THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY
AND THE FOUNDERS OF OUR
GOVERNMENT

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It is not my function on this occasion to recall the conditions which led up to the assembling of the Constitutional Convention nor to recount the events which took place in Independence Hall one hundred and fifty years ago. Those conditions and events have been presented by others and I shall confine my remarks to a brief account of the history of the American Philosophical Society and its association with the founders of our government.

While the Constitutional Convention was meeting in this hall, then known as the State House, the building of the American Philosophical Society was being erected where it now stands on the east side of State House Square. It was begun in 1785 or 1786, but not finished until 1789, and next to Independence Hall it is the oldest building on Independence Square. The County Building, afterwards called Congress Hall, which stands on the northwest corner of the square and was occupied by Congress from 1790 to 1800, was not begun until 1787, while the old City Hall on the northeast corner was not started until 1790 and was occupied by the Supreme Court from 1791 until the seat of government was transferred to Washington in 1800.

But the American Philosophical Society is much older than its building, or even than Independence Hall. It is an outgrowth of the Junto organized by Benjamin Franklin in 1727 when he was but twenty-one years old. This organization, or possibly another with the same name and purpose continued until 1766, when its name was changed to "The American Society for Promoting and Propagating Useful Knowledge, Held at Philadelphia." Franklin was chosen its president.

1 Address before the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of America in Independence Hall, May 25, 1937.
Twenty-three years earlier, namely in 1743, Franklin had proposed the organization of a national society for the promotion of useful knowledge among the British plantations in America. His proposal was "that one society should be formed of virtuosi or ingenious men, residing in the several colonies, to be established in the City of Philadelphia, as the most central place, and to be called The American Philosophical Society." This society was duly organized, with Thomas Hopkinson as president, Benjamin Franklin, secretary, and with resident and corresponding members drawn from the various arts and sciences, but no records of the meetings have been preserved and apparently it ceased to function after a few years. However, when the Junto became the American Society in 1766, its members being drawn largely from the popular party, the American Philosophical Society was revived, its members belonging in large part to the proprietary or aristocratic party. Governor Andrew Hamilton was its president and meetings were frequently held in the State House. These two societies were for a short time rivals, although both had been fathered by Franklin and both had similar purposes. In 1769 they were united into a single society which has ever since borne the name "The American Philosophical Society Held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge."

At the first election of officers after the union of the two societies Franklin and Governor Hamilton were nominated for the presidency and the election was hotly contested, but Franklin was elected much to the mortification of the governor, who, when asked to become patron of the society, replied, "I never shall be Patron of a Society that has for its President such a ——— as Franklin." Governor Hamilton's successor, Richard Penn, showed better manners in accepting the position of patron and in attending a meeting of the society in 1773, but as long as the proprietary government lasted the society did not again meet in the State House, nor did it obtain a charter until 1780.

In spite of the fact that Franklin was in Europe on public business in 1769 and for many years after, he continued to be elected president each year until his death in 1790. During all this time he maintained a lively interest in the society, frequently sending books, apparatus and communications to its meetings. In 1785, when by Act of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth a lot
of ground on the east side of State House Square was granted to the society as a site for its future home, Franklin was the chief contributor to the cost of the building. While the building was being erected between 1786 and 1789 the society frequently met at Franklin’s home, owing to his infirmities, and although the building was finished and occupied several months before his death it is not certain that he was present at any of these meetings.

Throughout most of the history of the society its income was derived in large part from contributions, membership fees and the rental of the basement and first floor rooms of its building. Its first tenants were the University of the State of Pennsylvania, Peale’s Museum and the College of Physicians. Later the Municipal Court of Philadelphia occupied a portion of the building and still later banking and insurance firms were tenants. But from the first the south rooms on the second floor were the members’ rooms where for nearly one hundred and fifty years the meetings of the society were held; other rooms were used as the library and, when these were outgrown, a third story was put on the building in 1890 and the entire building was strengthened and rendered more nearly fireproof. In 1931 the munificent bequest of Dr. R. A. F. Penrose, Jr., enabled the society for the first time to take possession of its entire building and to house temporarily its very valuable library and manuscripts in the Drexel Building on Fifth Street opposite the building of the society.

No Colonial Dames were members of this oldest learned and scientific society of America, but there were many Colonial Sires of distinction. It is impossible here to call this roll of honor of the premier blue ribbon society of America, but it includes most of the leaders in the foundation of our government and in the promotion of science, art and education in America, as well as many of the most distinguished men of other lands. Fifteen members of the American Philosophical Society were Signers of the Declaration of Independence, eighteen were members of the Constitutional Convention which met here one hundred and fifty years ago. Of the fifty-five delegates who attended that Convention only thirty-nine signed the Constitution as it was finally drafted and of this number fifteen were members of the American Philosophical Society. Thirteen Presidents of the United States have been members of the society, among these Washington, Adams, Jeffer-
son and Madison. Jefferson was for eighteen years president of
the society and he took a very active part in its scientific work. It
was through his initiative while he was President of the United
States, as well as of the Philosophical Society, that the French
botanist, André Michaux, was sent out to explore the interior of
this continent. He was an active member of the society and his son,
François André Michaux, also a member, bequeathed to the society
the Michaux Fund for the extension and progress of agriculture,
and more especially sylviculture, in the United States. It was
also under Jefferson's orders and with the coöperation of the
Philosophical Society that the Lewis and Clark Expedition was
sent out to explore the country between the Mississippi and Cali-
forinia. The society took a very active part in promoting and organ-
izing this expedition and ultimately in publishing its results. The
original manuscript journals of this famous exploration were de-
posited by request of Jefferson in the keeping of the American
Philosophical Society.

