

## EXHIBIT REVIEW

Benjamin Franklin Museum, Franklin Court, Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia. Opening date: August 24, 2013. Rosalind Remer and Page Talbott, exhibit curators; Cynthia Macleod, superintendent. Exhibit design by Casson Mann (London); graphic design by Nick Bell Design (London); Interactive design by Memory Collective (Plymouth, MA), Bluecadet (Philadelphia).

*P*hiladelphia has never shirked its duty in commemorating Benjamin Franklin. From the outpouring of grief that followed his death in 1790, through the reproduction of images and texts in the nineteenth century, and the creation of numerous sites in the last century or so, Franklin's legacy was never forgotten. Yet Franklin scholars and the general public could agree that—until recently—it was difficult to direct the city's visitors to one location that could explain the man, his life, his varied career, and his role in the creation of the United States of America. The newly completed exhibit in the renamed and refurbished

Benjamin Franklin Museum at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia goes a long way to remedy that situation.

Visitors to the museum adjacent to the site of the house where Franklin lived and died will be struck by the dramatic change in the space. Gone is the Bicentennial-era museum, with its bright, jolting colors; gone is the pedestrian entrance leading from ground level to the Underground Museum (which, one visitor in a wheelchair once described as “the ramp of death”). Instead, visitors now enter a light-filled ground-level entry and admission-fee collecting area and descend either by a lovely staircase or modern elevator into subtly lit galleries with dramatic audiovisual displays that surround Franklin treasures, allowing them to be immersed by the story of Franklin’s life.<sup>1</sup>

Curated by Rosalind Remer and Page Talbott, whose “Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World” celebrated Franklin’s 2006 Tercentennial in a traveling exhibit that began at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia and then moved on to other American cities and to Paris, the newly opened NPS museum includes many of the same objects and themes that appeared in that earlier show, as well as new interpretive methods. The Remer and Talbott installation divides Franklin’s life and career into five rooms that thematically explore his many interests. While an attractive timeline spanning the center of the museum space does provide chronological reference, the five rooms do not stick to a strictly chronological story, instead examining topics such as “Ambitious and Rebellious”—which connects the experience of the seventeen-year-old runaway apprentice with



FIGURE 1: Franklin Court with the entrance to the new Franklin Museum on the right. *Source:* National Park Service museum press kit.

the seventy-year-old who broke with England and signed the Declaration of Independence. Other themes include Franklin's sociability, his efforts to improve himself and society, his quest for knowledge, and his chess player's mind and the way he used it to solve political problems.<sup>2</sup>

One challenge to interpreting Franklin's life in Philadelphia is the way items related to his story have been dispersed, first among a large number of descendants and then later as cultural institutions have clung on to their historical treasures. Independence National Historical Park, created by Congress and President Truman in 1948, never had the acquisition primacy, the budget, or the singularity of focus to acquire large numbers of Franklin-owned objects, and many of the most evocative of these remain in private collections, in other museums' displays, or in museum and library storage rooms throughout the city. Fortunately, the Benjamin Franklin Museum has created cracks in the walls that separate these various collections. At its opening, the museum includes a splendid array of artifacts on loan from the American Philosophical Society, the University of Pennsylvania, the Museum of Philadelphia History, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and others. Unfortunately, some of these objects are a limited-time offer, and loan agreements require that they will return to their home institutions before long. It might be hoped that these loaning institutions might reconsider, and join together in creating a plan of long-term (or permanent) loans that would allow visitors from around the country and world to see Franklin-related materials in an environment that is safe, easily accessible, well staffed, and beautiful.

With Franklin-owned objects at a premium, the National Park Service has used technology to interpret the science-loving Franklin, but one era's innovation became another's antiquated artifact. From the 1970s onward, visitors entered the museum commemorating America's founding electrician through an array of flashing neon signs that evoked Simon and Garfunkel as much as Franklin, then accessed primary sources about his life by lifting the receivers of a bank of princess phones with hard steel cables that played audiotapes of quotations from founding fathers to Woodrow Wilson to learn about Franklin's legacy. By the time this installation was finally removed after four decades, its technology was so out of date that young visitors were not always sure what exactly those phones were. Likewise, the high-tech of the 1970s also created a fondly remembered installation that later, jaded frequent visitors came to call "the Dancing Dolls" ("they never danced,"

an NPS ranger pointed out to me during my first visit to the space). Small figurines of characters from the American Revolution came out to a lighted audio presentation. But as the years passed, visitors were as likely to find the display out of order, or—if it was working—to struggle to hear the recorded interpretation over the snickers of those visitors whose technological expectations had newer standards.

