

# *The American Aesthetic of Franklin's Visual Creations*

**B**ENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S VISUAL CREATIONS—his cartoons, designs for flags and paper money, emblems and devices—reveal an underlying American aesthetic, i.e., an egalitarian and nationalistic impulse. Although these implications may be discerned in a number of his visual creations, I will restrict this essay to four: first, the cartoon of Hercules and the Wagoneer that appeared in Franklin's pamphlet *Plain Truth* in 1747; second, the flags of the Associator companies of December 1747; third, the cut-snake cartoon of May 1754; and fourth, his designs for the first United States Continental currency in 1775 and 1776. These four devices or groups of devices afford a reasonable basis for generalizations concerning Franklin's visual creations. And since the conclusions shed light upon Franklin's notorious comments comparing the eagle as the emblem of the United States to the turkey ("a much more respectable bird and withal a true original Native of America"),<sup>1</sup> I will discuss that opinion in an appendix.

My premise (which will only be partially proven during the following discussion) is that Franklin was an extraordinarily knowledgeable student of visual symbols, devices, and heraldry. Almost all eighteenth-century British and American printers used ornaments and illustrations. Many printers, including Franklin, made their own woodcuts and carefully designed the visual appearance of their broadsides, newspapers, pamphlets, and books. Franklin's uses of the visual arts are distinguished from those of other colonial printers by his artistic creativity and by his interest in and scholarly knowledge of the general subject. He collected and studied books and manuscripts

I am indebted to my friend Dr. E. McClung Fleming for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Albert H. Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (10 vols., New York, 1905-7), 8:167.

concerning the arts, heraldry, and emblems. Unlike other colonial American printers, Franklin had a thorough scholarly knowledge and appreciation of these subjects.<sup>2</sup>

### Hercules and the Wagoneer<sup>3</sup>

In 1747, during Europe's War of the Austrian Succession, a French and Indian war threatened the colonies. On July 12, 1747, a French privateer raided homes by the Delaware River not far south of Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> Since the Quaker-controlled Pennsylvania Assembly had refused to appropriate money for defense, the colony was vulnerable to such raids. Franklin, like many other colonial Pennsylvanians, believed in the necessity for self-defense. In his pamphlet *Plain Truth*, published in November 1747, he set forth the defenseless situation of the colony and called for a voluntary military organization. *Plain Truth* had "a sudden and surprizing Effect,"<sup>5</sup> and by the end of January 1748, Franklin had organized a body of more than ten thousand militiamen.

On the title page of *Plain Truth*, Franklin quoted Marcus Porcius

<sup>2</sup> On colonial printers, see Lawrence C. Wroth, *The Colonial Printer* (2nd ed., Portland, ME, 1938); and Elizabeth Carroll Reilly, *A Dictionary of Colonial American Printers' Ornaments and Illustrations* (Worcester, 1975).

R.T.H. Halsey provides a general introduction to Franklin's aesthetic interests: "Benjamin Franklin: His Interest in the Arts," in Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Benjamin Franklin and His Circle* (New York, 1936), 1-16. For Franklin as a printer, see Luther S. Livingston, *Franklin and his Press at Passy* (New York, 1914); Lawrence C. Wroth, "Benjamin Franklin: The Printer at Work," *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 234 (August 1942), 105-32, reprinted with revisions in Wroth's *Typographic Heritage: Selected Essays* ([New York], 1949), 91-134; and C. William Miller, *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing, 1728-1766* (Philadelphia, 1974).

Evidence of Franklin's interest in heraldry appears in Leonard W. Labaree, William B. Willcox, et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (25 vols. to date, New Haven, 1959-), 2:229-30; 13:245, n. 7 (hereafter, *Papers*).

<sup>3</sup> Scholarship on the "Hercules and the Wagoneer" cartoon appears in William Murrell, *A History of American Graphic Humor* (2 vols., New York, 1933-38), 1:11; Sinclair Hamilton, *Early American Book Illustrators and Wood Engravers, 1670-1870* (2 vols., Princeton, 1958-1968), 1:8; *Papers*, 3:xiv; Miller, *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing*, 219 (no. 415), 220 (no. 416), and 514 (no. 46); and Reilly, *Dictionary*, 313 (no. 1292).

<sup>4</sup> *Papers*, 3:180.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall, eds., *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York, 1986), 92 (hereafter, *Autobiography*).



Figure 1

"Hercules and the Wagoner." Woodcut, 1747. Verso of title page of Benjamin Franklin, *Plain Truth* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1747).

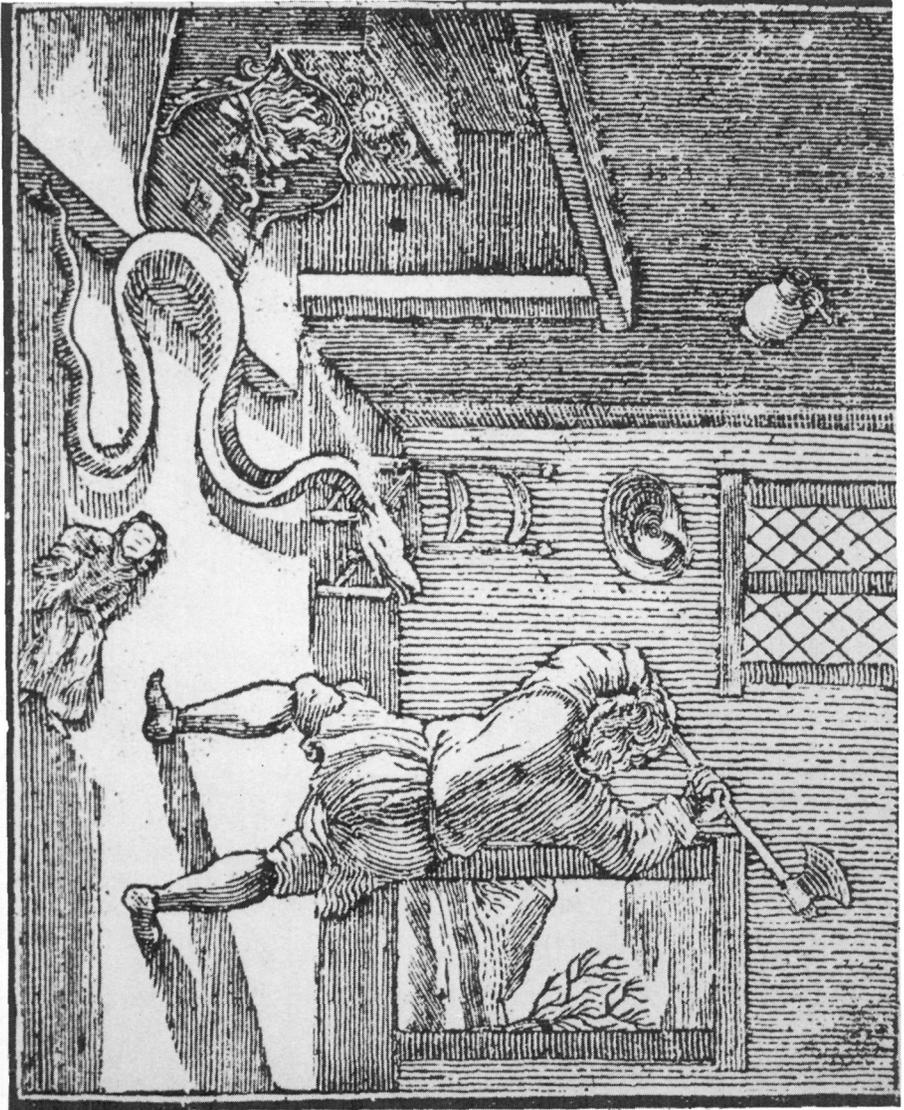


Figure 2

"Of the Good Natur'd Man and the Adder." Woodcut, 1747. From Thomas Dilworth, *New Guide to the English Tongue* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1747).

Cato's speech in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*.<sup>6</sup> Four lines from the bottom of the quotation, he set in capitals a key clause: NON VOTIS, NEQUE SUPPLICIIS etc. In the text, he translated the Latin sententiae: "Divine Assistance and Protection are not to be obtain'd by timorous Prayers, and womanish Supplications."<sup>7</sup> The point, as Franklin put it in Poor Richard's almanac for 1736, was "God helps them that help themselves."<sup>8</sup> To drive home the moral, Franklin printed on the verso of *Plain Truth*'s title page a woodcut from Aesop's fable of Hercules and the Wagoneer (Figure 1). It is the earliest American political cartoon (that is, a cartoon used in an American political situation).<sup>9</sup> The woodcut was not made for *Plain Truth* but for Franklin's reprint of a popular English grammar, speller, and reader, Thomas Dilworth's *New Guide to the English Tongue*, which Franklin had published earlier in 1747.<sup>10</sup> As part of the reader, Dilworth included twelve of Aesop's fables, illustrating them with woodcuts. Franklin's reprint of Dilworth contained the first printed and first illustrated set of Aesop's fables in America.<sup>11</sup>

In Dilworth's *New Guide* and in Franklin's reprint, the condensed fable of Hercules and the Wagoneer says: "As a Waggoneer was driving his Team, his Waggon sank into a Hole, and stuck fast. The poor Man immediately fell upon his Knees, and prayed to Hercules that he would get his Waggon out of the Hole again. Thou Fool, says Hercules, whip thy Horses, and set thy Shoulder to the Wheels; and then if thou wilt call upon Hercules, he will help thee."<sup>12</sup> Although not many people who read *Plain Truth* knew Dilworth's *New Guide to the English Tongue*, many were familiar with Aesop's fables, for English editions commonly turn up in colonial American

<sup>6</sup> The title page is reprinted in *Papers*, 3:189; and in Miller, *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing*, 220 (no. 416). Jasper Y. Brinton, "Franklin and the Conspiracy of Catiline," *Library Chronicle of the University of Pennsylvania* 33 (1967), 3-7, discusses the Latin text. John C. Rolfe, tr., *Sallust* (Cambridge, 1955), 100 and 106 (book 52, sentences 4-6, 24-25, and 28-29).

