



# The Grand Secret: Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography and Freemasonry

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The Grand Secret:  
Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Freemasonry

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A Thesis in the Field of English  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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## Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Masonic fraternity. Franklin enjoyed a 52-year Masonic career and strongly influenced American Freemasonry with the publication of *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (1734). Yet he did not write about or mention the fraternity by name in *The Autobiography*. Is there a Masonic subtext in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*? Information drawn from *The Autobiography* and fraternal and historical sources suggests that Franklin's remembrances are consistent with Masonic teachings, and that he lived his life in a manner consistent with those teachings. The study argues that there are three important parallels between *The Autobiography* and the fraternity. First, Franklin espoused a nondenominational, humanist moral mindset, which was consistent with Freemasonry's deistic perspective. Second, Franklin demonstrated the importance of sociability to cultivating leadership skills in a democratic society, mirroring Freemasonry's approach to grooming its leaders. Lastly, Franklin and Freemasonry shared the then-popular idea that personal virtue was the product of habit, as shown in Franklin's "Art of Virtue" and Masonic ritual. Despite these important similarities, a historic rift in the 1750s over lower-class Masons being barred from lodges populated by social elites destroyed grand lodges including Pennsylvania's. This combined with Franklin's corrosive temper—seen in jibes at his son William in *The Autobiography*—may have caused him to be silent on Freemasonry in his remembrances.

## Biographical Sketch

Matthew Bauer is a native of Williamsville, NY. He completed his undergraduate studies at Cornell University in 1989 and started a career in advertising and corporate communications that took him from Buffalo to Washington, DC, then to Boston, MA. The son of Rudolf Bauer and grandson of Joseph Bauer, both Freemasons, Matthew became a Master Mason in The Harvard Lodge in 2006, in the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. Subsequently Professor Leo Damrosch's class "The Enlightenment and the Modern Self"—combined with his long-time interest in the American Revolution—led him to investigate the influences of English Freemasonry on American colonial life.

Matthew lives in historic Newton Upper Falls, MA, with his wife, author Christina Bauer, and their son Max.

## Dedication

To Christina, who teaches me strength,  
and Max, who teaches me courage.

## Acknowledgements

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## Chapter I

### A Long-Neglected Topic

In 1734, Benjamin Franklin published a book that would profoundly affect millions of Americans. It set the foundation for a group intended to promote laudable virtues among men of different backgrounds and beliefs. Franklin's work would be praised initially, then repudiated and all but discarded during his lifetime. Now, more than 200 years after his death, it can be considered a landmark of American social history. But very few people know about the work, let alone the organization for which Franklin produced it.

Franklin's edition of *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* was the first American Masonic book. Originally published in London in 1723 and attributed to Dr. James Anderson, *The Constitutions* recorded by-laws for the burgeoning United Grand Lodge of England, the governing body of Freemasons in England and its colonies. Masonic doctrine envisioned an order of men from varied backgrounds, faiths and political persuasions socializing in an atmosphere denuded of differences for the sake of pursuing self-improvement through knowledge and the diffusion of charity. Franklin's particular interest in *The Constitutions* rose from his having recently become a Mason, joining a small group of influential men in Philadelphia and a growing network of elites

throughout the colonies, who sought to elevate themselves by adopting practices and attitudes of English gentry.<sup>1</sup>

Franklin's Masonic career served as a backdrop to many of his greatest achievements in literature, science and statecraft. After being raised<sup>2</sup> in St. John's Lodge #1 in February 1731, Franklin became a successful printer and promoted the Junto, progenitor of the American Philosophical Society. He experimented with electricity and turned out a prodigious collection of inventions. He made a name for himself in local and provincial politics, followed by his famed service as a colonial agent in England and Europe. Arguably, Freemasonry opened doors for him during his travels, especially in France where influential men with Masonic connections helped him procure support necessary to sustain the American Revolution. Yet Freemasonry and Franklin's role in it merits little attention among historians. In works by W.H. Brands,<sup>3</sup> Edmund S. Morgan,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 51.

<sup>2</sup> The term "raised" signifies completion of the third or "Master Mason" degree in speculative Freemasonry. Candidates are "initiated" into the first degree ("Entered Apprentice"), then "passed" into the second degree ("Fellowcraft") before becoming Master Masons. The degrees use the symbols and form of operative stone masonry's apprenticeship structure as an allegory for self-improvement.

<sup>3</sup> H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 113, 150-54, 563-65, 637. Brands discusses Franklin's joining the fraternity in 1731, his involvement in the death of Daniel Rees during a false Masonic ritual in 1737, and his membership in *Loge des Neuf Soeurs in Paris*, 1777.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). There are no direct mentions of Freemasonry in Morgan's work.

and Walter Isaacson,<sup>5</sup> only 13 total pages are devoted to Franklin's membership in and leadership of the fraternity. J. A. Leo LeMay's second and third volumes of his multi-book compendium on Franklin include a handful of mentions, comprising mostly close reading of a Masonic satire Franklin edited and reproduced in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and details of friction with William Allen over the office of grand master of Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup>

The fault for this oversight starts with Franklin himself, who left scant evidence of his Masonic activities. Over the last 50 years, researchers at Yale have compiled Franklin's collected papers into 39 volumes, stretching from before his obscure birth in Boston in 1709, to 1783 when he was at the peak of his fame as a scientist, statesman and man of letters. Only 19 entries in the papers' online edition mention Freemasonry, and of those only four—all letters—were written by Franklin himself: one to the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts,<sup>7</sup> a personal note to Massachusetts grand master Henry

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) 106-7, 355. Isaacson briefly mentions Franklin's possible motives for joining, the Rees incident, and *Loge des Neuf Soeurs*.

<sup>6</sup> J. A. Leo LeMay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 2: Printer and Publisher, 1730-1747* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) 83-92. Hereafter referred to as *Volume 2*; J. A. Leo LeMay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 3: Soldier, Scientist, and Politician, 1748-1757* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 170-172.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Franklin "To The Grand Lodge Of Massachusetts." *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 12 April 2008 <<http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=373b>>.

Price,<sup>8</sup> one to his friend Peter Collinson,<sup>9</sup> and the last to his parents, wherein he refers to Freemasons as “a very harmless sort of People.”<sup>10</sup>

However, this seeming oversight has not prevented Franklin from becoming one of the leading lights in American Freemasonry. In fact, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is required reading for Masons who seek to connect with the fraternity’s historical foundations. On its surface, *The Autobiography* can be read as remembrances of a remarkable man, one of the first true Americans. Upon closer examination, Franklin’s folksy, self-deprecating tales illustrate key Masonic ideals in action: virtuousness and sociability as a basis for enlightened leadership, built on the bedrock of ecumenical deism. The fact that Freemasonry is not mentioned anywhere explicitly in *The Autobiography* does not make it any less Masonic.

Franklin’s choice to omit his history with the fraternity may have been intentional if not obvious. Though Freemasonry was (and is) a secret society, Franklin made no effort to hide his membership.<sup>11</sup> A controversy between Scots, Irish, and English brothers

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To Henry Price,” 2006. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 12 April 2008 <<http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=375a>>.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To Peter Collinson,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 12 April 2008 <<http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=7&page=009a>>.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To Josiah and Abiah Franklin,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 12 April 2008 <<http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=202a>>.

<sup>11</sup> Several entries in the Franklin Papers comprise Masonic notices from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. For an example, see <http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=379a>, which announces the events surrounding Franklin’s election to his first term as provincial grand master of Pennsylvania in 1734.

that spilled over to the colonies in the 1750s may have soured Franklin on the fraternity, but his Masonic activities in France between 1777 and 1783 would indicate otherwise. Whatever the reason, the greater fault for the lack of serious study of Franklin the Freemason lies with historians. John M. Roberts observed that Freemasonry was rivaled only by religion in its ability to establish a “common fund of ritual rhetoric and social experience” for its members,<sup>12</sup> while religious adversaries accuse Freemasonry of being an anti-clerical civic religion, or a natural religion that rejects the necessity of divine revelation.<sup>13</sup> But the importance of Freemasonry in the social history of Great Britain and her colonies has been overlooked by serious historians. In England, the fraternity attracted respectable men and nobles who sought to use their station to advance the idea that merit was the best measure of a man’s quality, and that meritorious men working together could improve society.<sup>14</sup> And though Masons and Masonic lodges played a role in the American Revolution, the actions of brothers on both sides of the conflict underscore how the fight was over principles rather than ideologies. On the other hand, controversy dogged Freemasonry on the continent, posing threats to monarchy, religion and social order. Hence European researchers—especially in France, Italy and Germany—found more social, political and revolutionary currency in their countries’ Masonic histories.

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<sup>12</sup> John M. Roberts, “Freemasonry: Possibilities of a Neglected Topic,” *The English Historical Review* 84.331 (April 1969): 323.

<sup>13</sup> Joel Schorn, “What is the Catholic view of Freemasonry?” *U.S. Catholic* 70.5 (May 2005): 43.

<sup>14</sup> Bullock 31.

