IN A POSTSCRIPT to its August 24–26, 1762, issue the London Chronicle scooped its competitors by announcing that William Franklin, son of the celebrated Dr. Benjamin Franklin, had been appointed governor of His Majesty’s colony of New Jersey. Fresh though the news was, it caused few ripples in the capital; not many people were interested in New Jersey, a remote backwater of the British Empire, and, aside from his father’s fame, William Franklin was as obscure as the province he had been picked to govern. Within a month, however, William’s appointment was creating a considerable stir in the London coffeehouses and among his father’s friends and enemies, because someone had broadcast a fact about him which Benjamin Franklin had concealed from even his closest acquaintances during his five years in England as Pennsylvania agent: William was illegitimate.¹

¹ That Franklin concealed his son’s illegitimacy is proved by a letter from Thomas Bridges, Richard Jackson’s brother-in-law, to Jared Ingersoll, Sept. 30, 1762: “I hear there was some difficulty in his [William’s] being Confirmed in his place, for in our Conscientious Age, many Scruples were raised on account of his being Illegitimate, which we were Strangers to till very lately [italics mine].” Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society, IX (1918), 278. If Bridges, who was very close to Jackson, was ignorant of William’s secret, then the chances are that Jackson himself, Franklin’s closest political adviser, knew nothing about it; otherwise, he would almost certainly have told his brother-in-law. Apparently, not even Dr. John Pringle, a Franklin crony who interceded with Lord Bute to procure William’s appointment, was aware of the circumstances of his birth. At least, William Smith believed that “he knew Nothing of his [William’s] History.” Smith to Richard Peters, Sept. 14, 1762, Smith MSS, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. One measure of Franklin’s success in concealing the irregularity of William’s birth was the failure of his bitter enemy, Thomas Penn, who would have done almost anything to discredit him, to use the fact against him; ignorance of the affair can be the only explanation for Penn’s forbearance. It is possible, of course, that Franklin confided in a small circle of friends, including Jackson and Pringle, and that they kept his confidence inviolable. One wonders how much, if anything, William Strahan knew.
The present paper is not concerned with why Benjamin Franklin suppressed his son's secret (the answer would appear to be self-evident), but rather with who betrayed it. All evidence points to the Rev. William Smith, with whom Franklin had been quarreling since 1755.²

Smith had arrived in London on March 18, 1762, after a short voyage from America to raise money for the College of Philadelphia of which he was Provost.³ Instructed by the Trustees of the College to wait upon fellow Trustee Franklin and take his advice about soliciting funds,⁴ Smith paid a visit to the Doctor within four days of his arrival. The meeting can not have been an easy one, for the two men had not spoken since 1757⁵ and during Smith's last trip to England in 1759 they had appeared on opposite sides of an acrimonious hearing before the Privy Council. Nevertheless, Franklin offered to assist Smith by recommending the fund raising drive to his friends and by compiling a list of likely donors. He could not do more, he said, because he was busy settling his affairs in anticipation of returning to America and because some of his remaining time in England would be spent traveling in the country.⁶

One such sojourn took Franklin to Oxford in the last week of April where he received an honorary doctorate of laws (April 30).⁷ While at the university he learned that in 1759 Smith had written Dr. Thomas Fry, president of St. John's College, maligning him and warning against granting him an honorary degree. According to Smith, this information threw Franklin into a "great Dudgeon." Determined to take revenge, the Doctor decided to strike at Smith through the cause he was soliciting. Therefore, when he returned to London, he devoted himself to sabotaging the college fund raising drive. He

² For a comprehensive account of this quarrel, see Ralph L. Ketcham, "Benjamin Franklin and William Smith New Light on an Old Philadelphia Quarrel," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXXXVIII (1964), 142–163.
⁴ For Smith's instructions, dated Dec. 17, 1761, see ibid., I, 284.
⁵ Franklin to Peter Collinson, Nov. 5, 1756, Leonard W. Labaree, ed., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin (New Haven, 1963), VII, 12.
⁶ Smith to Richard Peters, Mar. 22, Apr. 5, 1762, Smith MSS.
⁷ See Labaree, ed., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, X, 76–78.
“took uncommon Pains,” Smith wrote to Richard Peters, to stigmatize the college to dissenters as a “narrow bigotted Institution, got into the Hands of the Proprietary Party as an Engine of Government.”

To merchants in the Pennsylvania trade like John Sargent, he repeated the accusation, adding that before coming to England to beg Smith should have asked the Pennsylvania Assembly for money, (although he well knew that the Assembly was unfriendly to the Provost’s designs). And to friends at Cambridge University he wrote in the same vein.

