

WHO WAS THE MOTHER OF FRANKLIN'S SON.

An Inquiry demonstrating that she was Deborah Read,
wife of Benjamin Franklin.

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THIS important historical conundrum has been puzzling historical students into three centuries, but heretofore no answer worthy of serious consideration has been given. Had investigators not stretched out their arms so far in the search for the answer, they might have found it close within their hand's grasp. At least this is the view we shall present, for, as our title shows, it is the purpose of this inquiry to demonstrate that Deborah Read, the common law wife of Benjamin Franklin, was the mother of Franklin's son and this explains the close intimacy that existed among them and has been such a stumbling block to all writers who have touched upon the subject. While the evidence to sustain this view is necessarily circumstantial, it seems unanswerable as the facts cannot be the subject of cavil.

To understand the situation, it is incumbent upon us to present the circumstances that led up to Franklin's taking Deborah Read to wife, as he expresses it, and the circumstances shall be related in Franklin's own words in his autobiography, which, it must be remembered *was written for William Franklin*, a very important point to bear in mind, in this inquiry.

Franklin first saw Deborah Read on the day of his historic entrance into Philadelphia, with "a roll under each arm and eating the other." Shortly afterwards he became an inmate of her father's house, as a boarder, and propinquity had the usual effect upon two young persons of the opposite sexes, of putting them on more than friendly terms; as Franklin describes it "I had made some courtship during this time to Miss Read. I had great respect and affection for her and had

some reason to believe she had the same for me." But their extreme youth "only a little above eighteen" and his proposed visit to England, made a present marriage undesirable. He therefore sailed away from Philadelphia on the day before Christmas of 1724, setting foot on Philadelphia soil again October 11, 1726, after an absence of two years all to a fortnight beyond two months. He found that the fair Deborah in his absence had married "one Rogers a potter" with whom "she was never happy and soon parted from him, refusing to cohabit with him or bear his name, it being now said he had another wife. He was a worthless fellow * * * got into debt, ran away in 1727 or 1728, went to the West Indies and died there."¹

Franklin now looked about him for a wife and his mind turned most favorably to his old flame Debby Read. He says "Our mutual affection revived, but there were now great objections to our union. The match was indeed looked upon as invalid, a preceding wife being said to be living in England. But this *could not easily be proved*, because of the distance and tho' there was a report of his death, *it was not certain*. Then tho' it should be true, he had left many debts which his successor might be called upon to pay."² "We ventured, however, over all these difficulties, and *I took her to wife, September 1, 1730*. None of the inconveniences happened that we had apprehended; she proved a good and faithful helpmate, assisted me much by attending the shop; we throve together and have ever mutually endeavor'd to make each other happy. *Thus I corrected that great ERRATUM as well as I could.*"

Franklin was a master of the English language with a perfectly honest mind absolutely free from subterfuge, and from his chosen words it is plain there was no formal mar-

¹ This mention of Rogers' death is of course not a contemporaneous statement but a fact ascertained long afterward and incorporated into the autobiography when it was written.

² Upon what principle this could be, we are at a loss to know, but it had its weight with Franklin.

riage ceremony performed to cement Franklin's union with Deborah Read, as indeed there could not be, without liability of prosecution for bigamy, when she had a husband who might be living, and they agreed, therefore, to live together openly as man and wife from that date until, by reputation and cohabitation, time should make them one in the eyes of the law.

Now as near as we can arrive at the date William Franklin was born just about the time that Benjamin Franklin took Deborah Read to wife. The only actual definite bit of evidence on the subject is a letter from William Franklin to his son William Temple Franklin, dated "London July 3, 1812" in which he writes "My health, considering *I am in my eighty-second year* is generally good".³ With these facts before us how pregnant with meaning for William Franklin, *for whom his father was writing*, is the last sentence quoted from the autobiography "*Thus I corrected that great ERRATUM as well as I could.*" What other error was there that the marrying of Deborah Read by Benjamin Franklin, would or could correct, and no plainer language was necessary to be used by a father to his son, who knew the truth about his birth. But as potent as this is on the point at issue it is only what may be called the *prima facies* of the case, the evidence to support it has yet to come and it does come unmistakably from Benjamin Franklin, Deborah Franklin, William Franklin, Sarah Franklin Bache and William Strahan.

