The Township: The Community of the Rural Pennsylvanian

In the last two decades our understanding of the American colonial past has been greatly enriched by a new approach: the community study. In rural Pennsylvania the township provides the community for such study. However, comparatively little is known about the township, not enough to enable the historian to proceed directly into micro-study at the township level. The purpose of this article is three-fold: (1) to discuss briefly the general concept of community study and the problems encountered by historians working with Pennsylvania communities; (2) to provide the background necessary for the effective use of the township in community studies through a review of its development and role during the colonial period; (3) to point up the wide range of data, filed at the county level, which is available for study at the township level.

The historical treatment of townships (the second section of the paper), focuses on the townships of colonial Chester County—today, the townships of Delaware and Chester Counties. The provincial laws of the eighteenth century shaped the development of the colony and were implemented within the counties and, ultimately, at the township level. As a result, a uniform body of records suitable for township study was created. It is possible, therefore, to develop a series of procedures and techniques for extracting data from these records which can be used with equal success in studying any Pennsylvania township and which will yield results suitable for comparative analysis. However, to do so requires a more detailed knowledge of and experience with these records than can be gained by work at only the state or county level. The records must be studied at the township level to fully grasp their meaning.

In the original three counties of Bucks, Philadelphia, and Chester, the township has an added dimension as well as a longer history. In the seventeenth century the township was a method of settlement designed
to create an environment conducive to the development of a market economy. In the eighteenth century the well-established rule that all men must share in the responsibilities of local government, coupled with the continued increase in the share of government borne by the township under Pennsylvania law, fostered individual initiative and developed managerial skills. The combination of these factors suggests that the early townships, as well as providing a unit for the study of mentalité, may have also helped to shape that world view by creating conditions for economic growth and by developing individual capabilities. To illustrate the possibilities I have chosen to approach the study of townships using the Chester County township as a representative model.

Although the methodology used in the study of communities has only recently been developed, the theoretical basis for such study is familiar. Historical change supposedly arises, at least in part, out of the lives of the masses. In the case of the American colonies, it arises out of the lives of ordinary settlers. Individual colonists pursued their own goals, but they interacted with their environment and with each other in familial and communal units. In so doing, they created patterns and forces which helped to determine the evolution of society.

The community study provides a framework for the systematic analysis of these phenomena and an opportunity to unravel the individual threads from which history is woven. Guided by procedures established by historical demographers, such as Louis Henry, E.A. Wrigley, and Peter Laslett, the historian reconstructs a community by reconstituting the lives of the individual within the community. Then, still guided by methodological considerations necessary if these studies, based on the disparate and fragmentary evidence available for the study of ordinary settlers, are to have historical validity and comparability, he seeks to understand the past by identifying the internal and external factors shaping each life.¹

For American colonial historians, community research started in New England. The records for the towns of that area closely resembled those used in the models described by the English school of historical demography, the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. With minor modifications, the recommended, standardized procedures could be applied to the data available, the English studies replicated, and comparable results obtained. Philip J. Greven, Jr.'s, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts*, typified the numerous American studies published in the 1970s.²

The method was successful. A new dimension was added to the understanding of the past. Colonial historians began to search out records and to develop ways to turn them to the task at hand. In 1974, the Maryland Hall of Records held a conference celebrating the new history being generated by the rich collection of public records available in that state. The imaginative use of private account books and diaries opened to analysis the life of the slave on the southern plantation.³ Historians turned to Pennsylvania with eagerness and anticipation.

The community study offered an opportunity to analyze with great precision the religious, social, and economic diversity evident within William Penn's colony. The very complexity and variety of social structures invited multiple sampling and comparative study. At the community level historians would be able to separate out and then describe quantitatively the various facets of life in communities com-


posed of heterogeneous, as well as homogeneous, populations. By tracing the lives of a group of individuals, they would be able to make meaningful statements about the worldview, the goals, and the environment of these persons. By checking, for example, family size against landholdings, inheritance patterns, acres plowed, and alternative economic opportunities, a factual basis could be assembled which would permit the Pennsylvania historian to address questions such as those raised by James A. Henretta's familiar article on the colonial mentalité: to what extent were the rural Pennsylvanians of the eighteenth century conservative, subsistence farmers primarily motivated by a desire for family security? To what degree were they venturesome, market-orientated individualists striving for upward mobility?  

But efforts to study Pennsylvania's colonial past through the community approach have not been as satisfying as expected. Community study presupposes a manageable community unit, a closed universe with an interacting population. It requires a set of records which deals specifically with individuals in that universe and which will permit the reconstruction of the society through reconstitution of the lives of the individuals within the society. Pennsylvania presents problems on both counts: community and records.

The obvious unit for community study is the town or village. There were towns in colonial Pennsylvania and they have prompted a number of valuable studies, among them Stephanie Grauman Wolf's Urban Village: Population, Community, and Family Structure in Germantown, Pennsylvania, 1683-1800. However, the majority of the Pennsylvania colonists settled not in towns but on farms scattered in seemingly random fashion across the landscape. The town does not provide a unit for the study of the typical rural farmer, craftsman, and laborer.

Recognizing this fact, historians looked for units other than towns, units which would be representative of the life style of the majority of the settlers. James T. Lemon, guided by the fact that the public records were organized at the county level, employed a county approach. His study of the rural settlers of southeastern Pennsylvania dealt with a representative population. However, because of a combination of fac-

---


tors (the size of the population and the extent of the area, as well as the nature of the extant records), he was unable to make use of a community approach. The records, particularly the tax records, central to community study in Pennsylvania, defy unraveling at the county level. Important distinctions and facts, relevant to an understanding of the mentalité of Penn’s colonists, continued to elude Lemon and others using the county as the unit of study.\(^6\)

A survey of colonial records suggested the extensive records of the Quaker meetings as a basis for community study. Using methods similar to those evolved for the study of English parishes and already tried with success in New England, the community of the meeting was reconstituted from the records of its members and subjected to quantitative study. These efforts are of importance because they provide significant insights into the Quaker experience. Barry Levy, for example, through his recent work on the Quaker families of the Delaware Valley, has contributed greatly to the understanding of the Quaker mentalité and, hence, to Pennsylvania historiography. However, as in the case of the studies of the urban villages, the study of the Quaker community is the study of only a segment of the population. Furthermore, the Quaker population declines relative to the total population throughout the period and as one moves westward. The historian intent on reconstituting the pluralistic society of rural Pennsylvania needs a set of records with a broader base. He needs records which will enable him to observe Quaker and non-Quaker, German and Welshman, laborer and merchant, widow and freeman, in short, all the individuals of a typical rural area interacting and living out their own histories. The Quaker records when used alone do not meet this need, and the church records of the non-Quakers are too incomplete to serve as supplements.\(^7\)

