

The 24 Proprietors

How the Woodbridge and Perth Amboy proprietary period came to shape the Garden State.

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Excerpted from his forthcoming book,
Changing Tides: Rediscovering Woodbridge, New Jersey, 1665-1702 *

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Sir George Carteret (1610-1680)
www.wikipedia.org

When Sir George Carteret died January 14, 1680, his will directed that his East Jersey property should be sold for the benefit of his creditors, but no purchasers appeared interested until 1682. The "Regime of the Twenty-Four Proprietors" began February 2, 1682, when his widow, Lady Elizabeth (after whom the present city of Elizabeth, New Jersey is named) sold the family's East Jersey interests at public auction, initially to twelve associates. This dozen was headed by William Penn, and eight were members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). They purchased the property for £3,400 and agreed to take in twelve more investors.

The Carteret period had come to an end, and a new era begun, bringing with it significant new currents in the development of the province. The motivating force at the beginning of this period was the desire to make East Jersey a haven for persecuted Scottish Quakers. The key figure responsible for this new course was the great Quaker colonizer, William Penn, the most prominent of the non-Scot proprietors.



Sir William Penn (1621-1670)
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William Penn

Penn's father, Admiral Sir William Penn (an Anglican and not a Quaker), had been First Lord of the Admiralty, commanding the Royal Navy. He had loaned King Charles II £16,000, which was still left unpaid at Admiral Penn's death. To at last settle the debt, Charles granted Penn junior's request for a large piece of North America on the west side of the Delaware River for settlement by Quakers and other colonists.

After his arrival in America in 1682, Penn visited both West and East Jersey the following year. When he first visited Perth Amboy, he described it as the "garden on earth most like to Paradise." At one time he had seriously considered establishing his "City of Brotherly Love" in Perth Amboy, but he founded it instead as Philadelphia in 1682 and Pennsylvania, or "Penn's Woods," is named in his honor. As a proprietor he owned town lots and land in Perth Amboy, to which he was entitled. Penn Street in Perth Amboy is named in his honor.

Often overlooked, Quakers settled in East Jersey long before they settled in William Penn's Philadelphia. By 1667, Quaker Samuel Moore had arrived with the Newbury pioneers from Massachusetts and the sect was also among those who had settled Shrewsbury in East Jersey.

It was anticipated that vast numbers of the victims of the cruel religious and political persecution raging in Scotland would grasp the opportunity to immigrate to East Jersey. Between 1683 and 1685 perhaps seven hundred Scots of high and low estate arrived in the colony. They were predominantly Presbyterians, and it is largely owing to their efforts that that denomination became established in New Jersey.



William Penn (1644-1718)
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The character of the population also underwent important



James, Duke of York (1633-1701)
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changes. Down to this time most of the inhabitants had migrated from New England. Now there was an influx of Scottish settlers, some of them the younger sons and daughters of nobility, others humble indentured servants. These new arrivals brought both Presbyterianism and Anglicanism to the province.

On March 14, 1683, James, Duke of York, issued a new patent to the Twenty-Four Proprietors. It included both the right to the soil as well as the right to govern. Thus was launched one of the most unusual colonization episodes in North America and Scottish history. The old Puritan criminal code—harsh in the extreme—was modified under the humane Quaker influence.

