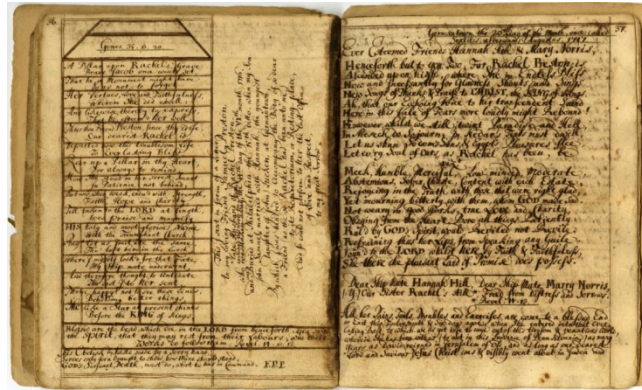


Forgotten Fathers: William Penn, German Anabaptists and Liberty in Colonial Pennsylvania

By: Brian Sando



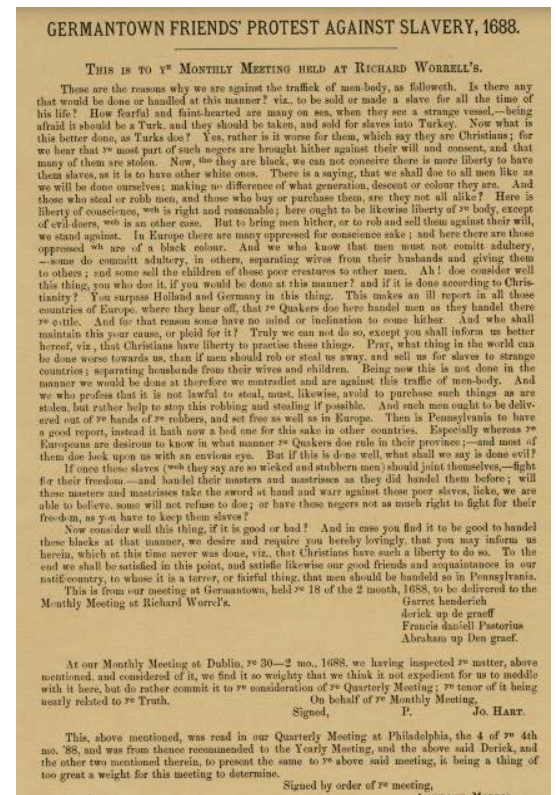
The journal of Francis Daniel Pastorius. From [The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Francis Daniel Pastorius papers \[0475\]](#).

The man walked up to the stone house and before entering its sturdy doorframe he checked his coat pocket to ensure he had the “Paper”. The wide avenue was lined with peach trees whose leaves swayed gently in the early April breeze, and the man looked fondly at the homes the settlers of Germantown had toiled for five years previous. The people had swarmed like bees at the hive about the wilderness...chopping logs, planting gardens, and carving out a new life on the frontier of North America. He was of average height and build with thin face, contemplating bright blue eyes, the nose jutting and beak-like; his full locks of hair were pulled back in a ponytail. The year was 1688 and the piece of paper the man carried was the first petition against slavery in the North American colonies. Born in 1651, in Germany, he was Francis Daniel Pastorius, an immigrant lawyer who had arrived in Pennsylvania in 1683 to greet

Europeans to the colony. On this fine spring morning he entered the stone house to discuss the antislavery message to a meeting of Quakers and Mennonites.

Packed into the tiny parlor of the house were a group of settlers eager to hear any developments Pastorius might bring. The people represented an eclectic mix of nationalities and faiths symbolizing the melting pot that was seventeenth century Pennsylvania: English, German, Dutch, Swiss of Quaker and Mennonite persuasion. They were unified by the ideals of separation of church and state as well as pacifist nonresistance to verbal and physical aggression. At the head of the meeting sat a fine oak table seated by Quaker leaders. Pastorius stood off to the side of the table to address the assembly. He spoke of the evil of slavery, quoting from the document: “These are the reasons we are against the traffik of men-body. Is there any that would be done or handled at this manner;? To be sold or made a slave for all the time of his life”? When the time came for a vote on approving the petition or striking it down, Pastorius stepped aside and allowed the Quaker elders to hold the referendum. The protest passed but the elders decided acting upon the charter would be “of too great weight”. The meeting adjourned having resolved to send the document on to Pennsylvania’s founder and proprietor, William Penn.

