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) wrote that his young neighbor William Penn “has returned from Ireland a Quaker—or some very melancholy thing—that he cares for no company, nor comes into any.” For Pepys, who despised the nonconformist Quakers, Penn’s reclusiveness was “a pleasant thing.” The diarist was affronted by the sect, which consciously disregarded all expressions of class distinction, as well as the rituals and compulsory religious observances of the Anglican church. Nor did Pepys, secretary of the admiralty, have much respect for the young Quaker’s father, Admiral William Penn, whom he criticized as a “hypocritical rogue” for allowing his son the transgression of becoming a member of the radical sect. Although Pepys was infamous for fostering local gossip, there is some truth in the suggestion that the young Penn had forsaken an aristocratic way of life by joining the Religious Society of Friends.*

*William Penn was born in London on October 24, 1644, the son of an aspiring aristocrat later knighted by King Charles II for his service to the*

*Crown. Expected to follow in his father’s footsteps, young William entered Oxford University in 1660, but was dismissed two years later for refusing to participate in required Anglican observances; instead, he joined a group of radical free thinkers. For the next five years, Penn led a life of leisure. A grand tour of Europe was followed by two years of legal studies, and a stint in Ireland to supervise the family’s estates. It was during his stay in Ireland that Penn came under the influence of Quaker preacher Thomas Loe and—“with an opening of joy”—converted to Quakerism. Infuriated by his son’s decision, Admiral Penn banished him from home. Embittered, father and son did not reconcile until 1670, shortly before the admiral’s death.*

*For many, it is difficult to imagine William Penn as a rebellious adolescent or as a faithful adherent of a nonconformist religious sect. History books have portrayed Penn as the idealistic founder of a progressive, utopian colony; the impassioned defender of liberty of conscience; and the political theorist who established participatory government. That is precisely why historians celebrate Penn, on the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth, as the*



# WILLIAM PENN

An Interview with Richard S. Dunn by William C. Kashatus III

*founding father who championed many of the inalienable rights often taken for granted today. And yet of all the seventeenth century's founding fathers, William Penn remains the most mysterious because so little is actually known about his temperament, personality, and motivations.*

*What is known of William Penn's life has been drawn primarily from business correspondence and public documents, most of which were written after his religious conversion at the age of twenty-three. Few personal materials exist. In fact, of the twenty-six hundred papers that have survived, only seventy-five are private family letters, making it difficult for scholars and students to understand Penn fully. Despite the great number of political, religious, and business documents that have survived, controversy still obscures Penn's personal reasons for settling his New World colony, further complicating the historian's task of interpreting an already elusive figure.*

*One historian, however, has managed to sift through this collection of documents and shed some light on William Penn, the man. He is Richard S. Dunn, professor of American history at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the*

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*Tamamend, a Delaware Indian Chief, presented a wampum belt as a symbol of friendship to Pennsylvania's founder.*

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*Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies. For nine years, from 1978 to 1987, he and his wife Mary Maples Dunn, now president of Smith College, co-edited The Papers of William Penn, a four volume edition of papers and letters to and from him.*

*Richard S. Dunn is neither romantic nor cynical about William Penn; rather, he makes a conscious effort to detach himself from the more gloried aspects of the founding father's character. As an editor of The Papers of William Penn, Dunn found himself not so much "interpreting" Penn as "explaining" him. His chief concern was to allow the founding father to speak for himself by presenting Penn's correspondence in an intelligible way with a minimum of interpretive commentary. In this interview, Richard S. Dunn discusses the exciting experience of editing The Papers of William Penn and addresses the difficulties, as well as the rewards, in attempting to explain Pennsylvania's founding father.*

The task of editing *The Papers of William Penn* must have been enormously demanding. The edition comprises close to three thousand pages of Penn's previously unpublished writings. What inspired you to undertake such a tremendous project?

