

# William Penn: Impact on Colonial America

William Penn (1644–1718) was a writer, thinker, and colonial leader. Known for founding the colony of Pennsylvania, he supported laws that respected religious freedom, encouraged egalitarian government policies, and treated Native American groups more fairly. **Read about William Penn's impact on colonial America. Then answer the questions on page 2.**



## Establishing the colony of Pennsylvania

William Penn was part of a devout religious group called the Quakers. Quakers had many strong beliefs that angered the monarchy in England. Quakers believed in equality—even the king was no better than anyone else. In the mid-1600s, the British persecuted and imprisoned William Penn and his fellow Quakers for their writings and beliefs.

Penn came from a powerful family. The king of England owed Penn's deceased father a large sum of money. In 1681, the king's Council repaid the debt to young Penn with a land grant in colonial America. It eventually became a new colony called Pennsylvania, meaning "Penn's Woods." It was the first colony to welcome the Quakers escaping persecution in England. Pennsylvania became part of a growing region (including New York, New Jersey, and Delaware) known as England's middle colonies.

## Ideas about government

Penn's Quaker convictions about equality and religious freedom became central tenets of Pennsylvania's colonial government. He called Pennsylvania his "Holy Experiment." In 1682, Penn drafted a charter of liberties for the new settlement. The charter guaranteed fair trial by jury, freedom of religion, freedom from unjust imprisonment, and free elections. Penn also designed a prison system that emphasized reform instead of relying solely on punishment. The torment he experienced in English prisons inspired Penn to want to replace dungeons with workhouses.



*William Penn*

## Relations with Native Americans

Penn recognized that some of the land he acquired in the royal charter was occupied by the Lenape Native American group. In 1682, Penn reportedly signed an agreement paying the Lenape for their land. Penn treated Native Americans with more respect than many other colonial leaders did. He made a point of learning their language in order to negotiate without interpreters and, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not bring weapons to meetings.

This artistic rendering of the purchase negotiation between Penn and the Lenape leaders is displayed in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. William Penn is pictured in the center offering payment to the Lenape leaders.



*Part of a larger mural painted by Constantino Brumidi in 1878*

