

John Penn

1741-1788

John Penn was a native of the county of Caroline, in the province of Virginia, where he was born on the seventeenth day of May, 1741. He was the only child of his parents, Moses and Catharine Penn.

The early education of young Penn was greatly neglected by his parents, who appear in no degree to have appreciated the value of knowledge. Hence, on his reaching the age of eighteen, he had only enjoyed the advantages conferred by a common school, and these for the space of but two or three years.

The death of Mr. Penn occurred in the year 1759, on which event his son became his own guardian, and the sole manager of the fortune left him, which, though not large, was competent. It was fortunate that his principles, at this early age, were in a good degree established; otherwise he might, at this unguarded period of life, left as he was without paternal counsel and direction, have become the dupe of the unprincipled, or giving loose to licentious passions, have ruined himself by folly and dissipation. Although the cultivation of his mind had been neglected in the manner we have stated, he possessed intellectual powers of no ordinary strength; and, as he now enjoyed a competent fortune, and possessed a disposition to cultivate those powers it is not surprising that his progress should have been rapid.

Fortunately he lived in the vicinity of Edmund Pendleton, a gentleman of rare endowments, highly distinguished for his legal attainments, and well known as one of the most accomplished statesmen of Virginia. Mr. Pendleton being a relative, young Penn sought access to his library, which was one of the best in the province. The privilege which was thus freely and liberally granted him, was by no means neglected. By means of reading, the powers of his mind soon began to unfold themselves, and he, at length, determined to devote himself to the study of law.

Such a project, on the part of a young man whose early education had been so greatly neglected, and whose only guide through the labyrinth that lay before him, was to be his own good sense, was indicative of powers of no ordinary character. Our country has furnished examples of a similar kind; and to the obscure and neglected, they present the most powerful motives to exertion and perseverance. The author of our being has prescribed no narrow limits to human genius, nor conferred upon any one class of persons the exclusive privilege of becoming intellectually great.

At the age of twenty-one, Mr. Penn reaped in part the reward of his toil and indefatigable industry, in being licensed as a practitioner of Law. The habits of study and application which he had now formed, were of great advantage to him in pursuing the business of his profession. He rose with great rapidity into notice, and soon equaled the most distinguished at the bar. As an advocate, in particular, there were few who surpassed him.

In 1774, Mr. Penn moved to the province of North Carolina, where he soon occupied as distinguished a place at the bar, as he had done in Virginia; although by his removal to another province it was necessary to understand and apply a new code of laws. With these he made himself acquainted with ease and celerity.

In 1775, he was elected a member of the continental congress, in which body he took his seat on the twelfth of October. He was successively re-elected to congress, in the years 1777, 1778, and 1779, in which body he was distinguished for his promptitude and fidelity. He was seldom absent from his seat, and hesitated not, either from want of firmness or patriotism, to urge forward those measures, which were calculated to redress the wrongs, and establish and perpetuate the rights of his country.

After the return of peace, Mr. Penn retired to the enjoyment of private life. The incidents in the remaining portion of his history were, therefore, probably few; and differed in nothing from those which usually belong to individuals of respectability, in the shades of peaceful retreat. His death occurred in the month of September, 1788, at the age of forty-six years. He had three children, two of whom died unmarried.

Source: Rev. Charles A. Goodrich *Lives of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*. New York: William Reed & Co., 1856. Pages 433-435. (Some minor spelling changes may have been made.)