Indian Origins

Four hundred years ago, the City of Brotherly Love was inhabited by a tribe of Native-American Indians known as the Lenni Lenape (the Original People), a trusting, sharing tribe that saw no threat in the arrival of the first British and Dutch seamen in the early 1600s. With the area’s lush and game-filled forests, its rivers and streams teeming with fish, the Lenni Lenape believed that there was plenty for everyone. By 1640, they had helped Swedish settlers establish a tiny colony along the Delaware River.

Eventually the newcomers from Europe began fighting for control of the area. The Lenni Lenape, the first Americans, were also the first casualties. Today, this Native-American Indian heritage remains in the Philadelphia area in the nomenclature of such towns and creeks as Tacony—“the empty place,” Passyunk—“the level place,” Wissinoming—“the place of fear,” and Wissahickon—“the catfish stream.”

William Penn

Before they disappeared forever, the Lenni Lenape made a lasting friendship with a man they called “the white truth-teller.” He insisted upon buying land from them instead of taking it. In admiration and respect, the tribe gave this man a belt of wampum, its beads depicting a clasp of hands, one red, the other white.

The man’s name was William Penn. Raised in the British aristocracy, Penn became, at an early age, a believer in religious freedom. In 1667 he shunned the Church of England to join the highly persecuted Society of Friends, the Quakers. He was imprisoned three times for his writing and preaching.

Fortunately, the Crown owed Penn’s late father a debt of some $80,000. In 1681 Penn persuaded King Charles II to repay the debt with land in the New World, and the following year he sailed across the
Atlantic to breathe reality into his dream that men could co-exist in freedom and peace regardless of their religious beliefs.

A “Holy Experiment” is what Penn called his plan. It was to unfold in a city called Philadelphia, Greek for “brotherly love,” and in a colony known as Pennsylvannia or “Penn’s woods,” in memory of his father. Many of the principles that Penn wrote into his Frame of Government after his arrival in October of 1682 were the same principles that the colonists would go to war for less than a century later.

Because his beliefs had been widely publicized in Europe, Penn was followed to his “greene Countrie Towne” by thousands of people suffering from religious persecution. As a result, Philadelphia quickly became known not only as a city of religious freedom, but also as one of economic opportunity. Its location on the Delaware River made the city a hub of shipping and trade in the colonies.

The Revolutionary War

Among the many people that Philadelphia attracted was a 17-year-old printer from Boston named Benjamin Franklin. Though he arrived with little more than the shirt on his back, Franklin was soon running the colonies' most successful newspaper, and in 1731 he published his first issue of Poor Richard's Almanac. As a burgeoning inventor, author, and philosopher, he also became Philadelphia's top civic leader, as well as one of the colonies' most influential statesmen.

Freedom of thought and expression was so important in Philadelphia that after the British imposed unpopular trade policies and taxes in the mid-1700s, the city became the logical choice as a convention site to formalize the rights of the colonies. In July of 1774, the First Continental Congress convened in Carpenter's Hall; less than a year later, following the initial salvos of the Revolutionary War, the Second Continental Congress met in the Pennsylvania State House, now Independence Hall. It was there that the Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776.

On that same day, more than 30,000 British troops arrived in New York Harbor and immediately began marching south. As they burned and looted their way through New Jersey in the ensuing months, George Washington, the general of the Continental Army, wrote, “I tremble for Philadelphia.”

A year later on September 26, 1777, the British finally captured Philadelphia, paving their way with their victory at the Battle of Brandywine. A week after that, Washington tried to regain the city in
Statue of Benjamin Franklin—Craftsman in Center City  

Photo by Jack Siderer
a surprise attack on Germantown. After being turned back, he took his army to Valley Forge and settled in for the winter.

On February 5, 1778, France officially joined the colonists’ war effort and, though the winter months had been hard ones, Washington’s army emerged from Valley Forge in the spring as a unified fighting force. In June, the British pulled out of Philadelphia to avoid being trapped by the French fleet.

In July, Congress again met in Philadelphia and continued to do so until 1783. Four years later, the Constitution of the United States was signed in Independence Hall, and from 1790 to 1800 Philadelphia served as the capital of the new nation.

The Pennsylvania Dutch

In 1793, Philadelphia was struck by a severe epidemic of yellow fever that claimed 5,000 lives and drove thousands farther inland. Among those forced to move were waves of Moravian Germans who settled in the rich farmland of Lancaster, Berks, York, and other interior counties. Though none were actually from the Netherlands, these people became known as the Pennsylvania Dutch because the word “Deutsch,” which means “German,” had been misinterpreted. Their genius for farming turned the region into a veritable garden spot, and today they still honor centuries-old habits of work and dress. Among these settlers were the Amish and the Mennonites, many of whom still refuse to use such necessities of modern life as cars and tractors.

The City Flourishes

Freed of British trade restrictions as a result of the successful war for independence, Philadelphia continued to grow and prosper. Coal mines flourished to the west, railroads were built, and new canals were dug. Individual fortunes were amassed in iron, shipping, machinery, and textiles.

By the late 1700s, Philadelphia had become the site of the first life insurance company, the first commercially-chartered bank, the first bank partly-owned by the government, the first stock exchange, the first mint, and the first building and loan society. Through the efforts of financier Robert Morris, who, assisted by broker Haym Salomon had raised huge sums of money to finance the Continental Army during the war, Philadelphia became known as “the cradle of finance.”
Waves of Immigration and the Civil War

In the first half of the 1800s, thousands of Irish Catholics arrived in Philadelphia, followed in mid-century by Germans and Italians. Although the first blacks were slaves, many more came later as freemen as a result of the Quakers' anti-slavery movement.

