

The Charter to William Penn This Venerable Document

by Linda A. Ries and Jane Smith Stewart
from the Winter 2000 issue of [Pennsylvania Heritage](#)® magazine



The 1681 Charter prior to conservation.

The famous patient in Harrisburg needed treatment immediately. Dismembered, suffering gaping wounds, and literally growing weaker day by day, the situation was critical. The Pennsylvania State Police provided special escorts to and from Philadelphia to ensure safe transport.

Once there, in the city this patient helped create, trained technicians administered highly effective restorative processes. After enduring for more than three hundred perilous years of wear and tear and wholesale neglect, the prognosis now appears excellent.

Pennsylvania's seventeenth-century Charter truly is a survivor. On March 4, 1681, William Penn (1644-1718) received his Charter from Great Britain's King Charles II for the land that ultimately became Pennsylvania. Because it marks the formal beginnings of the Commonwealth, the Charter is sometimes described as Pennsylvania's "birth certificate."

It enabled Penn to create a system of government without royal intervention, and also entitled him to more than sixteen million acres in the New World. The government created by Penn reflects some of the earliest conscious attempts at modern democracy.

His plan, grounded in Quaker philosophy, established such principles as representative government, separation of church and state, and the elimination of nobility and ranks. It stressed self-rule and peaceful coexistence among peoples of differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Nearly one hundred years later these ideals were adopted as fundamental, or "inalienable," rights with the establishment of the national government.

The legal precedent for these principles can be traced to

Penn's Charter. Thomas Jefferson hailed Penn as "the greatest law giver the world has produced." Although contemporary editions of this remarkable document do exist, the ornamental version owned by the citizens of Pennsylvania and safeguarded for them at the [Pennsylvania State Archives](#) in Harrisburg was Penn's personal copy, and is considered the "official" version. And its history and recent conservation are intertwined with the very story of Pennsylvania itself.



Shield motif from page one of the Charter.

The founder's father, Admiral Sir William Penn (1621-1670), had won crucial naval victories for the Crown during England's wars with the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century.

Having just recovered from its own civil war that had resulted in the beheading of Charles I in 1649 and the subsequent rule of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, England had few funds with which to fight. The admiral used his own personal wealth “for victualling of the Navy,” at the cost of about sixteen thousand pounds. At the admiral’s death, the matter of the debt remained unsettled.

The younger Penn, who had joined the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, three years before his father’s death, petitioned King Charles II in May 1680 with a plan: He would forgive the Crown its debt to the Penn family in return for land in the New World. On this land he would establish a colony for Quakers and persecuted religious groups.

The impecunious Charles agreed—he had much land to offer in America along the Mid-Atlantic coast, in the territory recently acquired from the Dutch as spoils of war.

The king referred Penn’s request to the Lords of Trade and Plantations, a committee of his Privy Council responsible for managing the Crown’s colonial commerce. William Penn would be a relative latecomer on the eastern coast of the New World. He received the largest piece of remaining unsettled acreage (by European reckoning), the land west of the Delaware River, south of the colony of New York, and north of Maryland. For several months the Lords of Trade and Plantations worked out the details, consulting periodically with Penn and appropriate crown officials such as Lord Baltimore, the proprietor of Maryland, and James, Duke of York, who administered the peninsula between the Delaware Bay and the Chesapeake Bay, also newly won from the Dutch.



King Charles signing the Charter of Pennsylvania, 1681, mural, Governor’s Reception Room, State Capitol, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, by Violet Oakley.

A draft of Penn’s Charter was presented to King Charles II on February 25, 1681. He approved it, insisting the new colony be named

Pennsylvania to honor Penn’s father. The younger Penn had wanted to call it “New Wales” or simply “Sylvania,” a Latin word for forest, but the Crown prevailed.

A final version was executed on parchment, as were most British charters, and the text written in engrossed, or oversized, calligraphy by royal clerks. Such important records were created on parchment, which is the hide of an animal—usually a goat, sheep, pig, or cow.

A hide would be scraped, treated with lime, stretched and dried, then cut to appropriate shapes, usually rectangular for writing purposes. Inks were made of iron gall, a ground assortment of chemicals primarily consisting of iron filings and pulverized galls, a leaf tumor created by wasps when laying eggs. Pennsylvania’s Charter is probably on sheepskin, and its text written with iron gall ink, factors which must be taken into account to understand the phases of its deterioration.

