

# In the Spotlight

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## LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale

# William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania

Part 2 of 2

When William Penn's ship *Welcome* landed on the bank of the Delaware River in October 1682, he likely knew that the area had been populated by Indians for centuries, as well as Dutch and Swedish settlers for many years. Penn's vision for a new society included accommodating the views and practices of those people who he met up with in the New World.

Reading of how he successfully interacted with the native inhabitants gives you a greater understanding of how important Penn was in setting a standard by which all other newcomers to the province would be measured in the following decades.

The Leni Lenape (Delaware) Indians inhabited the region from southern New York to New Jersey, southeastern Pennsylvania and Delaware. Numerous Indian tribes roamed the rivers and creeks including the Schuylkill, the Delaware and the Brandywine, the latter of which ran directly through future Chester County. Knowing that friendly relations with the tribes was essential, Penn learned different Native American dialects so he could freely converse with them while negotiating land agreements. Legend has it that Penn made contact with Tamanend, the Chief of the Lenape Turtle Clan, forming the Treaty of Shackamaxon in 1683. The event is captured in a painting titled "The Treaty of Penn with the Indians" by Benjamin West. While this remains a popular story, there is to date no written evidence of this treaty. It is possible that it was more of a "handshake" agreement, but we may never know. West was himself a



Map depicting the extent and tribes of the Leni-Lenape Indians.

Quaker; his painting portrayed the notion that different societies could interact peacefully. It depicts three groups which helped shape Pennsylvania in the 18th century: Native Americans, Quakers and merchants. The French philosopher Voltaire purportedly remarked that the agreement with the Native Americans was "... the only treaty never sworn to and never broken..."

After he got a look around, Penn wanted to put ideas from his Framework of Government to work. He did an excellent job—by instituting a democratic system with freedom of religion, fair jury trials, elected representatives for the people and separation of powers within the government. His framework was ahead of its time and attracted English, Welsh, German and Dutch Quakers and many others from Europe to the colony. He instituted laws which stated that if a European harmed a Native American or his property, court action would have

juries composed equally of Native Americans and Europeans for fairness. Always wanting peaceful relations, Penn met with local Indians many times, offering what he felt were reasonable payments in exchange for land. These have been described by some historians as among the most equitable arrangements made between Europeans and Native Americans.

Like all settlers, Penn needed a place to live. Having been accustomed to an elegant lifestyle in England, he wanted to build a home where he could enjoy the fruits of all his labors. He started construction on Pennsbury Manor in Bucks County along the Delaware River in 1683. His house can be viewed at [www.pennsburymanor.org](http://www.pennsburymanor.org).

Although Penn's relations with Native Americans were successful, his interactions with some Europeans were not so cordial. Shortly after Penn was granted his Charter, Lord Baltimore, the proprietor of Maryland made known his objection to the southern boundary line claimed by Penn. Lord Baltimore felt the southern line for Penn's colony was much further north; Penn insisted that it actually ran down across northern Maryland. In 1684, Penn returned to England to get help with this dispute, but he would never see it resolved. It took more than 80 years, until two surveyors came in the mid-1760s to lay



"Treaty of Penn with the Indians" by Benjamin West.

Courtesy Photos



William Penn's home Pennsbury Manor in Bucks County.

out what would become the Mason-Dixon Line, markers for which can be seen in Chester County.

Penn didn't return to Pennsylvania for 15 years, until 1699. When he got back, Philadelphia was bustling. Times had changed; he knew that Pennsylvania needed an updated document to maintain order. He crafted the Charter of Privileges, which became effective in 1701 to put his refined ideas into effect. The Charter is considered a breakthrough political document for the colonies. It allowed any male Christian to hold government office without the requirement of land ownership, exceptional at the time. The Charter also elevated the Assembly's powers to those of the Governor and the judiciary, creating a tripartite system. The document came to be highly respected as a step forward for human rights. It is thought by



Portrait of Voltaire by Nicolas de Largilliere.

some historians that the Liberty Bell, requisitioned 50 years later in 1751, was created to honor the achievement.

Penn left in 1701 to address personal issues back in England. Many people today assume William Penn spent most of his life in Pennsylvania, but he never returned to America. He was unable to resolve financial troubles created by an advisor and found himself deeply in debt, put in prison—again. Penn suffered a debilitating stroke in 1712; the last six years of his life were not happy ones. He died penniless on July 30, 1718 in Ruscombe, England. He was buried in the cemetery of the Jordans Quaker Meetinghouse in Buckinghamshire. Penn's sons took control of the

colony after his passing, unfortunately negating many of his policies toward the Indians and retained ownership of Pennsylvania until the American Revolution in 1776.

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Map showing the disputed border between Pennsylvania and Maryland.



William Penn's Charter of Privileges.



The gravestone of William Penn and his wife Hannah in Buckinghamshire, England.