Neglect in the U.S. and England had the effect of ceding Freemasonry to antiquarians and cranks.<sup>15</sup> Antiquarians would obsess over ritual and historic minutiae that were as off-putting as they were irrelevant to anyone but themselves. Cranks—and their conspiracy-theorist cousins—inherited historical anti-Masonic sentiments that have haunted the fraternity since its earliest days.<sup>16</sup> Anti-Masonic voices echo hundreds-of-years old condemnations: practicing Catholics are prohibited from participating in Masonic activities,<sup>17</sup> while fanatics of all stripes accuse Freemasons of being anything from Satanists<sup>18</sup> to the *éminence grise* behind global conspiracies for world domination.<sup>19</sup>

Roberts’s call fell largely on deaf ears for nearly two decades until serious study of English Freemasonry gained momentum in the 1980’s. The work of Margaret Jacob helped introduce 18<sup>th</sup>-century Freemasonry into the *academe*, concentrating on how it operated as a vehicle for disseminating enlightened ideas. In 2000 the University of Sheffield opened the Centre for the Study of Freemasonry and Fraternalism, which examined the cultural and historical legacy of the fraternity in England and, to a lesser extent, its former colonies.

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<sup>15</sup> Roberts 325.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Knoop, ed. *The Early Masonic Pamphlets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1945) 68-71.

<sup>17</sup> Schorn 43. Despite apparent easing of Canon Law the Vatican II, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reaffirmed Catholicism’s dim view of Freemasonry in 1983, explaining that Catholic Freemasons are in a state of grave sin and cannot receive the Eucharist.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Chick LLC, “The Curse of Baphomet,” Chick Publications, 1991, 27 September 2009 <[http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0093/0093\\_01.asp](http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0093/0093_01.asp)>.

<sup>19</sup> Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon A.F. & A.M., “Does Freemasonry Have a Secret Political Agenda?” 27 September 2009 <<http://www.freemasonry.bcy.ca/anti-masonry/anti-masonry04.html#politics>>.

Jacob in particular observes how English and colonial Freemasonry fashioned itself an organization in which men (to borrow her phrase) “lived the Enlightenment.”<sup>20</sup> Her perspective refutes the assumption that only a handful of men—including Voltaire, Diderot, Hume, and Franklin—shaped the Enlightenment. Indeed, Freemasonry was a social laboratory for men who—among other things—sought to become more enlightened. Within the lodge, brothers were exposed to art, music, philosophy, “the new science,” and republicanism.<sup>21</sup> In Europe especially, the tone of Masonic discourse was highly intellectual, attracting men such as sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, playwright Gotthold Lessing, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, whose *Die Zauberflöte* is recognized for its Masonic subtext. In England, key members of early London lodges were affiliated with important scientific groups of the day, including the London College of Physicians and the Royal Society of London.<sup>22</sup>

In the American colonies, early Freemasonry seems to have been more practical. Between 1750 and 1760, nearly 83 percent of Masons in Philadelphia were merchants or professionals, while less than eight percent were craftsmen or artisans.<sup>23</sup> Franklin was an anomaly in the fraternity, but bridged barriers that prevented others of his station from membership. This is precisely why *The Autobiography* appeals to American Masons: Franklin, though born of humble roots, came to be celebrated globally through hard work,

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 21.

<sup>21</sup> R. William Weisberger, “Parisian Masonry, the Lodge of the Nine Sisters, & the French Enlightenment.” *Heredom* 10 (2002): 168

<sup>22</sup> R. William Weisberger, *Speculative Freemasonry and the Enlightenment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 26, 166. Hereafter referred to as *Speculative*.

<sup>23</sup> Bullock 83.

sociability and the application of intellect to surpass traditional, religious, and class bonds. In keeping with the Masonic use of allegory to impart wisdom, Franklin exemplifies these qualities in the way he presents himself as a character in *The Autobiography*.

To understand the impact of Freemasonry on Franklin and *The Autobiography*, we must first construct a picture of Benjamin Franklin, Freemason. By combining timelines of personal and Masonic events in his life, we can hypothesize Franklin's level of activity in the fraternity and its influence on him. From there, we can apply historical information about how and when Franklin wrote *The Autobiography*, and how its contents intersect with his Masonic life. Combined with a close reading of the text, these sources will help show that *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is animated by key tenets of Freemasonry: the importance of ecumenism to social cohesion, the value of repetition in acquiring virtue, and the importance of sociability to those who would be leaders, all extensions of Enlightenment ideals.



## Chapter II

### Franklin The Freemason

Philadelphia winters can be cruel, so it is easy to imagine the Tun Tavern's beams creaking against a chill February wind whipping off the nearby Delaware River and up Water Street. A group of men gather inside against the cold, eventually filtering up the stairs to a ballroom on the second floor. The year is 1731, and candles flicker in the fading twilight as the men don ceremonial garb and arrange special furnishings, including an altar placed in the middle of the room on which rests a bible, a stonemason's square and a geometric compass. The door is guarded by a man wielding a sword, who is charged with defending the proceedings against eavesdroppers. Outside the ballroom, 25-year old Benjamin Franklin, deprived of his sight by a blindfold (or "hoodwink"), his hand and forearm in the gentle grip of a brother, listens to muffled voices and footsteps as his Masonic initiation ceremony begins. With an exchange of knocks at the door, Franklin's conductor ushers him into a new world of possibilities.

The path that led Benjamin Franklin to pass through that door started in Boston with an anonymous birth into a working class family, and would end with him being heralded as a founder of a new nation and progenitor of a new character: the American. The man in the hoodwink bore little resemblance to the precocious troublemaker whose body was indentured to his brother while his mind was secretly committed to learning, to

the distracted runaway who meandered up Philadelphia's Market Street with almost nothing to his name but a skill for printing and unlimited determination, to the naïve tradesman whose ambition tricked him into running a fool's errand to London. With each step, Franklin refined his skills, sharpened his wits, and focused his energy. Once he exited that room, Franklin had received a share of the "light of Freemasonry," and his belief in a man's ability to shape his own destiny had been reinforced by a brotherhood that he himself would shape, and that would ultimately abandon him.

Franklin's Masonic career can be divided into three periods: his American period (1731-1756) was very active, during which he became a shining light of the fraternity in Pennsylvania and beyond, and is contemporaneous to parts one and two of *The Autobiography*. During the British period (1757-1775), which encompasses *Autobiography* parts three and four, Franklin was relatively inactive but parlayed his membership to connect with Freemasons in England, Ireland, and Scotland who were influential scientists and philosophers.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the French period (1776-1785) was the culmination of both his political and Masonic career, with Freemasonry offering an inroad to the French social and intellectual elite through which he advanced the cause of American independence.

No reliable record of an American Masonic initiation ceremony exists from this time, but a Dutch illustration from 1780 shows a blindfolded candidate being guided by a brother before a lodge's worshipful master to receive instruction in the fraternity's rituals

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<sup>24</sup> *Speculative* 30. The Royal Society of London, itself a nexus of Enlightenment thought, was a particular hotbed of Masonic activity and counted many early fraternity leaders among its fellows. Franklin would later become a Society fellow based on his work in electricity.

and tokens.<sup>25</sup> Officers and brothers are gathered around a carpet bearing fraternal signs and symbols comprising the three “Blue Lodge” degrees that make up the core of Freemasonry. While the ceremony at the Tun was the final step in his path to Freemasonry, Franklin and Freemasonry seem to have been on a collision course since 1720. His exposure to Josiah Franklin’s “books of polemic divinity” and the Boyle Lectures against Deism had the ironic effect of making young Ben a “thorough Deist” by the age of 15.<sup>26</sup> Part two of *The Autobiography*, which came to be known as “The Art of Virtue,” was written by Franklin at age 26, based in part on his experiences during his London misadventure. The work offered a mechanistic approach to the cultivation of character through repetition, echoing Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* essay 447 on the acquisition of virtue through repetition of virtuous actions, which Franklin published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* shortly before taking the Masonic degrees.

Franklin was probably exposed to the fraternity by name through his newspaper work: it was customary for colonial publications to reproduce items from London newspapers and journals. But it is unlikely he would have known anything specific about Masonic teachings. Nonetheless, by the time he arrived in Philadelphia in October 1723, Franklin had been exposed to two of the fraternity’s core principles: ecumenism and the concept of virtue as a practice.

In November 1724, Franklin sailed with his friend James Ralph to London, under the misapprehension that Pennsylvania Governor William Keith would bankroll the

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts & Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) 6. Hereafter referred to as *Origins*.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 113-114. Hereafter referred to as *Autobiography*.

purchase of English equipment to set up Franklin in a new printing enterprise. As a result, Franklin was stranded in London and forced to work as a printer's apprentice. It was during this time that Isaac Greenwood, an acquaintance from Boston, probably introduced Franklin to Dr. John Theophilus Desagulier, renowned scientist and the third grand master of the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE).<sup>27</sup> No doubt this meeting would have piqued Franklin's curiosity about an organization that attracted men like Desagulier—an Oxford-educated scientist, member of the Royal Society of London, and early adherent of Isaac Newton—to its ranks. But as a lowly printer's assistant and mere colonial, Franklin was invisible to London Masons, who included intelligentsia like Desagulier and nobles such as the Duke of Montague, to whom *The Constitutions* was dedicated.

