

## “To Apply Thy Best Endeavors”: The Political Influence of Hannah Penn

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### Abstract

*Hannah Callowhill Penn was the widow of Pennsylvania founder William Penn and became the executor of the Pennsylvania colonial proprietorship after his death in 1718. As executor from her husband's death until her own death in 1726, Penn held power during key years of Pennsylvania's development. However, scholarship on colonial Pennsylvania tends to neglect Penn, and she is discussed mainly by her proximity to either her husband, their sons, or the Penn family secretary, James Logan. Penn's role as executor is often downplayed under the assumption that her male colleagues made decisions in her name while she acted as a figurehead. In my research on Penn, I have analyzed primary documents from her years of executorship to properly situate Penn's policy interests within the historical context of Pennsylvania's status during her executorship.*

When William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, passed away in 1718, his will named his wife, Hannah, as the new colonial proprietor. As proprietor, Hannah Penn was responsible for the governance of Pennsylvania during a challenging time in the colony's political landscape. The most famous document from Hannah Penn's executorship of the Pennsylvania proprietary power is a 1724 letter from Penn to the Pennsylvania colonial lieutenant governor Sir William Keith. The letter was written in the midst of a rise in populist sentiment in Pennsylvania, and it communicates both a scorching rebuke of Keith's past conduct and Penn's expectations for his future governance. Penn's letter clearly aligns with the colonial proprietary faction's view on

financial and government matters. It also demonstrates the policy differences between Penn and William Penn. Penn's financial motivation for involvement in Pennsylvania made her a more natural figurehead for the proprietary supporters than William Penn was, since she stood to gain more income from advancing the policies of the landowning elite. Her directives in the 1724 letter to Keith served to increase the power of Pennsylvania landowners, often in direct contrast to William Penn's early and most egalitarian constitutions.

Since her husband was a poor administrator and somewhat idealistic, the task of managing household finances often fell to Penn (Hirsch, 1991). For example, in 1704, Penn corrected a £20 difference in the

family account books that Logan mistakenly included. By contrast, prior to his marriage to Hannah Penn, William Penn's financial manager, Philip Ford, defrauded the family of £14,000 before he was discovered (Drinker, 1958, pp. 23-26). Penn's financial administration only increased once she was responsible for the Penn family income from the colony. In 1724, she sent Logan a list of directions mostly related to money, primarily a plan for increasing the efficiency of rent collection (Drinker, 1991, p.163).

A contentious issue in the colony was the use of paper money, especially as Pennsylvania crept towards an economic crisis in the 1720s. Deflation had made metal coinage increasingly scarce, which caused all but the richest Pennsylvanians to call for paper money. The Council, whose population skewed towards wealth and conservatism, was loathe to issue currency. Additionally, many Pennsylvanians were angered by their quitrents (fixed rent), which they owed to Hannah Penn as the beneficiary of the proprietorship (Wendel, 1968). Although the Assembly had voted against a paper money measure in 1722, they bowed to public opinion, and to Keith's charismatic political influence, by approving the printing of £15,000 in 1723 and an additional £30,000—more than \$8 million today—in 1724 (Smolenski, 2012, p. 255). Eventually, Penn relented on the issue of paper money, writing that although “the manner of passing them has given us reason to be dissatisfied,” that after, “a mature deliberation we have resolved to suffer the passing them” (Drinker, 1958, p.159).

The increasing gulf between the elite and the non-elite in Pennsylvania was a crisis for the proprietorship's public image. Wealthy Pennsylvanians were more likely to be Quakers, and they overwhelmingly supported the rights of the proprietorship and the Council (Wendel, 1968). In contrast, ordinary farmers and tradespeople

increasingly saw the proprietorship as out of touch. Their disillusionment with the colonial government allowed Keith to take on the role of populist hero. He began to disregard Penn and her allies, claiming a copper mine that belonged to the proprietary power and failing to send Pennsylvania laws to Penn for approval (Hirsch, 1991). The greeting of her 1724 letter suggests that Keith “consider, whether much of thy late conduct, together with so apparent a neglect of us, might not give us too much reason to doubt whether thou didst look upon thy self to be any longer accountable to us” (Drinker, 1958, p.155).

Keith's silence towards Penn increased the urgency of another main point of tension—a longstanding power struggle between the elite upper legislative house, the Provincial Council, and the more populist lower legislative house, the General Assembly. The Council, while elected, served as a part of the executive power and worked closely with the lieutenant governor. Different iterations of William Penn's constitutions show the development of populist ideology in Pennsylvania. His original constitution emphasized Assembly power, with the Council serving a cabinet-like role to the lieutenant governor (Penn, 1896). The 1682 and 1683 constitutions, however, give the Council and lieutenant governor the sole right to introduce legislation to the Assembly (The Avalon Project, 2008a, 2008b). In their studies of Quaker government in colonial Pennsylvania, Gary Nash and John Smolenski concur that William Penn increased Council power at the urging of his investors, who were likely to sit in the upper elected house and preferred for political power to be concentrated in their own class (Nash, 1993; Smolenski, 2012). The 1696 constitution seems to have been an attempt to mollify increasingly disgruntled non-elites. It allowed proposals of legislation to come from the Assembly or the Council, although

the Council clearly retained its higher position and executive power (The Avalon Project, 2008c).

In her 1724 letter, Penn strictly upholds the veto power of the non-populist Provincial Council, where her husband preferred it to serve an advisory role. She instructs that incoming Council members must be approved by the current membership and that at least half should be Quakers, “as the country was principally settled by those of our profession” (Drinker, 1958, p.156). She also requires that Keith receive Council permission for every communication to the Assembly and every potential law (Penn, 1724).

### **Conclusion**

As proprietors, William and Hannah Penn had separate visions for Pennsylvania that prioritized financial gain and political equality differently, which led to different relationships with Pennsylvania’s elite. Hannah Penn’s primary interest in Pennsylvania was financial, which caused her to oppose early colonial populism. Analyzing Penn’s goals in her political involvement in Pennsylvania lends context to the clash between elites and populists in colonial government throughout the 1720s and increases understanding of Pennsylvania’s historical emphasis on political equality.

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