

A Holy Experience: An analysis of William
Penn and The Welsh Tract in Early
Pennsylvania.

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Abstract

There is a scarcity of academic papers on the Welsh Quakers' emigration to North America, and those that exist mainly focus on the shortcomings of their "Welsh Tract," the land granted to them by William Penn, the proprietor of Pennsylvania. This is because extensive scholarship on William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania often centres on a term Penn used before his settlement there. Penn described Pennsylvania as a "Holy Experiment." Since the word experiment is often interpreted to mean a scientific endeavour undertaken to test a hypothesis or prove a known fact, many scholars view Pennsylvania similarly—as a new colony being experimented on by William Penn. Specifically, they believe Penn was focused on creating ideal conditions for a new colony that would reflect his Quaker political views, embracing pacifism, freedom of religion, democracy, and tolerance of Native Americans. Therefore, existing scholarly analysis of Penn either shows how he succeeded in meeting these conditions or, more often, how he failed to do so. The scrutiny of Pennsylvania as an experiment extends to the Welsh Tract, too, except not as a bastion of freedom and toleration, but as an experiment in Welsh independence. This is because, before the Welsh emigrated to Pennsylvania, they believed William Penn had granted them significant political and social freedoms, only for William Penn to rescind these freedoms due to ignorance and a loss of control over his colony. However, when the word 'experiment' is reinterpreted more in line with its original definition in Penn's vocabulary, both Pennsylvania and the Welsh Tract cease to be viewed merely as successes or failures, but rather as "holy experiences", with God guiding Penn and the Welsh in their Quaker faith to live out their beliefs in the Pennsylvanian Wilderness as an unprecedented Quaker encounter with the divine.

Introduction

In 1681, during the height of persecution against religious dissenters in the British Isles, adventurous members of the Society of Friends travelled from Wales to London to meet with a fellow Quaker named William Penn. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the purchase of a tract of land in Penn's newly granted province in North America, namely Pennsylvania, for Quaker emigrants from Wales to start a new life in a new land. On the surface, a meeting about this topic was becoming routine for Penn, as by October 1681, 'more than 250 individuals had purchased land in Pennsylvania,'¹ most of whom were also eager to take their chance in the new province. However, unlike other buyers, during this meeting, the Welsh settlers believed that William Penn granted them not only a considerable area of land in his new jurisdiction but also broad religious, economic, and political freedoms that bordered on a form of self-governance. Such a condition, as understood by the Welsh, might have given them, up to that point, the most substantial autonomy under the British crown. Nonetheless, in the years that followed their emigration to North America, the Welsh settlers faced conflict and disagreement, and the promises they thought Penn had made did not come true as they had expected.

Knowledge of this early Welsh emigration to Pennsylvania is limited and often overshadowed by another attempt to establish a Welsh colony in the Americas, the 19th-century Argentinian settlement of Y Wladfa. However, a superficial understanding has recently gained greater attention. In 2023, BBC News published an article titled, 'Welcome to Wrexham, Philadelphia and the Welsh language,' which included a brief history of this topic, noting that 'The Welsh Quakers believed an agreement was reached to create a "Welsh Tract" on 40,000 acres (160 sq km), where the language of government, law, business and daily life

¹ Andrew R. Murphy, *William Penn: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p.147.

would be Welsh.’² The article claims that ‘if things had been different,’ Welsh culture and identity would be far more prevalent. The author of the article even suggests that Welsh might be taught in schools and homes today in Philadelphia if the Welsh Quakers had realised their dream of a Welsh North American tract. More scholarly literature tends to explain thoroughly how and why the Welsh Quakers emigrated to North America and what happened after their arrival, emphasising specific events that caused the Welsh to gradually and reluctantly shift away from their original Welsh Quaker utopian intentions. Similarly to the BBC article, they note that the Welsh were originally promised an independent entity that ‘became known by the Welsh settlers as the “Welsh Baronry”, “Cambria”, “New Wales” or the “Welsh Tract.”’³ Generally, they conclude that because of political and religious conflicts prominent in the early years of Pennsylvania’s foundation, if events had occurred differently, the Welsh Quaker’s experiment in a form of national independence may have succeeded.

It seems, then, that the standard view of the historical understanding of the Welsh Tract is one of failure and shortcomings. It was a Welsh utopia that might have existed had it not been for shifts in specific perspectives and conditions. However, is it reasonable to continue analysing William Penn’s new province and the Welsh Tract as entities characterised by their tendency towards failure?

One reason Penn’s new province and the Welsh Tract have become embroiled in debates over their success or failure is undoubtedly linked to the contents of a letter sent by William Penn immediately after he was granted Pennsylvania. In this letter, Penn described his endeavours in North America as a “holy experiment,” suggesting that Penn believed his bequeathed land was an ideal place to realise his long-held philosophical ideals for a Quaker

² Chris Wood, ‘Welcome to Wrexham, Philadelphia and the Welsh language’, BBC, 12 November 2023, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-66922992>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

³ Chris Wood, ‘Welcome to Wrexham, Philadelphia and the Welsh language.’

utopia, with “religious toleration and peace” as its two primary principles. Because of the modern understanding of the term experiment, any analysis of Penn’s province is automatically framed as destined for success or failure, as it is constantly scrutinised against these ideals. As a direct result of Penn’s “experiment”, the Welsh Tract is likewise examined using language that indicates it as evidence of Penn experimenting. The BBC article, alongside scholarly accounts, inadvertently reinforces this claim by demonstrating how the Welsh Tract was a religiously and nationally motivated scientific endeavour aimed at proving the hypothesis that the Welsh could establish their own society, distinct from others, by using their own language, laws, and governance. When viewed this way, it is easy to conclude that because this did not occur, the Welsh Tract failed.

However, when the concept of what William Penn meant by experiment is reinterpreted, the long-held belief that the founding of Pennsylvania and the Welsh Tract are similar to scientific experiments and therefore destined for success or failure is challenged. Instead, Penn intended Pennsylvania not as a holy experiment in the traditional sense, but as a new land where an unprecedented holy experience was possible. He sought to establish a new physical and spiritual space to embody God’s divine word in the untouched North American wilderness. The flaws and faults that would arise in the province are an inevitable part of the process involved in establishing a region with no existing model to follow.

Although existing analyses of Penn’s intended understanding of the Holy Experiment have limitations, it does effectively recount the specific events involving William Penn and the Welsh Quakers. As a result, this revised account will expand upon the already detailed narrative, shifting the view of early Pennsylvania and the Welsh Tract from a project judged by the outcome of certain events to a sincere effort to establish a new Christian society where faults and flaws were inevitable. Central to William Penn’s vision for Pennsylvania and the Welsh desire for their own tract was their deeply rooted Christian Quaker faith. The Quaker

convictions of William Penn and the Welsh settlers have often been overlooked by scholars, who tend to focus on the settlers' Welsh nationality, Penn's unfavourable behaviour, or the material shortcomings of the Tract. Their Quaker predisposition was not merely an additional factor but the foundation of their entire worldview, which should shape how they addressed various challenging situations. Penn was never a religious scientist aiming to hypothesise perfect conditions to prove that religious toleration is vital for society. In Penn's perspective, Pennsylvania and the Welsh Tract were founded according to God's vision, not his own. Instead, he was responsible for carrying out God's plan as devoutly as possible, experiencing God's spirit within him and guiding his actions in a way he believed most accurately reflected that divine essence. First, a general overview remains necessary to provide a fair and balanced account of what occurred before their emigration and what transpired after they arrived in Pennsylvania.

Background History

William Penn was born to Sir William Penn, an admiral who served in Oliver Cromwell's Navy during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms and the period of the English Commonwealth. Having been granted land in Ireland by Cromwell, the Penn's resided at Macroom Castle in County Cork where William Penn Jr. first encountered a member of the Society of Friends, a man named Thomas Loe. He remembered

though WP was very young yet observed what effect TL's doctrine had on the hearers so that a black of his father's could not contain himself from weeping aloud. He looking on his father saw the tears running down his cheek also; he thought in himself what if they should all be Quakers.'⁴

Already being a devout man as known from his time spent at Chigwell School, Penn later attended Christ Church College at the University of Oxford in the early 1660s, where his 'intense piety was clearly out of place in Restoration Oxford, and his alienation from the established church solidified during his time.'⁵ Penn was later forced to exit Christ Church for unknown reasons, although it is likely that

William Penn's introspective spirituality, intense personal piety, and tendency toward self-interrogation and self-examination were bound to clash with both the ritualistic Anglican ceremonialism that dominated Christ Church.⁶

Afterwards, Penn travelled around Europe before arriving in Ireland, where, in 1667, in Cork, 'William Penn had in all likelihood already been imprisoned, along with eighteen other Quakers, in the Cork city prison.'⁷ This was because Penn, by this point, had joined the Society of Friends. This resulted in a breakdown in the relationship with his father, leading to 'William Penn's full-blown entrance into the life of a Quaker controversialist.'⁸

⁴ Murphy, *William Penn*, p. 21.