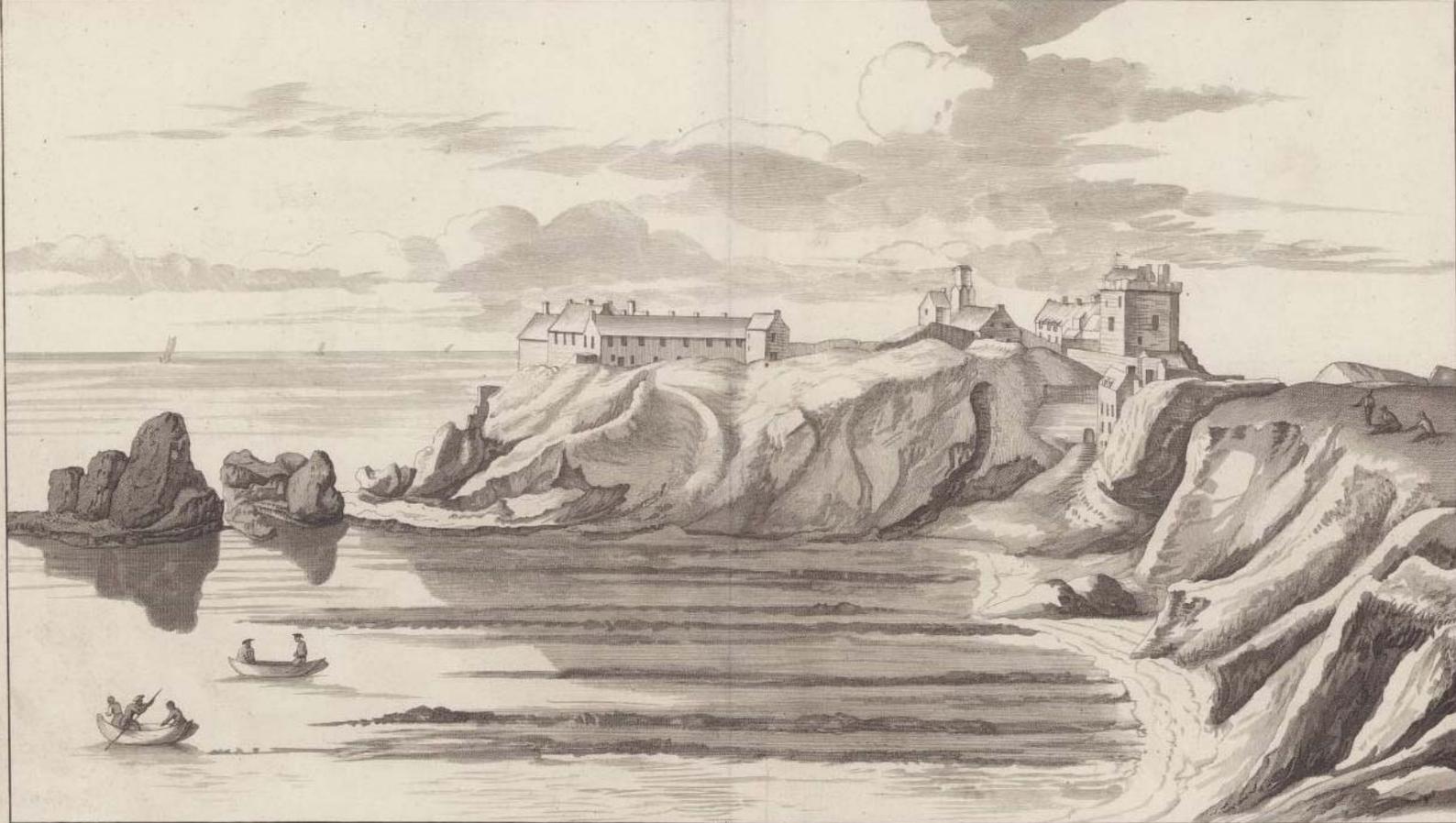
A new level of government was also introduced, intermediate between the towns and the provincial authority and emerging with the creation of four counties—Bergen, Essex, Middlesex and Monmouth in 1683. In 1688 Somerset County was formed from a part of Middlesex County.

Knowing the dimensions of their entire land holdings—especially Woodbridge Township—would be vitally important to the future proprietors of East Jersey. To memorialize their holdings, the Scottish Proprietors of East Jersey engaged John Reid. He had left Scotland in 1683 with a commission to lead a party of settlers and map these holdings. This map was intended to record property ownership and boundary lines at a time when these critical boundaries were still ill-defined and fluid. Reid's map of the Raritan River basin clearly defines the dimensions of the very large tract which was the original Woodbridge Township.

In 1683 the sessions of the County Court were increased to four, meeting in the Woodbridge Town Meetinghouse on the third Tuesday of March and September annually. This court was moved in 1689 to Perth Amboy, not only designated as the provincial capital, but also as the Middlesex County seat.

