

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, FREEMASON

The genius of Franklin was so overwhelming, and manifested in so many different directions, that no short paper can even list his achievements; the American Philosophical Society requires twenty large book pages merely to catalog his inventions, discoveries, accomplishments and the events in which he was intimately concerned. Printer, author, editor, inventor, scientist, diplomat; founder of schools, postal systems, government; ambassador, wit, speaker; philosopher, politician and Freemason, he was not only the amazing intellect, the Voltaire of Colonial America, but one of the most complex and gifted men of all times. He was the Francis Bacon of his age, far ahead of the years in which he lived, and as such, the subject of criticism from those who did not understand him.

Certain facts of his Masonic career stand out; particularly it is to be noted that Franklin was not merely a lodge member content with that and nothing more, but a Freemason intensely interested in his Craft, willing to give his enormous powers for its welfare, and leaving an indelible impress on its history in this country. His activities were so great and his Masonry so influential in his life, there seems little reason for historians to quarrel about matters of dates and “firsts” in connection with his revered name.

We do not know exactly when Franklin was initiated; it was in 1731 and probably at the February meeting of St. John’s Lodge in Philadelphia. Nor do we know when St. John’s Lodge was born. From an old and extraordinarily interesting account book, the famous “Liber B,” we know the Lodge was in existence as early as December 1730. Whether it was a “duly constituted Lodge” or a lodge meeting only under the authority of Ancient Custom, cannot here be stated. Many lodges in the early days so met; the Lodge at Fredricksburg, for instance, in which Washington was initiated, had no charter until after he became a member, although oral tradition says it met under authority of Massachusetts.

Prior to his initiation, Franklin had poked a little fun at the Freemasons in his “Pennsylvania Gazette.” Some historians think this was to “advertise” himself to St. John’s Lodge so that when he applied he would not be regarded as a stranger. Others see it merely as the witty writing of a man who knew little of the Fraternity.

Whatever the reason, Franklin’s membership changed his style of writing in the Gazette. He published story after story about Freemasonry in America in general and Pennsylvania and Philadelphia in particular; these have become foundation stones on which is erected the early history of Freemasonry in this nation.

That Franklin should immediately raise his head above the generality of the members of St John’s Lodge was inevitable. His whole life of public service, his boundless courage, which led him to express himself roundly on the non-popular side of many questions, his tremendous ability, would naturally bring him to the fore. It is not surprising then that he was very soon (1735) elected Secretary, an office he held until 1738. What is surprising, supposing our early brethren were as conservative as are we, is to find him a member of a committee to draft by-laws of his lodge in

1732; to this happening we are indebted for certain pages in “Liber B” in the handwriting of the great patriot.

Still more amazing in these days of lengthy years of service before a brother receives any recognition in Grand Lodge, is his appointment as Junior Warden of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania on St. John the Baptist’s Day, June 24, 1732. No attempt will here be made to go into those matters of Masonic historical controversy at issue between brethren in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. No opinion is here expressed as to whether that Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania was or was not a “duly constituted body.” Here the title is used as it was by Franklin. Even those who believe that this Grand Lodge was not “really” a Grand Lodge but only St John’s Lodge working as a Grand Lodge, are glad to know that Franklin became its Grand Master in 1734.

The first or Mother Grand Lodge was formed in London in 1717. Six years after “Anderson’s Constitutions” was first published. The second edition did not appear until 1738, and by 1734, the edition of 1723 was long exhausted. This was an opportunity - who better might print the “Constitutions” for American Masons than the Grand Master? The “Pennsylvania Gazette, from May 9 to 16, 1734, carried the following advertisement:

“THE CONSTITUTIONS OF THE FREEMASON;
Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, etc., of that most ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity, London Printed, Reprinted, by B. Franklin, in the year of Masonry 5734. Price Stitch’d 2s6, bound 4s.”

