

Introduction

Jean R. Soderlund
Lehigh University

The 350th anniversary of William Penn's birth compels us to think once again about the man who conceived the "holy experiment" in Pennsylvania. As residents and historians of his commonwealth we celebrate the highborn Quaker Englishman who devoted much of his fortune and energies to creating a model society in America. As with Pennsylvania's tercentenary of Penn's charter some thirteen years ago, this commemoration retains the ambiguity that has haunted relations between Penn and his colony since the founding. We embrace him for his idealism in requiring peaceful negotiations with the Native Americans and mutual respect among people of different religions. Yet we know too of flaws in his humanitarianism—for example, his ownership of enslaved Africans—and perhaps thereby justify our own failure three centuries later to conform to the spirit of his endeavor. Penn holds a grip on the collective conscience of Pennsylvanians, to a much greater extent than the founder of any other North American colony, despite the skyscrapers that now overshadow his statue on Philadelphia City Hall.

If we do not know quite what to make of William Penn, it shouldn't come as a surprise, for he was the son of an English admiral, a courtier, and a landlord of extensive holdings in Ireland and England as well as Pennsylvania. Born in the midst of the English Civil War, in 1644, Penn first alienated his father by joining the despised Society of Friends, then managed a reconciliation, without recanting his conviction, shortly before the admiral's death. Thus Penn began his career as Quaker polemicist, lobbyist, and spiritual leader. He used his inheritance and high social status to bankroll Quaker publications and ministerial travels, intercede with the English government for release of imprisoned Friends, lobby for religious toleration, and establish his colony in America. Penn's wealth and elevated status set him apart from other Quakers of his time, even while they benefited from his position. His colonists in particular failed to appreciate his paternalistic point of view (as well as his demands for money). As descendants of the early settlers and, to a much greater extent, of the multitude of immigrants who have come to Pennsylvania since 1700, we appreciate the comparatively open society that Penn fostered

even though we are perplexed by the inconsistencies of his thinking and character.

Thirteen years ago we celebrated William Penn at the height of his career. From 1680 to 1682, he successfully negotiated the grant of Pennsylvania from the king, drafted a frame of government, advertised and sold over 600,000 acres of land, and established the new colony. The occasion for celebrating this year is the anniversary of his birth. However, the papers in this issue of *Pennsylvania History* move us toward a better understanding of the adult, even middle-aged Penn, who marked his fiftieth birthday three centuries ago this month. In 1694, since receiving the charter, he had spent just two years in the province, from 1682 to 1684. He returned to England to defend his colony's borders from Lord Baltimore, then became embroiled in politics with the ascension of James II to the throne. With the Glorious Revolution, Penn faced charges of high treason, went into seclusion, and lost control of Pennsylvania for two years. In 1694, he regained the colony from the Crown, but lost his first wife Gulielma when she died after a long illness. That same year he began courting Hannah Callowhill, who in 1696 became his second wife. Penn's disputes with his colonists and financial troubles continued until his strokes in 1712. Though these were disappointing years, Penn remained faithful to Quakerism, to the cause of religious liberty, and to his wife and family.

These papers by Richard Alan Ryerson, Alison Duncan Hirsch, and Paul Douglas Newman build upon the efforts of many historians who have preserved and interpreted the record of Penn's life. Early in the twentieth century, Albert Cook Myers began the effort to collect and publish Penn's manuscripts, but died before his project was complete. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the sponsorship of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, which holds the great body of Penn family papers, Caroline Robbins and Hannah Benner Roach organized a more comprehensive search for Penn documents. Their efforts resulted in the microfilm edition of the Papers of William Penn (1975). Richard S. Dunn and Mary Maples Dunn obtained major funding and served as editors-in-chief for the next phase of the Penn project, also located at HSP, the select printed edition. *The Papers of William Penn*, published between 1981 and 1987, include four volumes of manuscripts edited according to strict scholarly standards. Alison Hirsch, Craig Horle, Richard Ryerson, Scott Wilds, Joy Wiltenburg, Marianne Wokeck, and I worked with the Dunns in publishing these papers. A fifth volume by Edwin Bronner and David Fraser provides a detailed bibliography of Penn's writings.¹

The essays in this issue demonstrate how valuable were the efforts to collect, organize, and make available in accessible format the papers of Pennsylvania's founder. And beyond the focus on Penn, these sources facilitate study of early Delaware Valley society, for the papers document the activities of many people besides the Proprietor. When the Penn Papers project was complete, Marianne Wokeck and Craig Horle carried on the effort to provide basic research tools for scholars and teachers by obtaining funding for the Biographical Dictionary of Early Pennsylvania Legislators. This project, now located at Temple University, has published one extraordinarily useful volume and will soon issue another.²

Each of the papers that follow provides more coherent understanding of an aspect of Penn's life. Where scholars have sometimes found contradiction and confusion in Penn's thought and actions—because his remarkably liberal beliefs seem out of tune with his more traditional seventeenth-century attitudes—these historians evaluate him in the context of his life and times. Ryerson finds inconsistency between the Proprietor's Whig philosophy, as inscribed in the first *Frame of Government*, and his high-handed, misguided actions toward the Pennsylvania colonists. While one might marvel at this dualism, Ryerson shows how Penn, while imbibing moderate late seventeenth-century political thought, modeled himself as governor after the executive he knew best, the English monarch. Hirsch builds upon her biography of Hannah Callowhill Penn to challenge the emphasis in Penn biographies upon William's first wife, Gulielma. Hirsch demonstrates that in many important qualities, both women were similarly gifted—and that William Penn loved and admired them both. Hirsch suggests that inattention to Hannah Penn may have resulted from the important role she played in family and colonial affairs after Penn became incapacitated in 1712 and died six years later. Newman tackles the tricky question of Penn's dealings with Roman Catholics, which included published attacks on the church as the "Romish Whore," successful negotiations for Delaware with the Catholic Duke of York, cooperation with James during his abbreviated reign, and a policy of religious freedom for Catholics in Pennsylvania. By distinguishing between the terms liberty of conscience and religious toleration, then examining the progress of Penn's attitudes chronologically, Newman makes greater sense of the Proprietor's apparently illogical behavior.

All three papers make William Penn more human, less vulnerable to idealistic

criteria that are too high. While he presents a standard by which our society must be judged, the Proprietor—like his City Hall statue—no longer towers over all. The Penn described in these essays thought like a Whig while acting like a Tory, but married twice for love as well as for money and learned over time to expand his notion of religious liberty. In many respects, the experienced middle-aged Penn is a more congenial recipient of honor than the brash controversialist and hopeful colonizer of earlier years.

Notes

1. Mary Maples Dunn et al., eds., *The Papers of William Penn*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981-1987).
2. Craig W. Horle et al., eds., *Lawmaking and Legislators in Pennsylvania: A Biographical Dictionary, Volume One, 1682-1709* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).