**William Franklin:**  
**His Father's Son**

Nothing has ever hurt me so much and affected me with such keen sensations as to find myself deserted in my old Age by my only Son, and not only deserted, but to find him taking up Arms against me, in a Cause wherein my good Fame, Fortune and Life were all at Stake. . . . Your situation was such that few would have censured your remaining Neuter, tho' there are Natural Duties which precede political ones, and cannot be extinguished by them.¹

Thus an aging Benjamin Franklin berated his only son, William, for opposing him and the patriot cause during the American war for independence. William having chosen to support the losing side in the conflict, was willing to let bygones be bygones once the war was over and was anxious to resume the sturdy friendship that had formerly existed between father and son. He longed to "revive that affectionate Intercourse and Connexion which till the Commencement of the late Troubles had been the Pride and Happiness of my life." But the father was not prepared to adopt the role of magnanimous victor. The son had been guilty of two acts of disloyalty. He had abandoned the cause of the American colonies, and he had rejected the "Natural Duties" a son owed to a loving and devoted father, duties that preceded any political allegiance William might have felt. Not only had William refused to join the colonial effort, but he had played an active part in opposing the colonial cause. He had been president of the infamous Board of Associated Loyalists and had used his influence to give aid and advice to the exiled Loyalists in London once the war was over. For this, Benjamin Franklin never forgave him.²

Historians have been fascinated by the "disloyalty" of Benjamin Franklin's son. Why, when he appeared to have everything to gain and little to lose by following his father into rebellion, did he choose to support the "wrong" side, making what was no doubt the greatest mistake of his heretofore successful political career. To be sure, he held the post of royal governor of New Jersey when the war broke out, and

¹ Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, August 16, 1784, Albert Henry Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, (New York, 1906) IX, 252
² William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, July 22, 1784, Benjamin Franklin MSS, American Philosophical Society (APS).
no royal governor supported the American rebellion. Moreover, many families had divided loyalties during the war. But William Franklin was not just any royal governor; the father, not just any father but Benjamin Franklin, the prototype of the new American personality, the man whose autobiography represented, in microcosm, the abandonment of old world values and the rise of St. John de Crevecoeur’s “new man.”

It is hardly surprising that efforts to understand William Franklin’s allegiance to the British cause have generally centered on his relationship with his father. Some historians have relied upon invidious comparisons between their personalities to explain the split between the two men, claiming that William, a son typical of a self-made man, was “something of a snob,” having rejected his father’s “bourgeois” simplicity in hopes of attaining a “fixed place in the English aristocracy.” “Haughty and ambitious,” the younger Franklin devoted himself to imitating the life-style of British aristocrats, thus becoming increasingly indebted to an indulgent father who was disappointed that his much-loved son could not live within his means. William’s trip to London with his father in 1757 only exacerbated his aristocratic tendencies. There he adopted the lifestyle of a true gentleman, and when he returned to America he continued to pretend to a social standing vastly superior to that of most Americans. The split between plain and simple Benjamin Franklin and his vain and pretentious son was, then, symbolic of the conflict between colonial democracy and British aristocracy.


This interpretation to unlocking William's personality contains, at its most simplistic level, a thinly disguised attack upon Loyalist motives in general. To prove their point, historians have seized upon a few isolated remarks that Franklin made about his son—he once worried that William was becoming "much of a beau" and, in the heat of controversy over the growing rift between the colonies and Great Britain, he called his son a "thorough Courtier" and a "thorough government man." They have bolstered their argument with descriptions of William made by his enemies, who variously referred to him as the "high and mighty William Franklin," a man of "deep deceit and light vanity," a man with "courtier-like airs" and "courtier-like propensities," in order to paint their picture of a character who was ideally suited to oppose the democratic aspirations of the American colonists.  

Other historians attempt to explain the younger Franklin's Loyalism by focusing upon the trauma he suffered as a result of his illegitimate birth. It is impossible to identify William's mother with any certainty; indeed it is not clear that William ever knew who she was. It seems most likely that she was one of the "low women" with whom his father had consorted in his youth. George Roberts, the son of one of the father's close friends offers the most trustworthy contemporary evidence concerning the identity of William's mother, acknowledging that "T'is generally known here his birth is illegitimate and his Mother not in good Circumstances." He hotly disputed, however, current rumors that William's mother was "begging bread in the Streets" of Philadelphia. "I understand," he said, "some small provision is made by him for her, but her being one of the most agreeable of Women prevents

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particular Notice being shown, or the Father and Son acknowledging any Connection with her.”

William’s political enemies never allowed him to forget that his origins were less than honorable. During the Philadelphia election of 1764, when Benjamin Franklin and his Quaker party were fighting for their political existence, the Franklins’ adversaries dredged up the whole affair in order to cast aspersions on the elder Franklin’s character. When William was named governor of New Jersey, his detractors referred to the appointment as a “dishonour and disgrace to the country” and a “burlesque on all Government.” Even in England there were rumors that some “Scruples” were raised “on account of his being illegitimate.” Forty years later, John Adams referred to William’s governorship as an “affront to the dignity and Insult to the Morals of America, the Elevation to the Government of New Jersey of a base born Brat.”

William Franklin’s illegitimacy—and his reaction to it—offers a possible explanation for the “courtier-like” airs attributed to him by his detractors. The “sneers and snickers about his illegitimate birth were not,” argues one historian, “memories he could easily forget or forgive.” His uncertainty about his own roots and identity perhaps made him a driven man, insecure, anxious, and determined to be accepted by the “best” people. His closely-held ties to the crown were, in effect, the outgrowth of an almost obsessive search for legitimacy.

A third explanation for William’s decision to desert his father’s cause during the American revolution involves a direct analysis of the relationship between the patriot father and the loyalist son. Some historians have drawn a picture of a reasonably intelligent and very ambitious


young man who always found himself in the shadow of his more famous, talented and revered father. They point out that William Franklin’s entire early career was made possible by his father’s care. The minor offices held in the Pennsylvania legislature after 1751 were all due to his father’s influence, and William’s appointment as governor of New Jersey has frequently been attributed not to his own worth and ability but to his connections with Benjamin Franklin. And even after William was firmly ensconced in the governor’s seat he remained almost “pathetically” dependent upon his father’s advice.

In trifling affairs, as well as important ones, William appeared to live an existence dominated by the character of his father. He was constantly in debt to his ever-generous parent. His father was awarded an honorary Doctor of Civil Laws degree by Oxford University in 1762, but William had to be content with a Master of Arts. When William was admitted into the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), Franklin belittled his son’s achievement, saying, “There you match my Dutch honour, but you are again behind,” and informed his son that he had just been named an Associé étrangeé of the Royal Academy, an honor reserved for “the most distinguished names for science.”

It is easy to conclude that William’s existence was characterized by dependence upon his father and that his filial gratitude was always mitigated by a subliminal resentment of that dependence. It was, insists William Mariboe, “undoubtedly galling to be known as the son of the

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10 It was commonly believed that the British government hoped to secure Benjamin Franklin’s loyalty to the crown by rendering William dependent upon royal pleasure. Historians are divided on the merits of this charge. Some insist that William secured the position on his own merits, even going so far as to claim that Benjamin had almost nothing to do with William’s appointment. William S. Hanna, Benjamin Franklin and Pennsylvania Politics (Stanford, 1964), 147, 148; William A. Whitehead, “A Biographical Sketch of William Franklin,” Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society, Ser. 1, III (1848-1850), 141. Others remain convinced that William’s appointment was meant to secure his father’s loyalty to the crown. Smith, “Expedient Loyalist,” 60. See also, “Letter from London to a Gentlemen in Philadelphia,” Pennsylvania Journal, 18 September 1766, James Hamilton to Thomas Penn, Nov. 21, 1762, Penn Papers, HSP; Newcomb, Franklin and Galloway, 97. Willard Randall argues that Franklin disapproved of the appointment, seeing William’s career choice as evidence of his “aristocratic tendencies.” Randall, Revenge, 178

11 Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, April 20, 1771, Labaree, Papers, XVIII, 74-77


13 Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin, 300, Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, 19 or 22 August 1772, Labaree, Papers, XIX, 257
great Benjamin and to have it said that his progress in the province was
due only to his father's influence." It can be argued, then, that William
was at least unconsciously jealous of his father, deeply resentful of Ben's
achievements, and motivated by a strong desire to carve out a separate
identity for himself. There may well have been a competitive edge to
William's relationship with his father, constantly driving him to find
some means of achieving respect and standing in the community that
would enable him to equal, or perhaps even rival, that already held by
his father. Thus William's life was characterized by one long search for
autonomy. His marriage represented an attempt to "wean himself from
his father." His assumption of the governorship of New Jersey "in-
spired him to feel that he had come into his manhood and achieved
independence at last." William's ultimate declaration of independence
came, of course, when he refused to join his father in rebelling against
the English crown. Ironically, Loyalism was William Franklin's
method of achieving personal autonomy.