<sup>7</sup> *Papers*, 3:204, n. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Papers*, 2:140; repeated in *The Way to Wealth*, in *Papers*, 7:341.

<sup>9</sup> Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor*, 1:11.

<sup>10</sup> Hamilton, *Early American Book Illustrators*, 1:8.

<sup>11</sup> Information on Columbia University catalogue card in the *National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints* (685 vols., London, 1968-80), 144:115, no. ND 0274068.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Dilworth, *New Guide to the English Tongue* (Philadelphia, 1747), 139.

inventories. Franklin's addition of the woodcut to *Plain Truth* brilliantly combined a familiar children's story, and a moral known by almost everyone, with the classical truths of Sallust. Actually, the suitability of the moral to the defenseless Pennsylvania had occurred to Franklin over a dozen years earlier. In the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of March 6, 1733/4, Franklin published a series of "Queries" concerning the French threat to Pennsylvania and urging the establishment of a militia. One query asked "Whether the ancient Story of the Man, who sat down and prayed his Gods to lift his Cart out of the Mire, hath not a very good Moral?"<sup>13</sup>

No record of payment for the woodcuts in Dilworth's *New Guide to the English Tongue* appears in Franklin's account books. Certainly some local Philadelphia craftsman cut them, and the evidence strongly suggests that Franklin did. The background of Fable Ten, "Of the Good-natur'd Man and the Adder," shows, in the fireplace, the only extant contemporary illustration of a Franklin stove in use. It is identifiable as a Franklin stove by its general shape and by the sun device that Franklin used to decorate the stove's front plate (Figure 2).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the wagon portrayed in the "Hercules and the Wagoneer" cartoon is a Conestoga wagon. Although the wagon is pulled by only three horses instead of the usual six (perhaps because of the difficulty of making the small woodcut show six horses) and although the wagon lacks the cloth cover and wooden bows common to the Conestoga type, it nevertheless may be identified as a Conestoga wagon by the larger rear wheels and especially by the curved bed

<sup>13</sup> Donald Wing, *Short Title Catalogue . . . 1641-1700* (2nd ed., New York, 1972), 21-22 (nos. A686-A732A), records more than fifty editions of Aesop in the sixty-year period of the bibliography. Although not printed in the *Papers*, the "Queries" have been attributed to Franklin by Alfred Owen Aldridge, "Benjamin Franklin and the *Pennsylvania Gazette*," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 106 (1962), 79, with further evidence for the attribution supplied in J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 1722-1776: New Attributions and Reconsiderations* (Newark, DE, 1986), 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> Reilly, *Dictionary*, 326 (no. 1344). *Papers*, 2: facing p. 445. The sun device appeared on the second series of Franklin's Pennsylvania stoves. If there was a device on Franklin's first series of Pennsylvania stoves, it is unknown (*Papers*, 12:386). For acute observations on the philosophical and aesthetic implications of the ornamentation on the second design, see Frank H. Sommer, III, "Benjamin Franklin: Stoves, 'Scripture Histories,' and 'moral Prints,'" *The Delaware Antiques Show 1979* (Wilmington, 1979), 27-49 (odd numbered pages only).

with the upswept bow and stern. Neither the earlier English versions of the woodcut nor the later American versions (except those that used Franklin's cuts) show the characteristic curved bed and upswept bow and stern of the Conestoga wagon. Like the Franklin stove, the Conestoga wagon is an unique bit of local color.<sup>15</sup> Franklin deliberately Americanized at least these two woodcuts that he used in Dilworth's *New Guide*. Both were local creations of which Pennsylvanians and Americans could be proud. The cartoon, "Hercules and the Wagoner"—even though it reprints an English illustration of an Aesop illustration—represents an intrinsic bit of patriotic Americana.

### The Associator Company Flags<sup>16</sup>

On December 12, 1747, Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported that "a great Body of the Associators met with their Arms at the State-House, and from thence marched down to the Court-House, in Market-Street, where they agreed to the proposed Divisions of the City into Companies." Franklin tells that "The Women, by subscriptions among themselves, provided Silk Colours, which they presented to the Companies, painted with different Devices and Mottos which I supplied."<sup>17</sup> No flag is extant from the 120 Associator companies, but we know twenty of the devices and mottos. Franklin published descriptions of ten in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for January 12, and

<sup>15</sup> George Shumway, Edward Durell, and Howard C. Frey, *Conestoga Wagon 1750-1850* (York, PA, 1964), 11-12, define the wagon. *Papers*, 3:xiv, first identified the wagon in the woodcut as a Conestoga wagon. The Bibliotheque Municipale of Dijon, France, kindly supplied me with photographs of the woodcuts in their copy of Dilworth's *New Guide* (London, 1746). For other American cuts of "Hercules and the Wagoner," see Reilly, *Dictionary*, nos. 1293-1296. Franklin was transforming another English popular book at just this time, George Fisher's *The American Instructor* (1748): Miller, *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing*, no. 439. See William E. Lingelbach, "Franklin's *American Instructor*: Early Americanism in the Art of Writing," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 96 (1952), 367-87, at 375-81. Cf. *Papers*, 3:304-8.

<sup>16</sup> *Papers*, 3:267-69. The sole published study of the flags deals only with no. 1: Francis Olcott Allen, "The Provincial or Colonial Flag of Pennsylvania," *PMHB* 18 (1894), 249-52. In the spring of 1979, Cynthia B. Baldwin and Doris D. Fanelli, students in my early American literature seminar at the University of Delaware, wrote excellent papers on the possible sources of the figures and mottos on the flags.

<sup>17</sup> *Autobiography*, 92.

ten more on April 16, 1748.<sup>18</sup> These twenty devices and mottos are the largest number of original heraldic emblems created by a single person in colonial America (Appendix I).

All but two figures on the devices are traditional. Number I is typical of the traditional devices. It depicts "A Lion erect, a naked Scymeter in one Paw, the other holding the *Pennsylvania* Scutcheon. Motto, Pro Patria." The shield and the lion are found on the Penn family coat of arms and on the official seal of Pennsylvania.<sup>19</sup> Both the "body" (or figure on the device) as well as the "soul" (or motto—"Pro Patria") were evidently meant by Franklin to reassure the Penns and the English government that the Associators, an army of more than ten thousand men existing completely outside any official government structure, were nevertheless loyal to the Penns, to the province of Pennsylvania, and to England.<sup>20</sup>

Attempting to be absolutely clear, Franklin deliberately avoids, at least in this first description, the specialized diction of heraldry. He says "A Lion erect" rather than "A Lion rampant guardant." The normal heraldic description of the flag would be: "A Lion rampant guardant, holding in the dexter forepaw a naked Scymeter, hilted and pommelled, and in his sinister the *Pennsylvania* Scutcheon."<sup>21</sup> But such a description would not be immediately understandable to all his readers, so he chose to use the common language: "A Lion erect, a naked Scymeter in one Paw, the other holding the *Pennsylvania* Scutcheon. Motto, Pro Patria." In number XVI, Franklin is not so careful and begins the description with the standard heraldic diction: "A Lion rampant, one Paw holding up a Scymeter, another on a Sheaf of Wheat; Motto, Domine Protege Alimentum." But in number

<sup>18</sup> For the number of Associator companies, see *Papers*, 3:279. Edwin Wolf, 2nd, *The Library of James Logan of Philadelphia 1674-1751* (Philadelphia, 1974), 176 (no. 767), quotes a letter from Logan to Peter Collinson of Feb. 28, 1751, saying that "above 120 Companies of Militia" were raised.

<sup>19</sup> Franklin printed one thousand copies of an engraving of Thomas Penn's coat of arms in 1733 (Miller, *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing*, 39 [no. 79]), and he printed the official seal of Pennsylvania on numerous publications (e.g., *ibid.*, 508 [nos. 1a, 1b, 2, and 3]).

<sup>20</sup> Allen, "Provincial or Colonial Flag," 249-52.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Gough and James Parker, *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry* (1894; rpt. Detroit, 1966), s.v. "Lion," 373-80.

XVII, he again avoids heraldic diction. Instead of "A Lion dormant," Franklin describes "A sleeping Lion; Motto, Rouze me if you dare." Franklin, a literary genius sensitive to the nuances of connotation, used clear diction in addressing a mass audience, but he likely also took pleasure in deliberately undercutting heraldry's formal, aristocratic traditions.

The figures on the flags generally fall into the normal categories. Ten are military symbols (nos. V, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIV, XIX, and XX). The traditional nature of the figures is emphasized by the fact that one, number V, includes such out-of-date equipment as iron armor, and another, number XIV, such un-American fortification as a castle. Two military figures refer directly to members of the royal family: Number IX, "A Coronet and Plume of Feathers," is the attribute of the Prince of Wales. Franklin had used it on the title page of his *General Magazine* in 1741.<sup>22</sup> Number XIX names the young Duke of Cumberland, William Augustus (1721-1765), second surviving son of George II. Cumberland was a famous soldier who defeated the Jacobites at Culloden on April 16, 1746. This flag ("The Duke of Cumberland as a General; Motto. Pro Deo and Georgio Rege") may well have been inspired by John Wootton's portrait of William Augustus on horseback at Culloden, well known to colonials from several popular engravings in 1746 and 1747.<sup>23</sup> Finally, one of the ten military figures, number XI, portraying three Associators, is original.

Of the other ten figures, five portray standard heraldic animals: three picture lions (nos. I, XVI, and XVII); one (no. III) shows an eagle; and one (no. VI), an elephant. The five remaining figures are miscellaneous. Two are common personifications: number IV per-

<sup>22</sup> Facsimile in Miller, *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing*, 511 (no. 22).