As the chronological order of the testimony is not of the slightest consequence, I will present the latest in date first, as being the most important. Deborah Franklin died December 19, 1774, and five days later William Franklin writes from Philadelphia to his father in London: "I came here on Thursday last to attend the funeral of *my poor old mother*, who died the Monday noon preceeding." Nor is this an isolated instance of his calling Deborah Franklin by the

³ Catalogue of autographs sold by Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge London, June 19 to 24, 1897, p. 24, Lot 285.

honored name of "Mother." September 1, 1769, he writes to his father: "I came to town with Betsy⁴ on Monday last in order to stand for *my little nephew*. * * * * Mr. Baynton stood as proxy for you and named Benjamin Franklin⁵ and *my Mother* and Betsy were Godmothers." Again, we find him writing to William Strahan, April 25, 1763: "*My Mother* is so entirely averse to going to sea, that I believe my father will never be induc'd to see England again." Here are three conspicuous instances where William Franklin calls Deborah Franklin "MOTHER" —a sacred name he would certainly not use toward the wife of his father were she not in truth and in fact his own mother.

Nor does Deborah Franklin in any way disown him as her own son. On the contrary she fully recognizes and proudly claims him. On December 24, 1751, she writes to William Strahan, in one of the few autograph letters from her that exist: "*My Son* is gone to Boston on a visit to his Friends." This was just about the time that he had reached his majority, and she, with motherly pride on the occasion, advises her English correspondent of the interesting event. And Strahan, six years later, December 13, 1757, writes to her: "*Your son* I really think one of the prettiest young gentlemen seen here from America." Can it be imagined or conceived that any wife would call her husband's illegitimate child by another woman "*My Son*," or would an intimate friend and correspondent of the family *compliment her* upon her husband's bastard child?

Now what has the father to say on this momentous subject. January 31, 1756, Franklin writes to his wife: "Billy presents his duty to *you and his grandmother* and love to *his sister*." This emphasizes the relationship and carries it to two other generations, "his grandmother" being old Mrs. Read, the mother of his mother, while "his sister" was presumably Sarah Franklin, then in her twelfth year; while the archaic

⁴ William Franklin's wife.

⁵ Benjamin Franklin Bache, son of Sarah Franklin Bache, born August 12, 1769.

expression "his duty," by itself fixes it, for a child owed "Duty" only to parents and grandparents. Two years later, January 14, 1758, Franklin repeats to his wife almost the same language: "Billy presents his duty to *you and mother* and love to *his sister*," and on February 19, 1758, he writes to her: "There is some music Billy bought for *his sister*." On November 8, 1764, Franklin writes to his daughter "Sallie": "Give my love to *your brother and sister*." This letter brings a new Richmond on the field, if that masculine patronymic may be applied to the gentler sex. That Franklin had a daughter, not commonly known, who married John Foxcroft,⁶ Franklin's Assistant Postmaster, there can be no doubt, and she too may have been the child of Deborah Read before length of time had made their union as binding as a marriage ceremony; or, it may be that Franklin refers, in this instance, to William Franklin's wife as "sister," he having married Elizabeth Downes, in London, September 4, 1762. On December 9, 1764, Franklin writes to his wife: "Love to *our Children*;" October 11, 1766, Id. to Id.: "My love to *our Children*;" January 6, 1773, Id. to Id.: "Love to all. Give mine to all that enquire concerning me and a good deal to *our Children*;" February 2, 1773, Id. to Id.: "My love to him and *our Children*;" July 6, 1773, Id. to Id.: "Love to *Our Children* and to Benny boy." What can be more conclusive on the question under consideration than this constant, repeated use of the plural "*OUR CHILDREN*" by Franklin in these letters to his wife? His special mention of "Benny boy," Benjamin Franklin Bache, in the last letter to her, shows that he did not include grandchildren in "*Our Children*," and can it be supposed that he would insult his wife, for whom he showed always so much consideration, by calling his illegitimate child by another woman her child to her very face. It is idle and absurd to attempt to give any other meaning to these words,