The book was delayed; perhaps even Franklin’s press was subject to the slowness which modern authors sometimes find in printing houses! It was not until August that the “Masons’ Book” was ready; then seventy copies were sent to Boston, others to Charleston, and still later, more to Boston. Some fifteen copies of the Masonic rarity are still cherished in Masonic Libraries.

On November 28, 1734, he wrote twice to Massachusetts.

One letter was to Henry Price, “Right Worshipful Grand Master” and the Grand Lodge in Massachusetts. The other was to “Dear Brother Price.” With one other, these are the only known letters Franklin wrote about Freemasonry. They are important enough to quote:

“Right Worshipful Grand Master and Most Worthy and Dear Brethren:

“We acknowledge your favor of the 23rd of October past, and rejoice that the Grand Master (whom God Bless) hath so happily recovered from his late indisposition; and we now, glass in hand, drink to the establishment of his health, and the prosperity of your whole Lodge.

“We have seen in the Boston prints an article of news from London, importing that a Grand Lodge held there in August last, Mr. Price’s deputation and power was extended over all America, which advice we hope is true, and we heartily congratulate him thereupon and though this has not been as yet regularly signified to us by you, yet, giving credit thereto, we think it our duty to lay before your Lodge what we apprehend needful to be done for us in order to promote and strengthen the interest of Masonry in this Provence (which seems to want the sanction of some authority derived from home to give the proceedings and determinations of our Lodge their due weight) to wit, a

Deputation or Charter granted by the Right Worshipful Mr. Price, by virtue of his commission from Britain, confirming the Brethren of Pennsylvania in the privileges they at present enjoy of holding annually their Grand Lodge, choosing their Grand Master, Wardens and other officers, who may manage all affairs relating to the Brethren here with full power and authority, according the customs and usages of Masons, the said Grand Master of Pennsylvania only yielding his chair, when the Grand Master of all America shall be in place. This, if it seems good and reasonable to you to grant, will not only be extremely agreeable to us, but will also, we are confident, conduce much to the welfare, establishment and reputation of Masonry in these parts. We therefore submit it for your consideration, and, as we hope our request will be complied with, we desire that it may be done as soon as possible, and also accompanied with a copy of the R.W. Grand Master's first Deputation, and of the instrument by which it appears to be enlarged as above-mentioned, witnessed by your Wardens, and signed by the secretary; for which favours this Lodge doubts not of being able to behave as not to be thought ungrateful.

“We are, Right Worshipful Grand Master and Most Worthy Brethren, Your affectionate Brethren and obliged humble servants, Signed at the request of the Lodge,
B. Franklin, G.M. Philadelphia, Nov. 28, 1734”

“Dear Brother Price: - I am glad to hear of your full recovery. I hoped to have seen you here this Fall, agreeable to the expectation you were so good as to give me; but since sickness has prevented your coming while the weather was moderate, I have no room to flatter myself with a visit from you before the Spring, when a deputation of the Brethren here will have an opportunity of showing how much they esteem you. I beg leave to recommend their request to you, and inform you, that some false and rebel foreigners, being about to set up a distinct Lodge in opposition to the old and true Brethren here, pretending to make Masons for a bowl of punch, and the Craft is like to come into disesteem among us unless the true Brethren are countenanced and distinguished by some special authority as herein desired. I entreat, therefore, that whatever you shall think proper to do herein may be sent by the next post, if possible, or the next following.

“I am, Your Affectionate Brother and Humble Servt”
B. Franklin, G.M. Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Nov. 28, 1734”
“P.S. - If more of the Constitutions are wanted among you, please hint me.”

The address upon the letters is:

To Mr. Henry Price
At the Brazen Head Boston. “N.E.”

These letters are variously “explained” according to the point of view of the apologists. M.W. Melvin M. Johnson, Past Grand Master of Massachusetts, noted Masonic historian, says:

“Should all other evidence and arguments be disregarded, these letters are definite and final. They establish that Pennsylvania Masonry as wanting in authority, i.e., was not duly constituted; that Henry Price was the ‘Founder of Duly Constituted Masonry in America.’”

