

ARTICLES

What's in a Name? Benjamin Franklin and the Birth of a New Town in Revolutionary America

Vicki Buchanio Earls

Abstract: Franklin, Massachusetts, incorporated in 1778 at the height of the American Revolution, was the first town in the United States named for Benjamin Franklin. And, because of Franklin's subsequent donation of books, the town founded the nation's first free public library. This article challenges established origin narratives for both the town's name and its library. It demonstrates that the name resulted from rumor and misinformation—Franklin's alleged assassination in Paris in 1778—which was common in Atlantic World communication networks of the late-eighteenth century. It also shows that Benjamin Franklin's donation of the books for the town meeting house, resulted as much from his personal family and friend networks as it did from the petition sent to him by the townsfolk requesting that he donate a bell for their meeting house. This local history case study highlights the interconnections between local, national, and world historical events.

It is hardly news that communications in the past were not like they are today. The slender threads of connection across geography had to be continually sustained by human effort. Human error, as well as prevarication, along with the ravages of nature, often conspired to obscure, confuse, or baffle an understanding of the true state of affairs. This reality turns out to have played a hitherto unrecognized role in the naming of one New England town and in its most famous subsequent historical event.

On February 27, 1778, a draft of the petition for the incorporation of a new town was submitted to the Massachusetts legislature. It was to be named Exeter, as most of the town's inhabitants came from Exeter in Devonshire, England. As it was a draft, many changes were made by the slash of a pen, all minor, except for one—a change in the proposed name. Above the now inked out "Exeter" was written the town's newly chosen name of "Franklin." On March 2, 1778, the

Massachusetts General Court approved the incorporation, establishing Franklin as the first municipality to take the name of the celebrated founder of the new nation. This change, and much of what happened thereafter, was likely the result of misinformation—a serendipitous mistake that spawned not only a town but a historic library and even helped shape the young mind of one of America’s greatest educators.

The history of the town of Franklin, MA, has always been closely linked to that of its namesake, Benjamin Franklin. The association was further cemented eight years after its incorporation by a gift that the citizens solicited from Dr. Franklin. A bell for the meeting house was their request, a request honored in the breach by Franklin when he substituted it with 116 books, stating in a letter that “sense is preferable to sound.” This is the origin story of the Town of Franklin and its library, considered to be the first free public library in the United States of America.¹

But there were always mysteries and unanswered questions about exactly why the town was named Franklin and just how Benjamin Franklin, operating from France, managed to align his agents in London and Boston, so that they could procure books for delivery to the selectmen and citizens of a town in the Massachusetts hinterland. Yet, exploring correspondence between Franklin and his intimates reveals the previously unrecognized fact that replacement of the name Exeter seems to have been a sudden emotional response to widely disseminated reports that Franklin had been assassinated at his home in Passy, near Paris, where he served as ambassador to France.

Rumors of Franklin’s demise that were circulating amongst the members of the Continental Congress and other associates were soon entirely discredited; but by then, the Franklin town name had been fixed by the process of the Great and General Court of the Commonwealth.

As to the entire tale of parsimonious country folk writing solicitously to the great American diplomat in hopes of saving themselves the cost of a bell, a wide-ranging web of correspondence, now more readily accessible than in the past, reveals it also to have been at best an abridgement of the actual story, if not largely wrong. For it was a

personal connection between townspeople and Franklin's nephew, followed by consultations in his orbit that "sealed the deal" and shaped the ultimate donation of the books.

Colonial Communication

Whether conveyed by carrier pigeons, foot messengers or postmen on horseback, there is little doubt that the speed of communication networks in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries had a profound influence on the trajectory of history. The rise of General Andrew Jackson, to take another well-known example, can be traced to his victory at the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815, a battle that famously wouldn't have occurred if either side had known of the peace treaty of Ghent, signed two weeks earlier, which had officially ended the war between the United States and Great Britain. As the battle raged, the ship carrying the signed peace treaty was sailing through rough Atlantic waters, not reaching Washington until February 15, 1815.²

There was, nevertheless, by the late eighteenth century, a robust system of communication across much of the nation. A remarkable and rapid transition in communication occurred after the Revolution, with newspapers, libraries, printing presses, and a US postal service multiplying and expanding to serve the needs and tastes of a rapidly evolving democratic nation.

During the Revolution, even as this comparatively frail network began to transform, it also fell short on many occasions, depriving military commanders of needed situational awareness and leading to miscalculations that could sway military outcomes.³ Benjamin Franklin himself had done much to knit the colonies together through his work on the postal service. Appointed by royal officials as Deputy Postmaster-General for the Colonies from 1753 to 1774, he was eventually dismissed for his Patriot politics. He was then appointed to much the same role in 1775, when the Continental Congress made him Postmaster-General.

What he inherited was a tenuous network of postal routes and offices, mostly along the coastal plain. Post offices were "unknown in rural New England before the Revolution," and barely present in the southern colonies.⁴ But even with the establishment of a postal service,

the movement of messages still took time, and the quality of the information it conveyed still depended on the accuracy and truthfulness of literate correspondents. Furthermore, rural Americans could not depend on newspapers for breaking news of the war. Newspapers published in the colonies appeared only once or twice a week, and some only published reprints of old stories from other papers. Postal couriers delivered the newspapers to areas beyond the cities, by which time the reports were even older than yesterday's news. Historian and journalist Frank Luthor Mott tracked the spread of the story of the battle at Lexington and Concord through colonial newspapers and found that it took six weeks for the report to circulate throughout all of the colonies.⁵ In addition, the easily corrupted word-of-mouth system was still a primary conveyor of information, both in remote areas and major cities such as Boston and Philadelphia.⁶ Unlike letters and newspapers, conversation was a medium open to everyone, free of charge, and did not require the ability to read or write. Ships from across the pond delivering titillating stories along with the mail, gossip after Sunday service, and tales told in taverns and coffeehouses were considered as legitimate a source of information as the weekly newspaper, especially in more rural communities. Above all, communication took time, and in the period between sending and receiving, all manner of mischief might occur.

