The Colonial College

We may . . . excuse our ancestors, that they established no academy or college in this province, wherein their youth might receive a polite and learned education. Agriculture and mechanic arts, were of the most immediate importance; the culture of minds by the finer arts and sciences, were necessarily postpon'd.

Benjamin Franklin

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Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) by Benjamin Wilson
The White House

Printer, scientist, and statesman, Franklin signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He contributed greatly to the cultural advancement of his adopted city, founding the Library Company of Philadelphia and playing an important part in creating the American Philosophical Society and the Academy and College of Philadelphia, which later became the University of Pennsylvania. He served as trustee of both institutions (1749-1790).

In 1740, a group of Philadelphians—pious artisans and merchants who did not adhere to any single religious sect—advertised their intention of erecting “a large Building for a Charity School for the instruction of Poor Children Gratis . . . and also for a House of Publick worship.” A deed of trust, promulgated the same year, is the first document associated with the origins of the University of Pennsylvania, where bicentennial celebrations were duly conducted in September 1940. The original “indenture bearing Date the Fourteenth day of November in the year of our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred and Forty” lists the names of the first trustees. Laying aside “Bigottry and party Zeal,” these citizens set about raising funds for the construction of a hall at Fourth and Arch Streets. The “New Building” as it came to be called was the largest structure in colonial Philadelphia. It seems, however, that the subscriptions collected were insufficient to cover the cost of the instruction which had been proposed, and, for a number of years, there were unpaid bills as well as unfulfilled engagements. At this point, Benjamin Franklin stepped in to direct his energies towards the establishment of an institution of learning in his adopted city.

In 1749, twenty-four signatures were affixed to the hand-penned draft of the “Constitutions of the Publick Academy in the City of Philadelphia.” Among the orthographic flourishes of prominent Pennsylvanians, including the Reverend Richard Peters, Tench Francis, and Thomas Hopkinson, is that of the self-made man who has been called Philadelphia’s first citizen. Benjamin Franklin acted as prime mover in founding a variety of institutions in his city, some of which were unique in the colonies and even the world. His regard for books and the availability of information had led to the establishment of the Library Company of Philadelphia, the first subscription library in the colonies, founded in 1731 and chartered eleven years later. Now the Academy came into being as a direct result of Franklin’s active concern with the instruction of the youth of Pennsylvania.

A proposal for a “higher school of Arts and Sciences” had died in council within a year of William Penn’s landing. A pamphlet on public schooling appeared in 1685 under the title “Good Order Established in
Pennsylvania & New-Jersey in America," but no further action seems to have been taken. With the Quaker hegemony in the state, there was no urgent call to educate men for the ministry—one of the main purposes of the colleges founded in New England and elsewhere in the colonies. The question of public education administered by members of the Society of Friends, like the question of their holding the reins of government at all, was inherently something of an anomaly. "To govern is absolutely repugnant to the avowed principles of Quakerism," declared a Presbyterian pamphleteer, to which the reply in kind was supplied: "To be governed is absolutely repugnant to the avowed principles of Presbyterianism."

The colonial Friends' failure to organize higher learning as early as the Puritans or as the Presbyterians were later to do was, in part, due to their lack of emphasis on individualistic accomplishments as a road to divine favor. The tradition for a "guarded" education for their children was another way in which sectarian beliefs conflicted with a philosophical concern for the good of all denominations. Although William Penn shared the Quaker conviction that learning was unnecessary for religious leadership and, on occasion, inveighed against the universities, he was nonetheless profoundly interested in the idea of universal education which he considered a right of the people and an obligation for the governor of a province. His guiding principle—that of preserving the civil liberties of the people in a "free colony for all mankind"—led to the foundation of the Friends' Public School, later the William Penn Charter School, which was established in 1683 for the instruction of all, regardless of religion, and at no charge to the poor.

