Benjamin Franklin and the Dr. Bray Associates

The Dr. Bray Associates of London, England, at their meeting of January 2, 1760, elected Dr. Benjamin Franklin as one of their number. This act, according to one of his biographers, designated him as one of the leading philanthropists of England.¹ In the light of the history of that institution the judgment may well stand, for one of the most interesting trends in social reform in England during the early decades of the eighteenth century was the setting up of philanthropic movements which were motivated by the latitudinarian clergy of the Church of England. Typical of such humanitarian enterprises was the establishment of charity schools and parochial libraries in the English possessions, particularly those which were established through the untiring efforts of Dr. Thomas Bray. Since the turn of the century Dr. Bray and his co-workers had been establishing charity schools and promoting through better libraries for the poorer clergy a sounder and more tolerant teaching of religious principles, taking advantage of the wave of educational enthusiasm which permeated earnest and pious souls of the Church.² Dr. Bray’s humanitarianism, however, also encompassed plans for the education not only of the unfortunate white people in England and its possessions but the Negroes who lived in the British plantations as well. In the execution of the broader and costlier scheme he was singularly fortunate in enlisting the support, moral and financial, of M. Abel Tas- sin, better known as Sieur D’Allone, secretary to His Majesty, William III, who gave as much as £900 during his life to be used in the worthy undertaking. Upon D’Allone’s death in 1721 there was willed to Dr. Bray one-tenth of his English estate and arrears of a pension

¹ Bernard Fay, Benjamin Franklin: The Apostle of Modern Times. (Boston, 1929), 287.
² Dr. Bray was the founder of The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge in 1698 and The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in 1701.
due him from the crown at the time of his death, as a fund, to carry on educational work among the Negroes.

In 1723, Dr. Bray, greatly fatigued by the performance of his many philanthropic enterprises, nominated a number of trustees to aid him in carrying on the work among the Negroes. Seven years later he died and the next year, 1731, his colleagues' authority as trustees of the D'Allone benefaction was confirmed by decree of chancery, under the name of "The Associates of the late Dr. Bray."³

The Associates very faithfully carried on their trust. For several years the interest from the D'Allone fund was used as a stipend towards the support of a catechist to teach the Negroes in Georgia. Most of the work at first was carried on with the adult Negroes and was not very successful, because many of them could not speak English and retained the superstitions peculiar to their race. Such obstacles led the Associates to turn their attention to the instruction of the children who were more pliable, and schools were opened in the various colonies in America "under the Care and Inspection of Worthy Persons."⁴

Just when their attention was turned from adults to the children is not known definitely, but in line with the desire to place the schools "under the Care and Inspection of Worthy Persons" we do know that the Reverend John Waring, secretary to the Associates, when he wrote to notify Benjamin Franklin of his appointment as the executor of the Reverend Henry Wheatly's will, took advantage of the opportunity and acquainted Franklin with the objectives of the Associates. Secretary Waring wrote in part:

We shall be much obliged to You if You will favour Us with Your Sentiments of the first Design conversion of the negroes, & let us know how & what means those poor ignorant people may be most effectually instructed. Whether the Parochial Clergy do take any pains with them & Help and Assistance they may want to enable them to diffuse the knowledge of Religion among them? As the


lately Imported Negroes are Strangers to our Language, Little Good I fear can be done with them, but might not the black Children born in the Province be taught to read & instructed in the Principles of Christian Morality, & if the planters would permit them, pray What sum Sterling, p. Ann. would be a suitable Salary for a Sober, Honest Master. Some few Years ago a pious Clergyman in Wales set on foot a Scheme of itinerant School-Masters; who after residing three, six, or nine months in one place, & teaching persons of all Ages to read, who came to them, removed to another, & did the Like there, by this means Six or Seven thousand persons (Young & old) for some Years past have been annually taught to read & instructed in religious knowledge. Might not some Such Scheme be set on foot in your province for the Service of the Blacks? The Assoc. beg the favour of You to consult with the worthy Commissary & some other Clergy in the Neighborhood & favour us with the Result of Your Deliberations.

