JOSEPH BREINTNALL
FIRST SECRETARY OF THE LIBRARY COMPANY
BY STEPHEN BLOORE, M.A.

Franklin notes among the original members of his Junto, "Joseph Brientnal, a copyer of deeds for the scriveners, a good natur'd, friendly, middleag'd man, a great lover of poetry, reading all he could meet with, and writing some that was tolerable; very ingenious in many little Nicknackeries, and of sensible conversation." Franklin utilized this ingenuity and experience in copying when he entered business. Breintnall assisted him in his stationer's shop, especially by keeping in proper form the various blanks which he sold. These were, in fact, "the correctest that ever appear'd among us."

The two friends also cooperated in publishing "The Busy-Body" papers in the American Weekly Mercury, Andrew Bradford's newspaper. The number for June 19, 1729, contained a poetical description of Market Street, introduced by an essay. Presumably this essay was written by Breintnall, and Fisher attributes the poem to him. However, the writer of the essay does not claim it as his own. He explains that it was sent to him by a friend after a discussion in which the ancients were extolled as superior to the moderns in

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1 The name Breintnall is spelled in various ways. Sometimes the i precedes the e, and at times the final I is not doubled. In this paper the spelling in manuscripts at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania is followed except, of course, where the spelling in quotations is different.
3 Ibid., p. 89.
4 Ibid., v. 83.
Joseph Breintnall

poetry. The writer states that in spite of this acknowledged superiority he has attempted to compose some poetry himself. Lack of time has prevented him from taking the whole city as his subject; hence he has confined himself to the main street. As far as this investigation has shown, there is no reason for assigning this work to Breintnall except that he wrote the essay. If we take his words at their face value, he was not the author.⁶

There is no easily discernible difference between the Busybody Papers attributed to Franklin and those written by Breintnall. Franklin is credited with Numbers 1 to 5 and Number 8;⁷ and he is authority for the statement that Breintnall continued the series.⁸ Number 32, the last, was in the *Mercury* for September 18–25, 1729, corresponding to the last number of Keimer’s *Universal Instructor*, which the Busybody Papers ridiculed.

As might be expected, these essays are most interesting when the moral instruction is conveyed by concrete examples, and the style is most entertaining when letters are received and comments made upon them. When abstract moralizing is the theme, as in Number 12,⁹ dullness is the inevitable result.

The most obvious analogy, of course, is the *Spectator* Papers; but the Busybody Papers present no regular characters as their more famous model does. Instead, characters are introduced when needed and dropped when their work is done. Thus in Number 14 there is the complaint of Matilda concerning the unfaithfulness

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⁶ *American Weekly Mercury*, June 12–19, 1729.
⁸ Franklin’s *Autobiography*, p. 83.
⁹ *American Weekly Mercury*, May 1–8. All the Busybody Papers were printed in the issues between February 11–18 and September 18–25, 1729.
of Florio.¹⁰ In the next number comes Florio's reply.¹¹ Another number deals with a woman's comments on the difference in her husband's attitude before and after marriage.¹² When material runs low, extracts from Cato are used.

Although the influence of the Spectator is evident in these papers, no one would mistake their language for the polished beauty of Addison's style. That is scarcely to be expected in the Philadelphia of 1729. What is significant is that Addison was known and imitated. The result was sprightly and entertaining on the whole, and must have been a welcome relief from Bradford's dullness in the Mercury and Keimer's efforts to improve upon it in the Universal Instructor.

When George Webb published Batchelors-Hall in 1731, Joseph Breintnall was one of the two writers who prefixed verses to the author. The Hall, which was evidently a kind of men's club in Philadelphia, had been attacked as a bad influence. Webb had moved to its defense with his poem. Although Breintnall does not give such fulsome praise to Webb as another poet, Jacob Taylor, does, still he considers that the reputation of the Hall has been vindicated.

Verses to the Author of Batchelors-Hall

The generous Muse concern'd to see
Detraction bear so great a sway,
Descends sometimes, as now to thee,
To chase its fame and spite away.

Censorious tongues, which nimbly move,
Each virtuous name to persecute,
Thy muse has taught the truth to prove,
And be to base conjecture mute.