⁶The True Benjamin Franklin, by Sidney George Fisher, p. 104.

than their natural and common one, for they will bear none other than that Deborah was the mother of William as well as of Sarah.

That this was well understood in the family circle and that the relation of brother and sister actually existed between William and Sarah, we find Sarah Franklin writing to her father, October 14, 1765, "I left *my brother* well." And that she had the warmest sisterly feelings of affection and regard for her brother is shown in a letter that she wrote to his son, William Temple Franklin,⁷ October 1, 1782. "My dear Nephew;—It is a long time since I have had a letter from you. When your *dear father* was in England and a very gay young gentleman, he found means of writing to me very often and very entertaining letters. I should hope the son had as much affection for me. I feel no less for him than *I did and now do for the father.*"

The only single item of contemporary writing with an adverse trend to it, is found in the Diary of Daniel Fisher of Virginia, who visited Philadelphia, in 1755, and lived in Franklin's house.⁸ Every other contemporaneous word bearing on the subject has been injected into some scurrilous political diatribe against Franklin, who had a host of enemies, of no more weight and no more worthy of respectful consideration than are such attacks to-day. After commenting upon Mrs. Franklin's turbulent character and jealousy, Fisher says: "She suspecting Mr. Franklin for having too great an esteem for his son in prejudice of herself and daughter," adds, "One day as I was sitting with her in the passage when the young gentleman came by she exclaimed to me (he not hearing): 'Mr. Fisher, there goes the greatest Villain upon earth.' This greatly

⁷ For the maternity of this young man examine Letters from Elizabeth Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, August 16, 1776, Duane's Domestic Correspondence of Benjamin Franklin, p. 70, and Benjamin Franklin to William Temple Franklin, September 19, 1776, and September 22, 1776, in Smyth's Writings of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. vi, pp. 467 and 469.

⁸ Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. xvii, p. 276,

confounded and perplexed me, but did not hinder her from pursuing her invectives in the foulest terms I ever heard from a gentlewoman." The inference might be drawn from Fisher's statement that no mother would speak in this manner of her own son. To us, however, it seems from the character given of Mrs. Franklin, by Fisher, that she would be equal to saying anything when aroused, and that mere inference from these words cannot overthrow the weight of the numerous convincing expressions by father, mother, son and sister that can have but the meaning contended for, and that out of their own mouths it is proved the mother of Franklin's son was Deborah, wife of Benjamin Franklin.

This view, too, clears both Franklin and his wife of the charges of loose morals often made against them by writers who could not understand how she could bring up in her own household the natural son of her husband by another woman. On the contrary it shows the highest type of morality and sense of honor and duty in what they did. What else should they do but bring up their own child in their household as one of the home circle? Even if Franklin had been able to marry with formal ceremony, it would not have legitimated the birth of William, for this fiction of the law, in Pennsylvania, is only a little more than half a century old.⁹ In making this inquiry the writer has been guided only by the desire to set wrong right by presenting this avalanche of contemporary proof, that cannot be gainsaid, in so important an incident in the life of one of the greatest of Americans.¹⁰

⁹ Act of May 14, 1857, P. L. 507, sec. 1.

¹⁰ All of the letters cited in this monograph will be found either in one of the editions of Franklin's Writings by Sparks, Bigelow or Smyth, or in the Mss. Collections of the American Philosophical Society, except when especially noted.

