As we celebrate William Penn's 350th birthday, let us reflect that the venerable Quaker probably would not have appreciated the way we turned out—or the way we remember him.
In commemorating William Penn’s 350th birthday, perhaps we should pause to ask whether he would approve of such homage. Penn’s writings rebuked those who took pride in family, money, intellectual, or worldly achievement. As an adult he never had his portrait painted. Modest even in death, Penn was buried in an unmarked grave in the Jordan’s Meeting House cemetery. (Early Friends did not believe in honoring the dead with gravestones.) The present-day historic marker says only that Penn, his wife, and several other prominent Friends are buried in the general vicinity.

Yet we celebrate Penn today for his intellectual acuity and worldly achievement. Part of our fascination with Penn is the contrast between the unworlthy Quaker and the clever courtier, the defender of liberties and colonial lord proprietor, the creator of a successful colony and the failed businessman who spent time in debtor’s prison. Which Penn and what accomplishments did and does the monument on City Hall portray?

He would have had little sympathy for a celebration of Pennsylvania’s wealth, power, or fame, though he would have rejoiced to have his name associated with a place where the people sought to follow the will of God and to dwell together in love and peace. Penn argued that how well the new land turned out would determine whether he and Quakers should be remembered; but before his death Penn was bitterly disappointed in his fellow Pennsylvanians. So as we celebrate his legacy, let us reflect that Penn probably would not have liked the way we turned out.

When he received the colony’s charter, Penn saw the opportunity as a gift from God and a responsibility. His Frame of Government enshrined political liberty, but Penn prayed that it would be a liberty to do good. His desire was that his heirs and Friends would rule with wisdom, yet his commitment to rule by consent of all rather than by the virtuous caused him to design a political system in which Quakers’ and non-Quakers’ votes counted equally. He was well aware of the risks of resting goodness on charters, laws, electoral success, and votes in an assembly, but he was too strong a Whig believer in entrusting responsibility to representatives of the people to do otherwise.

His great hopes for the colony were symbolized by his name for the capital city, Philadelphia. Contemporary commentators who stress the Greek derivation of brotherly love forget or are ignorant of the biblical connotation that Penn and his contemporaries knew well. Philadelphia in the biblical book of Revelation is the city where people do God’s will. Penn named his town at a time when he saw the new land as a unique achievement: a historical city in which the goodness of the inhabitants might fulfill biblical prophecy and usher in the rule of Christ on Earth.

If the prophetic Penn remembered for No Cross, No Crown excoriates us for shortcomings, remember there is another side to Penn: the rationalist-moralist who lived plainly but according to his rank in society. This Penn recognized that people did not come to Pennsylvania to beggar themselves. He rejoiced in the economic opportunity that the new colony offered and celebrated its capacity to produce the ingredients for good beer and wine.

Penn saw his colony as a gift from God. His Frame of Government promised political and religious liberty, and he prayed that it would be a liberty to do good.

The publicity Penn issued for the new land did not promise prospective settlers wealth; but it did imply that hard work would provide a good living.

Penn’s legacy survives today in many forms. Those of us who live or work in Philadelphia encounter the outward physical legacy every day: the name of the province and its major city; the general layout of the city in a grid system with parks, streets named after trees, and a massive center square (although the Quaker meetinghouse he envisaged there has been replaced by City Hall). There is an enjoyable provincial celebration of William Penn that comes just from living and working in this city, looking up at the Calder statue, and reveling in the architectural beauty of Georgian houses and the State-house, the latter building used by a legislature operating under the Frame of Government granted by Penn.

Penn definitely recast Quaker history by providing an area for Friends to govern. Developing from an obscure minority in England to an imposing force in Pennsylvania, Quakers dominated the Pennsylvania Assembly from 1682 until the American Revolutionary War. It is as natural to talk about Quaker Philadelphia as Puritan Boston, although Quakers became a minority in the city by 1710 and Roman Catholics became a majority in both cities long before the Civil War.