²⁰ American Weekly Mercury, May 15–22, 1729.
²¹ Ibid., May 22–29, 1729.
²² Ibid., August 21–28, 1729.
Let every deed that merits praise,
Be justly crown'd with spritely verse;
And every tongue shall give the Bays
To him whose Lines they, pleas'd rehearse.

Long stand the Dome, the garden grow,
And may thy song prove always true:
I wish no greater good below
Than this to hear and that to view.¹³

Brett-James gives Breintnall the character of an
"enterprising merchant";¹⁴ and, good Friend as he
seems to have been, he made application for a certifi-
cate of good standing to the Philadelphia Monthly
Meeting on the twenty-fifth of the eighth month, 1717,
when he planned a voyage to the Barbados for trading
purposes.¹⁵ Whether this voyage was actually made
seems not to be a matter of record.

There are several references to Breintnall in early
documents. His marriage was in accordance with ac-
cepted Quaker custom, for he and Esther Parker,
appeared before the Monthly Meeting twice to an-
nounce their intentions. The second time the clerk
noted that their parents were present and gave their
consent to the match.¹⁶ Breintnall must be numbered
among the property holders of Philadelphia, for his
land was one of the boundaries of a lot upon which a
John Breintnal [sic] raised a mortgage on February 18,
1724.¹⁷ It was possibly this same John whose daughter
was married to Thomas Kite in February, 1743, with
Joseph Breintnall as one of the witnesses.¹⁸

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¹³G. Webb, Batchelors-Hall. Transcribed by Duyckinck, New York
Public Library, p. 4.
¹⁴Brett-James, N. G., The Life of Peter Collinson, London, Edgar G.
Dunstan and Company, 1925, p. 125.
¹⁵"Early Minutes of the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting," Publications
of The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, VII. 186.
¹⁶Ibid., VII. 260.
¹⁷"Abstracts of General Loan Office Mortgages," Publications of The
Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, VI. 284.
¹⁸"Abstracts of Marriage Certificates," Publications of The Genealog-
ical Society of Pennsylvania, VII. 93.
Breintnall was called into the public service also. He served three terms as Sheriff of Philadelphia County, 1735–1738. As part of his duty he signed a bond for forty pounds given by Thomas Duffield to insure his appearance in a suit brought against him by Benjamin Baldwin. His record in office is not without a blot, however. The Committee for settling Corporation Accounts, reporting to the Common Council of Philadelphia on August 3, 1747, found that Breintnall was indebted to the Corporation for eighty-four pounds, eleven shillings. For some reason he had failed to remit fines collected by him with the exception of a scale beam. By this time, however, the former Sheriff had been out of office nine years and had been dead for one. Therefore the debt was stricken off as not recoverable.

Breintnall gave some of his time to poetry as well as to public affairs. On January 3, 1739, the *Mercury* published a notice of the death of John Salkeld. This man was described as “a noted preacher among the people called Quakers,” who had died in Chester on December 22, 1738. Part of the notice was in verse describing the preacher’s method and delivery.

Salkeld from silent sitting slow would rise,  
And seem as with himself he did advise,  
His first words would be soft, but might be heard;  
He look’d resolv’d,—yet spoke as if he fear’d.  
Then gain’d Attention, in a gradual Way,  
As Morning Twilight ushers in the Day:  
Propos’d his Theme,—and sometimes would repeat,  
Then gently louder on the Text explain,  
And set to View its every Nerve and Vein:  
Till, when he saw the list’ning Flock give Ear,

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*Manuscript Collections, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.*

*Early Minutes of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia,* p. 471.

And trickle from the tender Eye, a Tear,
Still louder then he rais'd his Cheerful Voice:
The Sounds grew tuneful, and their Hearts rejoice.
To Heav'n he lifts them with delightful Notes,
And ev'ry Soul to its first Cause devotes.
And when he ceases, still the Musick rings,
And every Breast its Halleujah sings.  

The writer is careful to note that he is not "aiming at a poem" or a display of learning. His only desire is to "add a few Lines in Verse to his Memory." Is this an example of author's modesty, or is it a sop to those who might think poetry unworthy of its subject?

