

FRANKLIN'S ACADEMY: THE UNIVERSITY'S FOUNDATION

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It was a clear, brisk November afternoon as George Whitefield, a twenty-four-year-old English minister, stood in a clearing preaching a moving sermon to a crowd of several thousand. The large gathering of attentive Philadelphians cried and shouted for heavenly forgiveness as he called on them to repent in order to gain eternal salvation on that autumn day in 1739. After stimulating hundreds of Pennsylvanians to renew their Christian vows, Whitefield left Philadelphia and did not return again until 1740. Though he had been warmly embraced by many of Philadelphia's lay people, he found on his return visit in 1740 that he was not looked upon favorably by most of the clergy, who considered him a threat and a troublemaker. As a result, Whitefield was not permitted to preach in most pulpits.

His ardent followers, however, sought to construct a church to accommodate him during his visits to Philadelphia. On September 15, 1740, a plot of land was purchased and two months later construction began. Whitefield and eight of his adherents signed an indenture on November 14, 1740, declaring that the building being constructed,

should be appointed to the use of a Charity School for the Instruction of Poor Children Gratis in useful Literature and Knowledge of the Christian Religion and also for a House of Publick Worship.

Whitefield and his colleagues had no idea that the building they were constructing would give rise to the Academy, the first educational unit in what would eventually become America's first university, the University of Pennsylvania.

In mid-1742 the construction of the "New Building," as it was generally known, was finally completed. However, the fervor of revival evangelism had died down. In 1746 Whitefield preached his last sermon there. Furthermore, construction of the building had tallied a tremendous debt. In 1747 the "New Building" was put up for sale in order to pay outstanding bills and creditors.

In these same years Benjamin Franklin, the world-renowned inventor and leading Philadelphia citizen, was launching a proposal for increased education of the young. As a lover of knowledge and a true intellect, Franklin realized the benefits of higher education for young people. At the time, the educational facilities of Pennsylvania consisted only of elementary and charity schools. The colonists saw no impending need for institutions of higher learning, and primary education was considered the duty of the church and the family.

The church and the family were responsible for instructing youth in religion and morality, which were considered the most fundamental and significant elements of education; schools, though they did teach and reinforce Christian values, were primarily responsible for instruction in the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, which were of lesser importance. The few colonists that had received a formal education were either from the mother country or were from wealthy families that could afford to send their children overseas for

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formal schooling. This worked well while there were only a few settlers but as the colony began to grow the need for local educational institutions increased.

Franklin began to examine ways to remedy the problem. He decided that a secondary school was needed in Philadelphia. To raise support and public interest for such a school he wrote a pamphlet, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania*. The *Proposals* point out the necessity for education in the Philadelphia area and the benefits of educating the young. Franklin said,

It has long been regretted as a misfortune to the youth of this province that we have no academy in which they might receive the accomplishment of a regular education.²

Franklin realized that there was a growing need for an academy in Philadelphia since Princeton College had been founded in New Jersey in 1746, and had graduated its first class in 1748. By establishing a local academy Franklin hoped to educate students in a utilitarian rather than cultural style. He intended to provide students with an education that was useful and practical rather than one based on ornamentation such as manners and arts.

Instruction would be entirely in English and would follow the best models of that language. Franklin planned a curriculum that included mathematics, geography, history, logic, and natural and moral sciences with a great deal of attention devoted toward "training in thought and expression." His main objective was to insure that the youth of Pennsylvania would receive "an education for citizenship that would lead to mercantile and civic success and usefulness."

Franklin published his *Proposals* in 1749. Later that year he gathered a group of his distinguished friends and, on November 13, they drafted a document constituting themselves the trustees of the new school. The trustees purchased Whitefield's building and the surrounding plot of land for seven hundred and seventy-five pounds, eighteen shillings, eleven pence and three half the construction price. In exchange for this bargain price, Franklin promised to maintain a charity school and room for itinerant preachers inside the building. The Academy now had a home on Fourth Street near Mulberry Street.

The brick building occupied by the Academy was the largest building in Philadelphia at that time. It sat on a plot of land measuring one hundred and fifty feet by ninety-eight feet.⁴ The Academy stood three stories high and was "extremely strong in structure."⁵ The facade of

the building was designed in a symmetrical pattern made up of two rows of six arched windows.

In the center of the ground floor there was an arched doorway framed by two unadorned columns which supported a triangular pediment. On the western side of the building there was a huge playground of one hundred by fifty feet. The entrance of the Academy opened into a large hall. On the other side of the hall were four large classrooms. At the far northern end of the building, next to the classrooms, a charity school was set up.⁶

Opposite the classrooms there was a large room measuring ninety by thirty-five feet. In the center there was a platform where the faculty could teach classes. A heavy staircase in the hall led to the second floor. At the top of the stairwell there was a big upper hall that ran the width of the building and was ninety feet in length. Over the stairway at the south end of the building there was a gallery with a rostrum along the

During the first few years of operation the trustees made several renovations to the Academy building. In April 1751, a steeple, surmounted by a ball and weather vane, was erected to house the school bell. Eight large circular and six rectangular windows were added to the end walls to allow more light into the stairwell and the great hall.