Upon his return to Philadelphia in July 1726, Franklin pursued membership in the city's embryonic brotherhood, but was no doubt dissatisfied with his inability to gain the attention of local Masons. Out of frustration—or in an act of extreme attention seeking—Franklin edited and published in the December 8, 1730, *Pennsylvania Gazette* “The Mystery of *Free Masonry*,” an exposé of Masonic ritual reproduced from the August edition of London's *Daily Journal*.<sup>28</sup> This was not the first time Franklin had used a newspaper to swing a target population in his favor, and he was well aware of his power in the community. On the *Pennsylvania Gazette*'s reception during a political squabble in Boston, Franklin observed, “(S)ome spirited remarks of my writing, on the dispute then

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<sup>27</sup> Greenwood was employed by Desagulier as a laboratory assistant. *Volume 2* 83.

<sup>28</sup> Remarkably some details in the article would be recognizable to modern Masons, but due to the lack of reliable records the overall accuracy of this expose cannot be measured. *Volume 2* 84-86.

going on between Governor Burnet and the Massachusetts Assembly, struck the principal people, occasioned the paper and the manager of it to be much talk'd of, and in a few weeks brought them all to be our subscribers.”<sup>29</sup> Whether it was out self-preservation or the political desire to curry favor with a powerful opinion-shaper, the members of St. John’s Lodge selected Franklin to take the Masonic degrees.

Once he joined their ranks, Franklin moved quickly to prove his leadership. He helped draft by-laws for St. John’s Lodge in 1732,<sup>30</sup> then was elected to his first Pennsylvania Grand Lodge post, that of junior grand warden. He organized fraternal entertainments and feasts, and could act as a stand-in for the grand master in the event of an emergency, requiring intimate knowledge of etiquette and ritual. The office allowed Franklin to circulate widely in his new society, get to know non-Masonic VIPs who regularly attended lodge entertainments, manage event budgets and receipts and—of special interest to Franklin—print blank forms for use in the lodge.<sup>31</sup> One can easily imagine him practicing his considerable charm in such a position, while also consolidating a good opinion of himself among influential persons inside and outside the fraternity. Franklin also seems to have been a boon to membership: many of his

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<sup>29</sup> *Autobiography* 119-120.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Franklin et. al., “Report of a Committee on By-Laws for St. John’s Lodge,” *The Papers Of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 10 October 2009 <<http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=231a>>.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson 68-69.

influential friends applied for the degrees after he joined.<sup>32</sup>

A key Masonic privilege is the right to visit other lodges upon proof of membership, which Franklin made great use of especially later in life. During a trip to New England from August 31 to October 13, 1733, Franklin attended lodge communications in Boston where he met Grand Master of Massachusetts Henry Price, a merchant tailor and native of England. Their meeting was fortuitous: Price held a warrant from the UGLE as the grand master of New England and dependent territories, and was charged with regulating the fraternity's growth in the colonies. As a result, Price had authority to grant charters, create other colonial grand lodges and appoint provincial grand masters for the colonies. For Franklin, Price's favorable impression of him accomplished two things: it raised the profile of Pennsylvania Masonry in the eyes of the most influential Mason on the continent, and gave Franklin the reflected glow of associating with someone who consorted with English nobility and held sway over important men throughout the colonies.

Just a year later, Franklin was elected grand master of Pennsylvania and installed on June 24, 1734. According to *The Constitutions*, the grand master would typically be a noble or "*Gentleman* of the best Fashion, or some eminent *Scholar*, or some curious *Architect*, or some other *Artist*, descended from honest Parents, and who is of singular great Merit in the Opinion of the *Lodges*," and was to be "obey'd ... with all Humility,

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<sup>32</sup> Several men from Franklin's social circles were initiated after him, including Thomas Hopkinson, a lawyer, Junto member, Library Company member, and trustee of the Academy of Philadelphia; Joseph Breitnall, a scrivener, Junto member and Library Company secretary; Thomas Bond, a dear friend who would later become a principal founder of the Pennsylvania Hospital; and James Hamilton, son of Franklin's business patron Andrew Hamilton, who would go on to become governor of Pennsylvania. *Volume* 2 91.

Reverence, Love, and Alacrity.”<sup>33</sup> This made him a pillar of his adopted community, a rise in class made all the more remarkable by the obscurity of his birth.

To further emphasize Franklin’s progress, he contacted his brother and friend Henry Price on behalf of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania in November 1734 requesting a new charter issued by Price under his deputation from the UGLE. Such a step would tie the Pennsylvania fraternity more closely to London, and raise its prominence in the province. In a separate, private note to Price, Franklin worried about men claiming to be Masons bringing the fraternity into bad repute in Philadelphia, and explained how a new charter would once and for all establish Franklin’s grand lodge as Pennsylvania’s legitimate Masonic authority.<sup>34</sup> An announcement in the *Boston Gazette* of the end of Franklin’s term as grand master was the first mention of his name outside Philadelphia, putting him on the map as both a prominent Pennsylvanian and a figure of note in the colonies.<sup>35</sup>

On October 15, 1736, Franklin’s life of public service began when he was named clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly. But tragedy and scandal followed closely on the heels of this achievement. One month later on November 21, his son Francis died of smallpox at the age of four. Subsequently, Franklin entered a dark period which reached a

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<sup>33</sup> These qualifications are based on requirements for becoming a brother, which emphasize “real Worth and personal Merit only.” *The Constitutions* emphasize Freemasonry’s lineage, which descended from Adam through various figures from the Bible, Greece, Rome, and British history, underscoring an implied genetic link to “real Worth” through a man’s parentage. Anderson 7-56, 50-51.

<sup>34</sup> Sachse 39-42.

<sup>35</sup> *Volume 2* 90.

new low in June 1737, with a Freemasonry-related scandal involving the death of one Daniel Rees.

Rees was apprenticed to Dr. Evan Jones, and expressed an interest in becoming a Mason to Jones and a number of other men who posed as brothers. They agreed to bring the young man into their false fraternity, and Rees met them in a tavern to make final arrangements for the initiation ceremony. Franklin happened to be sitting nearby, and in his capacity as a court-appointed auditor was preparing to mediate a case between Dr. Jones and a man named Armstrong Smith.<sup>36</sup> What happened next was disputed: Franklin insisted the the men waved to him and called his name, to which he responded cordially, and that was the end of their interaction. The conspirators claimed that Franklin engaged them in conversation, became aware of the ruse and egged them on.

What happened subsequently is clear: during the course of the mock initiation in Dr. Jones's basement, Rees was blindfolded and made to engage in numerous unsavory activities, including drinking a strong "physick" and kissing a conspirator's buttocks. At one point, a bowl of alcohol was lit in front of Rees and conspirators sat grimacing behind the flames, giving their faces a demonic cast. One even went so far as to dress in a cowhide and horns to resemble Satan. When his blindfold was removed Rees saw the grotesque scene and declared that he was not afraid, so his master Jones splashed the flaming spirits on his chest, causing mortal injuries. Rees died three days later.

Franklin's critics attacked him in print, accusing him of complicity in Rees's death. Franklin surely was concerned over the damage done to his fraternity's reputation, but aggravated more so by personal attacks on him in print. While much of the vitriol

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<sup>36</sup> J.A. Leo LeMay, "1737," *Benjamin Franklin: A Documentary History*, 1997, 20 September 2009 <<http://www.english.udel.edu/lemay/franklin/1737.html>>.



directed at Franklin was written anonymously, he took the extraordinary step of defending himself and his brotherhood in an open letter in the *American Weekly Mercury* on February 21, 1738, which included a personal affidavit from two witnesses who supported Franklin's version of events.<sup>37</sup> For a man who prided himself on having a spotless character, this scandal must have been mortifying, made only worse by the fact that coverage of the crime and lengthy trial made it into Boston's newspapers, bringing Franklin the kind of notoriety he did not want. After defending himself to his Philadelphia neighbors, Franklin had to defend himself to his mother and father back home. In a letter dated April 13, 1738, Franklin tried to calm his parents' fears:

As to the Freemasons, unless she will believe me when I assure her that they are in general a very harmless sort of People; and have no principles or Practices that are inconsistent with Religion or good Manners, I know no Way of giving my Mother a better Opinion of them than she seems to have at present, (since it is not allow'd that Women should be admitted into that secret Society).<sup>38</sup>

The Rees scandal seems to have cooled Franklin's public zeal for Freemasonry, but he likely continued to attend meetings and may have dabbled in some Masonic song-

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<sup>37</sup> Sachse 58-66.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "To Josiah And Abiah Franklin," *The Papers Of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 10 October 2009 <<http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=202a>>.

writing.<sup>39</sup> When he returned to New England in 1744, Franklin—who had mostly retired from his successful printing business—attended another meeting at Boston’s St. John’s Lodge where he met Dr. Archibald Spencer, an itinerant lecturer on electricity. It was Franklin’s first exposure to the topic, and clearly captured his imagination. After meeting Spencer, “I purchas’d all Dr Spence’s (sic) Apparatus, who had come from England to lecture here; and I proceeded in my Electrical Experiments with great Alacrity, but the Public now considering me as a Man of Leisure, laid hold of me for their Purposes; every Part of our Civil Government, and almost at the same time, imposing some Duty upon me.”<sup>40</sup>

With two notable exceptions, the launch of Franklin’s political and scientific careers signaled the end of his American Masonic period. The first exception was Franklin’s appointment by Most Worshipful Brother Price to a second term as Pennsylvania’s grand master in July 1749, which Franklin vacated after seven months. The second was his involvement in the development and building of Philadelphia’s Freemason’s Hall between 1752 and 1755.