I have to confess that I did not know all that much about Penn when I got started in 1978. My wife was the William Penn expert. She had written her doctoral dissertation on Penn, and her first book, *William Penn: Politics and Conscience*, was about Penn's political ideas and belief in religious liberty. But as a seventeenth century Anglo-American historian, I am interested in every aspect of English settlement in the New World. I've done work on the colonists who came to New England in the seventeenth century, and I've done work on the colonists who came to early Pennsylvania too. Of course, anyone who is going to study William Penn has to realize that he was an Englishman, not an American. He only lived four years here and to understand anything about Penn you must understand something about Quakerism, and you also have to understand something about the society he grew up in and rebelled against. I was not an expert in Quakerism but I could count on my wife for help there, and we formed a partnership when we set out to do the editing for *The Papers of William Penn*.



of Penn's letters during his early years and with his first marriage were probably not preserved by his second wife, who outlived him and had no interest in that side of things. So we have almost no letters from Penn's boyhood or early adulthood, and the historian is left to make all kinds of guesses about his early life.

**I have often thought of William Penn as a man who lived his life in stages: Quaker evangelist, political philosopher, urban planner, and moralist. How accurate is this observation?**

Penn went through some very dramatic stages. It's hard to say anything about his first stage or the early years of his life from 1644, when he is born, to 1667, when he converts to Quakerism. That part is the most shadowed. But during the next phase, from about 1667 to 1680, he becomes a very belligerent champion of Quakerism, isolating himself from his father's upper class world in order to aid George Fox, the founder of the movement. And then, in the early 1680s when he decides to found a New

World colony, Penn suddenly changes again. He pursues a kind of "sunshine policy," dropping all of his belligerence and inviting a wide range of people to join him in his new colony, including non-Quakers.

There was another rapid change in the mid- to late 1680s when he returns from Pennsylvania to England and



*Penn seems to be always on the move, perhaps because he was afraid of confronting himself, of asking the painful question, "Who am I?"*

**I understand that few materials have survived to give us insight into the personality of the young William Penn. What happened to the early documents?**

Unfortunately, Penn's early years, before his conversion to Quakerism, is the thinnest part of our whole edition. I guess it's necessary to say that while there are close to three thousand surviving Penn letters—which is a lot for a seventeenth century figure—it is still a very small number compared with a founding father like Benjamin Franklin, whose surviving papers number close to thirty-five thousand. Other famous Americans of the Revolutionary generation—Washington, Jefferson, and Adams in particular—have left even larger collections of papers. But we do have more of Penn's papers than any other seventeenth century Anglo-American figure. Nevertheless, as generally happens, the papers that have survived are mostly from the last years of his career and they are mostly impersonal because nearly all of his private letters were destroyed. Either he destroyed them or, what seems more likely, his descendants destroyed them. We know that a man named Captain Granville tried to destroy the entire collection of Penn papers in the 1870s and did destroy a number of them in a warehouse in London before he was stopped. But even beyond that, a lot

becomes a secret advisor for King James II. Here you have this "Quaker-activist-apologist" for an intolerant Catholic king, and Penn ends up at least as isolated as he had been during the 1670s, only this time with more disastrous consequences because he's on the wrong side in the Glorious Revolution. He is forced to go into hiding after James is overthrown and he cannot participate in any of the events of the revolution settlement, most of which he agreed with ideologically. That launches him into what I see as a final phase which is that of an elder statesman and public philosopher, still trying to run his colony but not doing a very good job of it. Penn is not really able to take control of his colony simply because he isn't there enough, but he still publishes and presents himself to the public as a moral advisor.

Indeed, Penn did experience these kinds of distinct phases. The funny thing, though, is that not only did these phases tend to contradict each other in obvious ways, but it is difficult to find a total inner consistency to this man. That he is a great man, I have no doubt, but just exactly what made him tick is not clear to me or to my wife. I tend to agree with her feeling that Penn seems to be always on the move, perhaps because he was afraid of confronting himself, of asking the painful question, "Who am I?"