The Academy building served as an educational facility and also as a public facility. The building was occasionally used as a public meeting place and, once in a while, evening plays and concerts were presented there. Its primary use, however, was for educational purposes. The great hall was used as a gathering place where matriculates met for roll call and prayer. The gallery of the building was used for commencements, and on Sundays public exercises were held there.

It is not unusual that the Academy was utilized in a religious capacity since public education and religion were very closely tied during this time period. The trustees who established the school were religious men and took precautions to insure that students be trained in Christian doctrine, and that "ministers who preach in the hall must be sound in principle and acquainted with experimental religion in their hearts." The trustees even referred to the whole project as "a pious work," yet they chose to establish the Academy as a non-sectarian institution. The Academy was established for "purely secular and civic purposes, without support of any regular body or patronage of people or government."¹⁰ Though the Academy was established for secular reasons it was not a secular school. The Academy was non-sectarian because

Pennsylvania was too religiously diverse to be dominated by any one religion. As a result, the Academy was founded as a non-denominational institution.

Over a short period of time the Academy and its charity school began to evolve into a major collegiate institution. By the end of 1751 the size of the student body had grown from seventeen to one hundred and forty-six students. On July 13, 1753, Franklin, Thomas Hopkinson, Tench Francis and Reverend Richard Peters, as trustees of the school, received a charter naming them the "Trustees of the Academy and Charitable School in the Province of Pennsylvania." At this point the trustees expanded the school's curriculum of Latin, English and mathematics to include logic, rhetoric, natural and moral philosophy and the study of the Greek language. Two years later, on June 16, 1755, the school obtained collegiate honors and the power to grant degrees in a new charter making them "The Trustees of the College, Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia.

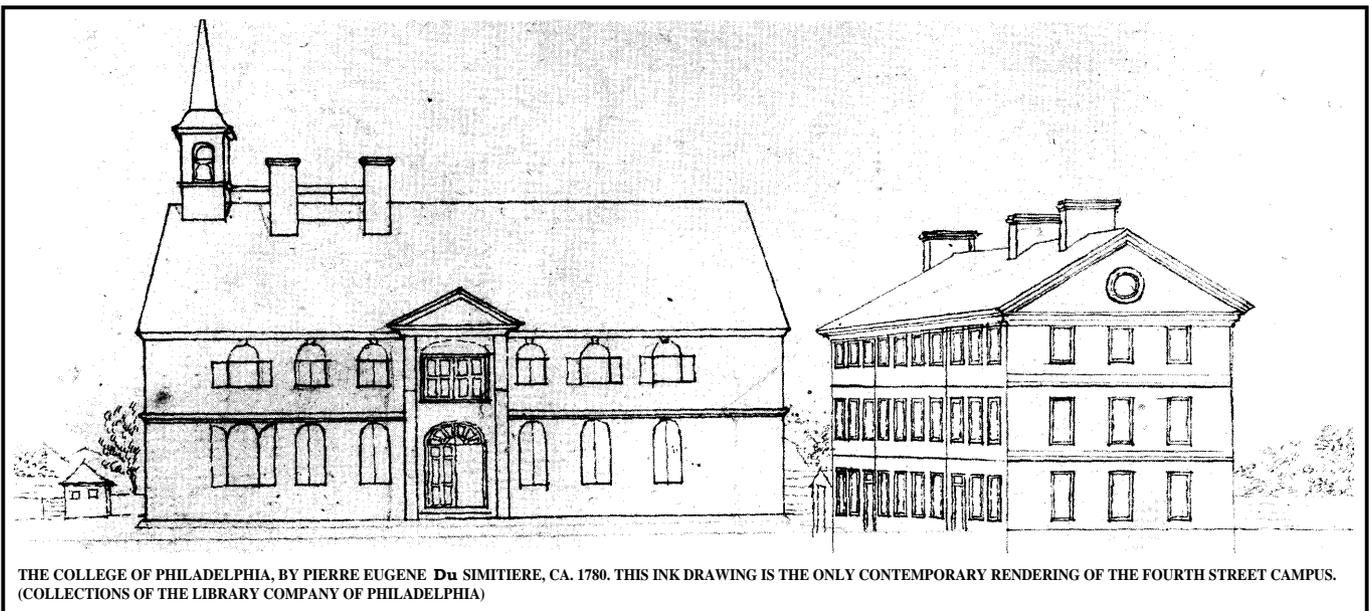
The school was now under the administration of Provost William Smith. Under Smith the curriculum stressed cultural rather than practical education. This defied Franklin's original intent in establishing the Academy. In 1756 Franklin retired from the Board of Trustees and the Academy continued to develop in the direction intended by Provost Smith.

