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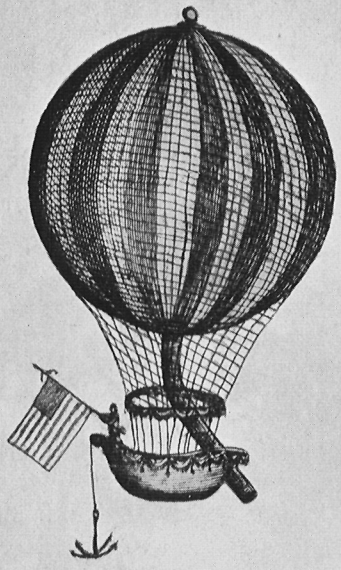

45.th Ysecntion and the frst made in America January 9.th 1793. at Philadelphia 39.o 56.' N. Latitude by M.r J. P. Blanchard.	45.e ascension et la premiere faite en Amerique Le 9 Janvier 1793 a Philadelphie 39.o 56.' Latitude N. par M.r J. P. Blanchard.

THE FIRST BALLOON HOAX.

BY JOSEPH JACKSON.

PARADOXICALLY as it may appear, the "first balloon ascension in this country" never occurred. This statement naturally requires explanation. What is intended to be conveyed by the sentence is that the balloon ascension, which is regarded as having taken place in Philadelphia on December 28, 1783, is purely mythical.

The statement originally published in a foreign newspaper bears every evidence of having been constructed as a hoax by some resident of Philadelphia, who appeared to believe that when discoveries were being made in aeronautics in France, Philadelphia, with her famed Philosophical Society, should not be found backward.

That this story was a hoax, was discovered by the writer only when he attempted to supplement the generally accepted account of the ascent with fuller particulars. At the Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, it was found that although two members of that eminent association were mentioned as being leading spirits in the famous ascent, there was absolutely no record of the experiment. As will be apparent later, there was a dearth of contemporary evidence elsewhere and the conclusion was necessarily arrived at that the ascension could not have taken place at the time or in the manner stated in an account that is to be found to this day in some of the most authoritative works of reference.

With this evidence before one, it is necessary to conclude that the first ascent of a balloon in this country did not occur until July 17, 1784. This, so far as the aeronaut was concerned, was unsuccessful, for, before the aerostat had risen many feet above the ground, Peter Carnes, an amateur balloonist, of Baltimore, was thrown from the basket, but

the hot-air bag arose to a great height. The first real ascension was performed by Blanchard, a French aeronaut, in Philadelphia, in January, 1793, and both of these events are historic facts.

Blanchard, who came to this city in December, 1792, found a hearty response to his request for patronage, and foremost among his patrons was President Washington, who took a lively and evidently very real interest in the experiment. On January 9, 1793, the subscribers to the fund which made the ascension possible, and which amounted to over $2000, assembled in the yard of the old Walnut Street Prison at Sixth and Walnut Streets. Washington, next to the aeronaut, was the most prominent figure in the crowd. They watched the great aerostat in which Blanchard already had made ascensions in Europe, as it was filled with hydrogen gas, and when all was ready and Blanchard walked over to the President to inform him of the fact, Washington handed him a passport so that persons who never had seen a balloon would treat the aeronaut with consideration. Doctor Rush and Doctor Wistar took the greatest interest in the ascension, and it was at their request that Blanchard made numerous observations while in the air.

Blanchard reached a height of 5812 feet, and after being in the air for 46 minutes, descended without accident in Deptford Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey. He hastened back to Philadelphia, and immediately presented himself to the President at the Executive Mansion, then on Market Street west of Fifth. Blanchard presented a small flag which had adorned his balloon to President Washington, who warmly congratulated the daring balloonist.

On the authority of numerous histories of aeronautics it has been customary to credit David Rittenhouse, the astronomer, and Francis Hopkinson, patriot, lawyer, scientist and satirist, with having contrived the first balloon ascension on this continent, within a few months after the success of Charles's first voyage through the air in France. It can now, after one hundred and twenty-six years, be asserted

that the whole narrative was a hoax, which through some strange fatality, has been unpenetrated by later writers on the subject.

There is every internal evidence that the hoax was perpetrated by a resident of Philadelphia, for it bears on its face the authorship of a person who was familiar, not only with the city, but in a small way at least, with the men of prominence here. It was mainly, if not entirely, intended for European consumption, and if the hoax ever reached Philadelphia in the period in which it was published, it is not a matter of record that any attention was paid to it. If the story of this truly remarkable balloon ascension ever was read there in those times, evidently no person took the trouble to correct it.

Proving that the ascension never took place does not take away from Philadelphia the honor of being the first city in the United States to encourage aeronautics, for there was a genuine ascent some months later which, as has been remarked, is of record.

