

# THE LIVING SPIRIT OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

By Mary Patterson McPherson



The American Philosophical Society, held in Philadelphia “for promoting useful knowledge”,<sup>1</sup> is the oldest learned society in the United States and now one of the liveliest organisations of its kind in the scholarly world.

In 2011 the Society includes 813 domestic and 162 international Members from 26 countries. In addition to its biannual meetings for members and friends, it supports a major research library, active fellowship and publication programs, and a small museum that has attracted since its opening in 2001 more than 600 000 visitors.

The Society is housed in four handsomely appointed buildings: Philosophical Hall (built in 1789, renovated last in 1998-1999), Library Hall (built in 1959, renovated in 2005-2008), Benjamin Franklin Hall (acquired in 1981; renovated in 1987) and Richardson Hall (acquired in 2000; renovated in 2003). Its endowment, which supports 75% of the Society’s operation, is currently approximately \$130 million.

The Society we know today emerged from a union of several earlier societies, each of which profited from the intellectual energy of Benjamin Franklin (A).<sup>2</sup> In 1727, Franklin brought together a group of congenial friends in a club called the *Junto* which was concerned largely with the mutual improvement of its members and the public benefit

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *A proposal for promoting useful knowledge among the British plantations in America*, (May 14, 1743). Franklin printed his renowned Proposal; in a double folio sheet. Originals are in the Library of Congress and in the Mason-Franklin Collection at Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> (A), (B) and (C) designations - Before the union of The American Philosophical Society and the American Society into the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge in 1769... there were members of both societies and members of either society. It is impossible to establish the date of election of many of these members. Accordingly, in the list... those marked (A) were members of the two societies at the time of the union, (B) those who were members only of the American Philosophical Society, and (C) those who were members only of the American Society.

~ Mary Patterson McPherson ~

of Philadelphia. This group shared ideas and experiences rather than what became a later focus — discoveries and inventions.



*Philosophical Hall photographed by Frank Margeson, courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.*

In this period, several Philadelphians had regular correspondence with Members of the Royal Society of London, to which 19 Americans had been elected before 1743, and they were also knowledgeable of the purposes and work of the Dublin Philosophical Society founded in 1731 “for improving husbandry, manufactures and other useful arts”.

In 1739, John Bartram (A), a Philadelphia Quaker farmer with an interest in botany and natural history, had correspondence with, among others, Peter Collinson, a British botanist and member of the Royal Society, who imported seeds from North America and later financed the travels of Bartram who provided him with seeds and plants from the Colonies. Bartram became enamored with creating in America a Society like the Royal Society to promote inquiries into “natural secrets,

arts and sciences". His plan included procuring a house, and the sponsorship of lectures and expeditions. Though the idea was considered at that time too ambitious, it was picked up four years later by Franklin, who revised and simplified it, and offered his fellow Americans "a proposal for promoting useful knowledge among the British plantations in America".<sup>3</sup>

The proposal was simple: to provide an opportunity for 'virtuosi, or ingenious men' from across the colonies to come together to share their observations, experiments and research. Through these exchanges, new ideas could be generated, and the work of one man could benefit from the insights and scrutiny of another. More important, such collaborations could yield inventions and improvements of use to a broad public.

The new Society began to hold meetings in 1744 and elected persons such as naturalist, Dr. John Mitchell (B) of Virginia, and mathematicians James Alexander (B) and Cadwallader Colden (B) of New York. But after a few meetings, interest lagged and Franklin found the Philadelphia Members, upon whom success depended, "very idle gentlemen; they will take no pains". In 1746 most activities ceased. In the 1760s younger Philadelphians, sympathetic to the resistance to the Stamp Act, and interested in strengthening the Colonies economically as well as politically, formed a new American Society for promoting useful knowledge.

Charles Thomson (C), later secretary of the Continental Congress, spelled out its program: "improved methods of farming, including the breeding of livestock, new medicines and cures for specific diseases, new manufactures and improvements in the old, new sources of mineral wealth". He made it clear that other useful subjects would be most welcome.

