

In the Spotlight

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LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale

William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania

Part 1 of 2

On March 4, 1681, something occurred that brought a British colony into existence and helped shape the future course of a nation.

On that day, King Charles II of England granted William Penn the rights to approximately 45,000 square miles of mostly uncharted land in what would become one of England's most prosperous colonies. Charles wasn't being kind; he was repaying a debt the Crown owed to Penn's father, Admiral William Penn, who died in 1670.

Young William was not exactly his father's ideal son; he had rejected the teachings of the revered Church of England and become a Quaker, which stunned his family. William Penn's conversion to Quakerism formed the foundation for his efforts to start fresh in a place where people could worship freely, a "holy experiment" that broke new ground in the move toward liberty for millions in the decades ahead.

Born on October 14, 1644 in London, William Penn was from a well-known family. His father was recognized for his service in the Royal Navy and owned land in England and Ireland. After a trip to Ireland, the Admiral invited traveling Quaker preacher Thomas Loe to stop in and speak to the family. It was a moment that changed young William's life. The Quaker religion was founded by George Fox, who had raised eyebrows by opposing many of the tenets and practices of the Church of England and Christian churches in general.

After entering Oxford University to study in 1660, Penn rejected the state-sponsored Anglican Church and was later expelled for religious nonconformity—a

serious issue back in the day. In 1666, the Admiral sent William back to Ireland to manage the family estates, a move that would have unintended consequences. William again crossed paths with Loe and the next year converted to Quakerism, a choice that would land him in deep trouble in the years ahead.

Penn was taken into custody four times for criticizing the Anglican Church. That didn't stop him: he wrote a total of 42 books and pamphlets explaining his beliefs in the seven years following his conversion. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he wrote his most famous work "No Cross, No Crown," which condemned the luxuries of England while extolling ascetic self-denial and social reform. As Penn continued to raise the ire of those in power, his father's death allowed him to make a fresh start somewhere else. It is possible that Charles II considered Penn's land grant a way of getting rid of him. It worked.

As proprietor of the new tract, Penn sailed on the ship *Welcome* for the New World in August 1682 with his Frame of Government, which would allow people "...no power of doing mischief, that the will of one man may not hinder the good of a whole country." Freedom of worship would be absolute, with no "approved church."

Penn made a leap forward in political thinking. He included an amending clause in his outline of government—the first of any written constitution—so it could be altered as needed for future generations. Some historians consider this to be a precursor to Article V of the U.S.

Constitution—written more than a century later— which allowed for amendments.

Penn was ready to build a new society as he landed in present day New Castle, Delaware on October 27, 1682; he later travelled north to Pennsylvania soil. Penn's landing site was in today's city of Chester. There stands an historical marker: "This stone marks the spot where WILLIAM PENN landed October 28/29, 1682." The spot where he stepped ashore is estimated to be near the mouth of Chester Creek, a block south from the marker.

Penn wanted to name his colony "Sylvania" after the Latin for "woods" but the King persuaded him to add "Penn" in honor of his father. Pennsylvania's first counties were Bucks, Chester and Philadelphia, all established in 1682, the first two named after areas in England.

Chester County back then was huge compared to what it is today, encompassing parts of Lancaster, Berks and Delaware Counties, each created later by taking portions of Chester County as their territory. In the Chester County Archives a map titled "Chester County, Pennsylvania As Constituted 1690" shows the extent of the county at that time. The map includes areas that we now know as Radnor, Haverford, Darby, Tinticum, Ridley, Springfield, Newtown, Chester and other sites along the northern border of Delaware and the western boundary of Philadelphia County.

Despite 340 years and dozens of books written about him, many people today do not know much about the man who was responsible for it all. William Penn's vision was to create a society where people could be free to pursue their faith, their businesses and live their lives amicably with their neighbors. He even helped design a city whose name hinted at that: Philadelphia, "City of Brotherly Love."

