

“Extraordinary Freedom and great Humility”: A Reinterpretation of Deborah Franklin

WITH THE IMPORTANT EXCEPTION OF ABIGAIL ADAMS, portrayals of the “founding mothers” of the United States have been far from complimentary. Historians have tended to dismiss these women, who invariably suffer from comparisons to their more famous spouses, as one-dimensional, insignificant, and uneducated. No individual has suffered more acutely than Deborah Read Rogers Franklin (ca. 1704–1774), wife of Benjamin Franklin, whose activities have been all but obliterated by her husband’s considerable shadow. In order to preserve the carefully crafted image of her husband single-handedly rising from obscurity to achieve success and international fame, historians have portrayed Deborah¹ as servile rather than as an active contributor to the

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¹ When writing for a scholarly audience, historians have traditionally refrained from addressing historical figures by their given names, instead referring to them by their family name. In writing about the distinct activities of husband and wife, relying on traditional methods produces a degree of confusion. In an effort to produce clear references, and rejecting the gendered connotations of referring to the subject as “Franklin’s wife,” I have chosen to refer to Deborah Read Rogers Franklin and Benjamin Franklin by their given names. By no means does this imply a level of disrespect to the Franklins or an assumption of familiarity with these historical figures, but rather should be perceived as an attempt to produce a clear, readable paper free of gendered language. In footnotes describing correspondence, Deborah Franklin and Benjamin Franklin are referred to as DF and BF respectively. For an example of how historians have dealt with this dilemma see Edith B. Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, 1992).

success of Benjamin's political career and the Franklin household.² Her obscurity is compounded by a shortage of surviving documentary evidence of her life, although historians have failed to consult several diaries and letters that shed light on her activities.

By incorporating both a gendered analysis and an examination of grass-roots political activity, a more complex portrait of Deborah emerges: one that admits both her considerable business acumen and her assertive political voice. Although Deborah's activities were unique in the context of her colonial contemporaries, her experiences were often replicated by women in the next generation of political activists, including by her daughter Sarah (Sally). This essay will provide a broader portrait of an elite white woman's life during the colonial period; one that develops a definition of women's roles that includes participation in both the public and private spheres.³ Deborah Franklin's experiences foreshadow the active role women played during the American Revolution and the early national period; a role that moved beyond the hearth and expanded the possibilities for women's active involvement in politics.⁴

² The life of Deborah Franklin is hardly mentioned in her husband's autobiography. In *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (Knoxville, 1981), Deborah is mentioned a mere nine times, eight of which deal exclusively with the couples courtship and marriage. In reflecting on their marriage, Franklin notes "she prov'd a good & faithful Helpmate" (71) and "She assisted me cheerfully in my Business." (76) Through his autobiography, Franklin develops an image of himself as a self-made man, the embodiment of American individualism. Linda K. Kerber notes that the language of individualism has limitations, especially for gender relations: "But that language is also inadequate, also limits the ways in which people think, because it has not been acknowledged that the language of individualism has been a male-centered discourse, that its imagery has traditionally served the self interest of men, whatever their class." (Kerber, "Can a Woman Be an Individual?: The Discourse of Self-Reliance," in *American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-National Context*, ed. Richard O. Curry and Lawrence B. Goodheart (Kent, Ohio, 1991), 166.)

³ For a broader discussion of women and politics, see Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca, 2000); Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven, 1986); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Alan Tully, *Forming American Politics: Ideas, Interests and Institutions in Colonial New York and Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1994); Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2001).

⁴ Scholarship by Mary Beth Norton and Linda Kerber has also addressed this issue, focusing on the considerable contributions of women during the American Revolution. Given her declining health after 1765 and her death before the beginning of the Revolution, Deborah Franklin is unfortunately excluded from these two important reinterpretations. In *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980), Mary Beth Norton emphasizes the "troika" that defines women's roles of wife, mother, and household mistress. Norton concludes that while the line between the feminine sphere and the public sphere was less defined in

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Women of the colonial world have been characterized as "good wives," a customary title highlighted by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*.⁵ As implied by the title, Ulrich's study focuses on women's roles within the household. Women assumed various gendered roles: wife, mother, mistress, and most important for this discussion, deputy husband. According to Ulrich, while women performed admirably in the absence of their husbands, their activities provide little evidence of independence or of rebellion against traditional gender roles. In serving as substitute or "deputy" husbands, women adopted their husbands' public role, not to promote their own interests, but solely to promote the interests of their husbands. While this argument explains many of Deborah's economic activities, Ulrich's model neglects to take into account women's broader participation in traditionally male spheres of influence and deemphasizes the possibility that women could act independently of their husbands' interests. By harnessing her social standing, her economic and political power, and the power derived from her famous husband, Deborah Franklin was able to sustain a level of independence and freedom of action unusual for women in colonial America.

Historians' interpretations of Deborah's life generally do not begin until her marriage to Benjamin. Scholars have often questioned the rationale behind Benjamin's common-law marriage to Deborah in 1730. Benjamin is most often portrayed as Deborah's savior, freeing her from a life of disgrace and poverty. One recent historian applauds him for "marrying prudently, to a woman unlikely to accompany his restless mind or to seduce him from the world of free speculation with an overwhelming tenderness."⁶ And historians who have projected Benjamin's later financial

the wake of the Revolution, woman's public activities remained firmly bound to her domestic responsibilities. Focusing more on the political activities of revolutionary women, Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980), examines the implications of these activities for women in the nineteenth century. Noting that women had no intellectual tradition to facilitate their transition into the male-dominated world of politics, Kerber recognizes the limited effect the Revolution had on breaking down the barriers to women entering the public sphere. While women played an active role in revolutionary politics, the conservative nature of the Revolution necessitated that the proper boundaries for women's political activities be defined within traditionally female spheres.

⁵ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, 1982).

⁶ Ormond Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life* (University Park, Pa., 1988) 129.

and social prominence backward have interpreted his marriage at best as a good business decision and at worst as a social and economic blunder.

Deborah's position within the Franklin household during the early years of her marriage, historians concur, was an important one, as subordinate yokemate, supporting Benjamin's printing business and ensuring the success of the family. Working side-by-side in their print shop/stationary store/post office, the Franklins built one of the most successful printing ventures in the colonies between 1730 and 1748. Though documentary evidence of Deborah's activities during this period is sparse, Franklin himself conceded in his *Autobiography*, "She proved a good and faithful helpmate . . . We throve together and have mutually endeavor'd to make each other happy."⁷

According to most accounts, Deborah's life radically changed in 1757, with her husband's nomination by the Pennsylvania Assembly to serve as the colony's agent to England. His departure in June would be the first of two extended sojourns in England, necessitating his separation from her for years at a time. As Claude-Anne Lopez writes, "when Benjamin Franklin entered political life, she lost him."⁸ But Deborah in fact seized the role of a *feme sole* in her husband's absence. Deborah executed the tasks at hand admirably and often went beyond the prescriptions of a deputy husband. Her handling of financial matters, business enterprises, and family issues indicates a high degree of independence during this period, borne not only of necessity but of her importance to Benjamin as his representative in America.

No period of Deborah's life has been more misinterpreted than the years after 1757 when Benjamin labored for the colonial cause in England. Historians have portrayed this phase of the Franklins' marriage in a predominately negative light. One biographer describes Benjamin as "escaping from his wife, the shrill, dumpy and semi-literate Deborah." Surrounded in England by wit, beauty, and power, writes another, the "neither educated nor interesting" Deborah paled in comparison.⁹ One almost wonders if Franklin scholars must portray Deborah in such a negative light in order to justify Benjamin's extended absence from Philadelphia. No doubt Benjamin enjoyed and even flourished in London

⁷ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 71.

⁸ Claude-Anne Lopez, "Deborah Read Franklin," in *American National Biography*, ed. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York, 1999), 397.

⁹ Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 188; David T. Morgan, *The Devious Dr. Franklin, Colonial Agent: Benjamin Franklin's Years in London* (Macon, Ga., 1996), 17.