There is an element of truth in these analyses of William Franklin's
character. No doubt he aspired to the life-style of the country gentlemen
and loved to adorn himself and his pampered wife with all the accou-
trements of the English aristocracy. His social life was surely charac-
terized by much pomp and carried on in a fashion his governor's salary
could never quite afford. Nor is it unlikely that William's exceptionally
strong desire for respect and propriety was party motivated by the in-
securities he suffered as a result of his illegitimate birth.

But the evidence in this article will show that William Franklin was
not obsessed by a desire—even an "unconscious" or "subliminal" one
—to declare independence from his father. William's pride in his fa-
ther's achievements certainly outweighed any resentment he may have
harbored toward his illustrious parent. If anything, he was obsessed

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14 Lopez and Herbert, Private, 200, Fleming, Lightning, 93
Franklin New Jersey's Last Royal Governor (Trenton, 1975), 12, 30, Lynn, Divided People, 23,
Randall, Revenge 179
16 William Franklin to Betsy Graeme, May 16, 1757, Simon Gratz, "Some Material for a
Biography of Mrs Elizabeth Fergusson," PMHB, 39 (1915), 262, William Franklin to
to Benjamin Franklin from his Family and Friends, 1751-1790, ed William Duane (Freeport, N Y 1858, reprint 1970), 46, William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, June 30, 1772,
Labaree, Papers, XIX, 193-5, Frederick Tolles, "A Literary Quaker John Smith of Bur-
lington and Philadelphia," PMHB, 65 (1941), 304
with retaining a close relationship with his father, not with trying to destroy it. Even his refusal to support colonial independence was not a rejection of Benjamin Franklin’s teachings, but, ironically, a confirmation of them.

For William’s decision to remain loyal to the English crown was in large part due to the lessons he learned from Benjamin Franklin. Franklin functioned as an “indulgent parent,” earning his son’s love and respect, but conveying the message that authority was beneficent, not threatening. He taught his son to view authority positively, to look to his superiors for guidance, support, and approval. Moreover, as a strong supporter of the British empire throughout much of his life, he imbued William with the belief that loyalty to the crown and service to the colonies were not mutually exclusive, and that the crown was the best guarantor of colonial rights. Psychologically and ideologically, Benjamin Franklin paved the way for his son’s ultimate decision to remain loyal to the mother country. And in the end it was not William who abandoned his father, but his father who abandoned him.

An analysis of the relationship between Benjamin Franklin, the father, and William Franklin, the son, is more than a study of two individuals whose private quarrel became the object of public comment and historical fascination. It offers, as well, a means of examining some of the current hypotheses concerning the role of family life in the eighteenth century, particularly the father-son relationship, in creating a peculiar “loyalist personality” marked by a high need for external authority, a fear of autonomy, and a low tolerance for disorder. Thus, it is argued that for many individuals the decision to support the crown was not merely one involving questions of political status, religious affiliation, gain or loss, or even ideology. The choice was a “matter of temperament” that “rested in the last analysis upon intensely personal inclinations.” This “temperament” or “personality,” argues Kenneth Lynn, was created in childhood by fathers who, for various reasons, did not prepare their children for autonomy and independence.

Benjamin Franklin raised his only surviving son at a time when attitudes toward child rearing were becoming increasingly "modern." Rebelling against old Puritan notions of innate depravity and original sin, Franklin and his contemporaries rejected the advice of Separatist pastor John Robinson who had once argued that the "stubborness and natural pride" of children must be "broken and beaten down." Instead, they embraced the more "enlightened" view of John Locke who maintained that children were malleable and potentially rational, not inherently sinful; that parental power was justifiable, but also limited and temporary. Indeed a parent's primary obligation was to prepare his child for independence. Locke had compared the entire process to the use of swaddling clothes, which were gradually loosened "till at length they drop quite off, and leave a man at his own free Disposal." Once a child had become a reasonable human being, he would be an equal to those who had formerly nurtured him. Moreover, those parents who did not prepare their children for independence, or who tried to hold on to their power too long, could no longer maintain respect and obedience from their offspring. The act of preparing the child for maturity, equality and autonomy—not the accidental blood ties bestowed by birth—was the factor that legitimized parental power. There was, then, no "natural duty" that a child owed his parent, except that duty stemming from grateful acknowledgement of a job well done. The relationship between parent and child was always voluntary and contractual, and the voluntary nature of that relationship became increasingly obvious as the child approached maturity.\(^\text{18}\)

Locke's ideas concerning the voluntary nature of childhood were not wholly original, and he himself would have disapproved of the uses to which many colonists put them during the American revolution. Moreover, Locke gained popularity in America at least in part because family life there, as well as in England, was moving rapidly toward an

orientation that seemed consistent with the Lockean ideal. Children were in fact becoming more autonomous because of the colonial population increase—rendering parents unable to control their children's lives through the disbursement of land—and because mobility forced greater numbers of people to abandon their ties to widespread kinship networks and to live more isolated and independent existences.19

Relationships between parents and their children, then, grew gradually less patriarchal and more companionate. A "new indulgence" toward children characterized paternal attitudes; consequently, children became more willing to separate themselves from their parents and to pursue an independent course of action.20 It is tempting to argue that this new autonomous child was ideally suited to support political equality, republicanism, and, ultimately, revolution. For this already liberated individual, Thomas Paine's "call for independence in 1776 from the mother-country and from the father-king might have been just what Paine claimed it to be—'common sense.'"21

One need not be familiar with eighteenth-century family life or with Lockean theory to know that private experience and public identity are inextricably intertwined; that the context within which a child is born and raised is crucial in molding his subsequent values, beliefs, and behavior; and that an "intimate connection . . . exists between the family and the wider structure of community life." Psychological studies suggest that an individual's political personality is generally


20 John F Walzer, "A Period of Ambivalence, Eighteenth Century Childhood," in Lloyd de Mause, ed , The History of Childhood (New York, 1974), 372 This new independence can be seen most dramatically in attitudes toward marriage as, particularly among the elite, young people began to take "romantic love" and personal desires, rather than economic motives and the wishes of their parents, into consideration when they chose their prospective mates Herman R Lantz, et al , "Pre-Industrial Patterns in the Colonial Family in America A Content Analysis of Colonial Magazines," American Sociological Review, 33 (June, 1968), 421, 422, Fliegelman, Prodigals and Pilgrims, 136-148

determined in the home, in the years before he actually begins to think or act politically. Thus to understand William Franklin one must discover what messages he received from his parents—particularly from his father—throughout his childhood and youth, that might have led him to abandon his "natural duties" and to view colonial independence with hostility and even fear.\textsuperscript{22}

Little evidence suggests that Franklin's early years were in any significant way unusual. His childhood experiences in most respects fit the classic prototype of male children born into middle-class households during the mid-eighteenth century. William, to be sure, may have suffered some pangs of anxiety and insecurity as a young boy. Notable is the attitude of his father's wife Deborah; her treatment of her husband's natural child was at best marked by grudging tolerance rather than motherly love. When William was only two, a rival for his parent's affection was born. Francis Folger, as William's half-brother was christened, was named after Benjamin Franklin's maternal grandfather, Peter Folger, thus giving the child a palpable link with his father's past, a link that William could never claim. "Franky" died of smallpox in December, 1736, a month after his fourth birthday; but his presence continued to haunt the Franklin family. Deborah kept a portrait of her only son prominently displayed in the Franklin home, and thirty-six years after Frances's death his father referred with obvious sorrow to his young son "whom [he had] seldom since seen equal'd in every thing, and whom to this Day I cannot think of without a Sigh."\textsuperscript{23}

Although William Franklin's youth may not have been idyllic, it was in many ways an enviable one, and he grew up in an environment that was generally characterized by affection and love. His stepmother's apparent hostility toward him, though its effect may have been sig-


significant, was somewhat mitigated by the presence of other adults in the Franklin household who could assume the role of surrogate parents. Benjamin Franklin dominated William’s childhood and taught the important lessons the young boy learned. Like most parents, Franklin was not altogether consistent in his attitudes about child raising. Yet, from the little he said on the subject, a picture emerges of a man whose basic philosophy was the product of his own childhood experiences, his understanding of Lockean precepts, and, of course, his own inimitable personality.