In 1768 then, there were two Societies with similar purpose, organisation and program. Interestingly, both were inter-colonial and

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<sup>3</sup> Franklin, *A proposal for promoting useful knowledge*.

international though the Members had rather different political and religious leanings.

Annoyed at the success of the newer Society, Members of the original American Philosophical Society concerned that they had not been invited to join, revived the older body. But good sense prevailed finally and the two Societies merged in January of 1769 becoming “the American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia for promoting useful knowledge” — with Franklin, then in England, as President.

The election of Franklin was not uncontested however. Supported by the Quakers’ anti-proprietary members, Franklin defeated Governor James Hamilton (B) who as a result never attended another meeting, and Thomas Penn declined the Society’s invitation to be its Patron. To Hamilton and Penn the reorganised Society must have seemed political opposition in another guise.

Franklin spent the next six years abroad serving the newly formed Society principally as a conduit for correspondence, gifts of books and notices of nominations and elections. Franklin did play an important role, however, as an ambassador to the older European societies by circulating the new world Society’s publications and thereby securing an exchange of *Transactions* and *Memoirs* and establishing the American Philosophical Society’s reputation.

The newly formed American Philosophical Society was saved early in its history from political squabbling by its involvement with a major project to study the transit of Venus and the planet’s atmosphere. An active Member of the Society, David Rittenhouse (A), was the first man to build a telescope in the Colonies. Astronomers who had been studying Venus chose Rittenhouse to take on this important investigation in 1769. Twenty-two telescope stations were set up, half of which were manned by Members of the Society. Rittenhouse calculated the distance from earth to sun to be 93 million miles. His report of the transit, published in the Society’s *Transactions*, was hailed by European scientists, helping to establish the reputation for the excellent work of the American Philosophical Society.

Rittenhouse — astronomer, inventor, clockmaker, mathematician and surveyor, who served as librarian, secretary, and, after Franklin's death in 1790, second President of the Society until 1769, went on to survey the Delaware-Pennsylvania border — work so precise it was simply incorporated in the *Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon's Survey of the Pennsylvania-Maryland Border*. A member also of the Royal Society, Rittenhouse was active in Pennsylvania politics and served as the first director of the United States Mint.

The American Revolution, with its attendant political controversies, put the Society into what one of its members described as a “languishing state”. It was only with the return of Benjamin Franklin in September 1785 from Paris that the Society was reinvented.

For years, as Franklin's popularity and reputation grew, scientists sent him their publications which he in turn used to build the Society's collection. At a meeting in the September of his return to Philadelphia, he presented at the American Philosophical Society meeting two scientific papers for discussion which reasserted the Society's purpose. Franklin proposed at that same meeting that Philosophical Hall be built to house the work of the Society, a project he later supported generously. The Society flourished under Franklin's direction, publishing, providing research support, and opening the new building, Philosophical Hall, next door to Independence Hall, in November of 1789. It remains the Society's headquarters today.

During the next half century the Society served the young nation as its library (later the Library of Congress), museum (later the Smithsonian), patent office and academy of sciences. Thomas Jefferson (1780)<sup>4</sup>, who served as the third President of the Society before, during and after he was President of the United States, called on its members frequently for advice. The Society, for example, under Jefferson's direction, prepared the scientific instruction for Meriwether Lewis (American Philosophical Society 1803) and William Clark, whose journals from their expedition Jefferson later deposited in the Society's

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<sup>4</sup> All bracketed dates following names will henceforth refer to the first year of membership to the American Philosophical Society.

library. Other departments of the government called often on its maps, scientific instruments, and publications.

Discoveries in new and applied sciences were encouraged and America's first museum was established at the American Philosophical Society in 1794 by Jefferson's close friend Charles Willson Peale (1786). He rented space for the museum, and his large family, in Philosophical Hall, and remained there for 15 years. Two of Peale's sons were born in the Hall. One appropriately was named Franklin.

Other notables also took up residence as tenants in the Hall during this period. Thomas Sully (1835), well-known portrait painter, had a studio and gallery in the Hall from 1812-1822 and the Society became the beneficiary of some of his best portraits.

