Phaeton in Philadelphia
Jean Pierre Blanchard and the First Balloon Ascension in America, 1793

Not until ten years after Philâtre de Rozier in France made the first ascent in a free balloon on November 21, 1783, did native Philadelphians witness a similar successful attempt in their own country. Nor was it that they were uninterested in early aeronautical experiments. Between 1783 and 1785 they followed with excitement and cautious emulation the adventures in France of the Montgolfier brothers, of the intrepid physicist J.-A.-C. Charles, and of their own expatriate countryman, Dr. John Jeffries, who accompanied Jean Pierre Blanchard on the first air voyage across the English Channel. Benjamin Franklin in Paris wondered if a system of balloons could not be invented to transport him buoyantly from place to place, so that he might avoid jolting his gout over cobblestones. More seriously, he contemplated the possibilities of aerial transport for commerce and warfare.¹ In Philadelphia itself paper balloons were released daily “to the great astonishment of the Populace.”² “The name of Congress,” wrote Francis Hopkinson, “is almost forgotten—and for every person that will mention that respectable body, a hundred will talk of the Air Balloon.”³ A public subscription was solicited to finance an “Elegant Air Balloon, capable of raising great weights, of carrying up men and other living animals into the regions of the atmosphere and returning them safely to the earth.”⁴ The possibilities of flight captured all imaginations: “We

² MS Franklin Papers, American Philosophical Society, XXI, 185.
³ MS letter to Thomas Jefferson, March 31, 1784. Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, X, 1636. American interest at this time in aeronautics was, of course, not limited to Philadelphia. The Connecticut Journal, May 26, 1784, featured “A Description of a Machine, Proper to Be Navigated through the Air”; the Boston Magazine, I (August, 1784), 433, 478, displayed not only articles but detailed illustrations of “The Ascent of the Aerial Balloon” and “The Descent of the Air Balloon.” Most editors in America in 1784 found aeronautics good copy.
⁴ Independent Gazetteer, July 12, 1784.
shall soar above the clouds.” “This discovery,” predicted Thomas Jefferson, only half facetiously, “seems to threaten the destruction of fortified works unless they can be closed from above, the destruction of fleets and what not.”

Hopkinson sketched a plan for a mechanically propelled dirigible. Philip Freneau, in jest, foresaw further benefits of air transport:

The man who at Boston sets out with the sun,
If the wind should be fair, may be with us at one,
At Gunpowder Ferry drink whiskey at three,
At six be at Edentown, ready for tea.

But early experiments in aeronautics were not always taken in high seriousness. An anonymous correspondent to the *Journal de Paris* of May 13, 1784, wrote a burlesque account of the remarkable adventures of a Philadelphia carpenter, one James Wilcox, who, sponsored by Francis Hopkinson and David Rittenhouse, was supposed to have ascended in a contraption of forty-seven small balloons and who only saved himself from a ducking in the Schuylkill by puncturing the balloons one after another. It was a life-like figment of some satirical imagination, a realistic hoax which, though exposed often, is still taken seriously. Once, indeed, a trial was made in Philadelphia. Peter Carnes, an amateur balloonist from Baltimore, ascended from the Prison Court Yard amid great public fanfare on July 17, 1784. Such was the interest in the event among Philadelphians that, we are told, even the advertised execution of two notorious street robbers on that day was virtually unattended by the populace. Thousands are said to have gathered in Potter's Field for a glimpse of the balloon as it came over the housetops. Up it went. But at the height of ten or twelve feet the carriage struck against a wall of the court and the balloonist was hurled to the ground. Freed of its burden the craft shot upward with amazing

---


8 In spite of the fact that the hoax has been exposed by Joseph Jackson, “The First Balloon Hoax,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXV (1911), 51-58, and, more recently by Hastings, *op. cit.*, 335, the story is still credited in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in I. Bernard Cohen, “Benjamin Franklin and Aeronautics,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, CCXXXII (August, 1941), 111.
rapidity, till it seemed hardly the size of a barrel. Many onlookers
did not realize that the aeronaut was not still aboard. When, high
over the city, the bag caught fire from the wood-burning furnace
within it, it was taken for granted that Mr. Carnes had perished
with his "elegant Air Balloon." Not till the next day was the truth
generally known. By this time, public interest was considerably
dampened by the near catastrophe. The newspapers solicited in vain
for a new subscription for a new balloon.  