The Academy stood out from the rest of the academic institutions established during the eighteenth century because it was established on entirely different grounds. Other early American schools and colleges were founded by masters or

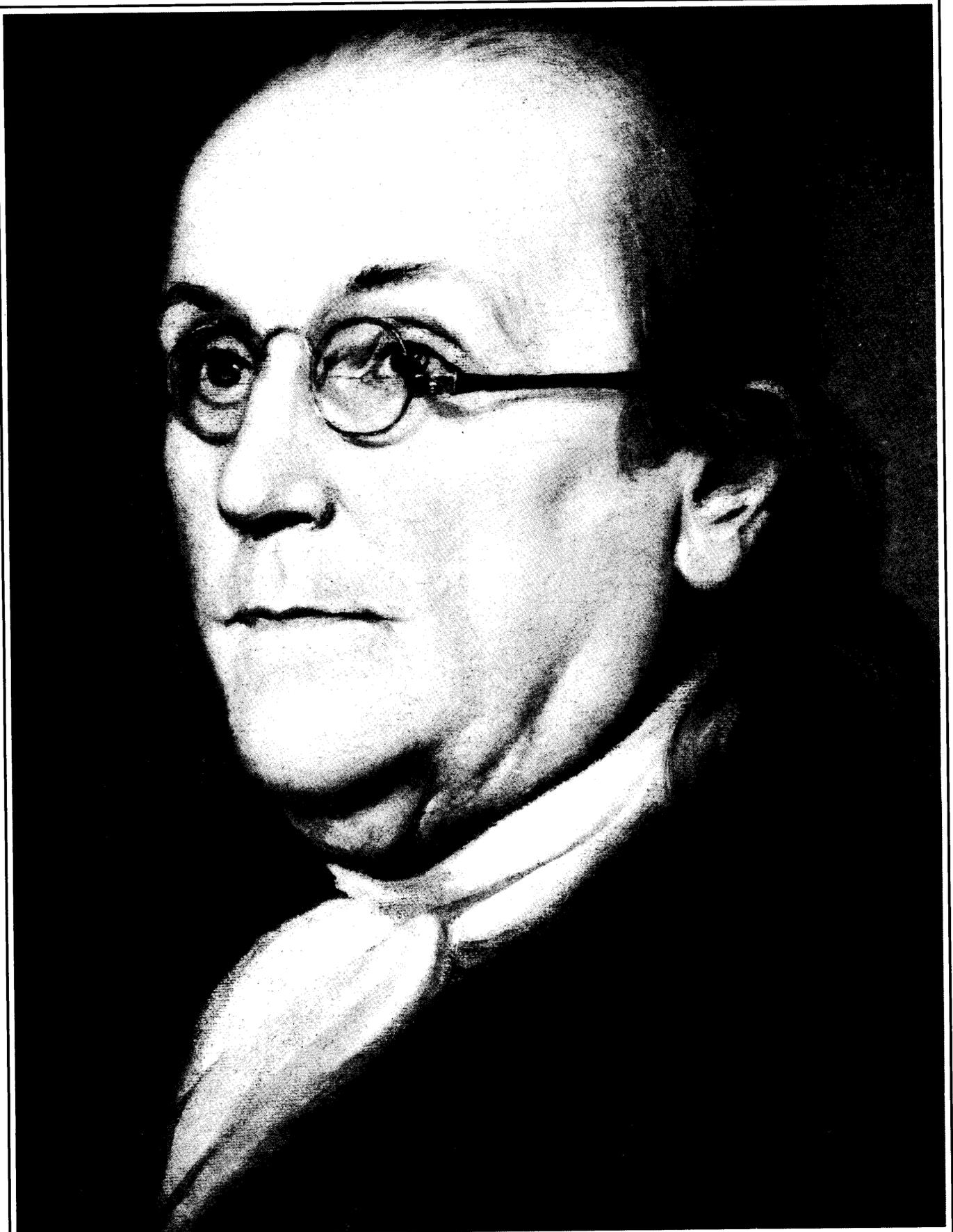
students driven by their love for learning, or by religious societies for training ministers and propagating the faith, or by sovereigns aspiring to increase their prestige. The University of Pennsylvania, unlike any of these institutions, was established by a "voluntary society of founders" to serve the community and its youth in the means of education necessary for good citizenship and independent thinking.

The Academy was founded for the purpose of "increasing the material, intellectual and moral benefits of students which would enhance the prosperity and good order of the community." ¹² By establishing the Academy, Benjamin Franklin hoped to teach people to think for themselves. Today these values are still our ideals and the University of Pennsylvania continues to function in this capacity. Though the original Academy building has long since been obliterated, our modern campus in West Philadelphia continues to meet the educational needs of American youth and students seeking advanced education.

The Academy of Benjamin Franklin is an enduring symbol because it shows that education has remained a primary objective of American society throughout the history of the country. While other institutions have come and gone, the need for education has remained a top priority for American citizens. Now two hundred and fifty years old, the University of Pennsylvania remains the oldest and one of the finest universities in America. The continued success of what began as the Academy proves that intellectual growth and accomplishment is still valued highly by American society.



THE COLLEGE OF PHILADELPHIA, BY PIERRE EUGENE Du SIMITIERE, CA. 1780. THIS INK DRAWING IS THE ONLY CONTEMPORARY RENDERING OF THE FOURTH STREET CAMPUS. (COLLECTIONS OF THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA)



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, BY CHARLES WILLSON PEALE, 1785. (COLLECTIONS OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS)