

Pennsylvania

Hello, my name is Christopher Hoh. I work in the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, and I was born and brought up in the “the Keystone State.”

Pennsylvania was one of the original 13 colonies. It was called the Keystone State in the 18th century because of its central location and role in U.S. history. The first capital of the United States was in Philadelphia.

Before it was colonized, the area was home to Native American tribes, including the Lenape and the Susquehannok. One of Pennsylvania’s main rivers is called the Susquehanna.

The name Pennsylvania means, “Penn’s Woods.” In 1681, England’s King Charles II gave the land to William Penn as payment for a debt of 16,000 pounds. This was one of the largest land grants to an individual in history – 45,000 square miles, more than 116,000 square kilometers.

William Penn was a member of the Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, who were persecuted in England. So Penn established the colony for any people persecuted for their faith.

Many religious exiles from Europe settled in Pennsylvania, including the Amish, an Anabaptist sect. Today, the Amish live much as they did in the 17th century, without modern conveniences such as electricity and cars.

In the 18th and 19th centuries Germans migrated to Pennsylvania in large numbers. English-speakers mispronounced the German word, “Deutsch,” as “Dutch,” and these immigrants became known as the “Pennsylvania Dutch.”

In many Pennsylvania communities, German was spoken as the language of everyday life into the early 1900’s. You can still hear German dialects in the farmers’ markets of Lancaster and Reading, my home town.

There are folk festivals and academic studies of Pennsylvania Dutch language and culture. The language is similar to Germany’s Palatinate dialect. For example, the man’s dog – der Hund des Mannes – is this in PA Dutch – em Mann sei Hund.

Today, 12.7 million people live in Pennsylvania, the sixth most populous state in the U.S. It covers over 46,000 square miles (more than 119,000 km²).

Pennsylvania has more untouched forest per square mile than any other state and more than 140 state parks and forests. Naturally, it’s known for hunting and wildlife.

Much of the state is agricultural. Pennsylvania is the No. 1 producer of mushrooms in the U.S. and a top source of apples and Christmas trees.

Pennsylvania has several large cities. Philadelphia was known in the 1700's as the "Athens of America" because of its rich cultural life.

Part of that is attributed to Pennsylvania's most famous citizen, Benjamin Franklin – author, inventor, philosopher, businessman, diplomat and revolutionary leader.

Philadelphia is also home to the Liberty Bell, the icon of American freedom. It remains on view, cracked, on Independence Mall, where the Continental Congress met and in 1776 declared independence from Britain.

"Philly" as the city is known was also famous for the arts. Francis Hopkinson, a delegate to the Continental Congress, was the first classical composer in the colonies.

The city of Pittsburgh was the gateway to the American west and the birthplace of the industrial revolution. Pennsylvanians first produced Conestoga wagons used for westward expansion.

Coal and iron were major contributors to the railroads, to Pennsylvania's growth and to American prosperity. For years Pittsburgh was known for its steel industry, but today it is more economically diverse.

Two of the country's first colleges are in Pennsylvania – the College of Philadelphia, today the University of Pennsylvania, and Dickinson College, the first founded after independence.

Here are some other firsts from Pennsylvania:

The first medical school, hospital, library and insurance company were established in there.

The first commercially drilled oil well near Titusville produced the first U.S. oil boom in 1859.

The first U.S. Envoy to Austria in 1838 was Henry A.P. Muhlenberg, from Lancaster.

And the Philadelphia Zoo is the oldest zoo in America.

My hometown, Reading, is located in southeastern Pennsylvania. Formerly a textile and manufacturing center, Reading became known as "The Factory Outlet Capital of the World."

The surrounding area has been called the "Snack Food Capital of the World," leading all other states in the production of pretzels, chips and candy. Sturgis Pretzel Bakery in Lititz was the first commercial pretzel producer and the family uses the same recipe as they did in 1861.

The state has some other interesting food facts.

The Yuengling Brewery, in Pottsville, is the oldest operating brewery in America, established in 1829.

A little further west is Hershey, the birthplace of Hershey chocolate bars. The town smells of chocolate and the street lights are shaped like Hershey kisses.

Pennsylvania is also known for its chicken pot pie and scrapple. In Amish country, you'll find a variety of pies, including their specialty, Shoo Fly Pie. And don't forget Philly cheese steaks.

Pennsylvania gave birth to one US President – James Buchanan in the 1800s. More recently, General Dwight Eisenhower retired to his beloved farm outside Gettysburg, PA and from there launched his winning Presidential campaign.

Vice President Joe Biden was born in Scranton.

Many actors also come from Pennsylvania including Kevin Bacon, Bill Cosby, Tina Fey and Sharon Stone, to name a few. And a famous family of actors – the Barrymores – Ethel, John and Lionel, also hailed from Pennsylvania.

Artist Mary Cassat lived in Allegheny City and pop pioneer Andy Warhol came from Pittsburgh. The 80's experimentalist Keith Haring was born in Reading.

Pennsylvania has always had a creative music scene. Each religious sect that settled in Pennsylvania brought with it a unique style of music. The Moravians, in Bethlehem, introduced organs and trombones into their worship. The Mennonites and Lutherans sang heartily, from German hymnbooks. And the Ephrata Cloister was known for beautiful harmony.

Southeastern Pennsylvania became a center of organ-building, and several fine instruments by the master builder David Tannenberg may still be heard.

Many famous singers also started out in Pennsylvania. Popular singers today include Taylor Swift, from Wyomissing, and Christina Aguilera and George Benson, from Pittsburgh.

Philadelphia is also the birthplace of the famous TV program, "American Bandstand," which introduced singers and bands to teenagers for more than 20 years.

I travel the world but I still have a strong connection to my home state:

I'm a career diplomat – like Benjamin Franklin, our country's first envoy. I'm also a composer who benefited from my home state's musical milieu.

And, of course, I love all kinds of food, especially pretzels!

I'm proud to come from Pennsylvania, the land of the Liberty Bell, which helped inspire the cause of freedom for all humanity.