

William Penn and the Land Tax

THERE is very good precedent for the recent legislation in Pennsylvania granting permission to all third-class cities within the state to increase their collection of economic rent for public revenue.

As far back as 1681, no less a personage than its famous founding father, William Penn, as revealed in his writings, believed in the policy of securing government income by the taxation of land. A measure in line with the idea was passed in Philadelphia in 1683 without a dissenting vote.

Furthermore, Penn provided that in his colony landowners must make use of their holdings within three years or permit others to acquire the title. He denounced absentee landlordism and declared that such owners were "great debtors to the county" in that while their lots had increased from four to forty times in value, they themselves had "served no office, run no hazard, nor as yet defrayed any public charge."

Becoming more than ever convinced that he had discovered a plan calculated to insure within his settlement not only freedom from political and religious persecution but from poverty as well, he wrote in 1693: "If all owners were so far tenants to the public that the superfluities of gain and expense were applied to the exigencies thereof, it would put an end to taxes, leave not a beggar, and make the greatest bank for national trade in Europe."

Although William Penn was an extensive landowner, his ideas more nearly approached the natural law of social progress than any others of which we have record until the year 1879, when Henry George formulated them into scientific axioms.

Proving also that through friendliness and fair division of the land both Indians and colonists could live peacefully together, it was in Pennsylvania under Penn's treaty that during the seventy years of Quaker rule there were no acts of violence on either side.

As both Penn and George were Philadelphians, Pennsylvania has been twice blest in being the home state of these distinguished leaders. Fitting but enviable indeed would be Pennsylvania's position in the annals of freedom, if in addition to being the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence and of the Constitution it should also lead in its campaign for equality of economic opportunity through just use of the earth and its natural resources.

MABEL L. REES

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