**Did Penn possess any particular characteristic or personality trait that impressed you during your editorship of the various documents in this collection?**

One of the things that tended to impress me was the fantastic energy of the man—and it is something quite a few historians seem to overlook. He was just a whirlwind of activity throughout his life until he became quite elderly. He was always traveling, always on the move—something uncommon given the state of travel in the seventeenth century. As a youth he studied in France; he took care of his father's estate in Ireland, where he first came into contact with the Quakers; and later, after his conversion to Quakerism, he spread his religious beliefs all around England, into Wales, to Germany and to the Netherlands. So he traveled very widely and, it seems, almost continuously. He obviously had full reserves of physical stamina. Once he became a Quaker, he not only wrote close to one hundred tracts in defense of Quakerism, some of them very,

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*With his wife Mary Maples Dunn, Richard S. Dunn (facing page) served as co-editor of The Papers of William Penn. Edward Hicks (1780-1849) painted dozens of versions of his famous Peaceable Kingdom (below), in which William Penn's relationship with the Indians was depicted.*

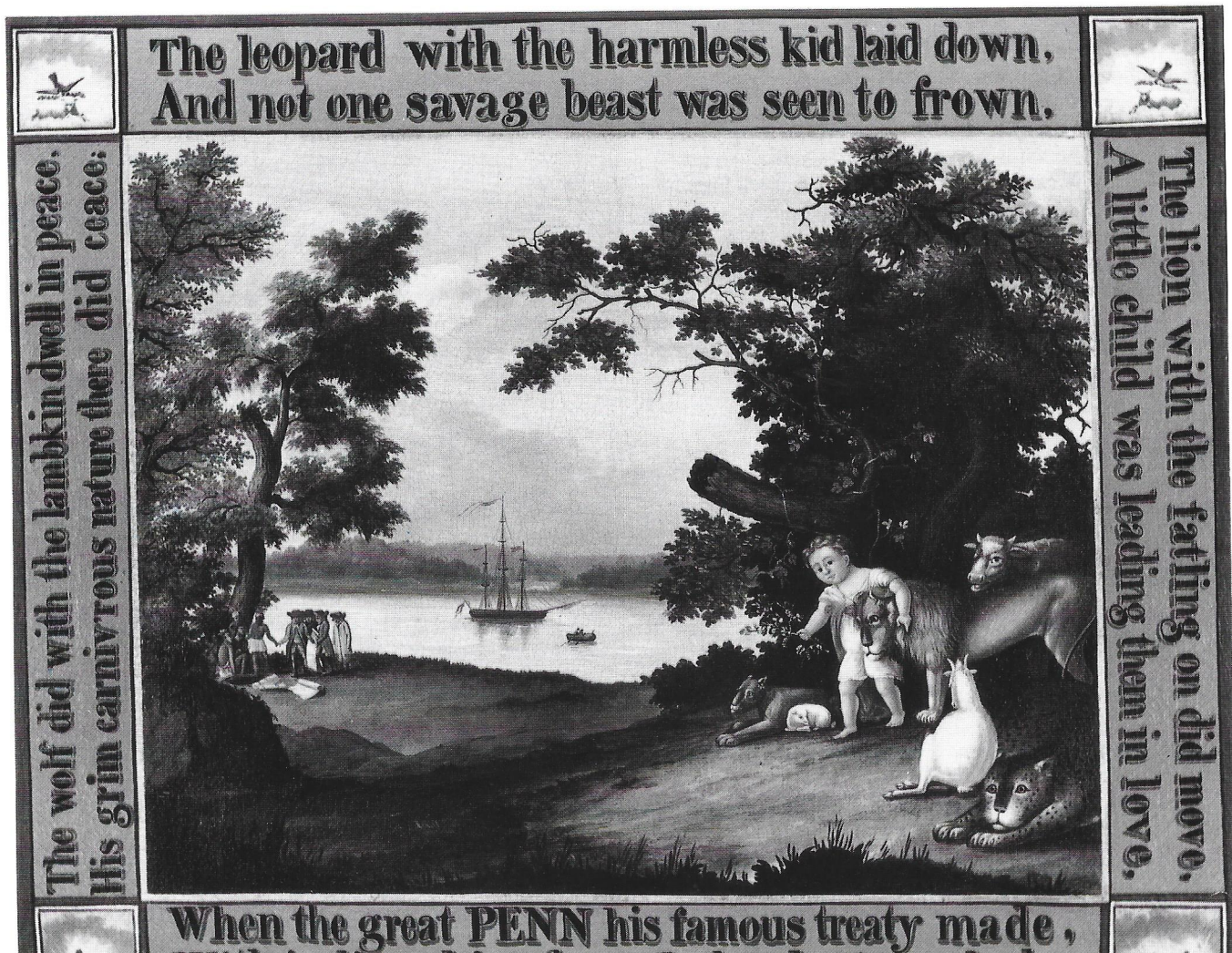
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very long, but he engaged in enormous numbers of disputations with critics of Quakerism, he preached among the Quakers all the time, and he just threw himself into this cause as he did almost everything that interested him. So I see him as a man of enormous physical vigor.