Today, despite the numerous articles and books on the colonial ex-


perience published in the last decade, and one has only to read Douglas Greenberg's survey of Pennsylvania historiography to sense the scholarly activity, there is a justifiable feeling of frustration among historians of colonial Pennsylvania. They possess a method for dealing with questions of world-view, economic growth, and mobility. But the encompassing community and appropriate records elude their grasp. The majority of the colonists supposedly existed outside of communities suitable for study. Ordinary citizens seem to have failed to leave the records necessary for microstudy. In actuality, communities did exist and appropriate records do exist for the study of the rural population. However, historians need to back off from the literature generated by and about community study and look directly at Pennsylvania.

The township, the administrative unit into which Pennsylvania counties were subdivided, warrants reappraisal. The fact that public records filed at the county level were directly related to the residents of the townships needs to be recognized and appreciated. Once the township is understood as the community of the typical Pennsylvanian, and the records identified, it will be possible to work out the necessary methodological modifications needed to permit Pennsylvania community studies to proceed at a level and in directions commensurate with the studies in other colonies.

The history of the Pennsylvania township in the colonial period was not simple. The colonial township was both a unit for local self-government and a method of settlement. As a governmental institution its history extended beyond the colonial period into the present. The township's significance increased over time as its role expanded to meet the demands of a growing population and a more complex society.

The reverse was true of the township viewed as a method of settlement. The township had its maximum impact in the first decade of settlement, remained a guiding policy over the next, and then was abandoned. As a method, the township determined the pattern of settlement only in the area opened to colonists during these early years, southeastern Pennsylvania. However, the rigorous enforcement of settlement by township during the first wave of immigration brought important economic and social consequences for the entire colony. The

---

township as the unit of settlement also became the unit of local government. Governmental needs and proprietary policy interwove in these two aspects of township history from 1682 to about 1700. The township as an institution took root and was nurtured in the township method of settlement.

To establish the role of the township in the colonial period, it is necessary (1) to review briefly the directives of Penn to his surveyors and his descriptions of the alternative spatial arrangements possible within the township and to note their effect on early settlement; (2) to consider how the quasi-judicial, quasi-administrative role of the court system, evolved in England, was transferred and adapted to the new circumstances; (3) to note how the necessities of the form of local government inherent in this English court system welded the inhabitants of these townships into communities.

William Penn recognized that the economic prosperity of his province would depend to a great extent on its ability to participate efficiently within the English pattern of trade. The colonists would have to produce commodities for export to other parts of the Empire at a competitive price and at a profit to themselves. In a free society of the type Penn envisioned, profit would be an essential stimulus to settlement and to economic activity prompting farmers to move out of a local subsistence economy into the more risky market economy. The costs of land, labor, and transportation to market would have to be low enough in relation to price to justify the effort involved. A survey of Penn's promotional literature indicates that he considered these factors when he ordered land to be surveyed and granted by the method of townships. The mingling of idealism and economic awareness in his approach to the colony is exemplified by a sentence written in 1685, justifying settlement by townships:

> I had in my view Society, Assistance, Busy Commerce, Instruction of Youth, Government of Peoples manners, Conveniency of Religious Assembling, Encouragement of Mechanicks, distinct and beaten Roads.\(^9\)

---

In Penn’s view, settlers left to themselves would tend to scatter over the province, take up land wherever they pleased, and leave large irregularly shaped parcels of less choice acreage for later sale. This would prove harmful to the social and religious welfare of the settlers, would make government difficult, and inhibit commerce. Random settlement would pose a double threat to Penn’s economic security by leaving him with inferior land and thereby reduce profits from land sales by delaying the colony’s entrance into trade with the outside world. Participation in the English mercantile system required an efficient organization of resources, a good highway system, and a large compactly settled population. Orderly settlement by townships would facilitate the creation of such conditions.

To assure orderly and compact settlement the acquisition of land should precede location and survey. Colonists obtained the right to land a number of ways. Up to two hundred acres could be taken at a yearly rent to the proprietary of one pence per acre. Land could be purchased from Penn or his agents at one pound per fifty acres, subject to the yearly quitrent of one English shilling per hundred acres. To those who came as servants and to their masters, Penn promised fifty acres at the end of the term of servitude, subject in the case of the former servant to a quitrent of two shillings yearly, and in the case of the master, four shillings yearly. However, the settlers purchased, rented, or were given, according to these terms, the right to land in general, not specific tracts.

Penn instructed the surveyor general’s office to lay out the acres acquired by settlers according to the method of townships. That is, he wanted the acres taken up by purchase, rent, or gift laid out and surveyed in a series of regular contiguous townships, beginning at the Delaware River and progressing along the boundaries of Philadelphia and its environs and then outward until all the area available for set-

10 William Penn, *Some account of the province of Pennsylvania in America*. ...Made publick for the Information of such as are or may be disposed to Transport themselves or Servants into those Parts (orig. publ. London, 1681), ed. Myers, *ibid.*, 202-215; Penn, *A Further Account*, ed. Myers, *ibid.*, 259-278. The only inconsistency among the tracts and pamphlets used seems to be in the Concessions. There Penn seems willing for one family to settle one thousand acres rather than five hundred, as stated elsewhere. William Penn, *Certain Conditions or Concessions, Agreed upon by William Penn, Proprietary and Governor of the Province of Pennsylvania and those who are the adventurers and purchasers in the same province the Eleventh of July, One thousand six hundred and eighty one*, in Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, I (Harrisburg, 1838), xviii-xxi.
ment was allotted. Each township supposedly contained approximately five thousand acres, distributed among at least ten families. For every five hundred acres in the township at least one family was to be seated, although families could take up less than the five hundred acres. Settlers who purchased a full five thousand acres could have them surveyed as a township but within one of the township blocks in line for settlement.\(^\text{11}\)

In his directives, William Penn adhered firmly to this method of townships or, as he referred to it on occasion, to "the regulation of the Country": one family for every five hundred acres surveyed, five thousand acres to a township. The rule applied to individual purchasers of two hundred acres or of one thousand acres, to adventurers or to ethnic groups who hoped to establish semi-autonomous units within the colony. The person who purchased and then requested the survey of a tract committed himself to the seating and improvement of that land at the rate of five hundred acres per family. Assuming the buyer intended to settle on part of his tract, this meant that for every acre over five hundred he was obliged to provide additional settlers according to the regulation of the province. Land left vacant and uninhabited three years after survey was forfeit and could be disposed of to those able and ready to settle "to the end that the Province might not be like a Wilderness... but be regularly improved for the benefit of Society in help, trade, education, Government, also Roads, travill, Entertainment, and so forth."\(^\text{12}\)

The Office of the Surveyor General and the Commissioners of Property appointed to act in Penn's name had joint responsibility for the enforcement of Penn's policy.

To adventurers, those who saw land and settlement as an investment, Penn offered several options. Take up five thousand acres, he suggested, and settle ten families on tracts of five hundred acres each. Provide them with housing, stock, and farm implements at a cost of

\(^{11}\) Aware of these conditions, small groups of purchasers who wanted to settle together seem to have circumvented the problem successfully. They simply appeared together at the surveyor's office, presented their deeds of purchase together. Warrants for survey were issued and the land surveyed in adjoining tracts on successive days, though not necessarily within the same township. Little of the later movement within the area of settlement can be attributed to a reshuffling of families to bring kinship groups together. Moves would be more apt to be prompted by the quality of the land received under the method of distribution followed.

about sixty pounds per family. In seven years the improvements alone will double in value, and the land will be suitable for leasing or sale as a plantation. Or take up five thousand acres and settle ten families on one hundred acre tracts, rent free for four years. Allow each household thirty pounds to cover the initial costs. After the fourth year, charge a yearly rent of five pounds per tract. The remaining four thousand acres thus will be secured to the investor and can be used as he will. "The method of the country" will have been satisfied. 13

Penn saw these schemes as offering a profit to the purchasers and to the colony at large. The ten families settled by the investor represented ten families contributing to the colonial labor force, ten families to speed the creation of a productive provincial economy capable of participating in the English market.

Penn granted a temporary exception to the insistence on compact settlement in 1681 to a group of Welsh Quakers who petitioned for the right to establish a Welsh barony where Welsh justice would be meted out in the Welsh tongue. Penn agreed to reserve in one contiguous tract the forty thousand acres purchased in large tracts by the promoters of the barony for resale in smaller parcels, at cost, to Welshmen willing to remove to Pennsylvania. The short history of this barony demonstrates the importance Penn attached to the township method of settlement and indicates the integrating consequences of the policy.

As originally located, the tract lay just west of the city of Philadelphia, wedged between Chester and Philadelphia Counties but, it seemed, not within the boundaries of either. In 1684, the Welsh leaders protested that some of their land was being surveyed to the English. In response, Penn ordered a resurvey of the forty thousand acres. He noted in the warrant to the surveyor that the land was to constitute a barony and added that he had been assured that "the number allready come and suddenly to come, are such as will be capable of planting the same much with in the proportion allowed by the custom of the country, and so not lye in large and useless vacancies." The new survey, "in the method of townships lately appointed by the Governor," was made and recorded. 14

13 In a variation of the last possibility, Penn advocated that the adventurers simply give the ten families one hundred acres each outright. The appreciation on the four thousand acres retained would more than compensate for the loss of the unseated acres.

The following year, however, the surveyor set the boundary lines for Chester and Philadelphia Counties not on either side of the Welsh tract but on a line running through the length of the tract. This placed it within two different counties and, implicitly, under the jurisdiction of the two county governments or so both the courts at Chester and at Philadelphia argued. Welsh immigration slowed. The English continued to encroach on the Welsh lands. Problems developed over quitrents and surveys, and, generally, over the failure of the Welsh to observe the "regulation of the Country," and the English to respect the Welsh territorial rights. In April 1691, the government reclaimed unseated lands in the Welsh tract for survey to any who would immediately settle. The assimilation of the Welsh by the method of townships began and compact settlement advanced.  

On the distribution of the land within the townships among the ten or more families, Penn was less firm. He recommended that land be reserved in the center of each township proportionate to each family's holding, at the rate of one acre for every ten purchased. Settlers would build their homes on these reserved tracts and form a village unit within the township. However, a village in the center of the township was not in any way essential to Penn's interests as proprietary or to the economic welfare of the farmers. The arrangement was not forced on the colonists. Although small rural villages later developed at important crossroads, the planned village envisaged by Penn was rarely tried. Generally, the surveys allocated township land in contiguous tracts extending from the road bisecting the township to the boundaries. Each family located on its own plantation. The pattern of dispersed settlement within the township reflected the preference of the colonists, not Penn's dictates.  

15 Petition, The Inhabitants of the Welsh Tract to William Penn, Apr 23, 1688, in Futhey, 29 Pa. Arch, 2d Ser, XIX, 67 Similar restrictions placed on German settlers were handled with more success by D F Pastorius See Daniel Francis Pastorius, Circumstantial Geographical Description of the Lately Discovered Province of Pennsylvania, Situated in the Farthest Limits of America ed Myers, 360-448  
16 In Chester County, Newtown was the only township laid out strictly in accordance with Penn's plan The experiment was not a success Most of the farmers settled on their plantation tracts and later sold off their village lots In the eighteenth century the village, Newtown Square, was a typical Pennsylvania crossroads village, owing its importance more to its location at the intersection of the well-traveled road from Philadelphia to Goshen with the equally busy Newtown Road than to the original method of survey  
17 The pattern of settlement is clearly represented by Thomas Holme's "A Mapp of the Improved Part of Pensilvania in America, Divided into Counties Townships and Lotts, Surveyed by Tho. Holme," orig engraving in the Library Company of Philadelphia (1687)
The method of townships as outlined here had a definite effect on settlement. There was an effort to survey and lay out the land of the early purchasers in accordance with Penn’s directives. If the three original counties were settled at approximately the same rate, Penn’s estimate that by August, 1684, at least fifty townships had been laid out can be confirmed for Chester County by the court records (references to the early townships in these records), and by the 1693 tax schedules. When we mark off the eighteen townships taxed in that year on a map of the county, they form a semi-circular band, beginning at the Delaware River and continuing along the bounds of Philadelphia and its environs, about four townships in depth, extending along the Delaware as far west as the Brandywine Creek. Eastern Chester County followed the ordered and compact pattern of settlement that Penn planned.\textsuperscript{18}

The surveyors, however, did modify Penn’s regulation. Just as he did when he selected the site for Philadelphia, Surveyor General Thomas Holme adjusted the plans to the topography. Townships were not uniform, squared-off tracts of five thousand acres, but were irregular in shape, conforming first to the terrain, then to the method. Usually, at least one boundary followed the course of a major stream. Occasionally, for the convenience of purchasers and for the administration of local government, townships included well over five thousand acres. These were later divided into two as their population increased.