Deborah Read Rogers Franklin (ca. 1704–1774), Simpson Plates, no. 91. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

society, but his letters indicate that at least part of his heart was in America. Driven by a sense of purpose, Benjamin never stopped hoping for diplomatic success while in London. Finding this success ever elusive, Benjamin hoped that one more spring, one more winter, would find him journeying back to his “dear Girl.”¹⁰

Despite recent advances in women’s history, some historians continue to interpret Deborah Franklin’s activities and contributions as being firmly restricted to women’s traditional roles of mother and housewife. Deborah’s detractors emphasize her domestic and familial activities, noting that her correspondence during Benjamin’s absence is “often melancholy, filled with complaints, poorly written, at times almost incomprehensible, and filled with ‘unimportant’ details about family, children, and the neighbors” and contains little discussion of political topics.¹¹

¹⁰ BF to DF, 9 Nov. 1765, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, et al. (New Haven, 1959–1982), 12:360. Cited hereafter as *PBF*.

¹¹ Shelia Skemp, “Family Partnerships: The Working Wife, Honoring Deborah Franklin,” and Larry E. Tise, “Introduction: Benjamin Franklin and the World of Women,” in *Benjamin Franklin and Women*, ed. Larry E. Tise (University Park, Pa., 2000), 20, xx.

However, her economic contributions both supported the geographically dispersed and often needy extended Franklin family and helped finance Benjamin's lengthy diplomatic missions far from home. Upon the death of his wife, Franklin admitted to his friends that he had to return home because he now lacked a trusted manager of his affairs.¹² By reexamining the life of Deborah Franklin, her story will reveal what her husband always knew—that without her continued skillful support and level of independent action, his success would not have been possible.

The details of Deborah's childhood and youth have been lost to the historical record. Though the exact year is not known, historians have speculated that Deborah Read was born between 1704 and 1708, one of at least three children of John Read and Sarah White. Deborah was most likely born in Birmingham, England, the residence of her parents until their immigration to Philadelphia in 1711.¹³ A young child in 1711, Deborah would have been old enough to remember the Read family's journey to the colonies, but not quite old enough to understand this emigration experience. This voyage may have been a difficult one, possibly explaining Deborah's later refusal to undertake long journeys, especially those entailing an ocean crossing.

After arriving in Pennsylvania, the Read family enjoyed some economic success. A carpenter by trade, John Read found a ready market for his skills in the growing port city of Philadelphia. On May 24, 1711, Read obtained title to the eastern half of a lot at 318 Market Street and by December 1716 was able to purchase the remaining half.¹⁴ The household inventory of John Read's estate indicates that in 1724 he "was a man of some substance, owning two adjoining lots and two houses on High Street between Third and Fourth Streets, and with personal effects valued at 88/8/6 £."¹⁵ The Reads also owned at least one slave, a "likely Negroe Woman," advertised for sale in 1730 by Sarah Read in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.¹⁶ The Reads prospered in Philadelphia, in part due to the

¹² Skemp, "Family Partnerships," 35.

¹³ Lopez, "Deborah Read Franklin," 396; and Tise, "Introduction," xix.

¹⁴ "Sarah Read to Benjamin and Deborah Franklin: Bargain and Sale April 9, 1734," *PBF*, 1:362.

¹⁵ Edward M. Riley, "The Deborah Franklin Correspondence," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 95 (1951): 239.

¹⁶ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 9 Apr. 1730, *PBF*, 1:186.

contributions of Sarah Read.

Like most women during the colonial period, Sarah Read engaged in a variety of tasks meant to supplement her family's income. It is apparent that Sarah, like her husband, brought her own marketable knowledge from England. While women have traditionally acted as informal medical practitioners within the family, Sarah took this role a step further, producing a number of ointments and salves for sale. After her husband's untimely death in 1724, she relied on her acquired skills to maintain both her family's physical and economic health. Sarah had a loyal clientele, for when she moved in with her daughter and new son-in-law in 1731, she gave notice that she was still in business. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertised that Sarah Read,

... continues to make and sell her well-known Ointment for the ITCH with Which she has cured abundance of People in and about this City for many Years past . . . She also continues to make and sell her excellent Family Salve or Ointment, for Burns or Scalds . . . and several other Sorts of Ointments and Salves as usual. At the same Place may be had Lockyer's Pills, at 3d. a pill.¹⁷

The young Deborah undoubtedly assisted her mother with this undertaking, observing first hand the complex web of trade and home production.

The Reads also supplemented their income by taking in lodgers, their most famous being the destitute seventeen-year-old Benjamin Franklin. Benjamin boarded with the Reads during his first years as a journeyman printer in Philadelphia in 1723 and 1724, during which time he became enamoured with their daughter Deborah. The young couple soon became quite attached to each other but faced a formidable obstacle in their plans for the future. Having been recently widowed and unsure of Benjamin's prospects, Sarah Read refused to allow the relationship to go any further. In response, Benjamin endeavored to secure the means for opening his own print shop in Philadelphia.

Benjamin appeared to gain the favor of the governor of Pennsylvania, William Keith, in 1724. Keith promised Benjamin an appointment as Pennsylvania's official printer, if Benjamin would only travel to England to obtain his own press. After exchanging promises for the future with Deborah, Benjamin and a friend set off to find their fortune. But upon his

¹⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1731, *PBF*, 1:219.

arrival in London, young Benjamin found that his benefactor had not forwarded the promised letters of credit.¹⁸ At the very best this was a misunderstanding, at the very worst a cruel joke on an ambitious young man. Benjamin attempted to place this unfortunate turn of events behind him, forgetting the world he left behind, including his promises to Deborah.

With no word from Benjamin in 1725, Deborah married John Rogers, a local potter, at Christ Church in Philadelphia. The marriage was a disaster almost from the beginning. A cloud of intrigue surrounded John, as rumors surfaced that he had another wife and child in England. Unhappy in her new marriage, and in light of these reports, Deborah exhibited a great deal of independence by soon refusing "to cohabit or bear his [Rogers] name."¹⁹ Within four months of their marriage, John disappeared and was later rumored to have been killed in a barroom brawl in the West Indies. Like the earlier tales of Rogers's bigamy, it was difficult to substantiate the reports of his demise. This left Deborah in the difficult position of being married to a man she could neither stand nor locate.

In 1726 Franklin returned to Philadelphia from London with little more in his pockets than he had two years before. Unable to find better employment prospects, Benjamin was forced to seek work from his former employer, Samuel Keimer. Amused by the misfortune of the brash young man, Keimer never passed up an opportunity to remind him of his present condition. Within six months of his return, Benjamin again quit Keimer's print shop and sought financial backing from Philadelphia's elite. In 1729, Benjamin secured a series of loans that enabled him to establish his own print shop.²⁰

Benjamin sought not only economic support from the upper ranks of Philadelphia society, but also social acceptance. A sure way to the elite's ample pocketbooks was through their daughters, whom the calculating Franklin courted with abandon. But in spite of his prospects for financial success, the monied families of Philadelphia rebuffed his marriage proposals.²¹ Unable to marry into status and wealth, Benjamin instead opted for affection, renewing his relationship with Deborah Read Rogers. They declared themselves husband and wife in 1730.

¹⁸ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 41–42.

¹⁹ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 52. Quoted in Claude-Anne Lopez and Eugenia W. Herbert, *The Private Franklin: The Man and His Family* (1975; reprint, New York, 1985), 20.

²⁰ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 60–61; Lopez and Herbert, *The Private Franklin*, 21.

²¹ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 70.

The Read family may not have been as hard-pressed financially as historians have portrayed them. Though deprived of her husband's income with his death in 1724, Sarah Read was able, in 1729, to repurchase the family lots mortgaged by her husband.²² For the price of 11 pounds to secure execution on the property and 354 pounds paid at auction, a considerable sum by colonial standards, the Read family once again owned the land on which they lived. Through his common-law marriage, Benjamin profited from the Read family's accumulated wealth. The lots would become the centerpiece of what developed into Franklin Court, the homestead of Benjamin and Deborah Franklin.²³ Considering his lack of success in marrying into Philadelphia society and his substantial debts, the union of Benjamin Franklin and Deborah Read should be interpreted as advantageous to both. In marrying Deborah, Benjamin gained much needed labor and support for his fledgling enterprise and access to valuable real estate.