This is perhaps the reason why another such flight was not at-
ttempted in Philadelphia until the ascension in 1793 of the popular
French aeronaut, Jean Pierre Blanchard. The best known of the
air-men of his day, the first to navigate a lighter-than-air craft across
the English Channel, Blanchard was also an ardent republican who
had proved his devotion to the cause of freedom by suffering im-
prisonment in the fortress of Kufstein. As a patriot and as an
adventurer he won his way to the hearts of all liberal Americans.
January 9 was the date on which he took off from the Walnut Street
Prison Court and, after forty-six minutes in the air and three at-
ttempts to descend, came down in Deptford Township, Gloucester
County, in New Jersey: "The haziness of the horizon, especially over
the sea, towards which he was flying, made it imprudent for him to
lengthen his voyage." Nearly a century and a half before Orson
Welles, Monsieur Blanchard astounded unsuspecting citizens of the
eastern seaboard. While he "was attempting to descend from his
perpendicular height of two miles, he was espied by two Jersey
farmers, a few miles beyond Woodbury, . . . one of whom was so
terrified, that taking the aeronaut for some sky-man, hostilely in-
clined, he ran to his house for a gun, to defend himself. It was in
vain that M. Blanchard called to them for assistance in mooring his
balloon; their fears conquered every other consideration; and it was
not till some citizens of Philadelphia came up, who had followed on
horseback, that he was safely landed." Bribed by an offer of one
of the six bottles of wine which the balloonist carried as cargo, the

9 See J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia (Philadelphia,
1884), I, 436-37, and Independent Gazetteer, July 21, 1784.
10 Federal Gazette, January 10, 1793.
11 National Gazette, January 23, 1793; also see The Mail, or Claypoole's Daily Advertiser,
January 24, 1793.
farmers finally came to his assistance. Then Blanchard was escorted by way of Cooper’s Ferry in triumph back to the city by Sheriff Jonathan Penrose and the other adventurous Philadelphians who had galloped over the countryside to follow his flight. That evening he paid a ceremonious visit to President Washington, to receive official congratulations.

During the weeks before his flight Blanchard, an accomplished showman, had played up to his public well. Shortly after his arrival on December 9, 1792, on the ship Ceres from Hamburgh, he was established with his mysterious “aerostatic apparatus” at Oeller’s Hotel, and ready to receive the press. “The celebrated Mr. Blanchard, who thirty-eight times has visited the aerial regions, and soared above this earthly ball,” announced the Federal Gazette, “has arrived among us.” “Mr. Blanchard, we are informed,” the National Gazette added, “intends shortly, to favor the enlightened citizens of this metropolis, with the sight of a grand aerostatic experiment.”

Philip Freneau, whose facile pen had long been active in comment on public affairs in Philadelphia, was glad of the opportunity to discomfort his Federalist rivals by praising so popular a citizen of the new Republic of France. “What cannot her courage and genius attain?” First in arms, fierce in liberty, now she was adding laurels of science to her crown. Let Britain control the seas; France would own the air! Then, again in playful prognostication:

Instead of a vessel, to traverse the seas
Engage a balloon and you’ll do it with ease.

Blanchard himself soon let it be known that it was not his thirty-ninth but his forty-fifth ascension which he meant shortly to perform for the enlightened inhabitants of the city. “I am sending round to the citizens of Philadelphia proposals for a subscription to defray the expence of an aerostatical experiment,” he announced. “Mr. Roset,

13 American Daily Advertiser, January 10, 1793. See Pennsylvania Journal, January 16, 1793, for an affidavit signed by the seven Philadelphians who had witnessed the descent in Deptford Township—at 10:56 a.m.
14 American Apollo, December 28, 1792.
15 December 17, 1792.
16 December 22, 1792.
my secretary, at Oeller's Hotel, will receive them until the 25th inst. after which time the subscription will be closed, the time of the experiment fixed, and the tickets issued to each subscriber. The price of the ticket—five dollars.”