Another notable work under the auspices of the society was the
observation of the transit of the planet Venus across the disk of
the sun on June 3, 1769. The telescopes and clock which were used
on that occasion are now in the members' room on the second
floor of the Hall. A platform was erected in State House Square
for this observation and it was from this platform that the Decla-
ration of Independence was first read to the public on July 8,
1776. Other samples of useful knowledge which were promoted
by the society before 1800 were the surveys for the Delaware and
Chesapeake Canal and of the Susquehanna River, the promotion
of the culture of silk worms and the production of silk, the propa-
gation of Chinese vetches and soy-beans, the culture of vines and
the making of wine from American grapes, the culture of currants
and hemp and chestnut trees, methods of preventing the damage
to wheat by the Hessian fly, methods of curing the bite of the
rattlesnake, the first machine for mowing with a horse, and the
first steamboat, invented by John Fitch in 1785, which scheduled
regular trips on the Delaware at least twenty years before Robert
Fulton's Clermont navigated the Hudson.

In the society's “cabinet” are some of Franklin's and Ritten-
house's electrical apparatus, models of Franklin's stoves, a model
of Fitch's steamboat, the telescopes and clock used in observing the
transit of Venus and of Mercury, also William Penn’s theodolite with which the city of Philadelphia was laid out. In addition there are many memorabilia of Franklin, his old library chair, walking stick, medals, diplomas, etc. Also the armchair in which Jefferson is said to have written the Declaration of Independence, together with a copy of that famous document in Jefferson’s handwriting.

The society’s archives are especially rich in letters, manuscripts and documents which concern the beginnings of our government as well as earlier colonial history. Here is the original Charter of Privileges granted by William Penn to the colonists in 1701; his commitment to the Council of all his powers as Proprietor with certain reservations during his first return to England in 1684. Here is a manuscript volume of the laws of Pennsylvania prior to 1700, the original manuscript Minutes of the Provincial Council from 1693 to 1716; the Minutes of the Commission to determine the boundary line between Maryland and Pennsylvania, the Mason and Dixon line of 1760-1768; a set of the treaties with the Indians, also several Indian vocabularies prepared by Thomas Jefferson and others.

The society’s archives contain many original letters and documents of the period leading up to the Revolution and during the War for Independence; the resolutions of the merchants of Philadelphia and of Boston regarding non-importation in protest to the Stamp Act of Parliament; General George Wheedon’s Valley Forge Orderly Book; letters to and from Richard Henry Lee; the General Greene papers during 1778-1780 while he was Quarter-master General of the Continental Army; letters of Washington, Jefferson and other founders of the nation; finally, the largest collection in existence of the letters to and from Benjamin Franklin and of his writings and publications.

The society’s collection of portraits and busts is especially valuable. The portrait of Washington by Gilbert Stuart is notable since it was painted by request of the society and was approved by a committee appointed for the purpose. The portrait of Jefferson by Sully is one of the best in existence. Portraits of Franklin and Rittenhouse by Charles Wilson Peale are much admired and often copied. In addition to these there are fifty-five portraits of other worthies whose lives and works have enriched American science
and learning. Among the collection of busts, those of Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Condorcet, Turgot, Lafayette, Alexander Hamilton, Nicholas Biddle, Nathaniel Bowditch and Baron Cuvier are especially worthy of notice.

The society is not merely a relic and museum of antiquity, but a living, active organization "for the promotion of useful knowledge." Its meetings of scholars from all parts of the country and from foreign lands are among the most important events in the learned world today as they were one hundred and fifty years ago. Its publications have been issued since 1769 in more than thirty volumes of Transactions, seventy-eight volumes of Proceedings, and eight volumes of a new series known as Memoirs. Its library is especially rich in volumes on Americana, archaeology, botany and forestry, the history of science, and publications of learned societies. Best of all, since receiving the Penrose bequest in 1931, the society has been able to engage in an extensive program of research work through the award of grants to investigators in many fields of science and the humanities. Since July, 1933, it has awarded one hundred and seventy grants of a total value of more than $200,000 for the promotion of knowledge in some twenty subjects ranging alphabetically from archaeology to zoology, chronologically from ancient paleontology to modern political systems, geographically from Philadelphia to India, and cosmologically from stardust and cosmic rays to protoplasm and evolution. Thus is the oldest learned society in America justifying its original purpose, "the promotion of useful knowledge."