Benjamin Franklin’s childhood experiences introduced him to many “father figures” who provided him with role models upon which to fashion his own approach to raising his son. One such model was his own father, Josiah. Although Josiah Franklin was financially unable to provide his son with the educational opportunities that both men would have preferred, Franklin had fond memories of the man whose mealtime conversations had “turn’d [his] Attention to what was good, just & provident in the Conduct of Life.” And while his father had ended in apprenticing his youngest son as a printer to his demanding brother James, he had done so only after walking about the city of Boston with him, endeavoring to help the youth decide what trade would suit him best. Benjamin Franklin had other models as well. Many other “parentalistic benefactors,” men like Matthew Adams, Governor Burnet, William Lyons and Thomas Denham, had considerably widened the young boy’s world. It can be fairly argued that Franklin tried with his own son to fill the roles of all of the positive father figures he had himself encountered in his youth. He provided William with a good education, gave him the use of a fine library, guided him toward a career that promised social respectability and opportunity for advancement, eased the way for his entry into politics, and, during their extended stay in London together, introduced William to some of the most cultured and intellectual men in Europe. He was, in his own words, an “indulgent”


25 Marboe, “William Franklin,” 26, Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin, 125. Some historians have indicated that the presence of a variety of “parental” figures in a child’s early environment had a positive effect in helping him adjust to the adult world. See Greven, Four Generations, 254-258, D.B. Smith, “Autonomy,” 51.
parent who pampered, even spoiled his only living son.  

And while he tried to replicate for William the positive experiences of his own youth, Franklin made every effort to help his son avoid the more painful aspects of his own past. He was much more reliable than Samuel Keith, Simon Meredith, and Governors William Bradford and William Keith had been for him. William grew up secure about his father’s support. And Franklin did not rule his son with the heavy-handedness that had been the cause of so much friction between him and his older brother. He later credited James’s “harsh & tyrannical Treatment” with having first impressed him “with that Aversion to arbitrary Power that has stuck to me thro’ my whole life.” It was his brother’s “tyranny” that had ultimately motivated him to leave Boston, improve upon his station, and develop a new sense of values that placed experience, achievement, and autonomy above tradition, obedience, and filial respect. William’s early experiences, unlike those of his father, taught him to view authority as kindly, beneficent, and basically trustworthy. His secure relationship within the bonds of loving authority provided him with his sense of well-being, self-respect, and self-worth. It was, paradoxically, because of his positive relationship with his father that he was able to attain his own autonomy.

If Benjamin Franklin was “indulgent” he did not allow his son to grow up without firm direction, guidance, and discipline. He was too good a Lockean and too much a product of his own age for that. Franklin knew that parents had to balance authoritarianism and permissiveness, had to enable their children to grow up as self-determining agents who could make moral choices. Indulgence might secure a


27 Dawson, “Fathers and Sons,” 273, Franklin, Autobiography, 69n. D.B. Smith has argued that the attention and affection showered upon children in upper class Chesapeake households enabled those children to absorb parental values, and to develop a strong sense of duty to their parents that dominated them throughout their adult lives. Children raised in an atmosphere of love were more likely to remain obedient and respectful to their parents than were children whose early lives were characterized either by harsh authoritarianism or mere indifference. He also argues that the same care and attention provided the basis for the child’s autonomy Smith, “Autonomy,” 50, Smith Great House, 82, 86, 88, 102.

28 See Franklin, Autobiography, 64, Franklin, Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Philadelphia (1749), in Labaree, Papers, III, 397-421 for direct evidence that Franklin was familiar with and heartily endorsed Locke’s educational theories.
child’s lasting affection and gratitude; but firm discipline was also required to ensure obedience and a continuing duty to parents. While Locke thought a father should raise his son to be his equal and his friend, he also was quick to emphasize that children were not yet the equals of adults. They were potentially, not actually, rational beings who, in their infancy and youth were especially subject to the temptations of the world around them. To protect their children from the deleterious influences of their environment, parents had to curb their “unruly and disorderly appetites,” to teach them self-denial, “even from their very Cradles,” and to inculcate in them the habits of rational adults, who, not surprisingly, would “rationally” and “independently” choose the lifestyle approved by their parents.  

Locke’s approach to child rearing was, in some ways, more oppressive than the Puritans’. Eschewing the rod and physical force in all but the most troublesome cases, Locke argued that “Esteem and Disgrace are, of all others, the most powerful Incentives to the Mind. . . . If you can once get into Children a Love of Credit, and an Apprehension of Shame and Disgrace, you have put into them the true Principles, which will constantly work, and incline them to the right.” These principles, he insisted, would be all the more firm and lasting when secured through rational persuasion and inculcated habit. They would be “Habits woven into the very Principles of his Nature.” In the end, the values of the rational parent would be appropriated and internalized by the child so that he could be trusted with independence.  

Benjamin Franklin was ideally suited to follow the Lockean prescription for child rearing. A believer in firm but enlightened discipline, affection tempered with strict training, Franklin sought to mingle authority and indulgence. In his own life as well as in his advice to others, Franklin insisted that character modification could best be secured by habit and proper training; indeed, he assumed that anyone with proper training could be virtuous. “A trade is a valuable thing,” he admonished his sister, Jane Mecom, “but unless a habit of industry be  


30 Locke, Thoughts Concerning Education, 148, 150, 152, 153, 146 Most historians have stressed Locke’s concern with child rearing as a preparation for adult independence, while downplaying the potentially repressive tendencies of Lockean thought. For an alternative emphasis see Greven, Protestant Temperament, 160n, Fliegelman, Prodigals and Pilgrims, 13-22
acquired with it, it turns out of little use.” Children must be made, he said, to “go on petty errands,” to perform useful tasks until they have become “fit for better business.” And he was quick to praise his wife Deborah who obviously doted on her grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache, when she allowed Sally, his mother, to discipline the young boy. “I feared,” he said, “from your Fondness of him that he would be too much humored and perhaps spoiled.”

But Franklin could play the indulgent parent as well, particularly where it concerned Billy Hewson, son of his close friend Polly Stevenson Hewson. He believed that habit, firm discipline, and even an occasional whipping were important components of child rearing, but kindness and generosity also taught children important lessons and were essential to the formation of good character. His advice to Polly reflected this attitude, as much as it did his devotion to her. “Pray,” he said, “let him have everything he likes. I think it of great Consequence while Features of the Countenance are forming. It gives them a pleasant Air, and that being once become natural and fix’d by Habit, the Face is ever after the handsomer for it, and in that much of a Persons’ good Fortune and Success in Life may depend.”

