

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Tribute to John Bartram, With a Note on Jacob Engelbrecht

A COPY OF Benjamin Franklin's edition of Cicero's *Cato Major* was sold at auction in New York in 1937.¹ Though it was not one of the first impression, with the oft-remarked misspelling of "only" as "ony" on page 27, and though its pages had been cropped, the book brought a good price. This was partly because there was laid in the volume what the sales catalogue described as "an autograph transcript by Benjamin Franklin of an imitation of Horace's famous Ode 22, 'Integer Vitae . . .,' which was given to Franklin by the author, who was in all probability James Logan, the classical scholar who translated this edition of 'Cato Major.'" The verses, which are a tribute to John Bartram, were reproduced in the catalogue in facsimile:

Given by the Author
to his Friend B Franklin

Horace, Ode 22. Lib. 1. Integer vitae, &c.

Imitated.

Whose Life is upright, innocent and harmless
Needs not, O Bartram, arm himself with Weapons;
Useless to him, the Sword, the venom'd Shaft, or
Murdering Musket.

Thus when thou'rt journeying tow'rd's wild Onondago,
O'er pathless Mountains, Nature's Works exploring,
Or thro' vast Plains where rowls his mighty Waters
Fam'd Missisipi;

¹ American Art Association—Anderson Galleries, Sale No. 4323 (Apr. 22–23, 1937), item 58. The sale was of the library of George Allison Armour; the item was purchased by Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach.

included Franklin, and that Franklin asked the author for a copy. How that copy got into George Allison Armour's copy of *Cato Major* in 1937 they would not even guess.

Here the Franklin editors let the matter rest: the verses were not Franklin's, their interest was only incidental. Some weeks later, however, additional light was thrown on Breintnall's poem by the discovery in the National Archives, in a box of papers relating to the purchase of Henry Stevens' Franklin Collection by the United States government, of typed copies of two letters from President James Madison to one Jacob Engelbrecht.⁶ In one of these Madison quoted the whole of Breintnall's verses. The problem had now obviously become one which only the knowledge and resources of Madison's editors could solve. To its solution they have brought four letters from Engelbrecht to Madison and drafts of four from Madison to Engelbrecht, all in the Library of Congress.

Jacob Engelbrecht was a citizen of Frederick, Maryland, where he was born in 1797. From a youth he was interested in history, kept a diary, and collected materials about his home town.⁷ About 1824 he conceived the idea of collecting letters of famous Americans, especially of the dwindling number of Revolutionary patriots and signers of the Declaration of Independence.⁸ He requested those to whom he wrote to pen some instructive or edifying sentiment which, discreetly withheld from the public's gaze during the writer's lifetime, might be exhibited as an inspiration to posterity. Thomas Jefferson, for example, acceded to Engelbrecht's request by copying out Psalm XV in Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate's version.⁹ John Adams, now eighty-nine years old, though he protested that he could "no more

⁶ "Papers relating to the Purchase of the Franklin Papers," Record Group 59, National Archives.

⁷ Jacob Engelbrecht (1797-1878) was later a member of the Frederick town council, tax collector, and mayor, 1865-1868. Throughout his life he collected "scraps of local history," and from 1819 he kept a diary of local occurrences (now in the C. Burr Artz Library in Frederick). J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland* (Philadelphia, 1882), I, 468; Dieter Cunz, *The Maryland Germans: A History* (Princeton, N. J., 1948), 291-292.

⁸ Though one of the earliest collectors of "Signers," Engelbrecht was not mentioned in Lyman C. Draper, "Autograph Collections of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, and of the Constitution," *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, X (1883-1885), 373-447.

⁹ Jefferson to Engelbrecht, Feb. 25, 1824, Library of Congress. We are grateful to Julian P. Boyd, editor of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, for copies of three Jefferson-Engelbrecht letters.

write a line than work a miracle," approved Jefferson's sentiments (Engelbrecht had sent him a copy of his friend's letter) in a note of characteristic tone, giving Engelbrecht the kind of autograph he wanted.¹⁰ The collector now sought letters of deceased American heroes. Judge Bushrod Washington sent him a letter of General Washington; and, encouraged by Jefferson's cordial response to his first request, Engelbrecht ventured to ask him for letters of Hancock, Franklin, Charles Thomson, or "any of the other gentlemen, who Signed the Declaration of Independence."¹¹ On September 5, 1825, Engelbrecht wrote former President Madison.

What he wanted, he explained in a respectful request like others he had sent, was "a Letter, in your own hand writing, which Letter, I wish to keep and preserve in honor of you, and after your death to have it neatly framed to preserve as a relick." The subject might be anything Madison chose. Engelbrecht assured Madison that his letter would not be "publicly exposed" until after the writer's death; and he reminded the former president to "let space at the margin, for framing."