⁵ Murphy, *William Penn*, p. 26.

⁶ Murphy, *William Penn*, p. 27.

⁷ Murphy, *William Penn*, p. 44.

⁸ Murphy, *William Penn*, p. 55.

The Quakers were an often persecuted sect established by George Fox in 1650 that placed great emphasis on ‘the God-given inner light above creeds and Scripture and regarded personal experience as the true source of authority.’⁹ This resulted in an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards political, economic and social conventions, such as the rejection of making oaths, and pacifism, but also questioned the religious orthodoxy of the Anglican Church at the time. During the 1660s, Penn often published inflammatory pamphlets, such as *Truth Exalted: To Princes, Priests, and People*, and various others, which will be mentioned in due course, that landed him in jail for blasphemy charges. Meanwhile, in 1660, George Fox

dispatched an agent named Josiah Coale to buy land from the Indians in what is now southeastern Pennsylvania. His mission failed, but he later informed William Penn about the region. George Fox himself also made a personal reconnaissance of the Delaware Valley in 1672 and found the Indians “very loving.” He urged Penn to plant his colony there.¹⁰

Despite Penn’s controversial publications, in May 1680, William Penn petitioned King Charles II for a tract of land in North America. Although only half of the fragment from his petition has survived, its other half has been reconstructed through conjecture. It reads as follows:

he [William Penn] humbly prays that the King’s majesty, out of his royal Grace and that princely respect he of old has shown to the petitioner’s father, and from his compassion to the afflicted, will grant him letters patent for a tract of land in America.¹¹

As evidenced from Penn’s surmised petition, he requested this land as payment of a debt the King owed to Penn’s father, who had died earlier in 1670. He claimed the debt amounted to at least £11,000, possibly increasing to £16,000 with the interest that had been

⁹ Henry J Cadbury, ‘George Fox’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 27 June 2025, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Fox>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

¹⁰ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 452-453.

¹¹ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania, 1680-1684: A Documentary History*, ed. by Jean R. Soderlund, Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn (University of Pennsylvania Press & the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1983), p.23.

accumulated over the nine years it had been left outstanding.¹² Yet, instead of requesting currency, William Penn Jr. requested land in an unsettled area of North America, having knowledge that such a tract existed, as he served as a trustee of the Quaker colony of West New Jersey since 1675.¹³ By the 4th of March 1681, after negotiations between Penn and the Crown, Penn was granted his colony by King Charles in a charter. Although Penn himself outlines an ostensible reason for such a request in his petition, it is initially questionable why the king would have considered Penn's appeal, given his inflammatory and illegal beliefs that he publicly and proudly expressed. However, it is most likely that 'the grant to Penn certainly served the Crown's imperial aims by cementing English control over the eastern seaboard of North America.'¹⁴ This is further evidenced by the specific wording of Penn's charter, which reads, 'out of a commendable desire to enlarge our English Empire, and promote such useful commodities as may bee of benefit to us and our Dominions.'¹⁵ The charter granted Penn various freedoms to Penn, such as the use of the land and wildlife, but also restrictions that differed from other colonies because, 'aware that Quakers would dominate this colony, the King specified in the Charter that if twenty inhabitants appealed to the Bishop of London for an Anglican clergyman, one should be sent.'¹⁶ Furthermore,

all laws had to be submitted to the Privy Council (the King's advisors) within five years. Colonists were to obey Parliament's trade laws, first passed in the 1650s and re-enacted in the 1660s and 70s, that required trade in most commodities to be with England. Penn was to maintain an agent in or near London to respond to any charges of their violation.¹⁷

¹² *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.23.

¹³ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2: 1680–1684, ed. by Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p.22.

¹⁴ Murphy, *William Penn*, p.140.

¹⁵ Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, 'Pennsylvania Charter to William Penn — March 4, 1681,' <<https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/documents/1681-1776/pennsylvania-charter.html>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

¹⁶ Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, 'Pennsylvania Charter to William Penn — March 4, 1681.'

¹⁷ Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, 'Pennsylvania Charter to William Penn — March 4, 1681.'

It is clear from the charter, then, that the King never intended this to be Penn's Quaker Holy Experiment, but instead the Crown sought to maintain strict moderation over the administration of the province. Furthermore, there is no indication from Penn that he disagreed with any aspect of this charter or that he believed the conditions were too strict to experience his Quaker faith in North America. If Penn truly was intent on creating a holy experiment in the scientific sense, that demanded freedom of religion, pacifism, and toleration, his granted freedoms can hardly be seen as ideal conditions for such an endeavour.

Clearly feeling euphoric, a day after being granted the charter, William Penn wrote to one of his acquaintances, 'Thou may communicate my grant to Friends, and expect shortly my proposals. It is a clear and just thing, and my God that has given it me through many difficulties will I believe bless and make it the seed of a nation. I shall have a tender care to the government that it be well laid at first.'¹⁸ Keeping his word, Penn disseminated knowledge of the grant widely across the British Isles and the European continent, publishing promotional pamphlets that showcased his new province, despite never having visited the land itself. These were titled *Some Account of the Province of Pennsylvania*, and a shorter document titled *A Brief Account of the Province of Pennsylvania*. Within the longer pamphlet, he writes that those most suited would be 'Industrious husbandmen and day labourers, that are hardly able (with extreme labour) to maintain their families and portion their children.'¹⁹ Secondly, 'Laborious handicrafts, especially carpenters, masons, smiths, weavers, tailors, tanners, shoemakers, shipwrights, etc., where they may be spared or are low in the world.'²⁰ Thirdly, 'those ingenious spirits that being low in the world, are much clogged and oppressed about a livelihood.' Fourthly, 'younger brothers of small inheritances'²¹ and lastly 'men of

¹⁸ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.55.

¹⁹ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.63.

²⁰ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.63.

²¹ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.63.

universal spirits that have an eye to the good of posterity, and that both understand and delight to promote good discipline and just government among a plain and well-intending people.’²² Interestingly, this list does not include any specific request to call other fellow Quakers to North America, and there is no explicit mention of his Quaker beliefs anywhere within his advertisement. Jean Soderlund notes this omission is most likely because ‘he was already widely known as a Quaker leader.’²³ However, it is also strong evidence of Penn’s soft proselytisation as he desired to establish a society built around Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He wrote in *Some fruits of Solitude*,

He [Jesus] was Holy, Humble, Harmless, Meek, Merciful, & when among us; to teach us what we should be, when he was gone. And yet he is among us still, and in us too, a living and perpetual Preacher of the same Grace, by his Spirit in our Consciences.²⁴

For Penn, despite Jesus’ bodily form being ascended to heaven, he remains on earth through the medium of the Holy Spirit in everybody’s heart and conscience. Reverence to the Holy Spirit’s message embodied in Jesus Christ was, for Penn, a matter of salvation or damnation. As he writes, ‘It is the nature of true faith to beget a holy fear of offending God, a deep reverence to his precepts, and a most tender regard to the inward testimony of his Spirit.’²⁵ To disregard outwardly and inwardly an opportunity to build a society focused on Christ’s message to the meek and merciful is to offend the Holy Spirit and God Himself. Thus, Penn’s announcement that those most suited to inhabit Pennsylvania are the low in the world is saturated with carefulness and caution for the spiritual safety of his new society.

It is within this context that the meeting between the Welsh Quakers and William Penn occurred, taking place only shortly after the publication of Penn’s promotional pamphlets in May 1681. The history of the Welsh Quakers before they migrated to North

²² *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.64.

²³ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.63.

²⁴ William Penn, *Some Fruits of Solitude in Reflections and Maxims* (Kessinger Publishing, 2010), pg.87.

²⁵ William Penn, *No Cross No Crown* (James Lister, 1743), pg.17.

America is well-documented in Richard Allen's paper, "In Search of a New Jerusalem," which examines why the Welsh initially sought emigration. One conspicuous reason Allen notes is the persecution that Quakers across the country faced as religious dissenters.²⁶ Their unusual thoughts and theological practices generated widespread suspicion among establishment figures to such an extent that it led to the passage of the Quaker Act of 1662. This decree defined the Quakers as those,

under a pretence of Religious Worship do often assemble themselves in great numbers in several parts of this Realm to the great endangering of the Publick Peace and Safety and to the terror of the People by maintaining a secret and strict correspondence amongst themselves and in the meane time separating and dividing themselves from the rest of his Majesties good and loyall Subjects and from the Pubilick Congregations and usual Places of Divine Worshipp.²⁷

Due of the perceived danger to the public peace and safety, the act banned the Quakers to

assemble themselves to the number of five or more of the age of sixteen yeares or upwards at any one time in any place under pretence of joyning in a Religious Worship not authorized by the Lawes of this Realm that then in al and every such cases the party so offending being thereof lawfully convict by verdict of twelve men or by his owne confession.²⁸

Additionally, this act also made it illegal not to swear an oath of allegiance to the King, a practice the Quaker's refused to embrace, justified by the book of Matthew where Jesus says

But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.²⁹

The punishment for refusing to swear an oath, or for gathering in worship, was, for a first offence, a fine of £5, and £10 for a second offence. Refusal to pay either fine resulted in 3- or

²⁶ Richard C Allen, 'In Search of a new Jerusalem: A Preliminary Investigation into the Causes and Impact of Welsh Quaker Emigration to Pennsylvania, c.1660 – 1750, " *Quaker Studies*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, (2005), Article 4, (p.32) <<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=quakerstudies>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

²⁷ Legislation.gov.uk, 'Quakers Act 1662', <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Cha2/14/1/paragraph/1/enacted>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

²⁸ Legislation.gov.uk, 'Quakers Act 1662'.