Franklin treated his son with a mixture of indulgence and firmness, providing him with the tools he needed to become a successful adult, while gently but firmly guiding him away from temptation and toward respectability. When William tried to run away from home and join a privateering expedition, his father put an end to his plans—even as Josiah Franklin had ended his own similar yearnings when a youth. But he seemed to view William’s adventurous spirit with equanimity, noting simply that the privateering life was attractive to all young boys: “It fills their heads with notions, that half distract them, and put them quite out of conceit with trades, and the dull ways of getting money by Working.” Franklin’s response to the incident was of the sort that Locke would have heartily approved. He walked the middle ground between abject surrender to William’s whims and severe punishment of the boy’s actions. He did not try to break the boy’s will, instead he tried

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31 Norman S. Fiering, “Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue,” American Quarterly 30 (Summer 1978), 206, 207, Franklin, Autobiography, 148-157, Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, May 21, 1757, Van Doren, Jane Mecom, 59, Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom (1748), 42, Benjamin Franklin to Deborah Franklin, Oct 3, 1770, Labaree, Papers, XVII, 239 Sally was William Franklin’s younger sister and his only living sibling

32 Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom (1748), Van Doren, Jane Mecom, 43, Benjamin Franklin to Mary Hewson, November 25, 1771, Labaree, Papers, XVIII, 253
to channel his son’s desire for excitement and adventure into more legitimate and socially rewarding avenues, arranging for him to become an ensign in one of the four companies raised in Pennsylvania for a campaign against Canada. He also asked his friend, London printer William Strahan, to send some maps and the works of Polybius from England so that his “soldier son” could prepare more effectively for a military career. By giving his son a chance to pursue his own goals, he made it impossible for him to rebel. William’s early experiences, unlike those of his father, taught him to view authority as beneficent and basically trustworthy.  

William’s first public position, thanks to his father’s aid, was undertaken in defense of king and empire. The young boy spent the winter of 1746/47 in Albany, where he acquitted himself well, was elevated to the position of Captain, and witnessed first hand the disastrous results that bureaucratic bungling could have on military affairs. Soldiers had to content themselves with rusted guns, defective cutlasses, and “stinking beef.” Desertion was rampant. But William did not quit his task. He was sent to Philadelphia in May, 1747 to round up deserters, and the next year he traveled with Conrad Weiser to the Ohio country where he was present at the Logtown negotiations. While Franklin had hoped that his son’s taste for adventure would abate, it appeared that William had a real love of military life. Only the prospect of peace between England and France could alter William’s plans for a career in the British armed services.  

William spent the next few years enjoying the social life of Philadelphia, becoming “much of a beau,” and, according to his rather disgruntled father, living indefinitely off his father’s income. Franklin once again took a hand in steering the young boy’s path in a more productive direction. Although he did not demand that the boy follow his own profession as printer, (recognizing, perhaps, that William’s attitude toward the business was decidedly negative), Franklin did at-

tempt to top his son's aimless drifting. In 1750 he sent William to study law under young Joseph Galloway—a man who even then saw Britain "as the source of all law and justice"—and made plans to enroll him in one of the Inns of Court. By 1751, with his own political career well under way, Franklin began using his influence to secure minor government posts for his son. In that year William succeeded his father as Clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly; in 1753 his father appointed him to the position of Postmaster of Philadelphia; and in 1754 he was made Comptroller of the postal system in the Northern Colonies.

Benjamin Franklin continued his efforts to mold his son's character while taking advantage of the lad's natural attributes. William accompanied his father to the Albany Congress in 1754, where he saw him propose a plan to reform the Empire and give England and America a common purpose and direction. The following year, when Franklin sought to prove his own and Pennsylvania's loyalty to the mother country (at the beginning of the French and Indian war), he used his son's military expertise in gathering supplies for Braddock's abortive expedition and in visiting and fortifying the forts in western Pennsylvania. Once again William was placed in the service of the empire. Once again William performed creditably.

The effect of William's military adventures on his education paled in comparison with the trip he took to London with his father in 1757. Franklin took his son to the British capital in part because he wanted William's help in negotiating with the Pennsylvania proprietors, whose refusal to allow the taxation of their estates, coupled with their use of inflexible secret instructions to the Pennsylvania governors, had se-

35 Randall argues that Franklin disapproved of William's decision to become a lawyer. The preponderance of available evidence indicates otherwise.

36 Benjamin Franklin to Abiah Franklin, April 12, 1750, Labaree, Papers, IV, 475, William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, Nov 13, 1766, 501, Benjamin Franklin to William Strahan, Dec 6, 1750, IV, 78, Edw(ar)d Shippen to Joseph Shippen, Jan. 17, 1753, Shippen Papers, APS Newcomb, Franklin and Galloway, 131, Mariboe, "William Franklin," 54, Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin, 201, 212. There is no evidence that William resented "living in his father's shadow" when he accepted these posts. Indeed "nepotism" was an accepted and approved practice. William would no doubt have resented his father if he had not helped him achieve political office. See for example Randolph S. Klein, Portrait of an American Family The Shippens of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1975), Lopez and Herbert, Private, 53.

37 For some indication of William Franklin's service to his father, and to the empire, in 1755 and 1756, see Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin, 228-230, 246-253, Mariboe, "William Franklin," 61-64, Franklin, Autobiography, 184-190, Broadside 156 APS, Thomas Lloyd to Benjamin Franklin, Jan. 31, 1756, Labaree, Papers, VI, 380-382, William Franklin to Timothy Horsfield, June 21, 1756, Horsfield MSS, APS.
verely curtailed the powers of the colony’s assembly. Franklin’s concerns were personal as well as political. He wanted his son to begin his long postponed studies at the Middle Temple. He intended to give William the chance to see something of the world while keeping him under his own benevolent and watchful care, away from the temptations of a possibly corrupt environment. Finally, he hoped that the trip might make William forget Miss Elizabeth Graeme, with whom he had fallen madly—if not deeply—in love. Graeme was a member of one of the wealthiest and most socially prominent Philadelphia families. Her father, Dr. Thomas Graeme, was a provincial councilor; her mother was the stepdaughter of former Pennsylvania governor William Keith. Both staunch supporters of the proprietary interest, they must have shuddered at the prospect of welcoming William Franklin, the illegitimate son of one of their greatest enemies, into their home. William’s timely trip to London helped him avoid public humiliation. Once again, Franklin helped shape William’s life, gently steering him away from potential disaster and offering him a more attractive course of action.

The trip to London proved to be more instrumental in shaping the future course of William Franklin’s life than either father or son had imagined possible. Both psychologically and politically it helped determine William’s ultimate divergence from his father’s course. Both Franklins enjoyed their first trip together, to England’s capital. “The infinite Variety of new Objects; the continued Noise and Bustle in the Streets; and the Viewing such Things as were esteem’d most curious” quickly engrossed the youth. His father’s name gave him access to “Politicians, Philosophers, and Men of business;” he enjoyed visits to Vauxhall and Windsor Castle and attended concerts, plays, and parties.

38 See for example, James H Hutson, Pennsylvania Politics 1746-1770—The Movement for Royal Government and its Consequences (Princeton, 1972), 19-40; Newcomb, Franklin and Galloway, 39, 40 For an analysis that is more critical of Franklin’s motives, see Hanna, Benjamin Franklin and Pennsylvania Politics.

39 Locke had noted that while trips abroad gave young people knowledge of the world, that same world could introduce them to bad habits and vices at the very time in their life when they were most vulnerable. Locke, Education, 165-171 Moreover, Ben recalled with a shudder the “hazardous situations” he had encountered in his own youth, when he found himself “among Strangers, remote from the Eye and Advice of [his] Father.” Franklin, Autobiography, 114-115

40 Labaree, Papers, VII, 177n, Martha C Slotten, “Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, A Poet in the ‘Athens of North America,’” PMHB, 108 (July, 1984), 260, 261, William Franklin to Elizabeth Graeme, April 7, 1757, Gratz Collection, HSP, Benjamin Franklin to Isaac Norris, Feb 9, 1763, Labaree, Papers, X, 194
without any apparent regard to their cost. Only proprietary obstinacy and administrative "Prejudice against the Colonies in general and ours in particular" marred an otherwise perfect stay.  

