THE MARTIN PORTRAITS OF FRANKLIN

by ALBERT P. BRUBAKER, M.D.

The origin and historical descent of the much admired portraits of Benjamin Franklin painted by David Martin, the Scotch painter, have been a subject of much interest and discussion for some years. Though the writer has been interested in the history of these portraits for several years, it has not been possible until quite recently to secure evidence which places their descent and ownership in a light which it is believed will be convincing to those interested. The evidence to be presented is essentially correct and authentic.

A few words in this connection regarding the artist, David Martin, may not be without interest. The following statements are taken from Bryan's *Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*:\(^1\)

David Martin was born at Anstruther in Fife in 1736. He was a pupil of Allen Ramsay and when quite young accompanied him to Rome, after which he studied at the St. Martin's Lane Academy. He joined the incorporated Society of Artists and in 1775 settled in Edinburgh and was made chief painter to the Prince of Wales for Scotland. Before long he married a wealthy lady in London and removed to Soho where he lived till after her death when he returned to Edinburgh and died there in 1798. Among his painted portraits were Dr. Franklin and Lord Mansfield, both of which were afterward engraved in Mezzotint, the former at least by himself.

Three very similar portraits of Franklin, all painted by Martin, are known to be in existence, namely the original and two replicas. In addition to these there are three copies each painted by an American artist. All three are to be found in Philadelphia. These paint-

---

\(^1\) Published by Macmillan and Company, 1904 (III. 291).
Ings will be alluded to in subsequent paragraphs. The history of these portraits will be better understood after a brief reference to the circumstances which caused them to be painted.

It will be recalled that Franklin, in 1764, at the age of 58 years, was sent to England where he acted as agent for Pennsylvania and Massachusetts and on behalf of the Colonies generally in their difficulties with the mother country. After a residence there of about ten years he sailed for home, May 5, 1775. During the early years of Franklin’s residence in London he formed the acquaintance of Robert and William Alexander, sons of a distinguished citizen and banker of Edinburgh. Between these sons of William Alexander and Franklin there developed a warm and abiding friendship as subsequent events reveal.

Between the years 1770 and 1777, Jonathan Williams, a grandnephew of Franklin, made several visits to England and France and while in London resided much of the time with Franklin. There he became acquainted with many of Franklin’s friends and soon developed a deep interest in and knowledge of the political relations of England to the Colonies.

After his return home in 1775, Franklin was appointed, in 1776, Minister Plenipotentiary to France where he remained for nine years. During a large part of the time he resided at Passy. In the meantime William Alexander had become a resident of France and resided with five daughters at St. Germain. Of these daughters the one of most interest from the present point of view was Marianne. The friendship between Franklin and William Alexander was continued and strengthened in France and the negotiations with which Franklin had been intrusted were not only a subject of discussion but were made less difficult by reason of William Alexander’s knowledge of people and political conditions in England.
In 1777, Jonathan Williams was commissioned to act as commercial agent at Nantes to carry out the orders of Congress. As an outcome of the social relations of Franklin and William Alexander and his family, Jonathan Williams and Marianne Alexander were married at Nantes in the house of the Dutch Ambassador and in the presence of Franklin. In 1785, Jonathan Williams and his wife, in company with Franklin, left France for the United States and arrived in Philadelphia on the thirteenth of September. In 1790, they acquired for themselves a home on the banks of the Schuylkill River. Mr. Williams died in 1815. They had three children, two sons and a daughter. Their son, Alexander J. Williams was killed at Fort Erie, August 14, 1814. The younger son, Henry Jonathan Williams, married Julia Rush, the daughter of Dr. Benjamin Rush. Mrs. Williams died in 1861, and her husband Henry Jonathan Williams, in 1879. There were no children by their marriage. The daughter of Jonathan and Marianne Williams was named Christine. She married Thomas Biddle by whom she had five children, namely, Clement, Thomas A., Henry, Alexander and John. The son, Thomas A. Biddle, died in 1888. The succeeding generations are well known but will be referred to when tracing the descent of the original portrait of Franklin painted by Martin.

