IT IS the object of this short article to draw attention to the archives of the Royal Society of Arts, London, as a source of information for the history of the American colonies between 1750 and 1770. Unfortunately the society’s archives are entirely uncatalogued. Hence, it is not certain at present how much material they contain. But a few references to the greatest of eighteenth century Americans will serve to indicate the nature of this new quarry for historical researchers.

The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce was founded on March 22, 1754, at Rawthmell’s Coffee-House in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden. The real credit for its foundation belongs to William Shipley and Lord Folkestone, though there were eleven original members in all, including Lord Romney, Stephen Hales and Henry Baker. From its first year the society offered premiums and medals for important inventions, improvements in agriculture, new manufacturing methods—in fact, almost anything that might be of advantage to “the publick Good.”

The secretary, William Shipley, soon wrote to Benjamin Franklin, possibly on the advice of Peter Collinson, asking him to become a corresponding member. Franklin replied from Philadelphia, on November 27, 1755, making an offer of twenty guineas to assist the society’s work. It would appear that this letter never reached London, so on June 15 of the following year, Franklin repeated his offer, enclosing a copy of the original letter. Meetings of the society were held on alternate Wednesday evenings, and

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2 Stephen Hales was a celebrated doctor, botanist and inventor. See A. E. Clark-Kennedy, *Stephen Hales, D.D., F.R.S.* (Cambridge, 1929).
3 Henry Baker was associated with Daniel Defoe in the production of a periodical entitled the *Universal Spectator and Weekly Journal*, and married Defoe’s daughter. He was an authority on microscopy and typography.
4 See Appendix A.
Franklin’s communication was read to the members on August 18. We find the following entry in the society’s first minute-book:

A Letter from Benj. Franklin, Esqr., Dated Phila: Novr. 27th, 1755, was read, wherein he mentions he should esteem it as a great Honour to be admitted a Corresponding Member of this Society; and tho’ it is not required that Corresponding Members should bear any part of the Expence of the Society, yet he desires he may be permitted to contribute 20 Guineas to be applied in Premiums.

Order’d That a Letter be sent to Mr. Franklin to return him Thanks for his Letter and generous offer; and Mr. Baker was desired to write the same.6

Shipley himself proposed the unexpected benefactor as a corresponding member and at the next meeting, on September 1, the nomination was unanimously approved. On this occasion one ordinary member was also elected, namely, “Mr.” Joshua Reynolds. Henry Baker read the letter of thanks which he had drafted, and it was ordered that this should be despatched forthwith to Philadelphia.6

Less than two months after his arrival in England in 1757, Franklin attended a meeting of the Society of Arts, namely, on September 7. The minutes would seem to indicate that he had praised its schemes in his own country:

Mr. Franklin read an Extract of a Letter to him from Mr. John Hughes, Merchant of Philadelphia, as follows: “I herewith put into your Hands Thirty two Dollars which I desire you to present to the Society you mentioned to me some time ago, and be pleased to let them know I commit it to their Direction to be laid out either for the good of Great Britain or America as they think proper”; which Donation was paid in by Mr. Franklin. Order’d That the Thanks of the Society be returned to Mr. Hughes for the above Donation; and also to Mr. Franklin for the Trouble he had taken in this Matter.7

After this, Franklin attended fairly regularly and he served on various committees—even one established to consider the value of

6 Minute Book, 1754-1757, p. 169.
8 Ibid., p. 170.
9 Ibid., 1757-1758, pp. 89-90.
Chinese seeds! Finally, on November 18, 1761, the members elected him chairman of the Committee of British Colonies and Trade. In the minutes of the meeting held a fortnight later we read that, "Dr. Franklin being present was pleased to signify his acceptance of the Office."9

The minute books of this committee have unfortunately disappeared, so we are not informed about its deliberations. But two of Franklin's letters to the society have been preserved, and these are printed at the end of this article. The opportunity may be taken to mention that among the letters found together with these, are some from Henry Ellis, Francis Faugière, Alexander Garden, etc. This correspondence is explained by the society's offer of premiums to most of the colonies on the coast of North America.10

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Appendix A

Two letters from Benjamin Franklin to the Society of Arts.