Sir George Scott

Woodbridge and Perth Amboy remained the two important population centers in Middlesex County. Sir George Scott left an interesting description of Woodbridge in his "Model of Government," published in 1685. He had been repeatedly fined and imprisoned by the Privy Council of Scotland for his religious views. From his prison cell, Scott petitioned the Privy Council asking for his release to "go to the Plantations," even offering to raise a security against returning to Scotland—and he promised to take with him his wife's cousin, Archibald Riddell, considered to be one of the more obnoxious preachers. This petition was accepted on April 1, 1684, and, using his political and social connections, Scott sought the support of the Proprietors of East Jersey. To encourage his emigration scheme and attract other emigrants, he spent several months compiling, printing, and circulating a book, "The Model of the Government of the



PROSPECTUS ARCIS DUNOTRIE. *The Prospect of Dunotter Castle.*

Engraving of Dunnottar Castle by
• John Slezer (1693)
www.wikipedia.org

Province of East Jersey, in America, and Encouragement for Such a Design to be concerned there." In describing Woodbridge Township, he wrote that it "pretends to have more privileges than any other town in the province, and has a charter of incorporation." Woodbridge boasted a courthouse and a prison. The population consisted of 120 families, or a total of 600 inhabitants, and the townsmen had taken up 10,000 acres and an additional 20,000 acres on the outskirts for planting. To substantiate his statements, Scott printed in the "Model" thirty-odd letters from persons from Scotland who had already arrived in East Jersey. The Scottish migration was underway at the time his book went to press. The result was that while East Jersey of the Twenty-Four Proprietors was a Quaker-initiated, it would not be Quaker-administered, for their enterprise failed to produce a single Quaker settlement. Few Scottish immigrants were Quakers, and the few if any came as indentured servants.

Thus, the vision of Sir George Scott to proceed and arrange for the prison release and to bring persecuted Presbyterians and Quakers to the Port of Perth Amboy was affected. Scott's expedition was the most ambitious and, at the same time, the most tragic. Many of his passengers were from the dungeons of Dunnottar Castle as well as the notorious Bass Rock prison outside Edinburgh. More than 200 exiles departed Scotland in September 1685, aboard the ship *Henry and Francis*, including the preacher Scott promised to rid them of, Archibald Riddell, who had been released from Bass Rock prison.



Robert Barclay (1648-1690)
www.quakercloud.org

The voyage had been disastrous. The ship was badly ventilated, had insufficient fresh water, was almost unlit below decks, and reeked throughout with the stench of excrement, vomit, and bilge. The main mast split in two, and there were days and nights on the end of mountainous tempestuous seas. The noise, with the wind screaming through the rigging, the slamming of sails, the creaking of timbers and the eternal wash of saltwater thudding against the side or crashing over the bowsprit, alarmed the already frightened passengers of the *Henry and Francis* with terrifying persistence. The main occupation of the passengers soon became simple survival.

Sickness soon broke out, especially among those who had been prisoners in the great vaults at Dunnottar and Bass Rock Prisons. "Jail fever"—typhus, no doubt—added to the already unhealthy tone of the voyage, and the moaning of the sick could be heard throughout the ship. To add to this misery, the food was bad, causing an outbreak of ptomaine poisoning. It was not unusual for three or four dead bodies at a time to be thrown overboard daily. Evening prayers with the recitation of the Twenty-third Psalm began to double as a funeral service, including for Sir George Scott and his wife, Lady Margaret, and her sister, Lady Athlernie, and her two children.

This voyage—accompanied by sorrow, sickness, and death—brought with it a strong strain of Scottish blood to mingle with that of the other exiles who have helped make this country what it has since become. After a melancholy passage of three months, with days of pitching, rolling, and swaying through storms and squalls, on December 7, 1685 about 130 persons arrived in the tidewater capital of New Scotland—Perth Amboy. At last they had limped into a safe harbor on the western shore of Raritan Bay.

Perth Amboy

The original vision of the Twenty-Four Proprietors of East Jersey was to establish a colony for persecuted Scottish Quakers. Their plan was to help those who were oppressed and suffering, and to rescue prisoners and exiles by offering them a place to live that embraced religious toleration. The proprietors chose Robert Barclay, the most Quaker apologist of the seventeenth century, as governor without requirement of residence. Barclay appointed Thomas Rudyard, a London attorney, as his deputy governor. Though not himself a Quaker, he had been of service and the personal council of William Penn.

Perth Amboy was set aside in the Woodbridge Charter of June 1, 1669, and became the port of entry for both Quaker and Calvinist Non-conformist Presbyterian Covenanters who would subsequently establish the Presbyterian Church in America and Perth Amboy as their capital on November 23, 1683. As a result, four ship loads of persecuted Quakers and evangelical Presbyterian Scotch Covenanters from Edinburgh, Montrose, Aberdeen, and Kelso arrived in Perth Amboy between 1683 and 1685.



