

New Castle Court House Museum
ALL PHOTOS—NPS / MARK MUSE UNLESS OTHERWISE CREDITED

For more than 300 years,

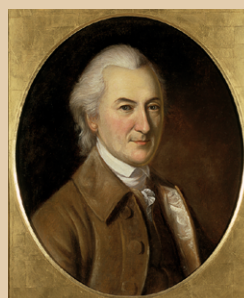
on a fraught and uneven course, people in Delaware have worked to pursue human rights and self-determination for themselves and others. As with the nation as a whole, the journey has never been straightforward. Questions and contradictions in the First State story expose threads of conflict, personal motivations of altruism and self-

interest, and social forces that shaped a centuries-long pursuit for civil and human rights. Today, First State National Historical Park encompasses places and events related to the founding of the nation, the ratification of the US Constitution—and well beyond. The story evolves as each new generation finds its voice.

Colony to Constitution

The 1500s saw big European powers competing for empire and colonizing the Americas. By the 1600s and early 1700s they were sending a steady stream of colonists to what are now New Jersey and

Pennsylvania. Swedes, Dutch, and Finns left their home countries to pursue economic prosperity in the region, building forts and settlements along the Delaware Bay and river. The newcomers encountered the Lenape people and soon adopted their travel networks over local waterways. In 1681 King Charles II of England granted William Penn land in Pennsylvania, including the “Lower Three Counties” on the west bank of Delaware Bay. Penn’s colony became a refuge for the persecuted



John Dickinson was a Continental Congress delegate, primary author of the Articles of Confederation, and drafter and signer of the US Constitution. Enslaved and free laborers were at his Poplar Hall estate (shown below in part).
COURTESY INDEPENDENCE NHP

Society of Friends (Quakers). Unlike other colonial governors, Penn extended freedom of religion to outsiders. The three Delaware counties grew to resent Pennsylvania’s Quaker-led assembly and in 1704 established their own legislature in New Castle.

During the American Revolution the state capital moved to Dover. In December 1787 state legislators met at the Golden Fleece Tavern on The Dover Green to ratify the US Constitution, making Delaware the First State. The new constitution would soon face a series of challenges.



The Lenape people had long inhabited the Mid-Atlantic region and in the 1860s were moved to Oklahoma. Jennie Bobb and Nellie Longhat are shown there in 1915.

NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHIVES / SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



The Constitution Tested

In the first decades of the 1800s the issue of slavery divided the nation. Delaware’s northern border marked the frontier between slave states and free states, securing its role in human migration and self-emancipation efforts that became known as the Underground Railroad.

Its most famous conductor, Harriet Tubman, crossed the state at least a dozen times to shepherd freedom-seekers north from Maryland’s Eastern Shore. In 1857 a group from Tubman’s home county was betrayed in Dover for a \$3,000 reward. The Dover Eight managed to escape and elude capture.



Samuel Burris, a free man from Philadelphia, was captured in Dover in 1847 and convicted of helping a woman escape slavery in Delaware. He was sentenced to seven years of enslavement. Abolitionists posing as buyers rescued Burris on the auction block.
NPS

In 1848 abolitionists Thomas Garrett and John Hunn were tried on federal charges at the New Castle Court House for violating the Fugitive Slave Act. They were found guilty and received hefty fines. Garrett, formerly a prosperous business owner, was unrepentant and continued his work.

In 1920 the First State played a new role in constitutional history. Only one more state was needed to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the vote. Mabel Lloyd Ridgely, Florence Bayard Hilles, and others advocated tirelessly, but the legislature declined to vote—which counted as a “no.”

Hilles traveled to Tennessee to work for passage there. Two months later Tennessee ratified the amendment, and it became law on August 26.

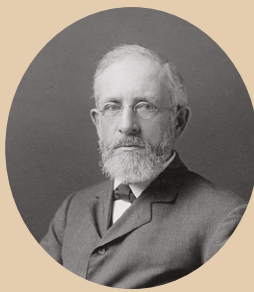


Mabel Lloyd Ridgely, 1872–1962, suffragist and preservationist, raised money to restore Delaware historical sites like John Dickinson’s Poplar Hall. Her house on The Dover Green is beside where The Golden Fleece Tavern stood.
DELAWARE PUBLIC ARCHIVES



Pro-suffrage rally on The Dover Green, 1920
NATIONAL WOMAN'S PARTY

Caring for Lands and Legacies



William Poole Bancroft (1835–1928) came from a family of Wilmington industrialists. Quaker values led him to champion improved factory workers. A love of nature inspired him to improve access to lands like Brandywine Valley (background).

