



Doctor Franklin, Jefferson's 'beloved and venerable' friend

"The succession to Doctor Franklin at the court of France was an excellent school of humility." So Thomas Jefferson reflected as he prepared notes for a eulogy that would be read in memory of Benjamin Franklin at the American Philosophy Society on March 1, 1791.

Yet this "school of humility" was never one that Jefferson seemed to begrudge. He lauded Franklin as scientist, statesman, and a "great and dear friend, whom time will be making greater while it is sponging us from its records."

As neither man has been expunged from history, it is interesting to consider the nine months they spent together in Paris, a time when they renewed the relationship begun in the Continental Congress of 1775-76 and when the younger Jefferson again had the opportunity to work closely with Franklin, seasoned veteran

of international diplomacy, science, and letters.

When Jefferson arrived in August 1784 to assist in the negotiation of commercial treaties, Franklin had been in France for more than seven years. He had arrived late in 1776, primarily to secure French support for the American colonies in their fight for independence from Great Britain. By 1783, he was concluding the peace treaty that formally ended the conflict.

Jefferson's arrival was little noticed amid the fanfare and notoriety that surrounded Franklin. "No one was more fashionable, more sought after in Paris than Doctor Franklin. The crowd chased after him in parks and public places; hats, canes, and snuffboxes were designed in



Benjamin Franklin preceded Thomas Jefferson as American representative in Paris.

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Benjamin Franklin

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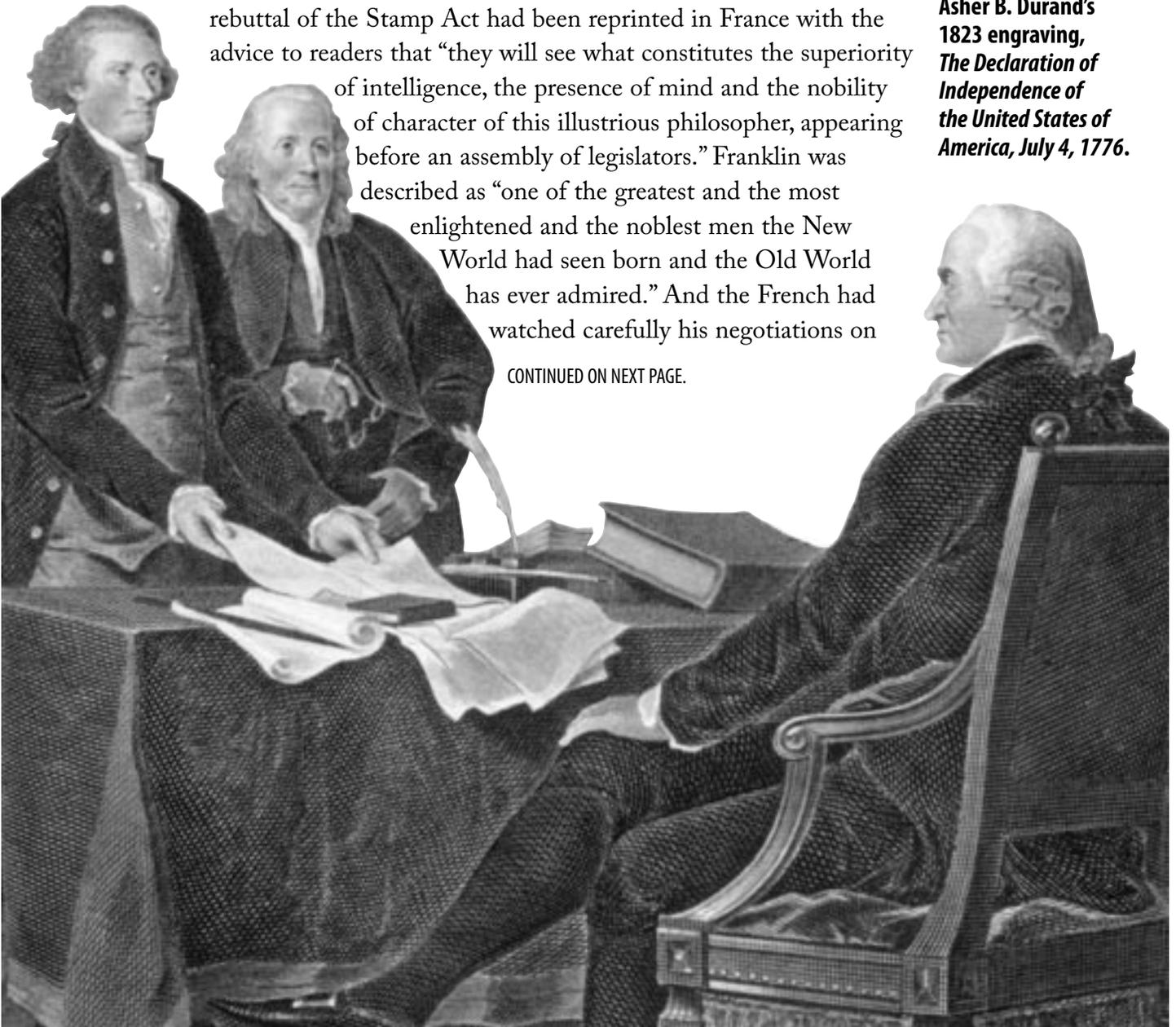
the Franklin style, and people thought themselves very lucky if they were invited to the same dinner party as this famous man,” one Parisian observed.