Though he thought this request a "little singular," Madison replied in a friendly note six weeks later. (It was a typed copy of this response that reopened the subject of Breintnall's ode and led to the present collaboration of Franklin's and Madison's editors.) "As your object is to preserve for public view, at a posthumous day, the letter you wish me to write," Madison told Engelbrecht, "it ought to contain something worthy of such a purpose. To give it more of this character, than it might otherwise have, I transcribe a page in the handwriting of Doctor Franklin, prefixed to a copy of John Bartram's *Travels to the Lakes* published in 1751, which was purchased many years ago in a bundle of pamphlets, sold at auction. This little poetic effusion does not probably exist elsewhere; and it merits preservation, as well on account of its author, as of its moral improvement on the original ode." Madison then copied out the "effusion," from an original manuscript that appears to have been precisely the

¹⁰ Adams to Engelbrecht, June 9, 1824, Massachusetts Historical Society. Leonard C. Faber, assistant editor of *The Adams Papers*, provided this reference, which we gratefully acknowledge.

¹¹ Engelbrecht to Jefferson, Sept. 6, 1824, Library of Congress.

one which, with the copy of *Cato Major* it was laid in, was offered for sale in 1937.¹²

Thus Jacob Engelbrecht received an unusual Madison autograph which linked the old statesman with Franklin. But Madison soon discovered that he had incorrectly assigned the verses to Franklin. "On a critical re-examination to which I was just led, of the appearances on which my letter of Oct. 20, 1825, ascribed the poetic effusion copied from a page in Bartram's pamphlet to Dr. Franklin," he wrote on June 20, 1827, "I find that I may have committed an error in the case, by hastily applying the word 'Given' to the pamphlet, when it was meant for the poetry, and by mistaking for the handwriting of the Doctr. what was only a remarkable likeness of it. You will be sensible that the least uncertainty on this point ought for obvious reasons to have the effect of cancelling my communication to you." He accordingly asked Engelbrecht to return the letter, and promised to replace it with "some other communication answering the purpose of your original request."

It is possible that Madison came to his revised judgment of the ode on his own initiative, in the course of the continual study and rearrangement he gave his voluminous papers. More likely, however, the sharp-eyed detection of the error in ascribing the penmanship to Franklin coincided with Jared Sparks's visit to Madison's Virginia home in April, 1827. Although Sparks's mission at Montpelier had to do with his editorship of Washington's papers, he and Madison discussed the history of the American Revolution; and Madison may have showed the ode to the eminent editor-historian. Thus, almost by chance, a young autograph enthusiast obtained highly competent opinion on an item in his collection.

In any event, Engelbrecht complied at once with Madison's request to return the ode, only expressing the wish that the substitute letter might be written on July 4. Madison finally sent the substitute in October, though the letter was dated, as Engelbrecht had asked, July 4; and it contained "a short autographic extract" from an essay on "Charters" which Madison had written anonymously for Philip Freneau's *National Gazette* on January 19, 1792. Because only the draft of Madison's letter has thus far been found, it is not possible to identify the "autographic extract." The likeliest sentiment for

¹² Madison's transcript has several unimportant variations from the manuscript.

Madison's purpose seems to be the sentence: "Liberty and order will never be *perfectly* safe, until a trespass on the constitutional provisions for either, shall be felt with the same keenness that resents an invasion of the dearest rights, until every citizen shall be an Argus to espy, and an Aegeon to avenge, the unhallowed deed."¹³ Whatever the precise sentiment chosen by the Father of the Constitution, it pleased Engelbrecht, who received it, he said, with "all the gratitude that imagination can conceive."

Apparently, Madison destroyed the letter he wrote Engelbrecht in 1825, but the draft survives among his papers in the Library of Congress. The manuscript of Breintnall's poem, separated from Bartram's journal and inserted in a *Cato Major*, is in a private collection in New York. As for Jacob Engelbrecht, he continued to collect autographs of famous Americans, though he never completed a set of Signers. At Frederick's celebration of the centenary of American independence in 1876, he contributed to an exhibition of "ancient relics" letters of Hancock, Lewis Cass, Charles Sumner, Braxton Bragg, Henry Clay, Sam Houston, and Stephen A. Douglas; and he may have been one of the "various parties" who exhibited on that occasion letters of Washington, Charles Thomson, Jay, DeWitt Clinton, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, John Adams, Jefferson, and Madison.¹⁴

The Papers of Benjamin Franklin
The Papers of James Madison

WHITFIELD J. BELL, JR.
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¹³ Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison* (New York, 1900-1910), VI, 85. Another sentence Madison might have selected from his essay on "Charters" was: "We look back, already, with astonishment, at the daring outrages committed by despotism, on the reason and rights of man; we look forward with joy, to the period, when it shall be despoiled of all its usurpations, and bound forever in the chains, with which it has loaded its miserable victims."

¹⁴ *The Centennial Celebration, in Frederick County, Md., on June 28th, 1876* (Frederick, Md., 1879), 55. Engelbrecht was a member of the committee on the history of Frederick city.