Both Franklins were in love with London. Their travels together in the British countryside and their brief trip to the continent were even more pleasant. They met with some of the best minds of Europe, all of whom were eager to converse with the man who had conducted the famous kite experiment. They were honored, feted and admired—a pleasant change from the cold shoulder they had received in London from the proprietors and from myopic politicians. And there, most importantly, William Franklin gained a sense of his connection with his past. For in the spring of 1758, father and son took a leisurely trip through the English countryside, stopping at Willborough in Northamptonshire where they met one of Benjamin Franklin's cousins, and making their way to Ecton, the birthplace of Josiah Franklin. The two prowled around the old house and grounds, looked at the ancient church register "in which were the births, marriages, and burials of our ancestors for 200 years," and saw the family's moss-encrusted grave stones. They visited awhile with the rector's wife, "a goodnatured chatty old lady" who entertained them with accounts of Benjamin's uncle Thomas Franklin, "a very leading man in all county affairs, and much employed in public business," whose practical advice, like that of his nephew, was "sought for on all occasions." The comparison between Thomas and Benjamin was obvious. Even more uncanny, the grave stones revealed that Thomas had died a mere four years before Ben was born, on the same month and the same day. In an awed tone, William remarked on the "extraordinary" coincidence, for had Thomas died on the same day, "one might have suppos'd a Transmigration." 

The experience was of monumental importance to William. His father had introduced him to the members of his family who resided in

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41 William Franklin to Elizabeth Graeme, Dec 9, 1757, Sparks MSS, Miscellaneous Papers 6, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, William Franklin to Mrs Abercrombie, October 24, 1758, Gratz, "Elizabeth Fergusson," 263, 264
42 Indeed, Strahan hoped that Benjamin Franklin would remain in England, and there are indications that he seriously considered doing so See Benjamin Franklin to William Strahan, Aug 23, Dec 7, 1762, Labaree, Papers, X, 149, 168
43 William Franklin to Sarah Franklin, Oct 10, 1761, Labaree, Papers, IX, 366-368, Benjamin Franklin to Deborah Franklin, Sept 6, 1758, VIII, 134-138, Franklin, Autobiography, 48-49 See also J Bennett Nolan, Benjamin Franklin in Scotland and Ireland, 1759 and 1771 (Philadelphia, 1956), 11-97
New England, assuring him that he had some sense of connection with the rest of the Franklins. But this was different. This encounter with his father’s heritage, which obviously moved the father almost as much as it did the son, brought William closer to his father than ever before. It gave him, as well, a past to which he could relate, a framework within which he could define his own existence. It gave him, moreover, a visceral sense of belonging to the England that he had already grown to love.\footnote{Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, Oct. 24, 1751, Van Doren, \textit{Jane Mecom}, 46, Labaree, \textit{Papers}, IV, 200n, 208, 215, 268.}

The trip to London gave William more than a profound psychological connection to the mother country. It gave him an excellent political education as well. Acting as Franklin’s trusted aide, running errands when his father was too ill to leave his rooms on Craven Street, amassing material for an anti-proprietary tract, the sentiments of which his father undoubtedly endorsed, and admiring what seemed to him to be the clever way Franklin handled his adversaries, William received an excellent training in the machinations of English politics and managed in the process to impress his father’s contacts with his own considerable ability. William Strahan thought that he exhibited “a solidity of judgement, not very often to be met in one of his years.”\footnote{Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Feb. 17, 1758, Benjamin Franklin to Isaac Norris, June 9, 1759, William Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Aug. 26, 1760, Labaree, \textit{Papers}, VII, 400, IX, 188-194. Benjamin Franklin to Edward Tilghman \textit{et al.}, Nov. 26, 1761, IX, 390, William Strahan to Deborah Franklin, Dec. 13, 1757, VII, 297.}

The trip was hardly an unmitigated success. Despite their best efforts, the Franklins failed to alter the Pennsylvania proprietors’ attitudes toward their colonial possessions. By the fall of 1758, Benjamin Franklin had laid “aside all Thoughts of an amicable Accomodation;” and by the end of the year Thomas Penn had refused even to meet with Franklin. Penn’s recalcitrance was probably not much of a surprise. Nevertheless, it was apparent that Pennsylvania’s envoys had to adopt an alternative strategy. They could not expect to protect the autonomy of the Pennsylvania Assembly or to assure to the colonists the rights of Englishmen guaranteed by the British Constitution, so long as the colony remained in the hands of the Penn family. Thus Franklin began publicly to advocate the abrogation of the proprietary charter while urging that Pennsylvania consider seeking status as a royal colony. It was a decision with which William willingly concurred. While they
may have seen some danger to Pennsylvania's traditional rights when they began to consider such a move, they felt they had little choice. Neither saw any fundamental conflict between firm loyalty to the crown and the preservation of colonial rights. To them, in the days before the Stamp Act crisis, the proprietary government, not the king, represented the greatest threat to Pennsylvania liberties.  

By 1760 it had become apparent that the Franklins would be able to wring only minor concessions from the Penns. Father and son began preparing for their return to America, the father to initiate his ill-fated fight to make Pennsylvania a royal colony, and the son to pursue a career of his own. At the age of thirty, William was at last ready to assume that autonomous life that was the ideal result of proper childhood training. He had been called to the bar. His attachment with his "dear Betsy" was broken. His relationship with his father was stronger than it had ever been. Strahan noted that Franklin was "at the same time [William's] friend, his brother, his intimate, and easy companion." The Franklins' common experience in London did much to equalize their relationship. For despite the plaudits he had received from scientists and men of letters, Franklin proved unsuccessful politically, and especially during his illnesses, he relied heavily upon his son for help in achieving their shared goals. William needed only to use the influence both men had earned to launch himself in a career in the British bureaucracy. Probably through the auspices of the Earl of Bute, young King George's tutor, friend and confidant, and Dr. John Pringle, private physician of both Bute and the King, William Franklin was appointed governor of New Jersey, much to the surprise and anger of the Penns who knew nothing of the Franklins' machinations until it was too late. The whole "shameful" business, it seemed, had been transacted "in secrecy" and

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47 The Penns finally agreed to allow the proprietary lands to be taxed in return for the promise that they would be taxed at a rate no higher than that imposed on other colony land. Hutson, Pennsylvania Politics, 60-67, 119-121, Newcomb, Franklin and Galloway, 66-68

48 William Franklin to Mrs. Abercrombie, Oct. 24, 1768, Gratz, "Elizabeth Fergusson," 263-267. Significantly it was Betsy, not William, who terminated the affair. William may have been relieved that the relationship was over, but it was not he who put an end to it. This unwillingness to sever even the most unsatisfactory ties that bound him to others was always a characteristic of his personality.
there was little that anyone could do about the \textit{fait accompli}.^{49}

The London experience did more for William than provide him with a career. Particularly after 1758 it enabled him to lead a personal life that was socially, if not financially, independent of his father. He took occasional trips to the English countryside. Despite his father's hopes that he could help his son avoid the corruptions of English life, William managed to emulate his father, becoming the father of an illegitimate child, William Temple, sometime after 1759.^{50} Also during the London sojourn, William met, and after a long courtship married, Elizabeth Downes of Barbados, who made him a "Suitable and Agreeable wife." Franklin had encouraged a match between Mrs. Stevenson's daughter Polly and his son, but he was willing to let his son make his own decision no matter how "afflicted" with disappointment that choice made him. William was mature enough, and independent enough, to choose his own marriage partner. The father said little about the marriage at first; and he left London before the wedding took place. But there is no doubt that he gave the couple his "Consent & approbation" before sailing for home.^{51}

Franklin was disappointed with his son's marriage, but this could hardly have constituted a turning point in their relationship; nor was William's decision a declaration of manhood or an announcement of his

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49 William Strahan to Deborah Franklin, Dec 13, 1757, Labaree, \textit{Papers}, VII, 297, Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, Nov 11, 1758, VIII, 174. Because the affair was conducted in secret, it is impossible to say much more about the specific negotiations surrounding William's appointment. The Bute/Pngle connection is obvious. Both were friends of the Franklins, and Pringle accompanied the two on their trips through Belgium and Holland in the spring of 1762. Benjamin Franklin's influence was no doubt important, but William was chosen for his own abilities as well. He managed to "pass" a "close examination" by Lord Halifax, Minister of American Affairs, before he was awarded the governor's post. See John Penn to William Alexander, Sept 3, 1762, Duer, \textit{William Alexander}, 70, Thomas Penn to James Hamilton, March 11, 1763, Penn Papers HSP, Whitehead, "Sketch," 141. Randall's claim that Benjamin Franklin disapproved of William's desire to be a royal governor is doubtful. Randall, \textit{Revenge}, 178.