²⁹ Matthew 5:34-37, ESV.

6-month imprisonment, respectively. A third offence resulted in transportation ‘in any Ship or Ships to any of His Majesties Plantations beyond the Seas.’³⁰ Allen notes that ‘between 1681 and 1695, 42 per cent of Friends who emigrated from North Wales had been fined or imprisoned,’³¹ demonstrating both the inability of the Crown to properly suppress Quakerism and the Quakers’ emboldened stance in the face of religious persecution. Even though the ‘Quakers generally embraced their status as persecuted martyrs and frowned on attempts to evade punishment’³² as they saw religious chastisement by an overreaching imperial force analogous to Christ’s suffering, consistent persecution undoubtedly resulted in some seeking an escape from the anguish. The cost of transportation to North America in 1698 was roughly also £5 for an adult, and so when compared to the price of a fine, understandably, it must have played on the minds of many of the Welsh Quakers. However, as Glenn writes, persecution alone was not responsible for the removal of so many Welsh Quakers to seek a new life in Pennsylvania, as the conditions on board the ships that sailed from ports such as Bristol were squalid. In 1898, Edward Foulke and his family from Merionethshire in North Wales sailed across the Atlantic, during which 45 people died of dysentery.³³ The difficult choice of continuing their suffering in Wales or deciding to risk a long, perilous journey was one many Quaker families had to contend with. However, in addition to push factors from Wales and the direct impact of the government’s incessant punishment, there were certainly pull factors as well. With William Penn’s advertising pamphlets circulating across the country, a reprieve from persecution, a chance for a life that could increase their wealth, and, most importantly, deepen and extend their faith-filled practices, was evidently auspicious and worth the perilous ocean crossing.

³⁰ Legislation.gov.uk, ‘Quakers Act 1662’.

³¹ Allen, ‘In Search of a New Jerusalem’, p.33.

³² Murphy, *William Penn*, p.139.

³³ Allen, ‘In Search of a New Jerusalem’, p.33

An agreement was reached between the Welsh Quaker party and William Penn that they would purchase 40,000 acres of land to the west of the Schuylkill River, which was subsequently named the Welsh Tract. Although there was no official record taken of the meeting, as noted above, it became common consensus among the Welsh that Penn had promised them that,

we might live together as a Civill Society, to endeavour to deside all Controversies and debates amongst ourselves, in a Gospell order, and not to entangle ourselves with Laws in an unknown Tongue, as also to preserve our Language, that we might ever keep Correspondence with our friends in the land of our Nativity.³⁴

After the meeting had concluded, the Welsh began their preparations to emigrate. One prominent member of the Welsh Quakers was Dr Edward Jones, a surgeon from North Wales, who left the Liverpool docks in May 1682 and arrived there roughly three months later, in August.³⁵ After arriving in Pennsylvania, Dr Jones wrote a letter to be sent back to Wales to John ap Thomas, a fellow Welsh Quaker who was unable to travel to the province due to ill health. This letter reveals a snapshot of what early Pennsylvania looked like and captures Dr Jones' initial impressions of how the colony was to be divided among the purchasers. He writes,

Here is a Crowd of people striving for ye Country land, for ye town lot is not divided, & therefore we are forced to take up ye Country lots. We had much adoe to get a grant of it, but it cost us 4 or 5 days attendance besides some score of miles we travelled before we brought it to pass. I hope it will please thee, and the rest [tha]t are concerned, for it hath most rare timber. I have not seen the like in all these parts. There is water enough, besides the end of each lot will be on a good river, as large, or larger than the Dye, at Bala. It is called Skool Kill River. I hope the Country land will within this fourteen days surveyed out. The rate was for surveying 100 Acres, twenty shillings. But I hope better orders will be taken shortly about it.³⁶

Dr Jones displays early concerns regarding the surveying of the land, noting that only the land purchased in the countryside has been allocated. Despite this initial concern, the Welsh

³⁴ Charles Henry Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania* (William J Campbell, 1912), p.379.

³⁵ Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania*, p.64.

³⁶ James J Levick, Owen Wynne, Humphrey Hughes, John Wynne, Lewis Owen, ap Thomas, David Davies, Edd Jones, 'John ap Thomas and His Friends', *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1880), pp. 301-328, (p.315) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20084463>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

who arrived were able to practice their Quaker faith without hindrance or threat from any governing body, and the agreement reached with William Penn in London was beginning to bear fruit in the form of a prosperous and independent Welsh entity in North America. Their assurance in the continuation of the practices they had started in Wales is demonstrated in the recorded minutes taken from their monthly meetings, the earliest of which dates back to 1684, held at Thomas Ducketts' house on the 10th of the second month, most likely April/May. The agenda for that day set the tone for the subsequent meetings, as it concerned the intention laid down by Thomas Stampford that he and Joane Hooding were to be married.³⁷ As noted by Levy,

In the Welsh Tract, in the men's monthly meetings (1683- 1709), forty-six per cent of the business dealt with marriages: the next largest category of business, administrative concerns, like building burial grounds or arranging worship meetings, included only 17 per cent of the itemised business.³⁸

Marriage constituting such a significant part of the Welsh Tract's monthly meeting was not unusual among Quaker meetings, as the ardent necessity to 'help save most of their children,'³⁹ from falling into sin was achieved with help not only from their parents but also from the Quaker meeting and the community more widely. Part of the process involved the mind waiting "in the light" to contemplate on the truth of the holy spirit to provide clarity for the parties concerned, and a community-led investigation to establish the "clearness" of the proposed marriage from prior ties, where the results would be announced during the following monthly meeting. Thankfully for them, Thomas and Joane were found to be clear and thus were allowed to marry freely. The constancy of marriages dominating each Quaker meeting and the wariness with which they were adjudicated echoes the writings of Penn within his advertising pamphlets that Pennsylvania is to be inhabited by merciful and god-

³⁷ Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, RG2/Ph/R32 1.1-1.17, Minutes of Radnor Monthly Meeting 1684 to 1733.

³⁸ Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family* (Oxford University Press, 1988), p.132.

³⁹ Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, p.130.

fearing souls. At this point, undeniably, the Welsh and Penn exemplified and mutually shared in a common ideal of what the province of Pennsylvania ought to look like, as they were both ardently intent on fulfilling the inward light's promise of a bountiful and holy land.

In 1684, William Penn left Pennsylvania and sailed back to England, trusting that the now-established Provincial Council, as well as five specially appointed commissioners of state, would operate functionally and morally. He wrote to Thomas Lloyd the President of the Council as chosen by Penn that

the Power I have should be left to maintain & exercise Govern[ment] for the Good of the Province & Territories To the end that the People may be sensible of the Intire Confidence I have in them which which I hope will begett the like in them to me & mine.⁴⁰

He clarifies in a postscript that ‘that all laws that shall or may be made should receive and have my furthr determination Confirmation & Consent — or else to be voyd in themselves.’⁴¹ This demonstrates that Penn possessed the power of veto over any new law that was to pass through the council, an authority he held reluctantly yet necessarily, as the King’s charter for Pennsylvania held Penn personally responsible for any violation of the navigation Acts.⁴² Despite Penn requiring that he determine the final passage of all laws, documented issues began to arise in the Welsh Tract in 1685, as the Provincial Council discussed the setting of definitive county boundaries between Philadelphia County and Chester County. It was decided that ‘severall tracts of land belonging to the Welch & other inhabitation,’⁴³ namely Haverford and Radnor Townships, would be marked within Chester County, and not Philadelphia. Up until this point, the Welsh believed they were at least a county unto themselves, as agreed with William Penn at their London meeting, and members

⁴⁰ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.583.

⁴¹ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.583.

⁴² *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.584.

⁴³ The State of Pennsylvania, *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania Vol I* (Jo Severns & Co, 1852), p.126.

of neither county. Nevertheless, the legislation to separate the Welsh Tract across two counties was passed, but it was never implemented. According to Browning, Thomas Lloyd, himself a Welsh Quaker, dropped all matters of discussion regarding the county boundaries, and so the ‘Chester line matter lay dormant for three years.’⁴⁴ However, background tensions concerning the land boundaries of the Province simmered between Thomas Holmes, the surveyor general, and Charles Ashcom, the deputy surveyor for Chester County. Holmes wrote to William Penn in 1686 stating

I cannot get a Mapp of this Pro[vince] yet, for C.A. [Charles Ashcom] will neither give me his draughts & regular returns, nor acc[ount] of the survey money, out dares all authority; The great controversy between the Welsh & others in Chester County hangs still, it hath been above a year depending before Council & Comrs, but like other things, nothing done. I have complained to the Pres. & Council but to no purpose.⁴⁵

Holme and Ashcom’s relationship is well documented by Andrew Murphy as being tense, ‘with Holme accusing Ashcom (“that vile C.A.”) of corruption, sloppy surveying, and a refusal to turn over copies of maps to the Surveyor General’s office.’⁴⁶ In May 1687, Holme wrote to Penn once more concerning Ashcom’s poor surveying skills by writing,

As for T Barkers & Compa business, that vile C. A. laid out lands for them within the Welch Tract, & many 1,000a[cres] besides to others, & got the survey money (which was what he cared for) & that was the reason of that controversy.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania*, p.351.