In the place of these departed antiquities are a collection of interactive screens from the age of the iPad that allow children—some of whom range in age from their forties through their eighties—to have fun while learning about early American history. The first of these that visitors approach at ground level allows them to comprehend the Robert Venturi–designed ghost structure that commemorates the Franklin house, to furnish it virtually with surviving Franklin family artifacts, and to use primary sources to understand how museum professionals recreate historic interiors. This interactive display greatly enhances the Franklin Court interpreted area, and complements the nearby Fragments of Franklin Court museum space, a Market Street house built by Franklin in the 1780s that allows visitors to use a stripped, unfurnished interior to learn about early American architecture and historical archaeology.

Among the best of the interactive technology is a touch screen that allows a visitor to try to get to Philadelphia as a young apprentice, as pence and shillings fly away to cover the costs of inns, ships' passages, and food. While observing this installation, one teenaged visitor shouted in agony when



**FIGURE 2:** A virtual Franklin at work in his library.  
*Source:* National Park Service press kit.

“her” money was stolen when her apprentice accepted free hospitality in a disreputable inn (drawing one nearby pundit to say, “this will teach her not to check into cheap hotels”). I found myself impressed into the British Navy by a group of soldiers offering “me” (or my avatar) a free boat ride. I marveled at the ways these interactives can aid in the teaching of complex issues like economy, social class, and age experiences.<sup>3</sup>

For its many successes, the Benjamin Franklin Museum does leave some aspects of Franklin’s life in obscurity. Perhaps the strangest part of the museum is that, for a museum exploring one man’s life in a national park that commemorates the creation of the United States, the reasons behind Franklin’s break with the mother country and the ideas and actions that shaped his progression from loyal subject to founding father seem underexplored. As in the 2006 Tercentennial exhibit, the new museum space uses a life-size statue of Franklin, dressed in a recreated suit that curators based on the measurements for one of Franklin’s outfits that survive in his papers, to show Franklin as he would have appeared when he stood before Alexander Wedderburn in the cockpit in London, a moment of disgrace that several historians have argued ended Franklin’s life as a British subject and turned him into a patriot.<sup>4</sup> But unlike the drama conveyed by that life-size statue when it stood in the center of an open space facing Wedderburn’s portrait in the earlier exhibit, this narrative is partially lost because the Franklin statue and the new accompanying text of the cockpit experience are placed within a small, dark space that evokes ideas of a shaded broom cupboard.



FIGURE 3: Young visitor engaged with interactive exhibit.

Source: National Park Service press kit.

Where the exhibit may draw the sharpest criticism is in its treatment of African Americans in Franklin's life and era. The audiovisual display of Franklin's households in four cities does mention that he took two enslaved African American men with him to London when he went to serve as colonial agent there, and that one of these men ran away. But the casual visitor will not hear of the slaves who lived in the Franklins' various Philadelphia homes or encounter any data about the size of the city's African population, its experiences, or the changes it experienced over time. The exhibit team's decision to place the interpretation of Franklin and slavery (a wall display with accompanying interactive table below) near the end of the installation is unfortunate. That placement, its brevity, and the glaring inaccuracy that Theodor De Bry's 1590 engravings of a John White drawing of Native Americans is used to represent mid-eighteenth-century Africans in North America, seems literally to marginalize the story of race in early America. It may be hoped that the exhibit will be allowed to grow and transform over time, and that rather than one or two brief mentions the experiences of diverse peoples in Franklin's time might be more fully represented.<sup>5</sup>

It may also be hoped that the lessons of long-defunct technology from the earlier Franklin museum will encourage the National Park Service truly to honor Franklin's mind and legacy by allowing this new interpretation to continue to develop. As we see how visitors use the space, provide feedback, and ask questions, the technological innovations—both those now in place and those just forming in some young inventors' minds—could allow the interpretation to grow and evolve. The Benjamin Franklin Museum is an innovative, beautiful space located in the center of America's most historic area. Its new design allows visitors a rich experience, exploring the many rooms of one innovative mind.

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## NOTES

1. On Franklin Court, see Constance M. Greiff, *Independence: The Creation of a National Park* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Claude-Anne Lopez et al., *Benjamin Franklin's "Good House": The Story of Franklin Court* (Washington, DC: National Parks Service, 1981); Barbara Liggett, *Archeology at Franklin's Court* (Philadelphia: Eastern National Parks and Monuments Association, 1973); John L. Cotter, *The Buried Past: An Archaeological History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

2. See Remer and Talbott's website, <http://www.remertalbott.com/ben-franklin-300.html>, for images of the 2006 exhibit, and Page Talbott, ed., *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).
3. For a scholarly treatment of impressment, see Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).
4. See Sheila L. Skemp, *The Making of a Patriot: Benjamin Franklin at the Cockpit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 2005).
5. On the earlier controversy at Independence National Historical Park related to the site of the President's House and the slaves George Washington held there, see Gary B. Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll? From Controversy to Cooperation," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). On Franklin and slavery, see David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).