
The Quakers and Political Practices in the Pennsylvania Colony (1681–1756)

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Abstract: The “Holy Experiment” conducted by the Quakers in the Pennsylvania Colony from 1681 to 1756 was a historical endeavor to integrate religious ideals into governance. This paper examines these developments, focusing on a central question: How were the Quakers’ ideals of egalitarianism, peace, and religious tolerance implemented within the interplay of William Penn’s political framework, the operation of institutions, and societal changes? And for what reasons did they ultimately withdraw from local political life? Quaker ideals shaped Pennsylvania’s constitutional framework, transforming the region into an early testing ground for religious freedom and representative democracy. Following the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War between Britain and France in 1756, an irreconcilable conflict arose between Quaker pacifist principles and imperial politics and practical interests, causing their political influence to gradually wane. This withdrawal did not signify the end of all influence; the Quakers shifted their focus to the realm of social reform, preserving their spiritual legacy within the American democratic tradition through the abolitionist movement and prison reform. The Quakers’ practices demonstrate that religious ideals can be transformed into concrete institutions, while also revealing the inherent tensions that arise when idealism engages with the realities of politics.

Keywords: Quakers; Pennsylvania Colony; religious ideals; governance practices; Peace Testimony

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1. Introduction

In 1681, Quaker William Penn received the Charter of Pennsylvania from King Charles II of England and immediately launched a political experiment later known as the “Holy Experiment.” He sought to translate Quaker religious concepts—such as the “Inner Light,” egalitarianism, and pacifism—into a functional framework of governance, establishing a society grounded in religious tolerance and democratic principles. This experiment lasted for over seventy years. With the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War between Britain and France in 1756, Quaker members withdrew en masse from the legislature, marking the end of the experiment. This endeavor in Pennsylvania represents the only instance in Quaker history where the community sought to exercise control over public governance, and it is regarded as a significant source of the American democratic tradition.

Foreign academic circles have accumulated a wealth of research on the relationship between the Quakers and Pennsylvania politics. Early studies focused primarily on Quaker religious beliefs and their dissemination in the colonies.

After the mid-20th century, Perry Miller's "Puritan Imagination" paradigm long dominated colonial studies, treating religion as the determining factor in political culture. In *Quakers and Atlantic Culture*, Frederick Tolles points out that Quaker political practice possessed a unique characteristic of "silent resistance," and that their model of church-state relations differed markedly from the theocratic rule of New England Puritanism. In recent years, revisionist scholars such as Andrew Murphy have begun to focus on the pragmatic shift in Quaker governance. However, existing research still suffers from two blind spots: first, a temporal bias toward the early period, with a lack of in-depth exploration of the Quakers' gradual withdrawal from the political stage after 1730; second, a narrow spatial perspective, often approaching the subject from the perspective of mother-country–colony relations while neglecting the influence of indigenous tribes and cross-colonial systems. Domestic academic circles have paid relatively little attention to this topic, with only a few scattered discussions from legal and political science perspectives; no systematic historical examination has yet been conducted.

In light of this, this paper sets its timeframe from 1681, when Penn received the colonial charter, to 1756, when Quaker legislators resigned. It focuses on the dynamic interplay between Quaker religious ideals and political institutional design, exploring the following questions: How were Quaker religious ideals embodied and adapted within colonial governance? How was their principle of "Peace Testimony" tested in the face of internal social change and external war pressures? Did the Quakers' withdrawal from politics in 1756 signify the complete failure of the "Holy Experiment"? By examining colonial archives, Quaker writings, and contemporary scholarship, this paper seeks to reveal the tensions and limitations of religious idealism within the realm of practical politics, and to reassess the profound influence of the Quakers on early American political culture.

2. The Three Foundations of Quaker Political Theology

Originating from the 17th-century radical Puritan movement in England, the Quakers were founded by George Fox, who advocated that every individual could communicate directly with God through the "Inner Light," without the mediation of clergy or sacraments. From this emerged three core principles: first, egalitarianism, which opposed hierarchical structures, advocated for gender equality, and was among the earliest movements to oppose slavery; second, the "Peace Testimony" which rejected all forms of war and violence, advocating the use of spiritual weapons in place of military force; third, religious tolerance, which upholds freedom of belief and refuses to pay tithes or take oaths in court. These principles not only shaped Quaker religious life but also laid the foundation for their subsequent political engagement: concepts such as consensus decision-making, simplified government, and religious freedom were later articulated in William Penn's *Framework of Government*.