When it came into being, the Academy was a nonsectarian foundation in contrast to the other schools of higher learning in the colonies, although faculty and trustees were required to take an oath upholding the Protestant succession to the throne. With conditions of religious toleration more generous in Pennsylvania than even those of Rhode Island, it is not surprising that the original institution of higher education in Philadelphia should have been founded by the deist Benjamin Franklin, upon the underlying principles of religious freedom espoused by the Quaker founder of the colony.

The spirit of toleration exemplified by the Friends provided a fertile soil for intellectual developments. In the words of the Quaker historian Isaac Sharpless, "free institutions brought free thought, and free thought is the only atmosphere in which science can flourish." By the middle of the eighteenth century, the city was the most cosmopolitan center of culture in the colonies, as well as the busiest port and a hub of commercial activity. The year of the Revolution, a French abbé exclaimed: "Everything here [in Europe] turns into rottenness: religion, law, arts, sciences; and everything hastens to renew itself in America." He went on to advise his correspondent: "Therefore, do not buy your house in the Chaussée d'Antin; buy it in
When, in 1749, Benjamin Franklin turned his attention to founding a school with collegiate aspirations, there was a receptive audience ready to support his efforts.

Franklin himself is the link with the deed of trust of 1740. When he became a trustee of the Charity School proposed in that document, he was able to obtain the transfer of the Whitefield Building, as the New Building was also called after the popular English evangelist who had used it, to the purposes of a new Academy. Encumbered by debts, the building was still not fulfilling the educational functions for which subscriptions had been raised. Franklin mentions his lack of any religious affiliation as the reason he found himself in the advantageous position as “Member of both sets of Trustees, that for the Building and that for the Academy,” which enabled him to negotiate the purchase of the building. The original contributors had provided for a nonsectarian Protestant establishment, and there was considerable dissension when the sole Moravian on the board of trustees for the Charity School was not replaced at his death, which upset the balance among the various religious persuasions. With his customary irony, Franklin describes how he was instrumental in settling the dilemma: “At length, one mention’d me, with the Observation that I was merely an honest Man, and of no Sect at all; which prevail’d with them to chuse me.”

Earlier in that decade, Franklin had given some serious thought to the form that an institution of learning should take. During a period when he had some idea of attracting an able young clergyman, the Reverend Richard Peters, to superintend such an establishment, he had drawn up a proposal for an academy. Then, in a new burst of activity in 1749, he brought his full energies to bear on the enterprise. This point in the University’s history is forcefully described in Franklin’s autobiography. After a passage on his invention of the Pennsylvania fireplace (later known as the Franklin stove), with a magnanimous comment on the Britishers who subsequently infringed his patent rights, Benjamin Franklin describes the foundation of the Academy, soon to become the College of Philadelphia:

... I turn’d my Thoughts again to the Affair of establishing an Academy. The first Step I took was to associate in the Design a Number of active Friends, of whom the Junto furnished a good Part: the next was to write and publish a Pamphlet intitled, Proposals relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania. This I distributed among the principal Inhabitants gratis; and as soon as I could suppose their Minds a little prepared by the Perusal of it, I set on foot a Subscription for Opening and Supporting an Academy; it was to be paid in Quotas yearly for Five Years; by so dividing it I judg’d the Subscription might be larger, and I believe it was so, amounting to no less (if I remember right) than Five thousand Pounds. In the Introduction to these Proposals, I stated their Publication not as an Act of mine,
The Proposals, to which he refers in this account, are replete with the horticultural images and allusions common to earlier manuals of enlightened education. Franklin gives a brief description of various aspects of the proposed school, including the place he favors for its establishment, “the Situation high and dry, and, if it may be, not far from a River.” He details the equipment and provides for a library although, “if in the Town, the Town Libraries may serve”; he notes the moral qualities of the Rector who will be in charge and the accommodations where “boarding Scholars diet together, plainly, temperately, and frugally.” There follows the often-quoted statement illustrating the practicality of Franklin’s mind: “As to their Studies, it would be well if they could be taught every Thing that is useful, and every Thing that is ornamental: But Art is long, and their Time is short. It is therefore propos’d that they learn those Things that are likely
to be most useful and most ornamental. Regard being had to the several Professions for which they are intended." His proposed curriculum of academic subjects which follows includes opportunities for learning from practical experience. Indeed, the cultivation which Franklin envisages is not restricted to that of the mind. “While they are reading Natural History,” he queries, “might not a little Gardening, Planting, Grafting, Inoculating, &c. be taught and practiced?”

