

## PREFACE

William Penn is the best known and yet the least understood of all the founding fathers of seventeenth-century America. To those who live in the Philadelphia area, his image is omnipresent. All thirty-seven feet and fifty-three thousand pounds of his statue look down from Philadelphia's City Hall, but whether he approves or disdains what we do is unclear. He extends one hand toward Shackamaxon Creek, where he signed a peace treaty with the Lenape, although there is no documentary evidence of this event. He represents respect for Native Americans and peace, both important in early Pennsylvania history and prominent elements in his Quaker faith. In the other hand he holds the 1701 Frame of Government, which symbolizes his commitment to religious liberty and respect for elected representatives. Of course, this part of the statue oversimplifies Penn by ignoring his support for monarchy and his unhappiness with what he saw as the Pennsylvania Assembly's power grab and the weakening of proprietary power in this new constitution.

A video made in 2015 confirmed that today some Philadelphians think the statue atop City Hall depicts Benjamin Franklin.<sup>1</sup> They should read the introductory chapter summarizing Penn's life and times. My ideal reader is a person who knows a little about Penn and wants to understand why he became a Quaker, how that decision shaped his later life, and when he became significant in the history of Quakers and early Pennsylvania.

Since he disapproved of painted images glorifying any man, Penn would have been troubled both by his monument and by the Second French Empire building that it graces. A further incongruity is his wearing a beaver hat and an elaborate coat with many extra buttons and lace sleeves—very fashionable in the seventeenth century. Quakers wanted simplified dress they called “plain style.” Plain the hat, coat, and lace are not.<sup>2</sup> There are many images of him, but we don't know whether Penn was actually the subject in any of the frequently reproduced paintings and drawings of him (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> A false picture of Penn

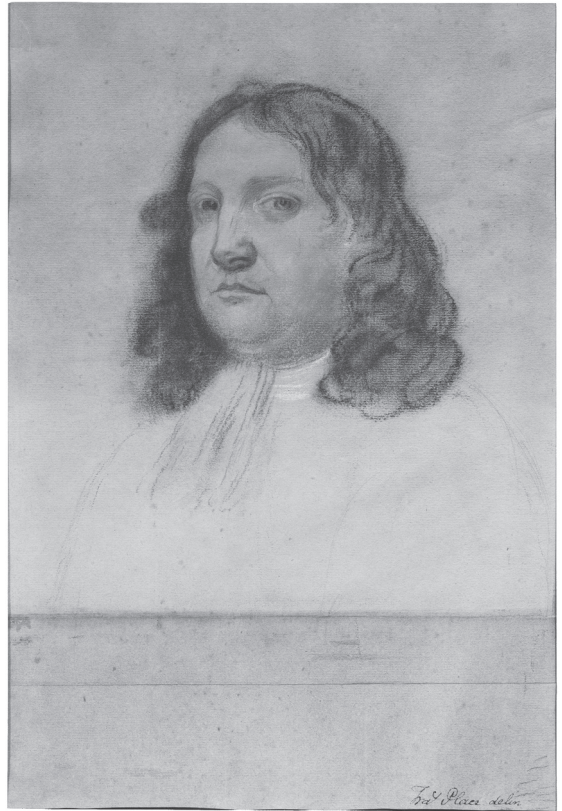
does no harm and fulfills our desire to see how he could have looked. Because Penn, in life and reputation, presented a vision of a benevolent governor creating a tolerant, prosperous, and moral society, he reminds Pennsylvanians, on the rare occasions on which they think of him, that they would do well to live up to his ideals.

Many residents of Pennsylvania believe that the state is named after him, although in actuality King Charles II bestowed that honor on his father, the naval hero Admiral William Penn. The colony owes its existence not to the peaceful son William but to the debt owed to his warrior father for feeding British sailors in the wars with Holland.<sup>4</sup> Still, the belief is essentially correct, because there would have been no Pennsylvania without the court connections, lobbying, and skill with which the Quaker son approached the king. Charles II owed many debts that he neglected to pay, and although historians have offered various reasons why the monarch granted this land, all are speculative, because he never said. There is good written evidence, however, of what the younger William Penn wanted for his new colony.