⁴⁵ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3: 1685–1700, ed. by Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p.132.

⁴⁶ Murphy, *William Penn*, p.183.

⁴⁷ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.157.

The company named in Holmes' complaint was a London Quaker merchant firm that had land surveyed for them by Ashcom, which overlapped with the Welsh Tract, leading to increased tensions among the Welsh settlers and growing doubts about the effectiveness of those employed by Penn. Thankfully for the Welsh Quakers, 'the Board of Propriety reversed this decision in July,'⁴⁸ protecting any dilution of the Welsh Quakers' land for now. However, without the Welsh Quaker's knowledge, in 1687 Holme, undoubtedly using Ashcom's flawed surveys, had created a map of the Province that separated the Welsh Tract into two by placing Radnor and Haverford in Chester County, yet keeping the rest of the Tract in Philadelphia.



⁴⁸ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3; ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.160.

This is evident from his map, dated 1687, which highlights Chester County in red and Philadelphia County in turquoise.⁴⁹

With Penn still away in England, he was ‘becoming increasingly uneasy about the conduct of affairs in Pennsylvania.’⁵⁰ The system of governance he had allocated in his absence was no longer functioning effectively, and quarrels concerning land policy, as discussed above, were worsening. Therefore, by July 1688, Penn decided to appoint a Governor of the Province, replacing the power he had invested in the commissioners of the state. Thomas Lloyd, the most likely candidate for the job, turned down the offer for the position, and so Penn contacted John Blackwell, a Puritan from New England, to serve as Governor in his stead to steady the growing disagreements among the settlers. Blackwell accepted and responded that he was ‘Surprized (as I was) with the receipt of your Commission for the Governm[ent] of this place & people, I having not the least {previous} intimation therof.’ Just as Blackwell was surprised, so were the Quakers of Pennsylvania, who regarded Blackwell’s presence as an affront. Penn himself became the target of Quaker dissatisfaction by choosing a Puritan Governor, as Murphy writes, ‘Penn had permanently poisoned his relationship with leading Pennsylvania Friends and driven both Lloyds—Thomas and David—into open opposition to his interests.’⁵¹ Murphy further claims that the appointment of Blackwell ‘seemed rather clearly to signal, at the very least, the end of the Quaker colony as Penn had always understood it.’⁵²

The border controversy resurfaced in 1689-1690, as members from Chester County once more raised the contention that Radnor and Haverford were to be situated within Chester County, not Philadelphia County. At the meeting at the council room in Philadelphia,

⁴⁹ Thomas Holmes, *A mapp of ye improved part of Pensilvania in America, divided into countyes, townships, and lotts*, (1687) <<https://www.loc.gov/item/81692881/>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

⁵⁰ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.183.

⁵¹ Murphy, *William Penn*, p.198.

⁵² Murphy, *William Penn*, p.198.

the minutes read that, ‘The Governor [John Blackwell] and most of The present members of Councill Declareing themselves satisfied Concerning their being a part of Chester County Vpon ye grounds alliged and proved as aforesaid,’⁵³ The grounds for reaching this decision that they mention is Holme’s map, which was presented to the council as proof that the Welsh Tract had in fact been separated. As William Penn was absent, the council decided that this map, published and commissioned by Penn, served in lieu. Directly prior to this in 1688,

the Welsh settlers had sent Penn a petition with more than twenty signatures, claiming that he had reneged on his promises to them, that they were being summoned to serve on juries in both Philadelphia and Chester counties since their tract spanned that border, and that they feared being assessed taxes by both counties as well.⁵⁴

Yet, as this council meeting demonstrates, Penn’s absence from the province was clearly causing increasing difficulties in satisfying all the intricate decisions and arrangements that Penn had personally overseen, and the request that he oversee the passage of new laws was being circumvented. On April 14 of 1689 Penn wrote to the Commissioners of Propriety, stating that ‘Let the Welsh know, they must be of a County, Philadelphia or Chester: But they shall be a Seignory or Corporation of themselves in that County they are of, so soone as the Lord brings me over.’⁵⁵ This explanation of the Welsh settlement is somewhat confusing because it is vague about what Penn meant when he wrote “seignory” or “corporation”. In a letter later on in December 1689 to Hugh Roberts, who was visiting North Wales from Pennsylvania, Penn wrote, ‘for the welch I ha[ve ordered t]hem to be a Barrony or Corporation apart] from others, so as to fall under the [general government].’⁵⁶ From both of these letters, it is assumed that Penn intended the Welsh to be within the political boundaries of an existing county, and not to become an independent one; however, they were allowed to remain as a barony or corporation, which most likely meant that they could remain as one

⁵³ The State of Pennsylvania, *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania*, p.265.

⁵⁴ Murphy, *William Penn*, p.183.

⁵⁵ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.241.

⁵⁶ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.265.

contiguous land mass. Nevertheless, these letters from Penn lacked political weight, as the Welsh Tract was split across county lines.

A second grievance the Welsh Tract faced concerned their 40,000 acres and the payment of Quit-rent, a land tax Penn imposed on early settlers. The disagreement centred on the date when the tax would become payable. The Welsh insisted they would only pay tax from the date of their final survey, whereas the Board of Property, established to collect the rent, demanded that it be paid from the date of their grant.⁵⁷ The Welsh, after writing another letter to William Penn on May 15 1691, that directly outlined their increasing grievances, eventually agreed to pay the full quit rent; however, it was at this point too late. The tract's lands that had not paid quit rent were broken up and sold off. Browning writes that, 'the Commissioners also took some of the tract for themselves and friends, as also did the surveyor. Browning further writes somewhat dramatically that 'this was the end of the Welsh Tract,'⁵⁸ as unoccupied areas of their lands were sold off to predominantly English settlers.

It is arguably forgivable that the Welsh Tract was not at the forefront of William Penn's mind when, in 1688, William of Orange invaded England to start the Glorious Revolution. The current king, James II, with whom Penn was building a growing relationship, fled, leaving Penn vulnerable to imprisonment through association. After being imprisoned and released on bail on charges of treason, 'Penn decided that the most prudent course of action was to go into hiding until he could clear his name.'⁵⁹ Despite being in hiding, 'sporadically WP appointed officials for Pennsylvania and issued commissions and instructions. These intrusions were usually resented and ignored by his erstwhile subjects.'⁶⁰ Therefore, at the time when the Welsh tract appeared to end, Pennsylvania was also in a state of poorly

⁵⁷ Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania*, p.384.

⁵⁸ Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania*, p.386.

⁵⁹ Murphy, *William Penn*, p.201.

⁶⁰ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.276.

managed disrepair. This is ultimately why Penn's quote of a holy experiment becomes more significant. Because clear consequences can be identified, alongside Penn declaring that he was undertaking a social experiment in Quakerism, scholars naturally conclude that Penn, and the Welsh Tract, did not succeed as originally intended. These scholarly conclusions are as follows.

Literature Review

As noted in the introduction, a significant part of the existing scholarly literature on William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania largely references his letter to a Quaker minister in northern England, where Penn describes Pennsylvania as a “holy experiment.” However, their interpretation of the word experiment relies explicitly on a modern understanding and usage of the term, namely, as a procedure or test conducted to verify a hypothesis or demonstrate a fact. In this context, it is assumed that Penn intended his experiment to be a test of his Quaker morals and lifestyle, scaled up to the size and scope of a new country. The focus of the experiment varies depending on the scholars’ understanding of William Penn’s beliefs. Additionally, depending on the specific focus, the outcome of the experiment is viewed either positively or negatively.

Evidence for this common scholarly approach is found in a multitude of books, such as *Quakers: A Very Short Introduction*, where Pink Dandelion writes,

When William Penn set up the Holy Experiment in Pennsylvania, religious toleration and peace were its two key ideals, a symbol, more than anything else, of how far Quaker ecumenism had developed, or could develop given political freedom.⁶¹

For Dandelion, Penn’s peace and toleration dominated his hypothesised experimental attempt at a colony.

In the *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Lonnie Valentine describes the holy experiment as ‘a radical experiment in democracy as a government established for the good growth of the human spirit, but the seeds of its own destruction were there because of the recognition of the primacy of conscience in democratic governance.’⁶² She argues that because Penn, in his original vision for Pennsylvania as a democratic experiment, had

⁶¹ Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p.93.