The events surrounding the dedication of the building are described in minute detail by Sachse, including a mention of Franklin’s son William, who as Pennsylvania’s grand lodge secretary carried a bible on a crimson pillow through the procession. Though nominally owned by the city’s Masonic lodges, Freemason’s Hall was the site of public gatherings and dances, making it a focal point for community life. The building must

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<sup>39</sup> LeMay is skeptical of this claim. J.A. Leo LeMay, “1742,” *Benjamin Franklin: A Documentary History*, 1997, 7 April 2006 <<http://www.english.udel.edu/lemay/franklin/1742.html>>.

<sup>40</sup> *Autobiography* 196. The footnote to this quote indicates that “Dr. Spence” is in fact Archibald Spencer.

have given Franklin a great sense of pride and accomplishment: a notice of the dedication in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* was the first mention made of Freemasonry in his newspaper in 14 years.<sup>41</sup>

In 1731 when Franklin was extended the privilege of taking the degrees, St. John's Lodge consisted of four bricklayers, a farmer, a merchant, and two men whose professions are unknown.<sup>42</sup> In the intervening years, Franklin helped the fraternity to acquire some of the patrician patina of British Freemasonry. By 1756, 62% of Franklin's Masonic brothers were in the top half of Philadelphia's tax rolls, and the fraternity had weathered scandal and public scorn to establish itself as a shining light of public life in Philadelphia.<sup>43</sup> He had succeeded in reinventing himself, and positioning himself for opportunities not normally afforded to a soap-boiler's son. With an influential appointment to be Pennsylvania's agent in London, Franklin sailed to London in 1757 just as a new type of Freemasonry established itself in Philadelphia, bent on subverting the existing brotherhood. In the years following, internecine rivalry would tear at everything Franklin had accomplished for the fraternity in the preceding 25 years.

*The Autobiography* ends shortly after Franklin arrives in London on July 27, 1757. While he had more than half of his Masonic career before him, Franklin's American Masonic period was over. He would start to write his remembrances while in England in 1771, as revolutionary political currents began to swirl around him. And though he may not have written explicitly about the fraternity that helped shaped his

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<sup>41</sup> Sachse 92-101. William Franklin is mentioned on page 98.

<sup>42</sup> *Volume 2* 86-87.

<sup>43</sup> Bullock 95.

character, he wrote avidly about characteristics of Freemasonry that would be associated with him throughout history.

### Chapter III

#### The Most Acceptable Service

Benjamin Franklin's academic career worked in reverse. Instead of a long progression of achievement, young Ben's schooling was an abrupt sequence of diminishing opportunities. "I was put to the Grammar School at Eight Years of Age," he recalled in 1771, "my Father intending to devote me, as the Tithe of his Sons, to the service of the Church."<sup>44</sup> After one year at South Grammar School—in which Franklin claimed to rise from the middle of the class to the second form by year's end—he was removed to George Brownell's English school, which taught a non-classical curriculum and was a decided social and academic step down.<sup>45</sup> The next year, Franklin returned to his father's chandlery, where he trimmed wicks, poured boiling wax into candle molds and was grateful for the shop's oppressive heat during the frigid New England winter. Franklin commented in *The Autobiography* that his lack of progress in Arithmetic caused his schooling to end.

A clerical vocation fell out of Franklin's reach quickly, but there is considerable irony in the thought of America's foremost free-thinker preaching Puritan gospel in

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<sup>44</sup> *Autobiography* 52.

<sup>45</sup> J.A. Leo LeMay, "1706-1714," *Benjamin Franklin: A Documentary History*, 1997, 10 October 2006 <<http://www.english.udel.edu/lemay/franklin/1742.html>>.

Reverend Mather's fiery manner. Had he completed his studies (which would have taken him to Harvard) Franklin's inquisitive nature might have made him something of a maverick in the church. Instead Franklin's voracious appetite for learning placed him among the vanguard of American intellectuals, one of a few self-taught philosophers of the Enlightenment.

In the place of formal education, Benjamin Franklin read. It is not hard to imagine 10-year old Ben reading eagerly as dawn broke over Boston, or late at night by the light of his father's candles. He confessed to contriving excuses to go to his brother's print shop on Sunday and read in secret, choosing philosophy or navigation or geometry over Ebenezer Pemberton's services in the Old South Meeting House.<sup>46</sup> Instead of solemnly enduring Puritan pieties, Ben pored over leather-bound volumes of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (strictly to learn Bunyan's style), Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, De Foe's *Essay upon Projects*, and Mather's *Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good*, the least doctrinaire of his works. Within the small library his father kept, Benjamin found and read what he characterized as "books in Polemic divinity, most of which I read, and have since often regretted."<sup>47</sup>

His early exposure to strident Puritan theology made a significant, negative impression on young Ben. When he later read philosophical works by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, and the Necessitarian deist Anthony Collins, Franklin began to question the tight-laced faith of his upbringing outright. By age 15 he read sermons against deism by Robert Boyle, which had the opposite effect, making Ben a

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<sup>46</sup> Isaacson 24-27.

<sup>47</sup> *Autobiography* 57-58.

“thorough Deist.”<sup>48</sup> As his doubts about religion grew, they intersected with his youthful fondness for debate and burgeoning talent for writing. Thus, Franklin remembered, “my indiscrete (sic) Disputations about Religion began to make me pointed at with Horror by good People as an Infidel or Atheist.”<sup>49</sup> This was a key point that made Franklin flee Boston for more hospitable environs, where he was unknown and could start his character anew.

His experiences in Boston are a cautionary tale to Masons: When it comes to another’s religion, brothers should make every effort not to offend one another. In *The Autobiography*, the dangers of religious controversy are embodied in Samuel Keimer, Franklin’s first employer in Philadelphia, who “had been one of the French Prophets, and could act their enthusiastic Agitations.”<sup>50</sup> Before moving to Pennsylvania in 1722, Keimer had taken refuge in London with fellow sect members, whose apocalyptic faith included trances, visions and end-of-days revelations. In *The Old Bailey Proceedings* dated January 10, 1718, Keimer takes space in the advertisements section to sell his book, *A Search after Religion, Among the Many Modern Pretenders to It*. In the ad Keimer decries “Hireling Priests and Soul-Brokers, near 40 of whose names he has inserted ... whom he found to be Cheats, false Teachers, and Soul-destroyers.” He goes on to insult his own sect, referring to “the Pranks of the French Prophets, &c.”, and ends with an

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<sup>48</sup> *Autobiography* 113-114.

<sup>49</sup> *Autobiography* 71.

<sup>50</sup> *Autobiography* 79.

insult to potential buyers: “Reader, but read my Book with serious Mind, Thou'lt own it Truth, or else I'm sure thou'rt blind.”<sup>51</sup>

None of this information appears in *The Autobiography*, but it reinforces Franklin’s approximation of Keimer’s character, being that of a man with neither consideration nor couth. Keimer, it seems, was an equal opportunity offender. Franklin describes him as knavish and “very ignorant of the World,” a man who at first professed no faith, then professed some knowledge of many faiths during their acquaintance.<sup>52</sup> He is precisely what Franklin—and by extension his readers—endeavors *not* to be: insincere, faithless, rude, and ignorant.

The example of Keimer carries a deeper message for Masons. Anderson’s *Constitutions* is explicit regarding a brother’s duty to observe the universal tenets of the fraternity, namely charity, truth, and brotherly love. If practiced properly, these will promote harmony among brothers and show the mettle of a man’s own character. “A Mason is oblig’d by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid *Atheist*, nor an irreligious *Libertine*.”<sup>53</sup>

*The Constitutions* encourage Masons to set aside piques over their particular faiths to promote an ecumenical, humanist outlook. But beyond encouraging brothers to simply get along, Anderson’s lengthy and apocryphal history of Masonry suggests that fraternal teachings may reveal something about the true nature of God—referred to by

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<sup>51</sup> Samuel Keimer, “10th January 1718,” *Old Bailey Proceedings*, December 2008, 19 November 2009 <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?path=sessions/Papers/17180110.xml>>.

<sup>52</sup> *Autobiography* 79.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson 48.