By 1700, Penn had largely abandoned the method of townships. Debts, a lack of control over the growing population, and the Assembly’s pressure made him willing to sell on the buyer’s terms. The phrase “method of townships” continued to be included in every warrant of survey issued, but the words lost meaning even to the surveyors.\textsuperscript{19} They became merely part of the formal language of warrants. Still, the phrase is of historical importance. In determining the patterns and conditions of land distribution to the first wave of settlers, the township left its

\textsuperscript{18} The townships taxed in 1693 were Aston, Bethel, Birmingham, Chester, Chichester, Concord, Darby, Edgmont, Haverford, Marple, Middletown, Newtown, Nether Providence, Upper Providence, Radnor, Ridley, Springfield, and Thornbury. In 1787, the area covered by these eighteen townships, less a part of Birmingham and Thornbury, was separated from Chester County and incorporated into a new county, Delaware County.

\textsuperscript{19} Surveyor Samuel Blunston wrote from Lancaster County in 1734: "I also observe the Lands are to be laid out according to the method of townships, to which method I am...[a] Stranger," To T. Penn, Aug. 13, 1734, Lanc. Co. MSS, 1:7, cited in Lemon, \textit{The Best Poor Man's Country}, 111.
imprint on the subsequent history of southeastern Pennsylvania. It must be taken into account in the interpretation of geographic mobility, in the discussion of farm size, of population pressures, and market participation in Chester, Philadelphia, and Bucks Counties during the colonial period.20

William Penn designed the method of townships to meet the conditions of colonial settlement and to achieve the desired economic and social welfare of the province. Since the pattern was new and particular to Pennsylvania, the writings of Penn were, therefore, quite explicit on the subject of the distribution of land by townships. However, on local government, county and township, he wrote almost nothing. There was no need for he intended merely to adopt the eighteenth-century English pattern of local government administered through the county courts.

The English Justices of the Peace in the eighteenth century not only administered justice in the local courts but included implicitly within their commissions all the administrative functions and properties of government at the regional level. They not only sat on successive days, at regular intervals, as judges of the county courts but kept the peace throughout their jurisdiction, directed and supervised the levying and collection of taxes, built and maintained highways, cared for the poor and performed the numerous tasks necessary to implement the current laws and policies of the King and Parliament.21 A number of minor officials—constables, overseers of the poor, supervisors of highways—assisted the justices and actually carried out the duties of local government within the villages, towns, and townships. This network of administrative and judicial responsibilities included under the English courts was, in theory at least, transferred intact to Pennsylvania in Penn's Commission to William Markham, April 1681.22

20 For a more complete account of land distribution in Pennsylvania to 1760 see Lemon, 42-70.

Unable to leave England himself, Penn sent Markham to the colony to assume control and to govern in his name. His commission authorized him to “erect courts, make sheriffs, justices of the peace, and other requisite inferior officers, that right may be done, and peace kept, and all vice punished, without partiality, according to the good laws of England.” By this order, the quasi-judicial, quasi-administrative court system of England was established in Pennsylvania. Penn instituted specific reforms in the judicial process to assure swifter and more equal justice. The justices had power to make the necessary adaptations and modifications of the administrative process. The township replaced the village and town as the unit for government at the community level; the roles of the requisite inferior officers—constables, overseers, supervisors—remained as defined by custom and English law. The Pennsylvania township government gradually evolved from this flexible English transplant.

The historians who rejected the township as a unit suitable for community study argued that within the county court system the township was merely the handy unit into which counties were divided for administrative efficiency. The high visibility of the county government coupled with the low visibility of the township has lent credence to this judgment. The Pennsylvania township almost completely lacked the superstructures and symbols of government associated with county government or even the New England town. Penn’s settlers did not gather in villages and did not build township halls. Town meetings were held as necessary at convenient places within the community. The law required the constable or, in his absence, the overseer of the poor to post notice of the place and time of such meetings at least five days in advance of the event.

The township had no repository for records. Deeds, wills, and other

24 A discussion of the Pennsylvania township is in Alan Tully, William Penn’s Legacy: Politics and Social Structure in Provincial Pennsylvania, 1726-1755 (Baltimore, 1977), 57-66, 115-117. Tully finds “tantalizing evidence that the township was more than a handy unit of administration.” In the end, however, he accepts the position taken by Lemon and Clair W. Keller that the township is not really a vital social and political unit. Lemon, Best Poor Man’s Country, 111; Clair W. Keller, “The Pennsylvania County Commissioner System, 1712 to 1740,” PMHB, XCIII:3 (1969), 382.
legal documents were entered at the county seat; births, deaths, and marriages, at the churches. The township book which contained the names of the officers and the account of their expenditures seems to have been passed from officeholder to officeholder. The overseer of the poor or, as in Darby in 1694, the township clerk probably served as the custodian. These modest utilitarian volumes conceal in their brief statements the drama, the tensions, and the routine of township government. 25

Township government has to be grasped, as does common law, by a study of the acts and expectations of the people and a reconstruction of particular activities. In a real sense it is only the sum total of the governmental acts and responses of the people residing in the individual townships. Township government's importance within the frame of provincial rule can best be appreciated by a review of these acts. When county government is approached from within and from below, the township is seen as balancing the county. Furthermore, the vitality resulting from the coordinated community effort contributed significantly to the economic, social, and political growth of the residents of the township.

