

## Early Welsh Immigration to Pennsylvania

The early Welsh immigrants to Pennsylvania were mostly Quakers who had borne the brunt of religious persecution in their English homeland. Given the opportunity to secure relief from their religious oppression, they were among the first to accept William Penn's offer to settle in his new colony of "Penn's Woodlands." In 1681, with the promise of religious liberty as well as of economic opportunity, a committee of prominent Welsh Quakers met with William Penn in London. Their intent was to purchase a large tract of land in Pennsylvania where they could conduct their affairs in their own language. The Welsh Tract, as it became known, consisted of almost 40,000 acres situated on the west side of the Schuylkill, north and west of Philadelphia. It was a fertile, attractive region of about sixty-two square miles. Its general lines include present-day townships in Montgomery, Chester, and Delaware Counties, including Lower and Upper Merion, Haverford, Radnor, Tredyffrin, East Whiteland, West Whiteland, Willistown, East Goshen and West Goshen.

In 1682 William Penn arrived at Upland (present day Chester). Accompanying him were some 2,000 members of the Society of Friends or Quakers. As many as ninety more shiploads of immigrants from the Midlands of England followed in the next three years. By 1715 it is estimated that about 23,000 new colonists had emigrated to the Delaware Valley and the rapidly growing city of Philadelphia and its surrounding region.

This region stretched west of the Schuylkill River outside of Philadelphia into the interior of the new colony, some fifty miles. The Welsh Quakers came mainly from the more prosperous regions of Merioneth, Radnor, and Montgomeryshire in east Wales. The place names of Merion, Radnor, Bala Cynwyd mark what was to become the "Main Line" of Philadelphia.

But other Welsh settlers from the poorer northern and western area of Wales also emigrated. Some were not Quakers, and, indeed, large groups of the new colonists from Anglesey and Carnarvon were members of the Church of England. They founded new Anglican churches in the region, including St. Asaph's in Bala Cynwyd and St. David's in Radnor. The Quaker Pennsylvania community experienced a theological schism during these early years and some Friends converted to the Anglican Church. About 1718 a group of families from the St. David's congregation left Radnor and pushed further west into what later became Lancaster County, founding their new community on the banks of the upper Conestoga River. A few later, in 1722, they began to gather as a new congregation for worship using the Book of Common Prayer with readings from a Welsh language Bible. The new congregation was named after Bangor Cathedral in northwest Wales. Bangor Church, officially came to be chartered as "The Episcopal Church of Bangor in Caernarvon" It has always anchored what was to become the village of Churchtown on Main Street, the Old Conestoga Pike from Philadelphia to Lancaster, now PA Rt. 23.