Masons as “the great Architect of the Universe”—and man’s place in that universe. Men who might otherwise have been kept at a distance from each other due to religion could instead become Masonic brothers, and share in hermetic knowledge about the building of one’s character, unadulterated wisdom of the ancients given to Adam and handed down through successive ages to the citizens of “the *Freeborn* BRITISH NATIONS, disentangled from foreign and civil Wars, and enjoying the good Fruits of Peace and Liberty.”<sup>54</sup>

More than paying lip-service to the idea of ecumenism, Freemasonry was fulfilling *The Constitution*’s promise. By 1731, Jews had joined at least two London lodges.<sup>55</sup> In Philadelphia, Franklin’s own St. John’s Lodge counted Quakers, Anglicans, Baptists and Presbyterians as brothers. In puritanical New England, brothers from Boston started a lodge in Newport, R.I., which was dominated by Jews from Portugal and the Caribbean. Even a French prisoner of war, presumably Roman Catholic, was made a brother in Boston in 1744, and the customary initiation fee was waived due to his incarceration.<sup>56</sup>

The idea of Masons possessing hermetic knowledge, a cornerstone of the English fraternity, was downplayed in straightforward American lodges, but the humanist message was still clear. Franklin illustrates it in one of the most memorable scenes in *The Autobiography*. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, young Ben ambled through the streets of Philadelphia with all of his worldly possessions stuffed into his coat pockets, drenched

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<sup>54</sup> Anderson 44.

<sup>55</sup> Bullock 33.

<sup>56</sup> Bullock 59.

from his soggy boat ride down the Delaware and chewing a loaf of bread. After a providential moment when he passes by his future wife Deborah Read, Franklin encounters a crowd of well-dressed people that he follows into a Quaker meeting. The silence combined with his exhaustion cause Franklin to doze off for the duration of the meeting. Still, his warm welcome at the hands of a friendly Quaker man, who steers him away from one boarding house of questionable reputation toward better accommodations helps to illustrate how a stranger can be a friend, and how caring for one's fellow human beings can change their fortunes for the better.<sup>57</sup>

As sweet as this scene is, Franklin does not spare himself criticism. He famously cites five mistakes in his young character that he describes using the printer's term "erratum." Four errata relate to personal behavior: breaking the indenture to his brother James to leave Boston, "forgetting" his engagement to Deborah Read while he was in England, spending money entrusted to him by a Mr. Vernon, and taking liberties with a young woman in London whom his friend James Ralph was courting. The fifth was an error of philosophical judgment.

While employed at Samuel Palmer's London printing house in 1725, Franklin type-set William Woolaston's *The Religion of Nature Delineated*. Taking issue with some of Woolaston's opinions, Franklin wrote and published the pamphlet *A Dissertation upon Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, which argued that the idea of free will in man clashes with the concept of a benevolent god. "It occasion'd my being more consider'd by Mr. Palmer as a young man of some ingenuity, tho' he seriously

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<sup>57</sup> *Autobiography* 76.

expostulated with me upon the principles of my pamphlet, which to him appear'd abominable.”<sup>58</sup>

As with his other errata, Franklin knew there was no good that came from anything that might or does cause offense. Franklin’s assessment of Keimer, arrival in Philadelphia, and personal rebuke over *A Dissertation* show his position on faith to be practical, an outlook he shared with Freemasons. Both are concerned with the good men can do rather than the philosophy that would prompt them to do it. Both also show deep concern for the maintenance of a harmonious atmosphere in the name of social cohesion. In March 1790, Franklin composed what might be the best description of his personal creed in a letter sent to the Rev. Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College. The letter, which would prove to be among his last, expresses a philosophical ideal of harmony based on a practical standard of mutual assistance:

I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him, is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever Sect I meet with them.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Autobiography* 96.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To Ezra Stiles,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 10 October 2009 <<http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/yale?vol=46&page=400>>.

But this ideal was not exclusive to Franklin. Comparing Masonic philosophy to Franklin's credo, one finds that Anderson covered similar ground in *The Constitutions*. He suggests that, instead of dictating a particular faith, Masons need only commit themselves to a universal truth that Franklin found a common denominator among "all sound Religion." "(T)is now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be good Men and true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Anderson 48.

## Chapter IV

### For The Forming Of Future Great Men

In 1771 Franklin set down his pen and broke from work on his remembrances. Soon after, the events of the revolution caused his global profile to skyrocket, and his writings completed at Twyford took on new significance. In 1783, two friends from Philadelphia—Quaker merchant Abel James, who obtained Franklin’s original manuscript by chance, and Junto member Benjamin Vaughn, with whom James shared the manuscript<sup>61</sup>—wrote Franklin urging him to complete the work. When he picked up his pen again in 1784 it was not a successful Philadelphia printer and civil servant recording personal anecdotes, but a world-renowned statesman, scientist and thinker relating the events of his momentous life.

Another noteworthy change is his audience. No longer does Franklin address his son William, a loyalist who was exiled to England in 1782 from his father’s new country. Franklin wrote for anyone who might be interested in his life. He also made marginal remarks to guide assembly of the component parts into a cohesive work. No longer was this a personal work—were it ever so. Franklin was preparing a manuscript for publication.

The narrative, however, does not change and, despite his not having the 1771 manuscript, he picks up exactly where he left off: in 1730, soliciting subscriptions for the

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<sup>61</sup> *Autobiography* 23.

fledgling Library Company of Philadelphia. He writes parenthetically that Vaughn and Abel's letters should be inserted at the break between the 1771 manuscript and the work started in 1784, but continues in his text to advance the "impropriety of presenting one's self as the proposer of any useful project, that might be suppos'd to raise one's reputation in the smallest degree above that of one's neighbors."<sup>62</sup> Whether or not he was swayed by his friends' mawkish pleas to continue his work, Franklin's desire to include the letters underscores another subtext of *The Autobiography*: how a potential leader in a democratic system must navigate the waters between self promotion and civic interest to lead effectively.

Franklin illustrates this in his 1784 retelling of Library Company fund-raising stories. He was motivated at first by the lack of a good book-seller in Philadelphia to slake his—and his fellow Junto members'—thirst for reading. "I propos'd that we should all of us bring our books to that room, where they would not only be ready to consult in our conferences, but become a common benefit, each of us being at liberty to borrow such as he wish'd to read at home."<sup>63</sup> Over time Franklin sought to open the collection to others, creating by-laws for the organization and going so far as to have an attorney formalize a contract for potential subscribers to sign. Hereafter the Junto is not mentioned in relation to the Library Company, and Franklin takes center stage in the effort. He neutralizes "objections and reluctances" of potential subscribers by explaining that "a number of friends" were behind the scheme, not just one man. Still he refers to the Library Company effort as his alone: "In this way my affair went on more smoothly, and

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<sup>62</sup> *Autobiography* 143.

<sup>63</sup> *Autobiography* 141-142.

I ever after practis'd it on such occasions; and, from my frequent successes, can heartily recommend it.” To enhance this observation on the potential to do well by doing good he adds, “The present little sacrifice of your vanity will afterwards be amply repaid.”<sup>64</sup>

Franklin is unabashed in relating this and his other “frequent” successes. In the following paragraph, he explains how his industry and focus on duty—to family, employees, and debtors—was deflected each day by only an hour or two of reading, an effort for self improvement through “constant study” afforded by the library. By the end of the paragraph he explains that such industry and mental exertion helped him achieve personal and political status that, among other things, placed him in the presence of five kings.

In a few paragraphs Franklin has transported readers from a tiny library made up of borrowed books to dinner with the king of Denmark, owing in large part to his application of benevolent self-interest. This is a far cry from the young man whose indulgence in disputation was partial cause for him to bolt from Boston. With the benefit of hard-earned wisdom, Franklin relates cautious advice on how *not* to advance one’s own agenda:

If you wish information and improvement from the knowledge of others, and yet at the same time express yourself as firmly fix'd in your present opinions, modest, sensible men, who do not love disputation, will probably leave you undisturbed in the possession of your error. And by such a manner, you can seldom

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<sup>64</sup> *Autobiography* 143.

hope to recommend yourself in pleasing your hearers,  
or to persuade those whose concurrence you desire.<sup>65</sup>

Freemasons worked to cultivate a public air of enlightened benevolence about the fraternity. But within the lodge system, would-be Masonic leaders worked to raise their profiles without offending their brothers, on whose support any leader would depend. In the early days of the American fraternity, the small number of lodges did not always allow for a plebiscite on Masonic officers, so the provincial grand master could appoint grand masters in other jurisdictions as Henry Price did for Franklin in 1749.<sup>66</sup> However, as the colonial fraternity grew, so did the opportunity for individuals to vote on the direction of their fraternity. *The Constitutions* further state that lodge officers are representatives of their constituent brethren: a lodge's brothers would instruct their master on how to vote in the election of a grand master, and relate any particular issues they wish to be brought before the grand lodge.<sup>67</sup>

This relationship between the governing and the governed mirrored that of the fledgling American republic and its guarantee of suffrage for free-born men of age. Thus Freemasons who sought to take on leadership roles would have found much to learn from *The Autobiography*.

As described in *The Constitutions*, the characteristics desired in a grand master were lumped into the term "Merit," and whose character fit best was determined by the grand lodge's constituent masters under the direction of their brothers. *The Constitutions*

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<sup>65</sup> *Autobiography* 65.

<sup>66</sup> Bullock 47.