Within a week the date was set: he would ascend, weather permitting, from the enclosed prison court yard at ten o’clock on the morning of January 9. To excited young men of Philadelphia who wished to accompany him on the flight, Blanchard was forced politely to reply that it was “out of his power to gratify their wishes, having brought with him from Europe only 4,200 weight of vitriolic acid, the quantity necessary to effect the ascension, once.” The last word was chosen well: there would be no second ascent—tickets had best be purchased immediately, while they lasted. Lest air-minded Philadelphians persist in their pleas, the aeronaut warned: “The additional quantity necessary to carry up a companion in this aerial journey could not be had in this city; and if it could, would cost at least 100 guineas, an expense which, in Europe, has always been defrayed by the person accompanying.”

Throughout all his preparations Blanchard maintained a gracious, though slightly condescending attitude toward prospective subscribers. “As many among us,” wrote a correspondent to the Federal Gazette, “would wish to follow you on horse-back, and yet would not wish to be absent from the spot of departure, inform us of the doors that will be opened, that we may know where to order our horses to stand.” Blanchard insisted that they had no need to worry: “If the day is calm there will be full time to leave the prison court without precipitation, as, in that case, I will ascend perpendicularly; but if the wind blows, permit me, gentlemen, to advise you not to attempt to keep up with me, especially in a country so intersected with rivers, and so covered with woods.”

This could only have added zest to the chase: the gentlemen and their horses would certainly be on hand.

Most Philadelphians were attracted by the suave and urbane mien of the daring Frenchman and seemed glad to be able to do what they could to help him. “We do not doubt,” wrote one who represented...

18 Federal Gazette, December 22, 1792.
19 National Gazette, January 2, 1793.
20 January 4, 1793.
21 Federal Gazette, January 5, 1793.
a "knot of admirers," "that you have already a respectable number of subscribers and that . . . the number will yet be increased, for no citizen in easy circumstances, to save five dollars, will deprive himself from viewing, at a small distance, a philosophical experiment so magnificent." Would it not be profitable, he continued, to set aside a number of less well-located places, however, at two dollars the ticket? "We can assure you it would give pleasure to many and especially to the heads of families, who having subscribed for themselves, would wish to procure the sight for their children."\(^{22}\) Blanchard was happy to comply. "By the calculation I have made, I find that the prison court will easily contain 4,800 persons, but that those who honor me with their attendance may be perfectly at ease, and see the operations preliminary [sic] to my ascension, without being incommode[d], I shall distribute 500 tickets for the first places, and 1,000 for the second."\(^{23}\)

When the morning of the great day arrived, crowds of curious townsfolk, an "immense conourse" of people, gathered about the jail yard, envious perhaps of those who had tickets to enter the enclosure and straining for a sight of the balloon as it rose over the fence top. Some, like canny Jacob Hiltzheimer, saw no reason to pay admission, but climbed instead to the roofs of neighboring buildings, to look over the barrier.\(^{24}\) Many more thronged the streets and fields. All of fashionable Philadelphia was there. When President Washington arrived with his party at nine, a salute of fifteen guns from the local artillery company welcomed him. Thereafter, every fifteen minutes until the time of the ascension, two guns roared over the heads of the crowd. Governor Mifflin presented the balloonist to the President, who in turn presented Blanchard with the following aerial passport:\(^{25}\)

To all to whom these presents shall come.

The bearer hereof, Mr. Blanchard, a citizen of France, proposing to ascend in a balloon from the city of Philadelphia at 10 A.M. this day to pass in such direction and to descend in such place as circumstances may render most convenient.