Colonial Philadelphia, as historian Patricia Cleary notes, supported a well-developed network of female businesswomen, and Sarah Read and Deborah Franklin undoubtedly participated in and benefited from it.²⁴ The Franklins' print shop and stationary store was situated at the heart of Philadelphia's commercial district, in close proximity to the weekly market. Benjamin not only gained the labor of Deborah at marriage, but also the assistance of his mother-in-law, Sarah Read, who came to live with them less than a year after her daughter's marriage. Sarah's trade in medicinal ointments and Deborah's establishment of a shop of sundry goods helped sustain the Franklins while Benjamin set himself up as an independent printer. Not until after the publication of *Poor Richard's Almanac* (or as Deborah called it, *Poor Dick's*) beginning in 1732, did the Franklins truly begin to prosper. While Benjamin gained a business partner, Deborah gained an agreeable spouse and a reprieve from the legal limbo caused by the disappearance of her first husband. The abandonment by

²² "Sarah Read to Benjamin and Deborah Franklin: Bargain and Sale April 9, 1734," *PBF*, 1:362.

²³ "On April 9–11, 1734, Mrs. Read entered into a series of transactions with her son John and her two sons-in-law and daughters, Benjamin and Deborah Franklin and John and Frances Croker, by which she transferred title to the . . . lots and its dwelling house . . . but received back from the latter couples a lease for 99 years or life at the nominal annual rental of 'one Pepper corn only if demanded.'" (*PBF*, 1:363.)

²⁴ Patricia Cleary, "'She Will Be in the Shop': Women's Sphere of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia and New York," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 119 (1995): 181–202.

one's spouse, though not the norm, was not uncommon during the colonial era. Newspapers carried notices of both men and women pursuing alternative lives, deserting their spouses and often their children. In light of Deborah's ambiguous circumstances (Rogers's alleged bigamy, his abandonment of her, and his possible death), any stigma attached to her second marriage would be noticeably diminished.

The alleged lack of "an overwhelming tenderness" that characterized the Franklin marriage should be reexamined in light of the obstacles faced by the couple, particularly the penalties for bigamy in Pennsylvania.²⁵ If John Rogers ever returned, as bigamists, both Deborah and Benjamin would have faced thirty-nine lashes upon the bare back and imprisonment for life at hard labor. They could also have been charged under the adultery and fornication laws of the state. Furthermore, Pennsylvania law would hold Benjamin accountable for any debts incurred by Rogers.²⁶ In spite of these considerable potential penalties, Benjamin and Deborah chose to enter into a common-law marriage, an action that suggests much more than just utilitarian motives.

During the first years of their marriage, Deborah worked side by side with Benjamin in the printing office. While documentary evidence of her activities during this period is sparse, what exists indicates that Deborah played an important role in the success of the Franklins' early business ventures. As Sheila Skemp has argued, Deborah was far from uneducated, keeping the account books of their printing office and often completing complex transactions. In her correspondence, Deborah discussed the going rate of exchange between, for example, "Barbadoes Currency" and "sterling value."²⁷ In addition to the print shop, Deborah maintained a small store within the house. Advertisements from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and account books now housed at the American Philosophical Society provide evidence of the variety of goods sold by Deborah. The stock of the Franklins' print shop/stationary store included such items as:

printing and writing materials, bills of lading, servant's indentures, powers of attorney, blank books, quills, ink, ink horns and ink powders, slates, parchment sealing wax, spectacles, chocolate, coffee, tea, palm oil, saffron, linseed oil, Rhode Island cheese and codfish, mackerel by the barrel, mus-

²⁵ Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 129.

²⁶ Lopez and Herbert, *The Private Franklin*, 22.

²⁷ Skemp, "Family Partnerships," 24.

tard powder, scales and compasses, patent medicines, scarlet cloth, white stockings, and iron stoves.²⁸

Deborah's independent commercial activities and capable accounting skills helped ensure the Franklins' success. As aptly put by Boston merchant Elizabeth Murray, "many familys are ruined by the women not understanding accounts." Benjamin's experience with Deborah would help persuade him to support a more substantial education for women, including accounting.²⁹

Benjamin relied on Deborah's business experience during his many trips away from Philadelphia. While Benjamin undoubtedly had journeymen and apprentices to help set type within the print shop, Deborah remained responsible for the front counter of the stationary store. Individuals corresponded with Deborah regarding the transfer of kegs of printer's ink and reams of news and brown paper and other items.³⁰ Benjamin expressed appreciation of Deborah's ability to individuals beyond his family and his Philadelphia acquaintances. In a letter written home from London, Benjamin asked Deborah and daughter Sally to give "Advice and Countenance in the Prosecution of their Designs" to two young women immigrating to Philadelphia. Miss Farquarson and Miss Smith hoped to establish businesses as a "Milliner" and "Mantuamaker" respectively.³¹ Benjamin could think of no individual more qualified to introduce these two women to the inner workings of Philadelphia's business community than his wife.

Deborah not only possessed a basic education, but also displayed a degree of intellectual curiosity. In an advertisement appearing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on August 13, 1741, she appealed for the return of two books. "Lent about a month or six weeks ago, two books call'd *Law's Christian Perfection* and *His Call to a Devout and Holy Life* the Owner's name at Length on a blank Leaf at the Beginning. The Borrower is desired to return them to owner, which will be thankfully acknowledged by Your Humble Servant, Deborah Franklin."³² The two books, *On*

²⁸ Lopez and Herbert, *The Private Franklin*, 30-31.

²⁹ Cleary, "She Will Be in the Shop," 199; *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 12-13, 95-96.

³⁰ James Franklin Jr. to DF, 10 June 1760, and D. Weyman to DF, 26 Jan. 1756, Bache Collection, American Philosophical Society. Referenced in *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin in the Library of the American Philosophical Society*, ed. Isaac Minis Hays (Philadelphia, 1908), 4:183, 177.

³¹ Morgan, *The Devious Dr. Franklin*, 174.

³² *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 13 Aug. 1741, PBF, 3:245.

Christian Perfection (1726) and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, Adapted to the State and Condition of All Orders of Christians* (1728), were both written by William Law, a theologian, nonjuror, and writer of Christian devotional literature. Far from a doctrinal theologian, Law exhibited "mystical" tendencies and embraced the idea of a "union-with-God."³³ Her life-long membership in Christ Church and her willingness to undertake study beyond the accepted cannon of Anglican thought is indicative of Deborah's religious devotion, an interest that she did not share with Benjamin. That she treasured these books, inscribing her name at length on the title page and then lending them to others, is evidence of her separate intellectual life; one that developed apart from the more secular interests of her husband.

On another occasion, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* published an appeal from Deborah for the return of her prayer book which had disappeared from her pew in Christ Church. In the advertisement, printed in 1737, Deborah requested "The person who took it . . . open it and read the Eighth Commandment, and afterwards return it into the same pew again; upon which no further notice will be taken."³⁴ When Benjamin asked from London in 1765 for a room-by-room description of their new house, Deborah noted with pride that her room contained, "sum books in my Closet and sume of our famely pickters."³⁵ While the contents of Deborah's library remain unknown, that she maintained a "closet" or office in the house and that she owned a number of volumes is testament to her literacy.

Through her work in the print shop, Deborah had the opportunity to become acquainted with a large portion of Philadelphia society. The print shop served as a center of activity in Philadelphia, as both advertisers and readers of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* frequented the shop. Readers, for example, were directed to "Enquire of the Printer hereof," if interested in a "Servant Lad's Time for near Five years," selling old rags, and hiring a "Book-Keeper."³⁶ These interactions placed Deborah well within the political sphere of Philadelphia; a sphere to which few women had access.

