WILLIAM PENN’S SUCCESS AND FRUSTRATIONS
by Burt Froom

William Penn was Pennsylvania’s parent. Along with other founders of English colonies in North America, he gave birth to a new species of humans who called themselves “Americans.” Like William Penn, these colonists were born into a semi-feudal world. They were inspired by the new religious vision of the Religious Society of Friends and created a new community of farmers, craftsmen and merchants based on toleration and peace.

In my last two essays, I gave a brief sketch of Penn’s life and we looked at his writings, which shaped the early Quaker movement. This essay is an assessment of William Penn’s accomplishments and frustrations as proprietor of Pennsylvania and his role in the Quaker story.

CIVIL LIBERTY
William Penn lent his voice to justice so that ordinary English people and Quakers could find freedom from persecution by their own government, which required the use of all the rites and ceremonies in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer in church services. Penn gave voice to Quaker values. He spoke boldly in the face of the threat of arrest and jail for those who defied arbitrary use of power by the Anglican Church and a government that spoke for the wealthy classes. His voice made the Quaker movement the conscience of 17th century England.

The 1664 Conventicle Act (which forbade non-conformist religious meetings of more than five persons,) and the 1665 Five Mile Act (which prohibited dissenting ministers from preaching within five miles of a town) were enforced to persecute mainly Quakers. In the next 20 years, 15,000 Quakers were arrested in the England of the Merry Monarch, Charles II.

William Penn was outraged at what was happening to fellow Quakers, and he decided to challenge the laws by gathering in the street in front of a locked Friends meeting house. Penn and another Quaker were arrested on trumped up charges of unlawful and tumultuous assembly. Penn’s trial resulted in a historic victory for fundamental English justice in the famous 1670 “Bushel Case.” The jurors refused to find Penn guilty and were themselves sent to jail. England’s highest court, the House of Lords, decided that a jury must have the right to hand in a verdict based on the facts as they saw them, without coercion from the bench. Henceforth, the independence of the jury was beyond question in English courts. William Penn’s courageous act of defiance in the street and his cogent defense of legal rights in the courtroom were strategies in a war to transform English society.

RELIGIOUS TOLERATION and FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE
Penn’s mission was to fight for liberty of conscience so that all English people could hear and obey the word of God in their heart without threat of imprisonment for disagreeing with the government and the Anglican state church. Penn asserted that to force conformity of belief and action was to deny men and women the truest judgment of their own knowledge and sense of God. Penn never wavered in his commitment to attain for all his countrymen their right to
worship as they pleased. Historian John Moretta (see end note) says that Penn believed that his never ending struggle for liberty of conscience would be his most enduring legacy, both in England and in the colonies.

Penn’s efforts succeeded! In 1687, King James II, promulgated a first Declaration of Indulgence, a royal edict granting toleration to Catholics and non-Anglican Protestants. All such individuals were now free from prosecution for breaches in the penal laws against religious dissent. William Penn’s arrests and public agitation succeeded in establishing this permanent right for all English-speaking people. He was very active in lobbying Parliament and the king to ensure passage of the Declaration of Indulgence.

LENNI LENAPE INDIANS
Penn’s sincere yet shrewd policy of cultivating the goodwill of the Lenni Lenape (or the Delaware) people contributed significantly to Pennsylvania’s rapid growth and financial success. Native Americans in Pennsylvania numbered about 5,000 people in 1682. Penn’s approach allowed his colony to enjoy prolonged peace with the indigenous peoples, avoiding the uprisings that devastated other colonies. The settlers also benefited from the fact that the Lenni Lenape were relatively weak and few, and had just been devastated by multiple epidemics, alcoholism, and destructive raids by the Iroquois Five Nations confederation.

In his first meeting with the Lenni Lenape, Penn laid the foundations for peaceful relations when he told them that his king had given him a great Province, “...but I desire to enjoy it with your Love and Consent, that we may always live together as neighbors and friends...” Penn treated the Lenni-Lenape and their culture with respect. He told his own people, “Don’t abuse them, but let them have justice and you win them.” These native Americans trusted William Penn and the settlers – at least until the treachery of the Walking Purchase of 1737.

FOUNDING OF PHILADELPHIA
A healthy and temperate climate and the adjacent Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers provided easy transportation and access to the rich forests of Pennsylvania. Penn’s new city of Brotherly Love and Pennsylvania had a population of 18,000 Pennsylvanians by 1700. Penn did not want Philadelphia to be an unplanned shamble or suffer from crowding and congestion. He remembered the Great Plague and the Fire of London in 1665-1666. He wanted a systematically designed city with straight streets running from the rivers, with houses built upon a line at the street, and every house built in the middle of its plot so that it might be a “green country town” that would always be wholesome. True to his aristocratic and agrarian heritage, Penn envisioned a “pastoral city” with boulevards lined with trees, country manor houses and parks.

Philadelphia was never an exclusively Quaker city. Besides Quakers, there were Anglicans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Swedish Lutherans. Nearby Germantown had Lutheran, Moravian and Mennonite Churches. Pennsylvania was ethnically diverse, as well. In addition to the original Swedes and Dutch, and the English and Welsh, there were Scotch, Irish, Germans, other Europeans, African slaves and Native Americans. Unfortunately, Penn’s model city made no provision for the poor and artisan classes that provided vital services. The addition of “backward streets” with houses and shops for these people cluttered Penn’s green vision. By the time of Penn’s death in 1718, Moretta says that the “City of Brotherly Love” sadly resembled any crowded and filthy English seaport.
THE HOLY EXPERIMENT
Penn had long thought about establishing a Christian state along Quaker lines. Then, Charles II granted Penn possession of Pennsylvania as its “True and Absolute Proprietor.” He expected his colony to be permeated with the spirit of God, a province full of virtuous people who knew God’s will and lived according to his light. In Penn’s mind, Pennsylvania would be “an example and a standard to the nations,” of an ideal Christian community to prove that Quaker people were disciplined and industrious. Here in Pennsylvania, Quakers would be safe from persecution and people of all religious persuasions would be welcome. The colony’s government would reflect Quaker values.