These are to recommend to all citizens of the United States and others that in his passage, descent, return, or journey elsewhere, they oppose no hindrance or molestation to the said Mr. Blanchard: and that on the contrary, they receive and aid him with that humanity and good will which may render honor to their country and justice to an individual so distinguished by his efforts to establish and advance his art in order to make it useful to all mankind.

The balloon was a magnificent affair of highly varnished yellow silk, meshed with strong ropes from which hung a car of spangled blue. At five minutes after ten, Blanchard, taking ceremonious leave of Washington, donned a fine cocked hat decorated with jaunty white feathers and sprang into the car. When he had thrown out ballast and the balloon began to ascend amid the cheering of spectators, the booming of cannon, and the spirited playing of a band, the aeronaut leaned, it seemed perilously far out from his car and waved vigorously the Stars and Stripes in one hand, the tricolor of France in the other. It was an occasion few Philadelphians would forget.

Yet some found it a profane performance, and "asserted that the aeronaut was intruding into regions where he had no business." Others, like John Adams, were alarmed at the Francophile aspect of public enthusiasm. "Blanchard," he said, "today is to set all the world upon a broad stare at his balloon." The Vice-President wished "H[amilton?], would make it an interlude and send him back to Europe." In New England, staunch Federalists scoffed at the ascension as a "cheap" performance. Republicans like Philip Freneau, however, rejoiced at the impression made by the Frenchman's daring. There was a deep-rooted seriousness beneath the former's apparently playful observation that "it would seem worth while to determine by a few experiments whether the human race if generated in the higher regions of the atmosphere would not partake

26 The best accounts of the ascension are in the American Daily Advertiser and the Federal Gazette, January 10, 1793, et seq.; but all the papers of Philadelphia were full of it for weeks. Archibald Henderson, in "Washington and Aeronautics," Duke University Archive, XLIV (May, 1932), 5-15, prints a letter written in Philadelphia on the day of the flight, by John Steele, Comptroller of the Treasury: "... Today a balloon about the size of a small hay stack went up with a man in it, for several miles in the air. ... I could not help trembling for his safety. As he was going up he took off his hat, and bowed to the bystanders, when about half a mile high, and from that to a mile high he waved his flag beautifully."

27 National Gazette, January 19, 1793.


29 "The Echo," American Mercury (Hartford), February 25, 1793.
of a more exalted nature, more inclined to virtue, and less to evil, than that which we now possess, and communicate, confined as we are to our woods and vallies." Then, breaking again into verse, Freneau addressed the balloonist:

```
By science taught, on silken wings
Beyond our groveling race you rise,
And soaring from terrestrial things
Explore a passage to the skies—
O, could I thus exalted sail,
And rise with you beyond the jail.
```

In spite of petty opposition, the ascension had been a public success. Nor was it without its scientific advantages. Blanchard had busied himself with careful experimentation as the balloon arose: "when he was at the height of 58 1/2 feet from the surface of the earth, he found from the mean result of several observations, 92 pulsations of the arteries in the space of a minute; whereas on the ground only 88 were observable at the same time." With a loadstone which on earth raised five pounds and a half, he was at this height able to lift scarcely four ounces. His highest elevation during the flight was, he estimated, "968 fathoms 4 feet; or 1 mile 532 feet." But, for all the flattering notices which appeared in all the Philadelphia newspapers, the ascension was a financial failure. Blanchard represented his expenses as five hundred dollars; tickets were sold, he reported, only to the extent of a little less than one fifth of that amount. Joseph Ravara, Consul General of Genoa in Philadelphia, set in motion a subscription to reimburse the aeronaut, but it fell far short of the mark. Governor Mifflin, "for the encouragement of science," allowed him to utilize a portion of a lot on Chestnut Street, above the New Theatre between Seventh and Eighth, for the construction of an "Aerostatical Laboratory." "M. Blanchard, we understand," said Freneau in the National Gazette, "does not mean to ascend [again], unless the subscription shall be such as to indemnify him for the expence; the last having fallen considerably short." Meanwhile, he

contented himself with exhibiting at his newly erected rotunda both
the balloon in which he had made his now celebrated American
ascension and another, even larger, similar to that in which he had
crossed the English Channel eight years before.32