Great Britain’s charters bore the likenesses of monarchs on the first page in the upper left corner, embellished with pre-printed borders on each page symbolizing the shields of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and France (an archaic reference to England’s wars with France centuries earlier). Royal scribes carefully produced the calligraphy on red lines drawn across the pages.

The text of the king's message to Penn required four pages. On March 4, 1681, the Lord Chancellor, custodian of the Great Seal of England, authorized its placement upon Penn's Charter. Hence, this date (and not February 25, the date of the king's approval), is considered the official date of the grant.

A braided cord, probably of silk, was threaded through three small holes cut through the lower center of the pages. The other end of the cord passed through the Great Seal itself. The seal, made of beeswax, on one side bore the likeness of King Charles upon his throne; the reverse depicted him astride with the City of London in the background.



Charles II presents the Charter to William Penn.

The seal was prepared with a green pigment, indicating that it was a charter. (Red seals were usually used for other official documents.) The fragile wax seal was placed in a skippet, a small round metal box, to protect it. The document was then folded in thirds, lengthwise and widthwise, and the cord and seal wound around it. So prepared, it was presented to William Penn.

Penn referred to this handsome document periodically in the legal machinations affecting his new colony. He possibly cited it when dealing with Lord Baltimore about the exact boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland, a dispute that would remain unresolved until the final agreement and survey of the Mason-Dixon Line in the 1760s. Upon his death in 1718, the Charter and other important documents passed into the custody of his executrix, his second wife Hannah Callowhill, and from her to succeeding proprietors: their sons John, Thomas, and Richard, and Richard's son John. During the American Revolution, the General Assembly of Pennsylvania passed the Divestiture Act, which relieved the Penn Family, considered loyalists to the Crown, of any right to land in the Commonwealth not already surveyed and deeded to them.

For years, the Charter languished in a London warehouse with other Penn family possessions. In 1802, Philadelphia lawyer John Coates, representing the Penns in a legal issue centering on land in Delaware, sailed to England and obtained proprietary records to use as evidence in court. An inventory of these documents, prepared in 1804, lists the Charter. On February 21, 1812, Coates deposited the Charter with the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and it passed into public ownership.

By the opening years of the nineteenth century, the document was likely showing signs of deterioration. The propensity of animal skin, living or dead, to harbor foreign biological growth is great. When this characteristic is combined with humidity and the hygroscopic (or water-absorbing) nature of parchment, mold growth is inevitable, and drastic planar distortions, or curling and warping, occur.

Quite often this curling is the skin's "memory," as it tries to revert to the animal's original shape. The iron gall ink, lying on the surface of the parchment (as opposed to ink on paper, which is absorbed by the cellulose fibers) began to dry and flake away. Page one of the Charter is the most visually pleasing, but its placement on the outside of the folded package caused it to suffer the most damage.

Constant folding and unfolding prompted decay and caused it to break along the creases. The most prominent break, a large hole, occurred in the lower left-hand corner.

In 1837, the General Assembly of Pennsylvania directed Secretary of the Commonwealth Thomas H. Burrowes to display the Charter in his offices at the State Capitol “for the inspection of visitors.” When framing the document for display, workers presumably removed the Great Seal of England, with its skipet and silken cord, and trimmed four to five inches of the lower section of each page. Semi-circular rust marks, caused by the skipet, and holes on page four are the only remaining physical evidence that the document once bore such a seal. The whereabouts of the document’s Great Seal of England are, sadly, unknown.



Penn Charter prior to conservation. A large hole had been created by constant folding and unfolding.

The framed Charter was displayed in the Secretary of the Commonwealth’s office for much of the nineteenth century. In 1850, Samuel Hazard reported in his Hazard’s Register that “this venerable document . . . is now framed and hung up.” It probably remained on continuous display, in whole or in part, at least until the opening of the twentieth century, when responsibility for it passed to the Division of Public Records, created in 1903 as part of the State Library. In 1945, the Division of Public Records became part of the present-day [Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission](#) (PHMC). At that time, the Charter was placed in a small fire and theft-proof metal vault, which could be opened for display purposes, at the old State Museum building (renamed the Speaker Matthew J. Ryan Legislative Office Building in October 1999), adjacent to the State Capitol.



A paper conservator tests the inks for solubility prior to humidification.

It also received its first known conservation treatment. The document was sent to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where it was extracted from its frame and examined with thoughts of “restoration.” It was also discovered at this time that before the Charter was framed in 1837, all four leaves had been treated with some substance, presumably a consolidating coating to stabilize the flaking inks.