This piece in the Mercury is not signed or acknowledged in any way. It is ascribed to Breintnall in an article in the Friends Miscellany, which states that "Joseph Breintnall, the author of this essay, was a respectable member of the Society of Friends." It adds further identification by quoting Franklin's description of him. Smith, in his Catalogue of Friends' Books, also attributes this piece to Breintnall.

An anonymous poem called "The Wits and Poets of Pennsylvania," which undertakes to criticize the literary qualities of the writers of the time, includes Breintnall among those upon whom he comments.

For choice of Diction, I would B—ret-nl choose,
For just Conceptions and a ready Muse;
Yet is that Muse too labour'd and prolix,
And seldom, on the Wing, knows where to fix.
So strictly regular is every Rise,
His Poems loose the Beauty's of Surprize,
In this, his Flame is like a Kitchen Fire,
We see the Billets cast, that mounts it higher:

The critic would seem to be amply justified in his derogatory comments if we may judge from the samples of Breintnall's poetry which we have seen.

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23 American Weekly Mercury, January 3, 1739.
24 Friends' Miscellany. Edited by J. Comly, III, 69, 70.
26 American Weekly Mercury, April 29-May 6, 1731.
Joseph Breintnall

It seems to have been the custom in eighteenth century Philadelphia for the newsboys to deliver a poem to each customer on New Year's Day soliciting a present. A letter from Joseph Rose to Jacob Taylor shows that Breintnall at one time composed the verses for the newsboys. Taylor is solicited to take over the duties because Breintnall is too much occupied with other matters. No specimens of Breintnall's work in this field have been found.

Doubtless the most important of Breintnall's services were given as Secretary of The Library Company of Philadelphia, organized by Franklin in 1731. He continued in this office until his death in 1746. The minutes kept by him begin on November 8, 1731, and the notices for the annual meetings bear his name. His signature is found on the list of members who accepted the charter of the Library Company. It became part of his duty also to request the Proprietor to donate a lot for the use of the Library. At his death Franklin took over his office, and the Board of Directors passed a resolution of appreciation.

As Secretary of the Library Company, Breintnall was introduced to a larger world. Peter Collinson, Fel-

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28 Franklin's Autobiography, p. 103.
30 C. W. Dulles, "Life of Dr. Thomas Cadwalader," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXVII. 266. This article contains minutes of the meetings of the Library Company.
31 Pennsylvania Gazette, April 24, 1733, April 22, 1736, April 21, 1737, etc.
32 Reprint of the original document from the collection of Charles Roberts, Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXIII. 107.
33 Reprint of a minute of a meeting of the Directors of the Library Company, Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXII. 259.
low of the Royal Society of London, was agent for the Library Company in England. He bought books for them there\textsuperscript{36} and carried on a correspondence along scientific lines with two or three interested Americans, chief of whom was Benjamin Franklin.\textsuperscript{37} Breintnall, however, was also one of the number. Darlington prints extracts from a letter lent to him by Edward Ingraham. The date is not complete, but a note written on the letter indicates that it was received on April 28, 1738.

London, January 31 —

Respected Friend:—

I have several of thy obliging favours.—Thy Snakeroot—so called from thy first importing it is Sanicle (Sanicula Canadensis, L.), having all the characteristics belonging to that class: but I believe it is not mentioned in Miller, because not known when he wrote that book. Thee has many thanks from the Royal Society, for thy account of the Aurora Borealis, as mentioned in thine of November 24.

It gives me great pleasure to hear of that generous proposal of your proprietor, to give you a lot for a Library House; who, in great gratitude, you should choose President of your Society, which may encourage him further. All thy observations and schemes relating to it, are an instance of thy zeal for promoting the good of mankind, and deserves the greatest commendation from all that are well-wishers to so noble and useful a design. Your worthy proprietor may be truly said to be a father to his people, when he has the public weal so much at heart. I hope ways and means may be found to carry on that laudable work: but, really, I cannot flatter thee with hopes of benefactions from hence. The love of money is too prevalent, and we have too few generous, public-spirited men, considering our numbers: however, I shall not fail to impart your design to some likely persons. If I have any success in my solicitations, the Company will be sure to hear from me.

I am with much respect thy sincere friend,

P. Collinson.

P.S. I have enclosed the Company’s account, which I hope thee will find right.