Penn is often conflated with the religious group that he joined as a young man, the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. Unlike other churches, Quakers are identified with a particular American state. There is no such entity as a Methodist or Roman Catholic state (Puritan Massachusetts and Mormon Utah come closest), but the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is “the Quaker state”—an odd juxtaposition because the Quakers were a minority within a few years of Pennsylvania’s founding and today represent less than 1 percent of its population. Whatever legitimacy comes from the name, members of the Society of Friends controlled the Pennsylvania General Assembly (as the state legislature is called) for the first ninety years of its existence, and there are Quaker meeting houses (other denominations call such structures “churches”) throughout the Commonwealth, though they are concentrated in the eastern part of the state.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, though they have no connection to the religious group, there is Quaker State Motor Oil, a Quaker moving company, a Quaker real estate firm, the Quaker Oats Company, and dozens of other businesses that use “Quaker” in their names. Sometimes the name is used ironically; during Prohibition, the largest producer of illegal booze in Philadelphia was the Quaker Brewing Company. Wm Penn Perfecto cigars, manufactured in Pennsylvania and advertised as the “mildest cigar ever made,” sold for five cents, although the retailer could sell them for no less than four and no more than six cents apiece. (There is no evidence that Penn smoked, but if he had, he would

FIG. 1 | Francis Place, *Portrait of William Penn*, n.d. The family that owned this portrait for many years thought it was Penn, but modern examination has proved this unlikely. © Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



have smoked a pipe.) Sometimes the images conflate Penn and Quakers; the generic benevolent man supposedly dressed like Penn on the Quaker Oats label is supposed to convey the high quality of the oats, not any religious significance. Strawbridge and Clothier, formerly a leading department store in Philadelphia, used a model of Penn shaking hands with a Native American. The Quaker-style clothing in both images is based on Benjamin West's 1771 painting *William Penn's Treaty with the Indians* (see fig. 3) rather than on seventeenth-century garb. Sometimes Penn stands alone, as in the logo of the Colonial Penn Insurance Company, whose building towers over and provides spectacular views of Independence Hall, surrounding colonial-era buildings, and the Liberty Bell, the biblical inscription on which proclaims "liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof," celebrating Penn's 1701 Frame of Government, though there is only a later oral tradition linking it with the Liberty Bell.

Penn's policies still affect daily life in Philadelphia. His plan for the city named streets going east-west for trees and assigned numbers to streets going north-south, establishing a grid pattern that became normative for many American cities. The four squares he envisioned still endure as parks, now named Franklin, Logan, Washington, and Rittenhouse; there is also a central square that replaced a reservoir. The area on the bank of the Delaware River where he first came ashore is now named Penn's Landing. The site of his house is a park filled with plaques recording his sayings. In New England, the town is the basic local unit of government, but in Pennsylvania it is the county, as Penn intended, and people lived on their farms rather than in villages clustered around a green. At some point in virtually all television coverage of Philadelphia sports events, the announcers will refer to Philadelphia as the city of "brotherly love"—assuming that Penn intended the Greek meaning. The term can also be used as a sarcastic reference to the failure of the city's residents to live up to Penn's high expectations.

Penn would have approved of his identification with religious liberty. From the day he became a Quaker until his incapacitating stroke in 1712, he consistently advocated freedom of worship. In England, where the only legal worship was in a state church supported by tithes, he desired liberty of belief and worship, though he did not seek to end other privileges of the Church of England. In West Jersey and Pennsylvania, he wanted no established church, no tithe, and either no militia or no one forced to serve in it. Freedom of belief and worship were inalienable rights, but Penn also thought that government should enforce clear moral standards that were learned through Bible study, reasonable thought, and religious experience. He feared anarchy, desired deference and order, saw strict morality as necessary for any society, and advocated laws to prohibit all licentious behavior. A major goal in all of Penn's writings and political activities was the creation of a civil polity that would promote internal and external harmony. As an observer of violence within and outside the state, he advocated policies designed not just to prevent war but to foster peace, and he was thus the first exponent of what would become the Quaker peace testimony in the twentieth century. He was also an English imperialist and saw no contradictions among colonization, empire, and harmony among states and with Native Americans.

William Penn remains the most comprehensively studied seventeenth-century Friend, a prominence that is well deserved. Through his writings, debates, political agitation, and statesmanship, he made significant contributions to Quaker, English, and American life as a theologian, political theorist, courtier

to three kings and two queens, founder and lawgiver of Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia city planner. Penn wrote two classic works on the moral life—one based on religious discipline and the other on rational prudence. As a pacifist, he advocated a parliament of European kingdoms and a union of British North American colonies so as to avoid war. Penn converted to Quakerism around 1667, and for the next forty-five years he preached, lobbied, traveled, and wrote on behalf of his fellow believers. He published more pages than any other Friend except George Fox. His willingness publicly to espouse controversial positions landed him in prison, made him enemies, and earned him respect. Historians, journalists, antiquarians, and many Friends have sought to understand this complicated man—a fascinating but also an elusive person. He was a rebel who supported authority, an aristocratic plain Quaker.