Soon, however, he began to advertise a second American ascension,
his forty-sixth aerial flight, to be made accompanied by his patron,
Mr. Joseph Ravara. The "Superb Balloon, . . . the most volumi-
nous that ever was made, in Europe," would be "filled twice a day
with atmospheric air," at ten every morning, at two every afternoon.
Admission would be a quarter of a dollar.33 This time Blanchard
was going to be sure that he paid expenses beforehand. But hood-
lums—Federalists perhaps—threw stones from outside the rotunda
against the inflated balloon, injuring it so that the projected ascen-
sion could not then take place.34

The Frenchman, however, was not easily to be undone. On June 5
"the citizens of Philadelphia were entertained by an experiment in
natural philosophy, made by Mr. Blanchard with a parachute, or
falling screen." Three live animals, a dog, a cat, and a squirrel,
were sent up in a balloon to which was fastened a slow burning fuse,
which, after a certain time, would disengage the basket in which
they rode. The experiment was a success. The released balloon
fell into the Delaware. The parachute opened as the animals fell,
and deposited them slowly to the ground near Bush Hill. Again, a
"vaste concourse" of people attended, but again many of them
watched from street and hillside, not from within the rotunda where
an admission of fifty cents was demanded.35 Blanchard tried again
on June 17: this time the animals fell to the Friends' Burying Ground
on Arch Street.36 But again the public remained outside. Finally
on June 21 a third attempt was made, and this time it was a money-
maker. The rotunda was "handsomely filled." The air balloon was
inflated and in the air in four minutes' time—a record, Blanchard
announced. Three minutes later "the parachute detached itself, and

32 National Gazette, January 30, 1793.
33 Federal Gazette, May 7, 1793.
34 Scharf and Westcott, op. cit., I, 471.
35 Pennsylvania Journal, June 12, 1793. Blanchard had exhibited the parachute earlier,
at Rickett's Circus (see National Gazette, May 25, 1793), but apparently without a live cargo.
This exhibition was advertised as "the first of its kind in America."
36 Pennsylvania Journal, June 19, 1793.
it took it about a minute to reach the ground. The whole experiment succeeded completely."

Other performances followed at the rotunda on Chestnut Street as the aeronaut attempted to build up capital for another flight. Models of balloons and "philosophical equipment" were on display. Among them was a "wonderful carriage" propelled by an "automaton in the shape of an eagle chained to the tongue of the carriage and guided by the traveller." "Gentlemen who have dogs accustomed to the chase, are requested not to bring them along, as experience has shown that they may prove very dangerous to the Eagle, which imitates nature to perfection." Just what the vehicle was history does not tell, but it was said to travel "as fast as the best post-chaise," not only over highways but up mountain roads. Philadelphians responded with interest, if not with sufficient cash for a second ascension. "Mr. Blanchard," the Federal Gazette announced, "will make Experiments with his Balloon, and his carriage, running without horses, every day (Sundays excepted)."

Finally, in 1794, Blanchard advertised again for a public subscription: he would make his forty-sixth flight if he could procure the equipment necessary for filling his balloon with the proper amount of gas. But the equipment was not available. He declared that he would attempt no further aerial voyage in America "until the arts are brought to such perfection as to furnish him with the means necessary to success."

Philadelphia having failed him, he went to New York. There he found no greater success. A severe windstorm on September 14, 1796, leveled the building in which his equipment was housed. "The

38 Pennsylvania Journal, August 24, 1793.
39 Federal Gazette, August 24, 1793.
40 August 28, 1793.
41 Scharf and Westcott, op. cit., I, 472.
42 On leaving Philadelphia Blanchard had apparently first gone to Charleston, South Carolina, where advertisements for a public flight are found in the newspapers early in 1794. See Eola Willis, The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century (Columbia, S. C, 1924), 244. Blanchard announced in the New-York Daily Advertiser, August 6, 1794, that unless he received more than the "small encouragement" there accorded him, he would quit the city; on August 20, however, he advertised in the Minerua that he had been prevailed upon to attempt in New York an ascension to "Aerial Regions." For an account of the aeronaut's subsequent activities in New York, see George C. D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage (New York, 1927), I, 365; 366, 422, 440.
balloon which at the time was inflated, is much injured, perhaps irreparably,” noted young Alexander Anderson, who visited the scene on the next day. “Mr. Blanchard, luckily quitted the building just before the fall. He was almost inconsolable, on account of so fatal a blow, which frustrates one of the grandest experiments ever exhibited in this city.”

