Dr. Franklin Meets Dr. Johnson

While serving in London as agent for the American colonies, Benjamin Franklin met various prominent Englishmen. Several of his friends were also intimates of Dr. Samuel Johnson. Both men, for instance, knew William Strahan, the printer, John Hawkesworth, the writer, Dr. William Heberden, and that curious-minded and sociable Scot, James Boswell. Altogether Franklin spent about fifteen years in London between 1757 and 1775. Like Dr. Johnson, he was a member of various clubs, he enjoyed the company of women, and he believed in keeping friendship in repair by constantly broadening the circle of his intimates. Thus, there is nothing strange in the fact that these two distinguished men shared many acquaintances, especially at a time when scholars and writers formed a rather distinct group. What has seemed remarkable to students of the period is that no one has been able to prove that Franklin and Johnson knew each other. Boswell, despite his fondness for bringing people together, never mentions an occasion when both were present, and neither Franklin nor Johnson ever refers to the other as an acquaintance. Since other sources seemed equally lacking in evidence, many have concluded that these two remarkable men were probably never in each other's company.

This opinion can now be rejected. Franklin and Johnson definitely did meet upon at least one occasion. In fact, they both held membership in an eighteenth-century society which, though almost forgotten, included several prominent Englishmen. The nature of this society, the meeting between Franklin and Johnson, and the part each played in the organization will be described in this paper.

The society to which Franklin and Johnson belonged was called the Associates of Dr. Bray. It was one of several semireligious, benevolent organizations that came into existence during a century noted for its philanthropies. It differed from most societies of the time in that it was formed to perpetuate the work of one man. Its founder, the Reverend Thomas Bray (1656-1730), had become inter-
ested in the first of his philanthropic projects shortly after his appointment in 1695 to assist the governor of Maryland in the maintenance of clergymen in that colony. In selecting missionaries to serve abroad, Bray was disturbed to find that most of them were too poor to provide themselves with libraries. To supply them with religious literature, he began soliciting donations of books. After a short time in Maryland, he returned to England, where he undertook the ambitious project of supplying books not only to the colonial clergy, but also to many English parishes. So successful were these endeavors that during his lifetime he sent upwards of 34,000 books and tracts to America, besides establishing eighty-three catechetical libraries in Great Britain.  

Bray also became interested in a plan to educate and convert Negroes in the American colonies. This project won the support of Mr. Abel Tassin D'Allone, once secretary to William III. To help finance schools for Negroes, D'Allone established a fund of nine hundred pounds and made a further provision for this charity in his will. As administrator of this endowment, Bray saw the importance of naming responsible persons to carry on his work after his death. Hence, in 1723, he appointed a group known as “Dr. Bray's Associates for Founding Clerical Libraries and Supporting Negro Schools.” The most distinguished of the early members was James Oglethorpe, founder of Georgia, whom Bray had met through their common interest in the plight of British prisoners.  

After Bray's death in 1730, the society continued to further his philanthropies. New members joined from time to time, but at no period did it become a large organization. In 1767 it had fifty-four members, about half of whom were clergymen. The Associates paid an annual fee of a guinea, and these dues, added to the income from invested funds and occasional contributions, enabled the society to conduct its charities on a modest scale.  

Rather full information about the Associates is found in two sources, the occasional printed reports and the manuscript Minute

1 An Account of the Designs of the Associates of the Late Dr. Bray (London, 1767), 21.
2 Edgar L. Pennington, Thomas Bray's Associates and Their Work Among the Negroes (Worcester, Mass., 1939).
3 Account . . . of the Associates.
Books of the organization. Monthly meetings were held at Mr. Bird's bookshop in Ave Mary Lane. Generally not more than eight or ten members were present. During the year 1760 the most regular attendants were Joseph Waring, who served as secretary, the Reverend John Berriman, the Reverend John Burton, Fellow of Eton College, and Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin's election to the society had occurred on January 2, 1760. At this meeting it was decided to fix the first Thursday of the month as the regular date for future gatherings. Before adjourning, however, the members agreed to hold a special session on January 17 to consider the founding of additional schools for Negroes, and the secretary was instructed to consult Mr. Franklin beforehand about the project.