The primary sources on Penn are massive and include Joseph Besse's two-volume *Collection of the Works of William Penn* (1726, 1,800 pages) and Richard S. Dunn and Mary Maples Dunn's five-volume *Papers of William Penn*, which comprise four volumes numbering three thousand pages, plus an additional volume of bibliography, edited by Edwin Bronner and David Fraser, covering all the early editions of Penn's published writings.<sup>6</sup> The Historical Society of Pennsylvania's microfilm edition of Penn's correspondence comprises fourteen reels. It is not difficult to learn what Penn wanted us to understand about his life and thought.

Although we know more about Penn than about any other seventeenth-century Quaker, and even given the voluminous primary and secondary sources, significant gaps in our knowledge remain. Some of these lacunae may have been caused by Penn's attempts to protect himself after the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and the deposition of James II, with whom he had been closely associated. There are no surviving letters from Penn to his first wife, Gulielma, from his first visit to Pennsylvania, although she mentions having received several.<sup>7</sup> His second wife, Hannah, her sons, or later descendants may have discarded papers for various reasons, including fear that his support for King James II could be used to blacken his reputation, Hannah's possible jealousy of Gulielma, or perhaps just a desire for privacy.

Although Penn wrote accounts as a traveling minister on the Continent and in Ireland and left a fragmentary story of his life in one short period, nothing comparable to Fox's or other Quakers' journals has survived.<sup>8</sup> Even if, like many other prominent Friends, Penn had kept a diary, I doubt that it would have shed much light on what we would like to know. What was his mother like? What were his attitudes toward his brother, his sister, his daughter

Letitia? Who were his friends, if any, and how well did he get along with non-elite Quakers? Did he recognize his evolution from Christian humanist to apocalyptic radical, and then to orthodox authoritarian? Penn would have insisted that we can know him as a man who experienced the Inward Christ and attempted to follow its guidance in daily life. All our other questions, he believed, were irrelevant.

There are many modern biographies of Penn. The best older ones, William I. Hull's *William Penn: A Topical Biography* (1937) and Catherine Owens Peare's *William Penn: A Biography* (1956), are based on extensive reading in original sources, but both reflect a liberal or modernist understanding of Quakerism that has been significantly revised in recent years. Two-thirds of the footnotes in the Wikipedia entry on Penn cite Bonamy Dobrée's *William Penn, Quaker and Pioneer* (1932) or Hans Fantel's *William Penn: Apostle of Dissent* (1971), but the entry ignores Harry Emerson Wildes's *William Penn* (1973). All of these works contain dubious assertions and repeat stories for which there are no primary sources. The extensive documentation in the Dunns' *Papers of William Penn* required a rethinking of all earlier biographies. Mary Geiter's *William Penn* (2000) is a study of Penn in power and a corrective to earlier laudatory accounts, and instead stresses his political skills and business acumen. John Moretta's *William Penn and the Quaker Legacy* (2006) is a readable popular version designed for undergraduates, but it lacks adequate documentation. Andrew Murphy's *William Penn: A Life* (2019) makes excellent use of Penn's papers and of Murphy's own research on political theory, and it deserves to become the standard scholarly biography of Penn.<sup>9</sup>

Although I have learned much from these books, they were not very helpful on the topics that most interest me as a scholar of American religions who specializes in Quaker history. For example, all of them ignore Penn's few published sermons, even though preaching was a major activity for most of his adult life. None deals with Quaker writings on religious liberty before Penn's conversion. To cite the most recent example, Murphy spends more time on a libelous account of Penn's alleged romantic involvement in Ireland than on the contents of the two editions of *No Cross, No Crown*, nor does he discuss the differences between the two editions or why the second has remained in print for more than three hundred years.<sup>10</sup>

The three major influences on Penn's life were seventeenth-century political events, his social status, and his Quakerism. This is not a book for those interested only in Penn's theology, politics, business, theories of government, or contributions to the shaping of Pennsylvania. There are good books and

articles on each of these subjects, but even professional scholars rarely have the time (or patience) to read them all. (See the “Additional Reading” section at the end of the book.)

