

# Dinner with Ben Franklin: The Origins of the American Philosophical Society<sup>1</sup>

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We gather today to celebrate the American Philosophical Society's 275th anniversary. But in fact, our story begins 16 years earlier, in 1727, here in Philadelphia, and it is that origin story that is my focus this afternoon. The measure of my success in telling that story will be whether at the end of the next 20 minutes you will be left wishing—as I was when I first encountered this tale—that you could have been a guest at the young Benjamin Franklin's table during those years when the notion of the APS was taking shape in his incredibly fertile mind.

In 1727, Franklin was 21 years old and working in Philadelphia as the manager of a printing house. He invited those whom he called his “ingenious acquaintances” to join a “club of mutual improvement” that he called The Junto, from the Latin *iungere*, meaning “to join.”<sup>2</sup> Members of the Junto met on Friday evenings in a local tavern.

This was not a casual invitation. Here is how Franklin described the club in his *Autobiography*:

The Rules I drew up, requir'd that every Member in his Turn should produce one or more Queries on any Point of Morals, Politics or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss'd by the Company, and once in three Months produce and read an Essay of his own Writing on any Subject he pleased. Our Debates were to be under the Direction of a President, and to be conducted in the sincere Spirit of Enquiry after Truth, without fondness for Dispute, or Desire of Victory; and to prevent Warmth, all Expressions of Positiveness in Opinion, or of direct Contradiction, were after some time made contraband & prohibited under small pecuniary Penalties.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Read 26 April 2018.

2 Franklin had studied Latin in school for only one year, but he was proud of his language ability and was a great advocate for the study of foreign languages, particularly the living ones.

3 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 61.

Needless to say, the president was Franklin. The members included Joseph Breintnal, “a copyer of deeds” and lover and occasional writer of poetry; Thomas Godfrey, “a self-taught mathematician”; Nicholas Scull, “surveyor who loved books”; William Parsons, “bred a shoemaker but loving reading”; William Maugridge, “a joiner and most exquisite mechanic”; and several others, including Franklin’s particular favorite, William Coleman, “then a merchant’s clerk, about my age, who had the coolest, clearest head, the best heart, and the exactest morals of almost any man I ever met with.”<sup>4</sup>

The group also used the name “the Leather Apron Club.” While somewhat mystifying to our ears, “leather apron” had a specific social meaning, suggested by Franklin’s description of how his fellow members earned their livelihood. The phrase referred to people in trade, people who worked with their hands as craftsmen or artisans. The phrase signified class, not poverty; wearers of the leather apron were not necessarily poor. One Junto member, Philip Syng, was a prosperous silversmith. What these young men had in common was ambition to better themselves, drive to make their way in the new world that was unfolding around them.

Members took a series of oaths, pledging their mutual respect, their love for humankind, their dedication to the search for truth, and rejection of the idea that no harm should befall anyone “in his body, name or goods, for mere speculative opinions, or his external way of worship.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to the weekly dinners, members met once a month for an outdoor session of physical exercise. The Junto lasted for more than 30 years. Franklin called it “the best school of philosophy, morality, and politics that then existed in the province.” His biographer, Carl Van Doren, described the Junto as Franklin’s “life enlarged and extended.” It was also “his benevolent lobby for the benefit of

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4 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 62.

5 Lyons, *Society for Useful Knowledge*, 46–47. I’ll add here that like many of the Founders, Franklin was respectful of religion but skeptical of doctrine. In 1728, he composed his own liturgy, which he marked “for my own private use” and entitled it “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion.” In this unusual document, Franklin wrote that “. . . since there is in all Men something like a natural Principle, which enclines them to Devotion of the Worship of some unseen Power . . . Therefore I think it seems required of me, and my Duty, as a Man, to pay Divine Regards to SOMETHING.” He went on to speculate that as there were many solar systems, he assumed that there was a god for each one, each “exceedingly wise and good and very powerful.” Since we happened to be on Earth—“on this little Ball on which we move”—then it was to Earth’s revered God to whom praise and respect were due. Franklin accordingly gave thanks to what we might call his “god of choice” for “Knowledge and Literature and every useful Art; for my Friends and their Prosperity, and for the fewness of my Enemies.” See National Archives, “Articles of Belief.”

Philadelphia, and now and then for the advantage of Benjamin Franklin.”<sup>6</sup> Franklin’s printing business received regular referrals from his fellow members.

