

Old Billy, We Sure Do Love You

By Morri Namasté

City Halls serve a unique function for municipalities. Aside from housing most governmental services, these buildings are viewed as a reflection of the city's cultural climate. Some are modern and some not so much. But they are a point of pride, mostly, to the citizens. So it is with all towns regardless of size.

William Penn was born in London in 1684 to an aristocratic family and was a troubled youth, at least in terms of his father's view. This was a time in England when various religious orders emerged and were sources of great conflict. Billy chose to be involved with what came to be called the Quakers. Due to his pronouncements he was jailed once or twice, and, as the story goes, when acquitted by a jury the judge refused to accept the verdict and jailed Billy and the jurors. His father was a well accomplished military man so upon his death young Billy was given a large land grant by the King for what is now known as Pennsylvania and Delaware. Delaware wasn't too keen on Quakers so they petitioned for relief. Billy set up a grid for the city of Philadelphia to make it navigable, unlike his hometown of London. There were many accomplishments so he was to be honored.

Standing high atop Philadelphia's City Hall Building is the statue of William Penn, a most revered figure in Pennsylvania's history. Completed in 1894, he stands thirty-seven feet tall and weighs nearly twenty-seven tons which translates into over 106 thousand cheesesteak sandwiches in Philly speak. The statue is hollow inside with internal stairs leading up to the top. This allows for periodic cleaning and such, but far more important to the residents of Philly is that this access allows Old Billy to be adorned with hats and jerseys of their beloved sports teams.

Controversy ensued when the architect, designer or some such person made a decision as to which way Billy would face. The prevailing view was that he should face towards the south allowing for greater sunshine and visibility. But it was not to be. Billy was positioned facing the northeast, towards the site where he and the neighboring Lenape Indian tribe negotiated a peace treaty. But there were other more serious controversies to be reckoned with as time went on.

For almost ninety years there was an agreement of sorts that no building in Center City could be taller than his hat. It ended, as most agreements do, when there was money to be made. Twin towers were approved much to the chagrin of the Philly faithful. It was felt that a curse was placed on the city that took the form of no Philly sports teams ever winning a championship. This deal was brokered in 1985 which was five years after the Phillies World Series victory. None since. Finally in 2007 the proprietors of the Comcast Building, now the tallest in the city, made the decision to place a much smaller statue of Billy atop their building thus restoring Billy to his glory. The Phillies won the World Series the very next year, followed by the Eagles in 2018. The simple moral of the story ... Don't Mess with Billy.