The pretty white Ranunculus (Anemone thalictroides, L.) that Dr Witt sent me, sometime agone, is a neat delicate, double flower; but I never knew before, it was a Snake-Root. It is de-
scribed by the celebrated Plukenet, who has most of your country's plants. He names it—"Ranunculus nemorosus, Aquilegiae foliis, Virginianus, Asphodeli, radice."

We had, last December 5, a very remarkable and uncommon bloody Aurora borealis, which was seen all over Europe. Pray does thee remember if it extended to your parts?

Inclosed in the Library books &c., is a face glass. I was at a loss what size would be most suitable. This is a middle size, and, I think, sufficient for the purpose thou mentions. It cost six shillings. 38

This letter has been quoted at length as a sample of early scientific communication. In addition it gives us some insight into Breintnall's character. He emerges as a man with respectable interests; and his industry in promoting the Library, as indicated in the letter, is a matter of lasting credit to him.

Certainly he must have had some knowledge of plants, notwithstanding the precaution which Collinson takes of translating the Latin description in the postscript. Further evidence on this point is found in a letter written by Breintnall and dated March 28, 1734, four years before the above communication. Addressed to "My Friend Hugh," this letter goes on to say:

I am well pleas'd to have an Acquaintance with a few Persons who set themselves to the work of raising Trees and meliorating Fruit in their young Years when they . . . have time before them to make many experiments which a Proficiency in such an employment requires and deserves.

The letter includes five intelligent questions on the effect of grafting on trees. Apparently Breintnall's purpose was not to obtain information, but rather to stimulate the curiosity of his friend. He says, "I take the Freedom to prompt thy observations with following Queries." 39


Perhaps the "face glass" mentioned in the Collinson letter was some kind of magnifying glass or mirror requested by Breintnall to aid him in his observations or experiments, for he did carry on experiments and has left records of two of them.

In one, written probably in 1736, although part of the date is missing, he demonstrated the difference in the heat of the sun in summer and in winter. This was done by melting a piece of lead with a convex burning glass. The height of the sun and the condition of the air are noted whenever the lead is melted. The time necessary to accomplish the melting is found by counting "in a Moderate Manner of expressing." The lead was first placed on a board while the rays were being focused upon it, but Breintnall was afraid that the unevenness of the surface might affect the accuracy of the results; so the experiment was repeated with the lead held in pincers. The second time also the lead was blacked and the rays of the sun were focused nearer the edge of the metal, so that the dazzling effect of the sun on the eyes of the observer would be reduced to a minimum. These changes made the lead melt faster, as Breintnall notes. The experiment was repeated a number of times on different days, and all results showed that the rays of the sun were hotter in summer than in winter.

Breintnall’s other experiment was to prove that the rays of the sun penetrate colored material more than they penetrate white. The memorandum recording the information is dated August 3, 1737, but the experiment had been originally performed seven years previously. It was repeated at the later date as the result of hints given by Franklin. Other inducements to a re-study were his observations that people in warm climates wear white clothes, that a small glass will not burn white paper although this result is easily obtained.

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40 Logan Papers, X. 100. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
if the paper is stained, and that a young lady’s black gloves had burned her hands.

To reach his conclusions, Breintnall leveled the surface of the snow and placed pieces of linen, silk, leather, paper, woolen cloth, feathers, and similar materials thereon. He says the kinds of material may be ignored because they do not cause the pieces to sink. He notes which pieces sink after being exposed to the sun and concludes that the effect is caused only by the color of the particles except in the case of a piece of glass or where closeness of texture is a factor. The depressions are divided into six degrees of depth: shallow, less shallow, least shallow, deep, deeper, deepest. White materials make a shallow depression; black materials and glass make the deepest.

Breintnall called attention also to the fact that the gradation in depth of depression ranged from white through colors which are gradually darker until black was reached. Furthermore, the more closely woven the material, the more quickly are the effects apparent. Further proof is found in the fact that if one side is black and the other white, the depression is greater when the black is toward the sun. Suggestions for various easy ways to reach the same result are given. White and black bits of feathers may be used, or a piece of white paper may be blackened on one end. After an hour in the sun, the difference in sinking will be apparent.41

To be sure these are high school experiments; but there were few people in America making scientific experiments of any kind at this time. These experiments were sufficiently accurate to give true general results, and they indicate some appreciation of scientific method. They were carefully written down and described so that they might be checked. Breintnall expects them to be repeated by others, for he gives

41 Logan Papers, X. 100.
cautions to be observed when this is done. Attempts are made to control the various factors so that the results will not be affected by any influence other than the heat of the sun.