<sup>67</sup> Anderson 62.



describes a wholly democratic approach for the election of a grand master, the fraternity's highest office:

(T)he *GRANDMASTER* and his *Deputy*, the *Grand-Wardens*, or the *Stewards*, the *Secretary*, the *Treasurer*, the *Clerks*, and every other Person, shall withdraw, and leave the *Masters* and *Wardens* of the particular *Lodges* alone, in order to consult amicably about electing a  
NEW GRAND-MASTER.<sup>68</sup>

The Mason's approach was in direct opposition to the old order, with power being concentrated in the hands of a very few who wielded it by religious fiat. Instead, sociable men whose merit was well known among the brethren had a leg-up on less sociable (though no less meritorious) brothers on the climb to Masonic leadership. Franklin was prescient in understanding that a new nation based on democratic ideals required a new kind of leader—a man much like himself, who was guided by sociability in the service of enlightened self interest.

In the years after Franklin's Masonic initiation, men from the emerging merchant and professional class would make up a large percentage of candidates for the Masonic degrees. As mentioned earlier, Philadelphia's fraternity evolved during Franklin's time from a craftsman's club to a civic organization with connections to the English social and aristocratic elite. Subsequently candidates were literate, of moderate to good education, and wealthy enough to pay membership dues. They had to be free-born, had to believe in God, and were required to choose sociability over dogma, setting aside controversial

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<sup>68</sup> Anderson 71.

matters such as politics and religion, which “never conduc’d to the Welfare of any Lodge, nor ever will.”<sup>69</sup> Punishment for fomenting controversy in the lodge could lead to expulsion from the fraternity.

With benevolence as a core teaching of the order, Freemasons sought to improve their communities through charity: they sponsored civic agencies including hospitals and orphanages, as well as scientific lectures and artistic events. Desagulier and other key members of early London lodges were affiliated with important scientific groups of the day, including the London College of Physicians and the Royal Society.<sup>70</sup> Later in the century, *Zur wahren Eintracht* Lodge of Vienna had a house orchestra and counted Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart among its members.<sup>71</sup> The *Loge des Neuf Sœurs*, which Franklin led during his time in France, was founded as a charitable society at the Paris Academy of Sciences and re-organized under Masonic principles in 1776.<sup>72</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that Franklin’s remarkable charitable work for the citizens of Philadelphia—excepting the construction of Freemason’s Hall—was done on behalf of the fraternity or motivated by Masonic teachings, but his notoriety as a philanthropist would have reflected well on an already prestigious group and, by extension, its members.

But the fraternity also used the visual vocabulary of power to bolster its prestige, evidenced by the traditional Masonic procession. At least twice a year—on the feasts of the two saints John and for special fraternity events—brethren would gather for a great

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<sup>69</sup> Anderson 53.

<sup>70</sup> *Speculative* 26.

<sup>71</sup> *Speculative* 146-147.

<sup>72</sup> Weisberger, “Parisian” 167-170.

feast, which was also attended by dignitaries who were not Masons. From the banquet, a solemn parade would wend through the streets, with brothers garbed in trappings of the elite: white gloves and stockings, ceremonial swords, rods and chains of office, and snow-white lambskin aprons, setting their spiritual work apart from the earthly work of operative stonemasons. This spectacle was only prevented from tipping into ostentation by the members' public proclamations of universal concern, civic support and the public's generally positive regard for the brotherhood.<sup>73</sup>

In Franklin's philosophy, charity is the ultimate act of brotherly love and wealth is a powerful symbol of man's natural rights in action, the manifestation of merit earned through labor.<sup>74</sup> Since Masonic charity was enabled primarily through the wealth and talents of its brethren, a Masonic lodge should have a central place in the community and its members should be well-respected. Despite their (hoped-for) sober public image and philosophical warnings against overindulgence, Masonic lodges were also places where middle class men could observe and emulate patrician manners and luxury. In addition to elaborate regalia, the fraternity advanced traditions of group entertainment and other extravagances that would have been within the means of only successful men. Banqueting with local dignitaries and distinctive styles of drinking and singing were central to the Masonic experience, and accepted so long as the merriment was cast in the light of fraternal conviviality, not simple excess.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Bullock 52-54.

<sup>74</sup> Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography and the Education of America," *The American Political Science Review* 86.2 (1992): 358.

<sup>75</sup> Jacob, *Living* 65-69.

It is not hard to see why middle-class men would find Freemasonry so appealing: they worked hard and wanted to enjoy—or possibly flaunt—their hard-earned success. But simply being a Freemason enhanced their status automatically. In as much as Freemasonry was a philosophy, it was also a lifestyle. Austerity in the lodge was counter-balanced by gaiety at the banquet, demonstrating a Humean dichotomy that stressed simply having a good time over too much deep thinking. Where Franklin sought to explain the balance between public perception and personal ambition in *The Autobiography*, Freemasons lived it, and their individual characters carried with them the reputation of an entire order.

Franklin knew this as well as anyone, and perhaps saw Freemasonry as an organization that accomplished two important goals. First, it attracted ambitious, successful and thoughtful men who had the character to become leaders. Second, it offered a governance structure in which those men could practice leadership, cultivating their enlightened self interest for the benefit of their lodges, communities, and nation. As Vaughn suggests that the details of Franklin’s life would offer valuable lessons “for the forming of future great men”,<sup>76</sup> his sometimes bifurcated lessons would appeal to Masons, who sought to exemplify the social benefits endowed by good public character, while indulging in the simple enjoyments of a privileged society of friends insulated by secrecy.

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<sup>76</sup> *Autobiography* 135.

## Chapter V

### A Steady, Uniform Rectitude Of Conduct

In May 1760 Franklin was in London representing the interests of Britain's American colonies. While visiting Scotland the previous fall he met the jurist and philosopher Henry Home, Lord Kames. In a letter to Kames from London, Franklin asks the 64-year old noble to consider his perspective on virtue and its acquisition:

(Virtue) is as properly an Art, as Painting, Navigation, or Architecture. If a Man would become a Painter, Navigator, or Architect, it is not enough that he is *advised* to be one ... but he must also be taught the Principles of the Art, be shewn all the Methods of Working, and how to acquire the *Habits* of using properly all the Instruments; and thus regularly and gradually he arrives by Practice at some Perfection in the Art.<sup>77</sup>

Franklin was relating his twist on a popular concept of the time, applying Aristotelian thinking—channeled through the Associationists—to questions about human

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "To Lord Kames," *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006. 15 January 2010 <<http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=9&page=103a>>.

nature,<sup>78</sup> a perspective which served as the basis for his “Art of Virtue,” conceived and written between 1728 and 1732. Called by Franklin “the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection,” The Art is a ritualized approach to supplanting specific personal shortcomings with their positive counterparts to bolster one’s overall character.<sup>79</sup>

Franklin envisioned starting the process with deep reflection into one’s own character, then compiling a list of weaknesses to be changed. He chose 12 for himself: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity. He added humility to the list later at the urging of a Quaker friend who knew Franklin’s propensity to pride.<sup>80</sup> The number offered an elegant symmetry for the exercise: he would focus on one virtue each week and repeat the process quarterly, practicing each virtue four times in the space of about a year. To advance toward mastery of a virtue he would prevent himself from doing whatever he wanted to change for that week, comprising a continuous effort of self-denial that Franklin found to be challenging.<sup>81</sup> Ever the inventor, Franklin created a pocket diary to track his daily progress, marking with a black dot “every Fault I found upon Examination to have been committed respecting that Virtue upon that Day.”<sup>82</sup> Were frugality the goal for the week and he overspent his budget, Franklin would mark the error in his book, a

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<sup>78</sup> Norman S. Fiering, “Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue,” *American Quarterly* 30.2 (1978): 201.

<sup>79</sup> *Autobiography* 148.

<sup>80</sup> *Autobiography* 159.

<sup>81</sup> *Autobiography* 155.

<sup>82</sup> *Autobiography* 151.

literal and metaphorical black spot on his character and a reminder that he could (and should) do better. He also included aphorisms and quotes for inspiration. Thus Franklin sought to replace his bad behaviors with more laudable ones, acquiring “the *Habitude*” of virtue.