The story of William Bancroft unfolds in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when industry was both the source of vast fortunes and the cause of wealth disparity. Bancroft’s textile mills led to congested urban conditions where working families lacked access to open space.

In 1901 Bancroft set up the charitable Woodlawn Trustees to ensure affordable housing

and “wise development.” But the benefits did not extend to all. The group’s policies segregated African Americans in housing, schools, and other institutions.

In part through acts of conscience by Wilmington’s Quakers, the trustees were led to comply with federal civil rights legislation. In 1972 the trustees adopted a housing nondiscrimination

policy and implemented changes a local newspaper described as “a model of integration.”

Delaware’s natural resources were historically valued for serving human needs. Today, due to Bancroft and others, they are shared with current and future generations.

First State, Lasting Legacy

Established as a national monument in 2013 and a national historical park in 2014, First State has six sites operated by state, local, and nonprofit partners who provide visitor programs and services. The park Welcome Center and headquarters are in Historic New Castle. Use the NPS App to guide your visit.

ACCESSIBILITY We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Information for each site is on the website.

FOR YOUR SAFETY The park is a mix of federal, state, local, and private property. Respect owner privacy. • Be careful while crossing streets and bicycling.

Emergencies call 911

MORE INFORMATION

First State National Historical Park
c/o Welcome Center
10 Market St.
New Castle, DE 19720
302-544-6363
www.nps.gov/frst
Follow us on social media.

Learn about national parks at www.nps.gov.

National Park Foundation.
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

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BRANDYWINE VALLEY



Brandywine Valley preserves over 1,300 acres of farms, winding roads, forested hillsides, and stream valleys characteristic of northern Delaware and southern Pennsylvania. This landscape reveals evidence of 1700s English Quaker settlements and the early 1900s conservationist vision of Quaker industrialist William Poole Bancroft.

Smith Bridge Picnic Area
Wilmington, DE 19803
www.nps.gov/frst

OLD SWEDES HISTORIC SITE



Old Swedes Church is one of the oldest active congregations in the nation. Descendants of original Swedish colonists founded this church in 1698. The black walnut pulpit (*far left*) dates from the church's early years. The burial ground's 2,000 gravestones reveal hundreds of years of history. Operated by the Old Swedes Foundation.

606 North Church St.
Wilmington, DE 19801
www.oldswedes.org

FORT CHRISTINA

Swedish and Finnish settlers arrived at this spot on the Christina River in 1638 and named it for the Swedish queen. The riverside community thrived briefly until the rival Dutch, who settled other parts of Delaware, took control of the colony in 1655. Operated by the Kalmarnyckel Foundation.

1110 East 7th St.
Wilmington, DE 19801
www.kalmarnyckel.org



HISTORIC NEW CASTLE

New Castle served as Delaware's capital from 1707 to 1777. The courthouse was home to the Delaware legislature that voted for independence from Great Britain in 1776. The adjacent Green has been a space for civic gatherings for over 200 years. Operated by the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs.

New Castle Court House Museum
211 Delaware St.
New Castle, DE 19720
www.history.delaware.gov



THE DOVER GREEN



On December 7, 1787, state delegates met on The Green at the Golden Fleece Tavern (now gone). At this meeting Delaware became the first state to ratify the US Constitution. Historic buildings include the Old State House (*left*). Operated by First State Heritage Park.

First State Heritage Park
John Bell House
43 The Green
Dover, DE 19901
destateparks.com/History/FirstStateHeritage

JOHN DICKINSON PLANTATION



A strong advocate for American independence, John Dickinson wrote eloquently of liberty. Influenced by the Quakers, Dickinson freed his enslaved people by 1786. Operated by the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs.

340 Kitts Hummock Rd.
Dover, DE 19901
www.history.delaware.gov



0 5 Kilometers
0 5 Miles

- National Park Service site
- Urban area
- Other protected area

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