The aurora borealis was a subject of great interest and comment in colonial times just as it is now. Breintnall’s communication concerning this phenomenon for which the Royal Society returned thanks through Collinson was not the only one of its kind. His letter to his friend, dated Philadelphia, May 9, 1738, answers the question about the aurora borealis of December 5 in the negative and volunteers a description of another seen on December 27, 1736. It sheds further light on Breintnall’s interest in natural phenomena.

Philadelphia, May 9, 1738.

The remarkable *Aurora Borealis*, that was seen in Europe the beginning of last *December*, was not seen here.

But we had a visible *Aurora Borealis* the 29th of December 1736, The Day was clear, with a brisk cold Wind Northwest, the Evening calm and serene, and about seven we had a red *Aurora Borealis*.

On the 19th of November 1737. about Sun-set, many people in this town saw a fiery *Meteor* in the Air, large and bright; it seemed in the *Zenith*, and so it seemed to them some Miles from Town: it was observed to be higher than the lower Clouds.

On the 7th of December 1737. a Minute or Two before Eleven at Night, we had two Shocks of an Earthquake, greater than ever felt here before. The second Evening after, and for several Evenings in this Month, a red Vapour appeared to the Southward and South-westward, like the *Aurora Borealis*.

This letter was read to the Royal Society and printed in its *Philosophical Transactions*.

A more ambitious paper from Breintnall was read before the learned members of this Society after the author’s death. He had been bitten by a rattlesnake.

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42 *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, XLI. 359.
43 *Ibid.*, XLIV. 147–150. The name of the sender of this letter is given as “Mr. J. Breintal.” There seems no reason to doubt that this is another spelling of a variously spelled name. The letter was sent to Collinson, with whom, as we have seen, Breintnall was in correspondence. It comes from Philadelphia, and its date is within Breintnall’s lifetime.
Collinson's curiosity must have been aroused. No Englishman who stayed at home would have a similar experience; so Breintnall was in a position to render a unique service. He reported in a letter which displays a rare mixture of superstition and common sense.


I am much obliged to you for your kind Letter; but you injoin me a sad Task. You must know then, that, on the 2d of last May in the Afternoon, I took a Turn down to the River; and meeting there some Company, we tarried there about two Hours.

I hearing a Bell on the Top of a steep Hill, which I knew to be the Cows of the People where I then quarter'd, and thinking to drive them home, went right up the Hill, and as it was stony, sometimes I was ready to fall, so saved myself by my Hands, and got safe very near the Top; where either my Foot slip'd, or the Stone under it gave Way, and brought me down on my Knees. I laid my Hand on a broad Stone to stay myself, and, I suppose, the Snake lay on the opposite Side, and might be offended by some Motion of the Stone, so bit my Hand in an Instant, without any warning or Sight; then slid under the Stones, and sounded his Rattles.

I felt a sort of Chilness when I heard the Sound; because I had a constant Thought, that if ever I was bit, my Life was at an End. Without Stop I tore up the Stones, resolving to slay my Murderer: At last I found him; crush'd his Head to Pieces with a Stone, took him up in my left Hand, and ran to my Quarters, sucking the Wound on my right Hand as I went, and spitting out the Poison.

This kept it easy; but my Tongue and my Lips became stiff and numb, as if they had been froze: So getting quickly home—. "I am bit with a Rattlesnake, and there lies my Murderer," casting him down on the Threshold.

All Hands were aloft in a Minute; some for one Thing, some another, as they had seen or known in a like Affair; and none seem'd less concern'd than myself, as I thought by their actions.

The first Thing applied was a Fowl; his Belly ript up, and put on my Hand alive, like a Gantlet, and there tied fast. This drew out some of the Poison; for immediately he swell'd grew black and stunk.

