AN ORIGINAL PORTRAIT OF DOCTOR FRANKLIN,
PAINTED BY JOSEPH WRIGHT, BELONGING
TO THE ROYAL SOCIETY, LONDON.

BY CHARLES HENRY HART.

The discovery of an original authentic portrait painted from life by an American painter, of so distinguished a character as Doctor Franklin, and hitherto unknown, is a matter of great interest and of the first importance in the iconographic history of the country and of the man. It was known that in the collection of the Royal Society, at Burlington House, London, there was a portrait of Franklin, presented, in 1790, by Caleb Whitefoord, who had been Secretary to the Commissioners who negotiated the treaty of peace between Great Britain and the United States, but as to who was the painter of the portrait, or whether it was a copy or a life portrait, the society was in profound ignorance. Wheatley in his Historical Portraits (London, 1897, p. 222), confirms this by saying, “Franklin’s portrait at the Royal Society is anonymous.” And “anonymous” it might have remained but for that Eldorado of historic lore, the Franklin manuscripts in the American Philosophical Society, at Philadelphia. This magnificent collection has now been made accessible to students by the patient industry of the learned librarian of the society, as a memorial of the bi-centenary of Franklin’s birth. After several years of untiring labor he has had printed for the society, in five large volumes, a thorough index to the manuscripts, entitled Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin in the Library of the American Philosophical Society. Edited by I. Minis Hays. Philadelphia, 1908, and I have had the privilege, in the preparation of this monograph, of being the first person to use the Calendar practically, for purposes of research.
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
1782
Painted from life by Joseph Wright
From the original painting presented by Caleb Whitefoord
to the Royal Society, London, in 1790
Some years ago, in running over these papers, I had found a letter from Patience Wright, the American modeller in wax, to Franklin, in Paris, dated London, July 30, 1782, in which she wrote: “I am very happy to here by Mr Whitford and others that my son is painting your Portrite. We expect a order from the Comon Councill very soon and so beg the orders of the City or Part of them for your Pictur to be painted by Joseph Wright and presented to those or to whom or where it may do most honor.”

But diligent and persistent inquiry failed to identify any portrait of Franklin by Joseph Wright, who at the time his mother wrote was twenty-six years of age. That he was on terms of familiar intercourse with Franklin, went without saying, for his mother and the philosopher were old cronies, and she furnished the Doctor with much political information during the pendency of the war, until she was openly accused of being a spy.¹ And Dunlap, in his *History of the Arts of Design in the United States*, says²: “In the winter of 1782 Joseph was placed by his mother under the protection of Benjamin Franklin, in Paris.” And the following letter recently found in the A. P. S. collection³ from Joseph Wright to Temple Franklin, undated, but written just before the former left France in the fall of 1782, not only confirms this, but gives us an introduction to Whitefoord’s connection with the portrait of Franklin that Wright painted, which is of much significance.

Dear Sir; —

I found at my return to Paris yesterday, that I am obliged to be detained a week longer as every place was taken both in the Dilligence and Cabriolé and there being no other conveyance before then and as I receiv’d your packet this Morning perhaps your letter to Mr. Williams

² Vol. i, p. 312.

VOL. XXXII.—21
may require an immediate conveyance. I return my sincere thanks for this continued instance of your grand-father's kindness. I could wish my situation here had put it in my Power to show you that I had a sense of the Friendship I have received from him and yourself but I find I have only, more favours to ask.

I could wish he would give me leave to make another Copy of his Picture either in small or large. As I wish to make a Present of to Mr Beech\(^1\) or whatever Person he should think fit. The last I did Mr. Whitford has been pleased to take from me. I am fearful to ask as I consider I may be in some measure troublesom and he must be tired of seeing me so Constantly. I remain etc

JOSEPH WRIGHT.

P. S. I had a great notion of making it the Size of my Mother's or the other little one you saw as it will be portable and yet sufficiently marked to keep the likeness.

