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Guest Notebook

Residents, look at your own history

Premium content from Philadelphia Business Journal by Nicholas Pagon

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William Penn's "greene countrie towne" was not solely an experiment in religious tolerance; it was also an extraordinary entrepreneurial venture in international commerce.

"Though I desire to extend religious freedom, yet I want some recompense for my trouble," Penn wrote in 1681, and he was true to his word in both senses. Philadelphia rapidly developed into an international center of commerce and industry, and this commercial success was in turn vital to the city's significant role in the life of the American colonies. It was therefore no accident that Philadelphia would go on to host the Revolutionary events that shook the world, to become the financial center of the new American nation, to then lead the industrial development that made it "the workshop to the world" in the 1800s, and ultimately to be chosen as the location for the 1876 World's Fair – the great Centennial International Exposition.

In the words of historian **Gary Nash**, "Mercantile wealth created colonial Philadelphia." Recognizing that the prospect of his desired "recompense" lay in international trade, Penn immediately began to set up trading links with the local Lenape tribe, opened land for farming, mills and industry, included commercial interests in his first physical plans for the city, and ensured that individuals with significant commercial expertise were among the first immigrants into the new colony. Penn, the Personnel Recruiter, attracted farmers, artisans, and skilled laborers from throughout Europe (regardless of religious affiliation) to join the growing colony, and Penn, the Infrastructure Developer, laid out port facilities to support the ships required for trade, and set out to construct pathways and roads into the interior to feed commercial goods in both directions.

Exporting furs, produce, fish, meat, and lumber throughout the British Empire, and importing manufactured goods for the rapidly growing colony, Philadelphians were soon trading all around the world – with Africa, Europe, and the West Indies, and even, by the late 18th century, with China. By the 1760s a visiting British officer and peer was already referring to Philadelphia as "a great and noble city" and "one of the wonders of the world."

From a standing start in the 1680s, Pennsylvania's population grew to 220,000 inhabitants by 1765, with 20,000 in Philadelphia itself. By that time, there were as many as 70 working wharves along the Delaware River, with 12 supporting shipyards, and roughly 10 percent of the male population worked on the waterfront as mariners and dockside laborers. Competition and entrepreneurship flourished.

Philadelphians who, like the members of the Global Philadelphia Association, want to see their city thrive once again as a global actor in the 21st century, do not need to go far afield for inspiration. They have only to look at their own history, and to apply to today's new and challenging conditions the same openness to change and industriousness that characterized the city's beginning.