2.1. Egalitarianism

Quakers oppose hierarchical systems and believe that all people are born equal, regardless of gender, race, or class. From an early stage, they advocated for gender equality, believing that women should enjoy equal rights with men in both religious and secular life, and allowed women to serve in leadership roles within the congregation, participate in decision-making, and engage in religious activities; The Quakers were among the earliest religious groups to oppose slavery, and their efforts in the abolitionist movement were widely recognized; they also focused on social justice and educational equality, dedicating themselves to helping the disadvantaged, including the poor and prisoners, and promoting social equality through charitable work and educational programs, emphasizing the equality and universality of education. In the eyes of ordinary people, "they dress plainly, conduct themselves with dignity, and treat the upper classes with neither servility nor arrogance, refusing to perform such courtesies as bowing, kneeling, or doffing their hats... They hold secular authority in contempt^[1]."

2.2. Peace Testimony

Peace Testimony is a core tenet of the Quakers' opposition to war and serves as a code of conduct observed by all Quaker members^[2]. This principle stems from the early life experiences of founder George Fox, who endured persecution. It governs the manner in which Quakers interact with one another and helps maintain the unity of the community. While some early members had military experience—such as Fox's friend John Nayler, who served in the Parliamentary army—the Quaker community as a whole maintains a pacifist stance, classifying war as an improper act and refusing to accept it as a means of resolving conflict.

2.3. Religious Tolerance

The Quakers firmly believe that everyone has the right to freely practice their faith and express religious views according to their own conscience. The denomination does not recognize the intermediary role of clergy or the church and refuses to pay tithes to the church. If they appear in court for failing to pay tithes or violating other provisions, they will refuse to take an oath. *The Gospel of Matthew* records the prohibition against swearing, with the original text stating “swear not at all.” The Quakers believe that if a person has already claimed to be honest and upright, requiring them to swear in court to affirm the truth of their words constitutes a double standard. In 17th-century England, the Quakers faced widespread persecution for refusing to conform to the rituals of the established church and for upholding their own beliefs. The denomination has consistently advocated for religious freedom, respected the rights of groups holding different beliefs, participated in interfaith dialogues initiated by Judaism, Islam, and other Christian denominations, promoted deeper mutual understanding among different religious groups, and advocated for a simple lifestyle as a manifestation of the Christian spirit.

Fox's religious philosophy profoundly influenced the Quakers' political ideals, which were reflected in their political participation. The Quakers valued consensus-based decision-making and opposed the principle of majority rule, believing that truth might lie with the minority. They advocated for the simplification of government institutions, the reduction of bureaucratic layers, the implementation of the principle of equality, and the allowance of religious freedom for different groups to practice their faith and hold gatherings freely. These ideas were initially presented in William Penn's *The Frame of Government*, attempting to transform the religious community into a political one. Later, religious leaders such as John Woolman incorporated anti-slavery principles into their doctrine, ultimately forming a comprehensive moral framework. These religious ideals constituted the ideological foundation for the design of Pennsylvania's political system.

3. The “Holy Experiment” in the Era of William Penn

Quaker religious ideals—egalitarianism, the Peace Testimony, and religious tolerance—provided the intellectual resources for political design. Yet how could these ideals be transformed into institutions? How could devout faith be implemented within secular governance? These were the challenges William Penn had to confront after obtaining the Pennsylvania Charter in 1681. His prior experience drafting a constitution for the West Jersey Colony had already given him a glimpse into the path of translating Quaker principles into written form; the “Holy Experiment” in Pennsylvania, however, represented a more comprehensive and systematic endeavor. This chapter focuses on the institutional design and early practices of the Penn era, examining how religious ideals were initially implemented and what internal tensions this “Holy Experiment” faced at its inception.