The Junto was not without its perturbations. Thomas Godfrey, the self-taught mathematician, “soon left us,” Franklin explained, because “like most great mathematicians I have met with, he expected universal precision in everything said, or was forever denying or distinguishing upon trifles, to the disturbance of all conversation.” A more serious problem was that, despite the fact that the organization was nominally secret, members were so fond of the little club that they began inviting their friends. The Junto had become the go-to organization for enterprising young men. Insisting that 12 was the upper limit of membership, Franklin devised a plan whereby members who wanted to invite others could set up their own subsidiary clubs for that purpose. The scheme met with limited success, with only a handful of subsidiary clubs ever being set up. Perhaps what people wanted was proximity to Franklin himself, not only a shared organizational name.

Among the topics discussed at the weekly gatherings were: “Which is best, to make a friend of a wise and good man that is poor or of a rich man that is neither wise nor good?” and “How should we judge the goodness of a writing?” To this question, Franklin provided his own answer: “It should be smooth, clear, and short.” And he asked: “Is any man wise at all times and in all things?” His answer: “No, but some are more frequently wise than others.”<sup>7</sup> Franklin typically circulated a list of 24 questions for guiding discussion at each meeting. A review of these shows that his interest lay well beyond theoretical musings. One typical question: “Do you think of anything at present in which the Junto may be serviceable to *mankind*? To their country, to their friends, or to themselves?”<sup>8</sup> Do we hear in this question a glimmer of interest in “useful knowledge”?

Actually, Franklin’s commitment to useful knowledge was already deep by the early Junto years, leading him to draw the organization and its members into the public sphere in a way that it’s safe to say would not come naturally to the APS today. One example was his active role in advocating the adoption of paper money in Pennsylvania, where a persistent shortage of currency was a particular problem for tradesmen and small businessmen who had to borrow and were often in debt. The colony’s elite resisted the idea of paper money for fear of inflation. Franklin, having worked out his ideas in conversation with

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6 Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 78, 75.

7 Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 77.

8 Lyons, *Society for Useful Knowledge*, 47.

the Junto, argued that to the contrary, a relaxed money supply would lead to greater economic activity that would help everyone. When the idea finally gained acceptance, Franklin got the contract to print the notes.<sup>9</sup>

One of the Junto's other major projects was the establishment of the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731. Franklin's original idea, the previous year, was for Junto members to pool their books, since books often came up in the club's discussions but were not conveniently available to all. As he described the project in his *Autobiography*, by "clubbing our books to a common library, we should, while we liked to keep them together, have each of us the advantage of using the books of all the other members, which would be nearly as beneficial as if each owned the whole." But this rather casual idea was not a success, since there was no formal plan for taking care of the books that piled up. So Franklin came up with a more formal approach: a subscription library, not limited to Junto members, requiring an initial payment of 40 shillings and a subscription of 10 shillings a year. With 50 original subscribers, the project was quickly up and running, with a list of books to acquire, a part-time librarian installed in the Junto's shared quarters, and in short order, a catalog—printed by Franklin. Anyone could come and read when the library was open, while only members could take books home.<sup>10</sup> The Library Company of Philadelphia, which calls itself America's oldest cultural institution, thrives today, with a collection of more than 250,000 early American books and prints, including the first book Franklin bought, and a fully staffed reading room where researchers can use the collection. The APS and the Library Company maintain a close relationship.

In 1737, a decade after the Junto's founding, Franklin became Pennsylvania's postmaster general. This position gave him the opportunity to read newspapers from throughout the colonies and exposed him to intellectual ferment in other centers of learning. He acquired regular correspondents far from Philadelphia. His world widened and his ambitions grew. He learned about the Royal Society in London, to which a number of American colonists had been elected, and the Dublin Philosophical Society, which had been founded in 1731 "for improving husbandry, manufactures, and other useful arts."

So it was perhaps inevitable that his precious little Junto no longer sufficed. In 1743, Franklin decided to form a new organization, to be based in Philadelphia but to draw its members from a wider circle. The

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9 Lyons, *Society for Useful Knowledge*, 49–50.