THE ORIGINAL PORTRAIT

From evidence to be presented it is apparent that the original portrait of Franklin by Martin was painted shortly after Franklin’s arrival in England, between 1764 and 1766, when he was from fifty-eight to sixty years of age. This portrait was ordered and paid for by his friend and admirer, Robert Alexander, who felt indebted to him for his advice concerning the contents of certain papers which he had asked Franklin to read. The painting was designed to represent
Franklin engaged in the act of reading the contents of these papers. This original portrait is at the present time (1932) in the possession of Dr. and Mrs. Williams B. Cadwalader of Philadelphia. Its descent from the first to the last owner may be stated as follows: After the rather early death of Robert Alexander, the portrait descended to his brother William. When the latter's daughter Marianne was married to Jonathan Williams, September 12, 1779, the portrait was presented to them to "descend to the eldest male heir perpetually as the joint representative of both parties." Hence it was that when Jonathan and Marianne Williams came to Philadelphia, in 1785, the portrait was brought with them. These and other statements are abstracted from inscriptions attached from time to time to the back of the portrait, and are thus confirmed:

This portrait of Benjamin Franklin LL.D. was painted by Martin in London when the Doctor was about 60 to 65 (58–61) years of age. It was ordered and paid for by Robert Alexander, then of the House of William Alexander & Sons of Edinburgh and was designed to perpetuate the circumstance of his advice given in consequence of the perusal of certain important papers. After the death of Robert it descended to his brother William Alexander.

Jonathan Williams, a grandson of Doctor Franklin's sister having married Marianne the daughter of William Alexander 1779 9.12. the portrait has been given to them to descend to the eldest male heir perpetually as the joint representative of both parties.

This disposition is hereby confirmed

Jon: Williams
Marianne Williams

Jan. 1, 1806.

The foregoing memorandum is copied from the original in the handwriting of my father and my mother. By virtue of the direction contained in it the above mentioned portrait passed to me and has continued in my possession since his death (1815). I hereby in accordance with the disposition made by them bequeath it to my eldest male heir.

Nov. 1, 1828. Henry J. Williams (seal).
This picture came into my possession in 1879 soon after the
death of Mr. Williams, my eldest brother Clement Biddle hav-
ing survived him only a few days.
In accordance with the disposition made by my predecessors,
I bequeath it to my eldest male heir.
December 10, 1887. Signed Thos. A. Biddle.

This original portrait of Dr. Franklin by Martin came into
my possession at my Father's death in 1888. In accordance with
the disposition made by my predecessors, I bequeath it to my
eldest male heir.
Oct. 27th, 1891. Signed H. W. Biddle
Son of Thos. Biddle

This portrait of Dr. Franklin came into my possession Feb.
4th, 1916 my elder brother Henry W. Biddle having on that
day given it to me; the next in line of inheritance. In accordance
with the disposition made by my predecessors, I bequeath it to
my eldest male heir.
Dec. 6th, 1916. Signed W. Lyman Biddle
Son of Thos. A. Biddle

By reason of the early death of W. Lyman Biddle
the portrait reverted to his elder brother and previous
possessor, Henry W. Biddle. He in turn bequeathed it
to his daughter, Mildred Lee Biddle, who married Dr.
Williams B. Cadwalader. The portrait is now in their
possession. The foregoing statements appear to be
well authenticated and justify the view that the por-
trait in question is the original.

THE FIRST REPLICA

The first replica, the writer believes from facts to be
presented, is at the present time in The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The reasons for this belief are as follows:

Among the inscriptions attached to the back of the
original portrait there is a note written by Henry J.
Williams, son of Jonathan, to the following effect:

Dr. Franklin was so well satisfied with Martin's portrait and
the likeness was deemed so perfect that he was induced to have
a copy made by the same painter and at his own expense and
sent to his own family in Philadelphia.
The Martin Portraits of Franklin

This was accordingly done, and Franklin did not return to Philadelphia until May 6, 1775. A year later he was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to France where he remained nine years. On his return to Philadelphia, September 13, 1785, the second Supreme Executive Council was created, to which he was elected President, which position he held for three years. On July 17, 1778, Franklin made his will. In the codicil to this will, dated June 23, 1789, he added among other things the following:

The picture "drawn" by Martin in 1767, I give to the Supreme Executive Council of Penna. if they shall be pleased to do me the honor of accepting it and placing it in their Chamber.