<sup>23</sup> See the *Dictionary of National Biography* article on William Augustus by Ernest Marsh Lloyd; and British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, *Catalogue of Engraved British Portraits*, by Freeman O'Donoghue (6 vols., London, 1908-25), 4:495 (nos. 33-34, 36-38)—but other engravings of Cumberland were probably also known by Franklin; see nos. 1, 7, 10, and 19 on p. 494. Most literate Americans saw Cumberland's engraved portrait in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for May 1746. On July 10, 1746, Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* noted "There are great Rejoicings in Town on account of the Defeat of the Rebels by the Duke of Cumberland" (*Papers*, 3:96). Franklin celebrated him as "one of the right sort of Heroes" in *Poor Richard* for 1748 (*Papers*, 3:255). The Duke of Cumberland was even featured on a tavern sign in 1773 (probably from Yellow House, Rocky Hill, CT). See Marshall B. Davidson, *Life in America* (2 vols., Boston, 1974), 1:95.

sonifies Liberty (“The Figure of LIBERTY, sitting on a Cube, holding a Spear with the Cap of Freedom on its Point. Motto, INESTIMABILIS”); and number XVIII, the only description to mention a color, personifies Hope. Two more are religious, numbers XIII and XV. A final figure, number II, as far as I can determine, is original.

The original figures especially reveal Franklin’s American aesthetic. Number II is “Three arms, wearing different Linnen, ruffled, plain, and checqued; the Hands joined by grasping each the other’s Wrist, denoting the Union of all ranks. Motto, Unita Virtus Valet.” Two clasped hands are a common emblem of friendship. Franklin knew it, among other sources, from the seal of the city of Philadelphia.<sup>24</sup> But Franklin modified the symbol by making it three hands and wrists and strengthened the holds by having each grasp another’s wrist. The three kinds of linen symbolize the main classes of colonial American society: the gentlemen, with ruffled lace; the merchants, with plain linen (and the adjective *plain* especially suggests Quakers); and the common workmen, with checked gingham. In this original device, Franklin has created a dramatic symbol of the union of three classes. It seems quite likely that this figure inspired the emblem (suggested by Franklin?) of the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, the insurance company that Franklin organized in 1752. That emblem shows four hands, each grasping a wrist just below a ruffle of linen.<sup>25</sup> The other original flag,

<sup>24</sup> Theodore de Bry, *A New Artistic Alphabet* (Frankfurt-on Main, 1595), uses the clasped hands motif in his letter “F” (for *faith*). The London Hand-in-Hand Fire and Life Insurance Society (est. 1696) used this traditional symbol, and was probably followed by The Philadelphia Hand-in-Hand Company (est. 1742). Alwin E. Bulau, *Footprints of Assurance* (New York, 1953), 128-31; Jerome B. Gray, *One Hundred Years* (Philadelphia, 1929), 38. The seal of Philadelphia from 1701 to 1789 consisted of a quartered shield, with the clasped hands in the upper left. Joseph Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Philadelphia*, (4 vols., Harrisburg, 1933), 1077-79. The seal even appeared on an iron plate for a stove: Henry C. Mercer, *The Bible in Iron*, 3rd ed., rev. by Horace M. Mann and Joseph E. Sandford (Doylestown, 1961), fig. 63.

<sup>25</sup> For the device, see Insurance Company of North America, *American Fire Marks* (Philadelphia, 1933), 13-30; or Bulau, *Footprints of Assurance*, 26-28. Nicholas B. Wainwright suggested that “the immediate inspiration for the design may have been the local Hand-in-Hand Fire Company, although the idea can be traced to the old London Amicable or Hand-in-Hand Fire Insurance Company.” Wainwright, *A Philadelphia Story: The Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire* (Philadelphia, 1952), 34. But both the London and the Philadelphia companies used the simple clasped hands.

number XI, also has an egalitarian moral: "Three of the Associators marching with their Muskets shoulder'd, and dressed in different Clothes, intimating the Unanimity of the different Sorts of People in the Association; Motto, Vis Unita Fortior."

Franklin's original devices are realistic and absolutely understandable. They portray familiar American types, and they inculcate a democratic and egalitarian philosophy. At the same time, Franklin attempts to make his two original figures seem like traditional devices by using well-known Latin mottos for their "souls."

Two of the mottos, or souls, also appear to be original. According to the rules of emblem literature, the soul was supposed to be in a learned language—or at least in a language other than the native tongue. But Franklin deliberately violated this rule for his original mottos. They are in English, although they echo common heraldic sentiments. Number XVII, "Rouze me if you dare," contains the sentiment of a common Renaissance motto, NEMO ME IMPUNE LACESSIT ("No one provokes me with impunity"). And number IX, "In God We Trust," echoes religious appeals to God from ancient times. But the latter also shows Franklin's genius for proverbs and sententiae. It is the earliest recorded usage (and no one so far as I know has ever before pointed it out) of the exact words that first appeared on U.S. coinage in 1865 and were adopted as the official motto of the United States so short a time ago as 1956.<sup>26</sup>

### The Cut-Snake Cartoon<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps Franklin's most influential device was his cut-snake cartoon (Figure 3). At the outbreak of hostilities of the French and Indian War in 1754, the colonies were at a great disadvantage because each

<sup>26</sup> The motto does not appear in Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (Cambridge, 1977). The best discussion is in Richard S. Patterson and Richardson Dougall, *The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal of the United States* (Washington, 1976 [1978]), 514-20.

<sup>27</sup> The fundamental essay on the subject is Albert Matthews, "The Snake Devices, 1754-1776, and the Constitutional Courant, 1765," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 11 (1906-07), 409-53. See also Sinclair Hamilton, "The Earliest Device of the Colonies' and Some other Early Devices," *Princeton University Chronicle* 10 (1948-49), 117-23; *Papers*, 5:272-75; and Frank H. Sommer, III, "Emblem and Device: The Origin of the Great Seal of the United States," *Art Quarterly* 24 (1961), 56-76, at 63.

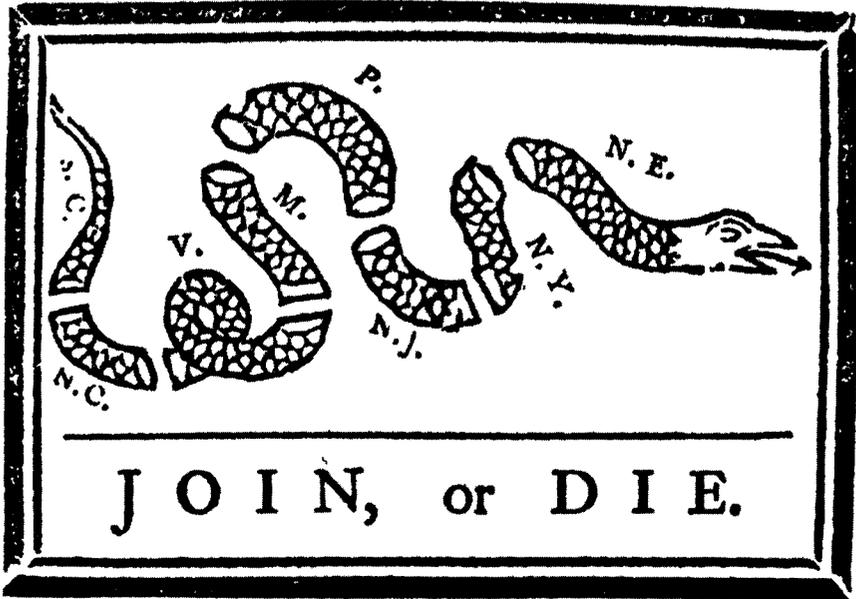


Figure 3

The cut-snake cartoon. Woodcut, 1748. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1754.

colony pursued its own separate military strategy and because several colonies, like New Jersey, refused to support any measures against the French invasion of the interior. On May 9, 1754, Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* announced the commencement of hostilities. A French army had invaded the Appalachian frontier. Forty-four Virginia militiamen surrendered to a French military force of over a thousand. After reporting this news Franklin analyzed the weakness of the colonies and called for action:

The confidence of the French in this Undertaking seems well-grounded on the present disunited State of the British Colonies and the extreme Difficulty of bringing so many different Governments and Assemblies to agree in any speedy and effectual Measures for our common Defence and Security; while our Enemies have the very great Advantage of being under one Direction, with one Council, and one Purse. Hence, and from the great Distance of Britain, they presume that they may with Impunity violate the most solemn Treaties subsisting between the two Crowns, kill, seize and imprison our Traders, and confiscate their

Effects at Pleasure (as they have done for several Years past), murder and scalp our Farmers, with their Wives and Children, and take an easy Possession of such parts of the British Territory as they find most convenient for them; which if they are permitted to do, must end in the Destruction of the British Interest, Trade and Plantations in America.

Following his analysis, Franklin dramatically presented the alternatives in his snake cartoon—JOIN OR DIE. It is the first symbol of unification of the American colonies.<sup>28</sup> Although the idea of the union of the American colonies recurs repeatedly in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it had a semi-secret existence. British officials knew that the divided colonies were weak and feared that the colonies, if united, would desire independence. And Americans realized that the British regarded any suggestion of American independence as traitorous.<sup>29</sup>

But French hostilities sanctioned American unification. The Lords of Trade themselves proposed on September 18, 1753, that representatives from the various American colonies meet together to renew "the Covenant Chain with the Six Nations" of the Iroquois Confederacy and to decide how they might best counter the threat of French and Indian hostilities.<sup>30</sup> All thoughtful colonists, as well as the English officials concerned with the American colonies, realized that American unification would greatly strengthen the colonies and would help prepare them for eventual independence.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, "Earliest Device," 118.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Frothingham, *Rise of the Republic of the United States* (Boston, 1872), 101-57; and J.M. Bumsted, "Things in the Womb of Time: Ideas of American Independence, 1633 to 1763," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (1974), 533-64. In 1732, James Logan wrote (the manuscript exists only in Benjamin Franklin's holograph copy) that Great Britain kept "the several Colonies under distinct and independent Commands, the more effectually to Secure them from a Revolt from the Crown." Joseph C. Johnson, ed., "A Quaker Imperialist's View of the British Colonies in America: 1732," *PMHB* 60 (1936), 97-130, at 127. See also *Autobiography*, 113-14; and Lemay, *Canon*, 132-33.