John Vaughan, a Member of the Society since 1784, and Librarian from 1803 until his death in 1841 lived in the Hall after the Peales departed. For half a century, Vaughan collected books, prints and manuscripts for the library with relish. He begged institutions and individuals for gifts, and accessioned and catalogued every new acquisition himself.

The collection built by Vaughan was international in character from the first, particularly in the long runs of learned journals, *Transactions* and other publications of the Royal Society of London, as well as the academies of science of Berlin, Paris, St. Petersburg, Stockholm and Turin. Numbering about 60 exchanges in Vaughan's day, such exchanges amount to 272 today with journals coming in from across the world.

Following the Society's success in fostering the Lewis and Clark expedition in concert with the federal government, it continued to play a part in the development of science in the early Republic. At the request of the Secretary of War, members of the Society suggested subjects for scientific study and nominated people to accompany Major Stephen H. Long's 1919 expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Long (1823) sent a collection of plants to Philadelphia and a number of the expedition's reports were published in the Society's *Transactions*.

Similarly, the Society was active in planning the South Seas Expedition, commanded by Lieutenant Charles Wilkes (1843), which charted some two hundred islands, discovered the Antarctic continent and brought back natural history collections that helped develop the United States Botanical Garden, the National Herbarium, the Naval Observatory and the National Museum. Today the Society's collections include Titian Ramsay Peale's (1833) splendid watercolors and sketches documenting both the Long and Wilkes expeditions.

Major scientists of the period such as Robert Hare (1803), a pioneer in the study of salts; Joseph Henry (1835), the most notable physical scientist who worked on electromagnetism, and Alexander Dallas Bache (1829), a geophysicist famed for his research on terrestrial magnetism, all were actively involved in presenting papers and furthering the work of the Society.

Following the War of 1812, president of the Society, Peter S. DuPonceau, a French lawyer, (1791) with Albert Gallatin (1791) and Thomas Jefferson made the Society the center of ethno-history and Native American linguistics, a commitment continued today.

During the late 1700s and early 1800s several other learned societies based on the Philadelphia pattern were established. In 1786 the Connecticut Society of Arts and Sciences was established; Salem, Massachusetts in 1781 formed a Philosophical Library with books of the Irish chemist and physician, Dr. Richard Kirwan (1786, international member from England), part of the cargo of a British merchant vessel seized by an American privateer. New Yorkers tried unsuccessfully to set up a Society in 1784. Delaware's Philosophical Society on the other hand opened its lectures to the public including women — a first.

Other societies in Mississippi; Pittsburgh; Virginia and Washington, DC were organised with great appeal to amateurs of science throughout the nineteenth century.

The most successful and long-lasting Society other than the American Philosophical Society, however, was that founded by John Adams

(1780) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Though Adams found Philadelphia lacking in almost all respects compared with Boston, he did concede to his wife, Abigail, that “they have more wit than we. They have societies; the Philosophical Society particularly, which excites a scientific emulation, and promotes their fame. If ever I get through this scene of politics and war, I will spend the remainder of my days, in endeavoring to instruct my countrymen in the art of making the most of their abilities and virtues. An art, which they have hitherto, too much neglected. A philosophical society shall be established at Boston”.<sup>5</sup>

In 1780, the Academy was founded by James Bowdoin (1787), John Adams and John Hancock. Their objective, stated in the Charter, was to “cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity and happiness of a free, independent and virtuous people. Prominent men, also members of the American Philosophical Society, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington (1780), Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton (1780) soon joined the new Academy.

In 1838, the Academy urged that both institutions join to form an American Association for the Promotion of Science. But Joseph Henry, who had watched what had happened to the British Association for the Advancement of Science when they included enthusiastic amateurs, feared that the merger might weaken the effort to foster professional science in the United States, so Boston’s overture was politely declined by Philadelphia as inexpedient.

The next half century was less interesting than the first part of the 1800’s. For one reason, the Society’s position in the learned world was no longer preeminent. More specialised institutions sprang up like The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, and the government began to create its own scientific agencies, again with a more focused purpose — for example the Smithsonian, the Corps of Topographical

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<sup>5</sup> Little H. Butterfield, ed., *The Adams Papers: Adams Family Correspondence*, 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963): 75.



