

From the Archives

Benjamin Franklin and the American Academy

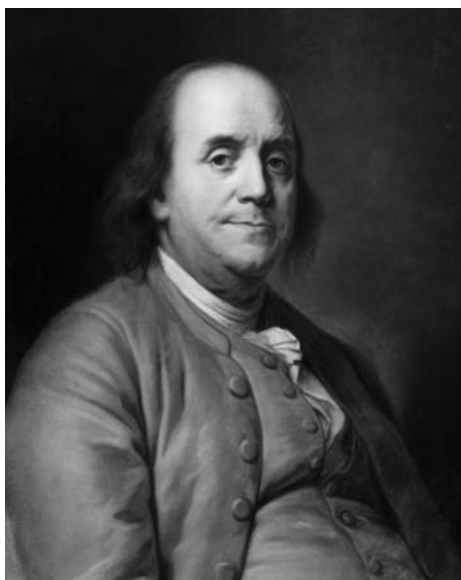


Image donated by Corbis-Bettmann

This year marks the 300th anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Franklin, a Fellow of the American Academy from 1781–1790. Franklin’s connections to the Academy, however, began many years before his election to membership. The American Philosophical Society (APS), founded by Franklin in Philadelphia in 1743, was a significant model for John Adams when he formed the American Academy in 1780. As early as 1776, Adams wrote to his wife Abigail from Philadelphia: “If I ever 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, if I have Wit and Address enough to accomplish it, sometime or other.”¹ Four years later, the newly chartered Academy held its first meeting.

¹ As quoted in Walter Muir Whitehill, “Early Learned Societies in Boston and Vicinity,” in *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic*, ed. Alexandra Oleson and Sanborn C. Brown (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Original letter from John to Abigail Adams, 3 August 1776, is in the Massachusetts Historical Society.

In January of 1781, the Academy held its first annual election of members. Franklin, in Paris at the time serving as American Commissioner to France, was one of fourteen Fellows chosen to join the original sixty-two charter members. In a letter to Franklin informing him of his election, Academy Corresponding Secretary Joseph Willard wrote: “The Society [Academy] esteems itself dignified in having your name added to the catalogue; a name so much and so deservedly celebrated, not only through your native country, but also through Europe; and it flatters itself, that it will ever have your favor and encouragement. I hope the Philadelphia Society, for which you are particularly interested, and this in Massachusetts, will be not only an honor to the United States of America, but also of extensive utility to the public, as they cannot fail of being, if the ends of their institutions are properly pursued.”²

During his years in France, Franklin corresponded with members of the Academy, particularly his close friend, James Bowdoin, the Academy’s first president. When Franklin was abroad, he also served the Academy by forwarding its notices and publications to scientists and learned societies in Europe. His endorsement of the Academy was further evident when, upon his death in 1790, he bequeathed to the Academy his handsome 32-volume folio set of *Les Arts et Les Métiers*. Ironically Bowdoin died that same year, leaving the Academy his library, which included a fine vellum-bound manuscript, now known as “the Bowdoin manuscript.” It contains copies of Franklin’s “letters and papers on electricity, lightning, etc.,” with additions and corrections by Franklin in his own hand.

Throughout its history, the Academy has celebrated Franklin’s birth in a variety of ways. On his bicentenary in 1906, the Academy sent the APS a “cordial expression of appreciation of the services to Science and

² Joseph Willard to Benjamin Franklin, 9 February 1781; in the *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 21, no. 55, American Philosophical Society.

Humanity of Benjamin Franklin, its founder,” and the APS reciprocated with a Benjamin Franklin Medal, struck by the United States Congress to commemorate Franklin’s 200th birthday.

In 1956, an Academy Committee on Franklin’s 250th anniversary organized a symposium on atmospheric research, followed by a musical presentation. E. Power Biggs, a Fellow of the Academy and one of the preeminent organists of the past century, demonstrated the use of a glass armonica, a musical instrument invented by Franklin.

In April 2005, the Academy marked its 225th anniversary, and Franklin was again the focus of attention. At a celebration in Cambridge, Academy members Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn, Co-Executive Directors of the American Philosophical Society, presented the Academy with a tribute from its sister institution: a striking facsimile of a document from the APS’s manuscript collections – Franklin’s certificate of membership in the Academy. ■