Citizens today in Chester County and around the state should be thankful Penn followed his vision. Despite persecution and imprisonment, he gave us each a chance to pursue our own dreams in an atmosphere of peace and harmony.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. He has written ten books which focus mostly on the Chester County and Philadelphia area. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution." His books are available on www.Amazon.com and through his website at www.GenePisasale.com. Gene can be reached via e-mail at: Gene@GenePisasale.com.



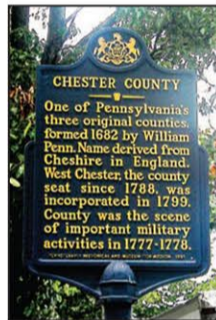
"William Penn" by Frederick S. Lamb.



"George Fox," founder of the Quaker religion by S. Allen.



"Charles II in Garter robes" by John Michael Wright.



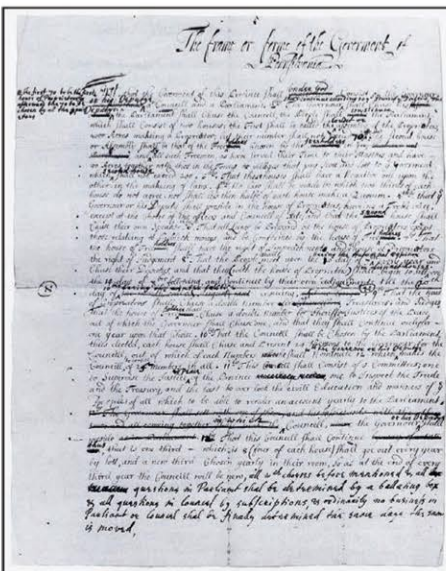
Chester County historical marker by The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.



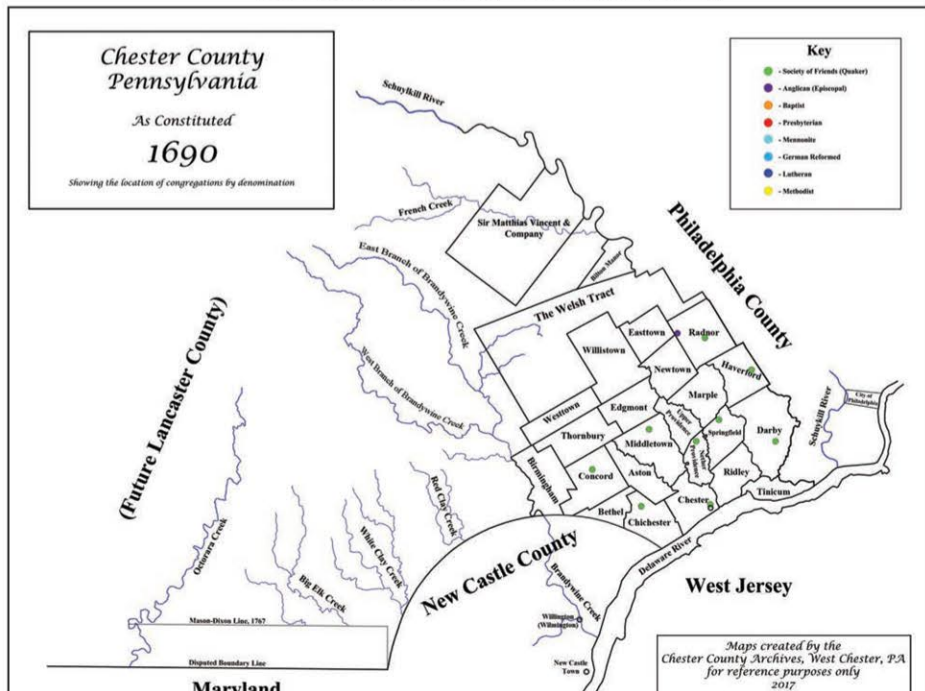
"The Birth of Pennsylvania" by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris.



Pennsylvania Charter to William Penn on March 4, 1681.



First draft of the Frame of Government of Pennsylvania written by William Penn in England 1681.



Chester County Pennsylvania as constituted in 1690 courtesy of the Chester County Archives.