3.1. The Law of God and the Light Within

As a devout Quaker, William Penn consistently sought to translate religious ideals into political practice. At the core of his thought lay the interpretation of the Quaker doctrine of the “Inner Light” as political “freedom of conscience.” In works such as *The Great Case for Freedom of Conscience* and *An Apology for the Quakers*, Penn repeatedly argued that God had implanted natural law in the human heart, and that people understood it through reason—that is “conscience.” Therefore,

safeguarding the freedom of individuals to act according to their conscience was the fundamental purpose of political society. This understanding formed the cornerstone of his constitutional thought: since the “Inner Light” is possessed by all, the government must respect each person’s religious choices; since conscience is the medium of divine revelation, political power must not interfere with this sacred realm. It was precisely on the basis of this theological-political logic that Penn incorporated principles such as religious tolerance and equal representation into the *Framework of Government*, seeking to establish a civic government in Pennsylvania that would defend freedom of conscience. His earlier experience in drafting the *Charter and Agreement* for the West Jersey Colony in 1675 provided an initial practical test of this vision.

3.2. Secular Law and Political Structure

Through the joint efforts of Penn and other Quakers, they sought to apply religious principles to the political framework and establish a society based on Quaker principles. The *Framework of Government for Pennsylvania* and the *Charter of Liberties* established principles such as religious tolerance, equal representation, and consensus decision-making. On this foundation, they implemented freedom of the press, trial by jury, and freedom of religion (all of which would later be enshrined in the U.S. Constitution). Freedom of religion was of paramount importance to the Quakers, as they had suffered severe persecution for their faith for many years. In 1660, Ms. Mary Dyer was arrested by the authorities of the Massachusetts colony for promoting Quaker beliefs in North America and was sentenced to death, becoming the first person to be executed in North America for her religious beliefs. In contrast to the attitudes toward Quakers in neighboring colonies, Penn deliberately established a governance framework friendly to Quakers. Pennsylvania became renowned for its tolerance of Quakers, serving as a haven for religious freedom in general and, in the years that followed, a fertile ground for diverse religious expression.

When Penn drafted the Pennsylvania Charter, he clearly demonstrated his intention to create a space of freedom and tolerance. The government of the Pennsylvania colony consisted of three branches: the Governor, the Provincial Council, and the General Assembly. The structure of the government was simple, with few bureaucratic levels, aligning with the Quakers’ advocacy for streamlined government operations. The House of Representatives was elected annually, with all free men eligible to vote. The House possessed the power to “advise, debate, and resolve, ...to enact or repeal laws, and any of the privileges of the British House of Commons”^[3]. Members of the House of Representatives received written instructions from their constituents, and before any legislation was enacted, representatives were required to consult with the people of their districts. The Governor and the Provincial Council had very limited scope for involvement in the legislative process^[4], as Penn did not grant the governor a veto power in the Charter. Elections to the General Assembly and votes on legislation in the General Assembly are conducted by secret ballot. Public officials who accept bribes are subject to punishment. The General Assembly elects a smaller council from among its members to undertake broader administrative and supervisory responsibilities. Penn openly supported the writ of habeas corpus, the supremacy of the rule of law, the *Magna Carta*, and the *Petition of Right*. He established the jury system and promoted a relatively humane criminal justice system, under which only those convicted of murder or “treason” would be sentenced to death. Penn emphasized that a written constitution, as the fundamental law, takes precedence over the personal will of any specific political actor. The constitution included specific Quaker-related provisions, such as the prohibition of oaths in legal proceedings, and the outright ban on theaters, taverns, and all forms of gambling, reflecting the Quakers’ moral stance of simplicity and self-discipline^[4].

The city of Philadelphia, designed under Penn’s leadership, centered on the concept of “Brotherly Love.” The plan adopted a grid layout while incorporating public green spaces, embodying the Quakers’ ideal of “simple and practical” urban development. In 1683, Penn sent a plan to the Society of Free Trade titled “Portrait of the New City” (**Table 1**). In this plan, the central city square, together with the surrounding parks, forms an orderly spatial configuration. Penn believed that this kind of physical order could foster a healthy social order, ultimately transforming religious ideals into a tangible urban landscape.

