

William Penn In The Conestoga Valley

By M. LUTHER HEISEY

Pennsylvania, Keystone State of the Union, was brought into existence by a strange course of events—an existence marked from the very start by all the elements making for “virtue, liberty, independence”—a state’s motto not carelessly chosen nor applied without just cause. Sir William Penn, daring admiral in the English navy, a favorite at Court, became a creditor of the Crown through loans and for services rendered. Upon the death of Admiral Penn, his son William, finding the obligations still unpaid, approached King Charles II with this proposition—in lieu of the payment of the debt of £16,000, a gift of land in the new world—America—would be acceptable. To this the king readily agreed, promising William Penn land west of the Delaware River, and for a name gave it Pennsylvania, “Penn’s Woods.” Lest it should appear as a sign of vanity in a Quaker, William remonstrated with the king. The name stood when the king assured William it was thus named in honor of his father.

Penn now saw a chance, in a world filled with bigotry and religious intolerance, to colonize this land with the oppressed people of the Quaker faith and other Protestant groups, and started, in all good faith and conscience—with little or no thought of remuneration—a “Holy Experiment,” as he called it, in governmental affairs. So here in Penn’s Woods began one of the first Experiments in religious liberty and democratic form of government.

The laws he promulgated were the most enlightened, just and equitable the world then knew. All people here could worship according to the dictates of their conscience; men would be ruled by an Assembly of their own choosing; laws were amended and humanized—for the English laws meted out capital punishment for over two hundred offenses: Penn thought only murder and treason should be punishable by death.

Penn met the native Indians without a show of force; the non-resistant Quaker policy held inviolate for a long period. His treatment of the natives was so magnanimous and friendly, that their complete confidence was gained. Treaties with them were the only ones “never sworn to and never broken.” He became endeared to the Indians who named him Brother Onas, a name ever afterwards mentioned in Indian conferences with a feeling of affection and regard. (Onas in the Indian language signified *pen*—a writing instrument.)

Penn’s broadness of vision, his liberal “frame of government,” his charitable and humane characteristics, are causes for memorializing his name by an appreciative and respectful citizenry. And so we celebrate (October 24, 1944) the tercentenary of his birth in a fitting and prominent manner.

Penn was granted a charter for his land in 1681, and formulated his Frame of Government in 1682. He arrived in Pennsylvania on his first visit,

October 29, 1682, and returned to England August 12, 1684. He came again to Pennsylvania December 1, 1699, hoping to spend all his remaining days here, but circumstances forced him to go to England on November 1, 1701. Religious and financial trials, added to ill health, kept him in the homeland, where he died July 30, 1718.

When we think of Penn's vast influence in shaping affairs for his province, and in promoting peaceful relations with the Indians, are we not amazed to learn that the high regard and worthy esteem in which his memory is held, was gained in four scant years (actually three years, eight and one-half months) spent among his colonists?

In urging people to colonize his land Penn issued this call, "Let all thrifty men who wish to establish prosperous homes in a new land and all who would live in just equality with their neighbors come to Pennsylvania." "I will put the power with the people," said he. And the following words spoken by Penn have been deemed worthy to be inscribed on the walls of Independence Hall and also cut in granite on the capitol grounds at Harrisburg: "Any government is free to the people under it, whatever be the form, where the laws rule, and the people are a party to those laws: and more than this is tyranny, oligarchy and confusion."

Janney says: "While the great principle of religious liberty had before been proclaimed in Rhode Island and in Maryland, it was reserved for Penn only to give it a clearer expression and wide field of action. The privilege allowed to every man, of worshipping God according to the dictates of his own conscience, is not placed on the ground of humane toleration, but established as an inherent right."

His first assembly, elected by the settlers, but influenced by his broad and benevolent views, enacted a "Great Charter" on April 8, 1683, in which all the functions of government were provided for by the representatives of the people.

Clarkson, in his history, epitomized the character of Penn in the dedicatory page to Lord Holland, in these words: "William Penn, the first statesman, who banishing political expediency, founded his public conduct solely on the principles of justice, by which he furnished a model of government, capable of producing to his own people, a superior degree of morality and happiness, and ensuring to foreigners connected with the same peace, security, moral improvement, and the rights of men."

Says T. I. Wharton, "In the early constitution of Pennsylvania are to be found the distinct annunciation of every great principle; the germ, if not the development, of every valuable improvement in government or legislation, which have been introduced into the political systems of more modern epochs."

And so with all these attributes, "no country on earth ever exhibited such a scene of happiness, innocence and peace, as was witnessed here during the first century of our social existence."

Penn Fostered Schools

To preserve and perpetuate their new freedom, Penn realized that the entire citizenry must be properly educated so that the electorate would be capable of intelligently directing the affairs of their government. To this end, one of the first concerns of Penn was the establishment of schools. He hoped "to provide the means for a good education for every child, and to see that all are taught some good trade or profession, [which] would do more for the promotion of peace and happiness, than all the machinery of courts and prisons."

So in a short time Enoch Flowers was engaged as teacher to open a school in Philadelphia in 1683, and "a few years afterwards 'Friends' Public School' was established there. In this institution the ancient languages were taught, as well as mathematics, and the more useful branches of an English education. The poor were taught gratuitously, and its doors were open to all. By an Act of Assembly it was required *that the laws should be read in the schools.*"

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On the tablet erected in Manor Township by the Lancaster County Historical Society, marking the site of Conestoga Indiantown, the inscription states that William Penn visited there in 1701, but it is silent on his former visit of 1683. Yet we have the testimonies of early writers to that fact. Buck says, "We have the authority of Oldmixon, derived from a personal interview, that sometime this year [1683] Penn made a journey into the interior of the Province." Then adds the obvious fact: "it was made on horseback." Surely not a long journey for one not yet thirty-nine years old.