This was accomplished. Then, with the adoption of the new Constitution the Supreme Executive Council or the council of state was abolished and according to a memorandum of Jonathan Williams this poor portrait became an abandoned orphan, without having any place in which to hang itself. The Celebrated Peale, a declared enemy to everything unnatural took pity on the wretched outcast and has humanely hung it up among his natural curiosities in the Philadelphia Museum.

This museum was established in 1802, and was located at Third and Lombard Streets. Charles Willson Peale died in 1827. In 1854, the effects of the museum were sold at auction. In the sale catalogue, a copy of which may be seen in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, there were two portraits of Franklin numbered 121 and 147.

Portrait No. 121 was bought by Mr. Edward Ingersoll for his brother-in-law, Mr. Henry Pratt McKean, for $300. At his death, January 5, 1894, it was inherited by his son, Thomas McKean, who died March 16, 1898. It then passed to his wife, Elizabeth Wharton McKean. Under her will and by her children's decision
The Martin Portraits of Franklin

255

the portrait was placed, in 1912, in The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as a loan.²

Portrait No. 147 was painted by Charles Willson Peale³ in 1787, and is supposed to be the latest life portrait of Franklin. It was bought for Joseph Harrison at $20., and, in 1906, was bequeathed to The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts by the will of Mrs. Sarah Harrison. This portrait was engraved by Peale in mezzotint. It is stated that some copies of the engraving reached France where it was transformed into a thoroughly frenchified physiognomy and as such has become known as the Vanloo portrait.

THE SECOND REPLICA

A second replica of Martin’s portrait of Franklin was recently brought to the writer’s notice through Mr. Mantle Fielding of Philadelphia, by the distinguished art critic, Mr. William Sawitzky, of New York City, who saw it, in 1928, in Woodburn House near Spring Station in Kentucky. The owner of the portrait is Mrs. Alexander John Aitchison Alexander. Mrs. Alexander, in a personal letter to the writer, states that the portrait is signed in the lower right hand corner, D. Martin, Pinxt, and below this the date, 1772. On comparing a phostint photograph of the first replica in The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts with the portrait in her possession, Mrs. Alexander states that the two correspond in every detail. This portrait came into the possession of her husband, A. J. A. Alexander, a direct descendent of William Alexander, the friend of Franklin and for whom it was doubtless painted. The history and descent of this portrait is very naturally associated with the history of the Alex-

²This information was furnished by Charles C. French, Secretary of the Estate of Thomas McKean.

³A marginal note in the Catalogue of the Paintings in Peale’s Museum (sold in 1854), in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, reads: “The remarkably fine and valuable picture, the original from which the most popular engravings of that great man have been copies was erroneously attributed to Peale instead of to Martin.”
ander family and its emigration to the United States. A few words of this history may not be inappropriate in this connection. The Alexander Family in Kentucky was founded by William Alexander (the friend of Franklin), and his son Robert. Several years before Franklin returned from France, in 1785, William Alexander emigrated to the United States and settled at Staunton, in Virginia, where he remained until 1811.

Robert Alexander, his son, was born in England, in 1767, and emigrated to the United States in 1785. He first settled in Virginia but, in 1791, he removed to Kentucky. There he purchased the extensive estate known as Woodburn, near Spring Station, in the County of Woodford. Here he resided until his death in 1841. His father William Alexander removed from Staunton, Virginia, in 1811, to Woodburn where he died in 1819, at the age of ninety. Robert Alexander had three sons: 1. William, who died in infancy. 2. Robert. 3. Alexander John Alexander.