During the Civil War, Philadelphia, already one of the busiest manufacturing centers in the country, continued to flourish. The wealthy built mansions in Rittenhouse Square and along what became known as "the Main Line." In an inspired bit of foresight 20 years earlier, the city had bought many of the estates along the Schuylkill River and produced Fairmount Park, the largest city park in the world. It was there in 1876 on the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the nation that the first World's Fair in the Western Hemisphere was staged.

At the turn of the century, still more Europeans flocked to Philadelphia; from 1880 to 1920, the city's population swelled from 850,000 to 1,800,000.

Turn of the Century

Not everyone in Philadelphia was making fortunes, however, for by the turn of the century slums had begun to appear in the city's core. Those who could afford to move left the city to build homes, mansions, and estates in outlying areas. A substantial part of the city's tax base left with these people, and the only major municipal project to be approved around the turn of the century was construction of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Over the next forty years, many of the city's homes, buildings, streets, and historical sites lapsed into decay.

By the end of World War II, Philadelphians were appalled at the status of their once-proud city. More than 400,000 attended the Better Philadelphia Exposition in 1947, and the vast majority of those polled said that they would pay higher taxes to see the designs of the exposition reach fruition. The federal government shared their desires, declaring the Independence Hall area a national park and providing partial funds for restoration.

Urban Revitalization

A new city charter was quick to follow in 1951, along with the rise to power of Democratic Party reformers Joseph S. Clark and
Richardson Dilworth in City Hall. A year later, the Chinese Wall, a mass of elevated railroad tracks on Market Street that had prevented Center City redevelopment, was torn down. Replacing it was the commercial complex known as Penn Center.

Elsewhere, the old Dock Street produce markets were razed, clearing the way for the revitalization of Old Philadelphia and the construction of Society Hill Towers. Rittenhouse Square was given a facelift and a host of new shops and restaurants arose around it. With city government and private enterprises working hand-in-hand, Philadelphia embarked upon an era of restoration and new construction that lasted into the mid-1960s.

The city then began gearing up for the Bicentennial. The year 1976, however, proved to be a disappointment. The federal government provided only half the money Philadelphia had expected. The Tall Ships, a primary attraction, headed instead for New York. The summer also brought the tragedy of Legionnaires’ disease. By the end of the year, 7 million tourists had visited Philadelphia when 20 million had been expected.

Century IV to the Present

Six years later, the city celebrated its 300th birthday with a year-long party called Century IV, an event which proved that more than a few lessons had been learned from the Bicentennial experience. For a fraction of the money that had been spent in 1976, Philadelphia offered, along with a host of special events, attractions that truly accented the past, present, and future of the city. Among these was the internationally-famous Flower Show featuring 300 years of gardening, an outdoor Restaurant Festival on Benjamin Franklin Parkway, and a Neighborhoods Festival in which some 50 of the city’s “small towns” opened their arms to welcome thousands of visitors.

This time, not only did the Tall Ships come in splendor, but the world’s mightiest ocean liner, the Queen Elizabeth II, also breezed in, having sailed the identical course that William Penn followed when he crossed the Atlantic Ocean 300 years before.

Century IV’s impact on Philadelphia was by all accounts a glorious success. Urban celebration and national publicity caught onto the soaring Philadelphia spirit.

A truly restored “City of Brotherly Love,” Philadelphia was the site of the nation’s celebration of the U.S. Constitutional Convention’s 200th anniversary during the summer of 1987. The successful celebration drew millions of visitors for parades, special exhibits, lectures, and appearances by a variety of dignitaries. “A Promise of Permanency,” an interactive computer exhibit on the Constitution, was installed at the
Independence National Historical Park Visitor’s Center. “Born Out of Time,” a multi-media sound-and-light show that illustrates Ben Franklin’s many contributions to the modern world, became a permanent exhibit at the Franklin Institute Science Museum.

Philadelphia spent 1994 celebrating William Penn’s 350th birthday and using the occasion to further re-establish itself as a premiere place to visit or call home. The building of the $522 million Convention Center in Center City was a catalyst to establish an Avenue of the Arts, refurbish existing museums, improve transportation, build hotels, restore neighborhoods, and open businesses. Philadelphia truly deserved its award as one of 1994’s Top 10 All-American Cities.

The city continued revitalizing and renewing itself as it entered the twenty-first century. Millennium Philadelphia comprised 18 months of festivities that began with the flash of the Photo of the Century—a group photograph at Independence Hall of 100 Americans born on the Fourth of July, one each year, from 1900 to 1999. The Independence Hall historic district itself was energized with the new “Lights of Liberty” extravaganza—a one-hour, 3-D, multimedia theatrical experience that transports visitors back in time to Revolutionary America. The Franklin Institute Science Museum celebrated its 175th anniversary with the new “Franklin—He’s Electric” exhibit. The Philadelphia Zoo, America’s oldest, celebrated its 125th birthday with the opening of the new Primate Reserve. The Avenue of the Arts, and the Convention Center and Waterfront areas increased their hotel, restaurant and tourist sites. And the list goes on.

The city has been moving ahead at a breathtaking pace. A small sampling must include the state-of-the-art Independence Visitor Center opened in 2001, boasting a concourse, ballroom, and rooftop terrace that welcome visitors to a revamped Independence Mall. Here, the Liberty Bell, treasured symbol of the city and the country, is now ensconced in a stunning new home. Independence Mall was also chosen as the site of the newly opened, superb National Constitution Center, the only museum in the United States dedicated solely to this country’s most important document. In the heart of the city, the spectacular Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts was just inaugurated. And a heavenly ride in the Channel 6 Zoo Balloon that floats above the country’s first zoo reveals bulldozers and jackhammers forging new vistas while a commitment to the past preserves and renews historic sights. Philadelphia is definitely a place to discover and enjoy. But most of all, it is a city to visit, revisit, or call home.