⁶² *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, ed. by Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (Oxford University Press, 2013), p.369.

allowed for freedom of conscience, the experiment was always likely to deviate from Penn's original intention, as other opinions were equally considered politically valuable. Her critique of early Pennsylvania is based on an analysis of its deficiencies, specifically its political shortcomings.

Kevin Kenny, in his book *Peaceable Kingdom Lost*, believes that Penn's holy experiment was 'benevolent but flawed,'⁶³ His perspective on the experiment focuses on Penn's toleration of the Native Americans. He describes how 'The colony moved from the false dawn of Penn's holy experiment, through the avarice and subterfuge of his sons, to the carnage of the French and Indian War.'⁶⁴ He writes further that 'William Penn's holy experiment, already in decline by the time of his death in 1718, disintegrated gradually over the next few decades.'⁶⁵ Both of these passages reinforce his claim that Penn intended Pennsylvania as a scientific experiment, which, for Kenny, is specifically in the context of pacifism and toleration.

In her book *A Mixed Multitude*, Sally Schwartz writes, 'Among Penn's goals was the establishment of a "holy experiment," a refuge where Western Europeans could live with minimal infringements upon their religious inclinations and enjoy the fundamental rights of English subjects.'⁶⁶ Schwartz continues by criticising Penn for failing 'to consider the problem of devising ways in which individuals of different faiths, languages, and nationalities, who in Europe were in frequent conflict with each other, would live together peacefully.'⁶⁷ Her analysis of the experiment highlights Penn as a tolerant pluralist, establishing Pennsylvania as a sanctuary for all of Europe's religiously persecuted. However,

⁶³ Kevin Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p.6.

⁶⁴ Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost*, p.3.

⁶⁵ Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost*, p.3.

⁶⁶ Sally Schwartz, *"A Mixed Multitude, The Struggle for Toleration in Colonial Pennsylvania"*, (New York University Press, 1987), p.2.

⁶⁷ Schwartz, *"A Mixed multitude"*, p.2.

Penn underestimated the challenges that come with attempting to establish a pluralistic society and suggests that if Penn had considered the consequences of establishing a pluralistic society more carefully, the experiment in Pennsylvania might have endured more peacefully.

Barry Levy, in his book *Quakers and the American Family*, writes, ‘Yet, among other things, his ‘holy experiment’ was a matter of providing adequate land and adequately commercially profitable land (both for himself and his customers) for Quaker familialism.’⁶⁸ Levy interprets that Penn’s original vision for Pennsylvania was mainly conceived as a financial venture for Quaker families. It was first and foremost an experiment that provided a ‘haven especially for desperate rural Quaker householders to practice Quaker familial discipline, intimate communication, and child-rearing without being traditionally poor or without becoming excessively commercial.’⁶⁹ Unlike the examples given above, Levy regards the experiment less as a space for outward-facing Quaker posturing that failed to translate into what Penn intended and instead concentrates on the successes the Quakers experienced, particularly economically. He writes, ‘the northwestern Quakers found a lush frontier in Pennsylvania, and used their radical familialism as well as their provincial, northwestern heritage to design their settlement pattern, behavior, and success.’⁷⁰ He gives the example that by 1686, Pennsylvania farms were already producing a surplus of flour and actively trading with the West Indian islands.⁷¹ Therefore, not all existing scholarship focusing on William Penn and Pennsylvania is inherently negative, yet it still considers the idea that Penn devised an experiment in the scientific sense. For Levy, this experiment was entrepreneurial, as it encouraged poor Quaker families from Europe to seek their fortune in a new land.

⁶⁸ Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, p.111.

⁶⁹ Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, p.110-111.

⁷⁰ Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, p.14.

⁷¹ Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, p.14.

Similarly to Levy, Richard S. Dunn and Mary Maples Dunn, in their extensive work *The Papers of William Penn*, believe Penn's reason for founding Pennsylvania was economic; however, not exclusively to benefit his Quaker purchasers, but also himself. They write,

WP needed a fresh source of income in 1680. He had contracted over £10,000 in loans during the 1670s, and his Irish and English tenants were defaulting on their rents. By obtaining the proprietorship to an American colony he could vastly expand his service to Quakerism and to the cause of and political liberty — and at the same time greatly enlarge his property holdings.⁷²

Therefore, whether it is enterprise, democracy, pacifism, or religious and cultural toleration, all of these scholars primarily focus on one aspect of what they consider most important in defining what Penn meant when he wrote about his Holy experiment. Jean Soderlund, in *William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania*, synthesises all of these methods of interpreting Penn's experiment by writing,

He wanted to establish a tolerant, moral society in which no one would be persecuted for his or her beliefs and in which the inhabitants would be free to make their own laws and to live as "sober and industrious people." But just as clearly, WP expected to earn enough money from selling land in Pennsylvania to get himself out of debt and to secure his financial future.⁷³

Whether Penn succeeded in his experiment or not is debated among scholars, although most agree that he did not. Nonetheless, all these works suggest that Penn was a sort of social scientist, incorporating morals and social expectations into his new province in the hope that it would produce a well-ordered, peaceful society.

Focusing on the Welsh Tract, it is clear that its scholarly debates are also distinctly anchored in the story of experimentation. However, instead of the experiment focusing on religious toleration, pacifism, and similar themes, it centres on Welsh autonomy and independence as an early Welsh colony in Pennsylvania. Due to the meeting between the Welsh and William Penn before their emigration, much of the existing scholarship

⁷² *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2.; ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.22.

⁷³ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.5.

emphasises how Penn reneged on his promise or misled the Welsh by promising a condition he could never fulfil. This type of critique implicitly assumes that the Welsh had a thesis they set out to prove, only for their aspirations to be thwarted by Penn and his false promises. Now, the Welsh become the experimenters by attempting to establish an independent Welsh colony in Pennsylvania.

During the 19th century, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* published works by James Levick, an early member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Generally, Levick devotes more attention to elucidating the identities and specific narratives of those within the Welsh Tract than to its broader context. However, setting the tone for future scholarship, he does inform the reader of his reasons why the Tract faced difficulties in the years following its establishment. He highlights two specific events that occurred, the first being the introduction of George Keith, a fervent Scottish Quaker living in Philadelphia, whom Levick describes as having ‘been animated with especial hatred of the Welsh Friends.’⁷⁴ The Keithian controversy began in 1690 ‘and remains one of the most perplexing events in Quaker history, and scholars have reached no agreement on causes or consequences.’⁷⁵ The second event that Levick believes led to the loss of the Welsh Tract’s special privileges as an independent entity concerns the surveyance of the Tract. Levick emphasises William Penn’s absence from Pennsylvania at the time as crucial in enabling the dispute between Chester and Philadelphia County to redraw their boundaries directly through the 40,000 acres of land owned by the Welsh Quaker settlers. This, in effect, divided the small settlements established there politically.⁷⁶ Although not explicitly critical of William

⁷⁴ James J Levick, ‘The Early Welsh Quakers and Their Emigration to Pennsylvania’, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1893), pp. 385-413, (p.410) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20083557>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

⁷⁵ Richard C. Allen and Rosemary Moore, *The Quakers, 1656-1723* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), p.200.

⁷⁶ Levick, ‘The Early Welsh Quakers and Their Emigration to Pennsylvania’, p.411.

Penn, Levick still notes that the tract's shortcomings were due to preventable measures, mirroring the understanding that the Welsh were partakers in an experiment that went awry.

One of the most notable voices that has significantly contributed to the understanding of the Welsh Tract is Charles H. Browning. His book, *Welsh Settlement of Pennsylvania*, contains a detailed chronological historical account of the lives of Welsh Quakers both before and after their emigration to Pennsylvania. Aside from his sweeping accounts of the Welsh Quaker lives, he implies that the Welsh were both misled by Penn and expected too much. He writes that 'Penn should keep his promises to them, especially as to the entire control and management of it through their meetings, or their monthly meeting.'⁷⁷ Browning suggests that the Welsh never truly intended for their land to be as autonomous as the term 'barony' would have meant in the 17th century. However, Browning observes that Penn could have definitely done more to ensure that their designated land was not split across two county boundaries, and that ultimately Penn was to blame for the Welsh' misfortunes as 'When you come to review the "Welsh idea," you may note that whatever the Welsh, when purchasing, wanted, Penn promised, and that they realised only disappointments out of their expectations.'⁷⁸ The "Welsh Idea" that Browning mentions is not much different from discussions about Penn's Holy Experiment. As Browning writes,

this little territory of "62½ square miles" the Welsh Quakers thought would be the acme of comfort to have it all by themselves, - to which they fled from "sufferings," and where they hoped for complete release and rest from all the unpleasantness of that "high civilization" that then prevailed in the old country, and to be left alone, all of which might have been granted by Penn if they had not tried unusual political conditions.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania*, p.341-2.

⁷⁸ Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania*, p. 337.

⁷⁹ Browning, *Welsh settlement of Pennsylvania*, p.375.

Once again, the debate about early Pennsylvania cannot avoid viewing it as an experimental attempt at creating a new society, leading to an analysis that highlights either its success or, in the case of the Welsh Tract, its failure.