James Drummond, 4th Earl of Perth
(1648-1716)
www.wikipedia.org

Named for proprietor James Drummond, the Earl of Perth, Scotland, Perth Amboy became the home of the proprietary leaders, the headquarters of the Board of Proprietors and the capital of East Jersey between 1686 and 1702. It later became the twin capital of the Royal Province of New Jersey from 1702 to 1776.

The Earl of Perth was unsympathetic to the cause of the religiously persecuted Covenanters and Quakers of Scotland. But they could be useful developing the proprietor's East Jersey's lands. Scotland was also beginning to feel the need of colonies as a vent for her surplus population. Poor soil and petty industries had long been unequal to the task of furnishing a livelihood for all whom the country produced.

Four major settlement voyages were made between 1683 and 1688, departing from Aberdeen and Edinburgh, Scotland, for Perth Amboy, as well as a number of lesser Scotland-arranged sailings from other ports. Perhaps 700 Scots immigrated to East Jersey through Perth Amboy during this period. While not a large number (Penn brought several thousand colonists to Pennsylvania during the same period), it was indicative of some success. Such Scottish estate names as "Plaine field" (John Barclay's estate), "Spoteswood" (Dr. John Johnstone's family estate), and "Aberdeen" in Middlesex County, along with "Montrose" in Monmouth County, remain as present-day town names.

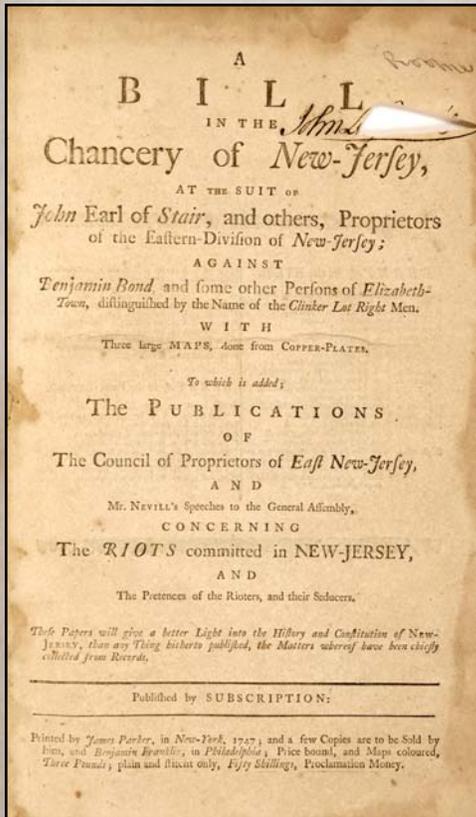
The Scottish Proprietors of East Jersey had different settlement concepts modeled on the large estate settlements of northeast Scotland on the North Sea. They insisted that land holdings be set out in large estate properties, generally 2,000 acres or more, with no lot smaller than 500 acres. This new system created two different types of land ownership in the colony—small homesteads of yeomen farmers clustered around towns, and the vast estates of the proprietors, many of who remained in England and Scotland, leasing the land they owned and collecting rent. The large estate properties existing today in Monmouth and Somerset Counties reflect the land titles that were established under the Scottish proprietors.

Woodbridge Quakers

The Quakers who had arrived in Perth Amboy held their first monthly meeting there on August 3, 1686. They then moved to Woodbridge, joining with Woodbridge Quakers, and began meeting in the home of Benjamin Griffith on August 17, 1689.

They challenged expected norms by refusing to contribute toward the support of "the public ministry" of the Congregational Theocracy. Further, their "Peace Testimony" rejected violence and supported alternative ways of resolving and engaging in conflicts, meaning they refused militia service. They had come to hate war not only because it kills off the flower of every nation, but also because it destroys spiritual as well as material values.

In 1713 the Woodbridge Society of Friends built a meetinghouse at what is today 71 Main Street. Later in the eighteenth century, because of their refusal to bear arms in the Revolutionary War, they would be pressured by their anti-British Presbyterian neighbors to sell the meetinghouse and burial ground in 1784 to a very early group of Woodbridge Methodists. Quakerism has remained a small sect in East Jersey to this day.