The Frame of Government included a strict moral code to be adhered to by all colonists. “Offenses against God,” such as cursing, lying, drunkenness, incest, sodomy, whoredom, duels, stage plays, card playing, dice and more were discouraged and severely punished. With Penn’s presence in the colony, promoting trade and business, recruiting settlers who shared his beliefs and values, and negotiating with political opponents, made Pennsylvania the most instantaneously successful of the English colonies in North America. And Penn framed the most enlightened and liberal plan of government anywhere prior to the 18th century.

Yet, the Holy Experiment quickly failed to work. What went wrong? Penn’s personality was partly at fault. Moretta points out that William Penn was often temperamental, petty, tactless, vindictive and given to self-pity. Frequently, he treated his fellow Quakers with the condescension of noblesse oblige. He had few close male friends within the Quaker community, largely because he was so patronizing of people who were beneath him socially. Yet, when he attended the Stuart monarchy court, he could be most charming, gracious and warm. However, with most of his Quaker brethren, his friendships were of a patron-client character. Penn was a devout Quaker, but he was also an ingrained elitist. He expected honor and obedience from his social inferiors. Because of his patrician background, Penn had great difficulty establishing true friendships with men who were not gentlemen of his own class.

ABSENTEE PROPRIETOR
In 1684, after only 22 months in his new colony, Penn left Pennsylvania to return to England. He expected to return quickly, but his absence stretched to 15 years. In all, Penn lived in Pennsylvania for two stays of 22 and 23 months. Why did he leave his colony and what was the effect of his absence?

Penn returned home to England to protect his property (Pennsylvania) from the claims to the counties that are now the state of Delaware by Lord Baltimore, the proprietor of Maryland. And he was always afraid that his charter to Pennsylvania would be rescinded by the reigning monarch. He felt he had to face his opponents in London. It seems that Penn never conceived of Pennsylvania as a radically egalitarian society. He never seriously entertained the thought of moving permanently to Pennsylvania because his country was England. Moretta shows that despite his Quaker beliefs, Penn’s aristocratic elitism prevailed over his interest in popular sovereignty. His identity as an aristocrat was reinforced by his confidence in his own superior wisdom and righteousness. And this attitude alienated many of his friends and superiors.
It distressed Penn that his colonists refused to accept the “proper relations among men.” Penn expected his colonists to accept his authority to govern them at all times and obey his representatives. In Penn’s world, the roles of men and women, servant and slave, nobility and commoner were well known and accepted. But his political opponents in Pennsylvania rejected Penn’s pretensions and never appreciated all he had done for them.

Penn’s prolonged absence from Pennsylvania caused him to lose touch with his province. When he returned in 1699, it was too late, for he then faced a hardened and hostile anti-proprietary combination of Quakers and non-Quakers determined to take from him what little authority he had left. The proprietorship continued in the Penn family with William Penn’s son Thomas, his son John, and his nephew John as Proprietor of Pennsylvania until 1775.

PENNSBURY MANOR
With William Penn’s success of establishing peace between the settlers and local Indians, he decided to build an elegant manor house on the Delaware River in Bucks County, 24 miles north of Philadelphia. Penn's plan was to establish the sort of gentleman's country estate that had been his home in England. The house was completed in 1686, but Penn did not enjoy the beauty of his new home until his last visit to his colony in 1699.

Pennsbury Manor included Penn’s mansion, farm buildings and stables, a boat house, and even buildings for baking and brewing. He wanted to create a refuge from the affairs of the city of Philadelphia and a peaceful home for his wife and children when they visited the colony. Actually, Penn spent most of his time in Philadelphia governing his settlement. The beauty of Pennsbury Manor unfortunately faded because Penn’s presence at the colony was limited to less than four years.

By 1735, William’s son Thomas Penn visited Pennsbury Manor only to report that it “was very near falling.” The house remained in the Penn family until 1792, and Robert Crozier purchased it in 1803. Crozier admitted that many people would steal parts of Pennsbury Manor as souvenirs. By 1835, there was not a single original component of the manor left and Crozier decided to build a new house in its stead. It was not until over one-hundred years later, in 1937 that a full reconstruction of Pennsbury Manor began.

Richardson Brognard Okie, known for his reconstructions of Colonial-Revival houses, designed the new Pennsbury Manor to be two stories of Georgian-style architecture. Okie also restored the Betsy Ross House. Pennsbury Manor opened as a memorial park in 1939 and the 43 acre property welcomes all visitors, Tuesdays through Saturdays from 9:00am until 5:00pm and Sundays from 12:00pm until 5:00pm. (You must be on a guided tour to see the inside of the Manor House.) More information can be found at [http://www.pennsburymanor.org/](http://www.pennsburymanor.org/).
I want to express my debt to John A. Moretta, author of *William Penn and the Quaker Legacy*, for his rounded picture of Penn. I appreciate the contribution of Jaime Kehler, who composed the section on Pennsbury Manor. In the May issue of this *Yesterday and Today* column, we will consider the first German settlers of Germantown and West Mt. Airy!