

# William Penn's "Holy Experiment" (1681)

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*Like Maryland, Pennsylvania also was a proprietary colony. In 1681, the English King Charles II granted a vast tract of land north of Maryland to William Penn in repayment of a loan that Penn's father had made to the Crown. Like Calvert, Penn hoped to make his colony a religious refuge. For Penn, this meant establishing a safe haven especially for members of his group—the Religious Society of Friends, known as Quakers. Quakers in England were unpopular because of their pacifism: they refused to fight in wars. Although Penn was a Quaker, he wanted his colony to be a model of justice and peace for any group that believed in God. He called Pennsylvania his "Holy Experiment." In the first document (A), Penn is writing in 1681 to those European colonists already living in the region, telling them what he plans to do.*

*Unlike other proprietors, Penn made treaties with Native Americans, buying their lands rather than just taking them. The painting (B) by Benjamin West (an American painter who lived most of his life in London, England), was created 100 years after the scene it shows. In the picture, Penn and Chief Tamanend of the Lenni Lenape (the Delawares) are agreeing in 1682 to the terms of the Treaty of Shackamaxon. They are meeting under what became known as the Treaty Elm at Shackamaxon, an area that is today part of Philadelphia.*

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## **A. William Penn's Letter to the Colonists of Pennsylvania, April 8, 1681**

... I hope you will not be troubled at your change and the king's choice. You are not at the mercy of a governor that comes to make his fortune great. You will be governed by laws of your own making, and live as a free, and, if you will, serious and industrious people. I will not take the rights of any, or oppress his person. In short, whatever serious and reasonable men can reasonably desire for the security and improvement of their own happiness, I shall heartily agree to.

## B. William Penn Signing the Treaty With the Leni Lenape, by Benjamin West



Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr. Collection)

### Review Questions

1. For what religious group did William Penn set up the colony of Pennsylvania?
2. (a) How did William Penn attempt to reassure the colonists already living in Pennsylvania? (b) Why did he do this?
3. How does the painting illustrate the relationship between William Penn and the Native Americans living in Pennsylvania?
4. By looking at the painting, what cultural differences can you see between the colonists and the Native Americans?