A year ago I had had occasion again to examine the Franklin manuscripts, and then found the following most valuable confirmatory letter from Caleb Whitefoord to William Temple Franklin.\(^2\)

LONDON June 30th 1784

Dear Sir; —

Sometime ago, our friend Mr West, having the opportunity of seeing three of the America Plenipos' here & whishing to transmit their Portraits to Posterity in some Historical picture, made a sketch of the signing of the Preliminary Treaty, to which I contributed a material part by lending him the Portrait of your grandfather by Mr Joseph Wright, which I brought with me from Paris. There is only wanting (to make it compleat) a head of the Secretary to the American Commission, which Mr West requests you

---

\(^1\) Either Richard Bache, the son-in-law, or Benjamin Franklin Bache, the grandson of Franklin.

will send us. A miniature will do; but it should be in Co-
ours; & the attitude of the head looking over the right shoulder.
I have promised the Portrait of your grand-father, when
Mr West can spare it, to Mrs Hewson, who from her long
acquaintance & great veneration for him, I thought
highly deserving of such a present. I reserve a copy of it
for myself & I have given one to Mr Strahan. I am etc

CALEB WHITEFOORD

P. S. I was elected F. R. S. last Thursday.

Here, then, was the proof positive from Patience Wright,
Joseph Wright himself and from Caleb Whitefoord, that
Joseph Wright did paint Franklin's portrait, and, further,
that Caleb Whitefoord owned no less than three of them, for
while he uses the word "copy," he unquestionably used it
in its common, ordinary sense, of repetitions by Wright,
as Wright himself uses it, and not in its strict technical
meaning, of a copy by another hand. West's "sketch of
the signing of the Preliminary Treaty," I well knew from
reproductions of the unfinished picture in possession of Lord
Belper, of Kingston, Hall, Kegworth, Derby, England; but
as West and Franklin were old friends, I naturally sup-
posed he had sketched the Doctor from life, and never
dreamed of his having copied the head from another's
painting.

In connection with our present inquiry, the "P.S." to
Whitefoord's letter was pregnant with suggestions,—"I was
elected F.R.S.¹ last Thursday." What more likely, then,
than when Caleb Whitefoord presented a portrait of Frank-
lin to the Royal Society, he should present the one by
Joseph Wright he had retained for himself, and what would
that one be but the original from life, while the replicas
went to Strahan and Mrs Hewson? But this was mere sug-
gestion, strongly presumptive, 'tis true, yet not proof. The
needed proof, however, was furnished too by the learned
society that Franklin had founded.

¹ Fellow of the Royal Society.
Three months before Franklin died Caleb Whitefoord was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society, which distinguished honor he accepted by letter of February 25, 1791, addressed to James Hutchinson and John Vaughan, the secretaries. This letter, on file with the society, concludes with the following all important postscript:

"P.S. It is a curious concurrence of circumstances, that on the day and hour when your letter arrived, acquainting me of my Election into the American Philosophical Society, I received a letter of Thanks from the Royal Society here, for a Portrait which I had presented to them, of my honoured friend, your late worthy President. It is an excellent Resemblance of that truly great man and useful Philosopher; and was painted by Mr. Wright, an American Artist, whom I employed at Paris in the year 1782. It is now added to the Heads of Illustrious Persons, in the Royal Society's Great Room; and Doctor Franklin is grouped with his immortal Brethren in Philosophy, Newton, Boyle and Locke."

Could proof be more direct, unanswerable and conclusive, and I have had the pleasure of advising the Royal Society that the painter of its portrait of Franklin, presented by Caleb Whitefoord, is no longer unknown,—that it was painted by the American artist JOSEPH WRIGHT.

