

Early Settlement

Initial European activity in the vicinity of present day Camden occurred along the banks of the Delaware River where the Dutch and the Swedish vied for control of the local fur trade. Fort Nassau, built by the Dutch West India Company in 1626, was the first European attempt at settlement in the area. Located within the present boundaries of Gloucester City, the fort served as a trading center and storehouse until 1651 at which time it was dismantled. English expeditions occurred as early as 1620, but the monarchy, consumed with domestic and European wars, did not have the power to enforce their claims against the Dutch or the Swedes.



Following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, King Charles II granted all the lands between the Delaware and Connecticut Rivers to his brother, the Duke of York. In turn, the Duke of York gave a portion of these lands between the Hudson and Delaware River (New Jersey) to two loyal courtiers, Sir George Carteret and Lord John Berkeley. Soon after, Berkeley was beset by financial problems and in 1673 sold his half of New Jersey to Quakers John Fenwick and Edward Byllynge. Fenwick took modern Cumberland and Salem Counties as is share, but Byllynge had to sell his share due to financial difficulties. Rescued by a group of Quaker trustees, (William Penn among them), Byllynge's lands were divided into 90 shares of 20,000 acres each and offered at 150 a share to men interested in creating a Quaker colony. A document entitled "The Concession", which promised religious freedom, representative government and fair taxation, was created to attract the Quakers who had long suffered persecution in England. In order to further facilitate settlement, the land was divided into tenths. The Third tenth, often referred to as the Irish tenth due to early settlements of Irish Quakers, comprises modern day Camden County.

By 1700, Quaker colonists had begun to reshape the West Jersey environment. Indians and settlers coexisted peacefully, but the European presence altered Indian life drastically. The native inhabitants, the Lenni Lenape, were peaceful hunters and gatherers who resided along streams in wigwams or long houses. English encroachment upon their woods and streams, and the use of other natural resources taxed the Indians' survival. The introduction of alcohol and the exposure of the Indians to infectious, diseases to which they had no inherent immunity further dwindled Indian populations. A half-century after settlement, virtually no Indians remained in the Third Tenth.

Europeans continued to settle in the improve the area. Much of the growth directly resulted from the success of another Quaker colony across the Delaware River. Philadelphia, founded in 1682, soon had enough population to attract a brisk trade from West Jersey. To accommodate the trade across the river, a string of ferries began operation.