Franklin’s reputation as a man of science and as a statesman had preceded him. His *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* had been translated into French in 1752 and endorsed by King Louis XV, who requested that his compliments be conveyed to the author. Other of Franklin’s essays and writings were available in French as well. His testimony before the House of Commons in 1766 in rebuttal of the Stamp Act had been reprinted in France with the advice to readers that “they will see what constitutes the superiority

of intelligence, the presence of mind and the nobility of character of this illustrious philosopher, appearing before an assembly of legislators.” Franklin was described as “one of the greatest and the most enlightened and the noblest men the New World had seen born and the Old World has ever admired.” And the French had watched carefully his negotiations on

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Jefferson with Franklin at his side in a detail from Asher B. Durand’s 1823 engraving, *The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, July 4, 1776.*





Benjamin Franklin

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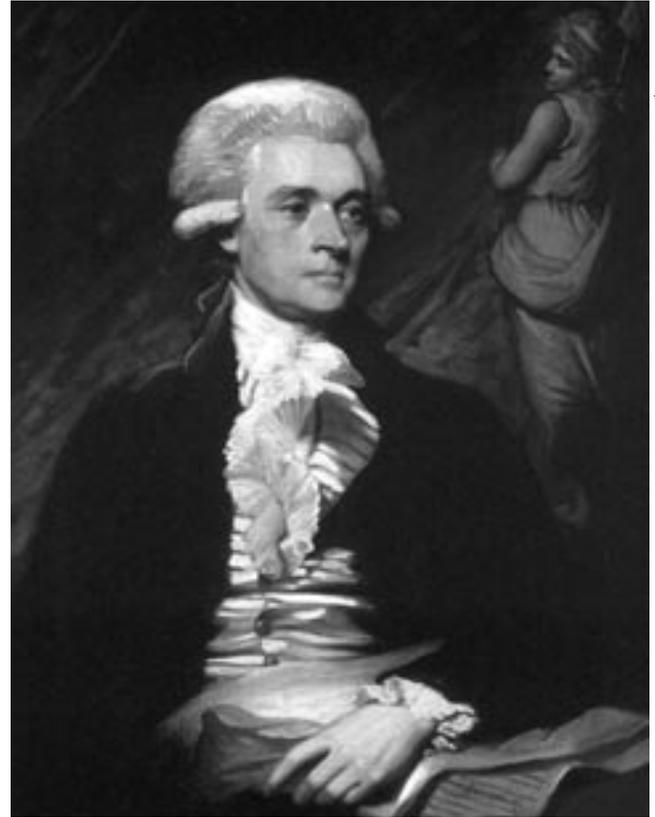
America's behalf with their traditional enemy, England.