I kept my Elbow bent, and my Fingers up, to keep the Poison from my Arm.—Thus I walked about, and set some of the Company to make a Fire on the Green; for, as it fell out, there were 7 or 8 People there more than our Family. It was done quickly, and there we burned the Snake.

Another Hand this while had got some Tumerick. This we bruised well, Tops and Roots; so made a Plaister, and bound it
Joseph Breintnall

round my Arm, to keep the Poison in the Hand: But Night came on, or else, I believe, it had never gone further than the Hand; for this kept the Arm secure, till Midnight or past. Nor all this while had I much Pain: My Hand grew cold and numb, but did not swell very much; but now puff up on a sudden, and grew furious; so I slit my Fingers with a Razor, and this gave some ease. I also slit my Hand on the Back, and cupped’d it, and drew out a Quart or more of ugly poisonous slimy Stuff. But my Arm swelled for all we could do: Then I got it tied so fast, that all Communication might be stopped with the Body, that it seem’d almost Void of Feeling; yet would it work, jump, writhe and twist like a Snake in the Skin, and change Colours, and be spotted; and then would move to and fro upon the Arm, which grew painful in the Bone.

Thus was it ty’d two Days, and all Things applied that could be got or thought on. At last, the Ashes of White Ash-Bark, and Vinegar, made into a Plaister, and laid to the Bite, drew out the Poison apace.

My Tongue and Lips swelled that Night, but were not very painful, occasion’d only, I suppose, by sucking the Wound. The Swelling of my Arm being sunk, till it was at least half gone, we then untied it; but, in two Hours, all my right side was turned black, yet swell’d but little; nor was there any Pain went along with that Change of Colour. I bled at the Mouth soon after, and so continued spitting Blood and feverish four Days.

The Pain raged still in the Arm, and The Fever more violent; and by turns I was delirious for an Hour or two. This happen’d 3 or 4 times; and 9 days being over, the Fever abated, and I began to mend; but my Hand and Arm were spotted like a Snake, and continued so all Summer.

In the Fall my Arm swell’d, gather’d, and burst; so away went the Poison, Spots, and all; Heaven be thanked for ridding me from such a cursed Adversary!

But the most surprising and tormenting were my Dreams; for, in all Sicknesses before, if I could but sleep and dream, I was happy so long; being ever in some pleasing scenes of Heaven, Earth, or Air: On the contrary, now if I slept, so sure I dreamed of horrid Places, on Earth only; and very often rolling among old Logs. Sometimes I was a white Oak cut in Pieces; and frequently my Feet would be growing into two Hickeries. This cast a sort of Damp on my waking Thoughts, to find my sleeping Hours disturbed with the operation of that Horrid Poison.

Thus have I sent you a Narrative of what happened on the fatal Bite, without any Polish, with a design only to be understood by you.  

*Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, XLIV. 147–150.*
It would hardly be fair to belittle Breintnall for his lack of knowledge in this crisis. Probably it would not have been handled in a much better way at any place in America at the time. The killing and burning of the snake when it was a matter of life and death to keep the poison from spreading, the personification of the snake and the Poison, and the comparison of the spots on the swelling to the spots on a snake’s skin contrast strangely with the application of the ligature. They also indicate the crude notions of medicine prevailing among the colonists, and afford some explanation of the high death rate in those early years.

Breintnall’s correspondence with Collinson was fruitful in another way. It was through him that the contact between the naturalist John Bartram and Collinson was established. Bartram had collected many specimens, and had made observations in natural history during extensive travels. Breintnall, who was his friend, both having been Quakers, undertook to send some of his notebooks to Collinson. This was the beginning of a long correspondence. Until Breintnall’s death, letters were sent in his care. As a merchant he was probably centrally located and easy to find. Packages for Bartram were sent enclosed in boxes of books sent to Breintnall.

There is frequent mention of “our friend, Joseph Breintnall.” Collinson’s request for “Joseph Breintnall’s Snake-Root” came in a letter to Bartram. Finally the letter dated April 12, 1746, from Bartram sends a new address for his letters because “Our friend Joseph Breintnall, departed this life, the middle of last month.”

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46 Brett-James, op. cit., p. 125.
46 Darlington, op. cit., p. 175.
47 Brett-James, op. cit., p. 126.
48 Ibid., p. 61.
49 Ibid., p. 175.