Philada. Nov. 27. 1755

I have just received your very obliging Favour of the 13th September last; and as this Ship sails immediately have little more time than to thank you cordially for communicating to me the Papers relating to your most laudable Undertaking, and to assure you that I should esteem the being admitted into such a Society as a corresponding Member a very great Honour, which I should be glad I could in the least deserve by promoting in any Degree so useful an Institution. But tho' you do not require your Correspondent to bear any Part of your Expence, you will I hope permit me to throw my Mite into your Fund and accept of 20 Guineas I purpose to send you shortly to be apply'd in Premiums for some Improvement in Britain as a grateful, tho' small Return for your most kind and generous Intentions of Encouraging Improvements in America. I flatter myself, from that Part of your Plan, that those Jealousies of her

*Mr. George C. Groce, Jr., for example, the author of an excellent article on Benjamin Gale of Connecticut, *New England Quarterly*, X, 697-716, had no opportunity of knowing that a number of Gale's letters is preserved in the society's archives.*
Colonies, which were formerly entertained by the Mother Country, begin to subside. I once wrote a little Paper, tending to show that such Jealousies with regard to Manufactures were ill-founded. It was lately printed at Boston at the end of a Pamphlet which I take the Liberty to send you. Never be discouraged by any Apprehension that Arts are come to such Perfection in England as to be incapable of farther Improvement. As yet, the Quantity of Human Knowledge bears no Proportion to the Quantity of Human Ignorance. The Improvements made these 2000 Years, considerable as they are, would have been much more so if the Ancients had possessed one or two Arts more now in common Use, I mean those of Copper-, Plate- and Letter-Printing. Whatever is now exactly delineated and described by those, can scarcely (from the Multitude of Copies) be lost to Posterity. And the Knowledge of small Matters being preserv’d, gives the Hint and is sometimes the Occasion of great Discoveries, perhaps Ages after.

The French War, which came on in 1744, took off our Thoughts from the Prosecution of my Proposal for promoting useful Knowledge in America; and I have ever since the Peace been so engag’d in other schemes of various Kinds and in publick Affairs, as not to find Leisure to revive that useful & very practicable Object. But if I live to see our present Disturbances over in this Part of the World, I shall apply myself to it with fresh Spirit; as beside the Good that may [be] done, I hope to make myself thereby a more valuable Correspondent.

You will greatly oblige me by the Communication of the Inventions and Improvements you mention. And as it is a maxim in Commerce, that there is no Trade without Returns, I shall be always endeavouring to ballance Accounts with you, tho’ probably never able to accomplish it.

I am, Sir,

Your most obedient humble Servant,

B. Franklin.

Philadelphia, June 15, 1756.

Sir,

The above is a Copy of my Letter sent you last Year, to which, having received no Answer, I imagine it by some means miscarried. I shall write to my good Friend
& Correspondent, Mr. Collinson, to pay the 20 Guineas therein mentioned to your Treasurer, Mr. Goodchild.

My Respectful Compliments to the Members of Your Society.

I am, Sir,
Your most humble Servt.
B. Franklin.¹¹

Philada. Sept. 2, 1764.

Sir,

Furman & Co., Merchants of this Place, send by Capt. Caton, 60 Keggs of Sturgeon, which they hope will be found so well cured as to obtain the Society's Approbation & a Premium. — They have desired me to introduce their Claim to you by a Line in its favour; but I have told them the whole will depend on the merits of their Fish when it comes over to London.¹² I can only say that what I have tasted of it here was excellent. America can furnish any Quantity, but for our Encouragement methinks the foreign Duty.

With great Esteem for your self, and best Wishes for the Prosperity of the Society,

I am, Sir,
Your most obedient humble Servant,
B. Franklin.¹³

Appendix B

The following analysis of the premiums and medals awarded by the Committee of British Colonies and Trade, from 1754 to 1778, is printed on p. 19 of a rare book entitled A Register of the Premiums and Bounties given by the Society instituted at London for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (London, 1778).

¹² Guard Book, I, No. 126.
¹³ This firm, we may note, was unsuccessful. In 1765, £50 was given to Messrs. Boehm and Son, and £25 to Messrs. Borryeau and Company.
²⁸ Guard Book, IX, No. 49.
A SUMMARY ABSTRACT
Of the Rewards given in the Class of Colonies and Trade.

| For establishing a BOTANICK GARDEN and for OBSERVA-
<p>| Pecuniary | Honorary Medals |</p>
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<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>2785 13 8</td>
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For importing EARTH NUTS, MYRTLE WAX, STURGEON and ZEBRA WOOD.
For making INDIGO, IRON and SALT PETRE.
For planting VINES and MUL-BERRY TREES, and producing SILK.
For establishing Manufactures of POT-ASH and PEARL-ASH.