**Just how significant was he to the survival, as well as to the growing respectability, of a movement that at its founding was extremely unpopular in English society?**

I think his significance is great. Almost anyone would agree that English Quakerism went through two radically different stages from its inception in the late 1640s to the end of the seventeenth century. The first is clearly associated with its founder George Fox. It is a religion largely of the down-trodden, a religion of enormous hope, and one striving to be universalistic in its appeal. As people are changed by the Quakers they will change society. They will be able to cleanse the corruption and imperfection of the world. So there was this early, powerful belief in revolutionary, moral change. Fox and his early followers not only got the Friends started, but they kept the movement going well into the 1660s. But by the time Penn was converted in 1667, the movement was clearly beginning to alter.

The Quakers could not have sustained their original apocalyptic style very much longer. They had to acquire



more discipline; they had to have some kind of meeting structure, a hierarchy of people including elder figures who would serve as a kind of a ministry. They needed people to write in their defense, to describe their position, and to fight for toleration—not a fight to conquer the world but a fight for preservation. Had Penn not accepted that kind of role, the Friends were going to be imprisoned and suppressed. Not surprisingly, he became the leading figure of the movement because he had the best connections to the government. Those connections allowed the Quakers to survive, but they became a much more inwardly-looking society than they had been earlier.

**Penn's settlement of a colony in the New World has been considered the fullest expression of his Quaker faith. In fact, he referred to his settlement as a "Holy Experiment." What did he mean?**

The Holy Experiment can be seen in religious terms as well as in political terms. In religious terms, it was an effort to sustain Quaker principles in action, to bring Quakers into a place where, for the first time, they could actually be in charge. In England, Quakers had no real rights of citizenship; they could not participate in the political process; they were complete outsiders who were subject to control and persecution by the authorities. Penn wanted a society in which they would be in charge and one in which they would be able to convey some of their most distinctive doctrines, such as the peace testimony.

At the same time, Penn made it clear that Pennsylvania was not exclusively for Quakers. It appears that a great many people who were disposed toward Quakerism but were not actually members of meeting in England, became so when they came to Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, very quickly there became a clear division between Quakers and non-Quakers.

The Quakers were eager enough to take political charge but they were very hostile to non-Quakers when it came to sharing power with them, which is one of the reasons they didn't get along with the settlers of the so-called lower