To accomplish the same end, Freemasonry created its own system of morality illustrated by symbols, expressed in allegory and taught through ritual. Masonic ritual is the principal tool used to express and reinforce fraternal ideals. The central allegory of Masonic teaching is the building of King Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, which represents character, divinely inspired and fixed within each brother. The multitude of laborers, stone workers and overseers who built the temple represents the Masonic brotherhood engaged in spiritual construction individually and as a group. Hiram Abiff, identified in Masonic lore as the chief architect of the temple, is the exemplar of ideal character for all Freemasons, and the focus of the drama comprising the Master Mason degree. Freemasonry’s primary degrees—Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason— imply apprenticeship and obligation to the brotherhood and its ritual. The core tenets of Freemasonry—relief (care for other human beings), truth (the effort to perfect one’s nature), and brotherly love—express how character is constructed: if brotherly love is the “*Cement and Glory of this ancient Fraternity,*” relief is its building blocks and truth-seeking is the labor necessary to build one’s spiritual temple.<sup>83</sup>

From the moment Franklin was hoodwinked outside the Tun Tavern’s ballroom he figured in a ritual drama based on operative stonemasons’ initiation rituals and

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<sup>83</sup> Anderson 55.

teaching methods.<sup>84</sup> Between 1598 and 1599, William Schaw, master of works to James VI of Scotland, codified the leadership structure, initiation requirements and methods of teaching the stonemason's craft to apprentices in operative Scottish lodges. Over the subsequent century, the population of operative stonemasons in lodges throughout Great Britain gave way to speculative Freemasons engaged in spiritual work, and the ritual likewise evolved. Through 130 years of elaboration the ritual became the most important tool of the Masonic fraternity, and its form and content solidified as the fraternity itself became more stable.<sup>85</sup>

Little is known about the form of that ritual today: Freemasons took three so-called "bloody oaths" to protect the secrecy of their ritual. Common sources for 18<sup>th</sup>-century ritual are "exposures," pamphlets of dubious quality published and sold to discredit the fraternity. In 1730 one such pamphlet appeared in London. Titled *Prichard's Masonry Dissected*—supposedly written by former brother Samuel Prichard—the pamphlet is remarkable for two things: First it caused the nascent United Grand Lodge of England to warn lodges about well-informed interlopers infiltrating lodge meetings.<sup>86</sup> Second, it bears striking similarities to modern Massachusetts Grand Lodge ritual in language and detail.<sup>87</sup> From this one can assume that *Masonry Dissected* rises above

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<sup>84</sup> *Origins* 11-12.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas Knoop, ed. *The Early Masonic Catechisms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963) 25. Hereafter referred to as *Catechisms*.

<sup>86</sup> *Catechisms* 17.

<sup>87</sup> It is worth noting that a copy of *Masonry Dissected*'s third edition is held in the Massachusetts Grand Lodge library. *Catechisms* 147.



spurious exposures in its depiction of English Masonic ritual in the years immediately before Franklin's initiation.

The introduction and conclusion of Prichard's pamphlet were tinged with antagonism toward the fraternity, but the ritual itself reflects a workman-like approach to self-improvement. Of particular interest is a pledge in the Entered Apprentice's degree:

Q. What do you come here to do?

A. Not to do my own proper will;

But to subdue my own Passion still;

The Rules of Masonry in hand to take,

And daily Progress therein to make.<sup>88</sup>

The phrase "subdue my own Passion"—which is extant in modern ritual—coupled with the idea of daily progress suggests congruence with Franklin's Art. Prichard also demonstrates how the interrogative format used frequently in Masonic ritual reinforces both degree language and underlying messages.

Pritchard also shows the sheer volume of information a Mason was required to learn, recite, and internalize, which might have been challenging even for a mind as formidable as Franklin's. Because of Masonic secrecy, new brothers were expected to practice and exemplify in open lodge the signs, symbols, and postures that signify membership and represent friendship, charity, and secrecy. As Addison suggested,

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<sup>88</sup> *Catechisms* 160.

“custom has a mechanical effect upon the body, at the same time that it has a very extraordinary influence upon the mind.”<sup>89</sup>

Like Addison and Franklin, the Masonic mind equated virtue with repeated behavior over time with little thought about spiritual transformation, emphasizing instead “a steady, uniform Rectitude of Conduct.”<sup>90</sup> Franklin’s Art and Masonic ritual—referred to by Anderson as “The Royal Art”—coupled with its governance structure emphasize the social and personal benefits of good character. From this perspective one may correlate Masonic processions on the St. Johns’ day feasts to Franklin rolling a wheelbarrow of paper through the streets of Philadelphia: virtue’s benefits could be had by anyone who behaves virtuously and learns to project the impression of virtuousness:

Thus being esteem'd an industrious, thriving young Man,  
and paying duly for what I bought, the Merchants who  
imported Stationery solicited my Custom; others proposed  
supplying me with Books, and I went on swimmingly.<sup>91</sup>

But Franklin and Freemasons were also painfully aware of the damage one can do to a carefully crafted character through bad behavior. Though Franklin’s list of desired character traits is hardly unique to him—consider what good The Art might have done for fellow Mason James Bosworth—*The Constitutions* warned brothers specifically against similar vices: drunkenness, slander, discourtesy, frivolity, profligacy, laziness,

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<sup>89</sup>Joseph Addison, “*Spectator* 447,” *The Works of the Right Honourable Joseph Addison* (London: George Bell & Son, 1889) 453.

<sup>90</sup> *Autobiography* 148.

<sup>91</sup> *Autobiography* 126.

insincerity, litigiousness, gluttony, ill manners, haughtiness, and the injury to one's self and family caused by indulging in these uncivilized behaviors.

Another feature shared by *The Art* and Masonic ritual is Franklin's device for dividing up one's day. In Franklin's little black book, he kept a chart indicating how he would spend his day: seven hours was devoted to sleep, seven to work, and fully 10 hours given over to spiritual, personal, and business matters. Taken together, these would help him advance his efforts toward both social advancement and moral perfection. Masons used the symbol of a 24-inch ruler, or "gauge," to represent the same idea with a slightly different twist. Ritual reminds brothers that the gauge was used by operative masons to "lay out their work," but that a Freemason engaged in spiritual construction would devote six hours to his usual vocation, six hours for rest and refreshment, and 12 hours in service to God and a distressed worthy brother.<sup>92</sup> The very existence of Franklin's book parallels popular Masonic pocket almanacs that contained an edited version of Anderson's history, maxims and illustrations, and a calendar with Masonic and Protestant holidays.<sup>93</sup>

In *The Autobiography* Franklin admitted that he "fell far short" of completing his plan for the cultivation of virtue, but "was by the Endeavour a better and happier Man."<sup>94</sup> There is no small irony in the thought that Franklin considered making his 13-week morality program an entrance requirement to the "Society of the Free and Easy," a secret fraternity he conceived around 1731, which would have been dedicated to the

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<sup>92</sup> *Three Distinct Knocks* (London: T. Hughes, 1760) 20.

<sup>93</sup> *Origins* 32.

<sup>94</sup> *Autobiography* 156.

advancement of personal virtue and bears a striking resemblance to Freemasonry.<sup>95</sup> Had he created such an organization, his failure to complete *The Art* may have disqualified him from membership. Masons as well may have considered the effort of self-improvement as being worthwhile even if a brother never achieved the moral perfection he sought. Mason William Hogarth published a well-known engraving titled *Night*, in which a lodge master—possibly Thomas de Veil, master of Hogarth’s lodge at the Hand & Apples Tavern in Little Queen Street, London<sup>96</sup>—is being escorted through a grubby London alley by a man who carries a small sword.<sup>97</sup> The sword-bearer is the lodge’s tyler, a minor officer who guards the lodge door against interlopers. The master wears his chain of office and an oversized apron, and leans heavily on his companion’s arm, signifying age and possible intoxication. Around them whirls a tumultuous urban scene: poor persons huddle along the walls, a maid empties a chamber pot into the street, occupants of a broken-down carriage shriek as they are threatened by two ruffians and a bonfire, a smoking tavern-keeper dumps a bucket of beer into a huge keg, and through a window a dentist yanks a tooth from his patient’s gaping mouth, all under a sliver of moon in a cloud-covered sky. The master shakes his walking stick in disgust at the rabble. Neither he nor his conductor, who seems to be whistling to feign ignorance, display a shred of Masonic charity or brotherly love toward their distressed inferiors, the

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<sup>95</sup> *Autobiography* 161-163.

<sup>96</sup> Jacob Hugo Tatsch, “Hogarth,” *The Masonic Dictionary*, March 1923, 10 December 2009 <<http://www.masonicdictionary.com/hogarth.html>>.

<sup>97</sup> William Hogarth, “Night,” *The “Doctor Johnson and his Circle” Collection*, Idaho State University, 20 November 2008 <<http://www.isu.edu/jhnsnbooks/PrintPages/HogarthNight2.htm>>.

same people who might cheer them through the streets during a St. John's day procession.

The master's ceremonial garb makes a show of his rank and character, just as Franklin's wheelbarrow made a show of his industriousness. Whether the master's disgust was brought on by drink or churlishness he shows that Masons, despite their ritualized moral teaching, are human beings susceptible to the same foibles as anyone else, including the rabble around him. Franklin's falling out with his Philadelphia brethren may have been brought on by another emotion to which he had a natural propensity: anger, which is overshadowed by his super-human legend, and which a close reading of *The Autobiography* will show that William Franklin knew all too well.

## Chapter VI

### The Shadow Franklin

Look at the image of Benjamin Franklin on the \$100 bill: his face is careworn but proud, the wattle under his chin and fullness of his cheeks imply both age and (a bit too much) good living. Unlike his contemporaries Washington, Jefferson, and Hamilton, who appear bewigged and stiff on their bills, Franklin is relaxed: almost smirking with his stringy hair flowing down to a frock coat that seems rumpled despite the engraver's precise cuts. In both the bill and the Duplessis portrait from which the image is taken, Franklin comes off as the "founding dude" who would be just as comfortable dining with the king of Norway as he would be knocking back a few beers at his neighborhood tavern.