The original story seems to have appeared in a Paris journal, named the *Journal de Paris*. In its issue for May 13, 1784, the following detailed account of the phantom ascent was printed:

PHILADELPHIA, Dec. 29, 1783.—No sooner was the extraordinary discovery of M. Mortgolfier known here, about a month ago, than a similar experiment was attempted, not, indeed, on so large a scale, for want of means, and this circumstance has led us to perhaps the happiest application of this phenomena. A man raised himself to a height of ninety-seven English feet, and came down again, but with too much ease.

Messrs Rittenhouse and Hopkins began their experiments with bladders, and then with somewhat larger machines. They joined several together, and fastened them around a cage into which they put several animals. The whole ascended, and was drawn down again with a rope.

The next day, which was yesterday, a man offered to get into the cage provided the rope was not let go. He rose about fifteen feet and would not suffer himself to go higher.

James Wilcox, a carpenter, engaged to go in it for a little money. He rose twenty feet or upwards before he made a signal to be drawn down.

He then took instructions from Messrs. Rittenhouse and Hopkins, and after several repititions on the ground, consented to have the rope cut for fifty dollars. Dr. Jaune, the principal medical person in the city, attended in case of accident.

The crowd was incredible and shouted after they saw Wilcox rise crowded in the cage surrounded by forty-seven balloons fastened to it with astonishing coolness, nodding his head to express his satisfaction and composure. After all, he could not rise above ninety-seven feet, ascending to the measures taken by the two other gentlemen of the Philosophical Academy. He was at least five minutes in the air, but perceiving the wind to blow from the east and drive him towards the Schuylkill river he was frightened and agreeable to his instructions made several incisions with a knife in three of the balloons. This was not sufficient, though we saw him descend a little. He pierced three more, and seeing the machine not come down, his fear increased. He cut five more in the greatest haste and unfortunately all on the same side. He was then seen to tack about, and as he had slid down he fell on a fence on the edge of a ditch. Dr. Jaune ran up and found the poor man had sprained his wrist, but received no other injury. He was taken care of, a new machine put in, and it is hoped it will be more complete.

There is a reminder of Gilbert's opera "The Mikado," in the way the unconvincing narrative is bolstered up with delicate touches intended to make for verity, about "nodding his head," and having "Dr. Jaune, the principal medical person" on hand in case of accident. There is something admirable in the imagination of the author, who conceived the fullest details, including those of little consequence, even had the yarn been true, which it was not.

The ditch which was protected by a fence, also was a fine, but unlikely touch, for near the Schuylkill River—and from the narrative the alleged ascension must have occurred on the east side of that stream—there were no fences in the year 1783. It must be understood to have taken place within the old city limits, for in those days outside the boundaries always was alluded to as near the city, a phrase that sometimes confuses the historian or antiquary.

From the narrative one is justified in translating Hopkins as Hopkinson, if we are to believe the feat was engineered by two members of the Philosophical Society. The name

of this society, it will be noticed, is given as the Philosophical Academy of Philadelphia, which was an institution that never existed. There was no physician in Philadelphia named Jaune in 1783. It is scarcely conceivable that the celebrated Dr. Kuhn was intended. And the carpenter, James Wilcox, also comes near to being a genuine name in Philadelphia at the time. The Directory for 1785 mentions three of the family named John, but unfortunately fails to give the occupation of any of them.

According to the narrative, the event must have attracted a great concourse of persons. It even mentions the crowd to which the daring Wilcox nodded his head. Yet the newspapers of the time are silent on the alleged ascent. Rittenhouse, who was the second president of the Philosophical Society, never appears to have made any reference to the experiment, although in the Transactions of the Society he is found to have contributed several important papers on his favorite study, astronomy.

In the Life of Rittenhouse by his son-in-law, Dr. Barton, there is unusual silence on an experiment so important that it must have been the pioneer in the New World, if it occurred. Doctor Barton fails to mention his father-in-law's alleged connection with it. Neither is the event mentioned in the Diary of Jacob Hiltshimer, who, however, does not neglect to mention Blanchard's ascent, ten years later. There were other diarists who were keeping journals in Philadelphia at the time, and although these, generally speaking, are gossipy, they all are silent on this wonderful scientific and popular event.

Even the journals of the Philosophical Society do not refer to the alleged ascension, although its president is proclaimed to be the leader of the experiment. In fact, there is a desert of silence on the subject on all sides. Surely, some one, in addition to the alleged correspondent of the Paris Journal, would have broken faith and have given the world for all time the true facts of such an historic event as this, if it had occurred, must have been. Yet there is nothing.