<sup>30</sup> Robert C. Newbold, *The Albany Congress and Plan of Union of 1754* (New York, 1955), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Writing of the failure of the Albany Plan, August 9, 1755, James Maury (who became Thomas Jefferson's teacher early in 1758) judged: "A remedy for this evil [the separate status of the colonies], though obvious and practicable, and recommended seriously by several of His Majesty's governors here, the great men on your side of the water have not thought

Within a month after the snake cartoon appeared, Franklin left Philadelphia to attend the Albany conference. He arrived in New York City on June 5. On June 8 he circulated among the New York intellectuals a draft of his Albany Plan for American unification. The snake cartoon had prepared the way. Franklin even sent a copy of his news account and snake cartoon to Richard Partridge, Pennsylvania's official agent in England, requesting he have it reprinted in the "most publick Papers there."<sup>32</sup> The news account and the snake cartoon are not reprinted in the standard English magazines, so it seems unlikely that they appeared in the English newspapers.<sup>33</sup> But the device achieved fame in America. It was reprinted in two New York newspapers and two Boston newspapers.<sup>34</sup> Two months later, the *Virginia Gazette* of July 19, 1754, reported Colonel George Washington's defeat at Fort Mifflin. The editor concluded by recalling Franklin's cartoon: "Surely this will remove the Infatuation [of security] that seems to have prevailed too much among our Neighbors [i.e., the other colonies], and inforce a late ingenious Emblem worthy of their Attention and Consideration."<sup>35</sup>

But why did Franklin choose a snake as the figure in his emblem? For all Christians, the snake recalls the devil in the Garden of Eden. Pictures of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve with a snake by the base of an apple tree commonly appeared in colonial primers, children's books, fireplace tiles, and even on the iron plates of Pennsylvania German stoves.<sup>36</sup> Franklin, like everyone in the Western world, knew that the snake symbolized evil. Indeed, Franklin himself,

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proper to apply, from a principle in politics, which we on this side of it think more obvious than wise or just." Ann Maury, ed., *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family* (New York, 1852), 382. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston, 1948), 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Papers*, 5:273.

<sup>33</sup> I have only examined the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *London Magazine*, and the *Scots Magazine* for the period. Although the magazines generally reprinted the most interesting news from the past month, the news report and device may have appeared in some English newspaper and not been reprinted.

<sup>34</sup> Matthews, "The Snake Devices," 412n (on Franklin's movements), and 417 (for reprintings of the snake device).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>36</sup> For illustrations in primers, see Reilly, *Dictionary*, nos. 1609, 1619, 1623, 1627, 1631, 1635, 1639 (printed by Franklin), etc. For the stove plates, see Mercer, *The Bible in Iron*, nos. 85, 86, 88, and 89.

in the most significant previous use of the snake in American culture, had written that the rattlesnake was the most suitable exchange that America could make for the human serpents, the English convicts, that Britain shipped to the colonies.<sup>37</sup> Franklin's savage satire of 1751, "Rattlesnakes for Felons," which followed a long catalogue of vicious crimes perpetrated by English criminals who had been transported to America, was the most biting anti-English satire in the colonial American press before the Stamp Act.<sup>38</sup> In the minds of many colonial American intellectuals, Franklin's rattlesnake became the symbol not only of America, but also of American resentment and hostility to English imperialist practices. When Franklin used a cut snake as a symbol of American unification on May 9, 1754, it implied patriotic American feelings and recalled anti-English sentiments.

Nevertheless, Franklin would not have chosen the snake for his device unless it were also a traditional emblem of unity. The serpent is a universal symbol with multiple and rich meanings, a symbol of eternity, of life, of energy, of wisdom, of prudence, and of resurrection.<sup>39</sup> As a symbol of eternity and unity, it is most often shown in circular form, with its tail in its mouth.<sup>40</sup> Franklin knew the various symbolic meanings of the serpent, and when he wanted to portray colonial union, he evidently recalled a picture of a serpent cut into two that he had seen in a seventeenth-century emblem book. The divided snake appeared in Nicolas Verien's *Recueil D'Emblemes* (Paris, 1696), plate 61, no. 7 (Figure 4). The accompanying French motto reads "A serpent cut in two. Either join or die." ("Un Serpent coupe en deux. Se rejoindre ou mourir.")<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Papers*, 4:130-33.

<sup>38</sup> No general study exists of colonial American responses to English condescension. When such a study is made, Franklin will be the key figure. Although Anne Reynolds Phillips did not know that Franklin was the author, she judged that a reprinting of his May 9, 1759, essay (*Papers*, 8:340-56) was the finest piece on the American character to appear in the colonial press: Phillips, "Expressions of Cultural Nationalism in Early American Magazines, 1741-1789" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1953), 37-39.

<sup>39</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, tr. Jack Sage (New York, 1962), s.v. "serpent," 272-77. See also E. McClung Fleming, "Symbols of the Young Nation, 1765-1790," in William Vincent Shannon, et al., eds., *Symbols and Aspirations 1776-1976* (Cleveland, 1976), 25-62, at 47-48; and Fleming, "Seeing Snakes in the American Arts," *The Delaware Antiques Show 1969* (Wilmington, 1969), 75-85 (odd numbered pages only).

<sup>40</sup> For example, George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes* (1635; fac. ed., Columbia, SC, 1975), 102.

<sup>41</sup> Sommer, "Emblem and Device," 63, 65, first pointed out Franklin's probable source.

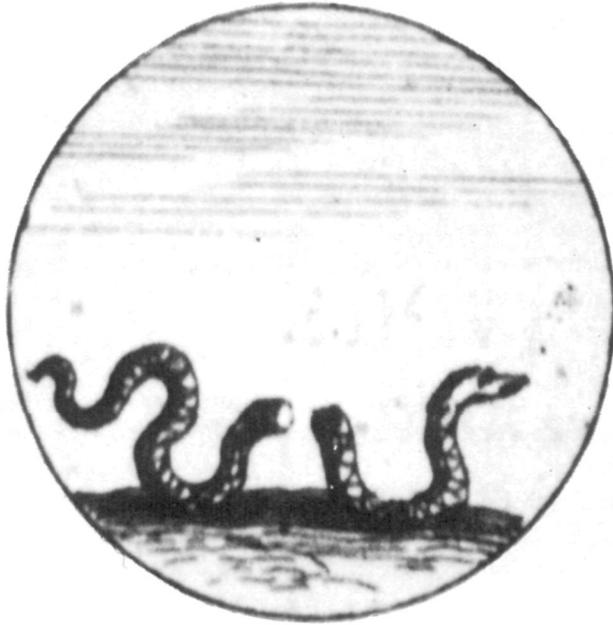


Figure 4

The cut-snake device. Engraving, 1696? From Nicolas Verien, *Recueil d'Emblemes* (Paris: J. Jombert, 1696), plate 61, no. 7.

### The Continental Currency Issues<sup>42</sup>

On June 23, 1775, the Continental Congress appointed Franklin to a committee "to get proper plates engraved, to provide paper and to agree with the printers" for the first issue of the Continental paper currency.<sup>43</sup> Franklin was the committee's expert, but he was overwhelmed with public responsibilities during the incredibly busy summer of 1775. In addition to his duties as a delegate to the Continental Congress, he was establishing a postal service, sitting on various

<sup>42</sup> The fundamental article on Franklin's designs for the Continental currency is Eric P. Newman, "Continental Currency and the Fugio Cent: Sources of Emblems and Mottoes," *Numismatist* 79 (1966), 1587-98. See also Newman, *The Early Paper Money of America* (Racine, 1976), 33-57; and Newman, "Benjamin Franklin and the Chain Design," *Numismatist* 96 (1983), 2271-84.

<sup>43</sup> Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789* (34 vols., Washington, 1904-37), 2:106 and 207.

congressional committees such as the one drawing up a petition to the king, encouraging schemes for manufacturing saltpeter, and serving as President of the Pennsylvania Assembly (in effect, governor). He could hardly spare the time to design ten new devices and mottos. Besides, a number of traditional ones were entirely suitable. He created three, but he took seven from the emblem books in his library. Six came from Joachim Camerarius, *Symbolorum ac Emblematus Ethico-Politicorum*, a four-volume work which Franklin owned in the Mainz, Germany, edition published in 1702. (His copy is extant in the Library Company of Philadelphia.)<sup>44</sup> And Franklin took one device from Diego de Saavedra Fajardo, *Idea Principia Christiano-Politics ci [101] Expressa* (Amsterdam, 1660).<sup>45</sup> When the currency appeared in September, Franklin published an essay explaining the various devices and mottos. The underlying purpose of his newspaper article, "Account of the Devices on the Continental Bills of Credit" (and of the actual devices on the bills), was to strengthen the resolve of the Americans to wage war. In 1775, the outlook was bleak. The conflict might be interminable. And the Americans had no existing Continental army. Franklin therefore emphasized unity, perseverance, and the certain future improvement of the presently miserable conditions. He began with a few expert remarks on how an "emblematical device" is rightly formed.<sup>46</sup>

The first specific device Franklin discussed is the eight-dollar bill, which contains the figure of a harp and the motto MAJORA MINORIBUS CONSONANT, translated as "The greater and smaller ones sound together." Franklin might have chosen this emblem first because it contained a favorite theme. According to him, the device urged not only unity and harmony between the separate colonies but especially between the "various ranks of people" within each. As we have seen, this egalitarian sentiment appeared earlier in his two original

<sup>44</sup> Edwin Wolf, 2nd, ascertained its provenance for Eric P. Newman: Newman, "Continental Currency," 1592. Library Company accession number Log. 1015.0.