What were the common responsibilities assumed by the townships during the colonial period? How did the residents go about fulfilling them? To list the responsibilities of the township is to reiterate the administrative duties of eighteenth-century English justices of the peace: keeping the peace, maintaining the highways, caring for the poor, levying and collecting taxes, and implementing special programs and

25 The township books fill a gap between the provincial laws and the local situation. The books contain such facts as in 1768 the overseer of the poor of West Fallowfield received a share of the poor tax as payment for his trouble. In that year the reimbursement for keeping a poor boy for West Fallowfield was calculated at the rate of five pounds per year. A young girl apprenticed in 1742 by the overseers of the poor of West Bradford was bound under terms customary for apprenticeship with the usual rewards. At a town meeting in 1740/1 the freeholders of East Bradford agreed to meet yearly in March "to chuse officers to serve the township in the ensuing year." Inserted in the pages of the West Fallowfield Book is a bond dated March 1773, payable by a father to the township in the event that his pregnant daughter and her unborn child should become a burden on the community. Township books for the following colonial townships are in the Chester County Historical Society (CCHS): Bradford-East Bradford, 1705-1858, West Bradford, 1736-1799, East Cain, 1735-1755, Goshen, 1718-1817, West Fallowfield, 1765-1803, West Whiteland, 1710-1947. The Radnor Township Book, 1765-1807 is in the Radnor Historical Society. By 1775 there were 53 townships in Chester County. A careful survey of local repositories should result in the discovery of additional volumes.
policies as directed by law. The justices, as administrators, coordinated and supervised the laws and the government programs, delegated authority on a yearly basis to township officials, and mediated any dispute which arose within and between townships in the course of exercising this authority. Action occurred primarily at the township level. All discreet and reputable freeholders, those persons qualified to vote, had an obligation to serve in turn in each of the three principal positions: constable, supervisor of highways, and overseer of the poor. Over the colonial period, township residents became increasingly involved in local government. Not only did the number of township officials multiply in proportion to the growth of the population, but their responsibilities and commensurate authority increased.

A favorite device of the social historian is the composite man. By combining facts about township government culled from the provincial laws and Penn’s writings with the documentary evidence of township government as experienced in Chester County, a composite of township government emerges. As in similar biographical sketches of Farmer Brown, the reconstruction uses disparate and incomplete evidence. Not everything which can be said about government at this level applies necessarily to all townships. On the other hand, sufficient documentation has survived to conclude that if township government were not conducted exactly as described, it closely resembled this description. Following the procedures, customs, and laws set forth in this composite, the residents of the townships accomplished the needs of local government and developed into a communal unit.26

Township officials were chosen yearly in one of two ways. The freemen elected them by voice vote or ballot at a regularly held township meeting, the dates of which were set by law, or justices of the peace appointed them from a ranked slate of candidates, prepared at a township meeting, usually with two names for each position to be filled. The elected officers were the keepers of the pound, the supervisors of highways after 1762, the inspectors of elections, the township assessors, and the auditors of the accounts of the overseers of the poor and of the supervisors of highways. The officers appointed by the justices on the

26 In Pennsylvania, the records of the Court of Quarter Sessions and the Court of Special Sessions are particularly rich in information relative to township government. In Chester County the repository for this material is the Chester County Archives (Ch. Co. Arch.), CCHS.
advice of the townships were the constables, the overseers of the poor, and until 1762, the supervisors of highways. These three positions antedate those of the first group and belong to the English county court system under which authority rested with the justices and was delegated to the local level. The Assembly created the elected positions with the exception of that of supervisor of highways which was redefined in 1762 by law.\textsuperscript{27} Although under the provincial laws the courts retained their supervisory and judicial or mediating role, the actual selection of officers followed the democratic process more directly.

The method for drawing up the slate for the traditional offices of township government rested, as did the definitions of the offices themselves, within English and colonial custom. The exact procedure has to be inferred. In the case of the overseer of the poor, for instance, the law specified in 1705 that one, two, or three overseers, depending on the size of the population of the township, were to be selected for each township by the justices. Each overseer supposedly submitted the name of his successor at the end of his term. Failure to do so meant either that the overseer must serve again in the coming year or received a fine up to fifty pounds.\textsuperscript{28} Evidence derived from the petitions of those selected to serve this office (as well as that of constable or supervisor) and from township books indicates that the residents of the township kept track and determined at meetings held at appropriate times who among the reputable freeholders should fill each position. Those designated by the townships for service learned of it before the returns (nominations) were sent to the courts. Before the overseer formally named his successor, he first consulted with the township; if the justices “elected” the constable, they chose it on the basis of township recommendation.

The occasional breakdowns in the system, with attendant appeals to the courts, provide an excellent source of information on the process of selection. On the 1751 return for Upper Providence, Richard Briggs, the outgoing supervisor, named John Day as the township’s choice for the next year. Day immediately petitioned the courts for a release. He was, he explained, not properly returnable because he held no land nor dwelling of his own in the township but lived with his father-in-law on a small two-acre tract. (He did not qualify as a freeholder.) Further-

\textsuperscript{27} James T. Mitchell \textit{et al.}, ed., \textit{The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801} (Harrisburg, 1896-1915), VI: 186-195, chap. CCCCLXXIX.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Statutes at Large}, II: 251-254, chap. CLIV.
more, he had not attended the township meeting, had not been duly informed of his nomination, and indeed, had learned he was not even the choice of the township. Day obtained release in favor of George Miller, the actual choice of the township.  

It is well known that township officials collected provincial and county taxes. By 1724 the procedures for levying a tax were at a "competent certainty and regulation." The Assembly, deeming it expedient to reduce the various tax laws to one, passed on March 20, 1724/5, "An Act for Raising of County Rates and Levies." County taxes were levied in accordance with this law for the balance of the colonial period. The decision to lay a tax to cover county expenses rested with the elected County Commissioners and Assessors. The group met annually after the fall elections to review the county budget. If they decided that a tax should be levied for the coming year, the Commissioners issued warrants to the township constables instructing them to prepare a list of all persons within their townships with a detailed account of each person's taxable wealth and to deliver the list, called a return, to the Commissioners. With the help of the County Assessors, the Commissioners assessed the county. A township collector, appointed by the Commissioners, demanded of each taxpayer the amount due and notified him of the day of appeal. After adjustments were made, he collected the tax and delivered it to the County Treasurer. Both the constable and the collector received a percentage of the tax levied on their township: three pence on the pound for the constable, twelve for the collector.  