This discovery of Joseph Wright's authorship of the Royal Society's portrait of Franklin is rich in results beyond anything anticipated. The reproduction accompanying this monograph is made from a photograph by G. Hyatt, 1 Hamilton Road, Ealing, London, direct from the painting belonging to the Royal Society and a comparative study of this photograph with the portrait of Franklin in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., attributed to Duplessis, and with the portrait of Franklin in the Public Library, Boston, Mass., attributed to Greuze, can leave no doubt upon the mind of any unprejudiced person that both

\[1\] Benjamin Franklin.
of these portraits are also by or after Joseph Wright. This is particularly gratifying to me, as long ago I expressed the opinion that the former was not by Duplessis and the latter not by Greuze; and, as we shall see, I have good evidence that I am absolutely correct in regard to the Corcoran-Duplessis picture. The Wright portrait is very like the pastel portrait of Franklin by Duplessis, of the following year, recently presented by the Hon. John Bigelow to the Public Library of New York,¹ and it is only natural that it should be, as portraits painted of the same subject at about the same time, by different artists, must necessarily, if each is like the sitter, be like each other; and Wright's portrait of Franklin having preceded Duplessis's portrait of Franklin, of the same type, by one year, there is no room for the suggestion even that Wright copied the Duplessis pastel; any contention of this kind would only put the boot on the other leg.

The history of the portrait in the Corcoran Gallery of Art confirms my judgment to the letter in regard to its authorship. It was purchased in 1885 from Henry Stevens, "G.M.B.," of London, an eccentric character who dealt in Americana, and who had bought it three years earlier from Graves, the print-seller and successor of Boydell. Upon the back of this picture is the following inscription: "This portrait of Doctor Franklin was painted in Paris in 1782 and was presented by him to Mr William Hodgson, of Coleman Street, as a token of his regard and friendship." William Hodgson (1745-1851), who lived to the age of 106, was a friend of Franklin and of the colonies, who acted on behalf of both, in England, for the exchange of American prisoners of war and the amelioration of their condition during confinement. Among his many letters to the American plenipoten-

¹ Mr. Bigelow in his letter of presentation, printed in the Bulletin of the Library for June, 1908, makes the error of saying that M. le Villiard, the original owner of the portrait, accompanied Franklin on his return voyage to America. Houdon, the sculptor, was his compagnon de voyage, but not M. le Villiard.
tiary that are preserved, one of October 14, 1782, is directly in point: "If the above bill on L'Orient is honored you will please to apply the whole or what part you please to Mr Wright, for the picture, which, when proper opportunity offers, I am expecting." Here, then, in the Corcoran Gallery, is the portrait of Franklin that belonged to Hodgson, and which Hodgson himself writes is by "Mr Wright." Before I found this decisive letter I felt that the date in the inscription on the portrait was a significant substantiation of the inherent evidences of the painting that it was the work of Joseph Wright; 1782 being the year that Wright had painted his portrait of Franklin, while Duplessis's portrait of Franklin, of the type similar to the Royal Society picture, by Wright, was not painted until 1783. This, I think, must be accepted as conclusive as to the authorship of the Corcoran Gallery portrait of Franklin; and now as to the one in the Boston Public Library attributed to Greuze.

The so-called "Greuze" portrait of Franklin, in the Public Library, Boston, has a somewhat more important history, but I fear an apocryphal one. In 1857 and again in 1859 Charles Sumner saw this portrait in London at the house of Joseph Parkes (1796-1865), who married a daughter of Joseph Preistley and collected the material for a life of Sir Philip Francis, which was afterward used by Hermann Merivale, and who was a long-time manager and confidential adviser to the Whigs, acting as intermediary between the Whigs and the Radicals on the question of parliamentary reforms in 1832. Parkes had received the portrait from James Oswald, M.P., for Glasgow, a great-grandnephew of Richard Oswald, who was the chief British commissioner of the Peace Conference with the United States, and the tradition that went with the picture was that Franklin had given it to Oswald in exchange for his own portrait, at the close of the negotiation of the Preliminary Articles of Peace of November 30, 1782. Parkes sold the portrait