When the Associates convened on January 17, Franklin was on hand. They had undoubtedly wanted him as a member because of his knowledge of America, and at this meeting he showed his familiarity with the situation in various colonies. Up to this time, the only Negro school supported by the society was one that had been established in Philadelphia in 1758. Franklin now proposed that the Associates found schools at Williamsburg, Virginia, in New York, and at Newport, Rhode Island. He also knew people in these communities who might serve to get the schools started. At Williamsburg, he suggested postmaster William Hunter, the Reverend Mr. Dawson, President of William and Mary College, and the minister of the local church. For New York he named the American Samuel Johnson, President of King's College, the Reverend Henry Barclay, and the Reverend Samuel Auchmuty, the rector and the assistant minister of Trinity Church. At Newport he mentioned the Reverend Mr. Pollen. The other Associates at the meeting agreed to Franklin's suggestions and asked him to write to these Americans about the project.

Franklin attended the two following meetings of the society, on February 7 and March 6. Upon the latter occasion the Associates paid him the honor of naming him their chairman for the ensuing

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4 The Minute Books are in the London Archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Photofilm reproductions have been made for the Library of Congress. In this paper all references to meetings between January, 1760, and May 5, 1768, are from Minute Book I. Later references are from Minute Book II.
year. He was not present on April 6, however, when the Reverend John Burton, occupying the chair, "recommended Samuel Johnson, M.A., as a proper person to be an Associate." The others promptly cast a ballot unanimously electing Dr. Johnson to their society.

Although the Minutes of the next meeting record only routine business, historically it was the most important session of the Associates. For here at Mr. Bird's in Ave Mary Lane, on May 1, 1760, Benjamin Franklin and Dr. Johnson met. Possibly they had been in each other's company before this date. Very likely they saw each other on later occasions. But that they met at least once, on May 1, 1760, we may be certain.\(^5\) Like most of the monthly meetings, this one was attended by only a few members. Altogether there were only eight present. Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that the two men should be introduced, if they had not met before. Furthermore, since they constituted two of a company of eight, they probably conversed with each other.

Unfortunately the secretary did not keep verbatim reports, and one can only speculate upon the nature of the discussion that may have ensued between these stalwart individualists. As the American Revolution would prove, their political views were in many respects irreconcilable. And if they had probed very deeply into each other's religious beliefs, the orthodox Dr. Johnson would have been disappointed to find that his American acquaintance was virtually a deist. Nevertheless, they shared many tastes—a seasoned delight in the conversation of others, a gusto for traveling and visiting new scenes, a curiosity that led each to perform scientific experiments. Both men were intellectual giants, towering above most of their contemporaries in wisdom, and excelling all but a few in understanding the culture of their own day. The fact that they were fellow members of a society dedicated to improving the lot of the Negro seems particularly significant. History has credited each with various accomplishments, but posterity will perhaps remember them longest for their strong and selfless humanitarianism.

The other Associates present on May 1, 1760, were: the Reverend John Berriman, the Reverend Dr. John Burton, the Reverend John

\[^5\] The Minutes of each meeting are headed by the names of those who attended. Both Johnson and Franklin are so listed on May 1, 1760.
Waring, Joseph Waring, a Mr. Jones and a Mr. Dixon. The most interesting item of business was the reading of a letter from Mr. Sturgeon, supervisor of the Negro school in Philadelphia. He wrote that eleven boys and twenty-four girls were enrolled. All were receiving instruction in reading and religion, and the girls were learning needlework. The Associates also heard a report on their lending library at Bampton, Westmoreland, and, before adjourning, voted to establish a library at Landaff.

After this one appearance, Johnson never again attended a business session of the society, according to the Minutes. Nevertheless, he remained a subscriber, and, as we shall see, he later contributed substantially to its funds.