It is not altogether surprising that Franklin should have been asked to give advice and aid. He was already well known as a social philosopher, interested in philanthropic movements, and, indeed, had since his youth given expression and adherence to the teachings of Shaftesbury as put forth in his Characteristics, to wit: "to love the public, to study universal good, and to promote the interest of the whole world, as far as lies in our power, is surely the height of goodness and make that temper which we call divine."

In the spring of 1757 Franklin was sent by the Pennsylvania Assembly to London as their agent to look after the colony's affairs. He arrived in London, July 27, 1757, and soon settled down at Mrs. Margaret Stevenson's house, at Number 7 Craven Street, in the Strand. It was not many weeks before all doors began to open to him, and he was welcomed "by all classes as one of the master spirits of the age." No doubt in attending to his official business and in making his social calls, he met with members of the Associates, or with the friends of members. It is quite likely that on occasions when he entered into the lively conversations of the time he revealed enough of Shaftesburian philosophy to impress his hearers with the similarity of his and their viewpoints on the social problems. Be that as it may, we know that the Associates must have been eager to approach him once more on the matter close to their hearts—the extension and

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7 Choate, "Franklin as Statesman and Diplomat" in The Record of the Celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Benjamin Franklin, etc. (Phila., 1906), 82.

8 Crane, loc. cit.
improvement of their scheme to educate the Negroes in America. Just what incident brought the matter of Negro education in the colonies to their attention at this moment is not definitely clear. But at a meeting held on February 1, 1758, this very matter was discussed and it was agreed that at the next meeting they should consider the expediency of opening a school for Negro children in Pennsylvania, and that in the meantime, Secretary Waring should get the best information possible to enable them to judge the efficacy of such an undertaking.

At the next meeting on April 5, 1758, the Secretary reported that he had consulted with Benjamin Franklin about the matter of the Negro school, and had been assured by him that it was a worthy undertaking and one that would meet with success. Moreover, he said, Franklin intimated that should it prove successful in Pennsylvania, it might be encouraged by the general public and extended to the other colonies in America. Franklin also without hesitation recommended as a proper person to superintend such an undertaking, the Reverend William Sturgeon, assistant minister to Christ Church and catechist to the Negroes of Philadelphia. Upon these recommendations the Associates resolved to set up a school in Philadelphia for the instruction of Negro children. It marked the beginning of one of the first really successful attempts on the part of the Associates to promote secular education of the Negroes in American colonies.

A school was opened in Philadelphia on November 20, 1758, and was in charge of a woman who was paid £20 sterling a year. She taught thirty children: the boys to read, and the girls to sew, knit, mark, and read. On Wednesday and Friday she took them to the church where the Reverend Sturgeon taught them the catechism.

9 There was a very close connection between the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and the Associates. Letters from the clergy to the former Society frequently contained references to work of the catechists among the Negroes. It is likely that such communications were directly brought to the attention of the Associates who decided to lend a hand to the catechists of the Negroes and to supplement their good work by secular education of the Negroes.

10 Mss. of Dr. Bray Associates, Minute Book I, 1735-1763. (Library of Congress. Photofilm enlargements), 12. Mr. John Waring was secretary to the Associates for many years. They met at various places in London, at the South Sea Coffee House to 1759, later at Mr. Bird's, the bookseller, in Ave Mary Lane, London.

11 Sturgeon was connected with Christ Church from 1747-1766.

12 Minute Book I, 114.

13 Ibid., 120-121, 124.
prospered and fulfilled the designs of the Associates was revealed clearly in a letter Franklin received from his wife. The part which he turned over to Mr. Waring was as follows:

... I went to hear the Negro Children catechised at Church. There were 17 answered very prettily indeed & 5 or 6 that were too little, but all behaved very decently. Mr. Sturgeon exhorted them before & after Catechism. It gave me a great deal of pleasure & I shall send Othello there. . . .