³³ Law was labeled a nonjuror due to his stance as an Anglican clergyman who refused to take the Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy to William and Mary and their successors. Erwin Paul Rudolph, *William Law* (Boston, 1980), 7, 92.

³⁴ Quoted in Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 127.

³⁵ DF to BF, 6-13 Oct. 1766, *PBF*, 12:296.

³⁶ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 30 Jan. 1734, 11 Apr. 1734, and 12 Dec. 1734, *PBF*, 1:378.

The Franklins provided a service to the community, making their home/print shop/store a hub for the dissemination of important public information. The Franklin home stood at a crossroads of eighteenth-century gendered interpretations of space, blurring the line between public and private space. Through her daily contacts with Philadelphians Deborah gained an important political education. She developed networking skills during this period that served her well later in life, when she maintained political alliances in her husband's absence.

The Franklins' small shop assumed even greater significance in 1737 when Benjamin became postmaster for the city of Philadelphia. The crowded house became the post office, as all of Philadelphia and the surrounding communities flocked to the Franklins' residence to collect their mail. The post office also became the city's newsstand, as newspapers were exempt from postage. Much of the day-to-day burden of managing the post office fell into Deborah's hands. Upon the arrival of the post rider, outgoing mail had to be gathered, incoming mail logged, and postage collected upon receipt. Numerous account books survive from this period, many of which are in Deborah's hand.³⁷ While Benjamin's position increased the Franklins' workload and undoubtedly added to their coffers, it also allowed both Deborah and Benjamin the opportunity to expand their contacts within Philadelphia and with the surrounding countryside. The Franklin shop played an integral role in the Philadelphia business community, and more often than not, Deborah was at the helm.

The Franklin household flourished during the first half of the eighteenth century. By 1748, the Franklins were so successful that Benjamin was able to retire from his printing business.³⁸ The Franklins were now positioned to become part of Philadelphia's elite. Though Benjamin was still a partner, no longer was he or Deborah concerned with the day-to-day affairs of running the print shop. At age forty, Deborah embarked on a new stage of her life. From the early 1750s until the late 1760s, Deborah balanced many roles, including those of housewife, mother, father, businesswoman, socialite, messenger, diplomat, and politician. Although still responsible for domestic duties, Deborah's world did not contract with her retirement from the print shop and stationary store, but rather expanded into new areas.

While Benjamin's activities increasingly took him away from

³⁷ Account Books, Bache Collection.

³⁸ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 108.

Philadelphia, Deborah did much more than sit home alone waiting for his return. In addition to her many relatives, Deborah surrounded herself with many close and influential friends. Her letters are replete with references to conversations with the elite of Philadelphia, including: Deborah Norris, sister of speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly Isaac Norris; Joseph Galloway; physician Benjamin Rush and his parents; Sarah Robert Bond, wife of Dr. Thomas Bond; Susanna Wright; Rev. Jacob Duchè,³⁹ and many, many others. This extensive list of influential acquaintances contradicts historians' claims that "in short, [Deborah was] not the sort that the wives of Franklin's more select acquaintances would welcome."⁴⁰

Entries in the diary of Charlotte Brown provide additional evidence of Deborah's place in Philadelphia society and of her astute networking skills. Charlotte Brown, matron of the British army's General Hospital, traveled to Philadelphia in 1755 and detailed her experiences in her diary. Upon her arrival, a number of Philadelphia women greeted Brown, including Deborah Franklin. It is significant that of the two groups of women welcoming Brown to Philadelphia, Brown mentions only Deborah by name and concludes initially that she was unmarried, an indication that Deborah did not present herself as the wife of a prominent man.⁴¹ The initial meeting of the two women must have been quite successful, for ten days later Charlotte Brown and Deborah met again. As probably the most important woman to visit Philadelphia, Deborah cultivated Brown's friendship and introduced her to her husband. As Brown recorded,

³⁹ Isaac Norris was elected as the first speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, a post he held for fifteen years. The friendship between Deborah Norris and DF was especially close. Upon her death in 1767, DF wrote BF, "She was one of my first play mates and I raly Loved her." (DF to BF, 16 May 1767, *PBF*, 14:158.) Joseph Galloway was speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly from 1766 to 1775 and was a delegate to the First Continental Congress. (DF to BF, 20–25 Apr. 1767, *PBF*, 14:135–36.) Dr. Thomas Bond was a member of the Board of Managers of the Pennsylvania Hospital and a founder of the University of Pennsylvania. (DF to BF, 12 Jan. 1767, *PBF*, 14:6.) Susanna Wright, poet, was an active participant in Philadelphia's literary circles. (Susy Wright to DF, 4 Apr. 1765, in *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Hays, 4:190, 194.) Duchè, an Episcopalian minister and rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia, delivered the opening prayer for the First Continental Congress. (Jane Mecom to DF, before Aug 1770? in *The Letters of Benjamin Franklin and Jane Mecom*, ed. Carl Van Doren (Princeton, 1950), 120.)

⁴⁰ Paul W. Conner, *Poor Richard's Politics: Benjamin Franklin and His New American Order* (New York, 1965), 215.

⁴¹ Charlotte Brown, "The Journal of Charlotte Brown, Matron of the General Hospital, with the English Forces in America, 1754–1756," in *Colonial Captivities, Marches, and Journeys*, ed. Isabel M. Calder (New York, 1935), 190–91.

Nov'r 28 [1755] Mrs. Franklin sent her Chaise for me and I was receive'd with great politeness. I return'd at Night and she did me the favour to drive me home herself. An Express is arriv'd with an Account that the Indians have scalped 30 Families 30 Miles from this Place a Ship is arriv'd from England but no Letters for me which makes me very uneasy.⁴²

Through the early months of 1756, Deborah Franklin and Charlotte Brown remained in contact, visiting and dining together. On one busy Sunday, Brown went to church, dined at the Franklins', and had tea at Dr. Loyds.⁴³ On February 12, 1756, Brown and Deborah Franklin went to the Philadelphia Academy, where they were "agreably entertain'd by hearing the boys speak. Dined at Mr. [William] Smiths and then went to see the State House"⁴⁴ When Brown departed from Philadelphia, Deborah Franklin was on hand to say goodbye, and to provide her with letters of introduction. Upon her arrival in New York, Brown, "delivered the Letters Mrs. Franklin gave me to Dr. Bard and was kindly received staid and dined and then went to see the Hospital which was in a large House in the Dock."⁴⁵

Charlotte Brown's diary provides a small glimpse into the separate political and social life of Deborah Franklin. Among the elite women of Philadelphia, Deborah was part of the group who welcomed Brown to the city. Wealthy enough to have a servant pick up her guest, Deborah decided to drive Brown home herself. Upon her departure, Brown relied on letters of introduction from Deborah to Dr. William Bard, a prominent New York City physician, to ease her transition to life in New York. As evidenced by her interaction with Charlotte Brown, Deborah moved easily within the most elite social circles. The portrait of Deborah that emerges from Brown's diary is one of a woman astute at networking and unafraid of independent action. In the wake of her husband's increasingly prolonged absences, Deborah relied on the accumulated skills that had served her so well during the first twenty years of her marriage to expand her engagement in public affairs.

Deborah's continual refusal to accompany her husband to London can also be interpreted in light of this far-flung network of relatives and

⁴² Brown, "Journal of Charlotte Brown," 191.

⁴³ "Dr. Loyd" is unidentified.

⁴⁴ This is probably Dr. William Smith, first provost of the college at Philadelphia. Brown, "Journal of Charlotte Brown," 192.

⁴⁵ Brown, "Journal of Charlotte Brown," 192-93.

friends. Benjamin did not abandon Deborah, as several historians have suggested. Deborah, herself, chose to stay.⁴⁶ Benjamin, realizing Deborah's resolve to stay in Philadelphia did not try to cajole her into joining him. When William Strahan, a close friend of Benjamin's, suggested to Franklin that he could convince Deborah to sail to London, Benjamin wrote to Deborah, "He has offered to lay me a considerable wager, that a letter he has wrote to you will bring you immediately over hither; but I tell him I will not pick his pocket; for I am sure there is no inducement strong enough to prevail with you to cross the sea."⁴⁷ Rather than leave those closest to her and give up the status and influence she had attained in Philadelphia, Deborah chose to remain at home.