In 1755 the Assembly passed a law granting £60,000 to the King's use, authorized the printing of £55,000 in bills of credit, and levied a tax to back the issue. This tax was the first of two provincial taxes, forerunners to the series of Eighteen Pence Taxes levied yearly to raise money for the King's use and the defense of the province from 1758 to 1776. The County Commissioners administered the 1755 tax and the one which followed in accordance with the law regulating the raising of county taxes. However, the tax law of 1758, the law ordering the first of the Eighteen Pence taxes created a new township office, that of assessor. The citizens elected the assessor yearly from among the "discreet and  

29 Petition, John Day to the Court of Quarter Sessions, May 26, 1751, Records of the Court of Quarter Sessions, Ch. Co. Arch., CCHS.  
30 Ibid., VI: 10-26, chap. CCLXXXIV.
reputable” freeholders of the township. His duty was to assist the constable in drawing up his return for the provincial tax, that is, “to go to places of abode and make faithful inquiry into the value of real and personal estate of all.” He assisted the County Commissioners and Assessors in assessing the inhabitants of his township and was present at the day of appeals for his township. The provincial tax law of the following year vested the entire responsibility for drawing up the returns in the assessor and allowed him a flat sum of five shillings per day for his trouble. County taxes, however, continued to be levied as before with the constable making the returns for such taxes.31

It is important, however, to realize that taxes were also levied at the township level. The right to levy taxes evolved slowly and gradually increased in importance over the colonial period. The Assembly granted it first to the overseers of the poor, then to the poundkeeper, and finally in 1762 to the supervisor of highways. In each case the purpose of taxation was to distribute the burden of government more equitably and to promote the common good. The right to tax within the township came as a direct result of the rising costs of such responsibilities as the care of orphans, the impounding of stray mares, and the repair of rutted roadbeds. It can most readily be considered in conjunction with each office exercising that right.

Until 1705 money for the relief of the poor originated out of the county taxes. After that date, townships levied and collected taxes for poor relief. Overseers of the poor had authority, subject to the approval of three, later two justices, to levy a tax of one penny per pound on the clear value of estates, real and personal, of all residents of the township and of four shillings on all not otherwise rated. This levying could be done as often as might prove necessary. In 1734, because of the increase in the number of the poor in the province, the tax rate increased to three pence per pound and nine shillings per head. (This was the same tax rate allowed for county levies.) The rate continued in the laws of 1771. Approval of the justices remained necessary before the laying of the tax. However, after 1771, the overseers no longer submitted their accounts to the justices for audit but to three freeholders, elected yearly within the township for that purpose.32

31 Ibid., V: 201-212, chap., CCCCVI; V: 294-302, chap. CCCXXII; V: 337-352, chap. CCCXXXI; 5: 379-396, chap. CCCXXVII.

32 Ibid., IV: 266-277, chap. CCCXXXVI; V: 79-93, chap. CCCLXXIX; VIII: 75-96, chap. DCXXXV.
In addition to providing relief for the poor of the township, the overseer had responsibility for protecting his township from vagrants, for providing work for the able unemployed, and for apprenticing the children of the poor to useful trades. As in England, communities carefully prevented those who might become public charges from establishing legal residence within their bounds for with it went a right to relief in time of need. The overseer required the registration of strangers and servants and forced wandering undesirables to move on promptly or return to their last legal residence. Each vagrant not expelled meant additional taxes which the overseer would have to levy. If necessary, the overseer brought suit in the county court to force a township to take back one of its poor.

In 1751, threatened with the charge of maintaining an aged man, recently removed from West Cain to West Bradford, the overseers of the latter township brought their suit before two of the justices of the peace and proved that the man's legal residence was in West Cain. The justices ordered West Cain to assume the responsibility for his care. West Cain brought a countersuit in the Court of Quarter Sessions. The judges of that court warned the overseers for West Bradford that if the old man should “dye before the next Sessions and the order of the two justices. . .shall be hereafter reversed or quashed then the overseers of the Township of West Bradford Shall pay to the overseers of [West] Cain Township all their Costs and Charges in this Suit for the maintenance of the said George during the time of Such Maintenance.” There is no further mention of this case in the Court Docket.

On March 6, 1752, the West Bradford overseers entered their expenditures in the Township Book for the approval of the auditors: the costs of removal, lawyers' fees, “expences and time tending Court,” and a quire of paper for the town's use. No specific payment to West Cain was listed, and no marginal note announced George's death. We in the twentieth century are left dangling. The accounts were duly endorsed, and the new overseers assumed the responsibilities of the office.33

In addition to the regular township taxes for the support of the poor, special taxes were occasionally levied within the township. In 1728, the

33 Overseers of the Poor of West Cain v Overseers of the Poor of West Bradford, Nov. Term, 1751, Docket of Court of Quarter Sessions, Ch. Co. Arch., CCHS, 173. Accounts of the Overseers of the Poor, Mar. 6, 1752, West Bradford Township Book, 1736-1799, Ms. 76214, CCHS.
Assembly ordered each township to elect a poundkeeper. With the assistance of the overseer of the poor, the keeper levied a tax to cover the costs of holding stray horses and other cattle and of advertising and to compensate the keeper for his trouble. Any money remaining in his hands went toward the relief of the poor.\(^{34}\)

In 1762, the supervisors of highways obtained the right to levy taxes to defray the high costs of building and maintaining roads in the townships. In the past they had followed the English custom of calling residents out as necessary for work on the roads. Each man provided his own tools and those who contributed a team for a day obtained credit for three days of work. The Assembly, recognizing that this seventeenth-century system was now burdensome and inadequate, passed the Highway Act of 1762. For the purpose of highway maintenance counties were divided into districts of one or, if necessary, two townships. The freeholders of each district elected two supervisors of highways, who with the assistance of the township assessors levied taxes within their districts to defray highway costs. In 1762 the rate for the highway tax was at three pence per pound on all property, real and personal, of freeholders and inhabitants.\(^{35}\)

In 1763, a Supplement to this law limited this tax to landowners. Tenants could deduct it from their rent; those not otherwise rated paid no head tax. All taxes levied at the township level for roads followed the schedules prepared for the county and provincial taxes. The laws which gave the supervisors the right to tax also provided safeguards. Two justices had to approve the laying the tax, and at the time the township elected the supervisor, it also elected four freeholders to inspect the accounts of the retiring supervisors.\(^{36}\)

The Highway Act of 1762 acknowledged the right of the township to elect its own officials and levy its own taxes. It recognized that to continue to speak of the supervisors as appointed officials was to perpetuate a seventeenth-century method of local government no longer accepted in practice. The courts routinely nominated the supervisor chosen by the township and no longer intervened except in their judicial capacity. The law recognized that the right to raise a local tax rested with

\(^{34}\) Statutes at Large, IV: 116-120, chap. CCCI.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., VI: 186-195, chap. CCCCLXXIX.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., VI: 274-276, chap. CCCXC; VI: 424-432, chap. DXXVI.
the people immediately concerned. In 1765 the right of taxation was exercised on three levels: at the provincial level by the Assembly for the King's use and for the welfare of the colony; at the county level by the County Commissioners and Assessors for the use of county government and the welfare of the county; at the township level by annually elected officers to provide for the welfare of the community and to defray the costs of township responsibilities.