50 Van Doren says he was born in 1760. Labaree, \textit{et al.} note that his Paris tombstone puts the date at Feb 22, 1762. Van Doren, \textit{Benjamin Franklin}, 290. Labaree, \textit{Papers}, I, lxx. William did not publicly acknowledge Temple until years later, but the boy was put in a foster home, educated at the Franklins' expense—mostly Ben's—and eventually became a member of the Franklin household, returning with his grandfather to America in 1775 where he was briefly reunited with his father.

independence. To be sure, William Franklin was beginning a new phase of his life. He was leaving London with a new wife and a government position at home. He was prepared to serve a king whom his father viewed as possessing "exemplary Virtues" and as "truly desirous of promoting the Welfare of all his Subjects." He was convinced, as was Benjamin Franklin, that service to the crown was in no way antithetical to the protection of colonial rights. And he did not believe that the time would come when he would have to choose between loyalty to his sovereign and fealty to his own father.\footnote{Benjamin Franklin to Samuel Cooper, April 27, 1769, Labaree, Papers, XVI, 118}

Nothing that happened during his first years as governor gave William any indication that he would ever be forced to make such a terrible choice. His relationship remained close with his father—who continued to take a keen interest in his son's progress, helping him, advising him, running interference for him in London whenever he could do so. If William resented his father's interference, or felt that he was living in his father's shadow, or that his identity was somehow overpowered by his father's, he gave little indication that this was the case. In fact, he seemed grateful for his father's aid and proud rather than envious of his accomplishments. If good training was intended to help a child internalize the values of his parents and insure his voluntary loyalty, then Benjamin Franklin had raised his son well.

Father and son continued to provide for one another's needs. When Benjamin returned to London in 1764 to seek the revocation of the Pennsylvania charter, William helped their mutual friend Joseph Galloway in his efforts to manipulate political affairs at home. In the fall of 1764, William travelled to Philadelphia where he could be found "canvassing among the Germans & endeavoring to get their votes." He was, said John Penn, "as bad as his father." Thus, too, William defended both his and his father's reputation during the frenzied days of the Stamp Act crisis, praised Franklin for his part in having the Stamp Act repealed, and made sure that appropriate pamphlets and letters of his father's were printed in the colonies. In 1769 William even encouraged his father to consider becoming the new governor of Massachusetts. The "Principal People there," he reported, "wish you
to be the Man & say that you would soon be able to conciliate all Differences."  

Franklin accompanied the newly-appointed governor to New Jersey in 1763, hoping that his presence would give his son's administration an auspicious beginning; he reminded William to get his reports to the Board of Trade submitted on time, even advising him on the form they should take; he worked diligently to persuade the ministry to approve William's various plans to establish a proprietary colony in the land west of the 1763 Proclamation Line; he lobbied in London on his son's behalf; and he advised William on the tactics he should use in dealing with his own assembly and with the ministry. Nor was his advice confined merely to public affairs. From a distance he managed to become involved in the most minute details of his son's life. He acted as a surrogate father for young William Temple, taking that somewhat embarrassing burden from his son's shoulders while encouraging William to become involved in making the decisions that would shape the boy's future. He worried about William's and Betsy's health, even prescribing a detailed exercise program for his son, who often worried that he was becoming too fat. Only occasionally did William give even the slightest indication that he resented his father's advice.

At times, of course, William had little choice but to oppose his father's wishes. This was particularly true after 1769, when the elder


54 These were plans in which Ben also had a deep and abiding interest. For a general analysis of the details of the two men's dreams of a Western colony see Cecil Currey, Road to Revolution Benjamin Franklin in England, 1765-1775 (NY, 1968), 192-302, Mariboe, "William Franklin," 277-344

Franklin became New Jersey's agent to the crown. He was appointed to the position by the Assembly, a body that increasingly found itself in direct opposition to crown prerogative and to the governor whose duty it was to defend that prerogative. But even when father and son served different masters and interests, William, in particular, tried to deny that any fundamental conflict existed between the two. When, for instance, the Board of Trade decided to halt the colonial Assembly's practice of choosing its own agents without consulting either the Governor or the Council, Benjamin Franklin predictably agreed with the Assembly's claim that its "rights" were violated. He even asserted that he would not accept any Agency that did not emanate exclusively from the lower house. William, of course, was duty-bound to uphold the crown position, although he had little hope that the Assembly would accede to his wishes. "It is a point," he said, "they will never give up." But "contrary to the Expectation of every Body, and indeed contrary to the Intention of most of the Members," William was able to persuade the Assembly to drop its claim exclusively to appoint the colonial agent. The governor was understandably pleased with his victory, even while he recognized that the concession was one that his father would "not be altogether pleas'd with." He tried to argue that the difference between their positions was minimal, a mere matter of style, not of substance, and that both crown and Assembly—and not incidentally father and son—should accept the compromise with grace. He simply denied that essential disagreements existed between them, and he attempted to rationalize or ignore any evidence to the contrary. That Franklin ultimately accepted the compromise and continued to serve as New Jersey's agent no doubt encouraged William's sense that there was, at bottom, "no difference" between his position and his father's.

Significantly, most messages that William received from his father reinforced his desire to serve the crown and to remain loyal to its interests. From the beginning of his term as governor until its ignominious end, William remained convinced that there was no conflict between serving both the colony of New Jersey and the King in Parliament, between upholding the crown's prerogatives and guaranteeing the American colonists their legitimate rights as Englishmen. His

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56 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov 30, 1769, Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, June 30, 1772, Benjamin Franklin Papers 45 45, APS, William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, January 6, 1772, Labaree, *Papers*, XIX, 3, 4
first speech to the Council and Assembly of New Jersey indicated his belief in the mutuality of interest between the crown and the colonies. Even in the end he assured his assembly: “Depend upon it you can never place yourselves in a happier situation than in your ancient constitutional dependence on Great Britain. No independent State ever was or ever can be so happy as we have been and might still be under that government.”

William strongly believed that it was in the interest of both the mother country and the colonies to bring the various members of the empire closer together. He once whimsically remarked that he and his wife had “often wished that we could put Great Britain under sail, bring it over to this country and anchor it near us.” And as the chasm between England and the colonies grew ever wider, he remained convinced that closer ties with London would put an end to the misunderstandings that were destroying a once fine relationship. He did not delude himself into assuming that the colonies alone were to blame for the difficulties that plagued the empire. But he did think that communication, understanding, the right program, or the judgment of men of experience and good-will could be used to effect a reconciliation between all but the most obstinate partisans on both sides. Particularly after 1774, he could be found arguing for American representation in Parliament, for Galloway’s Plan of Union, and for a crown commission composed of governors and the principal leaders of each colony assisted by “some Gentlemen of Abilities Moderation and Candour from Great Britain” who could be counted upon to find a compromise that men of honor on both sides of the Atlantic would find acceptable. Surely some system short of colonial independence could be devised that would restore peace to the empire. And until 1776, William Franklin felt justified in assuming that his father would be instrumental in finding the magical solution that would make peace possible.