This form of retrospective analysis appears repeatedly in discussions of the Welsh Tract, similar to Browning's work in books by The Rev T. Mardy Rees in his book *A History of the Quakers in Wales and Their Emigration to North America*, and Thomas Allen Glenn's book *Merion in the Welsh Tract*. Their narrative prose chronologically recounts the events of the Welsh Tract, with each author offering their own interpretation of why the Tract failed. Rees writes that

The Quaker experiment would have been more successful if the colony had been wholly independent of Crown interference. Orders from England frequently complicated matters, and the Proprietor was obliged to adapt his government sometimes to meet these orders, or to run the risk of having his charter annulled.⁸⁰

His analysis suggests that if Penn had somehow succeeded in establishing his own independent country, both Pennsylvania and the Welsh Tract would have been more prosperous, particularly as the Welsh would not have been hindered in their pursuit of greater autonomy. Additionally, he writes that 'had the whole tract been taken up by Welsh settlers its history might have been different.'⁸¹ Had the input parameters into the Welsh Tract been altered, then its original hypothesis would have been realised.

Thomas Allen Glenn, in his analysis of the situation, focuses on the meeting that took place between the Welsh and William Penn before they emigrated. He writes that,

The fatal mistake made by the Welsh upon this occasion was that there seems to have been nothing at all reduced to writing, and that they allowed themselves to be persuaded by the Founder that the powers given to him in his Charter, and the general Articles of Concession to all colonists, which papers were signed by the Welsh

⁸⁰ Thomas Mardy Rees, *A history of the Quakers in Wales and their Emigration to North America* (W. Spurrell and Son, 1925), p.191.

⁸¹ Rees, *A history of the Quakers in Wales*, p.181.

Patentees, would be sufficient, with his personal promise, to protect them, and enable them to carry out the plan they had in view.⁸²

Interestingly, Glenn demonstrates a different view from Browning, and instead notes that ‘There can certainly be no reasonable doubt that by his Charter Penn and his successors were empowered to erect Baronies.’⁸³ However, instead of attributing blame to Penn for the perceived failure of the Welsh to maintain themselves as a distinct barony, Glenn describes Penn as ‘naturally sanguine,’ suggesting that Penn’s attitude was unreasonably optimistic but not explicitly malicious. Therefore, Glenn also offers his version of the story that would have led to a positive outcome, based on the recording of that original meeting with Penn. Had this been the case, and if the Welsh had not trusted Penn so much, perhaps the Welsh Tract might have succeeded in flourishing as an independent entity after all.

Contemporary scholarship on the Welsh Tract and William Penn is less explicitly hostile towards Penn’s actions and intentions, and instead simply notes how the Welsh Tract failed to materialise in a manner the Welsh believed it would. Sally Shwartz, writing explicitly about the Welsh Tract, notes that ‘The Welsh Quakers who had negotiated with Penn about establishing an exclusive settlement where their language and culture could be maintained failed to achieve their goal.’⁸⁴ Richard Allen writes that

Welsh Quaker emigrants believed that they could recreate Wales in a new land and gain their religious freedom, but despite their good intentions and best efforts, they were unable to secure their Welsh enclave because of internal and external pressures.⁸⁵

Joseph Illick, in his book *Colonial Pennsylvania: A History*, writes that, ‘it was several years before Penn consented to survey the Welsh Tract, at that time encompassing 40,000 acres including Merion, Radnor, and Haverford, and he refused its inhabitants the

⁸² Thomas Allen Glenn, *Merion in the Welsh Tract* (Norristown, 1896), p.24.

⁸³ Glenn, *Merion in the Welsh Tract*, p.24.

⁸⁴ Schwartz, “*A Mixed multitude*”, p.77.

⁸⁵ Richard C Allen, ‘The making of a Holy Christian Community: Welsh Quaker emigrants to Pennsylvania,’ in *Cultural Conquests 1500 – 2000*, ed. by Tim Kirk and Luda Klusáková (Philosophica et Historica, 2009), pp. 45-61 (p.61).

special privileges they expected.’⁸⁶ This refusal comes from Illick’s belief that, ‘Penn and the early Pennsylvania settlers simply had different perspectives on the “holy experiment” the proprietor expected gratitude and harmonious cooperation from people for whom he provided a religious haven, economic opportunities and political liberty.’⁸⁷ For Illick, the Welsh’s perspective on how they interpreted the holy experiment was through ‘security in segregation, an attitude deriving as much from insularity in the Old World as uncertainty in the New.’⁸⁸ However, Penn’s understanding of the holy experiment was that the Welsh and other colonists should be grateful, as he was their salvific figure, and if all united under a banner of graciousness towards Penn, the colony would achieve integration and harmony. If only from the start, both the Welsh and Penn had shared a united vision of what Pennsylvania would look like, it might have thrived.

Throughout the discussion of these notable scholars and their works, an alternative history is woven. A history where Penn’s experiment could have either achieved greater success or been more disappointing. A history where the Welsh Tract might have succeeded as the Welsh initially envisioned. This retrospective analysis of the unfolding story is likely because these scholars believe Penn framed his original aim as an experiment, with many directly alluding to that quote. Understanding and examining William Penn and his actions in this way allows for criticism and advice from the scholar. If early Pennsylvania is viewed as a holy scientific experiment set on fulfilling the goal of being a bastion of democracy, a pacifist utopia, a tolerant multi-religious community, an entrepreneurial investment, or a Welsh autonomous community, then alterations in the variables might have brought Penn’s vision of the experiment significantly closer to realisation.

⁸⁶ Joseph E. Illick, *Colonial Pennsylvania* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), p.41

⁸⁷ Illick, *Colonial Pennsylvania*, p.41-42.

⁸⁸ Illick, *Colonial Pennsylvania*, p.41.

However, all of these examples misrepresent William Penn's original intention when he penned that letter informing his contact of his desire to establish a holy experiment, for one simple reason. They all believe that the term "experiment" implies a cause-and-effect relationship with early Pennsylvania. They believe there is a positive or negative causality between William Penn's initial conditions in early Pennsylvania, which contributed to and are responsible for the outcome of the province. It is indisputable that William Penn created a society that generated some sense of causality between what he included in his early advertisements and meetings with potential settlers to the province and what transpired; however, this does not justify the consistent positive or negative analysis of the tract as an experiment. Adding to this, there is likewise a causality between William Penn's meeting with the Welsh Quakers and the perceived failure of the Welsh Tract. However, Penn never intended for Pennsylvania to be created in this way, as he did not mean 'experiment' to carry the meaning it has in modern language.

The reinterpretation as a Holy Experiment

As demonstrated above, Penn's "holy experiment" has been traditionally understood as his attempt to establish 'a tolerant, moral society in which no one would be persecuted for his or her beliefs and in which the inhabitants would be free to make their own laws and to live as "sober and industrious people."'”⁸⁹ This phrase is enveloped in powerful and abstract nouns such as 'liberty of conscience,'⁹⁰ "religious freedom", and 'fundamental rights of English subjects.'⁹¹ Despite the propensity of scholars to translate Penn's meaning as a scientific experiment, instead of a holy experience of God, William Frost in his paper "William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness: Promise and Legend" writes,

was Penn trying to investigate the character of his new society and to change the character of English society by proving that his particular constitutional arrangement worked well? Was he trying to determine the pattern of the new colony? Or was he attempting to persuade others that the Lord had, by his grace, provided the land and the foundation for a new Christian existence? I think the last alternative is most plausible.⁹²

For Frost, William Penn was never a scientist testing his hypothesis, but rather, was God's instrument, ordained to seek out those godly enough to bring about God's plan for Pennsylvania. Frost continues by writing, 'Penn's argument is that if anyone is creating, or experiencing, or experimenting, it is God. Penn simply seeks clearness for his actions.'⁹³ Frost supports his claims by carefully analysing Penn's writings, revealing an alternative explanation for what he meant by experiment. He writes elsewhere that 'the myth that

⁸⁹ *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, ed. by Soderlund, Dunn and Dunn, p.5.

⁹⁰ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p.459.

⁹¹ Schwartz, "A Mixed multitude", p.2.

⁹² J. William Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness: Promise and Legend', *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 107, No. 4 (Oct.1983), pp. 577-605 (p.582)

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20091808>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

⁹³ Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness', p.584.

Pennsylvania was conceived as a "holy experiment" in free government and religious liberty is wrong, because Penn did not think such political arrangements were holy.⁹⁴

Therefore, it is essential to analyse the letter that Penn sent to his correspondent James Harrison, which includes this famous line, as it provides a deeper contextual understanding of what this term originally signified within Penn's vision. In the letter, he wrote,

for my Country [I see] the lord in the obtaineing of it: & mor[e was] I drawn inward to looke to him, & to o[we it] to his hand & powr then to any ot[her way.] I have so obtained it & des[ire] that I may not be unworthy of his love, but do that w ch may answeare his Kind providence & serve his truth & people; that an example may be Sett up to the nations, there may be room there, tho not here, for such an holy experiment.⁹⁵

On the face of it, the word experiment could suggest Penn's vision for his colony as a scientific process, and that Penn was conducting a test to see whether a society based on the principles of democracy, pacifism, or religious toleration could function. This would justify much of the scholarly literature surrounding early Pennsylvania that regards Penn as the political scientist proposing that a society based on toleration, freedom, and the defence of fundamental rights could exist, with its success or failure directly stemming from Penn's initial hypothesis.