It was probably this evidence of interest in the work of the Associates as well as his fine reputation which brought about, upon Mr. Waring’s recommendation, the unanimous election of Franklin as one of their number, at the first meeting of 1760. At the very next meeting, January 17, the Associates, well pleased with the success of their enterprise in Philadelphia, considered opening three other schools in the colonies, and as Franklin was present it was to him that they turned for suggestions. He recommended New York City, Williamsburg in Virginia, and Newport, Rhode Island as the best places. As proper persons to undertake the care and superintendency of the Negro schools should they be set up in those places, he recommended, respectively, Dr. Samuel Johnson, president of King’s College, the Reverend Mr. Henry Barclay, minister of Trinity Church, and the Reverend Mr. Auchmuty, in New York City; William Hunter, Esq., postmaster, and the Reverend Dr. Dawson, president of William and Mary College in Williamsburg; and the Reverend Mr. Pollen, minister in Newport. Upon the motion of the Associates Franklin was instructed to write to these men and request their assistance in organizing the schools. This he did and the schools were established. Upon his return to the colonies he made it a point to visit the schools and sent a report to the Associates.

The Associates were not lacking in appreciation of the abilities and enterprise of Dr. Franklin. He was appointed on March 6, 1760, to

14 Ibid., 127. This part of the letter dated Aug. 9, 1759, was published in a London paper under Mrs. Franklin’s name. Franklin to his wife, London, June 27, 1760, in Smyth, op. cit., IV, 22–23.

15 Ibid. and Minutes I, 128, under date of Jan. 2, 1760. Waring wrote to Franklin, Jan. 4, telling him of his election and asking him to be present at the next meeting, January 17. See Franklin Papers, I, 58. A. P. S.

16 Minutes I, 130–131.

17 Ibid., 193, under date of October, 1763. In the letter dated June 27, 1763, he tells of his visit to the school at Williamsburg, and mentions his intention of going to New York and Newport. The account of these schools can be traced in the Minute Books.
be one of a committee of three to audit the accounts, and it was agreed on the same day that he serve as the chairman for the ensuing year. As chairman he took a keen interest in the work of the Associates and did all possible to further their purposes. His other numerous activities in these years interfered with his attendance, but a perusal of the available records shows that he was no more remiss in regularity than most of his colleagues. Not only did he keep in constant touch with the three schools in America, but also looked after the needs of various groups which desired books. On June 5, 1760, he was responsible for getting "one Set of Dr. Berriman's Sermons & Erasmi Ecclesiastes" for the library at Philadelphia. It was, perhaps, only natural that he would look out for his "pet" library, but he was also responsible for having books sent to the residents of Woodbridge, New Jersey. Of equal significance was the gift of one guinea designed to be used to "purchase a Press for the Reception of those and such other Books" as might be sent to them.

On New Year's day, 1761, Franklin reported another encouraging letter from Reverend Sturgeon on the progress of the Negro school. The books for instruction which the Associates had sent to Philadelphia were just the thing needed for giving an impetus to the enterprise. It was during the summer of this very year, however, that religious controversies in Philadelphia put a damper on the school's

18 Ibid., 133—134. On this day he paid his fee of admission and benefaction, £2.2.0., p. 132. Some of the other members about this time were: The Hon. James Oglethorpe, Lieutenant General; Robert More, Esq., Reverend Dr. Burton, Fellow of Eton College; Rev. Mr. Berriman, Rector of St. Alban's; Peter Le Keux, Esq.; Dr. Ashton, Fellow of Eton College; Mr. William Strahan; Thomas Powys; Samuel Johnson; Mr. James Collinson, Lancaster; William Smith, D.D., Provost of the College at Philadelphia; Edmund Pepys, Esq.; Rev. Herbert Mayo, D.D., Rector of St. George's in the East; Rev. Hopton Haynes, M.A., of Ipswich; Mr. Thomas Wycliffe, merchant, London, etc. See Abstract (1766) pp. 40—41.