William Franklin’s continued hope that his father would be the leader in a movement to reconcile England and America was not merely

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the product of desperate and wishful thinking. It was based on their lifetime of shared experience. At least to William, such hope represented the logical culmination of his father's entire political career. From the time he accompanied his father to the Albany Conference, William had seen Franklin as one of the staunchest supporters of a strong and united empire. "No American," says Jack Greene of the elder Franklin, "had a greater or deeper affection for Britain or had worked harder to preserve its connections with the colonies" in the decade before independence. And Yehoshua Arieli points out, Benjamin Franklin's "insistence that the American people should remain part of the British Empire emanated not only from utilitarian convictions but from a profound feeling for the natural, historical and spiritual unity between the American colonies and the mother country." Franklin's long-range goal had always been the reformation of the British system along lines that would ensure the "future glory and prosperity of the Empire." 59

William's apprenticeship with his father had been conducted on the assumption that a strong attachment to the royal government was the colonists' best hope for the preservation of their liberties. Benjamin Franklin was, of course, a thorough-going Whig who supported the rights of the colonial Assemblies. In London he was even a member of the Club of Honest Whigs, all of whose members were staunch commonwealth men. Yet he also had a "sincere devotion to monarchy," and throughout much of the controversy between the mother country and the colonies, his quarrel was primarily with Parliament, not with the King. It was Parliament's endeavor to supplant the rights of the colonial assemblies that he found so reprehensible. At least as early as 1768 he insisted that it was the exclusive right of the individual assemblies to tax and regulate their own inhabitants, but he continued to acknowledge the strong tie that bound the colonies to the crown. Almost until the end of colonial dependence he tried to find some way to continue that connection without abrogating the rights of the assemblies. William Franklin took great comfort in his father's reluctance to destroy colonial subordination to the English crown, while ignoring his increasing emphasis on assembly rights and his growing pessimism over the chances

of securing a reconciliation between England and America.60

Throughout most of William Franklin's youth, his father had trained him to be a loyal and dedicated servant of the crown and a strong proponent of the British empire. And, as Locke had predicted, he internalized the lessons he learned from his father and made them his own. This, coupled with the experiences he had as a royal governor, gave him good reason to oppose independence. In the 1750s, when William first became interested in Pennsylvania politics, his father was almost myopically pro-empire, viewing English leaders as intelligent, educated, virtuous and enlightened. By 1764, William was helping his father in the long, abortive fight to make Pennsylvania a royal colony. "Royal liberty," for both men, seemed to promise an end to "proprietary slavery." And despite the apparent repudiation of his plans by the Pennsylvania electorate in 1764, Benjamin Franklin worked tirelessly and ever optimistically for a change of government for the next four years, a process that William, himself a royal governor, actively supported.61

Nor was the campaign for a royal government the only indication that the elder Franklin was a pro-empire man. His luke-warm opposition to the Stamp Act resulted in a great deal of embarrassment to his friends and family. His own house was threatened with destruction by an anti-Stamp Act mob, and even his ever faithful sister, Jane Mecom, expressed astonishment when she learned that Franklin had secured an appointment as Stamp Distributor for his friend and political crony John Hughes. Both Franklins opposed the Stamp Act, but neither countenanced the violent activities of the self-styled "Sons of Liberty," and neither seemed particularly concerned with the basic principles involved in the controversy. Franklin's advice was to maintain a "firm Loyalty to the Crown." This, he told his friend John Hughes, "will always be the wisest course for you and I to take, whatever may be the Madness of the Populace or their blind Leaders who can only bring themselves and Country into Trouble and draw on greater Burthens by


61 Hanna, Benjamin Franklin and Pennsylvania Politics, 72, Franklin, Observations Unjustly Thrown on the Quakers (1758) Labaree, Papers, VIII, 41-48, Hutson, Pennsylvania Politics, chapters 3 and 4
Acts of rebellious Tendency." The Act's repeal served only to persuade him of the basic good will that the British government had toward its colonial possessions.  

Benjamin Franklin continued to be a strong government supporter after 1766. In May of that year he proposed that America and Great Britain be unified along the lines of Scotland and England, and the following year he was working on a plan to obtain parliamentary representation for the American colonists. During the conflict over the Townshend Duties he continued to adopt a moderate stance, even after 1768, when it became apparent that his hope of making Pennsylvania a royal colony were futile. While Franklin supported the colonial non-importation agreement, he simultaneously decried mob action in Boston and told his son not to judge the ministers "by the libels printed against them." In 1768 he entertained hopes of being named under-secretary for Lord Hillsborough, though he feared that he might be considered "too much an American" to merit the position. And while he was increasingly critical of Parliament, he still hoped that "nothing that has happened or may happen will diminish in the least our Loyalty to our Sovereign or Affection for this Nation in general."

Even in the early 1770s Franklin held on to the ideal of a unified empire. His appointment as agent for Massachusetts was opposed by his political enemies because both he and his son held office at crown pleasure and because he was seen as too much of a moderate in supporting colonial rights. Franklin was a "placeman and the father of a placeman." His part in making public the Hutchinson letters—an action that William, a fellow governor, disapproved—was not intended to drive a wedge between England and America, but was rather

62 Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, Nov 9, 1765, Labaree, Papers, XII, 361-365, Pennsylvania Journal, Sept 25, 1766, Deborah Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, Dec 30, 1765, Van Doren, Jane Mecom, 86. David Hall to Benjamin Franklin, Sept 6, 1765, Labaree, Papers, XII, 255-259, Pennsylvania Gazette, May 29, 1766, Benjamin Franklin to John Hughes, Aug 9, 1765, Labaree, Papers, XII, 235. Much of Benjamin Franklin's seeming acquiescence to the Stamp Act can, of course, be explained in terms of his desire to make Pennsylvania a royal colony. He would allow nothing to stand in the way of this all-important objective. See especially Hutson, Pennsylvania Politics, 192-203.

63 Indeed Greene notes that Franklin's criticisms of the empire always rose in direct correlation with the decline in his own political influence in England. Green, "Alienation," 72.

an attempt to effect a reconciliation between the colonists and the mother country. As late as 1773, right before the Boston Tea Party, Franklin advised his fellow Americans to pursue a quiet and peaceable course in protesting the Tea Act. Even after the Tea Party, he continued to busy himself writing pieces on colonial rights for the British newspapers, hoping that the administration would be moved by reading them to restore the harmony that once existed between England and America.  

When the Coercive Acts were passed, Benjamin Franklin still did not fit comfortably in the role of ardent patriot. While it was certainly apparent that father and son often disagreed, an irrevocable break between the two men did not seem inevitable. Despite their obviously growing differences, Franklin’s signals to his son were ambiguous enough to convince William that his continued support of the royal government did not meet with his father’s unmitigated disapproval. Indeed throughout the early 1770s, Franklin’s attitude toward his son’s position reflected the increasingly mixed feelings he had about America’s relationship to the empire. In 1773 he had appeared almost conciliatory, telling his son he was a “true government man, which I do not wonder at, nor do I aim at converting you.” He asked only that William act “uprightly and steadily” and that he be diligent in promoting the prosperity of his people. If you do this, he said, “whatever your political principles are, your memory will be honored.” Four months later, however, after Franklin had been removed from his post as Deputy Post Master, he urged William to resign his governorship, a position, he rather unkindly reminded his son, that had never paid him enough to enable him to live independently in any case. But less than two weeks later, Franklin altered his advice, instructing his son to keep his job and force the ministry to fire him. Do not, he said, “save them the shame of depriving you, whom they ought to promote . . . one may make something of an Injury, nothing of a Resignation.” By May, Ben had changed his mind once more, telling William that “I think Independence more honorable than any Service.”


66 Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, Oct 6, 1773, Feb 2, 1774, Feb 18, 1774, May 7, 1774 (?), Labaree, Papers, XX, 431, XXI, 75, 180, 212, Maribo, “William Franklin,” 387
Franklin’s mixed signals to his son—and perhaps his own uncertainties as well—can be seen throughout the mid-1770s. After the Boston Tea Party, he immediately urged the Bay colony to reimburse the East India Tea Company for the damages it had suffered. Yet when William suggested that very course of action, he angrily responded that his son was a “thorough Courier” who saw “every thing with Governm’t Eyes.” At times he seemed eager to talk to William so that he could “learn thereby more perfectly the state of affairs” in the colonies. At other times he seemed to despair of making his son understand his own position. And through all the vacillations in his father’s attitudes, William Franklin remained steadfastly convinced that if his father would only come home, the differences between the two of them as well as the differences between England and America would somehow be resolved. He desperately wanted his father to return to America, where an apartment would always be waiting for him at Perth Amboy, so that his father could offer the Continental Congress “some plan for accommodation of our differences that would [meet] with the approbation of a majority of our delegates.” Benjamin Franklin was not averse to framing such a plan; indeed, he made one last effort to find a way around the impasse facing the empire before finally leaving England for Philadelphia in the spring of 1775. But he was forced by then to recognize what his son could not or would not see. No plan of accommodation would ever satisfy the demands of both England and the colonists. Independence was inevitable.67

After May of 1775, when Benjamin Franklin returned to Pennsylvania, it became apparent to William that his father had chosen to reject the empire that both men had worked so long to serve. When he first arrived in America, Franklin went straight to Philadelphia, avoiding an immediate confrontation with the son he had not seen in over a decade. When the two finally met with one another, both at Perth Amboy and again at Galloway's house in Buck's county, Pennsylvania, each tried to convince the other at least to remain neutral, but to no avail. In November, Franklin and his sister Jane stopped for dinner at

Perth Amboy, but did not spend the night. It was the last time the two men would see each other until after the war. 68

All his life, the father had tried to guide rather than to command his son, to secure his voluntary allegiance, not his abject obedience. Until independence was declared, he continued in his efforts gently to persuade William to appreciate and defend the colonial position. More often, particularly after 1774, both men avoided political discussion altogether, hoping to avoid unpleasantness and to maintain what was still a close personal relationship. Lord Hillsborough and his successor the Earl of Dartmouth were not so solicitous. They expected total obedience to their orders, giving William none of the chance to maneuver or simply to avoid confrontation that his father’s approach allowed. William could ignore the differences with his father more easily than he could disobey the English crown. And so in the end, he refused to listen to Benjamin Franklin’s advice, and at last declared independence from his father.