Robert, second son, was educated at Cambridge, England, and graduated Bachelor of Arts. He succeeded to the estates of Airdrie and Cowdenhall on the death of his uncle Sir William, who was born in 1758, and died in 1842, the eldest son of William Alexander. Robert died at Woodbury, Kentucky, in 1842.

Alexander John Alexander, third son, was born at Woodburn, in 1824, and succeeded to the estates of Woodburn, Airdrie and Cowdenhall, in 1867. Among his surviving children was Alexander John Aitchison Alexander, who was born in 1875, and died in 1928 or 1929. Mrs. Alexander still resides at Woodburn. The portrait of Franklin was bequeated from father to son. It is impossible to state just when the portrait came to Kentucky.⁴

⁴ Further information concerning the Alexander family will be found in Memorials of the Earl of Stirling or House of Alexander, by Reverend Charles Rodgers, LL.D.
The Martin Portraits of Franklin

THE COPIES

FIRST COPY

The Franklin Portrait in the hall of The American Philosophical Society.

The minutes of The American Philosophical Society, under date of December 16, 1785, furnish the following information:

Charles W. Peale presented by letter, a portrait of Franklin copied from a much admired painting of Martin. Thanks returned to Mr. Peale requested to keep the portrait till the Society shall have a convenient place for its reception.

At a meeting of the Philosophical Society held December 2, 1791, it was

RESOLVED, that the portrait of Dr. Franklin presented some time ago by Mr. Peale shall be framed in the best manner that can be executed for a price not exceeding 6 pounds.

This portrait hangs on the wall of the Philosophical Society at the present time (1932).

Mr. Peale's portrait of Franklin was apparently a copy of the Martin portrait obtained by Dr. Franklin and sent to his family in Philadelphia, and which subsequently passed into Mr. Peale's possession.

SECOND COPY


According to written evidence in the possession of its librarian, this portrait was painted by J. R. Lambdin from the original painting by Martin while it was in the possession of Thomas A. Biddle (1887–1888). A photograph of this painting has never been made so far as the writer knows. In 1835, while the painting was in the possession of Henry J. Williams, an engraving was made by T. B. Welch. This engraving is
to be found in the second volume of Jared Sparks' edition of "The Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin," published in 1836. In December, 1887, and January, 1888, a loan exhibition of historic portraits was held in Philadelphia. It was conceived and arranged by Charles Henry Hart. Among the portraits was the original Franklin-Martin portrait loaned by Thomas A. Biddle, in whose possession it was at that time. It was numbered 140 in the Catalogue. A note appended to this portrait in the Catalogue corresponds with the statements made in an earlier paragraph of this paper.

THIRD COPY

The Franklin Portrait in the hall of The Franklin Fire Insurance Company.

This portrait resembles in many of its features the portrait of Franklin in the hall of The American Philosophical Society. It has been in the possession of The Franklin Fire Insurance Company for fifty-six years. The artist who painted it, however, is unknown. An examination of the minutes of a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Insurance Company, held November 4, 1874, reveals the following entry:

On motion of Mr. Ellis a committee was appointed to obtain portraits of deceased members of the Board as the property of the Company, also a handsome portrait of Benjamin Franklin for the better furnishing of the office.

The committee appointed consisted of Messrs. Grant, G. S. Benson and McAllister, and

On June 2, 1875, the portrait committee reported that they had completed the duties assigned them and since the last meeting have placed the portraits of Samuel Grant and Geo. W. Richards in the Board room and a large painting of Benjamin Franklin (after C. W. Peale) in the Hallway of the office.
Unfortunately this committee did not state from whom the portrait was purchased, or the purchase price.

**SUMMARY**

**Original Portrait**
In the possession of Dr. Williams B. Cadwalader, Villa Nova, Pennsylvania.

**First Replica**
In the possession of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

**Second Replica**
In the possession of Mrs. Alexander John Aitchison Alexander, *Woodburn House*, Spring Station, Kentucky.

**First Copy**
In the possession of The American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. Painted from the first replica by Charles Willson Peale.

**Second Copy**
In the possession of The Library Company of Philadelphia. Painted from the *original* by J. R. Lambdin.

**Third Copy**