Brother J.E. Burnett Buckenham, M.D., writing as Librarian and Curator of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, in “The Amazing Benjamin Franklin,” says:

“Whether these letters were written as an excuse for bringing up the subject of the sale of more Constitution Books, or from a real (rather than fancied) danger to the Craft from not having a warrant of constitution, the writer does not pretend to say.”

In 1738 were heard the first rumblings of that anti-Masonic excitement which was to shake the Masonic world nearly a hundred years later. A young man was killed as a result of a mock Masonic initiation. This was seized upon by a rival of Franklin, William Bradford, publisher of the “American Weekly Mercury,” as a pretext on which to launch attacks on Franklin and his connection with Freemasonry. The incident raised anxiety in the hearts of Franklin’s father and mother over their son’s being a member of the Order. To allay their fears, Franklin wrote his father, April 13, 1738, as follows:

“As to the Freemasons, I know of no way of giving my mother a better account of them than she seems to have at present, since it is not allowed that women should be admitted into that secret society. She has, I must confess on that account some reason to be displeased with it; but for anything else, I must entreat her to suspend her judgment till she is better informed, unless she will believe me, when I assure her that they are in general a very harmless sort of people, and have no principles or practices that are inconsistent with religion and good manners.”

According to Old Masonic and family traditions the cornerstone of the Statehouse in Philadelphia (Independence Hall), built while Franklin was Grand Master, was laid by him and the Brethren of St. John’s Lodge.

Franklin was too busy to visit much Masonically. In 1743 he held Fraternal communion with his brethren in the First (St. John’s) Lodge of Boston. Later (1749) Thomas Oxnard of Boston, appointed him Provincial Grand Master. This appointment only lasted a year; he was deposed from his high estate in 1750, when William Allen received the appointment; Allen immediately appointed Franklin Deputy Grand Master..

In 1752 he visited Tun Tavern Lodge; two years later he was present at the Quarterly Communication of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, and in 1755 he was prominent in the anniversary and dedication of the “Freemason’s Lodge in Philadelphia,” the first Masonic building in this nation. Late in 1760, with his son, Franklin visited the Grand Lodge in London.

Among his first actions in France when he appeared as Ambassador, were affiliations with Masonic Lodges. In 1777 he was elected a member of the famous “Lodge des Neuf Soeurs” (Lodge of the Nine Sisters, or Nine Muses) of Paris, and in 1778 he assisted in Voltaire’s initiation into this Lodge. What a meeting that must have been, and what events may of had their beginnings in the meeting of these two brilliant minds - the Frenchman caustic, tart, rapier-like in wit, scathing in denunciation of wrong and evil; Franklin smooth, suave, direct, sensible, keen as his French contemporary - both laying aside their defensive arms of wit and diplomacy to meet upon the level and part upon the square. Alas, it was not for long - within the year Franklin helped bury the famous Frenchman with Masonic honors. The following year (1779) he was elected Master of the Lodge of the Nine Sisters; and it was not definitely known how much he actually served for he was but an honorary Master.

In 1782 he became a member of Lodge de Saint Jean de Jerusalem, and the following year was elected Venerable d'Honneur of that body. The same year he was elected honorary member of Lodge des bons Amis (Good Friends), Rouen

In the dedication of a sermon delivered at the request of R.W. Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, by Rev. Joseph Pilmore in St. Paul's Church, Philadelphia, on St. John's Day in December, 1786, Franklin referred to as "An Illustrious Brother whose Distinguished Merit among Masons entitles him to their highest veneration."

Four years later, April 17, 1790, Benjamin Franklin passed to the Grand Lodge above.

No catalog of Franklin's offices, services, dates, names, and places adequately can convey the essential facts regarding his Masonic Membership. Properly to evaluate them it is necessary to form an accurate mental picture of Franklin the man. But so much talent for so many activities makes it difficult to pick those facets of a many-sided jewel which best reflect the influence Freemasonry had upon him.

