

William Penn – a Short bio

William Penn was perhaps the first great hero of American liberty. During the late seventeenth century, when Protestants persecuted Catholics, Catholics persecuted Protestants, and both persecuted Quakers and Jews, Penn established an American sanctuary which protected freedom of conscience. Almost everywhere else, colonists stole land from the Indians, but Penn traveled unarmed among the Indians and negotiated peaceful purchases. He insisted that women deserved equal rights with men. He gave Pennsylvania a written constitution which limited the power of government, provided a humane penal code, and guaranteed many fundamental liberties.

For the first time in modern history, a large society offered equal rights to people of different races and religions. Penn's dramatic example caused quite a stir in Europe. The French philosopher Voltaire, a champion of religious toleration, offered lavish praise. "William Penn might, with reason, boast of having brought down upon earth the Golden Age, which in all probability, never had any real existence but in his dominions. "

Most of us have heard of the guy on the Quaker Oats box. Though the Quaker Oats company will deny it, the likeness is too similar. Either way, I knew nothing about the early Quakers. After I was born again of God's Spirit, one of the things I fell in love with was church history through the ages. The beginnings of the Quakers in England in around 1647 was a very powerful move of God. Heart purity, the ability to know God within, the ability to hear from Him, these things were wonderful to my heart. After I did much reading about George Fox the founder, William Penn was one of the men I came across in my readings. He was a great man, full of the Holy Spirit, unashamed to speak of Jesus and His salvation. I got hold of "No Cross, No Crown," one of Penn's famous writings. Great book! It speaks of the inner cross in our hearts and lives, and how God in His kindness works it in us to produce the life of Jesus in our inward parts. I loved it. If you get the time, the first 40 pages of the book is vital reading.

Penn was the only person who made major contributions to liberty in both the New World and the Old World. Before he conceived the idea of Pennsylvania, he became the leading defender of religious toleration in England. He was imprisoned six times for speaking out courageously. While in prison, he wrote one pamphlet after another, which gave Quakers a literature and attacked intolerance. He alone proved capable of challenging oppressive government policies in court--one of his cases helped secure the right to trial by jury. Penn used his diplomatic skills and family connections to get large numbers of Quakers out of jail. He saved many from the gallows.

Left mostly to himself, young William became interested in religion. He was thrilled to hear a talk by Thomas Loe, a missionary for the Society of Friends derisively known as Quakers. Then and there William Penn gave his life to Jesus and became a new man in Christ. Founded in 1647 by the English preacher George Fox, Quakers were a mystical group emphasizing a direct relationship with God. Quakers didn't have a clergy or churches. Rather, they held meetings

where participants meditated silently and spoke up when the Spirit moved them. They favored plain dress and a simple life rather than aristocratic affectation.

Penn emerged as a rebel when he entered Oxford University. He defied Anglican officials by visiting John Owen, a professor dismissed for advocating tolerant humanism. Penn further rebelled by protesting compulsory chapel attendance, for which he was expelled at age 17. In 1664, Penn studied at Lincoln's Inn, the most prestigious law school in London. He learned the common law basis for civil liberties and gained some experience with courtroom strategy. His father Admiral Penn, assigned to rebuilding the British Navy for war with the Dutch, asked that his son serve as personal assistant. Young William gained a valuable inside view of high command. Admiral Penn also used his son as a courier delivering military messages to King Charles II. Young William developed a cordial relationship with the King and his brother, the Duke of York, the future King James II.

Penn's desire for God led him to attend Quaker meetings even though the government considered this a crime. In September 1667, police broke into a meeting and arrested everyone. Since Penn looked like a fashionable aristocrat rather than a plain Quaker, the police released him. He protested, saying he was indeed a Quaker and should be treated the same as the others. Penn drew on his legal training to prepare a defense. Meanwhile, in jail he began writing about freedom of conscience. His father disowned him, and young Penn lived in a succession of Quaker households. He learned that the movement was started by passionate preachers who had little education. There was hardly any Quaker literature. He resolved to help by applying his scholarly knowledge and legal training. He began writing pamphlets, which were distributed through the Quaker underground.

In 1668, one of his hosts was Isaac Penington, a wise writer among the Quakers. Penn met his lovely stepdaughter Gulielma Springett, and it was practically love at first sight. They married on April 4, 1672. She was to bear seven children, four of whom died in infancy.