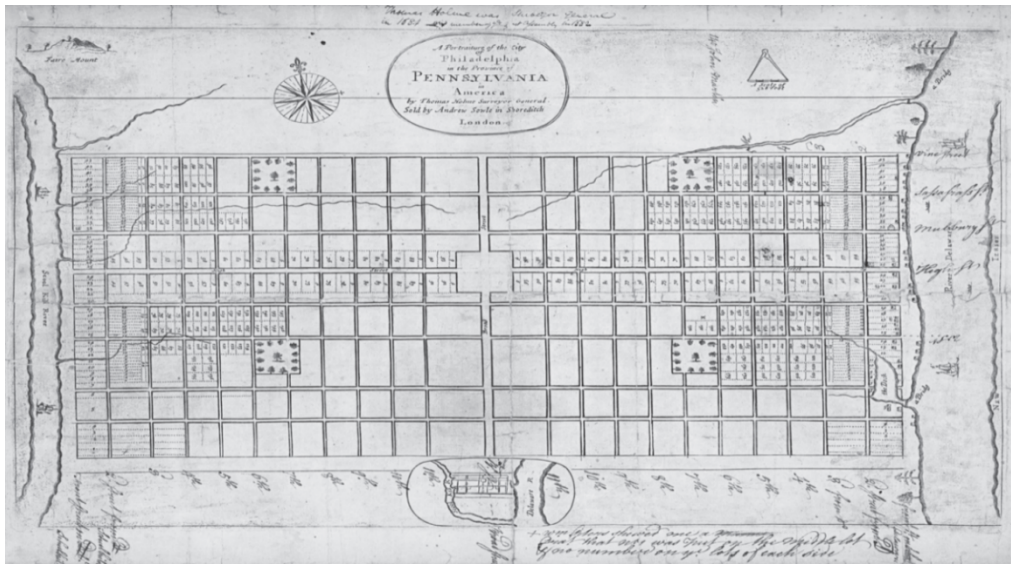


Table 1. Urban Plan of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania^[5]

3.3. Early Ethnic Policies

In handling matters related to Indigenous peoples, Penn adhered to pacifist principles, choosing fair trade over military conquest. Upon his arrival in the colony in 1682, he immediately signed a treaty with the Lenape chief, pledging not to encroach on their lands. He also established open markets and created an equitable judicial system to reduce conflicts between the two sides. In the early days of the Pennsylvania colony, this approach allowed it to avoid the bloody wars common in other colonies. Behind this approach lay the colonists' mindset of seeking to assimilate the indigenous peoples through "civilization," which laid the groundwork for future conflicts between the two sides.

3.4. Facing Challenges

While the "Holy Experiment" appeared prosperous on the surface, it harbored multiple crises beneath the surface. The issue of slavery remained unresolved, and within the Quaker community, divisions over moral purity versus practical governance had already emerged. The conflict between Thomas Lauder and Penn was a prime example of such divisions. External pressure from the British government, coupled with Penn's return to Britain, began to gradually expand its influence. These destabilizing factors would erupt one after another over the following decades, ultimately undermining the very foundations of Quaker rule.

4. The Conflict Between the Governance Practices of Religious Ideals and Reality

As discussed in Chapter 3, the institutional framework for the "Holy Experiment" was established and initial practices implemented during Penn's administration. However, these developments also sowed the seeds of instability: the constitution gradually shifted toward aristocratic tendencies, internal contradictions emerged in ethnic policies, and the principle of peace had never been truly tested. As colonial society developed and its social structure grew increasingly complex, the impact of these destabilizing factors gradually expanded. In his 1681 letter, Penn outlined an ideal state in which the public would enact laws to govern a free society^[6]. This ideal vision began to face challenges as it came under pressure from reality. This chapter examines these various challenges and analyzes how they undermined the Quakers' political practices.

4.1. The "Aristocratic Constitution"

When the final version of *The Framework of Government* was released in 1682, the democratic elements originally

envisioned by Penn were not fully incorporated. The Pennsylvania government outlined in this constitutional document consisted of three branches: the Governor, the Provincial Council, and the General Assembly. Legislative power was largely vested in the Governor and the Provincial Council, while the General Assembly which representing the common people, was relegated to a secondary position. Penn had previously publicly asserted that the common people were an indispensable component of government and that legislative power was their inherent right; this constitutional design ran counter to his principles.