10 Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 105–106.

proposal he circulated to likely recruits was entitled “Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America.” This new philosophical society didn’t so much replace the Junto as supplement it. Of the first 10 members, five belonged to the Junto. He sent his proposal to acquaintances in New England, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Maryland, and Carolina, calling for a society that would meet monthly in Philadelphia and engage in systematic correspondence with non-Philadelphians with the goal of improving “the common stock of knowledge”:

All new-discovered plants, herbs, trees, roots, their virtues, uses, etc. . . . new methods of curing or preventing diseases; all new-discovered fossils in different countries; . . . new and useful improvements in any branch of mathematics; . . . all new arts, trades, or manufacturers that may be proposed or thought of . . . and all philosophical experiments that let light into the nature of things, tend to increase the power of man over matter and multiply the conveniences or pleasures of life.

What a menu. Franklin offered to serve as the new society’s secretary “’til they shall be provided with one more capable.” The date was May 14, 1743.<sup>11</sup>

This is as good a place as any to pause for a discussion of the 18th-century meaning of the words “philosophy” and “philosophical.” Someone today who encounters the name American Philosophical Society for the first time naturally assumes that it is an organization—if not a trade association—of scholars and students of philosophy in its contemporary meaning. But in the 18th century, the word connoted the sciences and the study of the natural world much more than it did an academic discipline within the humanities. Eighteenth-century intellectuals were captivated by Newton’s explanation of the laws of motion, light, and mechanics that govern the natural world. The phrase “natural philosophy” was commonly applied to what we today would call physics.<sup>12</sup> Franklin himself was widely recognized as one of the leading scientists of the day, but among the Founding generation, he was hardly unique in his fascination with scientific inquiry. Thomas Jefferson, the American Philosophical Society’s third President, following Franklin and the astronomer David Rittenhouse, gave a lecture to the Society on

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11 See, generally, Carter, “*One Grand Pursuit*.” There are many secondary sources for the story of the founding, including Franklin’s original pamphlet, e.g., Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 139–40, and Lepore, *Book of Ages*, 76–77.

12 The full title of Newton’s *Principia* was *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*.

paleontology, after which he donated the fossil bones he had been discussing—discovered by miners in Virginia—to the Society’s collection. Science provided metaphors for broader discussions of politics and social organization. Newton’s “natural laws” offered compelling analogies for how things work—or should work—outside the realm of science.

So by naming his new, expanded club the American Philosophical Society, Benjamin Franklin was sending a signal that, far from passively contemplating Plato and Aristotle, this was to be an organization actively engaged at the forefront of human learning and discovery. To make certain that all fields of inquiry were accounted for, the membership was to include a physician, a botanist, a mathematician, a chemist, a “mechanician” (in today’s terms, perhaps an engineer), a geographer, and a general natural philosopher.

To step ahead a few decades, it was thus almost a natural development that in 1792 Jefferson used the platform of the APS to raise money to sponsor an overland expedition across North America to the Pacific. George Washington, Robert Morris, and Alexander Hamilton were among those who contributed. The fund-raising campaign was so successful that Jefferson, through the APS, was able by the next year to offer 1,000 pounds to any explorer who could undertake the journey and come back to report on it. This, of course, was Lewis and Clark’s Voyage of Discovery. Preparing for the expedition, Meriwether Lewis spent time in Philadelphia consulting with leading scientists, including Dr. Caspar Wistar, a Member of the APS and chair of anatomy at the University of Pennsylvania, who was the country’s leading authority on fossils. During the Voyage of Discovery, Lewis and Clark sent botanical and mineral specimens back to Philadelphia for addition to the APS collections. The journals of the expedition are among the APS Library’s prized possessions. The APS was extremely important to Thomas Jefferson, who by some accounts took more pride in becoming its President in 1797 than he did in becoming Vice President of the United States that same year. In his letter accepting the APS presidency, Jefferson wrote that “the suffrage of a body which comprehends 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.”

What happened next? Very briefly, the Society’s rather glorious beginning didn’t guarantee a glorious future. In fact, by the time of its centennial in 1843, long-term survival was in doubt. The APS had 237 Resident Members, half of them from Philadelphia, and another 110 from foreign countries. It had been hit hard by the financial panic of 1837 and was saddled with debt. The Philadelphia sheriff initiated

foreclosure proceedings against Philosophical Hall, the Society's headquarters building on South Fifth Street. As you will notice, it is still there. That's because Members came to the rescue and paid off the mortgage. But that reprieve offered no assurance of the future. "How is this to end? What account is our future historian to give of it?" Robert Patterson, director of the U.S. Mint and later the Society's President, asked during a centennial discussion.