The focus of this book is Penn’s religious faith and his roles within the Society of Friends. Each of the first eight chapters is designed to stand alone, even at the risk of minor duplication. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Stuart England, the evolution of the Society of Friends, an account of Penn’s parents, and a summary of his life. Penn’s writings show evolving interests, partially because he adjusted to the major changes in England and the Quaker faith between 1660 and 1712. Penn’s conversion around 1667 changed the trajectory of his life; instead of a would-be courtier, he became a leading advocate for the Quaker form of Christianity. Chapter 2 utilizes all of the extant documents on Penn’s conversion to show why it occurred and what it meant to him. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with Penn’s roles within the Society of Friends. He had greater wealth, better education, and higher social status than virtually all other Friends, but Quakers considered such metrics of little religious significance. How did Penn fit his strong personality into the organizational framework being established by English Friends? Chapter 3 shows that Penn combined his subjective religious experience with a demand that Quakers who publicly dissented must submit to the guidance of the leaders of London Yearly Meeting. Beginning in the 1670s and for the next thirty years, Penn sought to define and enforce Quaker unity. Diversity was allowed, but questioning the authority of ministers, including Penn, was not. Chapter 4 examines Penn’s importance in shaping Quaker policies during the reign of James II, throughout the Keithian schism of the 1690s, in the debate over whether the English government’s form of affirmation was really an oath, and in the context of the increasing conservatism of early eighteenth-century Quakers. For Friends, the essence of the Quaker religion was an encounter with the divine in the meeting for worship. Penn’s leadership rested upon his ability as a preacher. For years he “traveled in the ministry” in England, the Low Countries, and America. An outsider took down in shorthand twelve of his sermons in various meetings in London in 1693–94. These sermons show what Penn considered to be the essence of religion and are addressed in chapter 7 and the appendix.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with Penn’s writings on religious liberty and morality that were ostensibly addressed to outsiders but were read and approved by Friends. On the issue of religious liberty, Penn followed a policy of “walk when we must, run when we can,” with walking appropriate to England and running to Pennsylvania. Penn’s advocacy of freedom of conscience echoed

ideas he encountered in France that were discussed during the Commonwealth period and expressed by early Quakers. In many treatises, Penn employed scripture, church history, reason, English history, and pragmatism, and he changed his arguments depending on his audience. At first he advocated only freedom to worship and an end to persecution of dissenters, but he soon extended such protections to Roman Catholics. Although he insisted that the privileges of the Church of England would not be compromised by these protections, Penn did not specify what this meant. In Pennsylvania, by contrast, there would be no tithes, no oaths, and no militia, and all Christians (including Roman Catholics) could serve in any political office. (After 1705, in response to demands from the Crown, Pennsylvania would deny Catholics naturalization and political office, but open worship continued.) His Quaker contemporaries appreciated Penn as a moralist, and his major treatises on ethics—*No Cross, No Crown* (1669; 2nd ed., 1682) and *Some Fruits of Solitude in Reflections and Maxims* (1693; he published a sequel in 1702)—are analyzed in chapter 6. As late as 1679, his *Address to Protestants* could threaten hellfire, invoke scriptural literalism, stress personal piety, cite natural law, and rely on reason to reduce Christianity to its essence. In 1693 and 1702, reflecting the changing times, Penn's moral advice relied on reason and advocated adjusting to society rather than mortification and salvation. Soon after his death, Penn became a hero to Quakers in Pennsylvania and England, and then a symbol of religious liberty in America. In order to separate legend and fact, chapter 8 examines four myths or legends about Penn: the story of when he gave up his sword, the circumstances of his alleged treaty with the Native Americans, the meaning of his “holy experiment,” and the features of his evolving posthumous reputation. The brief final chapter, “Afterthoughts,” addresses Penn's accomplishments and weaknesses and the difficulty of understanding his complex character.

Readers should keep in mind that focusing on Penn's religion risks oversimplifying his larger significance. Such a focus neglects his role as a member of the upper class with properties in Ireland and England and ignores his skill in dealing with the Crown and Parliament as he obtained and developed in Pennsylvania an enormous tract of land and substantial powers of government. Biographers grapple with understanding modern men and women whose families and friends they can interview. Although I began reading about Penn in the 1960s, taught about him for many years in history and religion classes, and have written and edited articles and books on him and related subjects, William Penn remains to me a man of contradictions, an enigmatic Quaker



founding father. He was a radical when converting to an outlawed sect, enduring prison, advocating religious liberty, reforming criminal justice, seeking a moral transformation in England, and attempting to create a Christian utopia in Pennsylvania. As a conservative, he never questioned the existence of the monarchy and supported Charles II and James II, enjoyed the support of the nobility, disapproved of revolution, opposed so-called schismatics within the Society of Friends, and demanded deference from the settlers in Pennsylvania.