2.3 Middle Colonies
How did location affect daily life in the Middle colonies?

Explore

Democracy in the Middle Colonies
What democratic practices existed in the Middle Colonies?

William Penn called his colony a “holy experiment” because he tried to govern it according to his Quaker beliefs. One of those beliefs was the idea of democracy, or government in which the people have the power to make political decisions.

As part of that idea, Penn created a colonial assembly, or group of representatives, to make laws for the colony. Pennsylvania’s assembly was called the Provincial Council. Penn allowed colonists to elect the council’s members, one-third of whom were elected every year for three-year terms. This election process prevented the entire group from being thrown out at once by an active faction, or group of people who share a particular political or economic interest. However, the government of Pennsylvania was not a complete democracy: Penn alone chose the colony’s governor.

The governments of New York and New Jersey were structured similarly. The proprietors appointed the colonial governors, while the legislative, or lawmaking, assemblies were elected by the male landowners of the colony. This structure was an early step towards establishing a tradition of self-government in the American colonies.

Religious Tolerance

Another important tradition established in the Middle Colonies was the idea of religious tolerance. Tolerance means "accepting and protecting people who are different," in this case people of different religious faiths. In the Middle Colonies, there were no restrictions on what religion people could practice. Other British colonies, such as Massachusetts and Virginia, had established state religions: Only people who were members of the officially approved church were permitted to vote and hold office.

In the Middle Colonies, a tradition of religious tolerance not only attracted a greater variety of settlers, but it also set a standard that would become very important to American government.

Even in the Middle Colonies, religious tolerance did not apply to all faiths. For example, Peter Stuyvesant, the governor of New Amsterdam from 1647 to 1664, asked the Dutch West India Company for permission to remove Jewish settlers from his colony. Because some investors in the company were Jewish, Stuyvesant’s request was denied. New Amsterdam allowed Jews to own land and establish businesses, although they were prohibited from holding public office or building synagogues.