19 Minutes I, 142—143. The school at Newport, Rhode Island, was slow in organizing (1762). See the list of schools in Abstract (1766), 39.

20 It must not be forgotten that the distribution of books to aid in building parochial libraries was also an important activity of the Associates.

21 Minutes I, 140.

22 Ibid., 144, under date of Nov. 6, 1760.

23 See Abstract (1762), 5, for a reference to a letter of May 10, 1761, from Mr. James Parker of Woodbridge, N. J., thanking the Associates for the books and the gift of a guinea from an unknown benefactor. (This edition of the Abstract is also in Rare Book Room, L.C.)

24 Minutes I, 146.

25 Abstract (1766), 39, which shows that later, in 1765, the Associates sent to America to assist clergymen in the instruction of Negroes no less than 1032 books and pamphlets. These are not to be confused with the books sent to parochial libraries.
activities, and not until a new mistress was appointed did the school show progress.\footnote{Minutes I, 162, 172, 181. The new mistress was Elizabeth Harrison (appointed on May 1, 1761) wife of Richard Harrison, master of the free school in the Academy and College. See S. P. G. Mss. (L. C. Trans.) B 21, no. 280.}

In the spring of 1761, Franklin was re-elected as chairman. He seems to have been absent from many meetings within the next few months, but not altogether inactive, because through his efforts a donation of £3,3.0 was given to the Associates by Dr. Heberden.\footnote{Minutes I, 147, 157.} He was in the chair on October 1, and on this occasion he and Waring reported that they had not as yet come to “any Resolution where to fix any more Negroe Schools, for Want of better information.”\footnote{Ibid., 158.} The next spring Dr. Franklin was succeeded as chairman by Dr. Owen, Rector of St. Olave’s, in Hart Street, London.\footnote{Ibid., 174.}

It was in the fall of 1762 that Franklin returned to America. As mentioned previously, he visited the Negro school in Williamsburg and those elsewhere. In the autumn of 1763, he, Reverend Sturgeon, and some others visited the school in Philadelphia and thoroughly examined the children. He expressed sincere approval of the progress made, of the attentiveness of the children, and of the diligence of the mistress, and added that from such observations

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\ldots \text{I then have conceived a higher opinion of the Natural Capacities of the black Race, than I have ever before entertained. Their apprehension [is] as quick, their Memory as Strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of the White Children…} \]

This sanguine report must have given heart to the Associates and spurred them on to greater activity.

In a letter of June 15, 1764, he again mentions having looked after the school, but it was not in as flourishing a condition as the previous year, only fifteen children being in attendance.\footnote{Ibid., 214.} The decline of the school was no doubt due to the lack of proper supervision on the part of Sturgeon who was not very well, and the increasing neglect on the part of the mistress. A new mistress, Mrs. Ayres, was put in charge in November, 1764, and by the end of June, 1765, the school was again in a fine condition. Franklin had done his part to keep the school going during his stay in America.\footnote{Ibid., 216, 218, 229, 231.}
bly for a second time appointed Franklin as its agent and late in December, 1764, he was again in London.

At the meeting of July 24, 1766, Mr. Waring reported that he had received an important communication from the Reverend Mr. Broughton, secretary to the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, wherein it was stated that the Reverend Mr. Abott Upcher of Sudbury, Suffolk, had in a letter of June 28, expressed the intention of donating £1000 to the Associates to purchase an estate in America “or otherwise that They may receive clear Rents and Profits thereof for the purposes of educating Negroe Children till Episcopacy is settled in America. . . .” This generous gift the Associates accepted, and they requested Franklin to write to the benefactor to “acquaint him with the Circumstances of purchasing Lands in America.”

Franklin wrote to the Reverend Mr. Upcher from Craven Street, London, October 4, 1766, on this matter and suggested that the purchase be made in Pennsylvania,

where Titles are generally clear; and it would be well to empower three Persons in Philadelphia to purchase Ground Rents within that City and other safe & profitable Estate in or near the same, as Bargains may offer, in Trust for the Purposes you mention; drawing for the Money here from time to time as the Purchases are made; the Money remaining at Interest here till so drawn for. And the Rents receiv’d by such Trustees to be applied as you direct. . . .