Although the meeting of May 1, 1760, was the only regular session of the society jointly attended by both men, Franklin and Johnson may have met again at one of the annual dinners of the Associates. The custom of holding an annual dinner was instituted in May, 1761. The members dined at their own cost, usually at the Mitre Tavern in Fleet Street. Special invitations were issued to all subscribers. Although there is no record of the attendance, presumably these gatherings attracted a much larger representation than the monthly meetings. Franklin definitely attended some of the dinners, and Johnson, with his taste for sociability, would certainly have welcomed an occasion at which he could dine and discourse at large with various friends. If he was present at the dinner held in May, 1761, for instance, he would have met, besides Franklin, two of his most esteemed intimates, William Strahan and Dr. William Heberden.6

Franklin continued to be a leading light in the organization.7 Altogether he attended eight of the regular meetings in 1760. He was present only five times the next year, but the Associates did not convene during the summer months, since he and Secretary Waring were both away from London. In March, 1761, his fellow members named him their chairman for a second term. Meanwhile, the society received encouraging reports from America. Franklin's correspondents in Williamsburg, New York, and Newport responded to his

6 At the regular meeting in June, 1761, it was reported that Strahan had paid a guinea and that Dr. Heberden had given Franklin three guineas for the society at the dinner held in May.
7 For a detailed account of Franklin's part in the society, see Richard I. Shelling, "Benjamin Franklin and the Dr. Bray Associates," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXIII (1939), 282-293.
appeal, and each of these communities eventually established a Negro school for about thirty children.

Franklin was now planning to return to Philadelphia for a visit. After presiding at the January and March meetings of the society, he attended no further sessions in 1762. In August, he sailed for America, where he was to remain until the end of 1764. During this visit he devoted considerable time to inspecting post offices in different colonies. These trips gave him the opportunity to visit several of the Negro schools, and he faithfully reported his observations to the Associates in London. In a letter of June 27, 1763, he informed them that he had found the school at Williamsburg, Virginia, conducted in a satisfactory manner. He also expressed his intention of inspecting the schools in New York, at Newport, Rhode Island, and in Philadelphia.8

His next letter provides an interesting account of the Negro school in his home city. The report, as recorded in the Minutes of February 2, 1764, reads as follows:

Read a letter from Benj Franklin, Esq., LLd. of Philadelphia dated Dec 17, 1763, wherein he says that he, Mr. Sturgeon, & some others visited the Negro School and had the Children thoroughly examined. They appeared, he says, all to have made considerable Progress in reading for the Time they had respectively been at School & most of them answered readily and well the Questions of the Catechism. They Behaved very orderly, showed a proper Respect and ready Obedience to their Mistress & seemed very attentive to and a good deal affected by a serious Exhortation, with which Mr. Sturgeon concluded our Visit. I am on the whole pleased, says he, & from what I there saw have conceived a higher Opinion of the natural Capacities of the Black Race than I had ever before entertained. Their Apprehension seems as quick, their Memory as strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of white Children.

Franklin returned to England in December, 1764, but, according to the Minutes, did not attend a meeting of the society until October 2, 1766. His presence on this occasion had probably been specifically requested. In July, the Associates had learned that the Reverend Mr. Abbot Upcher of Sudbury, Suffolk, had offered to invest a sum of money in lands in America and to allocate the income to the society's program of educating Negro children.9 Naturally the other members

8 Meeting of October 6, 1763.
9 Upcher originally proposed investing 1,000 pounds with the understanding that the estate should be settled upon the Church in America when episcopacy was established there. From later Minutes it appears that this plan was changed. He actually gave the society 500 pounds, which remained in its possession.
would want Franklin's advice on such a matter. The Minutes do not reveal the specific nature of the discussion, but before adjourning the Associates asked Franklin to write to Upcher. Complying with this request, Franklin wrote the clergyman on October 4, 1766, "I think the best Province to make the Purchase in is Pennsylvania, where titles are generally clear." He particularly favored Philadelphia, and suggested that three Americans be empowered to purchase "Ground Rents within that City and other safe & profitable Estate in or near the same, as Bargains may offer." When Franklin next appeared at a meeting, on May 7, 1767, negotiations with Upcher had reached such a point that the Associates now asked Franklin to proceed with the purchase of land in Pennsylvania. For one reason or another, however, the actual investment in an estate was delayed for several years.