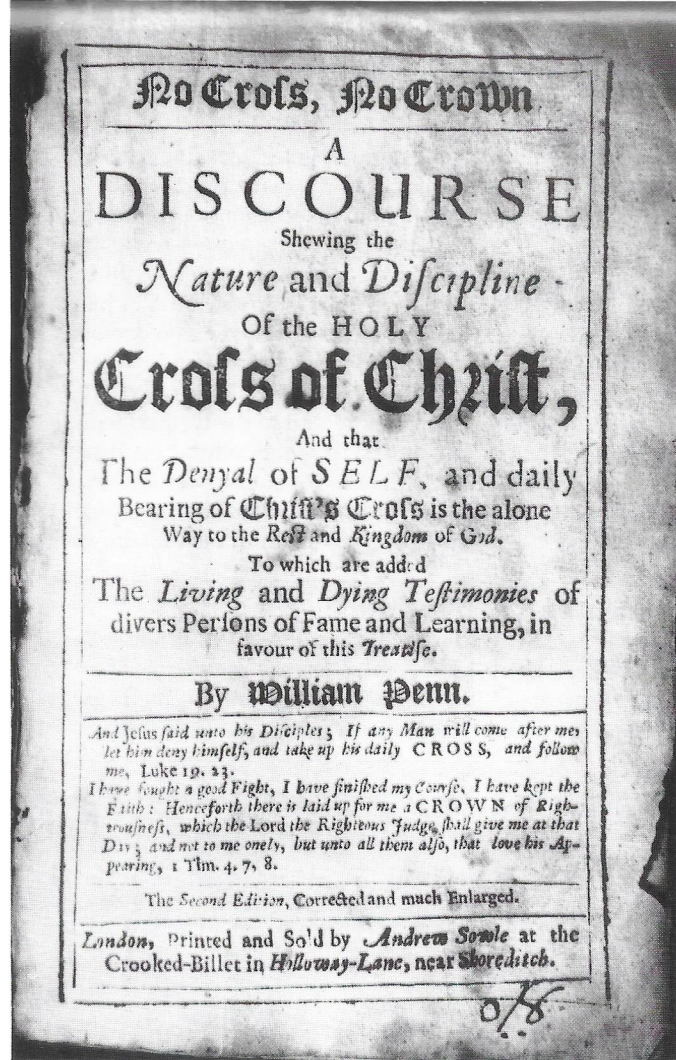


*Many regard him as a "good-hearted fool," a man with wonderful notions that were, nevertheless, totally impractical.*

counties—that is, the present state of Delaware—or even with those Anglicans who settled in Philadelphia. There was no disposition to share power with these non-Quakers, so the Quaker experiment could not apply—and did not apply—to the entire society almost from the beginning.

In political terms, the Holy Experiment was to be a very participatory society in which Penn sought to distribute power. He was the Proprietor but he did not give himself any particular proprietary role. Initially, he did not have a veto over any legislative proceedings and he hoped to persuade his fellow Quakers and fellow colonists to achieve a consensus or a benevolent common understanding of how to govern society. And here, I think, there is a certain amount of disagreement and misunderstanding.

Penn went to great lengths to compose a constitution for his colony, far greater lengths than any other seventeenth century founder. In the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania [Philadelphia] there are twenty drafts of a



constitution written out by Penn and his advisors. They were clearly trying to choose between two kinds of constitutions. The first design, known as the *Fundamental Constitutions*, was an extremely democratic one in which the

people elected assemblymen. The assemblymen were responsible directly to the people. They were elected every year, and they had total power, except for the fact that they could be voted in or out the next year. This democratic style of government was not the one Penn settled on. Instead, he settled on a style of government, more similar to other colonies, in which there would be a governor, and an assembly with an upper house and a lower house. But in Penn's plan, known as the *Frame of Government*, the upper house would draw up legislation and the lower house would pass on it.

Penn was trying to prevent corruption, trying to work out a legislative process whereby the upper house would have to appeal to the lower house. It was an idealistic effort to avoid factional interest groups, but it has been interpreted as an aristocratic form of government. I think that is a mistaken interpretation because originally Penn wanted a very large body of people in both houses—he wanted as many people as possible involved. He wasn't thinking in terms of

an elitist "House of Lords" type of chamber in the upper house, he was thinking more in terms of two chambers that would prevent political corruption. However you interpret it, though, the colonists did not like this *Frame of Government* and within twenty years they rejected it.

In 1701, they revised the constitution to provide for a single chamber and a governor who had an advisory council with no legislative authority. As a result, Pennsylvanians witnessed a naked conflict between the governor and the assembly, and this was true throughout the colonial period. No other colonial assembly had so much power, and no other executive was so nakedly pitted against a legislative body. It was the exact opposite of what Penn wanted and from my point of view wasn't all that democratic either, because the new constitution of 1701, called the *Charter of Privileges*, enabled a coterie of people, mostly Quakers, to remain in power as assemblymen year after year. Ironically, the system ended up becoming the most fractious one in all of the colonies. I guess you could say Penn underestimated human nature. I think, however, that his system would have had a better chance had he remained here in America and assumed a much more active role in government instead of returning to England in 1684.

**What about the social implications of his Holy Experiment? How, for example, do you view Penn's treatment of the Indians?**

Most historians agree that, compared to other seventeenth century colonizers, William Penn had a benevolent attitude towards the Indians. He admired their generosity, he did pay for their land, and he did make treaties to prevent warfare. I also believe that he certainly would have disapproved of his successors' ill treatment of the Indians, their outright stealing of Indian lands, as well as the gradual frontier warfare of the 1760s. But beyond that, it seems that

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*One of William Penn's most significant religious works was No Cross, No Crown (facing page), in which he argued for simplicity instead of self-indulgence. Violet Oakley's mural interpreting Penn's vision (below), which decorates the State Capitol.*

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Penn did little to protect Indian society. He took advantage of the Indians by exercising the European conception of purchasing land through treaties. It is also clear that he did not believe in an interracial society and would not have been disappointed if the Indians decided to move out of his colony. Therefore, you cannot find in Penn a fully satisfying attitude towards the Indians.