The Indian chief Kekelappan of Opasiskunk¹ conveyed to Penn on the 10th [of September, 1683], all his rights to lands along *the Susquehanna* with a further promise to sell unto him "at ye next spring at my return from hunting, ye other half of my land, at as reasonable rates as other Indians have been used to sell on this river." It is likely this was brought about by the Proprietary's recent journey into the interior, when he may have visited that portion of the province. (Buck, p. 134.)

On one occasion Col. George Talbot of Maryland said, "if Gov'r Penn should come into Maryland, he would Seize him & his retairce [retinue] in their Journey to Susquehannah fort." As this was recorded in 1684, it is quite apparent that the threat was made after Penn had completed one such journey to the Susquehannah fort. We find this in the minutes of Council, Philadelphia, June 11, 1684, and printed in the *Colonial Records*, vol. 1, p. 60.

In the "Further Account of the Province," written by Penn in 1685, he

¹ In C. Hale Sipe's "Indian Chiefs of Pennsylvania," p. 74, he tells us that Kekelappan was a Conestoga chief. In George P. Donehoo's "Indian Villages and Place Names," we find this item: "Opasiskunk." The village was probably on the Susquehanna River in the region of Conestoga Creek. Opasiskunk is not mentioned elsewhere. Pennsylvania Archives, series 1, vol. 1, p. 67.

states, "I have made a discovery of about a hundred miles west, and find those back lands richer in soil, woods, and fountains, than that by Delaware; especially upon the *Susquehanna river*." To which Buck adds: "Certainly a pretty good judgment respecting the present Lancaster County, one of the garden spots of America."

Penn's City on the Susquehanna

Writing in 1690, William Penn said, "It is now my purpose to make another settlement upon the river of Susquehanna that runs into the Bay of Chesapeake, and bears about fifty miles west from the river Delaware, as appears by the common maps of the English Dominion in America. There I design to lay out a *Plan for the Building of another City*, in the most convenient place for communication with the former plantations on the East: which by land, is as good as done already, a way being laid out between the two rivers very exactly and conveniently, at least three years ago; and which will not be hard to do by water, by the benefit of the river Scoukill; for a branch of that river lies near a branch that runs into Susquehannagh River, and is the Common Course of the Indians. . . ."

"That which Particularly recommends this Settlement, is the known goodness of the Soyll and scituation of the Land, which is high and not mountainous; also the Pleasantness, and Largeness of the River being clear and not rapid, and broader than the Thames at London bridge, many miles above the Place intended for this Settlement."

What a wonderful "Tale of Two Cities" could have been written had Penn's vision materialize; a sister city on the Susquehanna as a friendly rival to the "City of Brotherly Love!" It is no far-fetched fancy to imagine this city becoming the Capital of the United States, for had it grown by the time Congress was looking for a site favorably situated inland on a river (for our town of Columbia was so considered), there is little doubt that its choice would have been assured. This city would have been located south of the present Washington Boro.

Now to Penn's second visit.

Isaac Norris, in a letter dated Phila. 21st of 4th mo. (June), 1701, to Daniel Zachary, says: "I am just come home from Susquehanna, where I have been to meet the Governor [Penn]. We had a roundabout journey, having pretty well traversed the wilderness. We lived nobly at the King's palace at Conestoga, and from thence crossed to the Schoolkill, when we fell in about thirty miles up from thence."

"It was on this occasion, as tradition states, that Penn got lost among the woods on the hill on the northern or Chester County side, near the present Valley Forge, and that he did not know where he was till he got on the hill this side of Valley Creek, when by a glimpse of the Schuylkill and the country to the southward he regained his way, and in consequence named the former hill Mount Misery, and the latter Mount Joy, which names they respectively bear to this day." (Buck.)

The *Colonial Records* of June 6, 1706, tell us "That when he [Penn] was last in the Countrey he visited those of that place, and his son upon his

arrival did the same, in order to cultivate the ancient friendship between ym [them], that he & his posterity might, after his fathers example, maintain peace & a good understanding with them & theirs."

About a month after the return from Conestoga, Penn, writing from his country home at Pennsbury, on the 30th of the 4th mo. (June), 1701, to his secretary, James Logan at Philadelphia, said: I forgot a material point—the last Indian instrument from the Conestoga Indians—which I must have, or a copy, before I can answer Col. Blackiston's letter. . . ."

While not many Quakers settled in this county, there were groups in the eastern and southern parts where they had "meetings."

To William Penn we owe a debt of gratitude for starting us off "on the right foot," giving us laws of greater freedom and justice, the effect of which, we are persuaded, is reflected later in the Bill of Rights of the Federal Constitution, and helped to guide us as a state in "Virtue, Liberty, Independence."

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NOTE. This paper, abridged, was issued to the city and county schools as a service of the Lancaster County Historical Society in commemoration of the three hundredth anniversary of William Penn's birth, and was written by M. Luther Heisey. A state-wide celebration was held on October 24, 1944.

The Historical Society acknowledges the gift of three hundred fifty booklets entitled, "Your Friend, William Penn," from the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company, of Philadelphia, which will be mailed to our membership.