Jefferson and Franklin

With the exception of Washington and Lincoln, no two men in American history have had more books written about them or have been more widely discussed than Jefferson and Franklin. This is particularly true of Jefferson, who seems to have succeeded in having not only bitter critics but also admiring friends. In any event, anything that can be contributed to the understanding of their lives is important; if, however, something is discovered that affects them both, it has a twofold significance. It is for this reason that I wish to direct attention to a paragraph in Jefferson's "Anas."

As may not be generally understood, the "Anas" were simply notes written by Jefferson contemporaneously with the events described and revised eighteen years later. For this unfortunate name, the simpler title "Jeffersoniana" might well have been substituted. Curiously enough there is nothing in Jefferson's life which has been more severely criticized than these "Anas." Morse, a great admirer of Jefferson, takes occasion to say: "Most unfortunately for his own good fame, Jefferson allowed himself to be drawn by this feud into the preparation of the famous 'Anas.' His friends have hardly dared to undertake a defense of those terrible records."

1 John T. Morse, Jr., Thomas Jefferson (American Statesmen Series, Boston, 1883), 109.

I am not at all in accord with these conclusions. As with other historical biographies, notably Henderson's Stonewall Jackson, we frequently have to go out of our own country to get an unbiased picture. Let us turn therefore to an English historian and note the value that he places on the "Anas." It is too long to quote in full but let me draw your attention to this sentence: "Far from condemning the 'Anas,' I wish that Jefferson and his contemporaries had left us not less but
more of social and political table talk."^4 Personally, I agree with Hirst and am not in sympathy with the general criticism of the "Anas" as I feel they are a distinct contribution to history.

The fact that Jefferson frequently criticized Hamilton and, occasionally, Washington certainly is not unusual. He spent a number of years fighting Hamilton, and has expressed his opinion of Washington in his letter to Philip Mazzei. If he had said scurrilous things about either of them, there might have been some slight reason for criticism. He never once referred to Hamilton's various peccadilloes or his affair with Mrs. Reynolds. One reference in the "Anas" to the Secretary of the Treasury certainly was not unduly critical: "of acute understanding, disinterested, honest and honorable in all private transactions, amiable in society, and duly valuing virtue in private life, yet so bewitched and perverted by the British example as to be under thorough conviction that corruption was essential to the government of a nation." And he criticized Washington only indirectly for his aristocratic tendencies.

It is also claimed that the three manuscript volumes comprising the "Anas" which repose in the Library of Congress were revised eighteen years after the events happened and so must be incorrect. This does not necessarily follow for, inasmuch as Jefferson was undoubtedly emending them for publication, it is probable that he deleted anything that was questionable.\(^5\) To my way of thinking there is no better way of obtaining a picture of the first two administrations of our country than through these notes by Jefferson, although I agree with Mr. Hirst that it is unfortunate that the author saw fit to delete any part of them. To draw the proper conclusion, compare the "Anas" with Pepys, Evelyn, or Greville, all of whom are read with the greatest of interest.

With these preliminary remarks on the controversial nature of this source material, let us turn to the paragraph in the "Anas" which I wish to bring to your attention. It is dated February 26, 1793, and reads as follows:\(^6\)

The Presidt [Washington] at this meeting mentd the declaration of some person in a paper of Fenno\(^7\) that he would commence an attack on the character of Dr.

^4 Francis W. Hirst, Life and Letters of Thomas Jefferson (New York, 1926), 266.
^5 For further details, see Henry S. Randall, Life of Thomas Jefferson (Philadelphia, 1863), II, 26.
^6 Paul Leicester Ford, Thomas Jefferson (Boston, 1904), 239.
^7 Gazette of the United States, February 23, 1793.
Franklin; he said the theme was to him excessively disagreeable on other considerations, but most particularly so as the party seemed to do it as a means of defending him [the President] against the late attacks on him, & he wished it could be stopped. Hamilton and E. R. (Edmund Randolph) undertook to speak to Fenno to suppress it, without mentioning it as the President's wish. Both observed that they had heard this declamatory in many companies & that it had excited universal horror & detestation.

The paper in Fenno must lie between two persons, viz. Adams & Izard, because they are the only persons who could know such facts as are there promised to be unfolded. Adams is an enemy to both characters, and might choose this ground as an effectual position to injure both. Izard hated Franklin with unparalleled bitterness but humbly adores the President, because he is in loco regis. If the paper proceeds, we shall easily discover which of these two gentlemen is the champion. In the meantime the first paper leads our suspicions more towards Izard than Adams from the circumstance of style, and because he is quite booby enough not to see the injury he would do to the President by such a mode of defense.

First reading of this paragraph aroused my curiosity, but on investigation I found that no library in the Philadelphia area had a copy of the *Gazette of the United States* for that date. Not long ago, when rereading the "Anas," I determined to carry my investigation to a conclusion and procured a transcript of the article in the *Gazette of the United States* from the files of the New York Public Library. It reads as follows:

**GAZETTE OF THE UNITED STATES**

(No. 77 of Vol. IV) Saturday, February 23, 1793 (Whole No. 399)

*To the Printer of the General Advertiser.*

*Mr. Bache,*

By whom all the publications in your paper, designed to insult the President of the United States are written, is of little consequence, since the causes of that spleen which prompts you to publish them with so much avidity is perfectly known.