Many historians have pointed to "Extracts from the Diary of Daniel Fisher, 1755," printed in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* in 1893, as the definitive description of Deborah Franklin's personality. Mrs. Conway Robinson Howard's transcription is the only surviving account of this diary. In 1755, Daniel Fisher traveled to Philadelphia from Williamsburg seeking his fortune, "finding, according to his own account, every man's hand against him on the way." Upon Fisher's arrival in Philadelphia, he sought out Chief Justice William Allen in order to obtain a position. Finding Allen of little assistance, Fisher "in a kind of despair" applied to Benjamin Franklin for employment.⁴⁸

After Fisher's meeting with Benjamin, Samuel Soumaine, a local silversmith and neighbor of the Franklins', approached Fisher. Fisher knew of Soumaine, remembering him as a patron of the Indian King, a local ordinary. His first impression of Soumaine was that he was "a very inquisitive person, craving a knowledge of other People's affairs, though noways concerning himself." Fisher soon found his first impressions correct, as Soumaine, "began to fish for my business with Mr. Franklin."⁴⁹ In spite of Fisher's hesitance to provide Soumaine with gossip, he was soon invited to lodge with the Soumaines. It was while staying with the Soumaines that Fisher first met Deborah Franklin.

⁴⁶ See especially Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 188, and Skemp, "Family Partnerships," 25.

⁴⁷ BF to DF, 14 Jan. 1758, *PBF*, 7:359-60.

⁴⁸ Daniel Fisher, "Extracts From the Diary of Daniel Fisher, 1755," ed. Mrs. Conway Robinson Howard, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 17 (1893): 263, 265, 270.

⁴⁹ Fisher, "Extracts from the Diary," 271.

June 5—Thursday—As I was coming down from my chamber this afternoon a Gentlewoman was sitting on one of the lowest stairs, which were but narrow, and there not being room enough to pass, she arose up and threw herself upon the floor and sat there. Mr. Soumien and his Wife greatly entreated her to arise and take a chair, but in vain; she would keep her seat, and kept it, I think, the longer for their entreaty. This Gentlewoman, whom, though I had seen before, I did not know, appeared to be Mrs. Franklin. She assumed the airs of extraordinary Freedom and great Humility . . .⁵⁰

Within the month, Benjamin had employed Fisher and he began to spend time in the Franklin household. The talkative Soumaine had primed Fisher for this experience, warning him, "of great uneasiness and dissatisfaction in Mr. Franklin's family." With Soumaine's warning in mind, Fisher observed that the tension in the Franklin household was a result of Deborah's "turbulence and jealousy and pride of her disposition," after hearing Deborah assert that Benjamin had "too great an esteem for his son in prejudice of herself and daughter." One day while sitting in a hallway of the Franklin house, according to Fisher, Deborah unleashed "Invectives in the foulest terms I ever heard from a Gentlewoman," directed at her step-son William.⁵¹

Fisher's focus on Deborah's "turbulent temper," however, should be examined in light of his situation. Hoping to secure employment in Philadelphia, he failed to receive adequate offers from either William Allen or Benjamin Franklin. Fisher boarded with Samuel Soumaine, a man who consistently told tales about his wealthier and more famous neighbors. Predisposed by Soumaine's gossip and displeased with Franklin's attempts to find him work, Fisher returned to Williamsburg, citing Deborah's attitude as one of his reasons for departing. Fisher was clearly uncomfortable with Deborah Franklin's independent nature. The fortyish Deborah felt no qualms about sitting on the floor of the Soumaine house, even in front of a total stranger. Stubborn and assertive, she stayed on the floor, ignoring the Soumaines' requests to sit on a chair. Deborah rebelled against patriarchy and asserted the rights of her daughter and of herself. Lively, less deferential, and more assertive than the other women Fisher had met, Deborah's actions provided Fisher with an excuse for his own failure to secure acceptable employment in Philadelphia.

⁵⁰ Fisher, "Extracts from the Diary," 271–72.

⁵¹ Fisher, "Extracts from the Diary," 276.

Fisher's account should be read with a grain or more of salt, but it does confirm Deborah's independent spirit.

Her independence would serve Deborah well, as she spent a large portion of the final twenty-five years of her life physically but not emotionally separated from her husband. As Benjamin climbed the ladder of political power, his presence, more often than not, was demanded in locales other than Philadelphia. His appointment as co-postmaster of the American colonies necessitated inspection tours during which Benjamin surveyed and reported on postal operations along the east coast. Benjamin was called upon to travel to London on colonial business between 1757 and 1762 and again between 1764 and 1775. During these periods, Benjamin lived in London while Deborah maintained the Franklin household in Philadelphia.

Deborah had little time for leisure during these years, as she faced mounting household responsibilities and served as Benjamin's economic and political representative in Philadelphia. Because her husband's and her family's economic and political fortunes depended upon her successful independent maneuvering, Deborah's role grew in importance. Though Benjamin often provided detailed instructions, Deborah frequently relied on her own business and political acumen, informing Benjamin of her actions via the next packet to London. Whether extending credit to merchants, shipping kegs of ink, or settling debts, Deborah's activities kept the Franklin household firmly entwined in the complex economic web of early Philadelphia.⁵² Her confidence, independence, and competence in completing these tasks furthered Benjamin's political career. Without such a skilled and independent wife, Benjamin's long absences would not have been economically or politically feasible. Benjamin remarked in a letter to Deborah, "I leave Home, and undertake this long Voyage more cheerfully, as I can rely on your Prudence in the Management of my Affairs, and Education of my dear Child . . ."⁵³ Deborah's presence in Philadelphia insured the continued financial success of the Franklin family and allowed Benjamin to pursue the political agenda of the American colonies.

In addition to meeting the needs of the individuals within the house-

⁵² DF to BF, 12 Jan. 1767, *PBF*, 14:6; D. Weyman to DF, 26 Jan. 1756, James Franklin Jr. to DF, 10 June 1760, and Robert Smith to DF, 25 Apr. 1766, Bache Collection, referenced in *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Hay, 4:177, 183, 195.

⁵³ BF to DF, 5 Apr. 1757, *PBF*, 7:175.

hold, Deborah attended to the structure itself. In 1765, the Franklins moved into a new house and Deborah oversaw the final construction details. Over the next few years, Deborah filled her letters with news of her housekeeping, noting the transfer of books and shelves, discussing the yard and cellar, and describing each room in the house. When the opportunity presented itself, Deborah even purchased a large lot contiguous to the Franklins' property. While Benjamin noted the somewhat exorbitant cost (nine hundred pounds), he nonetheless conceded to Deborah that "as you observe, it is more convenient for us than any other, and I think we may make considerable Advantage of it in time" ⁵⁴ Deborah relied on all her accumulated skills, both as a businesswoman and as a homemaker, in expanding and furnishing the Franklin homestead.

On a personal level, Deborah's primary concern was for the well-being and success of her nuclear and extended family. The Franklin household consisted of (at various times) Deborah's mother Sarah, who would perish after falling into an open hearth in 1761; her adopted son William, who during most of Deborah's final years resided at Perth Amboy as royal governor of New Jersey; her daughter Sarah (Sally), whose marriage Deborah handled in her husband's absence; and a constantly evolving mixture of relatives, houseguests, boarders, slaves, and servants. An account book, left with her by Benjamin to track daily expenditures, provides a glimpse of Deborah's day-to-day purchases. Notations for household expenditures mix with references to money "laid ought fullishley and Generousley." ⁵⁵ As mistress of such a large and varied household, Deborah's duties and responsibilities were endless.