This shift stemmed from multiple practical pressures. The colony sought rapid development, but relying solely on small artisans and farmers could not meet its growth needs; it was necessary to attract wealthy landowners and merchants to invest capital. The prerequisite for attracting investment was safeguarding the political interests of this group. Penn's own aristocratic background also gradually revealed conservative tendencies as power took shape. After becoming the ruler, the arrogant attitude he displayed toward commoner legislators stood in stark contrast to the egalitarianism he had championed earlier. The interplay of practical interests and personal inclinations ultimately imbued the *Framework of Government* with an aristocratic character that served elite rule, setting the stage for future power struggles within Parliament.

4.2. The Walking Purchase

Although Penn established policies respecting the Native Americans, over time—and especially after his death—his successors and agents failed to uphold his original religious intentions, leading to a rift in relations with the local Native American tribes. The Walking Purchase of 1737 became a microcosm of the conflict between the Pennsylvania colonists and the indigenous peoples. In the early 1730s, John and Thomas Penn, sons of William Penn, presented a deed dated 1700 claiming that their father had purchased land in the Lehigh Valley from the Delaware tribe. The deed specified that the land extended to the distance a man could walk northward along the river in one and a half days, but the transaction could not be completed that year due to disputes over the walking route. In August 1737, following the re-signing of the deed at the request of Penn's sons, the Walking Purchase began. The Penn family hired professional long-distance runners to sprint along a straight path that had been scouted and cleared in advance, rather than following the winding river course stipulated in the original agreement. Ultimately, they covered a distance of approximately sixty miles within the allotted time^[7].

Through the use of fraudulent means, the Pennsylvania colony acquired a vast tract of land stretching from the Delaware River to the Lehigh River, far exceeding the Delaware people's initial expectations. Having been treated unjustly in this transaction, the Delaware people's trust in the colonists was completely shattered; they came to view the residents of Pennsylvania "not as brothers and friends, but rather as open enemies^[8]," and consequently began to employ more intense armed measures to protect their own rights. Although the Quakers' policy toward the Indians appeared somewhat progressive at the time, its implementation lacked legal safeguards, leaving future generations an opening to circumvent regulations and engage in unfair transactions. At the same time, it failed to account for the increasing demand for land as the colony developed; driven by economic interests and pressure from investors, colonial landowners would adopt increasingly radical land strategies.

4.3. The Failure of the Peace Testimony

The fraud and plunder perpetrated against the Native Americans not only undermined ethnic relations within the Pennsylvania colony but also shook the very foundations of the Quakers' philosophy of the "Peace Testimony." The intensifying Anglo-French rivalry over North American colonies, coupled with the actions of British Commander-in-Chief of North America Edward Braddock, further accelerated this process.

In 1755, British General Braddock assembled an army of over 2,000 soldiers—the largest in North American history at the time—to attack French strongholds, intending to drive the French out of North America. Braddock prided himself on his mastery of European tactics and scorned the idea of allying with the Iroquois or the Delaware. When Shingas, a

Delaware leader, came to Fort Cumberland, where the general was stationed, to ask whether Indians friendly to Britain could live, trade, and hunt on their lands, Braddock flatly refused: “No savage should inherit this land^[9].” The general’s contempt and disdain led him to reject the Indians’ assistance, and his tactics were ill-suited to the North American terrain. Ultimately, he was defeated and killed at the Battle of Monongahela near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Following General Braddock’s defeat, the Pennsylvania frontier came under attack by the French and Native Americans. Due to the principle of peace and opposition to war, no armed defensive forces had been established in advance. John Harris, a member of the General Assembly who was involved in the colony’s administrative and military decision-making at the time, stated in a report: “Most or the majority of our settlers would flee, leaving behind their homes, belongings, and grain... Under such circumstances, our people would be unable to mount any defense^[10].” Faced with the existential threat of hundreds of settlers being killed within a matter of months, the colonial assembly was forced to consider establishing a militia. However, Quaker legislators found themselves in a dilemma: supporting war would violate their Peace Testimony, while opposing it would leave the people unprotected. After intense debate, some Quaker members compromised under pressure, and the Assembly ultimately passed military legislation in November 1755 to formally establish an official militia. This turning point marked the first major concession of Quaker pacifist principles in the realm of practical politics.