*The Gazette of the United States* was started by John Fenno of Boston in 1789, and when Congress removed to Philadelphia in 1790 Fenno moved with it. Originally called the *United States Gazette,* it was the principal Federalist political organ, expressing the views of Hamilton and his friends. Fenno died of the yellow fever in 1798, the same year in which died Benjamin Bache of *Aurora* fame. His son, John Ward Fenno, succeeded him on the paper.

*The General Advertiser,* which later became the *Aurora,* was started by Benjamin Franklin Bache in October, 1790. This and Freneau's *National Gazette,* started in 1790, were the principal organs of the anti-Federalists.

*Benjamin Franklin Bache,* son of Richard Bache and Sarah Franklin Bache, was the grandson of Benjamin Franklin who had started him in his newspaper career. Bache was an ardent anti-Federalist and took particular delight in publishing disagreeable items about Washington and Hamilton.
If your venerable Grandsire views from his abode the mockery of Patriotism exhibited in your paper, it may console him for the follies which He committed, the servility and sychophancy He practised at the court of France; and for the disappointment He met with in not being able to place an idle sing song at the head of the Post-Office. But nothing can efface from the minds of free Americans, the infamously disgraceful Consular Convention he made with France and which, though on the remonstrance of Congress, it has been somewhat amended; yet still contains enough of its first principles to strip the boasted laurel from the brow of Franklin, and stamp indelible disgrace on American negotiation.

But, Mr. Bache, since your venerable Grandsire is made a competitor for Fame with Washington, I will hereafter furnish you some anecdotes of his career at the court of Versailles, which will more fully unfold the justice of his claim to admiration, for his patriotic and disinterested conduct.

In none of the Franklin or Jefferson biographies or in any other book I have read is there the slightest allusion to these minutiae. The allusion to "an idle sing song" is bothersome, as I can find no reference to Franklin’s trying to place anyone in the post office. In the early days he refused to put his nephew, Benjamin Mecom, in charge of the Boston post office because he would not ask the incumbent to resign. It would seem likely that he would have been glad to get the position for William Temple Franklin, whom Congress had refused to help much to Franklin’s disappointment. The reference is more probably to his son-in-law Richard Bache. The following appears in a letter from Ebeneezer Hazard to Jeremiah Belknap of New Hampshire in speaking of his not being reappointed Postmaster General:

New York, September 27, 1789. . . . A friend in Congress intimated that I was in danger of losing my office, and advised me to bestir myself. My friends were to be informed, and urged to exertions, to prevent the success of three competitors; viz., Mr. Bache, of Philadelphia (Dr. Franklin’s son-in-law), who had been removed from the same office before, for neglect of duty (he had Mr. Robert Morris’s interest to support him); Mr. Tench Coxe, of Philadelphia, who publicly and cordially huzza’d in the streets when General Howe took possession of that city; and Colonel William Smith (son-in-law to the Vice-President), who had his father-in-law’s merit and services to plead in his favour.14

11 Benjamin Franklin had died April 17, 1790, at the age of eighty-four.
12 This apparently alludes to his friendship for Vergenne, the French Foreign Minister.
13 I presume this refers to the often-repeated statement that Washington and Franklin together won the American Revolution; Washington in the field, and Franklin in diplomacy. However, this allusion is obviously most unfair because there was never a more modest man than Franklin.
14 The Belknap Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, Series V, volumes 2 and 3, Boston, 1877), Part II, 190.
In any event, none of these candidates secured the position, which was given to Major Samuel Osgood of Massachusetts who had the honor of being first Postmaster General under the Constitution.

The reference to the Treaty with France of 1778 is almost positive evidence that Izard wrote the article. Although the Congress signed the two treaties with France (Treaty of Amity and Commerce and Treaty of Alliance), they recommended to the Commissioners—Franklin, Deane, and Arthur Lee—that they try to get articles eleven and twelve expunged. These articles referred to the duty on molasses. Ralph Izard of South Carolina had been much offended because Franklin would not consult him about the treaties or, as a matter of fact, even show him the final draft, and when Izard and Lee wished to have these articles removed, Franklin refused to change them. Franklin often said he had only two enemies in the world, Arthur Lee and Ralph Izard.15

I think there can be not the slightest doubt of the correctness of Jefferson's guess that the author was Izard. Adams, although no friend of Franklin, was too high-minded and honest ever to defame someone who was dead. Furthermore, Adams much to his chagrin had little to do with the French treaties, nor any particular interest in them. That Jefferson did not accuse Arthur Lee and Izard, instead of Adams and Izard, of the authorship, is surprising. If Washington had not stopped the whole thing, Arthur Lee would no doubt have had something to say. It is pleasant to think of the stern, cold Washington expressing a desire that an attack on the character of Dr. Franklin be suppressed.

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15 For further information on this point, see Francis Wharton, editor, The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States (Washington, 1889, 6 vols.), I, passim.