Township residents, aware of the importance of roads, yet wary of being overcharged by their supervisors, did not automatically approve the accounts submitted. In March 1773, the supervisors of Marple submitted accounts for the year totaling forty-seven pounds. The freeholders elected as auditors judged the sum reported "too great a charge" and "saw cause to dock it" by seven pounds. On appeal the court reversed the decision of the auditors and awarded the supervisors the full amount requested.

The tenor of the debate and the involvement of the township is reflected in an angry petition to the court in support of the auditors. The protestors, fourteen of the fifty-eight township freeholders, feared that if a greater authority did not redress their grievances an ill precedent would be set for successive supervisors. They admitted that the retiring officers had put through a piece of road but, they added, it could have been done in half the time if rightly conducted. The increase in costs over the previous years was the real cause of their rage: "at least one third more than then has been expended in any one year this 20 years past—and yet no more work done, nor better performed, then formerly on such occasions." In the absence of a petition in support of the supervisors, we can only note that the "genuin Sentiments," strongly expressed, did not carry. The accounts were eventually paid as submitted.\footnote{Deposition, Inhabitants of Marple Township, Aug. 24, 1773, Records of the Court of Quarter Sessions, Ch. Co. Arch., CCHS. Records of the Court of Quarter Sessions, Nov. Term, 1773, Ch. Co. Arch., CCHS.}

As both the population within each township and the complexity of government increased, the number of county and township officials grew. County officers required additional help from the townships in order to perform their functions. Although the 1738 law for the election of the Assembly only required that inspectors from four townships assist the sheriff with the elections, that of 1752 stated that each
township should send an inspector with a list of those in his township qualified to vote. The creation of auditors to approve the township expenditures shows the transference of responsibilities formerly reserved to the justices to the townships.

Such increases in government at the local level can be viewed as resulting from external forces, that is, from the higher levels of government. In addition, township government grew from within. The number of overseers of the poor increased from one to two or even three; supervisors of highways, from one to two; the assessor assisted the County Commissioners to lay the provincial tax within his township and also helped the township officials to levy the township taxes. Only through township studies can we hope to discover whether the citizens viewed the obligation to participate in local government as an onerous burden or as an opportunity to exercise some control over local conditions and perhaps earn a small amount of ready money.

A petition for township status filed in February 1740/1 by the residents of a seven thousand acre tract in Chester County settled as a private venture indicated the importance the colonists attached to township government. Addressing the Court, these freeholders explained that there was "a great inconveniency attending us not having a distinct, or separate Township, of our own, and Officers, to serve there." They craved the Court's assistance in forming a township but prayed that their traditional boundaries be honored, that "no other Land be inclosed in the said Township, but only the said Society land." The inhabitants of what became Newlin Township were conscious of themselves as a community and desired the advantages of township self-government. The right to levy taxes for the support of township services and to select officials on a yearly basis led to personal and community involvement. Townships were small enough so that, as a rule, all residents had to participate in each governmental role more than once over their lifetimes. Settlers who moved from one township to another were particularly liable for repeated service, for service in the first township did not count as previous duty. Men balked if summoned before their

38 Statutes at Large, IV: 331-336, chap. CCL; V: 16-22, chap. CCCLXIV; V: 153-158, chap. CCCXCVI.
39 Petition, Inhabitants of Tract to Court of Quarter Sessions, Feb. 25, 1740/1, Records of the Court of Quarter Sessions, Ch. Co. Arch., CCHS.
turn had come. Samuel Shaw, for example, protested his appointment as constable in 1764 on the ground that he had already served the office. He pointed out that since custom demanded that all should serve in turn, he should not be called again for several years. For the "better information" of the judges, he annexed to his petition a list of names of those who had not yet served. The township appointed Valentine Weaver in his stead. In the case of the principal positions (constable, overseer, and supervisor) rotation of office continued through the period. As Alan Tully noted when summing up his discussion of township government:

"Rich or poor, old family member or recent resident, the town meeting made sure that every reasonably responsible man took his turn. . . . In large measure, the story of township officeholding in Pennsylvania is the story of the high turnover rate of incumbents; it is difficult to imagine eighteenth-century officeholding patterns that could have been more egalitarian."

In the course of this serving and acting on township business the residents of each township became a community. In Pennsylvania, the pattern of dispersed settlement meant that nucleated villages were the exception, even hamlets were rare, and town halls were virtually non-existent. Even so, and notwithstanding the distances between houses, the township became a community. A statement by Peter Laslett, apropos of the effect of enclosure on English community life is equally applicable to rural Pennsylvania of the colonial period.

The community still had its affairs to run cooperatively. . . . The poor law had to be carried out; the roads had to be kept up; the constables appointed to maintain the peace. The more important the common responsibilities of any community, presumably, the stronger the association between its members, because each one's interest is engaged. But living together in one township, isolated spatially, from others of comparable size, of very much the same structure, inevitably means a communal sense and communal activity.

40 Petition, Samuel Shaw to Court of Quarter Sessions, Mar. 26, 1764, Records of the Court of Quarter Sessions, Ch. Co. Arch., CCHS.

41 Tully, William Penn's Legacy, 117.

42 Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost (New York, 1965), 60.
No discussion of the township as a community and seat of local government can completely ignore the lack of congruence between township boundaries and Quaker meeting membership. Alan Tully concluded that this lack of congruence was one of the three things which prevented the township from becoming a vital political and social institution. The community of the meeting would have added direction, force, and cohesion to the operation of local government. This article has presented evidence to prove that the township actually did evolve into a vital institution. The question then is: what effect did the lack of congruence have on township development?