As Smith began to encounter the effects of Franklin’s campaign in the reluctance of prospective donors, he grew angry and decided to retaliate. First, he passed the word, as a recent arrival from Pennsylvania, that Franklin’s influence in the province had plummeted. But he believed that the Doctor deserved stronger medicine than a spiteful story, even though he perceived that it would be difficult to administer to a man who had gone down to Portsmouth (Franklin was there by August 11) to sail for Pennsylvania where an ocean would separate him from ordinary retaliatory shafts. It was at this point that the London Chronicle announced William Franklin’s appointment as governor of New Jersey. At once Smith perceived an opportunity to deal Benjamin Franklin a blow which would smart as much in Philadelphia as it would in London.

Like most well-informed Philadelphians, the Provost knew that William was illegitimate. He had alluded to the fact in past partisan pamphleteering and now with the help of Thomas Penn, one of the few men whose enmity toward Franklin equalled his own, he proceeded to apprise the English political world of it.

Smith appears to have gone to Penn and imparted the compromising information about William as soon as he read of his appointment in the Chronicle. The two men then schemed to have the appointment annulled. A letter from Penn to Smith of September 3, 1762, adum-
brated the strategy which they adopted.\textsuperscript{14} Penn informed the Provost that the next day a friend of his, possibly Lord Halifax or another peer with whom he was friendly, would see Lord Bute, who was credited with arranging William's appointment. Penn also revealed that he had requested the intervention of Gilbert Elliot and James Oswald, high Treasury officials who were among Bute's closest political advisers,\textsuperscript{15} and the Rev. Dr. Samuel Chandler, minister of Old Jewry and secretary of the Pennsylvania German Society. The arguments these men were to use with Bute can be inferred from Smith's letter to Richard Peters of September 14, 1762 (in which he also mentions having spoken to Gilbert Elliot).\textsuperscript{16} His Lordship was to be told that William Franklin was illegitimate—Penn suggested in his letter of September 3 that Andrew and James Allen, the sons of Chief Justice William Allen, who were in London studying law at the Middle Temple, could be called upon for verification—and this was to be cited as cause for vacating his appointment on the grounds that the people of New Jersey would refuse to be governed by the illegitimate son of a printer from a neighboring province.

The efforts of Smith and Penn were too little and too late. The Privy Council approved William's commission and instructions on September 1, his commission received the Great Seal on September 9, and on the same day he took the oath of office.\textsuperscript{17} Unable to block William's appointment, Smith tried to prevent his enjoyment of it by publicizing his pedigree. The result was that by the end of September Thomas Bridges and other Londoners knew that the governor-designate of New Jersey was a bastard. We will never know how much pain this disclosure caused William, but it must have hurt another person considerably. On September 4 the young man married Miss Elizabeth Downes of the West Indies. The revelation of her husband's illegitimacy can hardly have been a pleasant wedding present for her.

William seems to have known that it was Smith who betrayed his secret, for in a letter to William Strahan of October 14, 1763, he re-

\textsuperscript{14} This letter is in the Smith MSS.
\textsuperscript{16} This letter is also in the Smith MSS.
\textsuperscript{17} Labaree, ed., \textit{The Papers of Benjamin Franklin}, X, 146.
ported that he had heard that “my good Friend Parson Smith [the italics were his] has taken the Liberty (even before he could hear of my Arrival here) to propagate a Report that my Appointment to the Government was disagreeable to the People.” William realized that Smith could have invested such a rumor with plausibility only by alleging that the citizens of New Jersey resented the irregularity of his birth and so must have regarded it as a continuation of his campaign to advertise his illegitimacy. Benjamin Franklin’s reaction to Smith’s exposé of his son was exactly what the Provost must have wanted. The elder Franklin was so incensed at him that in June, 1763, he vowed never to meet him again. In tangling with Smith in a contest of retaliation the Doctor had picked the wrong man.

The episode just related is not a pretty one. It reveals Franklin and Smith belying their characters as two of eighteenth-century America’s most civilized men and acting like participants in a backwoods vendetta. As often happens in such affairs, innocent parties suffered most. There was also considerable irony in the contest. Franklin, one of America’s great promoters of education, attempted to wound Smith by discouraging financial support for a struggling seminary of learning which he himself had helped found. And Smith, a servant of the apostle of charity and good will to men, attempted to wound Franklin by circulating a defamatory story about another man who was blameless for the taint which he exposed to public ridicule. Ralph Ketcham in an article recently published in this Magazine observed that after the mid-1760’s the feud between Franklin and Smith became less rancorous. Considering the events just described, it is easy to agree with Professor Ketcham. After the summer of 1762 relations between the two men could do nothing but improve, because during that summer they had reached their nadir.

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18 Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.
19 Franklin to Strahan, June 2, 1763, Labaree, ed., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, X, 271.
20 See note 2.