Deborah's foremost concern was her daughter, Sally. Unaware or unappreciative of Deborah's many responsibilities, Benjamin charged her with Sally's education while he was away, writing, "As my Absence [will] make your House quieter and lessen your Business you will have the more Leisure to instruct her, and form her." ⁵⁶ Deborah accepted this charge and, with Benjamin's advice, ordered a large quantity of books from London meant for Sally. Given Benjamin's more advanced academic skills, in matters relating to Sally's education, Deborah generally deferred to her husband's choice of educational material.

⁵⁴ BF to DF, 11 May 1765, *PBF*, 12:128.

⁵⁵ Excerpt of Daybook, *PBF*, 7:168.

⁵⁶ BF to DF, 2 June 1757, *PBF*, 7:232.

In matters of the heart, however, Deborah took a more active role. Highlighting her increased responsibilities, she informed Benjamin in 1765 that, "I wold let you know in what manner I ackte as I am obliged to be father and mother." In this roundabout way, Deborah informed Benjamin of Sally's courtship with Richard Bache, a Philadelphia merchant. As much the politician as her husband, Deborah judged public opinion of her actions and the match by consulting one of Philadelphia's most prominent citizens, Joseph Galloway. Over dinner, Deborah Franklin and Galloway discussed the courtship: "he spooke to me a gin I freely told him and told him all so hough I had ackted. He sed I did write and as I should ac[t.]"⁵⁷ Unsure of her husband's reaction to Bache, who was unknown to Benjamin and was currently going through financial difficulties, Deborah used the court of male public opinion to justify her actions. Though initially unsure of Deborah's handling of this delicate situation, Benjamin eventually left the matter entirely to Deborah's discretion.

Deborah also endeavored to strengthen her relationship with her often destitute in-laws. In Benjamin's absence, Deborah secured employment, supplied lodging, and provided financial support to many of Benjamin's relatives. In writing his sister, Jane Mecom of Boston, Benjamin noted that Deborah might be able to aid his nephew Peter who was entering the family soap-making business: "I believe his aunt (Deborah) at Philadelphia can help him to sell a good deal of it; and I doubt not of her doing everything in her power to promote his interest in that way. Let a box be sent her . . . and she will immediately return the ready money for it."⁵⁸ Deborah assumed control of the transaction, promoting the goods and transferring the balance due.

The relationship between Deborah Franklin and Jane Mecom went beyond a series of financial transactions. It was built upon an exchange of letters, producing a correspondence filled with both family news and current events. More than just "unimportant" missives on friends and family, these letters contain valuable information relating to the literary interests of these two women. In a letter addressed to her "Dear Sister," Mecom updated Deborah on the health of her family, and also asked "a favour . . . which is that you would send me won of them Leters to the

⁵⁷ DF to BF, 20–25 Apr. 1767, *PBF*, 14:136–37.

⁵⁸ Van Doren, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Franklin and Jane Mecom*, 62.

People of Pensylvania," indicating an interest in politics.⁵⁹ In a letter discussing the death of four close relatives within the span of fifteen months, Mecom attempted to put the events into perspective by alluding to one of her favorite authors, Alexander Pope: "I do my Endeavour to adopt the Grat Popes Doctrin with Regard to the Providence of God what Ever is[,] is Right."⁶⁰

While the majority of surviving letters are from Jane Mecom, there is evidence of Deborah's part in this correspondence in other sources and that Deborah used her correspondence for more than family gossip. Hannah Callender, a Philadelphia contemporary of Deborah Franklin, copied into her diary on January 15, 1759, "some passages of Ben: Franklins droll humour related, in a letter to his Sister in New England . . . your religion leads you three stories high[,] Faith[,] hope[,] and Charity, but before I go any further, I wish to the lord, I could turn the house bottom up wards, and put Charity at the bottom."⁶¹ Exactly how this letter came to be circulated in Philadelphia so soon after being sent from London to Boston is unknown, but the most logical source is Deborah Franklin. Having a propensity to exchange news of friends and loved ones, Jane Mecom may have included a portion of Benjamin's letter in her correspondence with Deborah, or Benjamin may have copied the letter for Deborah. No matter the source, Deborah recognized the value of Franklin's work as both satire and as a vehicle by which to maintain her husband's presence in Philadelphia society. While the Deborah Franklin-Jane Mecom correspondence focused mainly on familial matters, it also provides evidence of a wider range of activities, a literary consciousness, and the circulation of letters for news and for influence in colonial society.⁶²

Deborah's helping hand was not limited to relatives, as her account books indicate various acts of charity, many to complete strangers. In 1766, Christopher Hussey of Nantucket, Massachusetts, sent his son

⁵⁹ "A Letter to the People of Pennsylvania: occasioned by the Assembly's passing that important Act for constituting the Judges of the Supreme Court and Common Pleas, during Good Behaviour," was advertised for sale in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of 6 Mar. 1760. See Van Doren, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Franklin and Jane Mecom*, 73-74.

⁶⁰ Van Doren, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Franklin and Jane Mecom*, 83-84.

⁶¹ Hannah Callender (Sansom) diary, American Philosophical Society. I am indebted to Susan Klepp for bringing this source to my attention.

⁶² For a broader discussion of the circulation of correspondence in colonial America, see Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karin A. Wulf, eds., *Milcah Martha Moore's Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America* (University Park, Pa., 1997), and David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

Albert to stay with Deborah while he received inoculation for smallpox.⁶³ Within her own household Deborah expressed interest in the lives of her servants and slaves. Benjamin Franklin had played an integral part in the establishment of a school for the "Negroes of Philadelphia," which was funded by "The Associates of Dr. Bray," a humanitarian group in London. Under the watchful eye of Rev. William Sturgeon, assistant minister to Christ Church, the school was opened on November 20, 1758.⁶⁴ Deborah took an interest in this school as well. In a letter to Benjamin in 1759, Deborah reported, "I went to hear the Negro Children catechised at Church. There were 17 that answered very prettily indeed, and 5 or 6 that were too little, but all behaved very decently. Mr. Sturgeon exhorted them before and after the Catechising. It gave me a great deal of Pleasure, and I shall send Othello to the School."⁶⁵

Though Benjamin was already known to the Associates of Dr. Bray, Deborah's letter of praise for the school could only have aided Franklin's unanimous election as a member of the group in early 1760. By praising the efforts of the school and displaying the willingness to send one of her own slaves, her letter became a testament to the success of the associate's endeavors. Deborah's brief description of the school was given to Mr. John Waring, secretary of the associates and also "published in a London Newspaper under Mrs. Franklin's name."⁶⁶ Her correspondence both indicated a degree of concern for the education of her slave and proved useful in promoting her husband's interests.

In spite of the miles often between them, Deborah did her best to care for Benjamin's every need. When Benjamin and his son William surveyed Pennsylvania's defenses in 1756, Deborah provided them with many comforts of home, including roast beef and roast veal. During his extended stays in London, Deborah forwarded a variety of items, including apples, cranberries, and even tamed squirrels as pets for Benjamin's acquaintances.⁶⁷ More important than creature comforts, however, was the extensive

⁶³ Christopher Hussey to DF, 27 Aug. 1766, and 2 Dec. 1766, in *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Hays, 4:196, 197.

⁶⁴ Richard I. Shelling, "Benjamin Franklin and the Dr. Bray Associates," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 63 (1939): 283-85.

⁶⁵ DF to BF, 9 Aug. 1759, *PBF*, 8:425.

⁶⁶ Shelling, "Benjamin Franklin and the Dr. Bray Associates," 286n.

⁶⁷ BF to DF, 25 Jan. 1756, *PBF*, 6:364; Claude-Anne Lopez, "Three Women, Three Styles: Catharine Ray, Polly Hewson, and Georgiana Shipley," in *Benjamin Franklin and Women*, ed. Tise, 60-61.

exchange of information between Deborah and Benjamin.