Penn bestowed four legacies on Quakers—and, I would argue, on all who participate in any faith community. First, he showed that there was no innate incompatibility between being a devout Christian and exercising political power. He condemned as unprofitable and cowardly a faith that enclosed itself in four walls in isolation from the problems of the world. “True godliness,” wrote Penn, “does not turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it.” Penn’s political activity grew out of his religious commitments. However, he did not exercise political power to make men and women religious—that was God’s responsibility—but to provide the faithful a place of freedom and refuge.

Second, Penn proved to Quakers that accepting diversity in religious faith need not lead to apathy about...
one's own religious commitment. Undergirding this frenetically busy man, and key to his success, was Penn's contention that he had experienced God. He prayed, read the Bible, attended meetings, preached, wrote theology, lobbied the Crown and Parliament in favor of the civil rights of Quakers and other dissenters, including Roman Catholics. He debated men of opposing faith and wrote tracts refuting their ideas. He was a devout Quaker, yet he worked closely in England with the dissolute Earl of Rochester, the Roman Catholic James II, and worldly courtiers surrounding the courts of the Stuarts.

Third, the toleration of differences learned in England influenced his treatment of the Native Americans and became a testimony of Friends everywhere in the United States. The only 17th-century Englishmen who seemed to escape Eurocentricity enough to appreciate American Indian culture on its own terms were Roger Williams and William Penn. Of course, since Pennsylvania had no militia and was neither prepared nor willing to fight, it made good sense to be conciliatory. The Indians appreciated Penn and used his memory to tell the colonists of the heritage of good relations and perhaps to remind Penn's sons and later Pennsylvania authorities of the conduct of the first proprietor.

In 1720 the Indians informed Lt. Gov. William Keith that Penn at his first council had promised "so much Love and Friendship, that he would not call them Brothers, because Brothers might differ; nor Children, because they might offend and require Correction; but he would reckon them as one Body, one Blood, one Heart, and one Head." I can imagine no other British colonist saying that to Native Americans. (In fact, I can imagine few upper-class Americans today able to say to a ghetto dweller that they would "reckon them as one Body, one Blood, one Heart, and one Head.")

So Penn gave to the Quakers a desire to respect minorities. In the 1750s Friends became defenders of two minorities: the American Indians and the black slaves. Penn's actions provided the historical precedent for later Quakers to support minorities.

Penn's final contribution to Quakers was his confidence that education and learning fostered religion. He did this by example, reading and quoting from the church fathers; by deeds, including provision for education in the first laws and granting land and a charter for the school that now bears his name [the William Penn Charter School]; and by argument, demonstrating in numerous tracts that appeals made with reason and intelligence could be persuasive. Penn was not afraid of erudition.

Perhaps the greatest monuments to Penn's legacy, one enjoyed by all Americans, are close by the Arch Street Meeting. Within a half mile, there are Anglican, Methodist, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches and a Jewish synagogue. If you journey north to Bethlehem, there are the places of worship of Moravians. To the west, in Lancaster County, there is the Ephrata cloister and dwellings of the Amish and Mennonites. In the England of Penn's youth, and at the time he received the charter for Pennsylvania, only worship in the Church of England was legal. All unauthorized worship was illegal, and everyone paid a tithe or tax to the established church.

Nearly one hundred years later, in 1776, Pennsylvania was the only place in the British Empire where Catholics legally could worship openly in churches they owned. Massachusetts and Virginia maintained established churches and harassed dissenters until 1776. Pennsylvania's tourism slogan should proclaim not that America starts here—that's nonsense, a triumph of public relations over historical honesty—but that religious liberty starts here:

Penn's quest for freedom of conscience began early. When as a young man he became a Quaker, he defied the social expectations for men of his class and encountered the wrath of his father. His father, England's greatest 17th-century naval hero, was outraged by his son's conversion to an outlandish sect. (As poet Daniel Hoffman has noted, William Penn's joining the Religious Society of Friends would be comparable to David Eisenhower becoming a Hare Krishna.)