Engineers, the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

Even though it was a quieter period for the Society, excellent papers on a wide variety of subjects began to be published. Offerings in anthropology and archaeology took place in the *Transactions* and *Proceedings*, earlier awarded only to scientific papers, the best of which were now appearing in government sponsored publications.

The Society did support explorer Elisha Kent Kane (1851) in his Arctic explorations in the 1850s during which period Kane became something of a national celebrity. The Society also supported geological surveys and geological and ethnographic photography, including many photographs of North American Indians. The first real attempt to admit women members occurred in 1869 and three women were elected who stood at the top of their respective fields: Maria Mitchell, the first female astronomer in the United States of America; Mary Somerville, a well-known British mathematician, and Elizabeth Cabot Agassiz, naturalist and pioneer in women's education, founder and first president of Radcliffe College.

Franklin had brought the first woman Member into the Society in 1789, the Princess Ekaterina Romanova Dashkova, who was the Director of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. She and Franklin became acquaintances in Paris, their only meeting at the Hotel de la Chine on February 3, 1781. As she was invited by Franklin to the Society in Philadelphia, Franklin was invited to become a Member of the Russian Academy. But 80 years passed before another woman was elected and following the three elected in 1869, a very small number of women, often one a year, were elected until the mid-1980's when the pace began to pick up. By 2009, 234 women had been elected in the 266 years since the Society's founding.

Women now play an active role in the Society, giving talks at the Meetings, serving as officers of the American Philosophical Society and members of the committees that decide Society policy. Scientists, artists, humanists, social scientists, jurists, and administrators of leading colleges and universities, the women Members of the Society are now engaged in every aspect of the work of the American Philosophical

Society. Mary Maples Dunn (1999) was the first women executive officer serving jointly with her husband Richard S. Dunn (1998).

Thirteen Presidents of the United States have been elected to the American Philosophical Society beginning with George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison (1785), and John Quincy Adams (1818) — most prior to their election to the Presidency. Jefferson, the third president of the country, also served as the third president of the Society for 18 years. He deposited approximately 300 documents in the Society's Library including a handwritten draft of the Declaration of Independence and a first edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. His great interest in Native American peoples and their various languages led to a splendid collection which today serves as one of the jewels in the Library's crown.

Jefferson, in his letter of acceptance "to the Gentlemen of the Society, written from Monticello on January 28, 1797", when he was Vice President of the United States, notes, "The sufferage of a body which comprehend whatever the American world has of distinction in philosophy and science in general is the most flattering incident of my life, and that to which I am most sensible". He goes on to say, "I feel no qualification for this distinguished post but a sincere zeal for all the objects of our institution, and an ardent desire to see knowledge so disseminated through the mass of mankind that it may at length reach even the extremes of society, beggars and kings".

Later John Adams served as president of the country and of the Academy of Arts and Sciences, that he had helped found in Boston. Today the Academy, housed in the elegant quarters in Cambridge, is also a thriving organisation composed of 4,000 American and 600 foreign honorary members.

James Madison, member of the Society for 51 years, was also generous to the Library, depositing his extensive meteorological journals he kept at his plantation. Encouraged by Jefferson to keep such notes, Madison followed bird migrations, sowing and harvesting from approximately 1784 to 1802.

Several presidents of the country, Ulysses S. Grant (1868) and William Howard Taft (1909), were elected to the American Philosophical Society just as they began their service to the country and Theodore Roosevelt alone was elected during his Presidency, in 1906. Jimmy Carter (1991), the last American President to be elected to the Society, was recognised ten years after his term as President.

During the decades of the 1930s and 40s, the Society enjoyed particularly strong leadership and financial support. The programs supported by the Society today were put on a firm footing. A decision was made to keep the Society in its building, next to Independence Hall, on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, rather than moving to the Parkway; classes of membership were established and the finances of the Society stabilised thanks to a most generous bequest of \$4 million provided by Society member, Richard A.F. Penrose (1905), a Philadelphian by birth and a highly successful commercial geologist.

