

DENNISONs in the Pennsylvania Warrant Registers, 1682-1748

from *Warrant Register Indexes (First Landowners of Pennsylvania: Colonial and State Warrant Registers in the PA Archives, Harrisburg, 1682-ca 1940)* (Ancestor Tracks CD, 2005); original documents at Pennsylvania Archives, 350 North St., Harrisburg, PA 17120

The documents in the case are digitized images of the original land registers of Pennsylvania. They, or their contents, are still in use as the official index to Pennsylvania land grants. The first of these documents, the Original Purchases register, recorded the names of all the investors to whom the Penns sold rights to Pennsylvania land—most of them Quakers—and the amount of land they had purchased, though not, unfortunately, the date of purchase. Many of these original purchasers never intended to take up land themselves, and the majority, who did, mostly subscribed for more than they needed, intending to sell or grant the balance to others, as “under purchasers”.

By acquiring rights to Pennsylvania land, the original purchasers in effect became sub-proprietors, or grantors, themselves, yet it gave them no title to any particular land. The acquisition of title was a three step process, and it applied equally to the original purchasers, to their under purchasers, and to newly arrived settlers who were not purchasers. First, a particular tract of land had to be roughly blocked out and a warrant to survey it had to be applied for. With that in hand, the prospective owner could legally settle on the land, and when convenient could apply for a survey to secure his exact boundaries. The final step in the acquisition of title was the application for patent. Once that was granted, the owner had full title to the land and could sell it to others by deed.

The Penn proprietors charged significant fees for granting warrants, surveys, and patents, proportioned to the acreage of the land. This deterred many people, including original purchasers, from perfecting their title until they were quite sure that they had a specific use for a specific piece of land. Even with just a survey, or just a warrant, though, the settler had the right to live on his land, and also to sell it, by simply assigning the warrant and/or survey to another—albeit without the protection of law. But without a survey, the owner was always vulnerable to encroachments by neighbors, and as noted, land which was merely under warrant was sometimes claimed by others and even warranted to them by the authorities, so that perfection of title by patent was always a desiderata.

The Original Purchases register served not only as a record of the rights held by the original purchasers, but also of their actions as sub-proprietors. An entry was made under their names when they warranted part of their land, or had it surveyed, or simply granted it to others to warrant and survey. The amount of land involved in these transactions was noted and sometimes the general location, as well as the name of the grantee (or “himself”), and dates were recorded for warrants and surveys, but no dates were noted for outright grants to others. Nor, it seems, was there any accounting for purchase rights not exercised: there are a number of original purchasers listed, along with the acreage they were entitled to warrant, but with no record that they ever exercised their rights or disposed of them to others, and there are also many cases where the parcels warranted or transferred do not add up to the amount of the original purchase rights. I conclude, therefore, that what the Penns sold to their investors were simply options on acquiring a certain amount of land in Pennsylvania, at the fixed price represented by the processing fees. No doubt many of those who purchased these options but were unable to attract buyers without coming to Pennsylvania themselves, simply walked away from their options.

It has been said that the proprietors did such a poor job of keeping track of the warrants and surveys that they had accepted, that there were many overlaps and resulting ownership controversies, and this is borne out in the many notes on the resolution of these controversies in the official survey documents, which, by the way, the Pennsylvania Archives have placed online [here](#). At any rate, they made a good decision in 1733 when they set up separate registers for each county. This was a step in the right direction, and in 1759, the Pennsylvania Assembly also ordered that all the pre-1733 warrants be copied into a separate set of Old Rights registers, one for Philadelphia, and one for Bucks and Chester Counties. Unexplained is what happened to any warrants issued for land in Lancaster County from 1729, when it was created, to 1733.

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I have carefully scanned all the official land grant indexes for Pennsylvania for the initial proprietary period (1682-1748) looking for DENNISONs—that is, the Original Purchases from Penn register, the “Old Rights” registers for Bucks, Chester, and Philadelphia counties, and the county warrant registers for Bucks, Chester, Lancaster, and Philadelphia—all the Pennsylvania counties created before 1749.

In the Original Purchases Register there is an entry for John Dennison’s purchase of 1250a, but there is no record that any of this land was ever warranted, and thus taken up. Evidently this John Dennison never exercised his option to Pennsylvania land..

There are no DENNISON entries in the Old Rights Register.

There are three DENNISON entries in the county books, two for John Dennistons, but since these were filed at least a generation later than John Dennison’s original purchase, which was never exercised (or apparently used in warranting this land) it is very unlikely that this John of 1738 and 1739 was the same man.

The County Warrant Registers

BUCKS Co (original county, created in 1682)

Warr#	Name of Warrantee	Warrant To	Warrant Location	Acreage claimed	Warrant Date	Survey Date	Acreage Surveyed	Name of Patentee	Patent Recorded	Survey Recorded
365	Dennison, Andrew	survey	HaycockRun	50	12Dec1745	7Mar1775	51.51	Aaron Klinker	AA15:374	C39:267

LANCASTER Co (created in 1729 from ChesterCo)

Warr#	Name of Warrantee	Warrant To	Warrant Location	Acreage claimed	Warrant Date	Survey Date	Acreage Surveyed	Name of Patentee	Patent Recorded	Survey Recorded
80	Denniston, John	survey	Salisbury	203	5Feb1739	5Feb1739	253	John Denniston	A10: 57	C39:105

The notes for [Survey C39:105](#) show that the original warrantee of this land was William Hazlett, and that Hazlett had it surveyed “14:6^m 1639” (presumably 14Aug1739). Then, on 5Feb1739[/40] John Denniston, having evidently purchased the surveyed land from Hazlett, was granted a warrant to accept the survey, and two days later, on the 7Feb1739[/40] he was granted a patent. This land, in Salisbury Township, was at the head of branches of both Pequea Creek and Brandywine Creek, which provides a very specific place locator to backstop the official township map of original patentees.

PHILADELPHIA Co (original county, created 1682)

Warr#	Name of Warrantee	Warrant To	Warrant Location	Acreage claimed	Warrant Date	Survey Date	Acreage Surveyed	Name of Patentee	Patent Recorded	Survey Recorded
12	Denniston, John	survey	Hopewell	250	27Sep1738	----	180.121	See #17“R”-Lanc.		B23: 36 B17:154

The note on the B23:36 survey, and the survey at B17:154 show that although this tract is now FranklinCoPA, and was indeed warranted to John Denniston on 27Sep1738, it was also warranted to John Rannels [Reynolds or Randall?] on 6Oct1738, surveyed in 1802, resurveyed in 1806 for Daniel Huston (B17:154), and patented to others with “No evidence of Deniston war[ran]t having been executed on the land....” I don’t understand the reference to “#17 “R” in the LancasterCo register: that is for a tract of land warranted 17Apr1734 by Israel Robinson, who vacated it in favor of Thomas Johnston who patented it.