William Penn – portly, with brown eyes and ruddy complexion – faced a moral conundrum. He had received the Germantown protest against slavery and he saw at once the ideological conflict it represented; the turmoil between freedom and tyranny coursed like a



Detail from the 1688 Germantown Friends' Protest against Slavery. From The Historical Society of Pennsylvania call number: Ab n.d.-149.

swollen river through Penn's own life. He came into the world in 1644, found the Quaker faith and had been imprisoned in the Tower of London for preaching in public. In repayment for loyalty displayed to the British Crown by his father, an admiral, Penn received the New World lands which would become Pennsylvania in place of his deceased parent. He and his friend Pastorius had welcomed the religiously persecuted to Pennsylvania with open arms. His contemporary in England, John Locke, had been arguing that "Nobody have any just Title to



*Detail from an undated pastel portrait of William Penn by Francis Place.
From [The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Treasures Collection](#).*

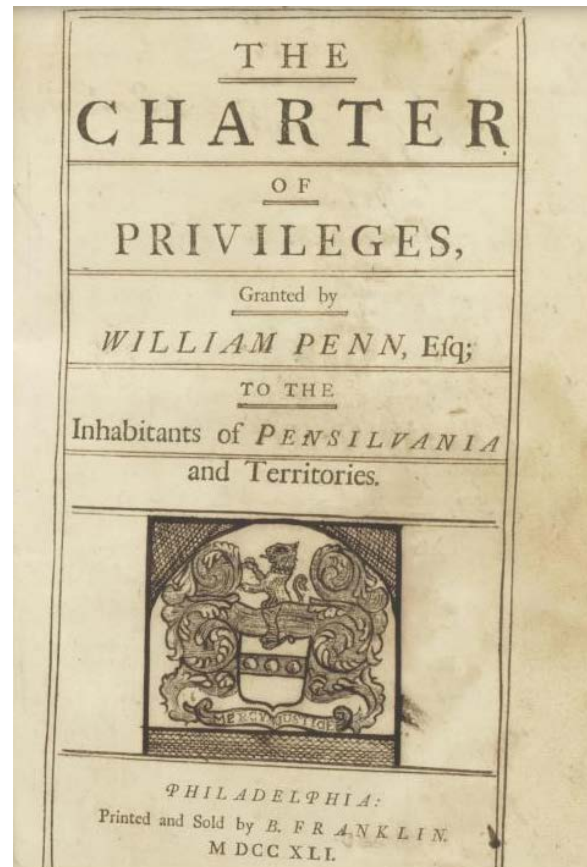
invade the Civil Rights of each other upon pretence of Religion".

This was the Enlightenment age, and Locke's civil rights included life, liberty, and property. How (Penn must have inquired) could his colony, founded upon freedom of conscience and peaceful coexistence among various ethnicities, continue to deny these

rights to slaves? Had the Lord not "made from one blood the whole

human race to dwell upon the entire surface of the earth"? If Penn glanced out of the window to his study at Pennsbury, the home he had built northeast of Philadelphia, he could see the slavery dilemma firsthand: the grounds were worked by blacks Penn had described as "able planters". The slavery question was not easily resolved as it was a fundamental issue between property rights and individual liberty. The decision to amend the burdens of slavery came in the form of

the Free Society of Traders established in colonial Pennsylvania. If planters or merchants decided to own slaves they were encouraged to free them after a term of fourteen years. Through this organization, almost a century before Jefferson would write “all Men are created equal,” Penn created a pathway to freedom for blacks in pre-Revolutionary America. For all the emphasis placed on the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*, much of the philosophical groundwork for the nation the United States would become was laid in Penn’s day. Take the *Pennsylvania Charter of Privileges*, from 1701 (ninety years before the *Bill of Rights* established freedom of religion in America): “no Person or Persons who shall confess and acknowledge One almighty God, the Creator, and profess him or themselves obliged to live quietly under the Civil Government shall be in any case molested or prejudiced in his or their Person or Estate because of his or their conscientious Persuasion or Practice.” The toleration for differing religious and political affiliations among the people defined by Penn created a liberal tradition we enjoy to this day. No doubt Penn was influenced by the plight of German Anabaptists pouring into his colony from persecution in Europe.