Jefferson had given similar voice to Franklin's abilities in his own *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he rebuffed European charges that America, among other things, was devoid of genius. "In physics we have produced a Franklin, than whom no one of the present age has made more important discoveries, nor has enriched philosophy with more, or more ingenious solutions of the phenomena of nature," Jefferson wrote.

But despite his avid defense of American genius, Jefferson upon settling in Paris was drawn to the stimulating, intellectual atmosphere of the French salons and scientific circles. He hoped introductions initiated by Franklin would open "a door of admission for me to the circle of literati." It was at the salon of Madame Helvétius, a very close and particular friend of Franklin's, where Jefferson met and established lasting relationships with members of the French literati such as the Comte de Volney, Destutt de Tracy, and Pierre-Georges Cabanis, among others.

Jefferson's only observation of a deficiency in Franklin's diplomatic skills was his elder friend's lack of training in the law. Jefferson cited a consular agreement made between Franklin and France's foreign minister, the Comte de Vergennes, that allowed privileges and exemptions to French consuls assigned to the United States contrary to the laws of many of the states. Jefferson, trained in the law, would later renegotiate these points.

However, Jefferson recognized this same deficiency as one of Franklin's strengths. Unlike lawyers, "whose trade it is to question everything, yield nothing, and talk by the hour," Jefferson noted that when he had served in the Continental Congress, Franklin never spoke as much as 10 minutes at a time and then only addressed the



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Jefferson was U.S. minister to France when he sat for this 1786 portrait by Mather Brown.

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Benjamin Franklin

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main point to be decided. Along with this ability to listen carefully, Jefferson listed among Franklin's diplomatic skills his amiable temperament and reasonable disposition, "sensible that advantages are not all to be on one side."

During Jefferson's first nine months in Paris, there were few accomplishments in negotiating commercial treaties. He fretted that Europe did not respect the U.S. government and looked upon it as lacking "tone and energy," and recognized that Franklin's cachet had been a major factor in the previous interest afforded the cause of the United States. As preparations were made for Franklin's departure and his own step into the position of minister plenipotentiary, Jefferson cautioned in letters to the United States that "Europe fixes an attentive eye on your reception of Doctor Franklin."

Despite some old political opponents who questioned Franklin's loyalty to the United States because of the number of years he had been away, Franklin was welcomed back for the most part with accolades, and his appointment to the Constitutional Convention to assist in the drafting of the new constitution indicated a continued confidence in his abilities.

Soon after Jefferson's own return to the United States four years later, he visited the "beloved and venerable Franklin" at his home in Philadelphia and tried to soothe his anxieties about his acquaintances who he feared were caught up in the political upheavals that erupted into the French Revolution. Upon hearing the news from France, Franklin's "animation [was] almost too much for his strength," Jefferson noted. Nonetheless, Jefferson still encouraged Franklin to complete his autobiography.

This would be their last visit, as Franklin died a month later, on April 17, 1790. Jefferson maintained his lasting respect and admiration for Franklin, and concluded his notes for his eulogy

Franklin's 300th

Printer, writer, scientist, inventor, civic leader, revolutionary, and diplomat Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston on Jan. 17, 1706.

The 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth will be marked with numerous events and a major traveling exhibition, *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World*, which will open in Philadelphia this Dec. 5 and go to St. Louis, Houston, Denver, and Atlanta before its grand finale in Paris in 2008.

The national celebration for the first Founding Father to reach 300 is being organized by the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary, a private, nonprofit consortium created by the American Philosophical Society, Franklin Institute, Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and University of Pennsylvania with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Information about the commemoration of Franklin's 300th is available at the Web site benfranklin300.com.

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Benjamin Franklin

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with a confession:

“On being presented to any one as the Minister of America, the commonplace question, used in such cases, was, ‘*C’est vous, Monsieur, qui remplace le Docteur Franklin?*’ ‘It is you, Sir, who replace Doctor Franklin?’ I generally answered, ‘No one can replace him, Sir; I am only his successor.’”

– GAYE WILSON

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COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org