Many years later, Philip Freneau published “Stanzas Addressed Several Years Ago to Mr. Blanchard, the Celebrated Aeronaut in America.” Your journeyings, he suggested now to the balloonist, are premature. Why yearn to leave this “world of little things,” the “fogs that round us rise,” for aerial heights beyond the ken of man? Wait, be patient, let the death to which all men must bow decide, in its time, to what regions of the ether you will travel. Then perhaps you will find in Nature’s heavens a “more sublime, enchanting scene” than you ever realized or poets ever invented. Everything will come in its turn: why hurry Nature in her course? Freneau perhaps represented the attitude of many of his conservative contemporaries as he warned:

But you ambitious, have design’d
With silk to soar above mankind;—
On silk you mount your splendid car
And mount towards the morning star.

How can you be so careless—gay:
Would you amidst red lightnings play;
Meet sulphurous blasts, and fear them not—
Is Phaeton’s sad fate forgot?

43 MS Alexr Anderson’s Diary 1796, Columbia University Library, p. 221. New York, inspired perhaps by Blanchard’s successful flight in Philadelphia, had been very much interested in balloon ascensions during 1793 and 1794 (see Odell, op. cit., Index under “Balloons,” and MS Diarium Commentarium Vitae Alex. Anderson, Columbia University Library, 1793 passim), but had apparently not yet witnessed a man-bearing ascension.


45 Some years before pro-British Joseph Dennie, in The Port-Folio, II (October 16, 1802), 322, had given what was apparently meant as the coup de grâce to ballooning in America when he said, “It might be imagined that the age of Aeronauts was passed, and that even a French head would not be giddy enough to thrust itself into a Balloon after those fragile vehicles had reeled and tumbled among the clouds, to the disgrace of the new Philosophy. But notwithstanding the vain flights of Blanchard, and the fatal fall [in France in 1785] of P. Rozier, it seems the Lunar project of soaring to the skies is not yet relinquished.”
During the next fifty years ballooning maintained in America its share of popularity. Fourth of July exhibitions and county fairs were seldom without their daring and often posturing aeronauts. Balloons of fantastic shapes and filled with colored lights were a familiar part of pyrotechnique displays at such amusement centers as the Vauxhall Gardens in New York. Sometimes adventurous laymen were even allowed trial flights in captive balloons. P. T. Barnum, never to be outdone, featured public ascensions at his newly opened American Gardens in 1842. Flights were made in Baltimore, in Boston, in Charleston. "In many of the towns of the interior," complained the Philadelphia Ledger, "ascensions of balloons are taking place, lives are lost, and new men, after not more than one or two ascents with others, set up on their own account . . . . We doubt if for mere amusement any such ascensions should be countenanced." But, in spite of conservative opinion of this sort, ballooning continued. Lighter-than-air craft were considered for military use in both the Seminole and the Mexican wars, and were used by the Union and the Confederate armies during the Civil War. Again, it was Pennsylvania which took a prominent part, as John Wise of Lancaster pioneered in experimentation and achievement. In 1859 he made a non-stop flight from St. Louis to Henderson, New York. In 1873 he projected a flight across the Atlantic Ocean. But this later story has been excellently told. Jean Pierre Blanchard in Philadelphia had laid the groundwork well.

*Duke University*  
LEWIS LEARY

47 October 5, 1859.  
48 By F. Stansbury Haydon in *Aeronautics in the Union and Confederate Armies, with a Survey of Military Aeronautics prior to 1861* (Johns Hopkins, 1941).