This Franklin is a two-dimensional representation that exists in part because of our perception of him, which is colored by *The Autobiography*. We can never truly know Franklin, but it is safe to say that despite being a leading light of science, politics, statecraft, philosophy, and Freemasonry, he had character flaws. He tells us as much: a super-human would not need a system for achieving moral perfection. Admitting his shortcomings makes him more likeable, and adds dimension to the cardboard cut-out character he helped construct.

Looking closely, one can see behind the lovable effigy a shadow that seems petulant and vituperative, and no one felt its brunt more than William Franklin. William

was a bastard, born when his father was in his early 20's. The identity of his mother is still not known. He plays a vital role in *The Autobiography*: part one is written to him, and is filled with family history and fatherly wisdom—though at the time of its writing William was 40 years old and had been royal governor of New Jersey for two years. Until that appointment in 1763, William was a sidekick to his accomplished father. They traveled together in the colonies' western frontier, worked together at the General Post Office, and both served as clerk to the Pennsylvania General Assembly. William also became a Freemason and was appointed grand lodge secretary, an office that his father held as well.<sup>98</sup> William even had an illegitimate child, William Temple Franklin.

Though William followed in his father's path he also enjoyed opportunities unavailable to his father. He rose to the rank of captain in his short military career, was an accomplished scientist in his own right and studied law in the Middle Temple with sons of British peers. William was enough of a player in London that he was seated in Westminster Abbey during the coronation of George III while his father was outside with the rabble.<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, one might think that a father seemingly so *simpatico* with his son would treat him lovingly in his autobiography. But sprinkled throughout part one of *The Autobiography* are subtle and not-so-subtle shots at William. Franklin's frequent mentions of his industry and frugality would have reminded William of the sums he owed

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<sup>98</sup> Bullock 53.

<sup>99</sup> William H. Schurr, "Now Gods, Stand Up for Bastards': Reinterpreting Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*," *American Literature* 64.3 (1992): 441-442.

his father right up to the eve of the war.<sup>100</sup> Franklin also goes out of his way to mention his frequent dalliances with “low Women who fell in my way”—one of whom can be assumed to be William’s mother—that were “attended with some Expense and great Inconvenience” such as an illegitimate son. These hurtful allusions harped on William’s already shaky provenance, which was the cause of jibes throughout his career.<sup>101</sup>

Franklin and William ended up on opposite sides of the revolution. In 1776, William was arrested by the revolutionary Provincial Congress of New Jersey and held prisoner under appalling conditions for two years. In that time there appears to have been no correspondence between father and son, with Franklin seemingly ignoring his son’s plight. After his release in 1778 William joined fellow Loyalists in New York City and opted to relocate to England in 1782 where he lived out the rest of his life. His attempt to reconcile with his father in 1784 failed. When his father died in 1790, William was almost totally cut out of the will, receiving only some useless land grants in Nova Scotia and forgiveness for his debts. Franklin took one last opportunity to insult William from the grave, explaining that had the British won the war they would have confiscated all of his property, leaving William with the same net result as being excluded from his estate.<sup>102</sup>

This is the shadow Franklin, the man that may have also carried a grudge toward his Philadelphia brethren. If one considers the events in Freemasonry around the time

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<sup>100</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To William Franklin,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2006, 10 February 2010 <<http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=21&page=332a>>.

<sup>101</sup> Schurr 445.

<sup>102</sup> Isaacson 471.



Franklin sailed for London the second time, it may not be a surprise that he tells us virtually nothing about his involvement in the fraternity. In 1751 brothers from Ireland who relocated to London were unhappy that their socially superior London brethren denied them entrance to lodge meetings. In protest they formed a rival grand lodge, discourteously describing the elitist London lodges as practicing “Modern” Masonry, which went against the fraternity’s egalitarian roots. The upstarts called themselves “Antients” (sic) to honor their adherence to Freemasonry’s true definition of brotherly love. Where nobles and wealthy men made up “Modern” Masonry, “Antient” Masons accepted men from all walks of life, including enlisted ranks of the British military. In the run-up to the Seven Years’ War, Scots and Irish soldiers brought Antient Freemasonry with them to North America. The first Antient lodge in Philadelphia, Number 4, opened its doors in 1757 before Franklin left on his diplomatic mission to London. It is not hard to imagine Franklin feeling insulted by the usurpers: they threatened to undo the efforts of Franklin and his contemporaries to elevate Freemasonry from a workingman’s club to one of the leading social organizations in the colonies.

When he sat down to write his remembrances at Twyford in 1771, Franklin had been involved with the fraternity in England only tangentially for the previous 14 years. He socialized with English Masons and represented Pennsylvania’s Grand Lodge at a UGLE communication on November 17, 1760.<sup>103</sup> But his involvement in the fraternity, which declined as his public service in Philadelphia increased, seems to have been further supplanted by diplomatic work while he was abroad. After a lengthy break Franklin resumed writing his remembrances at Passy in 1784, toward the end of his French

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<sup>103</sup> Sachse 105.

Masonic period. During the intervening years he joined and was twice master of *Neuf Soeurs*, initiated and buried Brother Voltaire, was made an honorary member of another French lodge, and took one of the emerging *ecossais* degrees.<sup>104</sup> But the focus of his writing at that time was the Art of Virtue, which was created *before* he became a Mason in 1732.

Whatever disappointment Franklin felt toward Freemasonry in 1757 may have turned to fury when he returned to Philadelphia for good. He was met by celebratory cannon, church bells and the cheers of his countrymen upon landing back home in 1785, but his fraternity had been almost wholly subsumed by the Antients, a successful British revolution 28 years in the making. And though in 1788 he started writing on the time period that would have covered his most active years as a Pennsylvania Mason, Franklin ignored the fraternity entirely. The man who publicly renounced his son probably had little compunction about privately renouncing his fraternity.

It seems like the Antient Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania had just as little use for Franklin as he had for it: if he wished to set foot in a Pennsylvania lodge again, Franklin would have had to go through an embarrassing “ritual of healing,” disavowing his allegiance to the fraternity he nurtured and which reflected the social, moral, and political ideals he sought to cultivate in himself and his new country. The rift may have been the last straw for a man of Franklin’s stature who no longer needed a fraternal organization to burnish his reputation.

After his death Franklin’s funeral was attended by 20,000 Philadelphians. The American Philosophical Society, the Society of the Cincinnati, the state and city

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<sup>104</sup> Sacshe 110.

government, and the city's clergy (including rabbis) were part of a grand procession in his memory. Notable by their absence were Philadelphia's Freemasons.<sup>105</sup> In their eyes the deceased—no matter how great a statesman, scientist, philosopher, or humanitarian he had been—was simply no longer their brother.

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<sup>105</sup> Bullock 81-82.

## Chapter VII

### The Grand Secret

“THEIR GRAND Secret is, *That they have no Secret at all.*”<sup>106</sup>

At times during my research I felt like the prosecuting attorney in a courtroom drama, trying to pin down the relationship between *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and Freemasonry using circumstantial evidence. Sadly I could find no smoking gun, no hidden manifesto, or as Franklin wrote in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, no grand secret at all.

But we do have the voluminous legacy of Franklin’s writings, which show a clear congruence of mind between the man and the fraternity. His ecumenical perspective, emphasis on sociability as a basis for leadership and use of ritual to inculcate virtue align closely with what is known about Freemasonry during his lifetime, and with what is still taught in American lodges. By placing him “at the scene of the crime” we can assume that Freemasonry played a larger part in his life than historians have implied.

It is unlikely that he acquired his views strictly from Freemasonry—both he and the fraternity were shaped by enlightened philosophical and social currents sweeping through Western society during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries—but Freemasonry gave Franklin a prominent stage from which he communicated those views to others. *The*

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<sup>106</sup> *Volume 2* 84.

*Autobiography* is a libretto for his grand achievements, conceived, rehearsed and perfected partly in lodges in Philadelphia, Boston, London and France, with his brothers as willing collaborators over a 52-year Masonic career. Whether he mentions the fraternity or not in *The Autobiography* is almost incidental.

Franklin and the fraternity came together at a unique moment in history to animate humanism in men and their communities. For example, Franklin's contributions to the city of Philadelphia alone—the Library Company, University of Pennsylvania, and the Union Fire Company to name just a few—benefit its citizens more than two centuries after his death. The same could be said of the legacy of Freemasons, who have endeavored to help brothers build their own characters, and by extension their communities, for nearly four centuries.

But both Franklin and Freemasonry demonstrate humanity as well as humanism. They fell short of achieving the fullness of their respective ideals, though they benefitted society in trying. Just as *The Autobiography* gives us hints about Franklin's ideals and shortcomings, Masons Prichard and Hogarth reveal how Freemasonry's approach for achieving the same moral perfection Franklin sought was not fool proof.

When Franklin published "The Mystery of *Free Masonry*" on December 8, 1730, he suggested that Freemasonry really had no secret insight into becoming a better man. In *The Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin further exposes Freemasonry as not so much a hermetic art or mystic philosophy, but as a lifestyle that any person who wished to thrive in his new nation could live.

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