“A Bill in the Chancery of New-Jersey” was published in 1747 by Woodbridge printer James Parker in the ongoing title disputes.

www.nj.gov

Conflicting Titles

Conflicting titles to property were created by subsequent grants from Governor Richard Nicholls of New York to the Monmouth Associates, and to the Newark, Elizabethtown, and Woodbridge inhabitants. These conflicted with previous claims based on deeds with Native Americans or possession under Governor Carteret's patents. Untangling this mess required considerable tact and careful handling by the East Jersey Proprietors when their patent was granted in 1683. They were called on to exercise authority over a body of townships which had each an independent civic existence. The rule of the Twenty-Four Proprietors went fairly smoothly until the nagging dispute over land titles erupted into full-scale rebellion in 1700.

In theory the Twenty-four Proprietors were stepping into the position occupied by Carteret, a position of territorial possession and political sovereignty. The Duke of York had granted the Proprietors all his rights not only over the soil but also jurisdiction and government subject only to rights inherent in the Crown.

The East Jersey Board of Proprietors claimed ownership of all East Jersey, and the right to a system of quitrents imported from England. In earlier times, feudal law held that a tenant living on land owned by a noble—the landlord—was obligated to perform various services for them in return. Since most of the landowners of East Jersey lived in England or Scotland, taxes on the land—called quitrents—took the place of directly serving the landowner. In addition to providing income to the landlords, this also funded the local administration of government. The Board of Proprietors in 1683 assessed the 60 Woodbridge “patentees” for 30,393 total acres a yearly rental of £27.17½ English sterling. However, this manor system of paying government expenses was not successfully transplanted to the province of East Jersey.

East Jersey men disliked paying for the expenses of government. They pleaded that their country was too poor to support any system of taxation. The insistence of proprietors upon collecting quitrents caused unending strife under whatever proprietor or governor.

At the time Charles II was creating the proprietary colony of New Jersey, the Lords of Trade and Plantations, and the Board of Trade of England, which succeeded them in 1696, exerted unrelenting pressure upon the Crown to convert such plantations of the Jerseys into a crown colony. The East Jersey settlers argued for self-

government, not what they saw as the pretended powers of government of the proprietary.

All kinds of resistance developed, even to the extent of rioting, jailbreaks, and avoiding the serving of legal papers. It was one of the underlying causes of the surrender to Queen Anne in 1702 of the Proprietor's right to govern. The final decade of the proprietary period (1692–1702) witnessed the virtual disintegration of proprietary authority. Unresolved battles over individual land titles lasted until being subsumed by the Revolution.

Throughout the period, mobs refusing to recognize proprietary ownership rioted, broke those arrested out of jails, and assaulted the courts. Respect for the law was at low ebb. The Proprietors were under a financial strain to pay for issues of the province concerning the militia, defending the frontier, customs duties, infrastructure, quitrent arrears and court cases related to the land.

Many questions had been raised during the seventeenth century about the legality of the Proprietor's right to govern. All this and more contributed to the decision by the Board of Trade in England in late 1701 to recommend the province be placed under royal rule.

These questions were resolved effective April 15, 1702, when Proprietor Dr. John Johnstone, representing the East Jersey Board of Proprietors, signed the document ceding the their right to govern to the Crown and Queen Anne. Two days later the Proprietors of West Jersey offered up their political rights also as a sacrifice, but retained their rights to all lands they owned under the original royal grant or for which no clear title existed, and continued to be prominent in New Jersey government, receiving important appointments from the Crown.

The End of Proprietary Rule

The two Jerseys (East and West) were now united to form a single royal province under one royal governor, and so began a new era in the political history of New Jersey. The government authority had passed from the self-serving hands of the Proprietors to a ponderous bureaucracy in England, assisted by royal appointees and royal—all officers of the Crown.

Operating out of their last Surveyor General's Office in Perth Amboy from 1852 until 1998, the contemporary proprietors of East Jersey realized that they had no more land to sell and voted themselves out of business, bringing to an end one of the oldest corporations in the British world.

During the nearly 40 years of proprietary rule, the firm foundations of representative self-government were laid in New Jersey. The colonists had made for themselves a way of life that reflected their deep and varied aspirations. New Jersey's characteristic disunity extends back to the years of early settlement, with the separate provinces of East Jersey created by Puritans and West Jersey created by Quakers.



Queen Anne (1665-1714)
www.wikipedia.org