Reverend Upcher was satisfied with Franklin’s suggestions and soon began to give donations—first one hundred pounds, then another of equal amount, and a third for three hundred pounds. These were invested in securities bearing three per cent interest. After the first benefaction was given, Franklin was instructed to inquire about the purchase of suitable lands. After the second gift of one hundred pounds he was requested by the Associates to purchase improvable lands, investing the trusteeship when purchase was made in the hands of himself, the Reverend Mr. Jacob Duché, Jr. (and after his decease, in the Rector of Christ Church forever), Francis Hopkinson, Edward Duffield, and David Hall, all of Philadelphia.
In the meantime, Reverend Sturgeon had resigned his position in Christ Church and moved to the country. This made it necessary for the Associates to find another person to superintend the Negro school, and it was most likely upon Franklin’s recommendation and solicitation that Messrs. Hopkinson and Duffield acted as the overseers. In the Minutes for May 5, 1768, there appears the following abstract of a letter from these two gentlemen:

Mrs. Ayers the Mistress states that from the Appointment to that Office, Novr. 20th, 1764 to March 24, 1768 Fifty Nine Negro Children had been admitted, that at that time twenty-seven attended . . . . Three are in the Bible, One in the Testament, Two in the Tables, Nineteen are Slaves, & Eight free & that Ten can say their Catechism pretty well.

These men faithfully executed the trust and made regular reports to the Associates. The school prospered and after May, 1768, was under another mistress, Mrs. Sarah Wilson.

From 1765 to 1768 there are very few references to Franklin in the Minutes, save that he was in the chair, in the absence of Dr. Mayo, on January 7, 1768. He must have written to Hopkinson and Duffield about purchasing land in Philadelphia, and kept the Associates posted on the trend of that matter; at least references are made to that effect. By September 2, 1773, the Associates were agreed to purchase a lot of ground in Philadelphia at a cost of about £600 sterling. Actual purchase was made sometime before May 3, 1774.

In the meantime the Reverend Mr. Coombe became the overseer of the Negro school from September, 1774, until the outbreak of the
Revolution. On April 1, 1777, there appeared the following significant entry on the Minutes of the Dr. Bray Associates:

The pious Designs of the Associates in supporting Negro Schools in the Continent of America being at present interrupted by the unhappy Disputes between Great Britain and her Colonies, and there being little Prospect of resuming the same till amicable Accommodation [sic] shall take place.

Agreed that in order to answer the pious Intention of our Association it will be adviseable [sic] to adopt some other Plan of Charity of a similar Nature, and this Board are of the opinion, the Establishment and Support of Schools in England for the instruction of poor Children in Such Places as shall appear to stand in need of such charitable Institutions will best correspond to the Intentions of the Society... .

Just how the school fared during the years of the Revolution is not known. Possibly the work of educating the Negro children was continued but no direct mention of the school is found in the Associates' records until April 2, 1789. However, as early as January, 1783, there was made mention of the Associates' land in Philadelphia. At that time Francis Hopkinson offered to buy it if the Associates would sell, but they deferred taking any action until they could receive some advice from Franklin. The intricate affair dragged on and Hopkinson, acting with Franklin, divided the land into plots and rented one to Samuel Corry. In the spring of 1788 they rented plots to James Farquair and John Miller, stone-cutters, and the hope was expressed that the money received as rent would be sufficient to sup-

41 Minutes II, 71, 74, and under the date of March 7, 1776, there is a minute which refers to a letter of Rev. Coombe's dated July 18, 1775, in which appears a postscript stating that on "the 20th of May there were 9 Negroe Ch. in the Alphabet, 7 in Spelling, 4 in reading, 5 in Reading & Sewing, 2 at needle & Knitting, 1 Sampler." p. 77.