Whatever the connection between the Proposals of 1749 and his ruminations of six years earlier, the “Paper of hints” which Franklin distributed along with his regular newspaper on that occasion already outlined his later views of education as well as reflecting the opinions of his time. The empiricist ideas of John Locke were widely known in the colonies from his Essay Concerning Human Understanding and Some Thoughts Concerning Education and from works by his disseminators, Isaac Watts and James Burgh. Unlike the partisans of traditional classical education, Franklin inclined to place Bacon, Boyle, Newton, and Locke on a par with the classical authorities. He also favored instruction in good English in opposition to customary emphasis on the languages of antiquity. What he proposed was a form of education which would be best suited to the needs of the colonies. Naturally enough, his ideas were also influenced by his experiments in self-education.

Franklin’s personal efforts at improving his own ability to express himself in his mother tongue were responsible for the weight he gives to English in his proposed curriculum. Persuaded that mastery of his own language was a matter of prime importance, he knew from experience the difficulty of achieving the clear, urbane style of the Spectator on which he had modeled his early writings. He records the practical advantages of studying the English language in his autobiography, commenting how “prose Writing has been of great Use to me in the Course of my Life, and was a principal Means of my Advancement.” One of his methods for improving his style and vocabulary was to distill the thoughts or “Sentiments,” sentence by sentence, from essays by Addison and Steele in their influential publication, the Spectator. A few days later he would attempt to reconstruct the original in order to discover the shortcomings of his own language. Franklin also devised a method for improving his prose through an exchange of letters on various subjects with “another Bookish Lad” in Boston who “had a ready Plenty of Words.” The success of these measures leads him to recommend them in the Proposals as methods for teaching English to students: “To form their Stile, they should be put on Writing Letters to each other, making Abstracts of what they read, or writing the same Things in their own Words.”

Franklin’s argument, taken up a few years later in his Idea for an English School, is that of a practical modernist with considerable personal experience of the educational process. Although he may have opposed the
classical bias of contemporary education, he tempers his reformist beliefs with the sensibility of a cultivated person. His proposals have been criticized as anti-intellectual and narrowly vocational; yet Franklin shows an understanding of the aims of true education when he expresses the hope that, through the formal schooling he receives, the student’s appetite will be whetted for further learning. Far from banishing the classics from the curriculum, Franklin nurtures the desire of seeing students motivated to learn “those Languages, which have endured Ages, and will endure while there are Men,” for they will have been made aware “that no Translation can do them Justice, or give the Pleasure found in Reading the Originals; that those Languages contain all Science” and “that to understand them is a distinguishing Ornament.”

These are not the words of an anti-intellectual iconoclast. Indeed, in later years, Franklin regretted having expressed himself with such moderation in his Proposals for, in the face of the forces of tradition, scant attention was paid to his innovative ideas. Franklin was embittered by the spectacle of the gradual attrition of the English school in the Academy with the departure, for want of adequate remuneration, first of David Dove, one of the original masters, and, much later, the resignation from the College of his friend, Ebenezer Kinnersley. In the last year of his life, Franklin spoke out more sharply against the continued dominance of the classical languages in a paper entitled Observations Relative to the Intentions of the Original Founders of the Academy of Philadelphia, dated 1789, but which remained unpublished among his papers.

