**William Penn:**

**The Most Influential Non-Founding Father**

**HIS1210N1 Written Assignment #1**

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William Penn may be the most influential person to the founding and fundamentals of our nation who was born outside of North America, with perhaps Benjamin Franklin as the only arguable equal. The ideals he brought to the New World upon which he founded Pennsylvania were radically different than those of the other colonies and would help inspire early immigrants to think differently. This seed would eventually develop into a separate national identity from England and ultimately the formation of a new, fledgling nation known as the United States of America.

Penn was born in 1644 in Tower Hill, London, prior to England’s Civil War, and this circumstance would play a vital role in his later venture in the New World. Child to Admiral Sir William Penn, he was raised Anglican and attended Oxford in 1660. Like many young people attending college, he encountered new ways of thinking and began to challenge authority. After clashing with both his strict military father and the secular school, he was sent to study in Paris for two years.

After returning home and being sent to Ireland, he met and joined the Quakers. He became very active with the “radical” group, enough to earn “time in prison for his flexing his yearning for religious freedom. But those formative years burned in Penn a belief in religious freedom and gave him time to hone the acclaimed writing skills that would be of such crucial importance upon his arrival in the colonies. His early writings were bold enough--and controversial enough--to earn him a stint in the feared Tower of London” (“William Penn”). This persecution for his faith would play a role in his core doctrine of religious freedom.

He and his father reconciled before his death in 1670 and after inheriting estates in England and Ireland, he married fellow Quaker Gulielma Springett in 1672 and had four children. He travelled to Holland and Germany during the 1670’s as a Quaker preacher, establishing contacts he would later use to help populate his colony. He even wrote party doctrine pamphlets for the Whig part.

Along with religion, law, and politics, there required one final catalyst for the founding of Pennsylvania. His first experience with “America came in 1677, when he became a trustee for West Jersey, which had come under the control of Friends (his religious group). At that time, he wrote the famous Concessions and Agreements document for the 200+ settlers” (“William Penn”). From England, he helped Quaker communities and businesses in both East and West Jersey. The knowledge and confidence gained from this preliminary experience in the New World would be fundamental in the founding of Pennsylvania.

Unlike many of the other thirteen colonies which were established as self-governing or crown colonies, Pennsylvania was granted as a proprietary colony. This extremely liberal arrangement, granted only to Penn and King Charles II’s younger brother The Duke of York, gave him complete discretion over nearly all aspects of the colony. This is due mainly to the personal history between King Charles II and William Penn’s father, Admiral Sir William Penn.

During the 1648 English Civil War, the Admiral had supported Charles I but was a powerful figure and important to the national security of the new Commonwealth of England, so wasn’t punished. When Charles II returned to power in 1660 in the Stuart Restoration, Sir Penn further indebted himself to the crown by investing a huge amount of his personal wealth to rebuild the Royal Navy.

This personal/national debt, estimated at 16,000 pounds at the time, formed the basis of the proprietary charter. In 1680, having grown weary by events in England and with some experience in Jersey, Penn approached Charles II asking for land to establish a “refuge from religious persecution” (“William Penn”). In repayment of that debt, Penn was granted roughly 45,000 square miles of land on the west bank of the Delaware River, becoming the largest non-royal landowner.

Arriving in 1682, Penn “oversaw the laying out of Philadelphia and was instrumental in laying out the commonwealth's government. As governor of Pennsylvania, he did what he could to mitigate the evils of slavery, to assure religious tolerance and freedom, and to maintain positive relationships with the Indians” (“William Penn”). This stood in stark difference to most other colonial governors, whether proprietary or royal, who often acted as absentee landlords.

Other notable differences included the capitol city of Philadelphia being designed on the now-traditional grid system with street numbers and tree names as well as attempts at integration with the Native Delaware and Lenape tribes. “Penn also made sure there were provisions for friendly purchase of Indian lands, and even provided for equal Indian representation on juries considering matters which included Indians” (“William Penn”). His view towards Native rights was unique in those days, especially among those of his class. It is these differences that sets Penn and Pennsylvania apart from the other colonies and is what led to our new national identity in time.

Though he may be most well-known in the United States as Pennsylvania’s namesake, Penn’s legacy in England forms much of the basis for why he is such a powerful figure here. Many stories of immigration to the New World in general, and America in particular, during this period are the stories of escape from religious persecution. Not only did Pennsylvania provide such a haven for them in America, but William Penn’s actions in England helped make positive changes for those that remained.

He published over forty books discussing political, religious, legal, social, and moral doctrines and extolling religious tolerance, self-denial, and social reform. It can be argued “that conflicts in Ireland and renewed persecution in England occasioned Penn’s most complete defense of religious liberty, The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience. Penn believed that freedom to worship would end religious conflict and thereby strengthen the state and create prosperity” (Frost 276).

Unfortunately, a territory dispute with Lord Baltimore led Penn to return to England where he remained for many years and was only able to spend another two years in America before having to once again return to England where he remained until his death in 1718. “Penn believed that benevolent government, good laws, a moral industrious people, consultation with indigenous peoples, and religious liberty would create a peaceful orderly society... Unfortunately for him, it did not work that way in West Jersey, or Pennsylvania” (Frost 277). Reality and perfection rarely coexist in the real world, but fortunately, Penn had lofty ideals and goals when founding his colony.

William Penn may not be considered a founding father by most because he was only in America roughly four years and died in England well before the actual birth of the new nation. Despite this, “his major legacy is the seeds of democracy he planted in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania--seeds that have sprouted and today continue to flourish in all of the United States” (“William Penn”). The lasting importance of the fundamentals upon which he founded Pennsylvania still resonate today.

Works Cited

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