Though many of the couples' letters are missing, it is possible to reconstruct fragments of conversations. Although more of Benjamin's letters have survived than Deborah's, his letters typically include reference to numerous letters written to him by Deborah, and he often replied to a number of her letters at once. Benjamin wrote to his wife in 1758, "I have now before me your Letters of Jany. 15, 22, 29, and 3. Feb. 3, 4 and 6. March 12. April 3, 9, 17, and 23, which is the last . . . It is impossible for me to get or keep out of your Debts." None of these twelve letters from Deborah has been found.⁶⁸ A close examination of the surviving correspondence between the Franklins indicates that Deborah consistently kept Benjamin informed not only about friends and family, but important political events within Philadelphia. The tasks requested of and independently pursued by Deborah both allowed Benjamin to remain visible in Philadelphia's political circles and afforded Deborah a degree of social status in her own right. Whether it was cementing political networks among Philadelphia's elite, or protesting policy to the commander in chief of the British army in North America, Deborah's words and actions indicate a degree of political awareness and savvy.

Undeniably, the correspondence between Deborah and Benjamin contains numerous references to family matters, but woven among the births, deaths, and marriages is also evidence of the political partnership between husband and wife. While Benjamin secured political alliances within the corridors of Parliament, Deborah concentrated on cementing political ties around the tea tables of Philadelphia. During Benjamin's tour of Pennsylvania defenses in 1755, Benjamin sent his partner, David Hall, a series of reports from the frontier through Deborah. In return, Deborah reported to the absent Benjamin the formation of militia companies and the selection of officers in Philadelphia.⁶⁹ Benjamin thought so highly of Deborah's account of the Native American chief Teedyuscung's visit to Philadelphia that he reported to Deborah he would, "entertain Mr. Colinson and Dr. Fothergil with your Account."⁷⁰ Though Deborah performed admirably as a reporter, her actions were

⁶⁸ BF to DF, 10 June 1758, *PBF*, 8:90-91.

⁶⁹ BF to DF, 27 Dec. 1755, *PBF*, 6:312-13.

⁷⁰ Teedyuscung (ca. 1700-1763) was a Delaware Indian leader who worked with the English in an effort to insulate his tribe from an Iroquois takeover. (*PBF*, 7:16n.) Unfortunately, Deborah's account of his visit has not been found. For BF's reference to DF's account, see BF to DF, 22 Nov. 1757, *PBF*, 7:276.

even more beneficial to Benjamin's political aspirations.

On April 4, 1757, before his departure for London, Benjamin signed over his power of attorney to Deborah.⁷¹ It is telling that in spite of his large circle of influential and powerful male friends within the city of Philadelphia, Benjamin chose his wife to be his sole representative in his absence. As a *feme covert*, a married woman had little legal power. Benjamin's decision to bestow his power of attorney on his wife suggests a degree of confidence in Deborah's abilities. Acting as a *feme sole* during Benjamin's absence, Deborah had increased authority in legal matters, though her public dealings would be circumscribed by prevailing gendered beliefs relating to the proper roles for women.

Benjamin's will, written upon his departure to London in 1757, is also testament to the high regard he felt for Deborah as a partner. Benjamin endeavored to divide a portion of his estate equally, providing shares to his wife, son, and daughter; leaving each with a share of the income from his printing partnership, his estate, and one thousand pounds. Through an additional bequest to Deborah, which included property acquired through her considerable efforts, Benjamin recognized her contribution to the family economy. "My loving Wife," would inherit the right to two houses and lots on Market Street, "all my Household Goods and Furniture," and the "Use of all my [printing] Plate during her Life." This bequest far exceeded the traditional "widow's third" of personal property by providing Deborah with the bulk of the Franklin estate. Deborah's share is especially significant when contrasted with the bequest to his son, William. In addition to Benjamin's library, air pump, and natural curiosities, William received an undeveloped lot on Arch Street and, "Pasture Ground in the Northern Liberties."⁷²

Confident in her abilities, Deborah was capable of challenging even the most imposing colonial officials, as a letter to Lord Loudon, commander in chief of the British forces in North America, makes clear. At the outset of Benjamin's journey to London in 1756, Benjamin appointed a relative, William Dunlap, to the position of Philadelphia postmaster. Before departing, Benjamin sternly warned Dunlap, "as Mrs. Franklin has had a great deal of Experience in the Management of the Post Office, I depend on your paying considerable Attention to her Advice in that

⁷¹ Printed in *PBF*, 7:169-170.

⁷² Printed in *PBF*, 7:200-202.

Matter."⁷³ As an added check on Dunlap, Benjamin made all post office accounts payable to Deborah. Under her watchful eye, Benjamin hoped Dunlap would prosper in the role of postmaster.

Dunlap would need Deborah's support in the waning months of 1757, when Lord Loudon lodged a formal complaint against him. As a peer of the realm, Loudon was entitled to franking privileges that allowed him to send mail free of charge. Since all colonial mail arrived at its destination postage due, Loudon accused Dunlap of charging postage to individuals receiving mail bearing his signature. Loudon perceived this slight as a threat to his authority within the North American colonies and quickly sought to remedy the matter. Exercising the political power she held as wife of the co-postmaster general of the North American colonies, and without prior approval from Benjamin, Deborah composed a letter to Loudon, answering the charges against Dunlap and posing a few complaints of her own regarding the postal system. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Deborah apparently employed a scrivener to provide a polished copy of her work. In her letter, Deborah defended Dunlap and provided a brief glimpse of many of the problems Deborah must have faced managing the Philadelphia post office.

I am not fond of complaining otherwise I might have before informed you that I think I have been treated very unpolitely I might say insulted in my own House by Sir John Sinclair in an affair of this nature; I will not trouble Your Lordship with particulars, but only say if the complaints made against the Post Office have come from him they are very unjust.

Deborah continued her letter, writing of the problems faced by the post office in maintaining a set rider schedule—problems she attributed to the interference of Loudon and his men. This letter also indicates that Deborah played an exceptionally large role in the day-to-day operations of the post office while Dunlap was learning the position. "Since Mr. Franklin went abroad," she wrote, "I have given particular Orders that no Express on his Majesty's Service be detained in the Post Office above three Hours."⁷⁴ Clearly setting policy, Deborah was unafraid to inform

⁷³ BF to William Dunlap, 4 Apr. 1757, *PBF*, 7:169.

⁷⁴ DF to Lord Loudon, 20 Jan. 1758, Public Record Office, London. Copy held by American Philosophical Society. Thanks to Roy Goodman at the American Philosophical Society for his assistance in locating this source.

Loudon of her decisions. She closed with another bold assertion; "I therefore hope your Lordship will order the Posts for the future to be regularly discharged from New York. And I shall be glad to know how the Charges of Expresses may be defrayed." Deborah's statements are clear, confident, and assertive. She noted the disruptions of the colonial postal system caused by Loudon's policies and refused to tolerate them.

Never published, this letter merits only a footnote in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*. Yet more than any other document, this letter is testament to the importance of Deborah's contributions to the success of her husband's ventures. It indicates a high degree of independence; a quality not often ascribed to her by historians. She wrote this letter without first consulting with Benjamin. Skillful in her duties relating to the post office and confident in her authority to act, Deborah refused to let anyone, not even the commander in chief of the British army in North America, interfere with the mail or insult her and her subordinates.

Taking Deborah's correspondence seriously, Loudon promptly replied, noting that his actions were, "never meant or intended to offend any one much less Mrs. Franklin." Deborah was a force to be reckoned with. In an exchange that was a microcosm of the relationship between the mother country and colonies, Loudon reasserted his "Privileges of a Peer" and noted he could not ignore such an affront to his powers, lest it weaken his authority.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, there is no surviving correspondence between Deborah and Benjamin on this matter. The Loudon correspondence provides an important glimpse into Deborah's political skills and her abilities to work independently of her husband's knowledge and approval.