Reflecting its scientific origins, the APS in its early decades grouped its members into six classes. The first class included "geography, mathematics, natural philosophy and astronomy." The second was medicine and anatomy; the third, natural history and chemistry; followed by trade and commerce as the fourth class; mechanics and architecture as the fifth; and "husbandry and American improvements" as the sixth. It wasn't until 1976 that the APS settled on its current organization of five classes: (1) mathematics and physical sciences; (2) biological sciences; (3) social sciences; (4) humanities; and (5) the arts, learned professions, and public affairs (the "everything else" class, added in 1976). Keeping up to date with the organization of the classes and their many subdivisions is an ongoing challenge, as new fields emerge and old arrangements no longer suit the way knowledge is organized and disseminated. It's perhaps some comfort to those of us who try to cope with this challenge to know that evolution in the class structure has been the order of the day almost from the beginning.

The Society elected its first female Member in 1789. She was Princess Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova, president of the St. Petersburg Imperial Academy of Science. It took 80 years for the APS to elect three more women. The situation has improved since then—not evenly among the five classes, or as quickly as it might have, certainly, but it's worth noting that two of the three current APS Vice Presidents are women, as are the heads of all five class committees. Since 1843, 5,605 individuals have been elected to the APS, which tries to maintain a steady state of just over 800 Resident Members by electing just 25 a year, five in each class.

To return to the historical narrative: the second half of the 19th century was a rather somnolent time for the APS. But that changed with the turn of the 20th century. A Philadelphia doctor named I. Minis Hays was appointed Librarian and from that position revitalized the Society and its membership. He instituted an annual General Meeting (there are now two, in April and November) that had the effect of bringing the membership together. The APS celebrated Franklin's bicentennial in 1906 with a series of scholarly and festive events. It

facilitated the publication of eight volumes of the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Less successfully, the Society engaged in a prolonged and eventually time-wasting and fruitless effort to trade Philosophical Hall for a site with a then-more fashionable address on the Parkway, where a number of Philadelphia's cultural institutions had relocated. This ambitious plan, which required major fund-raising, was killed by the Great Depression and also by the sudden death of Francis X. Dercum, the APS President who had been among the plan's leading boosters. He died while presiding over the 1931 annual Meeting, sitting in Benjamin Franklin's chair. As an in-house history later told the story: "Having just expressed his belief that the Society would realize its ambitious expectations, Dercum's heart stopped. By the cruelest of ironies, when the morning session resumed, a life insurance executive delivered a paper entitled 'Lengthening the Life Span.'"<sup>13</sup>

Today, the APS maintains four buildings in its ancestral neighborhood, where the value of historic property is well appreciated. In addition to Philosophical Hall—the location of the APS Museum as well as administrative offices—these are Library Hall, built in the 1950s in National Independence Historic Park; Richardson Hall, a building dating to 1871 currently used for rental income and by the Museum staff; and Benjamin Franklin Hall, where we now sit. It is a former bank building, acquired in the 1970s and remodeled to accommodate the general membership Meetings.

On its 275th anniversary, the American Philosophical Society is in robust shape. The current mission statement, last revised in 2008, expresses the goal of "promoting useful knowledge" in three ways:

We honor and engage leading scholars, scientists and professions through elected membership and opportunities for interdisciplinary, intellectual fellowship, particularly in our semi-annual meetings. We support research and discovery through grants and fellowships, lectures, publications, prizes, exhibitions, and public education. We serve scholars through a research library of manuscripts and other collections internationally recognized for their enduring historic value.

Benjamin Franklin would be pleased.

Franklin died on April 17, 1790. In his will, he divided his books and other material among the Library Company, the APS, and the society that John Adams had founded in Franklin's home town of Boston, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Franklin was still alive when the state of Pennsylvania granted the

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<sup>13</sup> Carter, "One Grand Pursuit," 62.



American Philosophical Society its charter. I will quote only a small portion of this 1780 document:

. . . the experience of the ages shows that improvements of a public nature are best carried on by societies of liberal and ingenious men, uniting their labors, without regard to nation, sect or party, in one grand pursuit, alike interesting to all, whereby mutual prejudices are worn off, a humane and philosophical spirit is cherished, and youth are stimulated to a laudable diligence and emulation in the pursuit of wisdom.

Franklin surely approved of these words. In fact, I'm inclined to think he wrote them himself.

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