

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Who Was Elizabeth Downes Franklin?

WHEN the handsome William Franklin married Elizabeth Downes in fashionable St. George's Church on Hanover Square on September 2, 1762,¹ most of the *haute monde* of London recognized William as the newly appointed royal governor of the province of New Jersey. They already knew that William was the son of one of the great figures in the Anglo-American world, Benjamin Franklin, but if London society knew Elizabeth's background it was not indicated in the periodicals of that day.

Since 1762, if American historians were interested in Elizabeth Downes' background, they have not discovered her origin. Historians do have fleeting references to Elizabeth in the correspondence of Thomas Bridges and Benjamin Franklin. Bridges wrote to Jared Ingersoll, William's friend, and reported the marriage. He identified Elizabeth as William's "Old Flame in St. James's Street," referring to the Downes' residence rather than her surname.² Benjamin described Elizabeth to Lord Kames as "a very agreeable West India lady."³

Recently, the author has discovered two documents which shed light on the origin of Elizabeth Downes Franklin. The first document is Elizabeth's certificate of baptism, and the second is the will of John Downes, her father. Elizabeth was born to a prosperous Barbados planter and his wife, John and Elizabeth Downes, in St. Thomas Parish in 1728. Elizabeth was baptized on September 8.⁴ She had an older sister, Hannah, and a brother, Jonathan. Elizabeth

¹ *The London Chronicle or Universal Evening Post* (London, 1762), XII, 232, reported the Franklin marriage took place on Sept. 2, 1762, and *The Gentleman's Magazine* (London, 1762), XXXII, 448, recorded the marriage as of Sept. 5, while Leonard W. Labaree, *et al*, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia, 1966), X, 146n, stated the marriage was made on September 4.

² *Ibid.*, X, 154n.

³ *Ibid.*, XII, 159.

⁴ Certificate of Baptism, Vol. 49A/1, Registration Office, Bridgetown, Barbados.

was a niece of King and William Richard Downes as well as of Hannah Earl (Mrs. John Earl) and Margaret Harper (Mrs. John Harper). She was also a cousin of Roger Piggot, another prosperous planter of Barbados.⁵

Elizabeth's father, John Downes, signed his last will and testament on April 22, 1731, when Elizabeth was not quite three years old. He died sometime between April 22 and November 29, 1731, when his will was filed with Samuel Barwick, clerk of the court in Barbados.⁶

John Downes was generous in his gifts to his immediate family as well as to his brothers and sisters and their children. He bequeathed to his daughters twelve hundred pounds current money each, to be paid to them when they reached the age of eighteen years. In addition, each daughter was given two Negro girls. Elizabeth received from her father the slaves named Kitty and Temperance. Downes also stipulated that both daughters should receive a yearly sum of seventy pounds for their maintenance and education, the latter of which was evidently superior as Francis Hopkinson described Elizabeth Franklin as "a Lady distinguished by a Refined Education."⁷

It was long believed that Elizabeth Franklin was forty-three years of age at the time of her death.⁸ With the discovery in Barbados of Elizabeth's baptism certificate dated September 8, 1728, it became clear that she was almost forty-nine years old when she died in British-held New York City on July 28, 1777.⁹ Perhaps through the recovery of these two documents and the identification of the early background of Elizabeth Downes Franklin, future historians will be able to clarify her role in the history of the Franklin family.

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⁵ Will of John Downes, 35/120, Registration Office, Bridgetown, Barbados.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Mrs. Franklin's obituary, written by Francis Hopkinson, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Aug. 13, 1777.

⁸ *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXII (1948), 413-414.

⁹ *Ibid.*