Penn knew that coercion by his father had not worked. He watched his fellow Quakers suffer imprisonment rather than allow the state to determine acceptable worship. When in the Tower of London on suspicion of heresy, he wrote that a person who went to a shop was interested in the quality of the goods for sale and the price, not the religion of the shopkeeper. What was true for business applied to the wider society. Government originated in a social contract that guaranteed rights to all citizens. Differences in religion did not, therefore, weaken the bounds of society...
You can’t dismiss William Penn as “just another colonialist,” says Rebecca Smith ’96, who organized a McCabe Library exhibit.

Talk about history—junior Rebecca Smith is the 17th member of her family to attend Swarthmore, including her father, Corey Smith ’65. It seemed almost inevitable for this lifelong Quaker to take a campus job in the Friends Historical Library, where she has worked for three years. This winter, in commemoration of William Penn’s 350th birthday, Smith did something few students are asked to do—organize a historical exhibit on William Penn in McCabe Library.

In doing so she learned a lot about how interpretations of history change and how figures like Penn can be both revered and reviled. “A lot of students today dismiss Penn as just another colonialist,” explains Smith, a double major in French and Latin. “While there’s some usefulness to this, you’ve got to step back and consider what a monumental thing he was doing. I tried to show this in the exhibit.”

The display consisted of dozens of books, artifacts, and artworks depicting Penn’s life, legend, and influence today. Included were a Penn letter from 1708 and a wooden relic of Penn’s Philadelphia home, both from the collection of the Friends Historical Library. With explanatory notes written by Smith, the exhibit followed Penn the Quaker, colonist, and historical figure from the 17th century to the 1990s.

In one glass case, a portrait of King Charles II sparked Smith to wonder why the English Crown “bestowed upon [this] rebellious nonconformist ... the most valuable land grant ever given to a private individual.” She speculates that “perhaps Charles wanted to get the troublesome Quakers out of the country, or perhaps he wished to excuse himself gracefully from his $16,000 debt to the Penn family.”

The view of Penn as a humane colonist who made peace with Native Americans—a view enshrined in paintings by Benjamin West and Edward Hicks—has contributed as much to myth as to history. Yet today in the postcolonial era, Smith’s commentary challenges what she calls “the politically correct interpretation” of his life: “Though in a modern view Penn’s attitude regarding Native Americans seems narrow-minded and hypocritical, for his time Penn was uncommonly open-minded,” she wrote. “Adhering to the Quaker belief that there is that of God in everyone, Penn saw the Native Americans as his equals under God....”

She concludes that “when Penn considered all sides of the issue, the injustice of colonization seems not to have so greatly weighed on his conscience as to make him reconsider his project. This seeming hypocrisy must neither be dismissed nor condemned, but rather thoughtfully examined as a progressive perspective limited less by the failings of the individual than by the narrow viewpoint of the era.... We must not judge him by our modern viewpoint without first taking into account the advances in anthropological understanding over the last centuries that have shaped the modern conscience.”

As for Penn the icon—especially the cherubic Quaker Oats Penn—Smith has to laugh. “He’s been used and abused. It’s inevitable, but people also need to see him for the intellectual contributions he made, for his contributions to our political and religious liberties. The icons just show how widespread his influence has been.”

—Jeffrey Lott
Defending liberty of conscience for all Englishmen and Englishwomen, Penn insisted that religious intolerance weakened the realm because it resulted in the persecution of good people who by their talents contributed to the common good.

The first Frame of Government for Pennsylvania insisted that women and men had the right to worship freely and could not be required by government to support any or all religions financially. So there would be no established church, no tithe, and no church courts here. There was no law against blasphemy and none against heresy. Ministers of the gospel had no special status under Pennsylvania law. Penn insisted that all worship consistent with good order be allowed. He divorced moral legislation from religious belief, arguing that the postulates of natural law established right and wrong. The churches might insist that the Ten Commandments were matters of revelation; however, the state based its outlawing of murder, adultery, and theft on reason and natural law.