<sup>45</sup> Like the Camerarius, the Library Company's copy of Saavedra (accession no. Log. 1203.D) was the gift of William McKenzie in 1828. Edwin Wolf, 2nd, believes it has the same provenance as the Camerarius and is from Franklin's library: Newman, "Continental Currency," 1592.

<sup>46</sup> This essay, signed "CLERICUS," on "the Devices on the Continental Bills of Credit" appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 20, 1775, p. 1. Although it is not in the appropriate chronological volume of the *Papers*, I showed in reviewing vol. 22 of the *Papers*, that it is by Franklin: *PMHB* 107 (1983), 147. See also my *Canon of Benjamin Franklin*, 122-24.

devices for the Associator flags. Franklin took the device from Saavedra, emblem number 61, p. 382. The Third Pennsylvania Regiment, authorized in 1777, borrowed the device and motto for its flag.<sup>47</sup>

He next wrote about the device on the four-dollar bill. It shows a wild boar rushing on the spear of a hunter. The Motto AUT MORS, AUT VITA DECORA ("either death or an honorable life") is the classical antecedent of Patrick Henry's famous phrase of March 23, 1775, "give me liberty or give me death." But Henry's speech was not widely reported in 1775, and Franklin's brief rendition of the Latin is "death or liberty." Franklin's emblem emphasizes the normal passivity of the boar (and, indirectly, of the colonists) but his determination when forced to action. Franklin adopted the emblem from Camerarius, 2:96, number 48. The Sixth Pennsylvania Regiment, raised in 1777, adopted the device and the motto for its flag.<sup>48</sup>

The three-dollar bill depicts "an eagle on the wing, pouncing upon a crane, who turns his back, and receives the eagle on the point of his long bill, which pierces the eagle's breast." The motto, EXITUS IN DUBIO EST, Franklin translated as "The event is uncertain." He stated that the eagle represents Great Britain, and the crane, America. The moral for America is "not to depend too much on the success of its *endeavours to avoid* the contest (by petition, negotiation, &c.) but to prepare for using the means of defence God and nature hath given it; and to the eagle, not to presume on its superior strength" for "a weaker bird may wound it mortally." Concluding his comment, he quoted the Latin couplet found with the device in Camerarius. He took the device from Camerarius, 3:64, emblem number 32. The Eighth Pennsylvania Regiment, raised in 1777, adopted the device and the motto for its flag.<sup>49</sup>

The five-dollar bill portrays a thorny bush with a hand trying to pull it up. Franklin wrote that "The hand appears to bleed, as pricked by the spines." (This detail cannot be discriminated in the small

<sup>47</sup> Edward W. Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1982), 42-44, 47, 190, and 288. In identifying the regiments that used the flags, I follow Richardson, 288.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-44, 48, 191, and 288.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

device in the paper bill, but it is clear in the original emblem.) The motto, *SUSTINE VEL ABSTINE*, he translated as "Either support or leave me." He said that the bush represents America, and the bleeding hand, England. Although the preceding device urged Americans to fight, this one asks that England either make peace or else leave the Americans alone. His final comment echoed a number of early American sermons, and, of course, their Biblical source: "so shall the hawthorn flourish, and form a hedge around it, annoying with her thorns only its invading enemies."<sup>50</sup> Franklin took the device from Camerarius, 1:82, emblem number 41. The Fifth Pennsylvania Regiment, raised in 1777, adopted the device and the motto for its flag.<sup>51</sup>

The six-dollar bill has "the figure of a beaver gnawing a large tree, with this motto, *PERSEVERANDO*, by perseverance." Franklin commented: "I apprehend the *great tree* may be intended to represent the enormous power Britain has assumed over us, and endeavours to enforce by arms, or taxing us at pleasure, and *binding us in all cases whatsoever*; or the exorbitant profits she makes by monopolizing our commerce." Franklin attacked, of course, the words of the Declaratory Act of March 18, 1766, and reiterated his nearly life-long protests against English restrictions on American commerce.<sup>52</sup> He recommended continuing to resist England: "Then the *beaver*, which is known to be able, by assiduous and steady working, to fell large trees, may signify America, which, by perseverance in her present measures, will probably reduce that power within proper bounds, and, by es-

<sup>50</sup> A W Plumstead, ed, *The Wall and the Garden Selected Massachusetts Election Sermons 1670 1775* (Minneapolis, 1968), 2, 30, 47, 147, and other references in the index, s v "wall"

<sup>51</sup> Richardson, *Standards and Colors*, 42 44, 48, 191, and 288

<sup>52</sup> Franklin's essay of 1751, "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind" was written to oppose English mercantilism Its central thesis is "The Danger therefore of these Colonies interfering with their Mother Country in Trades that depend on Labour, Manufactures, &c is too remote to require the attention of Great Britain" (*Papers*, 4 228) He bitterly pointed out to William Shirley in 1754 that "the private interest of a petty corporation or of any particular set of artificers or traders in England heretofore seem, in some instances, to have been more regarded than all the Colonies" (*Papers*, 5 449) His great satire of English mercantilism is "An Edict by the King of Prussia" (*Papers*, 20 413 18) The theme runs throughout Verner W Crane, ed, *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press 1758 1775* (Chapel Hill, 1950)

tablishing the most necessary manufactures among ourselves, abolish the British monopoly." Franklin took the device from Camerarius, 2:192, emblem number 96. The Seventh Pennsylvania Regiment, raised in 1777, adopted the device and motto for its flag.<sup>53</sup>

The one-dollar bill portrays the acanthus plant, sprouting on all sides under a weight placed upon it, with the motto *DEPRESSA RESURGIT*, which Franklin translated as "Tho' oppressed it rises." Franklin followed his source, Camerarius (who cites Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, lib. 4, cap. 1) in saying "The ancients tell us, that the sight of such an accidental circumstance gave the first hint to an architect, in forming the beautiful capital of the Corinthian Column." Franklin then attempted to use the example to inspire Americans: "This, perhaps, was intended to encourage us, by representing, that our present oppressions will not destroy us, but that they may, by increasing our industry, and forcing it into new courses, increase the prosperity of our country, and establish that prosperity on the *base* of liberty, and the well-proportioned *pillar* of property, elevated for a pleasing spectacle to all connoisseurs, who can *taste* and delight in the architecture of human happiness." Franklin thus drew forth a Poor Richard moral of industry and prosperity from the present oppression. Franklin took the device from Camerarius, 1:116, emblem number 58. The Twelfth Pennsylvania Regiment, raised in 1777, adopted the device and motto for its flag.<sup>54</sup>

The two-dollar bill shows a hand and flail over sheaves of wheat with the motto *TRIBULATIO DITAT*, which Franklin translated as "Threshing improves it." He went on to write a propagandistic bit of encouragement: This "may perhaps be intended to admonish us, that tho' at present we are under the flail, its blows, how hard soever, will be rather advantageous than hurtful to us: for they will bring forth every *grain* of genius and merit in arts, manufactures, war and council, that are now concealed in the bulk." The democratic belief underlying such statements is that presently undistinguished individuals in the "mob" possess all the possibilities for genius—and that these qualities will be brought forth by the demands of the

<sup>53</sup> Richardson, *Standards and Colors*, 42-44, 48, 191, and 288.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-44, 49, 193, and 288.

times.<sup>55</sup> Concluding the discussion, Franklin recurred to a Poor Richard sentiment: "The public distress too that arises from war, by increasing frugality and industry, often gives habits that remain after the distress is over, and thereby naturally *enriches* those on whom it has enforced those *enriching virtues*." Franklin took the device from Camerarius, 1:168, emblem number 84.

The seven-dollar bill "has for its device a storm descending from a black heavy cloud, with the motto, SERENABIT; it will clear up." Franklin wrote that the device "seems designed to encourage the dejected, who may be too sensible of present inconveniences, and fear their continuance. It reminds them, agreeable to the adage, that after a storm comes a calm." He reinforced his point with three lines from Horace. Franklin expressed the same sentiment and used the same quotation seven months earlier, in a letter to James Bowdoin.<sup>56</sup>

The motto is found in Camerarius, 2:44, emblem number 22, but Franklin evidently judged its figure too complex for reproduction in a small engraving. (Camerarius shows two bears fighting in a rain storm, with a clear sky in the distance.) Franklin made his figure a simple storm. Since the following two original emblems have similar motifs, it may have inspired them.<sup>57</sup>

The front of the twenty-dollar bill portrays a "tempestuous sea; a face, with swollen cheeks, wrapt up in a black cloud, appearing to

<sup>55</sup> On November 24, 1782, Benjamin Vaughan reported to Lord Shelburne that Franklin "thinks the lower people are as we see them, because oppressed; and then their situation in point of manners becomes the reason for oppressing them. But he is full of the measure of raising the sentiments and habits of all, as a thing that is wanting to contribute to the real *sensible* happiness of *both* orders—the rich and the poor." Letter in B. Vaughan Papers (American Philosophical Society).

<sup>56</sup> Horace, *Odes*, Book 2, ode 10, lines 15-18, 19-20. The Loeb Library translation says: "Though Jupiter brings back the unlovely winters, he, also, takes them away. If we fare ill to-day, 'twill not be ever so. Apollo does not always stretch the bow." Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, tr. C. E. Bennett (Cambridge, 1964) 131. *Papers*, 21:507.

<sup>57</sup> The supposition may shed light upon the essay's puzzling organization. One would expect Franklin to take up the bills in their numerical sequence, from \$1 to \$30. But I can discover no logic in their sequence. The essay's only structuring sequence is that the comments on the devices become more detailed (and more original) as the essay progresses. It is also surprising that Franklin does not give the bills' denominations (even if they are out of order). The denominations would aid the reader in following the essay, make it more interesting, and even aid the writer. (As it is, Franklin tried almost in vain to vary the openings of his paragraphs.) I suspect that Franklin wrote the essay as he decided upon the devices and before denominations were assigned to them.

blow violently on the waters, *the waves high, and all rolling one way*: the motto VI CONCITATE: which may be rendered, *raised by force*.” This is Franklin’s original design, and his sketch for it survives among his papers in the American Philosophical Society (Figures 5 and 6).<sup>58</sup> At first, he intended to use the motto VI VENTORUM CONCITATE but then evidently decided that VENTORUM was unnecessary. In commenting on the device, Franklin said: “From the remotest antiquity, in figurative language, great waters have signified *the people, and waves an insurrection*.”