Meanwhile, Penn attacked the Catholic/ Anglican doctrine of the Trinity, and the Anglican bishop had him imprisoned in the notorious Tower of London. Ordered to recant, Penn declared from his cold isolation cell: "My prison shall be my grave before I will budge a jot; for I owe my conscience to no mortal man." By the time he was released seven months later, he had written pamphlets defining the principal elements of Quakerism. His best-known work from this period was *No Cross, No Crown*, explaining very clearly the truth of the outward cross that Jesus was crucified on as a type or picture of the inward cross that we are to bear and allow to operate in our hearts and lives. Soon after, Parliament passed the Conventicle Act, which aimed to suppress religious dissent as sedition. The law was applied mainly against Quakers, perhaps because few were politically connected. Thousands were imprisoned for their beliefs. The government seized their properties, including the estate of his wife's family.

Penn decided to challenge the Conventicle Act by holding a public meeting on August 14, 1670. The Lord Mayor of London arrested him and his fellow Quakers as soon as he began expressing his nonconformist religious views. At the historic trial, Penn insisted that since the government

refused to present a formal indictment--officials were concerned the Conventicle Act might be overturned--the jury could never reach a guilty verdict. He appealed to England's common-law heritage: "if these ancient and fundamental laws, which relate to liberty and property, and which are not limited to particular persuasions in matters of religion, must not be indispensably maintained and observed, who then can say that he has a right to the coat on his back? Certainly our liberties are to be openly invaded, our wives to be ravished, our children slaved, our families ruined, and our estates led away in triumph by every sturdy beggar and malicious informer--as *their* trophies but our forfeits for conscience's sake."

The jury acquitted all defendants, but the Lord Mayor of London refused to accept this verdict. He hit the jury members with fines and ordered them held in brutal Newgate prison. Still, they affirmed their verdict. After the jury had been imprisoned for about two months, the Court of Common Pleas issued a writ of habeas corpus to set them free. Then they sued the Lord Mayor of London for false arrest. The Lord Chief Justice of England, together with his 11 associates, ruled unanimously that juries must not be coerced or punished for their verdicts. It was a key precedent protecting the right to trial by jury.

Penn had become a famous defender of liberty who could attract several thousand people for a public talk. He traveled in Germany and Holland to see how Quakers there were faring. Holland made a strong impression because it was substantially free. It was a commercial center where people cared mainly about peaceful cooperation. Persecuted Jews and Protestants flocked to Holland. Penn began to form a vision of a community based on liberty.

Next, Penn presented his case for religious toleration before Parliament. They would have none of it. Penn became convinced that religious toleration couldn't be achieved in England. He went to the King and asked for a charter enabling him to establish an American colony. On March 4, 1681, Charles II signed a charter for territory which would later become Pennsylvania, honoring Penn's late father, the Admiral. Penn would be proprietor, owning all the land, accountable directly to the King. Penn sailed to America on the ship *Welcome* and arrived November 8, 1682. With assembled Friends, he founded Philadelphia, naming it from the Greek which means "city of brotherly love" and because it was the name of one of the seven churches noted in the book of the Revelation in the Bible.

Penn was most concerned about developing a legal basis for a free society. His ideas and writings very much influenced the later writing of the Declaration of Independence. As a Quaker, Penn encouraged women to get an education and speak out as men did. He called Pennsylvania his "Holy Experiment." Penn's practices contrasted dramatically with other early colonies, especially Puritan New England which was a vicious theocracy. The Puritans despised liberty. They made political dissent a crime. They whipped, tarred, and hanged Quakers. The Puritans stole what they could from the Indians.

Penn achieved peaceful relations with the Indians--Susquehannocks, Shawnees, and Leni-Lenape. Indians respected his courage, because he ventured among them without guards or personal weapons. He took the trouble to learn Indian dialects, so he could conduct

negotiations without interpreters. From the very beginning, he acquired Indian land through peaceful, voluntary exchange. His peaceful policies prevailed for about 70 years, which has to be some kind of record in American history.

Behind the scenes, Penn worked as a remarkable diplomat for religious toleration. Every day, as many as 200 petitioners waited outside Holland House, his London lodgings, hoping for an audience and help. He intervened personally with the King to save scores of Quakers from a death sentence. He got Society of Friends founder George Fox out of jail. He helped convince the King to proclaim the Acts of Indulgence which released more than a thousand Quakers-- many who had been imprisoned for over a dozen years.

Penn's fortunes collapsed in later years. He was arrested for treason. The government seized his estates. Though he was cleared by November 1690, he was marked as a traitor again. He became a fugitive for four years, hiding amidst London's squalid slums. His friend John Locke helped restore his good name in time to see his wife, Guli, die on February 23, 1694. She was 48. Penn himself died on July 30, 1718. He was buried at Jordans, next to Guli, in England.

What a man he was, perhaps one of the greatest men in American history!