Most of his biographers are agree that Franklin's genius showed the greatest advantage in his philosophical concepts, and his abilities as an ambassador. The one pictures the man as he was "in his heart" which is not only good Masonic ritual but also good scripture, since, "as he thinketh in his heart, so he is;" the other paints him a master of tact, of homely wit, and fair-mindedly keen in an age when wit had a rapier edge; as skilled in the arts of diplomacy in a time when intrigue and deceit were the very backbone of bargaining between nation and nation.

His whole life of service exemplifies the practice of toleration on the one hand, and a non-dogmatic, non-credic religion on the other. We cannot prove that he received the inspiration for these from Freemasonry he loved and practiced, but neither can anyone prove the contrary. It is difficult to associate Masonic ideas with such thoughts as Franklin so often expressed, and not see a connection between.

In the Constitution Convention, when Franklin saved it for the Union, and the Union for posterity, he said;

"The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, "That God Governs in the Affairs of Men." And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, it is probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe, that, without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builder's of Babel."

It would be difficult to put much more Masonry in the same number of words.

To his father he wrote:

"The Scriptures assure me that the last day we shall not be examined for what we thought, but what we did; and our recommendation will not be that we said, 'Lord, Lord!' but that we did good to our fellow creatures. See Matt. XXV."

The famous epitaph he wrote for himself so slightly conceals the Masonic theme of immortality as told in our Legend that all may read who run:

The body of
B. Franklin, Printer
(Like the cover of an old book
Its contents torn out
And stripped of its Lettering and Guilding)
Lies here, Food for the Worms.
But the Work shall not be wholly lost;
For it will, (as he believed) appear once more,
In a new and more perfect Edition,
Corrected and Amended
By the Author.

Benjamin Franklin had everything that a reformer should have, except the desire to reform for the sake of the reformation. He improved everything which interested him, but he never tried to force his improvements into the lives of others. He could show a world a new way of making glasses, and that lightning comes down a kitestring, and that daylight saving time adds to leisure, and that wit and humor win more causes than arguments, but he did not try to “make laws about it.” He improved the printing press, the army and navy, the common stove, ideas of ventilation, paved Philadelphia and made it a better lighted town, invented a hundred gadgets for common living, such as a three wheel clock, a combination library chair and step ladder (they can be bought to this day) an artificial arm to get books from a high shelf, “but he never tried to improve or change or alter Freemasonry.”

Franklin is generally conceded to have been a diplomat of the first rank, but only those who read history carefully know what a load he carried on his old shoulders when in 1776 he went to France to represent the United States. He had to win the support of a nation largely controlled by court, fashion, beauty, gallantry - anything but the hard common sense of a Franklin. Yet this same practical philosopher, this inventor, scientist, printer, pamphleteer and politician; took France by storm. He was a gallant gentleman to the ladies, a man among men with French gallants. He won sympathy without a display of suffering, and made friends without seeming to try. He convinced every one of his honor and probity by being honest in an age when dishonesty was fashionable. On his simple promise to pay he secured millions in ships, men and goods, where a less able representative might have failed with an order of Congress on the Treasury for backing. He played international politics by using the King’s hatred of the English. He selected and forwarded military supplies. He fitted out and commissioned privateers. He kept the accounts between two nations. He helped plan the campaigns at sea.

He enthused the French ruler and the French people. And through it all he kept his sanity, made new friends and retained old ones, all by fair-mindedness, the innate justice and the toleration which are part and parcel of the teachings of Freemasonry.

Franklin lived to be eighty-five years old. Sixty of those years as a Freemason; he lived and wrote and practiced the principles of the Order.

It is not for us to say what he would have been had there been no Freemasonry in his life; it is for us only to revere the Franklin who was among the very greatest of any other nation, in all times; for us to congratulate ourselves and be thankful for our country, that this wise philosopher, this leader of men and of nations, had taken to his heart the immutable and eternal principles of the Ancient Craft.