However, the term "experiment" in the 17th century had a dual meaning. As well as being more traditionally understood as a scientific endeavour that seeks to establish a hypothesised outcome by controlling input, it was also synonymous with *experience*. A source for this usage of experiment during Penn's time can be found in George Fox's writing, in his *Journal*. Fox writes,

Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the

⁹⁴ J. William Frost, "'Wear the Sword as Long as Thou Canst': William Penn in Myth and History", *The Journal of the Friends Historical Society* Vol. 58, No.2 (1998), pp. 91-113, (p.108), doi.org/10.14296/fhs.v58i2.3420.

⁹⁵ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.108.

preeminence who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus, when God doth work who shall let [hinder] it? And this I knew experimentally.⁹⁶

Dandelion, despite her defective analyses of William Penn as an experimenter, does confirm this translation of experiment as experience by writing, ‘Wisdom and guidance is to come from God and those who think otherwise are “shut up in unbelief”, deluded. He knows this ‘experimentally’, that is, through his experience.’⁹⁷ Direct experience was one of the central tenets of a Quaker’s understanding of how one was to know God. As Rosemary Moore writes, ‘As they knew direct access to God—“experimentally,” as Fox put it— the Quakers found no need for a professional ministry. Their word for this experience was *light*, the light that lighteth every man, the light in their consciences that was subtly different from conscience itself. They spoke of living in the light.’⁹⁸

Aside from his letter to James Harrison, William Penn elsewhere expounds an experimental understanding of the inner light that is present in all. In 1679, only two years prior to the establishment of Pennsylvania, Penn wrote a letter to the King of Poland during his travels on the European continent as a Quaker Missionary. Written as a Quaker apology, he defends Quaker beliefs by highlighting how other Christians share fundamental principles of Quaker theology, and therefore, the persecution that Quakers were suffering from in Poland was not justified. He reads,

We do believe that all true ministry & worship only stand in the experimental sense, operations, & leadings of this holy light, spirit or grace, that is shed abroad in the hearts of men & women to conduct them in the holy way of regeneration unto life eternal.⁹⁹

Like Fox, Penn employs the term "experiment" to refer to a personal, transcendent encounter with God through the holy light. Furthermore, while imprisoned in the Tower of London from

⁹⁶ *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. by John L. Nickalls (Cambridge University Press, 1952), p.11.

⁹⁷ Dandelion, *The Quakers*, p.5.

⁹⁸ Allen and Moore, *The Quakers*, p.11.

⁹⁹ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 1: 1644–1679, ed. by Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p.437.

1668 to 1669 for his anti-trinitarian and thus heretical work *The Sandy Foundation Shaken*, Penn wrote *No Cross No Crown*, which was once again a Quaker apology. In this pamphlet, he wrote, ‘My friends, mind the just witness and holy principle in yourselves, that you may experimentally know more of the Divine life, in which, and not in a multitude of vain repetitions, true and solid felicity eternally consists.’¹⁰⁰ Both Penn’s quotes and George Fox’s quote highlight the Quaker tendency to view experiment as synonymous with experience. In *No Cross No Crown*, and in his letter to the King of Poland, Penn clearly does not intend to suggest that the reader must experiment scientifically to learn more of the Divine life. Instead, experimenting is a pathway to God, through the tuning of the light within all people.

Therefore, it is undeniable that in keeping with his Quaker-infused vocabulary, when Penn wrote ‘an example may be Sett up to the nations, there may be room there, tho not here, for such an holy experiment,’¹⁰¹ he meant a holy experience. Further evidence for this claim can be found in the direct preface to this specific quote as he wrote “for my Country [I see] the lord in the obtaineing of it: & mor[e was] I drawn inward to looke to him, & to o[we it] to his hand & powr then to any ot[her way.]’¹⁰² In exactly the same way that Penn knew God experientially through the inner light when writing his apologetics, he also knew experientially that God had reserved land for him to further develop the Quaker’s holy experiment of the inner light in Pennsylvania. In a flurry of excited letters, he wrote after discovering that the King had granted him Pennsylvania, Penn expanded even further on what he intended Pennsylvania to become. He wrote, ““God will plan[t] Americha & it shall have its day: or Glorious day of Christ in us Reserved to the last dayes, may have the last parte of

¹⁰⁰ Penn, *No cross No Crown*, p.290.

¹⁰¹ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.108.

¹⁰² *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.108.

the world, the setting of the son or western world to shine in.”¹⁰³ For Penn, God is in charge of this experimental endeavour. He elaborates elsewhere by writing,

I have been maid to Look to the Ld , & beleive in him, as to the obtaining of it, more then ever as to any outward substance, it comforts me, & I am firme in my faith that the Ld will prosper it, if I & they that are & may be ingaged, do not greeve him by an unworthy use of it.¹⁰⁴

This is Penn’s plea and prayer that Pennsylvania will live up to the standards that the Lord has placed upon its purpose. He feels specifically chosen by God to undertake this arduous yet blissful effort of building a prosperous society on the Lord’s behalf. God has planted His experiment and chosen Penn to fulfil the experience that will follow. Just as Penn knows through the experience of the inner light that God shines His favour upon him, he also knows through that same inner light of divine experience that Pennsylvania is his province to nurture. He confirms this by writing, ‘tis a cleer & just thing & my God that has given it me through many difficultys will I believe bless & make it the seed of a nation”¹⁰⁵

However, although it is clear that Penn himself believed Pennsylvania was to be regarded as an experience rather than a scientific endeavour, what evidence exists to support the idea that the Welsh also viewed settling the Welsh Tract as an experience rather than an experiment? It is most likely that the terms “experiment” or “experience” were never used by the Welsh Quakers when referring to their own tract. Moreover, if Illick is correct that Penn and the Welsh simply had different ideas about what the Welsh Tract was to look like, then how can it be certain that the Welsh also believed that Pennsylvania was to be an experience, and not an experiment in Welsh Quaker independence and segregation? However, the understanding that “experiment” likewise meant “experience” for the Welsh can be evidenced with reference to Penn’s own aligned beliefs with the Welsh, as fellow Quakers. John Ap

¹⁰³ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.106.

¹⁰⁴ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.106.

¹⁰⁵ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.83.

John, a prominent figure in the Welsh Quaker movement at the time, was a close disciple of George Fox. According to the Dictionary of Welsh Biography, John Ap John toured from Wrexham and undertook a journey

along the Marches to the south - to Monmouthshire and Glamorgan, where he was more than once thrown into prison. In 1657, accompanied this time by Fox, he made a similar tour to North Wales, proceeding by way of Carmarthen, Aberystwyth, Machynlleth, Dolgelley, and Caernarvon. In the course of these tours, and of others which followed, he slowly gained ground, especially in Monmouth, Montgomery, and Merioneth, and acquired disciples of some distinction.¹⁰⁶

Therefore, the Welsh Quaker movement was not a distinctive movement from the spread of Quakerism in England or elsewhere, and it is highly unlikely that there would have been such a dramatic separation in their understanding. John Ap John, accompanied by George Fox himself, proselytised a concurrent message of Quaker belief that knowledge of Christ was accessible through direct personal experience of the Divine, guided by tuning into the inner light within everyone.

One element that could point towards a more segregated view of the Welsh Tract as a Welsh Experiment, rather than a Quaker experience, was the desire for the Tract to be linguistically distinct. This hope partly explains why the BBC article claims it is a distinct and separate experimental attempt at relocating Wales elsewhere. A letter written to William Penn by the Welsh Tract Settlers in 1691 reads that,

Before we came from our Native Country we desired a tract of land from thee that we Might live together & help one another & keep our Language to hold correspondence] with them in our Native land wch Might be encouragemt from tyme to tyme to draw Many from thence here wch by thee was promised.¹⁰⁷

However, the desire to continue speaking Welsh was not an unusual request, nor was it an indication that the Welsh saw themselves as wanting to be segregated away. Instead, it was further evidence of their Quaker worldview being front and centre in their understanding of

¹⁰⁶ William Ambrose Bebb, 'John ap John (1625? - 1697), the apostle of the Quakers in Wales', Dictionary of Welsh Biography, 1959, <<https://biography.wales/article/s-JOHN-APJ-1625>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

¹⁰⁷ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.313.

