William Penn (1644–1718)

Born to a wealthy Anglican family, William Penn was first attracted to Quakerism while a student at Oxford in the early 1660s. In the years following Oliver Cromwell’s death in 1658 and the restoration of the English monarchy under Charles II, the Quakers were considered suspect by both Puritans and monarchists for various reasons including their pacifism and refusal to swear loyalty oaths. By the latter part of that decade, Penn had become closely linked with the sect and had written a number of treatises in support of Quaker doctrines and religious freedom generally. Beginning in 1667, Penn was arrested and tried several times for various offenses related to his espousal of Quakerism. The following decade, Penn worked with a group of other prominent Quakers to establish a colony in New Jersey, and was instrumental in drafting a charter of liberties for the settlement. In settlement of a substantial debt owed to his father, Charles II granted to Penn an enormous tract of land in the colonies, designating him as “Proprietary and Governor” of the new province of Pennsylvania in 1681. Penn spent 1682–1684 in Pennsylvania, and returned for another visit in 1699, but failing health and legal issues pertaining to his financial affairs forced him to remain in England for the remainder of his life.

Penn is well known for the vision of democracy and religious tolerance he exhibited in documents such as Concessions to the Province of Pennsylvania (1681) and Charter of Libertie (1682), works that influenced the framers of the Constitution nearly one hundred years later. His Concessions to the Province of Pennsylvania, ratified by Penn and the members of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania on July 11, 1681, is notable not only for the foresight of this planning document but also for the way in which fair dealing with native peoples and responsible stewardship of the land are included among the guiding principles of the colony.
Concessions to the Province of Pennsylvania (1681)

CERTAIN CONDITIONS OR CONCESSIONS,

Agreed upon by William Penn, Proprietary and Governor of the Province of Pennsylvania and those who are the adventurers and purchasers in the same province the Eleventh of July, one thousand six hundred and eighty-one.

First. That so soon as it pleaseth God that the above said persons arrive there, a quantity of land or Ground plat shall be laid out for a large Town or City in the most convenient place upon the River for health and navigation; and every purchaser and adventurer shall by lot have so much land therein as will answer to the proportion which he hath bought or taken up upon rent. But it is to be noted that the surveyors shall consider what Roads or Highways will be necessary to the Cities, Towns, or through the lands. Great roads from City to City not to contain less than forty feet in breadth shall be first laid out and declared to be for highways before the Dividend of acres be laid out for the purchaser, and the like observation to be had for the streets in the Towns and Cities, that there may be convenient roads and streets preserved not to be encroached upon by any planter or builder that none may build irregularly to the damage of another. In this custom governs.

Secondly. That the land in the Town be laid out together after the proportion of ten thousand acres of the whole country, that is two hundred acres, if the place will bear it: However that the proportion be by lot and entire so as those that desire to be together, especially those that are by the catalogue laid together, may be so laid together both in the Town & Country.

Thirdly. That when the Country lots are laid out, every purchaser from one thousand to Ten thousand acres or more, not to have above One thousand acres together, unless in three years they plant a family upon every thousand acres; but that all such as purchase together, lie together; and if as many as comply with this Condition, that the whole be laid out together.

Fourthly. That where any number of purchasers, more or less, whose number of acres amounts to Five or ten thousand acres, desire to sit together in a lot or Township, they shall have their lot or Township cast together, in such places as have convenient Harbours or navigable rivers attending it, if such can be found, and in case any one or more Purchasers plant not according to agreement, in this concession to the prejudice of others of the same Township upon complaint thereof, made to the Governor or his deputy, with assistance they may award (if they see cause) that the complaining purchaser may, paying the survey money, and purchase money, and Interest thereof, be entitled, inrolled, and lawfully invested in the lands so not seated.