Franklin used the same symbolism in his earlier writings to warn Great Britain that America might be driven to revolution. In his 1760 pamphlet, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered, With Regard to her Colonies*, Franklin had said that while “government is mild and just” and “while important civil and religious rights are secure,” the people “will be dutiful and obedient.” But an unjust, arbitrary government, “such as the Duke of Alva’s in the Netherlands,” would necessarily produce a rebellion. “The waves do not rise,” he said, “but when the winds blow.”<sup>59</sup> The threat was clear—if British administration of the colonies were not mild and just, if the rights and privileges of the Americans were violated, then the Americans would revolt. Eight years later, he employed a slightly different version of the proverb as the epigraph to his essay “Causes of the American Discontents before 1768”: “*The Waves never rise but when the Winds blow*.”<sup>60</sup> He there concluded his long list of the British violations of the colonial American rights of liberty and property with the warning that “this unhappy new system of politics tends to dissolve those bands of union [between Great Britain and America], and to sever us for ever.”<sup>61</sup>

Franklin’s original device recurs to the archetypal imagery (perhaps best known from *Revelations* 17:15) he had previously used, and it absolves the Americans of any active part in fomenting war. In the essay on the paper money devices Franklin explained: “The people

<sup>58</sup> Franklin Papers, L, ii, 45 (American Philosophical Society); reproduction in *Papers*, 22: facing p. 358.

<sup>59</sup> *Papers*, 9:91.

<sup>60</sup> *Papers*, 15:3.

<sup>61</sup> *Papers*, 15:12-13.

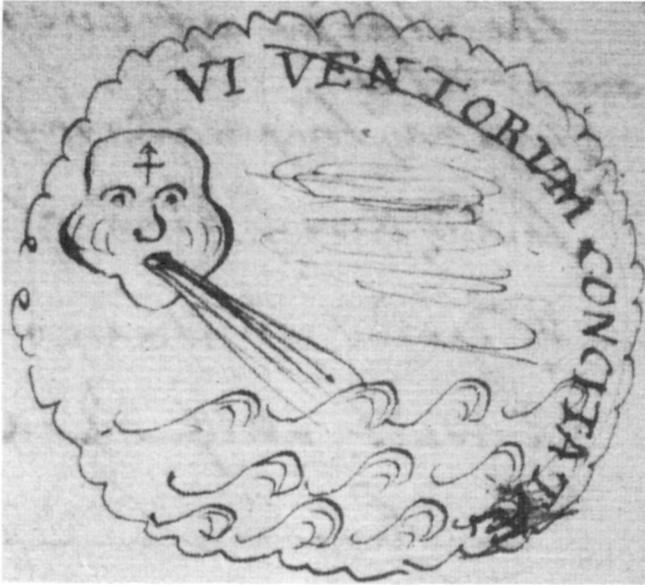


Figure 5

VI CONCITATE sketch. Ink on paper, 1775. Franklin Papers, L, ii, 45 (American Philosophical Society). Reproduced by permission of the American Philosophical Society.



Figure 6

The front of the \$20 bill, Continental Currency. Engraving, 1775, showing Franklin's design. Reproduced by permission from the collection of Eric P. Newman.

of themselves are supposed as naturally inclined to be still, as the waters to remain level and quiet. Their rising here appears not to be from any internal cause, but from an external power, expressed by the head of AEolus, God of the winds (or *Boreas*, the *North* wind, as usually the most violent) acting furiously upon them." Here Franklin covertly attacked Lord North, who was, in effect, England's Prime Minister, and whose speech in Parliament on April 19, 1774, confirmed Franklin's worst opinion of England's official contempt for the American colonists.<sup>62</sup> Franklin added that: "The black cloud perhaps designs the British Parliament, and the waves the colonies. Their rolling all in one direction shows, that the very force used against them has produced their unanimity."

The companion piece for the storm at sea appeared on the back of the twenty-dollar bill and also, side by side with the storm device, on the back of the thirty-dollar bill. This device portrays "A smooth sea; the sails of ships on that sea hanging loose show a perfect calm; the sun shining fully denotes a clear sky. The motto is CESSANTE VENTO, CONQUIESCEMUS," which Franklin translated as "The wind ceasing, we shall be quiet." Franklin commented: "Supposing my explanation of the preceding device to be right, this will probably import, that when those violent acts of power, which have roused the colonies, are repealed, they will return to their former tranquility. Britain seems thus charged with being the sole cause of the present civil war, at the same time that the only mode of putting an end to it is thus plainly pointed out to her." If Franklin drew a picture of this device, it is not extant, although he did write out the motto under his sketch for the former emblem.

The last bill of Continental currency authorized in 1775 was the thirty-dollar note. Its face shows "a wreath of laurel on a marble monument, or altar" with the motto SI RECTE FACIES, translated by Franklin "*if you act rightly*." Franklin wrote: "This seems intended as an encouragement of a brave and steady conduct in defence of

<sup>62</sup> See Franklin's "An Open Letter to Lord North," *Papers*, 21:183-86. North's speech of April 19, 1774, is excerpted in Bernhard Knollenberg, *Growth of the American Revolution 1766-1775* (New York, 1975), 118. Franklin attacked North's speech in an essay (on the rattlesnake as an emblem of America) published in the *Pennsylvania Journal*, Dec. 27, 1775, just three months after this essay. Although the rattlesnake essay is also not in the appropriate volume of the *Papers*, I have recently attributed it to Franklin: Lemay, review in *PMHB* (see above, n. 46), at 148, and *The Canon of Benjamin Franklin*, 124-26.

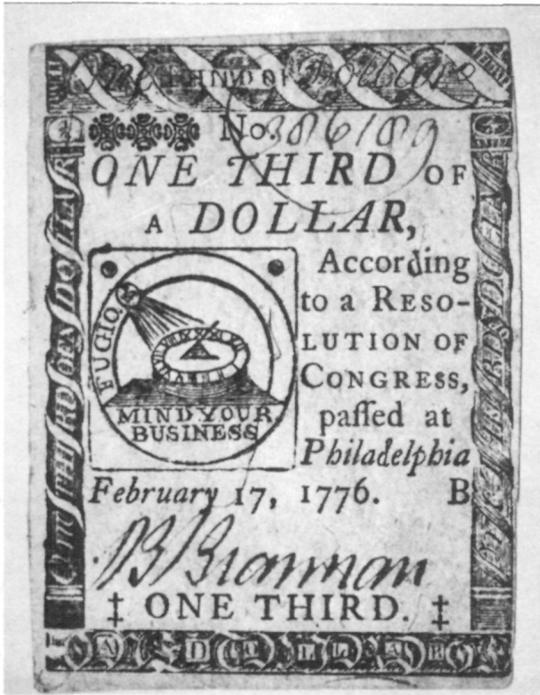


Figure 7

Front of fractional Continental Currency, showing the first use of the FUGIO design. Engraving, 1776. Reproduced by permission from the collection of Eric P. Newman.

our liberties, as it promises to crown with honour, by the laurel wreath, those who persevere to the end in *well-doing*; and with a long duration of that honour, expressed by the *monument of marble*." This device too he took from Camerarius, 1:100, emblem number 50.

On February 17, 1766, Congress passed a resolution calling for the issuance of four million more dollars, one million of which was to be in new denominations: one-sixth, one-third, one-half, and two-thirds of a dollar. Franklin created two new devices for the additional denominations. For the front of the fractional dollar bills, he designed a rebus, consisting of a sun shining down on a sun dial and the Latin word FUGIO on the left. Underneath the picture appears the English motto MIND YOUR BUSINESS (Figure 7). Literally the rebus states "I, the sun, fly; MIND YOUR BUSINESS." The idea is clear: time is flying, so get to work.

Franklin's inspiration may well have been the hourglass emblems

(in the popular emblem books) which usually warn of death's approach and often directly urge religious reformation.<sup>63</sup> Franklin secularized their message. Indeed, Franklin probably alluded to two subsidiary meanings in the motto MIND YOUR BUSINESS. Franklin used the proverb, "Drive thy business, or it will drive thee," in his almanac for 1744.<sup>64</sup> MIND YOUR BUSINESS recalls that proverb and implies that if you do not mind your business, poverty and necessity will follow. The second subsidiary meaning attacks an aspect of the puritan ethic. MIND YOUR [OWN] BUSINESS: i.e., do not meddle in the (moral) affairs of others. In light of the secondary meanings of the motto, Franklin's rebus suggests both a secularization of the common *tempus fugit* motifs of colonial America (which usually appeared in religious contexts associated with death, e.g., gravestones and funeral elegies) and a direct attack on the characteristic busy-bodiness of Puritanism.<sup>65</sup> The device was later used in 1787 on the first official copper coinage of the United States, suitably called the fugio cent.<sup>66</sup>

Franklin's last design for the Continental currency was widely adopted. It consists of an interlinked chain of thirteen circles bearing the names of the colonies, surrounding a sun-burst containing the motto AMERICAN CONGRESS in a circle, and within it, a small circle containing the motto WE ARE ONE. This device appeared on the back of the fractional dollar bills (Figure 8). (Franklin's entire series of drawings for it are extant in the Franklin Papers at the American Philosophical Society.) The first drawing carefully shows thirteen interlinked circles surrounding a circle; the second shows the whole enclosed within a ring and a large sun-burst emanating out beyond the interlinked circles; and the third and final design shows

<sup>63</sup> For example, Wither, *Collection of Emblemes*, 212, 235, and 257.