Using the common-sense arguments of all proponents of a vernacular against the ancient languages, Franklin notes in this late document: “The Origin of Latin and Greek Schools among the different Nations of Europe is known to have been this, that until between 3 and 400 Years past there were no Books in any other Language; all the Knowledge contain’d in Books . . . being in those Languages, it was of course necessary to learn them.” He goes on to deplore mankind’s blind clinging to old ways, the “unaccountable Prejudice in favor of ancient Customs and Habitudes.” In a last broadside, he comments on the persistent role of the hat in modern society, noting that headgear was not favored by those paradigms—the Greeks and Romans. With the arrival on the scene of powdered wigs and curls, the hat nevertheless lingered on as an antiquated form of dress worn, not on the head, but under the arm. “The still prevailing custom of having schools for teaching generally our children, in these days, the Latin and Greek languages, I consider therefore, in no other light than as the Chapeau bras of modern Literature,” he concludes, gracefully knotting together his tirade against the schools and his disquisition on the subject of hats.

If the curriculum of the Academy did not reflect the full intentions of Benjamin Franklin, the establishment of the institution in so relatively short
a time and the provision made for its accommodation and financing were almost uniquely the work of the University of Pennsylvania’s earliest and most energetic supporter. Franklin’s strategy included the use of his printing press. As has been seen, once satisfied of a receptive audience among his friends, he proceeded to circulate the Proposals free with a covering statement ascribing this move to people other than himself who “have directed a Number of Copies to be made by the Press and properly distributed.” Immediately afterwards, subscriptions were requested and obtained from the citizenry, and the largest donors were invited to serve as trustees. Franklin was elected president of the board in 1749 and was succeeded by the Reverend Richard Peters in 1756, a year before he departed for England. In 1755, a new charter had been obtained, this time for the “College, Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia.”

Conscious of having done “what no other could have done,” Franklin remained profoundly concerned with the institution he had called into being. In his valedictory remarks in the Autobiography, he speaks with pride of what had been accomplished during his lifetime: “Thus was established the University of Pennsylvania. I have been continued one of its Trustees from the Beginning, now near forty Years, and have had the very great Pleasure of seeing a Number of the Youth who have receiv’d their Education in it, distinguish’d by their improv’d Ability, serviceable in public stations and Ornaments to their Country.”

After many vicissitudes suffered by both the country and the institution, Franklin was reelected president of the College board in 1789. His fellow trustees honored his great services by meeting, in the last months of his life, at the house of “the venerable Dr. Benjamin Franklin, the Father and one of the first Founders of the Institution.”

In the face of countless exploits and aphorisms for which he is customarily acclaimed, Benjamin Franklin has been presented here principally in his role as the University’s founder and celebrated for his characteristically far-sighted views on education. Yet he held no degree from the University he founded and which descendants of his frequented. This situation was rectified by the president of the University in ceremonies at the outset of the nation’s bicentennial year. A feeling for Franklin’s other achievements—for the man and the manifold claims he persists in making on the attention of his compatriots down the years—was expressed in the tribute paid him, on Founder’s Day, January 17, 1976, which fell on his 270th birthday. On that day, the president bestowed on Benjamin Franklin the posthumous honorary degree of Doctor of Natural Philosophy with the following citation:

The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, on behalf of all University members, have determined to award their honorary degree to one of their colleagues. The Trustees and the Faculty of the University wish it made known that they do not award
Thomas Mifflin (1744–1800)
and Sarah Mifflin (ca. 1747–1790)
by John Singleton Copley
Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Last president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania and first governor of the state under the constitution of 1790. Born in Philadelphia, A.B. College of Philadelphia (1760), of which he was later a trustee and treasurer (1773–1791). A soldier-politician, he was a member of the Provincial Assembly and Continental Congress, chief aide-de-camp to Washington, who appointed him quarter-master-general and promoted him to the rank of major-general (1778). He married Sarah Morris in 1767.