Detail from the 1701 frontpiece of Charter of privileges, granted by William Penn, esq.: to the inhabitants of Pensilvania and territories. From [The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in The Library Company of Philadelphia](#) [Ap].

Who were the Anabaptists? What did they believe? Their movement grew out of the Protestant Reformation begun in Germany by Martin Luther's protests against the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences. The first Anabaptists "re-baptized" themselves as adults, in protest of the infantile baptism practiced by Catholicism. In essence, adult baptism was a display of the



A 1937 photograph of Pastorius' house on 25th High Street in Germantown, Pennsylvania. From the [Philadelphia Department of Public Transit historic Philadelphia sites photograph collection \[V51\]](#), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

freedom of conscience
Locke and Penn would
write about in the 1600s.
Here were the
Anabaptists establishing
by their own persuasion
the right to choose how
they would worship God,
more than a century
before Locke or Penn
were born. They also

asserted the idea of a people's right to challenge established authority, as the Church was a central part of government in Europe during the sixteenth century. As one can imagine, the Catholic authorities viewed the Anabaptists with hostility and many became the kindling for the fires of oppression. The movement spread, however, through Germany, Holland and the Swiss cantons. Continued repression led Anabaptist groups such as the Amish, German Baptist Brethren, and Mennonites to seek religious freedom in North America over the course of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. These people brought the aforesaid ideals of freedom of conscience and the civil right to resist authority to British America. One of these

groups, the Mennonites, was among those present at the Germantown protest of 1688 against slavery in Penn's Philadelphia. Jesus's teachings in the *New Testament* held the most weight with Anabaptists, and to "love thy neighbor" meant opposition to slaveholding.

Francis Daniel Pastorius, William Penn, and the Anabaptists are America's **Forgotten Fathers**. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison all made vital and everlasting contributions to our country, but we must remember that our Founders needed an ideological bedrock to build upon; the people of colonial Pennsylvania provided the framework. Their political ideas are reflected in our *Constitution* by the First Amendment right to "free exercise of religion," mirroring the toleration and freedom of conscience in Pennsylvania. The pacifism and coexistence of English Quakers with German, Dutch and Swiss Mennonites surely guided Washington's sentiments about United States relations with the world; look no further than our first president's 1796 *Farewell Address*: "Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest". Acceptance of various religious and political groups, and the upholding of a person's liberty to join any one of them, descends to us from Penn's vision. It is no coincidence that our Founders gathered in Penn's Philadelphia to declare separation from Britain and, later, form a government under the *Constitution*.

Pastorius would die in 1720, but the legacy of the slavery protest would inspire abolitionists in the nineteenth century. Penn passed on in 1718 having built a colony which would become one of the most populous and important states, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The Anabaptists continue to exist, albeit on the fringes of American society.

About the Author: Brian Sando was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1986. Educated at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, his passion for American history led to the study of Philadelphia and the Founders who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution there. Digging deeper, he discovered William Penn and his establishment of a religiously tolerant society for people who had been persecuted in Europe. Brian's fascination with the Civil War and slavery stoked his interest in the early abolitionist Francis Daniel Pastorius and the Germantown Friends antislavery protest of 1688. He wishes to acknowledge The Historical Society of Pennsylvania for their support and the use of their archival materials.

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Images

- The journal of Francis Daniel Pastorius. From the Francis Daniel Pastorius papers [0475], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
- Detail from the 1701 frontpiece of *Charter of privileges, granted by William Penn, esq.: to the inhabitants of Pensilvania and territories*. From The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in The Library Company of Philadelphia [Ap].

- A 1937 photograph of Pastorius' house on 25th High Street in Germantown, Pennsylvania. The Philadelphia Department of Public Transit historic Philadelphia sites photograph collection [V51], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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