The tale appears to have been more familiar in England and France than it was in this country, and it is only within the last half century that the story has been current here. No great attention ever has been paid to it. It has been taken as a matter of course, where it has excited any interest at all. In recent times the story seems to have been given currency by Hatton Turnor's "Astra Castra," a vast compendium of information and lore, on the subject of aeronautics from mythological times to the year 1865, when the book was published.

In "Astra Castra," the story, very much curtailed, is given as a matter of fact, and even the Ninth Edition of the "Encyclopædia Britannica" repeats the story. As both are substantially the same, that from the "Encyclopædia" may be produced here and answer for both. It will be noted that in this version of the story we are informed that the balloons were filled with hydrogen. This may have been a gratuity of Mr. Turnor.

It is proper here to state that researches on the use of gas for inflating balloons seem to have been carried on in Philadelphia nearly simultaneously with the experiments of the Montgolfiers. When the news of the latter reached America, Messrs. Rittenhouse and Hopkins, members of the Philosophical Academy of Philadelphia, constructed a machine consisting of forty-seven hydrogen gas balloons, attached to a car or cage. After several preliminary experiments in which animals were let up to a certain height by a rope, a carpenter, one James Wilcox, was induced to enter the car for a small sum of money; the ropes were cut and he remained up in the air about ten minutes, and only effected his descent by making incisions in a number of the balloons, through fear of falling into the river, which he was approaching.

It will be noted the writer in the "Encyclopædia" has improved on the original story. He asserts the aeronaut was in the air ten minutes. The original story recites that he was aloft at least five minutes, when he discovered he was drifting toward the river, and how much longer he was in making his descent the reader is left to imagine.

It is not possible to say with any certainty who was the author of this, the first balloon hoax, which, while not so

extensive as the later one by Poe and lacking in some of its dramatic features, equalled, if it did not excel that story by the fact that it continued to deceive for the last one hundred and twenty-six years.

If the author was a Philadelphian, he must have purposely invented the names for his characters. Francis Hopkinson himself might be mentioned as one who might have perpetrated the hoax, and this view would be strengthened by making his name as Hopkins. The celebrated practical joker, Colonel Thomas Forrest, also might have been the inventor if the story really went out from Philadelphia. On the other hand the story lies under some suspicion of having been concocted in England by some one who had been a resident of Philadelphia. In this case Isaac Hunt, the father of Leigh Hunt, might be regarded as the author. But all of these are the merest conjectures and have nothing more to substantiate them than has the hoax itself.

The idea of having forty-seven balloons filled with hydrogen gas points to one conclusion: it must have been the invention of a man who never had seen a balloon, but who had seen in the London Magazine, an engraving published about this time, of Lana's design for a balloon. Lana's balloon was not intended to be inflated, but the spheres were to be composed of thin, strong, hollow metal, exhausted of air, leaving a vacuum, which the inventor, not counting upon the pressure of the atmosphere, believed would raise a person to a considerable height. It now is known that such immense hollow metal globes—they were to have been twenty feet in diameter—from which the air had been exhausted, would be crushed by the pressure of the atmosphere. Lana's project was given to the world in 1670, when the barometer was not in general use, and may have been unknown to him.

All evidence points to the author having been a Philadelphian who desired to play a joke upon the Europeans. The author was, as has been related, little acquainted with the real appearance of a balloon, and was a person who

must have had little scientific qualifications, which would indicate that Hopkinson should be acquitted of the authorship. If, as seems probable, the hoax was prepared in Philadelphia, Hunt also, would be acquitted, for before April, or even March, 1784, a month or two before the letter appeared, many persons in England were familiar with the shape and appearance of balloons and actually had seen one. Such persons scarcely would have given thought to an aerial machine having forty-seven balloons as an ascensive force. It also is inconceivable that any scientist would have advocated such a machine in view of the tremendous difficulty of filling and managing forty-seven balloons, even small ones.

Having eliminated two of the persons who were capable of having perpetrated a hoax, it might be well to examine the evidence that points to the remaining person who has been mentioned as possibly guilty. This is Colonel Thomas Forrest. Readers of "Watson's Annals" need not be told that he was regarded as a practical joker. He also was the author of a comic opera called "The Disappointment," which so satirized some of the "Characters" in Philadelphia at the time, as well as having a realistic touch that scarcely could be presented even to an Eighteenth century audience, that after it had been announced for production in the old Southwark Theatre in 1767, it was withdrawn. It was printed, however, and in 1796 another edition with the text considerably enlarged was issued. Neither of these productions bore the name of the real author, but went out into the world as the work of Andrew Barton. Forrest, therefore, was a person who was regarded as a playful sort of man by the persons who knew him; as a practical joker and as a satirist. That he may be the author of the Balloon Hoax seems plausible, although there is no direct evidence connecting him with the story.

All that can be proved at this time, is that the ascension did not take place, and that the account of the first balloon ascension in America was a hoax.