<sup>64</sup> *Papers*, 2:399; for variants, see *Papers*, 2:197; repeated in *The Way to Wealth, Papers*, 7:342.

<sup>65</sup> The entries in [William George Smith], *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, third ed., rev. F. P. Wilson (Oxford, 1970), 533, s. v. "Mind (Meddle with) your (own) business," prove that the saying was often used in just this way. I have shown that Franklin earlier satirized this puritan characteristic: Lemay, "The Text, Rhetorical Strategies, and Themes of 'The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,'" in Lemay, ed., *The Oldest Revolutionary* (Philadelphia, 1976), 91-120.

<sup>66</sup> Sylvester S. Crosby, *The Early Coins of America* (1875; rpt. New York, 1970), 297-302; and Eric P. Newman, "The 1776 Continental Currency Coinage," *Coin Collector's Journal* 19, no. 4 (July-August 1952), 4-6.

a series of thirteen interlinked circles as the outside border, enclosing the motto AMERICAN CONGRESS written in circular form and within those two words, a small circle containing the motto WE ARE ONE (Figure 9).<sup>67</sup>

Although the idea for interlinked circles showing both individual unity and interdependence of the individual parts is archetypal and although Franklin may have known it from many sources, he was also undoubtedly familiar with the three interlinked circles that appeared in his copy of Camerarius, volume one, emblem number 99. From the paper currency of 1776, the motif of thirteen interlinked circles spread to other patriotic uses.<sup>68</sup> The second New Hampshire Regiment, raised in 1777, chose the device for its flag. Franklin's design may also have influenced the Newburyport, Massachusetts, company flag.<sup>69</sup> When Robert Morris was United States Agent of Marine, he had Franklin's old friend Josiah Wedgwood make him a set of china that featured the arms of the Continental navy, surrounded by thirteen interlinked circles labeled with the colonies' names.<sup>70</sup> The device appeared on a medal of 1783 celebrating the end of the Revolution and, later, on an Indian peace medal. It was repeated on the back of the first official U.S. coinage, the fugio cent of 1787, as well as the liberty cent of 1793. It appeared on Chinese export porcelain, on Liverpool transfer print china, on patriotic prints, and even on a George Washington inaugural commencement button.<sup>71</sup>

\* \* \* \*

The two cartoons and two groups of devices that I have briefly surveyed share six characteristics. First, they are all easy to understand. Franklin knew the scholarly theories and aristocratic traditions set

<sup>67</sup> Franklin Papers, LVIII, 151 (American Philosophical Society); the second and third ones are reproduced in *Papers*, 22: facing p. 358. All three are reproduced in Newman, "Chain Design," 2278 and 2280.

<sup>68</sup> David P. McBride, "Linked Rings," *Numismatist* 92 (1979), 2373-91.

<sup>69</sup> Richardson, *Standards and Colors*, 99-101, 209, 302-6. Richardson suggests (p. 303) that this flag may really have been the standard of the 11th Massachusetts Regiment of 1777 or of Seth Warner's Continental Regiment.

<sup>70</sup> Ellouise Baker Larsen, *American Historical Views on Staffordshire China*, (rev. ed., Garden City, 1950), 199 (no. 502). Illustrated in Homer Eaton Keyes, "An English Friend of American Liberty," *Antiques* 76 (November 1959), 446-49, at 449; and in John C. Millar, *Treasures of Independence* (New York, 1980), nos. 47-48.

<sup>71</sup> McBride, "Linked Rings," *passim*.

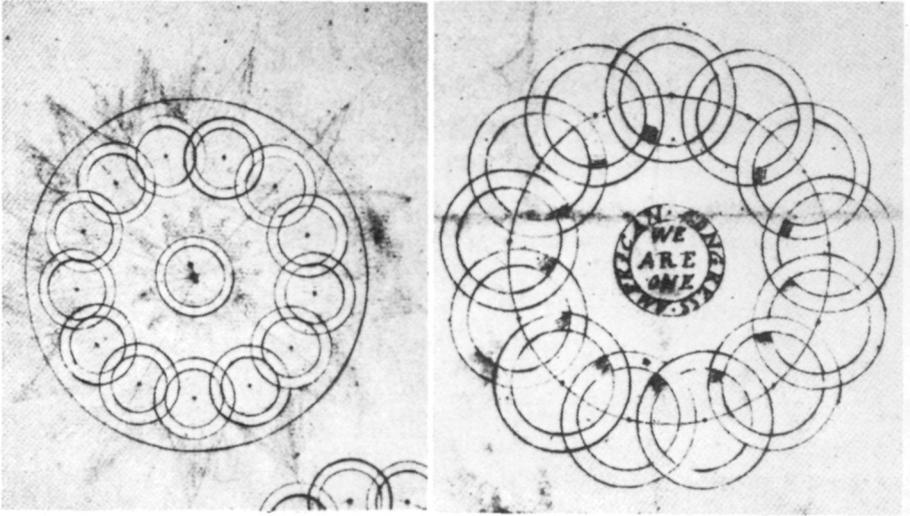


Figure 8

Franklin's original sketches for the thirteen interlinked circles. Ink on paper, 1776. Franklin Papers, LVIII, 151 (American Philosophical Society). Reproduced by permission of the American Philosophical Society.



Figure 9

Back of fractional Continental Currency, showing the first use of the interlinked circle design. Engraving, 1776. Reproduced by permission from the collection of Eric P. Newman.

forth in the emblem books.<sup>72</sup> Emblem book authors commonly said that proper devices should not be accessible to or understandable by the ignorant herd.<sup>73</sup> Devices should be the delight of learned scholars. They should have an element of wonder and awe in them and should be intrinsically beautiful and fascinating. Their subtle meanings should become clear only after sustained attention. Further, the "soul" or motto should never be in the native language of the maker of the device.<sup>74</sup> Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century emblem books were like today's most difficult crossword puzzles. Only a devoted and talented cognoscente, learned in their peculiar arcane mysteries (which, of course, are traditional within the genre and frequently repeated), can solve them. In his practice, Franklin deliberately ignored the aristocratic theories of the emblem writers. He chose instead the "superficial" tradition that they condemned.<sup>75</sup>

Second, Franklin's devices are all *rhetorical* symbols. They do not attempt to fascinate their viewers but to persuade them to take a certain course of action. They usually embody commonly shared values. They are propaganda—directed to the ordinary person.

Third, Franklin's designs either are directly taken from existing traditional symbols or present adaptations that modify traditional designs. In Franklin's version of the "Hercules and the Wagoneer" cartoon—which was, after all, created to illustrate Aesop's fable in Dilworth's *New Guide*—only some details of the wagon are original. Its application to a pressing political situation and its extraordinary suitability for Franklin's purposes give it force. Similarly, the cut-snake cartoon is a mere copy—except, of course, that the snake is cut into more pieces than its model and labeled with the names of the American colonies. But in its particular context, it is brilliant propaganda. Of the twenty Associator flags, eighteen use traditional symbols, while the two original figures adapt and change standard

<sup>72</sup> The opening remarks in his essay on the devices and mottos on the Continental currency (above, n. 46) paraphrase part of the standard emblem theory.

<sup>73</sup> Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery* (2nd ed., Rome, Italy, 1964), 58-59, 62-63.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. Praz quotes an early emblem book theorist who directly condemns the kind of "useless and superfluous" pictures that "serve only as a pastime for children like the pictures in Aesop's fables" (p. 82, my italics).

devices. And of the eleven Continental currency bills in the 1775 issue, only three devices are new, and they all use traditional symbols or mottos. But once again, it is the extraordinary suitability of the body (the figure) and the soul (the motto) for the existing circumstance that makes the device memorable. Of course, Franklin created two more devices for the 1776 Continental currency; these also adapt traditional ideas and forms.

Fourth, they are nationalistic and proto-American. Just as the stove in the fireplace for Franklin's illustration for fable ten of Dilworth's *New Guide* is an example of *The New Invented Pennsylvania Fire-Place* (to borrow Franklin's own name for the Franklin stove), so the wagon portrayed in the *Plain Truth* cartoon is the unique but extraordinary practical wagon evolving in early Pennsylvania. The wagon, like the stove, was cause for nationalistic pride. Of course the two original devices for the flags of the Associators (numbers II and XI) also portrayed local dress and customs. The cut-snake cartoon, that first emblem of the union of the American colonies, was a nationalistic device. Franklin's propagandistic devices (and his interpretations of them) on the paper money of 1775 also were patriotic, as was the great device of the interlinked circles on the 1776 fractional currency.

Fifth, they are democratic and egalitarian. Working within a basically aristocratic and esoteric tradition, Franklin transformed it into a public and democratic one. The traditional symbols he chose are all relatively obvious; and when there can be any doubt of their meaning, Franklin explained them. Moreover, his original devices commonly have a democratic message. Although emblems, devices, and illustrations were all gradually becoming more accessible in the eighteenth century (as the gradual development of children's illustrated books proves), Franklin dramatically illustrated the process of change. And the democratic aesthetic present in the devices complemented his known political principles as well as the underlying philosophy of his other artistic endeavors, whether in music<sup>76</sup> or in literature. Indeed, the characteristically informal and egalitarian tendencies of Franklin's prose paved the way for the development of

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Schiller, "Franklin as a Music Critic," *New England Quarterly* 31 (1958), 505-14; and especially M. E. Grenander, "Reflections on the String Quartet(s) Attributed to Franklin," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975), 73-87.