Franklin was next present at the meetings of January 7 and February 4, 1768, when the Associates decided to support schools in Bermuda. But the routine business of determining where to found the next school, or where in England to send the next parcel of books must have palled on anyone as busy as Franklin. Three years passed before he attended another meeting. When he did, on March 7, 1771, the chief item on the calendar was the reading of a letter from the Reverend Mr. Lyttleton of Bermuda, who reported that "he had discharged the Mistress of the first School for having received a Company of Jugglers into her home."

More important business ensued when Franklin next appeared at the society. Apparently he had asked two American acquaintances to report on opportunities to purchase real estate in Philadelphia. One of these men was Edward Duffield; the other was Francis Hopkinson, who in a few years would become one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. These gentlemen now recommended that the Associates buy a tract in the city of Philadelphia, having a frontage of 136 feet on Market Street and running along Ninth Street to a depth of 360 feet. With Franklin present, the members discussed this proposal at their meeting of September 2, 1773. They finally decided to purchase this plot of land, for which they eventually paid 575 pounds Sterling.  


11 The lot is later described as being bound by Market, Ninth, Filbert and Tenth Streets. See Minutes, May 19, 1774, September 1, 1774, and January 8, 1787.
Franklin had now attended his last meeting of the society. In these busy days on the eve of the American Revolution, first things came first. When he left England in March, 1775, he returned to America to help found a new nation. Even before the outbreak of the Revolution, the society’s school at Fredericksburg, Virginia, had failed because of the opposition of the slave owners, and the school in New York had closed when the mistress died. With a war in progress, Dr. Bray’s schools on the American mainland came to an end, although the schools in Bermuda continued for a while and the society later supported schools for Negroes in Nova Scotia. The Associates also experimented with the education of poor children at home, chiefly at Kingswood, Gloucestershire, and in the Scilly Islands, but these ventures never amounted to much.

Franklin still had one more service to perform for the society. At the conclusion of the American Revolution, Francis Hopkinson informed the Associates that their land in Philadelphia had lain idle for several years. In further correspondence he reported that the lot could be rented at favorable terms. The Associates finally agreed to this suggestion and empowered Hopkinson and Franklin to lease the plot. In acceptance of this appointment Franklin wrote the secretary the following letter:

Philadelp. June 3, 1786

Sir,

I received duly the Letters you wrote to me of Oct. 4, 1785 and April 4th 1786. Being much occup’d I referr’d the first to Mr. Hopkinson, who I suppose has written to you. This serves to acknowledge the Receipt of the Power of Attorney enabling us to lease the Ground belonging to the Associates, and to assure you that my best Assistance therein shall not be wanting.—With great Esteem for the Society, I am

Sir

Your most obedient
humble Servant

B. Franklin

Shortly thereafter, Hopkinson reported that he had divided the land in Philadelphia into lots. He had leased one of these with a twenty-five-foot frontage on Market Street for twenty-five pounds a year and expected, when the other lots were leased, that the entire tract would yield the Associates the annual sum of 250 pounds in American currency. The investment which Franklin had helped to negotiate proved in the end a profitable one.

12 Minutes, September 11, 1786.
During the American Revolution, Dr. Bray's society went through a period of stagnation. Meetings were infrequent, and sometimes only two or three members were present. The organization began to recover its vitality with the end of the war. General Oglethorpe, one of the original Associates appointed by Dr. Bray, had attended only one meeting between 1760 and 1783. Thereafter, however, this hale old warrior, who had been born in 1696, made up for his earlier delinquency by frequent participation. He made his last appearance at the society on June 6, 1785, three weeks before his death. As the older generation died off, new members took their places. Among the new subscribers were two of Johnson's younger friends, Bennet Langton, who joined on July 7, 1783, and the Reverend George Strahan, who became an Associate on May 27, 1784.

