



# William Penn

Subject guide





# Who was William Penn?

The eldest son of prominent 17th-century naval officer Admiral William Penn, William Penn was interested in nonconformist religion from an early age and was convinced by Quakerism when he was 22, becoming one of the religion's early theologians and legal defenders.

He advocated fundamental human rights on which laws were built and believed that these laws should be what rules a country, not the will or power of individuals. He spent most of his life involved in politics and argued for religious toleration in particular – largely because his own religious beliefs had seen him imprisoned numerous times and excluded from running for any kind of office.

He is best known for founding the colony of Pennsylvania in 1681. His *Frame of Government*, which established free elections, freedom of religion and fair trials, is described as an important step in the development of democracy and a forerunner of the US Constitution.

Penn's story is not without controversy. He espoused a doctrine of freedom and fairness, but he owned enslaved people. He was, in 1681, the largest non-royal landowner in the world, but he was terrible at managing his affairs and died in poverty. He founded Pennsylvania but spent barely five years of his life there and found himself in conflict with the legislative assembly. His legacy, however, is primarily one of a passionate advocate for democracy and religious freedom.

## 1644

William Penn born on 24 October

## 1657

Hears his first Quaker preacher, Thomas Loe

## 1662

Expelled from Oxford University for religious nonconformity

## 1667

Becomes a Quaker

## 1668

Writes first book, leading to imprisonment in the Tower of London

## 1670

Arrested with William Mead for creating an unlawful assembly. Subsequent trial leads to changes in the British legal system

## 1681

Receives grant to Pennsylvania from Charles II

## 1682

Makes his first visit to America, publishes his constitution – the *Frame of Government* – and meets with the Lenape Indians with whom he pledges a peace treaty

## 1708

Thrown into debtors' prison after being sued by the widow of his business manager

## 1718

30 July: dies of a stroke, leaving his second wife Hannah as governor of Pennsylvania

# William Penn in the Library's collections

## Getting started

Moretta, J (2007) *William Penn and the Quaker Legacy*. New York: Pearson Longman. [092.3 PEN MOR]

*Written as a university textbook, this offers a good overview.*

Murphy, AR (2016) *Liberty, Conscience & Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn*. Oxford: OUP. [092.3 PEN MUR]

*One of the most recent works on Penn's politics, with a useful literature review.*

Peare, CO (1957) *William Penn: A Biography*.

Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott. [092.3 PEN PEA]

*For many years the chief modern biography of Penn.*

Dunn, M M and Dunn, RS (Eds) (1981-1987) *The Papers of William Penn*. [092.3 PEN]

*Five volumes collecting annotated transcriptions of Penn's letters and documents and a comprehensive bibliography of his published writing.*

A longer bibliography of secondary works is available via the library.

The Library has a significant collection of Penn's published works. A list, with locations of digitised copies is available via the library.

## On the catalogue

To find out what resources the Library holds on William Penn, you can search for the following subject headings in our catalogue:

- Penn, William, 1644-1718
- Pennsbury (Pa.)
- Pennsylvania
- Penn, Gulielma Maria, 1644-1693/4
- Penn, Hannah, 1671-1726

<http://quaker.adlibhosting.com/search/simple>

## Archive collections

The Library houses a significant collection of archive resources relating to William Penn, including letters and writings in his own hand, copies of letters and other related documents. The majority of these are in a collection known as the Penn Manuscripts. Assembled by Philip Justice of Philadelphia, this consists of original letters, transcripts and facsimiles, engravings and newspaper cuttings relating to William Penn. These are also available on microfilm.

## Images and special collections

The Library has a collection of objects relating to William Penn, primarily Penn memorabilia, including medals, textiles and wooden objects allegedly made from the wood of the 'treaty tree'. The Library's collection of Penn illustrations includes early prints, photographs of original portraits and historical reconstructions.

## Online resources

### The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

This library in Philadelphia holds the Penn family archive, and has featured many William Penn-related objects in its blog posts.

<http://hsp.org>

### Articles with information on Penn's ownership of enslaved people

Frost, J W (n.d.) "George Fox's Ambiguous Anti-slavery Legacy" *Quakers & Slavery*. Available: [web.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/people/fox.php](http://web.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/people/fox.php)

McNeill, J (2015) "William Penn and Pennsylvania Quaker slave ownership" *The Life and family of the Quaker William Penn*. Available: [pennsylvaniahistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/31/william-penn-and-pennsylvania-quaker-slave-ownership/](http://pennsylvaniahistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/31/william-penn-and-pennsylvania-quaker-slave-ownership/)



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