English and especially American writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>77</sup>

Sixth, and last, they are *visual* pictures. As a printer, Franklin knew the appeal of a picture. One picture, goes the old saying, is worth a thousand words. Franklin's primary medium and genius were verbal. His youthful ambition was to become a great writer, not a great artist.<sup>78</sup> He could draw, make woodcuts, and engrave; and he emphasized the importance of some art training in his writings on education;<sup>79</sup> but he did not think of himself as an artist. Nevertheless, he is among the most visually conscious writers of eighteenth-century America: he frequently used emblems, devices, and visual pictures, and he deliberately attempted to create visual effects through his writing. In these respects, the only colonial American authors who surpass Franklin are William Byrd of Westover and Dr. Alexander Hamilton of Annapolis.<sup>80</sup> After all, Franklin created the most famous

<sup>77</sup> Richard Bridgman, *The Colloquial Style in America* (New York, 1966), documents the development of the colloquial tendencies of the American literary language. Unfortunately, the only study of Franklin's prose is vitiated by its use of poor texts: Lois M. McLaren, *Franklin's Vocabulary* (Garden City, 1928). Although Howard Mumford Jones, in "American Prose Style: 1700-1770," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 6 (1934), 115-51, says he surveys American prose from Cotton Mather to Benjamin Franklin, he ignores Franklin, perhaps because he thought Franklin's clear, plain, informal, and frequently colloquial prose style was so well known. Franklin was less colloquial than Samuel Clemens, but the times had changed. To see how colloquial he was in his own time—and for some years thereafter—one has only to examine what conservatives thought of his style. Writing in the Philadelphia *Port Folio* on February 14, 1801, Joseph Dennie declaimed against Franklin as "the founder of that Grub-street sect, who have professedly attempted to degrade literature to the level of vulgar capacities, and debase the polished and current language of books, by the vile alloy of provincial idioms, and colloquial barbarism, the shame of grammar, and akin to any language, rather than English" (*Autobiography*, 252). A foremost student of the history of journalism, Talcott Williams, believed that "more than any other one man, Franklin, the newspaper man, saved us from a separation and divorce of the English of the people from the English of the writer." Williams, *The Newspaperman* (New York, 1922), 109. (I am indebted to Professor Edward A. Nickerson for calling the last reference to my attention.)

<sup>78</sup> *Autobiography*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> "Drawing is a kind of Universal Language, understood by all Nations. . . . Drawing is no less useful to a *Mechanic* than to a Gentleman." *Papers*, 3:404n.

<sup>80</sup> Besides having an extraordinary interest in the arts, Hamilton was an artist himself. See Anna Wells Rutledge, "Portraits in Varied Media," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 41 (1946), 282-326; and Wells, "A Humorous Artist in Colonial Maryland," *American Collector* 16 (February, 1947), 8-9, 14-15. Dr. Sarah Elizabeth Freeman has discussed Hamilton's various designs for the Tuesday Club medal (which uses the clasped hands motif) in "The

single scene in all American literature, his entrance into Philadelphia, dirty and dishevelled from his journey, his pockets "stuff'd out with Shirts and Stockings," a roll under each arm and munching on the third.<sup>81</sup> Franklin knew the value of a picture.

### Appendix I: Flags for the Associator Companies

In the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 12, 1747/8 (No. 996) and April 16, 1748 (No. 1009), Franklin published descriptions of twenty of the devices and mottos he made for the Associator Company flags. They are listed below in the manner Franklin rendered them.

DEVICES and MOTTOES painted on some of the Silk Colours of the Regiments of ASSOCIATORS, in and near *Philadelphia*.

I. A Lion erect, a naked Scymeter in one Paw, the other holding the *Pennsylvania* Scutcheon. Motto, PRO PATRIA.

II. Three Arms, wearing different Linnen, ruffled, plain and chequed; the Hands joined by grasping each the other's Wrist, denoting the Union of all Ranks. Motto, UNITA VIRTUS VALET.

III. An Eagle, the Emblem of Victory, descending from the Skies. Motto, A DEO VICTORIA.

IV. The Figure of LIBERTY, sitting on a Cube, holding a Spear with the Cap of Freedom on its Point. Motto, INESTIMABILIS.

V. An armed Arm, with a naked Faulchion in its Hand. Motto, DEUS ADJUVAT FORTES.

VI. An Elephant, being the Emblem of a Warrior always on his Guard, as that Creature is said never to lie down, and hath his Arms ever in Readiness. Motto, SEMPER PARATUS.

VII. A City walled round. Motto, SALUS PATRIAE, SUMMA LEX.

VIII. A Soldier, with his Piece recover'd, ready to present. Motto, SIC PACEM QUERIMUS.

IX. A Coronet and Plume of Feathers. Motto, IN GOD WE TRUST.

X. A Man with a Sword drawn. Motto, PRO ARIS ET FOCIS. &c. &c.

XI. Three of the Associators marching with their Muskets shoul-

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Tuesday Club Medal," *Numismatist* 57 (1945), 1313-22. For Hamilton's amusing disquisition on medals, see Robert Micklus, "Dr. Alexander Hamilton's *The History of the Tuesday Club*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1980), 472-75.

<sup>81</sup> *Autobiography*, 20.

der'd, and dressed in different Clothes, intimating the Unanimity of the different Sorts of People in the Association; Motto, *Vis Unita Fortior*.

XII. A Musket and Sword crossing each other; Motto, *Pro Rege & Grege*.

XIII. Representation of a Glory, in the Middle of which is wrote *Jehovah Nissi*, in English, The Lord our Banner.

XIV. A Castle, at the Gate of which a Soldier stands Centinel; Motto, *Cavendo Tutus*.

XV. David, as he advanced against Goliah, and flung the Stone; Motto, *In Nomine Domini*.

XVI. A Lion rampant, one Paw holding up a Scymiter, another on a Sheaf of Wheat; Motto, *Domine Protege Alimentum*.

XVII. A sleeping Lion; Motto, *Rouze me if you dare*.

XVIII. Hope, represented by a Woman standing cloathed in blue, holding one Hand on an Anchor; Motto, *Spero per Deum vincere*.

XIX. The Duke of Cumberland as a General; Motto, *Pro Deo & Georgio Rege*.

XX. A Soldier on Horseback; Motto, *Pro Libertate Patriae*.

## Appendix II: The Eagle and the Turkey

I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen as the Representative of our Country; he is a Bird of bad moral Character . . . in Truth, the Turk'y is in comparison a much more respectable Bird, and withal a true original Native of America.—Benjamin Franklin

When Franklin wrote his daughter Sarah on January 26, 1784, these disparaging remarks about the eagle, he was serious, but he was also joking. He had himself used the eagle on one of the Associator flags that he designed in 1747. Number III was "An eagle, the Emblem of Victory, descending from the Skies." He had also used the eagle (and the crane) on the three-dollar bill in 1775, and he knew the eagle as the very first emblem in volume three of his edition of *Camerarius*. Furthermore, Franklin proved the year before he wrote these comments to Sarah that he had no major objections to the

official seal of the United States. Indeed, Franklin immediately put the official seal to good use.<sup>82</sup>

When he received the United States instrument of ratification of the preliminary articles of peace for the Treaty of Paris in May 1783, it contained an impression of the Great Seal of the United States from the first die of 1782. Franklin had an engraving made of this impression. He then used it as the ornament on the title page of *Constitutions des Treize Etats-Unis de l'Amerique*, which he had printed on his private press at Passy, France, that very month, May 1783. It is the first appearance of the Arms of the United States in any printed book.<sup>83</sup> Franklin again used the device on the title page of *The Definitive Treaty between Great Britain, and the United States of America, Signed at Paris, the 3d day of September 1783*, which was printed on his Passy press in September 1783.

Why then the satire in his letter to his daughter? The subject of his letter was the Society of the Cincinnati, a hereditary organization of the officers who had served three years or more in the United States or French military services during the American Revolution. Franklin found the whole idea of the Society undemocratic and distasteful. The letter to Sarah makes fun of the Society. Franklin had just seen the medals that Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant had secured in France for the Society. Franklin ridiculed the eagle on those medals. His first criticism, however, hardly complimented the turkey. He said that some persons found fault with the medal because the bald eagle on it looked "too much like a Dindon," or turkey-cock. One may well wonder if anyone other than Franklin really made this criticism. The implications of a *dindon* in France are similar to those of a turkey in America—a vain, strutting fool comes to mind. In effect, Franklin criticized the wearers of the emblem as, according to the common French colloquialism, "un franc dindon," or, as we might say, a thoroughly vain goose. Franklin did go on to

<sup>82</sup> Patterson and Dougall, *The Eagle and the Shield*, 383-85.

<sup>83</sup> William E. Lingelbach points out that the publishers of the first American edition of the *Constitutions* (1781) "couldn't make use of the seal, for it hadn't been adopted, but the editors of the Boston edition (1785) and the New York edition (1786), less sensitive to its significance than was Franklin, did not use it either." Lingelbach, "B. Franklin, Printer—New Source Materials," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 92 (1948), 79-100, at 98.

praise the turkey as "a true original Native of America," but he also added that the turkey was "a little vain and silly, it is true, but not the worse emblem for that." Franklin was saying that the vanity and silliness of the turkey made it suitable for the badge of the Order of the Cincinnati. At the same time, he praised the turkey as a fitting emblem for military officers, because the turkey was "a Bird of Courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards, who should presume to invade his Farm Yard with a red Coat on."<sup>84</sup>

In addition to joking about the whole matter and satirizing the aristocratic and hereditary principles of the Society of the Cincinnati, Franklin did have an undercurrent of seriousness in his criticism of the eagle as the national emblem of the United States. America was a society based upon new principles of republicanism. But the eagle was traditionally a symbol of military prowess, of aristocracy, and of feudalism. Franklin knew the traditional associations and chafed at them. His mock praise of the turkey and mock criticism of the eagle ridiculed the old traditional European aristocratic values and asserted the rise of domestic, democratic, and middle-class culture.

But Franklin always had good common sense, and he would never have proposed the turkey as an emblem of the United States. It was entirely unsuitable. Some underlying implications of the Arms of the United States may have disappointed Franklin, but he knew that perfection was not to be found in this world. He immediately recognized and adopted the eagle as an entirely traditional and suitable emblem for the Arms of America.

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<sup>84</sup> Smyth, ed., *Writings*, 8:166-68.