Although Johnson did not attend the monthly meetings, he had continued to be a subscriber from the time of his election to the society. Probably he felt that others were more capable of making the decisions. But there can be no doubt about his genuine interest in the two aims of the Associates. He had once said that "the qualifications of a minister are well known to be learning and piety." How could one better encourage these essentials than by the establishment of parochial libraries? He must have favored even more the society's program to educate and christianize the Negro. Always a stalwart Christian, he particularly condemned the failure of the plantation owners to be concerned about the salvation of their slaves. His views on this subject were well expressed in a letter he wrote in 1766: "Christianity is the highest perfection of humanity; and as no man is good but as he wishes the good of others, no man can be good in the highest degree, who wishes not to others the largest measures of the greatest good. To omit for a year, or for a day, the most efficacious method of advancing Christianity, in compliance with any purposes that terminate on this side of the grave, is a crime of which I know not that the world has yet had an example, except in the practice of the planters of America, a race of mortals whom, I suppose, no other man wishes to resemble."

Johnson's interest in the Associates of Dr. Bray was further revealed by his contributions. The Minutes for May 27, 1784, note that

14 Ibid., 27.
he had recently made the organization a gift of ten guineas. Shortly before his death, at the end of that year, he again demonstrated his esteem for the society. Although he did not mention it in his final will, he provided that it should receive the royalties from the first edition of his posthumously published prayers. The execution of this bequest was left to George Strahan, to whom he entrusted the manuscript. Strahan mentions the provision briefly in his preface to *Prayers and Meditations*: “Dr. Bray’s Associates are to receive the profits of the first edition by the Author’s appointment, and any further advantages that accrue will be distributed among his relatives.”

The proceeds of the first edition amounted to forty-seven pounds, seven shillings, two pence. This sum made Johnson one of the chief benefactors of the Associates of Dr. Bray.

It is interesting to observe that at one time Johnson had apparently intended to leave the society a still larger amount. His final will, which George Strahan and John Hawkins helped him to execute, was drawn up on December 8, 1784, with a codicil attached the following day. This final document provided that Johnson’s Negro servant, Francis Barber, should receive the bulk of his estate and become his residual heir. But Johnson had made an earlier will, on November 27, 1784. Here the only provision for Barber had been an annuity of seventy pounds. The earlier will differed from the final one in another rather remarkable way. According to John Hawkins, “The residue of his estate and effects, which took in, though he intended it not, the house at Lichfield, he bequeathed to his executors in trust for a religious association, which it is needless to describe.”

The organization which Hawkins chose not to name was probably the Associates of Dr. Bray. As we have seen, Johnson had long been a member of this society, and it is the only one for which he provided in disposing of his estate. Strahan does not say just when Johnson stipulated that the Associates should have the profits from his book, but it was probably about the time he changed his will. Although the society received a smaller sum from the first edition of *Prayers and Meditations* than it might have received under the terms of the first

15 *Prayers and Meditations Composed by Samuel Johnson* (London, 1785), vi.
16 Minutes, March 26, 1787.
17 Hill and Powell, IV, 402 ff. (note 2).
will, the designation of the royalties shows that Johnson was determined that the Associates should have some part of his estate.

If he had lived a few years longer, Johnson's strong aversion to the institution of slavery might have led him to take part in the abolitionist movement that developed in England shortly after his death. Probably the plight of the Negro was in his mind when he left a large part of his estate to his colored servant and a smaller amount to a society for improving the lot of the Negro. The aged Franklin, back in Philadelphia after serving as ambassador to France, also had the welfare of the Negro close at heart. In 1787 this most distinguished American of his time became president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and in 1789, a month before his death, he wrote his final essay On The Slave Trade. One may regret that these two great men who had so much in common did not become better acquainted. Yet it is gratifying to know that they met at least once, on May 1, 1760, as fellow members of a society dedicated to a humanitarian purpose.

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19 Carl Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1938), 774-775.