In 1965, when the complex housing the present [State Museum of Pennsylvania](#) and [Pennsylvania State Archives](#) was dedicated as the William Penn Memorial Museum and Archives Building, the Charter was again placed on long-term display in an alcove, behind a

towering statue of William Penn that dominates Memorial Hall. Not long after, it was examined, for a second time, by conservators. It was sent to a firm in Illinois for treatment that included “sterilizing the document via chemical vapor to inhibit future mold growth,” possibly using thymol or ethylene oxide. These gases, which continue to emit toxins after treatment on porous materials such as parchment and paper, are known human carcinogens, and would not be recommended for use today.

The firm also cleaned the surface of the pages, removed tapes attached during the earlier repair and, using new parchment, mended the holes.

By 1984, the staff of the Pennsylvania State Archives had grown extremely concerned about the condition of the Charter, in light of emerging modern professional exhibition and conservation standards. Despite previous conservation efforts, constant exposure to light, heat, and high humidity had caused noticeable damage in less than twenty years.



Weak areas of loss were reinforced with conservation materials.

The debilitating effects of light—especially the ultraviolet spectrum—upon parchment and paper is

cumulative, and the steady and intense exhibition lamps had caused the iron gall inks to fade. Fluctuating temperature and humidity levels inside the exhibit case had caused the document to warp again. The modern parchment inserts used to fill holes and gaps had pulled away from the original document, weakening its overall strength. The best preservation protocol—and only option, really—would be to remove the Charter from this

environment. Security, also a factor, was given greater import after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's Charter was stolen that year. (It was later recovered.)

And then came time for a rest.

The "venerable document" was removed from its display case on September 17, 1984, and placed in a special environmentally-controlled and high-security vault in the Pennsylvania State Archives. The vault, maintained twenty-four hours a day at a constant sixty-five degrees and thirty-five-percent humidity, contains a chemical fire suppression system and anti-theft alarms. In order not to disappoint museum visitors, however, full-scale color photographic reproductions were substituted for the original Charter.

In 1997, members of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission asked the Pennsylvania State Archives staff to find a way to display the Charter for, at the very least, its March 4 "birthday." State Archives specialists turned to the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) in Philadelphia, a regional preservation facility which has treated such precious national treasures as the 1783 Treaty of Paris and the second draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Custom fills were created by tracing areas of loss.



CCAHA parchment expert Susan Filter examined the Charter and made a critical decision: permanent display was no longer feasible for the fragile three-hundred-year-old document. Rare display under the strictest standards was permissible, but the document first needed stabilization. Restoration was not an option, though. Modern conservation ethics call for leaving an original item as "original" as possible.

While reattaching modern parchment to the missing margins and affixing a facsimile of the Great Seal would undoubtedly enhance its appearance, such efforts would inhibit overall understanding of what remains of the original object.

Conservation of historical materials is highly specialized, labor intensive and, therefore, expensive. Costs for stabilizing the Charter amounted to about three thousand dollars a page, or twelve thousand dollars for the entire document. The [Pennsylvania Heritage Society](#)® came to the rescue and, during fall 1997, not only raised the necessary funds for its immediate care but created an endowment for future maintenance. On October 23, 1997, the Charter was carefully removed from a vault in the State Archives and each page securely placed in transport boxes. A unit of the Pennsylvania State Police, the Bureau of Emergency and Special Operations, usually reserved for the governor and visiting dignitaries, escorted the precious document to the CCAHA in Philadelphia.

Filter and her assistants painstakingly performed the delicate procedures. Regardless of what conservators do to prevent deterioration, organic materials, including parchment, paper, wood, silk, and wool, naturally break down and turn to dust. However, conservation measures can slow this process so that future generations can enjoy and study original artifacts and documents from the past. CCAHA's stabilization effort included cleaning the parchment surface with mild enzymes and organic solvents, and dry cleaning with grated vinyl erasers and specialized hand tools. Mends made in the 1960s had begun to shrink and pull away from the original document. They were repaired with more compatible materials, which respond quickly to temperature and humidity fluctuations and will give way before the original parchment tears.



Penn Charter before the flattening process used in the conservation effort.

