JOHN BARTRAM AND THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

BY FRANCIS D. WEST*

That the American Philosophical Society, first scientific society in the United States, was founded in 1743 by Benjamin Franklin, is a matter of common knowledge and of pride to Pennsylvanians. Philosophical Hall, the home of the Society, was erected in 1789 on the State House Square beside what we now call Independence Hall. It is fitting that these two buildings, which hold primacy among our national monuments, the one in the political and the other in the intellectual field, should stand side by side at the head of Philadelphia's new Mall.

Who first conceived the idea of the American Philosophical Society has been a disputed question. The following article presents evidence that the idea originated in the mind of Franklin's very good friend, John Bartram, the botanist.—Editor

THE discovery by the late Dr. Edward E. Wildman and the present writer of fragments of the draft of a letter written by John Bartram of Philadelphia to Peter Collinson in England, throws additional light on the origin of the American Philosophical Society. It corroborates a statement made by Carl Van Doren:1 "If anything resembling the Society ever existed before Franklin's Proposal of May, 1743, it was a suggestion that seems to have been made by John Bartram in 1739."

All that is preserved of the letter is a badly torn and faded fragment found on page 38, Volume I, of the Bartram Papers in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It was evidently written in the forepart of 1739, for, though the date is not shown, Collinson's reply, written in England, is dated July 10th of that year.

The last lines on the page read as follows: "Now I have an opportunity I must... [ask?] thy opinion thereon I believe it might

*Mr. Francis D. West, Vice President of The John Bartram Association, is a direct descendant of John Bartram. On a grant from the American Philosophical Society, he collaborated with the late Dr. Edward Wildman on a life of John Bartram, some chapters of which have already appeared in historical magazines: "John Bartram's Journey to Pittsburgh in the Fall of 1761" (Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine), and "John Bartram and Slavery" (South Carolina Historical Magazine).

1Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 87, No. 3 (July 1943), page 277.
be... most ingenious & curious men that we... study of natural
secrets arts & syances would... academy or society & have A
house for to meet to communicate... discoveries freely this I
believe... .” There are at least two lines more, but they are in-
distinct and partly torn off.

The first line at the top of the other side of the sheet is gone. Then we read: “Sufficient number of ingenious persons for ye... [about three words missing] A beginning we should increase our
numbers but if wee delayed... before us & have credit for it”

There follows a space and then what appears to be the draft of another letter: “having by orders of severall members of ye Royal Society...”

Collinson’s reply, dated July 10, 1739, contains the fol-
lowing paragraph: “As to the Society that thou hints at, had you
a set of learned well qualified members to set out with, it might
draw your neighbors to correspond with you. Your Library Com-
pany I take to be an essay towards such a Society. But to draw
learned strangers to you, to teach sciences requires salaries and
good encouragement; and this will require public as well as pro-
prietary assistance which can’t be at present complied with con-
sidering the infancy of your colony.”

The subject is not mentioned again in any of the letters that passed between them; at least no record of any has been found. It is doubtful if Bartram mentioned the subject to his friend again. He seems to have spent the next two years in traveling, apparently endeavoring to supply orders from Collinson, who for the most part was taking care of the needs of Lord Petre.

In an attempt to interest the colonists in Bartram’s work, Frank-
lin’s Gazette on March 17, 1742, printed a “Copy of the Subscrip-
tion for the Encouragement of Mr. John Bartram,” which had been
mentioned in the issue of the week before, seemingly taking it for
granted that the possible subscribers must be convinced of the
project. It was about June 11, 1742, that the subscription stopped; and it was on December 18 of the same year that Bartram wrote
to Collinson: “since the death of our dear friend, Lord Petre will
discourage distant travels; and our Americans have not zeal enough
to encourage discoveries of this kind, at their expence”

Bartram Papers, I, 25, H. S. P.
Bartram must have been feeling pretty blue about this time, and perhaps during the winter brought up the subject of a society—an idea to which his friend Franklin must have given encouragement, starting things going by his printed proposal for the formation of the society. Bartram sent to his friend Cadwallader Colden a copy of the proposal, with the following letter written on the back:

March ye 27th 1744

Esteemed Friend

I have long expected a letter from thy hands having received none since that sent by thy son which I answered by him dear friend this neglect or misfortune gives me some uneasiness;

I should be very glad to hear oftener from thee by letter. I have sent thee one of our proposals for forming a Philosophical Society. we have already had three meetings & several learned & Curious persons from our neiboring Colonies hath alreadly Joyned membership with us & we hope thee will pleas to do us ye honor to be enroled in our number I hope this undertaking may be of public benefit to our american Colonies if we act with diligent application in the afair.

I have litt more to say at present having received no letters of London this winter but A very learned & curious Clergyman from Bristol sent me A long Catalogue of his garden furniture which did realy pleas me My respects to thy dear spouse & children & asure thyself of ye friendship & service of thy Sincere friend

John Bartram

Bartram again wrote to Colden on the 29th of April, 1744:

Our Philosophic Society increaseth finely. I think we have had 7 members initiated last meeting of which thee was one by unanimous conent—indeed James Logan was acquainted with it as A Compliment. I told Benjamin that I believed he would not incourage it; we should have been

*Bartram Papers, I, 26, H. S. P.*
pleased with his name at ye top of our List, as his person in our meetings however we resolved that his not favouring ye design should not hinder our attempt & if he would not go along with us we would Jog along without him. ye next fifth night we are going to have another meeting where Doctor Spence will accompany us. he exhibits Phylosophic Lextures now at Philadelphia & approves our design. offers to take our proposals with him to ye West Indies with A favorable account of our proceedings.

"A Brief History of the American Philosophical Society" states that in 1745 Franklin confessed, "The members of our Society are very idle gentlemen: they will take no part"; and John Bartram, second on the list of members, said, "Franklin, Dr. Bond and I talk of carrying it on with more diligence than ever."

Although the activities of the Society seemed to languish between 1744 and 1768, in the latter year Franklin, Bond, and Bartram were reported as still on the roll of the Society.

6 From a letter to Cadwallader Colden, Oct. 4, 1745: *Colden Letters and Papers 3*; pp. 159-160.