**On the issue of race relations, should Penn be considered a man of his time, believing in the natural superiority of whites?**

One could say that Penn was a man of his time. To be sure, he had several African American slaves. There are records of these slaves from his estate at Pennsbury and we know that he believed slave-keeping to be a satisfactory arrangement because they could be kept permanently. While I'd like to think of Penn as a man a bit ahead of his time because of his ideas on tolerance, it is certainly difficult to make him into a twentieth century liberal based on his outlook.

**Many historians consider Penn to be a great visionary but a poor administrator who failed to implement his vision. For example, he planned a colony based on the utopian ideals of religious toleration, human equality, and participatory government, but he did not possess the business acumen or the pragmatism to make it work. How accurate is this assessment?**

I think William Penn is a more significant figure than he is generally presented. Many regard him as a "good-hearted fool," a man with wonderful notions that were, nevertheless, totally impractical. In other words, you can admire his idealism, but you always end up saying his ideas are foolish. Still, I think you really need people like Penn to insist on the possibility of tolerance and pluralism in order to give it something of a start in America. If we hadn't had a founder like that in Pennsylvania, we wouldn't have had the kind of multicultural, pluralistic society that in fact was established here. After all, many of the Quakers who came here were really not interested in welcoming the Welsh, or the Germans, or the Irish. So I think that while Penn was



specific parts of his plan, his generous view of the world is very important.

At the same time, I also see Penn as a man with an enormously impractical streak. He knew that in order for his colony to succeed he had to recruit widely and especially to recruit investors. Therefore, he offered land on very attractive terms and tried to plan settlement in a very orderly and sensible way. While he did raise about ten thousand pounds from the sale of land—a great deal of money for the time—he also spent much more than that on his own. He actually lost money on the colony. In fact, Penn was never a good bookkeeper and left all business details to his steward. This tendency to spend twice as much as he brought in, coupled with his inattention to business details, left him hopelessly in debt near the end of his life.

### What legacy has William Penn left us living in the twentieth century?

I think it's a mixed legacy. I don't think that any other early founder had such a sweeping vision of a new society, so radically different from the one he knew in the Old World. The Puritans of New England certainly wanted to create a society different from the one they had left, but they were really just trying to establish a community of like-minded people. They did not want much change at all and in fact retained a hierarchical system, divisions between rich and poor, and a large laboring class which gradually became black and enslaved. With Penn, however, you have a person who was trying to create a society that was fundamentally different from Europe. That needs to be stressed even though



A drawing in chalk of William Penn by artist Francis Place.

and the ability to voice that opinion without the fear of persecution. ✦

William C. Kashatus III, a regular contributor to *Pennsylvania Heritage*, studied with Richard S. Dunn at the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a doctorate in history of education. He is director of religious studies and community service at the William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia.

John B. B. Trussell's *William Penn: Architect of a Nation*, a concise but broadly inclusive biography of Pennsylvania's founder published by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), offers readers an appreciation of Penn's life and work. Copies are available by

sending a check or money order for \$3.95, plus \$2.00 for shipping and handling, made payable to "Friends of the PHMC," to: Publications Sales Program, Dept. PH, Friends of the PHMC, P. O. Box 11466, Harrisburg, PA 17108-1466. For credit card purchases, telephone (717) 783-2618, or FAX (717) 787-8312. Pennsylvania residents please add 6% state sales tax.

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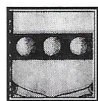
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the most conspicuous features of that society—the pacifism, the broad participatory benevolent government—didn't work out all that well. Nevertheless, Penn's Holy Experiment did establish an atmosphere for diversity and pluralism and some level of toleration which was exercised more fully in this society than any other early American society. For this reason alone, I think William Penn had an extremely progressive outlook. He was able to anticipate features of American society that we take for granted today: the rich diversity of this country of ours, the mix of opinion,