By 1765, however, Deborah's independence and confidence began to wane. The events and correspondence surrounding the Stamp Act crisis of that year give evidence of the weakening of the Franklin's political partnership. Her letters written in 1765 begin to note that "I donte go much to town" and "I partake of none of the diversshons I stay at home." Deborah's declining health, such as "the Head Ach and that Pain in your Side" alluded to in a letter by Benjamin, curtailed her participation in public activities. Benjamin's tremendous political success eventually sapped her own confidence, as Deborah became less willing to share her observations and opinions with him on colonial politics. "I have wrote several letter to you one almoste every day but then I Cold not forbair

⁷⁵ Lord Loudon to DF, 24 Jan. 1758, Public Record Office, London. Copy held by American Philosophical Society.

saying sumthing to you a bought publick affairs then I wold distroy it and then begin a gen and burn it a gen and so on but now I donte think to say one word a bought them as I beleve you have it much better then I Cold tell you."⁷⁶ Deborah's self-esteem suffered from excessive comparison to her more eloquent and famous husband. Misspelled words and poor sentence structure, even more pronounced with her increasingly poor health, become painfully obvious when compared to the polished, witty works emanating from the Franklin presses. On political matters, Deborah chose to defer to more eloquent correspondents. This does not mean that Deborah had little interest in political matters. Rather she did not feel her descriptions would do the events justice, leaving the task up to others whom she deemed more qualified.

Despite her reluctance to recount her experiences to Benjamin, however, Deborah did write an account of her dealings with the Stamp Act mobs in Philadelphia, including her own opinions of the disturbance: "but to me it semes we air verrey wicked and so is the pepel in in London and other plases on your sid the watter I pray god mend us all."⁷⁷ Her letters often described the personal aspects of the mob, providing Benjamin with information as to the source of each disturbance. In her letter of September 22, 1765, she informed Benjamin that "Mr. John Ross and Brother Swore it is Mr. Saml Smith that is a seting the pepel a-mading by teling them that it was you that had pland the Stampe ackte and that you air indevering to get the teste ackte brought over hear . . ." Later, Deborah described the formation of a mob to intimidate John Hughes, the local stamp agent, telling Benjamin, the "Number was 8 who wente backwards and forwards while Jemey Allin was att the Staite house a Sperriting up the mobe and inraigeing of them to porsiste in the affair thay had meet a bought[.] Mr. Tillmman was the head of them[.] O hough I dispise such men."⁷⁸

Deborah had good reason to pay close attention to the mob, as Benjamin's belated opposition to the Stamp Act placed her in a precarious position. In both reporting on and facing the mob, Deborah rose to meet the challenge. When "Cusin [Josiah] Davenporte" arrived to "protect" her

⁷⁶ DF to BF, 22 Sept. 1765; DF to BF, 10 Feb. 1765; BF to DF, 4 June 1765; and DF to BF, 8–13 Oct. 1765, *PBF*, 12:274, 44, 169, 300.

⁷⁷ DF to BF, 22 Sept. 1765, *PBF*, 12:270–71.

⁷⁸ DF to BF, 22 Sept. 1765, *PBF*, 12:274; Deborah refers to James Tilghman "who had been one of the spokesmen for the deputation that waited on Hughes, October 5, to demand his resignation as stamp distributor." (DF to BF, 8–13 Oct. 1765, *PBF*, 12:301–2n.)

from the mob, it was instead Deborah that set about fashioning a plan to defend her house. Realizing she had no weapons, Deborah summoned her brother and "I sed he shold fech a gun or two as we had none. I sente to aske my Brother to Cume and bring his gun all so so we maid one room into a Magazin. I ordored sum sorte of defens up Stairs such as I Cold manaig my selef."⁷⁹ Deborah's astute impressions of the mob and her subsequent actions are those of a woman who still refused to accept a submissive role.

A 1766 letter from John Holt, a New York printer and former associate of Benjamin's, provides one final example of Deborah's status and perceived influence within Philadelphia.⁸⁰ In the wake of the Stamp Act crisis, Holt, a favorite of the New York Sons of Liberty, wrote a six-page letter to Deborah discussing in detail local protests against the Stamp Act. On the final page, Holt revealed the purpose of his letter—a request that Deborah Franklin use her status to influence the political landscape of Philadelphia. John Hughes, a close friend of the Franklins, was to become Philadelphia's stamp agent. In his letter, Holt appealed to Deborah, "But as you are his Friend, I would wish you to prevail on him to make full absolute Renunciation of the Stamp Office."⁸¹ While Deborah's response has not survived, Holt's appeal provides evidence of Deborah's standing and influence in Philadelphia politics.

The final ten years of Deborah's life were a period of physical decline. Increasingly susceptible to the yearly rounds of disease, her correspondence took on a degree of melancholy. Traveling less, Deborah preferred the company of Benjamin's letters to outside diversions. Physically, as well as mentally, Deborah's body began breaking down. Too often, historians have relied on correspondence from this period as representative of Deborah's intellectual capabilities. Her correspondence, though always containing her characteristic phonetic spelling, became increasingly disjointed. She noted in a letter to her sister-in-law Jane Mecom, "I am not able to write nor am I abel to write agreeable leters as ones I youse to doe for I have not so good matter to worke on as I yous to wite on." Painfully aware of her inability to communicate effectively, she begged Mecom,

⁷⁹ DF to BF, 22 Sept. 1765, *PBF*, 12:271.

⁸⁰ See note 8, *PBF*, 13:108.

⁸¹ John Hughes, baker, had been appointed recorder of warrants and surveys in 1759 and he served as judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia from 1759 to 1761." (*PBF*, 11:374n); John Holt to DF, 16 Feb. 1766, Bache Collection, referenced in *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Hays, 4:195. See also James Parker to BF, 6 May 1766, *PBF*, 13:263.

"don'te let aney bodey see my letter as I write so bad."⁸² Family members became concerned as Deborah's health declined. In 1769 she suffered a paralytic stroke, foreshadowing the one that would end her life five years later.

In 1775 Benjamin Franklin returned to Philadelphia after a ten-year absence, noting that he no longer had a representative at home since the death of his wife the previous December. Disheartened by his lack of progress representing the colonial cause and unable to carry on business on both sides of the Atlantic, he had little choice but to return home. Benjamin's letters after Deborah's death in 1774 contain no discussion of her passing, no description of any grief. The degree to which Benjamin avoided the subject of his wife may betray just how much her passing affected him. With her death Benjamin lost a friend, a confidant, and a business partner. He had hoped that one day he and Deborah would be able to enjoy their grandchildren together, but the colonial cause proved too great a distraction.

Though Deborah Franklin did not live to see the fruition of Benjamin's work in England, the sacrifices made by her family for the colonial cause were great. Her marriage to Benjamin brought the politics of early America into her front parlor. In her husband's many absences she sought out political influence at dinners, teas, and school functions. At a time when politics were discussed primarily in male-dominated spaces such as taverns and courthouses, the Franklin household and Deborah's social life were intimately tied to the political issues of the day. Deborah's independent nature and well-developed leadership skills enabled Benjamin to pursue a political career on the other side of the Atlantic while she maintained contacts and monitored the political climate in and around Philadelphia.

Among the lists of prominent American patriots during the revolutionary period, there are few women. The historiography pertaining to women such as Deborah Franklin is beginning to evolve, but at times still reverts to well-worn stereotypes of victimization and proper, domesticated female behavior. Deborah Franklin's experiences and contributions to her family's economic and political development provide an alternative interpretation of women during the colonial period. Though her spiritual life was her own, as a housewife, mother, and businesswoman, her work

⁸² Van Doren, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Franklin and Jane Mecom*, 137.

complimented her husband's pursuits and often developed into expressions of independent action and political power. Though not as visible, Deborah made vital contributions to the colonial cause by monitoring events, forming and maintaining political alliances, and at times, actively participating. As Benjamin noted to a friend years later, "I discovered that she [Deborah] always knew what I did not know, and if something escaped me, I was sure that it was precisely that which she had seized."⁸³ Not content just to keep the home fires burning in the absence of her husband, Deborah Franklin relied on her accumulated skills and authority not only to survive but to prosper, asserting her own independence while at the same time furthering the career of her more famous partner.

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⁸³ Quoted in Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries* (New York, 1957), 209.