1A. P. S. vol. xxvi, No. 39.
to Gardner Brewer of Boston in 1860, and twelve years later Mr Brewer presented it to the Public Library of Boston.¹ The flaw in the history is that there is to-day at Auchincruive, Ayrshire, Scotland, which was the seat of Richard Oswald, acquired by him in 1759 from the proceeds of his business ventures in America, a precisely similar portrait with the same story tacked to it, and as the Ayrshire picture seems undoubtedly to have belonged to Richard Oswald and always to have remained in the plenipotentiary's house, it is most likely the identical one that passed in exchange from Franklin, and the one in the Public Library of Boston a copy of it. This, too, would seem to be the case from a study of photographs of the two pictures, the Boston portrait looking like a copy of the Auchincruive picture. This interesting information came to me in a correspondence I had, in 1897, with Mr Richard A. Oswald, a great-great-grand-nephew of Richard Oswald, the commissioner, who inherited the portrait with the house where it had always hung. This portrait, too, Mr Oswald wrote me, like the Parkes portrait, had always been attributed to Greuze; but it must be remembered, apart from the fact that neither of these portraits in its execution has the slightest resemblance to the well-known methods of Greuze, which intrinsically condemns their attribution to that painter, the portrait that Greuze did paint of Franklin is of a wholly different type.² It was painted in 1777, in pastel, and belongs to Mrs Thomas Lindall Winthrop, of Boston, whose first husband, Mr James Lawrence, purchased it at the famous San Donato sale of Prince Demidoff's collection, in March of 1870. The Boston portrait is therefore certainly not a Greuze, and that it is a copy or a replica of Wright's portrait is shown not only by its resemblance upon comparison, but by its traditional date, 1782, which is that of

¹ 20th Annual Report of the Trustees of the Public Library, 1872, pp. 21, 86-88.
Wright’s portrait; and the added fact that Wright did paint three portraits of Franklin for Caleb Whitefoord, who, it will be remembered, was Richard Oswald’s secretary, in Paris, and therefore who so likely as Wright to paint Franklin’s portrait for Oswald at that time? In final confirmation that the portraits of Franklin in the Royal Society, London, in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, and at the seat of the Oswalds in Ayrshire, are all from the brush of Joseph Wright, and that in the Public Library of Boston either by or after him, is found in the color scheme of the four pictures, each precisely the same—a red-brown or claret-color coat and a dark green chair.

Joseph Wright, who is now for the first time to receive the honor that is his due for his portrait of Doctor Franklin, never before published as from his brush, was born in Bordentown, New Jersey, July 16, 1756. As already stated, he was the son of Patience Wright, the first American modeller, and accompanied his mother to London when she settled there in 1772, and from her inherited the artistic instinct. He studied painting under Benjamin West and also with John Hoppner, who married his sister. Before he left London for Paris, he had exhibited at the Royal Academy, and had painted a portrait of the Prince of Wales, afterward George IV. His sojourn in France was rather brief, something short of a year, he sailing for home in the good ship Argo late in October of 1782, and after being shipwrecked reached Boston at the end of a voyage of ten weeks. Wright carried a letter of introduction from Franklin to Washington, which he presented in the fall of 1783, when the commander-in-chief had his headquarters at Rocky Hill, near Princeton, N. J., where Wright painted Washington’s portrait. This original study on a mahogany panel, 12x14—doubtless the portable size Wright in his

1 See letter from West to M. Pierre at Paris, introducing Wright. PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY, vol. xxxii, p. 17.
An Original Portrait of Doctor Franklin.

letter, supra, suggests for Franklin's portrait—became the property of Francis Hopkinson, and is now in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is difficult to feel that it can possibly be a true portraiture of the subject, and yet Washington has given Wright's portrait the guinea-stamp of his approval. When the Count de Solms, commandant of the Fortress of Königstein, solicited Washington, in July, 1783, for his portrait, writing: "Let the best pencil trace your image; let no pains or cost be spared to favor me with the most faithful likeness," Washington employed Wright to paint the portrait. He wrote to the Count de Solms:

Mount Vernon January 3, 1784

Sir;—

The letter which you did me the honor to write from Königstein on the 9th of July last came safely to my hands a few days ago, accompanied by one from Mons. le Count de Bruhl. * * * * * As the distance and circumstances will not permit me the pleasure of seeing you I must be contented with giving the best demonstration of respect in my power. I have not delayed a moment therefore to comply with your wishes, but have employed a gentleman to perform the work, who is thought on a former occasion to have taken a better likeness of me than any other painter has done. His forte seems to be in giving the distinguishing characteristics with more boldness than delicacy. And although he commonly marks the features very strongly, yet I can not flatter you that you will find the touches of his pencil extremely soft or that the portrait will in any respect equal your expectations. Such as it may be (and for your sake I would wish the execution was as perfect as possible) it will be forwarded from Philadelphia to the order of the Count de Bruhl, as soon as it is finished and I pray your acceptance

—

of it as a token of the great veneration and esteem with which I have the honor to be      Yours etc

Go. Washington

On the same day Washington wrote to the Count de Bruhl:

Mount Vernon January 3, 1784

Sir; —

In forwarding the letter of the Count de Solms, you have done a most acceptable office by bringing me acquainted with so venerable and dignified a character. You have also given me an occasion of experiencing your great politeness and of expressing my obligations for it. I now take the liberty of committing to your charge a letter directed to the Count. It is a harbinger of the Portrait which is intended to be presented to him, in conformity to his request and your permission and which will likewise be addressed to your care by my friend the Honble Robert Morris of Philadelphia. I have the honor to be      Yours etc

Go. Washington

A week later he wrote to Joseph Wright:

Mount Vernon, Jan. 10th 1784

Sir; —

When you have finished my portrait, which is intended for the Count de Solms, I will thank you for handing it to Mr. Robert Morris, who will forward it to the Count de Bruhl, (minister from his Electoral Highness of Saxe, at the court of London) as the channel pointed out for the conveyance of it. As the Count de Solms proposes to honour it with a place in his collection of military characters, I am persuaded you will not be deficient in point of execution. Be so good as to forward the cost of it to me and I will remit you the money. Let it (after Mr Morris has seen it) be carefully packed to prevent injury. With great esteem I am      Yours etc

Go. Washington
The same day he wrote to Robert Morris:

Mount Vernon January 10, 1784

Dear Sir; —

I will thank you for putting the letter herewith enclosed into a proper channel of conveyance. The Count de Bruhl is informed by it that my Portrait (which I have begged the Count de Solms to accept) will be forwarded to his care by you so soon as it is finished and I request the favour of you to do it accordingly. Mr. Wright is desired to hand it to you for this purpose and as he is said to be a little lazy, you would oblige me by stimulating him to the completion. By promise it was to have been done in 5 or 6 weeks from the time I left Philadelphia, near four of which have expired. I am sorry to give you trouble about trifles but I know you will excuse it in this instance. I am etc

Go, Washington

Washington paid for this portrait £18, and sent it to Königstein, where it was received August 4, 1785, and the above letters, with the exception of that from Washington to Wright, are printed from Washington’s copies in the Library of Congress at Washington, and have never before been published. Certainly Washington shows himself an incisive critic of the painter’s ability at delineation, but what is more important, and also surprising, is the statement that Wright has taken a better likeness of him than any other painter. In addition to painting several portraits of Washington, Wright modelled his bust for Congress, made a laureated head in bas-relief, and etched his profile. In regard to the first named Washington wrote Wright:

Mount Vernon 30th Jan’y, 1785

Sir; —

It has so happened that your card of Sept. 1st with the bust which accompanied it did not get to my hands until

1 The only painters who had painted portraits of Washington prior to Wright were Charles Willson Peale, Pierre Eugene Du Simitiere, and William Dunlap.
sometime in the course of last month and that a letter from your good mother, dated Dec. 8, 1783, only reached me the 12th of last December. For the first you will please to receive the united acknowledgments and thanks of Mrs Washington and myself. The large one she prays may give you no uneasiness or hurry your convenience in the execution will be most agreeable to her wishes, In answer to the second I give you the trouble of forwarding the enclosed letter when you have occasion to write to England. Our best wishes attend you and I am etc