Perhaps the township became a vital force because of the lack of congruence. The Quakers did not believe that the meeting was or should be a formal unit of government. During the early crucial years, the Friends were in the majority and the laws and policies implemented at the township level were not in conflict with their religious beliefs. The rural population, even of the original townships, was not, even in the first years, exclusively Quaker. Common concerns such as roads and vagrants required a non-religious governmental unit such as the township. Newtown Township was laid out around a central village. Although the area of meeting membership extended beyond the township lines, it was a close enough approximation for us to expect to see a greater degree of vitality in Newtown than, for instance, in Marple, a township without a central village or a meetinghouse of its own and whose Quakers attended four different meetings. But Marple was as active as Newtown. In a pluralistic society such as Pennsylvania perhaps the lack of congruence turned out to be an advantage by making it easier for the township to evolve as an independent political and social unit representing the entire society.

The positive support from William Penn during the first years of

Tully, *William Penn's Legacy*, 116. Tully saw two other factors as preventing the township from becoming an important force: the casual development of neighborhoods and the concentration of the taxing power in the hands of the county officials. The first of these has to be conceded. The second I addressed earlier in the paper. Taxes were levied at the township, county, and provincial level and originated at the level at which they were to be spent. In the case of provincial taxes, the tax was administered by the county officials acting as agents for the provincial government. However, during the period 1758-1774, the period of heaviest provincial taxation, the county assessors were assisted in levying the tax on a township by an assessor elected by that township for that purpose. The right of the townships to levy taxes evolved as the need to raise money for township expenditures developed. It was well-established by the middle of the eighteenth century.
settlement was important to the rise of the township as a vital force. To
the colonists of southeastern Pennsylvania the township as a method of
settlement brought orderly compact settlement and a government capa-
ble of maintaining the peace, supervising the highways, overseeing the
poor, and of assuming an even greater role as the colonial world ex-
panded and moved west. The townships fostered an environment con-
ducive to economic growth and community solidarity. Such was Wil-
liam Penn's stated intention.

By placing responsibility for implementing governmental policies
and for guarding the welfare of the community on all able residents of
the township, regardless of economic and social position, Penn also
encouraged organizational skill, initiative, and self-confidence
throughout a broad spectrum of society. From life in the township came
preparation both for the eighteenth century world of economic liberal-
ism and for political independence. The township as a unit of self
government and as the community of the rural Pennsylvanian was an
important part of Penn's legacy to his colony.

*   *   *   *   *

This article opened with the assertion that the township provides the
community for the study of rural Pennsylvanian. This concluding
section will consider the practical question: are there records suitable for
micro-study at the township level?

Yes, there are records which can provide the broad documentary
basis necessary for intensive study at the township level. However, to
assemble them will be a time consuming job. Very few records were
kept by the township and these concern township affairs only, e.g., lists
of expenditures for the support of the poor or the names of office-
holders. Township officials derived their authority from the County
Court. It was at the County Court House that all public records for the
colonial period were recorded or filed. They were stored chronologi-
cally, by court and type of document, not by township. To sort through
the vast accumulation of county records, to retrieve all those relevant to
the reconstruction of the population of any one township or to the
history of that township is neither an easy nor a quickly completed task.

Fortunately for the historian who undertakes such work, the town-
ship provided the basis for public identity in the colonial period. The
settlement was not merely John Morris, but John Morris of Marple. He purchased land, mortgaged it, sold or devised it under this appellation. As a resident of a specific township, he wrote his will, paid his taxes, sued and was sued. By working back and forth, following these various activities, with an occasional assist from the church, meeting, and family records, the data required for community study is gradually coaxed forth.

The social diversity and ethnic-religious pluralism of the colony suggest that numerous studies will have to be completed before generalizations can be made about the Pennsylvania experience on the basis of township studies. Given that so much time will have to be spent merely to construct the documentary base necessary to each one, should township study be undertaken as a means to study the colonial past in this province? Preliminary work with township records indicates that the study of these records is essential to our understanding of the colonial period. This statement holds whether or not one grants that the township is the community of the rural Pennsylvanian.

The historian considering the social and economic history of colonial Pennsylvania, regardless of whether he is working at the local or provincial level, needs the information available only through township study. Consider, for example, the tax schedules of Chester County. For the period prior to 1760 these lists provide the historian with the names of the landholders by township. In the records landowners were not distinguished from renters but both were grouped together as land-

---

"See Lemon, Best Poor Man's Country, 94 and 252, fn. 69; Lemon and Gary B. Nash, "The Distribution of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century America: A Century of Change in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1693-1802." Journal of Social History, II: 1 (1968-1969), 6-10; Ball, "The Process of Settlement in Eighteenth-Century Chester County, Pennsylvania," 78; Ball, "Dynamics of Population and Wealth in Eighteenth-Century Chester County, Pennsylvania," 642-644. The references cited contain statements of the type under question yet indicate the care with which these historians approached the tax records. A review of their methodology, procedures, and results have convinced me that there is little chance that they, or anyone else, working exclusively at the county level could have avoided misinterpreting the tax records and, therefore, committing the same errors when using data derived from these records. Only a prior knowledge of the status of the landholders on the township tax lists would have alerted them to such facts as: (1) A substantial number of tenants paid the tax levied on the land they leased and were entered on the tax lists as though they were owners (i.e. with acres held noted). (2) Non-resident landowners usually appeared only on the tax lists for the township where they were residing, and their leased properties were concealed under the tenant's name. The consequences of such facts will be obvious to anyone familiar with the studies cited and with the tax records used."
holders. A failure to reconstruct landholdings within townships and to compare the tax lists with a list of actual landowners within the township leads to a failure to note that in Chester County in the 1750s close to fifty percent of the landholders were renters not landowners. In the decade preceding the revolution, tenancy among farmers in that county was decreasing not increasing as has been thought.  

The township provides the community appropriate for the study of rural Pennsylvania. It offers a unit through which to study this population as a community per se, as a group of individuals, and as a community of individuals linked in various ways to each other and to the larger world of the county, to the town and to the Quaker community. The records, filed at the County Court Houses, will require methodical sifting and meshing but the historian can anticipate a richer understanding of the Pennsylvania colonial past at the end of the task.

LUCY SIMLER

---