Flattening parchment is not a matter of simply applying pressure. Reestablishing planarity, or a flattened surface, requires re-stretching the collagen fibers to orient them in the appropriate configuration, allowing the skin to lie flat. By slowly, gently, and evenly humidifying the Charter pages with water vapor, the collagen fibers of the parchment relaxed and could be reshaped. Once flat, maintaining planarity was achieved with a matting technique to hold the parchment skin taut. In this procedure, one end of numerous linen threads is attached with a benign paste all around the page edges. The threads are then twisted to the degree necessary, and evenly stretched and adhered to an acid free mat board with glue. Thus matted, the parchment remains flat yet is able to expand and contract with fluctuations in temperature and humidity. To protect the parchment,

the linen threads are designed to break away from the mat board before the parchment tears.

Upon completion of the arduous treatment, State Police troopers transported the Charter to Harrisburg in February 1998—just in time for its birthday celebration held the following month at The State Museum of Pennsylvania. Each page was carefully housed in its own custom display case acquired through the generosity of the members of the Pennsylvania Heritage Society®. All four cases are outfitted with special plexiglas to filter out ninety-nine percent of the ultraviolet spectrum of light,

and a linen-covered base layered with silica gel to maintain a constant humidity level. The exhibition area was lighted at low levels and secured by guards around the clock.



School children examine the Charter during its yearly exhibition in March.

Thousands of people came to see the dramatically changed document. After being exhibited for about ten days, the Charter was returned to its climate-controlled vault in the State Archives. In 1999, the document was placed on temporary display again, and this strategy will likely be repeated on special and appropriate occasions, as long as specialists believe the document can withstand it.

Not long after receiving the Charter, William Penn wrote to a friend, "It is a clear and just thing and my God that hath given it me through many difficulties, will, I believe, bless it and make it the seede of a nation." The Charter has received a new lease on life. With proper care and maintenance, the "patient" will last well into the next millennium, to be enjoyed and appreciated by future generations—undeniable testimony to the fact that Pennsylvania did indeed become "the seede of a nation," as its founder had envisioned.

Linda A. Ries is head of the Archival and History Programs section of the Bureau of Archives and History. She has contributed articles to Pennsylvania Heritage on the aerial photographs of Samuel W. Kuhnert and the bird's-eye views of T. M. Fowler and is the author of many articles and books relating to Pennsylvania history, including [Guide to Photographs in the Pennsylvania State Archives](#), and co-author, with Jay W. Ruby, of [Directory of Pennsylvania Photographers, 1839-1900](#), both published by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Jane Smith Stewart, formerly with the Pennsylvania State Archives, is the archivist for the Rare Books Room at the State Library of Pennsylvania. A specialist in paper and parchment preservation, she is a professional associate of the American Institute for Conservation and a graduate of the Queen's University Conservation Program in Kingston, Ontario. She served as conservator for the Penn Land Survey Project, 1995-1998, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, which preserved examples of the Commonwealth's earliest land records held by the Pennsylvania State Archives.

The authors wish to thank contributors to the Pennsylvania Heritage Society's 1997 campaign to preserve the Charter, especially Timothy Buchanan of Harrisburg. They caution readers that preservation techniques mentioned or described in this article should not be attempted without the advice and assistance of a professional conservator.

If you are interested in contributing to the Charter Endowment Fund for the perpetual care of this venerable document, write: Pennsylvania Heritage Society, 400 North Street, Plaza Level, Harrisburg, PA 17120; telephone (717) 787-2807; or e-mail c-kvansick@state.pa.us.

Own a copy of this venerable document!

Full-color facsimiles of the 1681 Charter, with descriptive text and in an attractive folder, are available from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission at \$4.95 each. Pennsylvania residents please add six percent states sales tax. Handling and shipping is \$4.00. Send check or money order, made payable to the Pennsylvania Heritage Society, to: PHMC Publications Sales Program, Plaza Level, Commonwealth Keystone Building, 400 North Street, Harrisburg, PA 17120-0053. To order by telephone or to place credit card orders, telephone toll free 1-800-747-7790 or (717) 783-2618. Please allow two to four weeks for delivery.

For further reading

Dunn, Mary Maples, et al., eds. *The Papers of William Penn*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981-1986.

Ellis, Margaret H. *The Care of Prints and Drawings*. London and Walnut Creek, Cal.: Altimira and AASLH Press, 1995.

Ferris, Lester, ed. *The Mystique of Vellum*. Boston: Bromer Booksellers Inc. and Richard Bigus, 1984.

Soderlund, Jean, ed. *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania, 1680-1684: A Documentary History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

Treese, Loretta. *The Storm Gathering: The Penn Family and the American Revolution*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.