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 slaves. He was, in 1681, the largest non-royal landowner in the world, but he was terrible at managing his affairs and died in poverty after his business manager defrauded him. 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.
William Penn in the Library's collections

Getting started
Written as a university textbook, this offers a good overview.

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

For many years the chief modern biography of Penn.

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.

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. Special collection material may be viewed by appointment only.

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

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
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Friends House
173–177 Euston Road
London
NW1 2BJ
020 7663 1135
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