But did he? Was he, even at this point, capable of leading the autonomous existence that good training was supposed to produce? William, of course, had begun to carve out his own separate identity long before the final break between father and son occurred. In 1771, for instance, his friend William Strahan had warned that Franklin’s political activities were standing in the way of William’s desire to create a colony in the lands west of the Proclamation Line. “It is imagined here,” he said, “that you entertain the same political Opinions with your Father, and are actuated by the same motives with regard to Britain and America.” The Governor quickly replied that Lord Hillsborough had “no reason (other than the natural connexion between us) to imagine that I entertain the same political opinion with my father. . . . My sentiments are really in many respects different from those which have yet been published on either side of the question.” And by 1774, he was assuring Lord Dartmouth that “no Attachments or Connexions shall ever make me swerve from the Duty of my Station.” 69


Nevertheless, although he certainly had good reason to do so, there is no indication that William ever really declared independence from his father. He remained true to his father and to the principles that had been the basis of their long and fruitful political alliance. William Franklin did not abandon his father. His father abandoned him. Benjamin Franklin's activities prevented William from obtaining a promotion to the more lucrative and peaceful position as Governor of Barbados in 1772, despite the fact that William was the "oldest Governor in all of His Majesty's Dominions." His refusal to deal with Lord Hillsborough helped destroy the long-hoped-for western lands project. He refused to intercede in his son's behalf when he was arrested by rebel forces and taken into captivity in Connecticut. And he lured William's own son away from him and the "Tory House" he inhabited at Perth Amboy just as Temple was actively seeking a more intimate connection with his natural father. And Franklin argued for the harshest possible treatment of the American Loyalists at the end of the war and refused to lift a finger to aid his son's struggle to get some just compensation from the British government after peace was declared.  

Despite the fact that Benjamin Franklin was no longer the "paternal despenser of gifts" and despite William's decision to support the "wrong" side in the war, William Franklin continued to be loyal to his father's person, if not to his politics. Throughout the war, he never ceased to inquire about his father's well-being. At war's end he did what he could to revive the "affectionate Intercourse and Connexion" that had so long characterized their relationship, only admitting final defeat when his father's will provided him with the ultimate proof that Franklin had not, and would not, forgive him for his loyalist activities.  

Giving William some virtually worthless lands in Nova Scotia  

70 William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, Oct 13, 1772, William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, Aug. 14, 1773, Benjamin Franklin to William Temple Franklin, Sept 19, Sept 22, Sept 28, 1776, Labree, Papers, XIX, 332-37, XXII, 170, 612, 613, 622, 634, Elizabeth Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, Aug. 6, 1776, XXII, 551, Fleming, Lightning, 454, 456, 472. When William was arrested Benjamin cryptically remarked that William was arrested because he adhered to "the Party of the King." He told Elizabeth Franklin that many people were suffering more than she and her husband, and he showed little sympathy for their plight. Benjamin Franklin to Jan Ingenhoosz, March 6, 1777, Franklin Papers, Stirling Library, Elizabeth Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, Aug 6, 1776, Labree, Papers, XXII, 551  

71 Strahan assumed the two would reconcile, telling Benjamin he was happy they were planning to meet again, and saying, "there is surely now nothing to interrupt your correspondence." William Strahan to Benjamin Franklin, Aug 26, 1784, Benjamin Franklin Papers, 32 91 APS.
along with the books and papers he already had in his possession, and erasing William's remaining debts, Franklin gratuitously added, "The part he acted against me in the late War, which is of public Notoriety, will account for my leaving him no more of an Estate he endeavored to deprive me of." For William, this "Shameful Injustice" once and for all "dissolved all my Connexions in [America] of a private as well as publick Nature."  

Even then, however, the "connexion" was not really broken. In later years, William's letters were liberally sprinkled with allusions to his father, and he seemed increasingly fond of quoting him whenever the opportunity presented itself. He toyed with the idea of writing Franklin's biography and remarked with obvious pleasure that Ellen D'Evelyn, his granddaughter and Temple's illegitimate child, looked "very much like my father." William Franklin remained loyal to his father.

William's decision to support the crown is not a surprising one. His father prepared him both psychologically and ideologically to remain loyal to the mother country. He was raised in an atmosphere that led him to believe that authority was beneficent, not threatening. He was guided by an indulgent father who molded his personality and bent his will without ever attempting to break it. The father's nurturance and devotion made the son both loving and appreciative, for William had internalized his father's values and seen that allegiance to those values brought him approval and success. Such experience indicates that the beneficent parent, who followed the Lockean prescription for child rearing, could produce children who were never autonomous, who remained grateful to their parents and loyal to their values throughout their adult life. Thus William tried to avoid independence from Great Britain. But at the same time he was never able to become independent

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72 Fleming, Lighting, 258, William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, July 22, 1784, Benjamin Franklin Papers, MSS., APS, Sarah Bache to William Temple Franklin, Sept 16, 1779, Benjamin Franklin Papers, 101 128, Will of Benjamin Franklin, Codicil, June 23, 1779, Benjamin Franklin Papers, MSS, APS, William Franklin to Jonathan Williams, Jr., May 11, 1791, Franklin Papers, Stirling Library

73 William Franklin to Jonathan Williams Jr., May 26, 1808, William Franklin to Jonathan Williams Jr., July 30, 1807, Franklin Papers, Stirling Library, Lopez and Herbert, Private, 308
of the man whose revolution he ended in opposing. Franklin’s continued watchfulness over his son’s career—a watchfulness that William always encouraged—made it even more likely that he would develop a “temperament” or personality that would find complete independence uncomfortable.

Moreover, as a result of such training and guidance, William’s entire political career had been devoted to pleasing men in authority. Unlike his father, who had held elective as well as appointive offices and who had learned how to curry favor from below as well as from above, William’s life had, from the beginning, been characterized by the need to gain approval from authority figures. His short-lived army career, his work with his father in London, his term as governor in New Jersey had all been achieved and maintained because he had served those who held more power and a higher position that he did. His legal training, too, had taught him the value of the law and the need to uphold it against all attacks.

Finally, Franklin had raised his son to be a loyal servant of the British crown. He had praised the virtues of the British constitution to William from the beginning of his political career. He had encouraged him to seek a colonial governorship. He continued to support the principles upon which the empire was based, even when he disagreed with particular parliamentary actions. It is, perhaps, not surprising that both of Benjamin Franklin’s protégés—his son and Joseph Galloway—remained loyal servants of the crown.

William Franklin’s decision to remain loyal to the crown was the logical and rational result of a lifetime of experience. It did not reveal any unusual weakness or “neurotic dependency” on his part. Neither did it represent a deep-felt desire to escape from the shadow of a domineering father. It reflected, instead, his constantly reinforced belief in the beneficence of authority in general and in the English crown in particular. William Franklin’s faith in the virtues of the British empire never wavered; his basic political beliefs remained remarkably consistent despite the chaos and confusion that threatened to destroy his family, his career, and his empire.

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