4.4. The Great Quaker Schism

The 1755 debate over the establishment of a militia and the taxation of personal property to support the war ultimately triggered a schism within the Quaker community. Faced with practical pressures, members split into two factions: the Orthodox, who adhered to traditional pacifist principles and rejected any form of support for war; and the Hicksites, who advocated for compromise in the face of reality. This doctrinal divide severely weakened the Quakers’ political cohesion.

As the Seven Years’ War between Britain and France escalated in 1756, the Quakers’ situation deteriorated rapidly. When the British Crown demanded that Quaker leaders in Philadelphia directly fund the war, the delicate balance previously maintained by “rendering unto Caesar” was completely shattered^[11]. Faced with a choice between doctrinal purity and political responsibility, ten Quaker legislators chose to resign from public office. Their departure signaled the withdrawal of the principle of Peace Testimony from the political stage of Pennsylvania.

Thereafter, the so-called “Quaker Party” led by Benjamin Franklin retained its name but had, in reality, no connection to the Quaker faith itself^[12]. The Quakers’ influence in the political sphere thus came to an end, but their social influence as a moral reform movement had only just begun.

5. The Quakers and the Development of American Democracy

This shift marked the beginning of the Quakers’ reinvention of their influence. Having withdrawn from the centers of power, they put their religious ideals into practice on a broader stage as a social reform movement^[2].

On the constitutional level, the Quakers’ intellectual legacy profoundly shaped the early political framework of the United States. The *Pennsylvania Constitution (1701)*, drafted by Penn, explicitly guaranteed religious freedom, becoming one of the earliest such laws in the North American colonies and providing a crucial model for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution of 1791, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The design in Penn’s *Framework of Government*—which established that a written constitution takes precedence over ordinary legislation and that the constitution should be amendable but not easily altered—also aligns with the concept of a fundamental law in American constitutionalism. As Harold Berman noted, the Quakers’ principles of religious tolerance had a profound impact on the formation of the American legal system^[13].

In the process of social reform, Quaker practices have endured for a longer period. The Quakers were among the earliest religious groups to openly oppose slavery; following John Woolman’s initiative, the Pennsylvania Quakers abolished slavery in 1776. In areas such as prison system reform, the expansion of public education, and the advocacy

for women's rights, the Quakers have consistently been at the forefront of exploration. In the 19th century, this group participated in the abolitionist movement, and in the 20th century, they provided momentum for the civil rights movement.

Through these two pathways—the institutionalization of constitutional ideals and the sustained pursuit of social reform—the Quakers effectively embedded the spiritual legacy of their “Holy Experiment” into the very fabric of American democracy.

6. Conclusion

Pennsylvania's “Holy Experiment” was a creative response that emerged after the reverberations of the 17th-century Reformation reached the other side of the Atlantic. The Quakers sought to inscribe the egalitarian ideal of the “Inner Light” into the secular constitutional framework, allowing the religious precepts of “Peace Testimony” to govern inter-ethnic relations and the power struggles within the empire. In 1756, all Quaker legislators collectively withdrew from the political arena, bringing this experiment to a close. It was not the simple failure that many perceive it to be.

The experiment's predicament revealed the profound tension between religious idealism and realpolitik: when pacifism rooted in individual conscience clashed with national security concerns, and when egalitarianism seeking consensus faced the social reality of divergent interests, pure moral principles were forced to compromise with complex governance logic. Yet the experiment's legacy remains substantial. As Morrison observed, Pennsylvania was “the first great community in modern history^[14]” as the only British North American colony to achieve political transformation without violent conflict, it stands as the most profound practical embodiment of the ideal of peace; and the Quakers' principles of religious tolerance and egalitarianism, incorporated into early American constitutional traditions through the *Framework of Government* and the *Charter of Liberties*, have continued to shape American civil society through social reforms such as the abolition of slavery and prison reform.

In this sense, while the political phase of the “Holy Experiment” has come to an end, its spiritual essence has become woven into the fabric of American democracy in a far more profound way. The Quakers' successes and failures demonstrate that any system of governance must seek a dynamic balance between core values and practical needs, and the very pursuit of this balance constitutes the essence of political practice.

Disclosure statement

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