42 Ibid., 78-79.


44 Ibid., 99. See also a letter from Thomas Lyttleton, secretary to the Associates, to Benjamin Franklin, dated October 4, 1785. A. P. S., Franklin Papers, XXXIII. Pt. 2, 203. They proposed to rent the land upon a perpetual ground rent. Moreover as Hopkinson had notified the Associates that a new street was to be made through the lot, they asked Franklin to see that there was just compensation made for land taken for the purpose. He was also to look after the rents and to report on the state of the school. For power of attorney see A. P. S., Ibid., XXXIV, 45, under date of April 4, 1786.

45 Or Correy. Letter from Franklin and Hopkinson dated, Phila., Oct. 22, 1787. Minutes, 147-148. As Franklin was too busy and growing too infirm to attend to all the matters pertaining to the land, he handed to Hopkinson the power of attorney he had received from the Associates. June 3, 1786. Ibid., 132 and 133, under the date of Oct. 2, 1786, in the Minutes.
port the school. The school again prospered and was later put under the supervision of Dr. White, Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Pennsylvania, and Hopkinson again visited it.

Benjamin Franklin died on April 17, 1790, and in August of that same year, Hopkinson wrote to the Associates asking them to appoint a successor to assist him in “the management of the Negroe School & charge of the Societies [sic] Lot of Ground in this City.” He recommended Bishop White as a proper person to assume the co-partnership.

It can be said truthfully that from the time Franklin’s advice was first asked by Mr. Waring in 1758, until the last year of his life, he took keen interest in the affairs of the Associates of Dr. Bray. He was without question the one person who did most to forward in the colonies the “pious Designs” of that venerable body. His association with these men, engaged in a purely philanthropic enterprise, must have been the fountainhead from which he gathered inspiration to carry on his never flagging interest in the welfare of the black race. In truth, his last public act was, as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, to sign a memorial presented by that Society to the United States House of Representatives, on February 12, 1789. Later in the year he wrote an address to the public on the subject of abolishing slavery, and also drew up a plan for the improvement of the condition of free slaves. The memorial of Feb-

46 Ibid., 152. Letter from Hopkinson dated, May 13, 1788. He added: “I have just come from visiting & examining the School. The State of it is as follows 11 Boys and 21 Girls—32 Scholars—14 in Reading 15 Spelling 3 Alphabet. The Girls Sewing—Catechism & Prayers every Thursday.” And he adds: “Your Estate is exempted from Taxation which is a considerable saving.”

47 Ibid., 160-161. Letter of Bishop White to Associates, Dec. 1, 1788. It is not the purpose of this paper to trace the transactions and school activities beyond 1790: that has been exceedingly well done in another place. See E. L. Pennington, “The Work of the Bray Associates in Pennsylvania,” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LVIII, 1-25. For the detailed account of land transactions to 1808 see pp. 10-25. Unfortunately the author does not touch upon the donation of the Rev. Mr. Upcher.

48 Minutes II, 176. Bishop White was accepted by the Associates.


50 See “Address to the Public, from the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and the Relief of free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage,” November 9, 1789; and “Plan for Improving the Condition of the Free Slaves,” October 26, 1789, in Smyth, op. cit., X, 66-68; 127-129.
ruary, 1789, called forth heated debate, and several attempts were made to justify the slave trade. This led Franklin to write an essay, signed HISTORICUS, which appeared in the *Federal Gazette*, March 25, 1790, only twenty-four days before his death.51

To the very end he was acting in a manner which must have pleased the Associates of the late Dr. Bray, and he had successfully striven "to love the public, to study the universal good . . . and [attained] that temper which we call divine." Such is the very brief story, revealing another facet in the interesting life of the "many sided Franklin."

**Easton, Pennsylvania**

**Richard I. Shelling**

51 *Ibid.*, 86–91, particularly the note by Dr. Stuber, pp. 86–87. It is of interest to note that on Monday, February 7, 1803, a Mr. Brand presented to "the Society a Print of Doctor Benjamin Franklin, a former Associate," which presumably was placed in their meeting room. Minutes, II, 330.