

Pennsylvania's Early Blue Laws:
A Quaker Experiment in the
Suppression of Sport
and Amusements, 1682-1740

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Pennsylvania's early blue laws reflected the social philosophy of William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, and the beliefs of most members of the Society of Friends, popularly known as Quakers, who settled in Pennsylvania. God was the focal point of life to Penn and the Quakers. To honor Him, Penn and his followers instituted

the strict Sabbath and practiced what they believed to be high standards of morality. In order to preserve the Lord's Day and to promote piety and virtue in Pennsylvania, Penn included restrictive legislation in the first frame of government he designed for his province. Such restrictive legislation was known as blue laws. Following Penn's example, Pennsylvania's Quaker government kept restrictive legislation in force or renewed it when the colony adopted new frames of government.

Restrictive legislation was of two forms in colonial Pennsylvania. One form preserved the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest. The laws preserving the Sabbath forbade work and all diversions on the Lord's Day. The second form of restrictive legislation banned various sports and amusements, such as cockfights, animal-baits, stage-plays, card games, and dice, on any day in Pennsylvania. Quakers prohibited diversions of this nature because they believed such activities contributed to luxury and idleness — the antithesis of the Friends narrow social ethic which emphasized industriousness, simplicity, and frugality. As long as the Friends dominated Pennsylvania's society and politics, they could enforce their standards of morality and virtue in Penn's colony.

During the final decade of the seventeenth century, several forces challenged the Quakers' narrow social ethic. Anglicans began to settle in Pennsylvania in increasing numbers during the 1690's. They believed in a liberal Sabbath and enjoyed many of the sports and amusements which the Friends considered immoral; consequently, their beliefs and practices gave Pennsylvania a more secular appearance. During the same decade, the tavern emerged as a social institution in Pennsylvania. It fulfilled the social needs of the lower classes who were often excluded from the colony's established social centers, namely the elite churches. As the hub of entertainment and recreation, the tavern contributed to the movement away from the Friends' narrow morality in Pennsylvania.

The Friends dealt with this mounting secularization in Pennsylvania through the enactment of blue laws. The Friends successfully kept restrictive legislation in force during the first fifteen years of the eighteenth century despite objections from the British government. William Penn's charter required the provincial government to submit duplicate copies of all laws passed in Pennsylvania to England for approval or disallowance. The ingenious Quakers circumvented the British opposition to their blue laws by using a loophole in Penn's charter. According to the charter, the Pennsylvania Assembly had five years from the date of enactment of a law to transmit a copy of it to England. The Friends waited until near the end of the five-year deadline before submitting their laws to England, thereby keeping their laws in force for nearly five years. When the British government vetoed their blue laws, the Friends simply reenacted the same measures and waited five more years before transmitting them to England. By resorting to this procedure three times between 1700 and 1715, the Friends attempted to preserve their ideals of piety and virtue in Pennsylvania.

At the close of Queen Anne's War in 1715, immigration increased because the journey across the sea was no longer threatened with naval warfare. In addition to Anglicans, new people, namely Scots-Irish and Germans, began to settle in Pennsylvania. As a result of increased immigration, political, social, and geographical changes occurred in Pennsylvania. Friends move their residence from Philadelphia to rural districts and, as a result, experienced difficulty in imposing their narrow morality on Pennsylvania's non-Quaker population. Consequently, those who enjoyed amusements were no longer hampered by the Friends' narrow social ethic.

During the 1720's and 30's, Philadelphia experienced a surge of recreational pursuits. Entertainment in the form of circuses and fairs became popular. Some governors and other public officials stimulated public conviviality with their patronage of amusements. In spite of the Friends' protests to this type of behavior, the trend in Penn's colony was toward the mundane as the Quakers' conception of piety and virtue yielded to worldliness. This secular trend liberalized the Sabbath and popularized many sports

and amusements hitherto discouraged. Pennsylvania's early blue laws were significant because they have revealed the existence of the very sports and pastimes which they prohibited in a society where the dominant political and social force shunned these activities.