Yet while the state left religion alone, Penn's colony encouraged religious practices because churches instilled the morality necessary for civilized life. Penn subscribed to the belief that a dissolute people could not be free: "Let men be good and the government cannot be bad: If it be ill, they will cure it. But if men be bad, let the government be never so good, they will endeavor to warp and spoil it to their turn." A church could not expect help from the state in enforcing matters of dogma, but religious organizations remained free to address the Assembly on subjects of morality, like gambling or dueling or slavery.

This pattern became an essential ingredient in the American tradition of church and state. We can debate prohibition, abortion, lotteries, and other moral issues knowing that religious passions influence our decision but that the state will not base legislation on our religious beliefs. That's what separation of church and state means.

There is one final topic: How did Penn get to be a monument, a hero for all Americans? Except by those who thought he was a Jesuit, he was recognized as an extraordinary man in England during his lifetime. The first accounts of him, written by contemporaries who did not share his faith, stressed his accomplishments in Pennsylvania and the making of peace with the Native Americans. In 1722, when Joseph Besse published the collected works of William Penn, he included a 235-page introduction filled with letters and testimonials, but he devoted only four pages to Pennsylvania, an indication of how important Pennsylvania was to the English! Besse also printed Penn's initial letter to the Indians, commented upon the resulting peace, and discussed religious freedom.

The first pictorial representation of Penn and the American Indians was issued in England in 1771. When Voltaire visited England, he stayed with a Quaker family. In 1733 he wrote a description of Pennsylvania that rhapsodized about Penn's unsworn but observed treaty with the Indians. Voltaire set the tone for a whole series of favorable comments on Pennsylvania by French intellectuals who contrasted the colony's religious freedom, peace, and prosperity with their own country, which was wallowing in decadence caused by a corrupt king, parasitic aristocrats, and a superstitious Roman Catholic Church. During the
French Revolution, the radicals claimed that they were creating a new state based upon the principles of William Penn.

In Pennsylvania two groups used Penn's image for political purposes. The sons of William Penn owed their power to their father's accomplishments. Proprietary governors claimed that the colony derived its peace and prosperity from the principles established by Penn. On the eve of the revolution (and after Benjamin Franklin's... 

No one considered whether it was incongruous to have a plain Friend enshrined with a 60,000 pound statue atop just the kind of pretentious building he would have hated.

Private group of wealthy Quakers, issued medals and a gorget with a picture of Penn offering a peace pipe to Native Americans. These medals may have been given to the Indians in an effort to create good will. In treaty negotiations with the proprietary and later the United States government as late as 1780, Indians cited the good relations established by Penn and their desire to re-establish peace.

All these positive connotations ended with the American Revolution. The Quakers opposed the Revolution because they were pacifists. The patriots, who could not win an election under the proprietary charter in May 1776, subverted Pennsylvania's government and created a new state constitution. With the reputation of William Penn in eclipse, he was never even mentioned in the ensuing debates on the Federal Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Quakers emerged from the Revolutionary era stripped of political power but with a reputation for good works. They would preserve the memory of Penn as the founder of a colony and a man of faith. Penn would re-emerge as a defender of religious freedom in the election of 1800. At issue were Thomas Jefferson's religious beliefs. The Federalist clergy of New England charged that Jefferson was a deist and an enemy of religion. The Democratic-Republicans identified the policies of Thomas Jefferson on church and state with those of William Penn. Both Jefferson and Penn stood for religious liberty and were, therefore, attacked by priestly authorities. Penn now stood forth as a Jeffersonian hero. 

Penn received additional kudos from the search by Americans in the 1830s for national heroes. Virginia had George Washington and Patrick Henry; Massachusetts had Sam and John Adams. Pennsylvania trumpeted the genius of Benjamin Franklin and the political and religious freedom established by William Penn. Parson Weams, well known for his fictional biography of George Washington, wrote an equally adulatory and inaccurate account of Penn. In a nation searching for national heroes, Penn was a natural. By mid-century West's image of Penn and the Indians became a decorative motif on tablecloths and china. And in 1877 a cherubic Penn...