Pennsylvania, as Boyd Stanley Schlenther writes in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* ‘In the absence of the necessity for religious leaders speaking Welsh, a Welsh Quaker could converse with the inner spirit in whatever language he chose.’¹⁰⁸ Moreover, because Quaker worship practices were conducted without any written texts, Schlenther notes that ‘absence of printed confessions, catechisms, or hymnbooks among Quakers clearly hindered the perpetuation of the Welsh language.’¹⁰⁹ The Welsh Tract’s main grievance with Penn was not about their apparent attempt at Welsh independence failing to materialise. Instead, it is clear their biggest complaint was much more logistical and practical than ideological. According to the Welsh, Penn had promised them an uninterrupted landmass in Pennsylvania, but because of numerous practical reasons, as already explored, this promise could not be kept, nor is it fair to assume that it must have been. The letter sent to William Penn in 1691 by the Welsh Tract settlers mainly focuses on complaints about land surveying and the encroachment by authorities in Chester County. Towards the second half of the letter, their main anger is directed towards the fact that, from a simple business transaction standpoint, they were not receiving what they paid for. They write

Governr we cannot but looke upon it hard being we have desired a Confirmation of the line this long tyme from thee & from tyme to tyme of thy Commissioners & have bin hindered to settle it, that we should loose our Land Legally surveyed out for us for not answering & paying the County Levyes to the people who have hindered us to settle it.¹¹⁰

The reason they believe this land encroachment happened to them specifically is not because of William Penn at all, as many secondary sources suggest, but instead because ‘we are a despiced people & doe suffer hard Censures.’¹¹¹ Penn’s slow and vague clarification and

¹⁰⁸ Boyd Stanley Schlenther, “‘The English is Swallowing up Their Language’: Welsh Ethnic Ambivalence in Colonial Pennsylvania and the Experience of David Evans” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History & Biography* Vol 114, No.2 (April 1990), pp.201-228, (p.203) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20092469>> [accessed 29 September 2025].

¹⁰⁹ Schlenther, “‘The English is Swallowing up Their Language’”, p.203.

¹¹⁰ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.314.

¹¹¹ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.314.

general shrinking power of his authority did not help, but they point towards a general mood of anti-Welsh sentiment far more pertinently at this point. A further story they relay to Penn concerns

Commissioner Robert Turner who told that they had more vexacion perplexity & trouble from us then from any people in the Country, & one of thy Commissioners said to an English man who Married a Welsh woman & lives a mongst us that we were a bad Cross people & Endeavoured to perswade him to Come away and not live amongst us, but the person answered he knew the welch better and that they were Cyvill honest people,¹¹²

This story highlights that the Welsh were clearly not driven above all other motivations to maintain a culturally distinct utopia in Pennsylvania, as they allowed the marriage of an English man to live among them. Once more, this is evidence of their Quaker practice, as their social guardrails were not intended for Welsh independence, but rather for spiritual purity and zeal. Further into the letter, they make their request to Penn clear.

we doe earnestly desire of thee for truths sake & for quietness sake that thou would be pleased to graunt us (according to thy promise) a Confirmation of the line that we may have all within it, & that we may be a Corporacion a part from all others out of any County, & to fall under the generall govermt , we shall be obleided to Maintayne a Councill man & assembly man of our owne Eleccion, & we shall further promise & engage that we shall not desire any helpe or assistance from any people in the province.¹¹³

Instead of the Welsh Tract being an experimental independent nation only to be thwarted by Penn's blind sanguinity and the breaking of his word, or his insistence on following the Charter provided by the King regarding how the province was legally permitted to function, or a misunderstanding of how Penn expected gratitude and cooperation, the Tract's most significant demand was for a contiguous plot of land. Within that plot designated for those who had purchased it together, they requested to operate as an individual county within the

¹¹² *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.314.

¹¹³ *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 2:, ed. by Richard and Mary Dunn, p.314.

framework of the Pennsylvania general government and elect their own representative to that political system.

This demand was not for the Welsh to view their emigration to North America as an experiment in the scientific sense, like Penn's live guinea pigs testing whether the supposed principles of pacifism, religious liberty, and toleration could succeed. Nor were they testing Welsh uniqueness to create a thriving Welsh utopia or an experimental colony of the old country they had left behind. As Frost notes, Penn's understanding of 'success or failure will depend not upon his clarity of vision but upon the providence of God and religious quality of those who migrate.'¹¹⁴ It was never destined that the Welsh settlers would definitively create a Welsh Quaker utopia, nor was it destined to fail. The Welsh Quakers were constantly vigilant and aware that the quality of their society as a holy people favoured by God depended equally on providence and communal attentiveness; hence, their strongest and most repeated request was for a contiguous landmass. They were not scientists, embarking on a resettlement to North America to test a theoretical hypothesis in positive Quaker or Welsh independent governance. Instead, they were inspired by the belief that God had predestined this settlement for them, and they would negotiate to secure the best possible deal, thereby maintaining the standard of society they believed God expected from them. As Frost continues,

Above all that Penn could say to persuade Friends to migrate to the new world was tell of his good will, emphasize the amount of land, describe a few features of the government, stress his belief in the Lord's underwriting of the enterprise, suggest coming only in obedience to God within, and challenge them to help create a radically different society.¹¹⁵

The Welsh clearly ascribed to Penn's understanding of Pennsylvania, as an experience of an outward manifestation of God's inner light, as 'prospective settlers had to emulate Penn in

¹¹⁴ Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness', p.584.

¹¹⁵ Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness', p.589.

seeking confirmation of the "holy experiment."'¹¹⁶ The Welsh had to accept Penn's view of the new colony, and in turn, Penn had to accept God's providence and 'not abase his love nor act unworthy of his Providence & so defile what came to me clean.'¹¹⁷ They believed that Pennsylvania's success or failure depended not on Penn's clear plans for a successful government, but on God's will. The events that were to unfold for the Welsh Quakers across the next ten years are regrettable only in hindsight, as when Penn provided the Welsh with their tract, 'Pennsylvania was presented not as a scientific investigation; it was an experience of worship and divine guidance, a meeting in the wilderness.'¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness', p.589.

¹¹⁷ Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness', p.583.

¹¹⁸ Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness', p.589.

Conclusion

William Penn then was, as David Hackett Fischer writes, a

bundle of paradoxes—an admiral's son who became a pacifist, an undergraduate at Oxford's Christ Church who became a pious Quaker, a member of Lincoln's Inn who became an advocate of arbitration, a Fellow of the Royal Society who despised pedantry, a man of property who devoted himself to the welfare of the poor, a polished courtier who preferred the plain style, a friend of kings who became a radical Whig, and an English gentleman who became one of Christianity's great spiritual leaders.¹¹⁹

Despite this characterisation of his whole life, his writings and letters from shortly after the King granted him his charter are clearly evident; Penn was fervently dedicated to transferring his experience of the Lord to North America. Therefore, examining the Welsh Tract by referencing Penn's lack of clarity of vision is not conducive to how Penn himself understood his ordained mission. Instead, by referring to his political and religious writings, as well as the specific language of the charter granted to him, a new framing of the Welsh Tract can be established. It can now be described as an experience like no other before it. An experience that inevitably led to misunderstanding, uncertainty, and a lack of knowledge about where God's providence would specifically guide Penn and his settlers. In many ways, this interpretation parallels the identity of a Quaker spiritual meeting, as Frost highlights by writing, 'in short, Pennsylvania was presented not as a scientific investigation; it was an experience of worship and divine guidance, a meeting in the wilderness.'¹²⁰ It is true that both William Penn and the settlers in the Welsh Tract were disappointed in how specifically the colony was to be managed. The Welsh lamented that Penn had not been decisive enough in upholding his promise concerning their contiguous land area, while Penn mourned the increasing evils within the province. As Murphy writes,

He was playing three roles simultaneously: proprietor, with an enormous amount of leeway to structure Pennsylvania as he saw fit; subject of the Crown, which retained veto power over

¹¹⁹ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p.456.

¹²⁰ Frost, 'William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness', p.589.

his laws and could withdraw his charter at any time; and businessman who needed investors, who in turn wanted practical guarantees of political stability.¹²¹

However, these are examinations that can only be observed and undertaken in hindsight of Pennsylvania's and the Welsh Tract's first decade. William Penn and the Welsh leaders of the Tract were undoubtedly initially united in their mission of cultivating the conditions for a Quaker experience in North America. Before Penn left for England for the first time, he wrote in his farewell letter the following:

And thou, Philadelphia, the virgin (settlement) of this province, named before thou wert born, wt love, wt care, wt service, and wt travail, have there been to bring thee forth & preserve thee from such as would (abuse) and defile thee. O that thou may be kept from the evil that would overwhelm thee; that, faithful to the god of thy mercies, in the life of righteousness thou mayst be preserved to the end. My soul prays to god for thee, that thou mayst stand in the day of trial, that thy children be blessed of the Lord.¹²²

Philadelphia, and by extension Pennsylvania, is a divine vision of a New Jerusalem. Penn never intended it to be upheld by abstract political ideas such as the toleration of religious freedom; it was sustainable through prayer. Pennsylvania and the Welsh tract were holy experiences, believed to be preserved not by Penn, his promises, or the Welsh Quaker's independent self-perception, but by God. It was blessed on Penn and the Welsh that God made room in North America, and no longer in England or Wales, for a holy experiment.

¹²¹ Murphy, *William Penn*, p.151.

¹²² Frost, "'Wear the Sword as Long as Thou Canst'" p.107.

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