Today the Society follows quite closely the course charted by the Society's 1930s leaders, Edwin G. Conklin (1897), Roland S. Morris (1922) and Francis X. Dercum (1892). In 2011, Members are no longer concentrated in Pennsylvania and New England; they come from 34 states and 26 countries. The largest concentrations are in California (171), New York (143), Massachusetts (126), New Jersey (91), Pennsylvania (55) and England (50). Twelve South Africans have been elected to the Society; all but Helen Suzman are still living.

New Members are nominated by their peers in five "Classes" — the mathematical and physical sciences; the biological sciences and medicine; the social sciences; the humanities; and the professions, arts and public affairs. The members are invited to Philadelphia twice a year, in November and in April, to attend, present papers, and enjoy lively discussion with friends and colleagues. These meetings are not so different from those instituted by Franklin, whose portrait, along with those of Washington and Jefferson, hang above the speakers on the stage at the front of Benjamin Franklin Hall auditorium. The talks are webcast live, for the benefit of the public and are also archived on the Society's website. Papers are given on all topics from yacht making — given by a scientist member in Class 2, who had won an Olympic Gold

Medal in sailing — to the latest achievements in organ transplantation to a discussion by Supreme Court Justices on “How judges know what they know”. Though the meetings are open and many people watch on the Society’s website, it is really the other four Society programs that more directly serve the public.

Talks are published in the Society’s *Proceedings*. The Society has an unbroken record of publishing since 1771, producing a series of monographs (*Transactions*), scholarly books (*Memoirs*) and the quarterly journal (*Proceedings*). Recently the Society has also begun to publish electronically under the Lightning Rod Press with a print-on-demand option. Books are marketed by Amazon, Google and Yahoo and a number of the Society’s publications going back to its beginnings can be found in JSTOR (The Journal Storage Project).

In 2001, the Society reinstated a museum, housed again in Philosophical Hall, with the charge to interpret the Society’s rich collection and explore the intersections of history, art and science through thematic exhibitions, public programs, and educational outreach to students, teachers and the general public. The most recent show celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Darwin’s birth and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the *Origin of Species*. The Society has the largest collection of Darwin’s papers outside of Cambridge, England. This spring it will present its seventh show: *Of elephants and roses: Encounters with French natural history 1790-1830*.

The Society today is one of the leading providers of grants and fellowships for scholarly research. The Society has six fellowship programmes which have supported 15 500 scholars in the past seventy years. Two-hundred of the young scholars who received American Philosophical Society grants later were elected members of the Society. The grants are awarded on a competitive basis reviewed in most cases by committees composed of members in the relevant fields.



*Portrait of Benjamin Franklin by James Peale after that by David Martin,  
Photographed by Frank Margeson, courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.*

Among the programs are Franklin Research Grants, awarded for research related supplies or travel for study in libraries and museums, and the Lewis and Clark Grants for Exploration and Field Research in all Fields. Library Resident Research Fellowships are awarded to scholars working on materials held by the American Philosophical Society Library, and the Phillips Fund for Native American Research in culture and linguistics.

The largest program area outside of the membership and meetings is the splendid independent research library, one of the world's premier repositories for collections in early American history, Native American anthropology and linguistics, and the history of science, technology and medicine.

Scholars come from around the world to work in the Library or contact reference librarians for help with accessing materials for their work. The collection, which continues to grow as members deposit papers and the library secures materials in its collecting areas, consists of more than 10 million manuscripts and more than 300 000 printed items.

The Society's purpose, its early history and its membership throughout have been intertwined with the development of the country in most interesting ways. Initially the "men of speculation" who joined the Society included those at the very center of the formation of the new nation. In addition to Benjamin Franklin — George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine (1785), James Madison and Alexander Hamilton were all members. From its beginnings, leading scientists, statesmen, jurists, humanists, and artists have graced and continue to grace the Society's membership rolls and to enjoy intellectual fellowship and the support and promotion of useful knowledge, just as Franklin proposed in the heady days of the founding era.



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