this degree lightly. The individual receiving it must well have proved himself and over a reasonable period of time to be so honored. The Faculty, for example, have generally preferred that the person they recognize have diligently excelled in one field and must have noted, with some reservation, that the man to be honored excelled in several, and in connection with this tendency, was inclined to change jobs and professions rather often. Benjamin Franklin was, for those who may not know his career, a printer, a newspaper owner, an essayist, a politician, an educator, a scientist, an inventor, an experimenter, a diplomat, a statesman, and a philosopher, among other callings. The University has further observed that he encouraged the writer of the so-called “Common Sense,” which was seen as no such thing by the established authority of that time, and that he was known to have signed documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States—which were at best controversial and at least one of which was basically illegal and even forcibly opposed by large numbers of his countrymen. That, in addition, during his public role as Postmaster General, he even turned the annual postal deficit into a profit, went against not only the established tradition of his day but against that of our own.

The Trustees and the University must also take note of his tendency toward the radical in education—he increasingly ignored the traditional curriculum of classical education of his time in favor of the teaching of English and science, along with broad-based history, geography, and modern languages, in opposition to the expert opinion of his peers. Moreover, the University members have found it necessary to consider his extraordinary behavior of flying a kite in a thunderstorm, which, while scientifically useful, made his neighbors wonder and the man-in-the-street stare. Further, it was brought to their attention that he not only followed eccentric medical practices but, worse, wrote about and proselytized for them as being sensible (the University of Pennsylvania itself had not small expertise in this matter, having established the first medical school in the colonies): at night Benjamin Franklin slept with his windows open to get the benefit of fresh air; he took regular exercise, particularly swimming, until late in life, and not only enjoyed cold air baths early in the morning but bathed, with hot water, regularly, habits that lifted the eyebrows of his contemporaries.

There is yet another matter which the members of the University have found it necessary to respond to, since the incidents were public knowledge and took place before witnesses. Themselves not adverse to a lively face or dancing eyes, the Trustees have been forced, since Franklin literally thrust the matter before them in his writings, to comment on his penchant for the opposite sex. This was marked, for example, even during his years in France as Minister Plenipotentiary and in his mid-seventies where it is known that, to the dismay of John Adams, he kissed, according to the astonishing French practice, the necks of the admiring women
who crowded about him in the salons of Paris. Too, with regard to women, he went once more against the accepted ideas of his day by advocating education for them.

All in all, it is not wondered at that the University of Pennsylvania did not wish to act rashly, considering that in spite of his pronouncements on education which firmly set the University's place in the history of instruction, Benjamin Franklin had only two years of formal schooling. True, Harvard rushed in and gave him an honorary Master of Arts degree in 1753 when he was but forty-seven, but the University must put that to Harvard's pushy desire to be first. If Yale followed suit only six weeks later in awarding the same degree (Yale was founded after Harvard), the Trustees frankly could not be surprised. And if Oxford University gave Franklin in 1762 the Doctor of Civil Laws, Pennsylvanians could only determine that Oxford, feeling her age at the six-century or so mark, believed she must present the degree since her time might be running out.

Nonetheless, after due and careful deliberation, and in the 270th year of his birth, the Trustees on behalf of the University of Pennsylvania have deemed it proper, even though a charge of nepotism may be made for so acknowledging one of their members and their first head, to award their honorary degree to the founder of the University of Pennsylvania, seeing that in spite of his own special traits and actions and undertakings, Benjamin Franklin's reputation seems to have withstood the test of time and that he has remained very much alive not only at his University but in the hearts of men and women everywhere.

Thus, won finally by his legacy of wise deeds, lasting words, brave example, and generous humanity, but most especially by his leaving them the idea and substance of the educational institution that has endured and grown beyond even the measure he gave it, the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania in this 200th anniversary year of the nation he helped make sure, name their founder and friend, and the enduring colleague and teacher of their countrymen and the world, with affection and pride for their honorary degree, Doctor of Natural Philosophy.

Franklin has never ceased to be an inspiration for educational policy as well as for human values. He continues to dazzle his countrymen and the world, no less than his heirs at the University, with the character and charm that affected, for so long, his own generation.