Go. Washington

Unfortunately Wright's bust of Washington is unknown to-day, although beside the one mentioned in Washington's letter there was one made for Congress, as shown by the action of that body "Passed 6 Apr. 1785":

"The Committee consisting of Mr Johnson, Mr Bedford and Mr Howell to whom was referred a report of the Secretary of Congress respecting the bust of General Washington, do report That it appearing to them that the Bust of General Washington is now finished and ready to be delivered and that Mr Wright the artist who executed the same is about to remove from the city of Philadelphia, Your Committee are of opinion that some immediate disposition should be made of said bust. Therefore submit the following resolution

"That His Excellency the President draw an order on the Treasurer of the United States in favor of Joseph Wright for 233 1/3 dolls it being the sum charged by him for modelling and completing the said Bust.

"That the Secretary of Congress take order for causing the said bust to be brought to this city and wait the further order of Congress"

The next day Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, wrote to Wright from New York, covering a warrant for the amount and requesting delivery of the bust.

Washington showed his appreciation of Wright's ability further by appointing him the first engraver and die-sinker
to the United States Mint, a position he had held but a short time when he fell a victim to the scourge of yellow fever that swept Philadelphia toward the close of 1793. The exact date of Wright's death is lost, but on November 6, 1793, Jefferson, as Secretary of State, wrote to David Rittenhouse, Director of the Mint, "It has been understood that Mr. Wright, our engraver, is dead." 1 His wife was a Miss Vandervoort, who died within a few days of her husband, and who is said to have been a niece of the Colonel Ledyard who was murdered by the British, near New London, Conn., in 1781, after he had surrendered his sword.

Wright's name appears in the Philadelphia Directory for 1793, where he is put down as "Limner, Sassafras Street." In his will, which was made the 11th of September before he died, he calls himself "miniature painter and engraver." His portrait, in a family group that he painted himself, belongs to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which owns also a bust of Wright by William Rush.

Caleb Whitefoord (1734–1810), for whom Wright painted the portrait of Franklin, was a very interesting character, and an intimate friend and next-door neighbor of Franklin in Craven St., London, for several years. He was the natural son of an army officer, born in Edinburgh and educated at that university, became a wine merchant, and was secretary to the commissioners that concluded peace between the United States and Great Britain. He was a noted wit and a welcome member of that famous coterie composed of Dr. Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Reynolds, Burke and their friends. His portrait was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and in 1782 by Gilbert Stuart, the latter an exceptionally fine one. Both have been engraved. He also had some facility with the pencil, and seems by the following extract from a letter to him from Franklin 2 to have tried his hand at the Doctor's phiz.

Dear Sir:—

********I thank you for the humourous and sensible Print you sent me, which afforded me and several of my Friends great Pleasure. The Piece from your own Pencil is acknowledged to bear a strong and striking Likeness, but it is otherwise such a Picture of your Friend, as Dr. Smith would have drawn, black, and all black.

Whitefoord had always been a friend of the Colonies, and in his letter to the American Philosophical Society, acknowledging his election, says: "I have long been a sincere well-wisher to America. No one lamented more the unhappy Quarrel between the Colonies and the Parent State. And having lent a helping hand to stop the Horrors of War and to negotiate a Peace between the two Countries I have the satisfaction to think I have not lived in vain."

If the clearing up of disputed facts and the fixing of the authorship of at least three portraits of Franklin upon Joseph Wright, which hitherto have been attributed to Duplessis, Greuze and one more correctly to an unknown hand, seem as important to the reader as to the writer, then, in the words of Whitefoord, "I have the satisfaction to think that I have not lived in vain."

---

1 The Reverend William Smith, D.D, an avowed enemy of Franklin.
2 "That famous horse Othello, alias Black and all Black."—New Foundling Hospital for Wit, 1784, v. 269.