News traveling across the Atlantic was not only slow—a trip from the American coast to the English coast could take as long as six weeks—but also particularly susceptible to manipulation and rumor. To use a modern concept, the bandwidth of this communication was limited: only a few vessels at a time were in transit across the sea, most of which were engaged in commerce, where speedy delivery of information was a secondary concern. In one notable instance, this frail link favored the Patriot cause, but only because of a deliberate attempt to take advantage of the slowness of the link. Even as the smoke was clearing from Lexington and Concord, patriot leaders, including Elbridge Gerry, recognized that the fury of the Mother Country would be unleashed when news of the events reached England, unless events could be shown in a light more favorable to patriots.

Gerry and others carefully gathered sworn depositions about the events of those crucial days and even included statements from captured soldiers, all of which pointed to the heavy-handed soldiery

firing first.⁷ A Salem, MA, broadside titled *Bloody Butchery, by the British Troops: or, The Runaway Fight of the Regulars* with macabre images of numerous coffins of the colonial dead was also procured and the whole sent off on the fastest vessel that could be found north of Boston.⁸

That ship, the *Quero*, managed to pass the slower vessel sent by General Gage from Boston with the official story, and on arrival, the colonial courier, one Richard Derby, sought out American representatives in London Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee (successfully in the case of the latter).⁹ So it was that the shocking news of fighting and bloodshed in the colonies was delivered to the seat of empire with an American spin, garnering considerable sympathy and embarrassing the government, which for several days lacked any information of its own.

A few years later, with the war in full swing and Franklin ensconced amongst the most powerful and influential people in France, another transatlantic communication also became consequential, particularly for a new town forming in Massachusetts.

International Intrigue, Benjamin Franklin

One of America's greatest public figures of the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin was busy and in demand as the events of the Revolution unfolded, serving on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. A few months later, he embarked by sea as one of the Commissioners of Congress to the Court of Louis the XVI, arriving on the continent on December 21, 1776.

The social, political, and diplomatic situation included two poles. The first, Britain, trying to prosecute its recalcitrant colonies, thwart their agents, and insure against French support for those colonies; the second, France, in a sense, truly neutral, but with a segment of the government, especially French foreign minister Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, having some sympathy for the Americans and, coincidentally, liking the idea of causing mischief for a traditional rival. Vergennes felt a personal enmity towards Great Britain and was eager to avenge France's defeat in the Seven Years' War. By December of 1775, he was advocating that France provide secret financial and military support of the American Colonies.¹⁰

Franklin, with stunning self-awareness and guile, embarked on a seduction of France using an invented persona that combined his intellectual prowess with imagery intended to portray America as a kind of perfect Arcadia. Franklin's pretensions at first annoyed and then alarmed the British, especially the British ambassador to France, David Murray, seventh Viscount of Stormont.

Stormont was tasked with the close surveillance of the American rebels, particularly Franklin. To Stormont's incredulity, Franklin quickly gained the admiration of the French intelligentsia and many nobles, as well as commoners who learned to recognize his visage, reproduced in thousands of prints and objects. His fur-topped, bespectacled image was the *en vogue* gift of the season, making Franklin, quite literally, a household icon.¹¹ Writing from Paris to Britain's Secretary of State for the Southern Department, Lord Weymouth, on December 11, 1776, Stormont offered his opinion of Franklin:

Some people think that either some private dissatisfaction or despair of success have brought him into this country. I cannot but suspect that he comes charged with a secret commission from the Congress, and as he is a subtle, artful man, and void of all truth, he will in that case use every means to deceive, will avail himself of the general ignorance of the French, to paint the situation of the rebels in the falsest colours, and hold out every lure to the ministers, to draw them into an open support of that cause . . . I look upon him as a dangerous engine, and am very sorry that some English frigate did not meet with him by the way.¹²

Another responsibility of Franklin's in France was to negotiate the release or exchange of prisoners of war. American prisoners were horribly abused by their British captors, and more American soldiers died of disease and starvation in captivity than were killed in battle.¹³ As American soldiers were considered by the Crown to be traitors, not prisoners of war, negotiating on their behalf was an uphill battle. Still, Franklin, along with his colleague Silas Deane, sent multiple letters requesting Stormont's attention to this situation. One such letter was published in the Tory newspaper *The Newport Gazette* on September 4, 1777:¹⁴

My Lord

Paris, April 2, 1777.

We did ourselves the Honour of writing some time ago, to your Lordship, on the subject of exchanging prisoners. You did not condescend to give us any answer, and therefore we expect none to this. We however take the liberty of sending you copies of certain depositions which we shall transmit to Congress, whereby it will be known to your Court, that the United States are not unacquainted with the barbarous treatment their people receive when they have the misfortune of being your prisoners here in Europe; and that if your conduct towards us is not altered, it is not unlikely that severe reprisals may be thought justifiable, from the necessity of putting some check to such abominable practices.

For the sake of humanity, it is to be wished that men would endeavour to alleviate, as much as possible, the unavoidable miseries attending a state of war. It has been said, that among the civilized nations of Europe, the ancient horrors of that state are much diminished; but the compelling men by chains, stripes and famine, to fight against their friends and relations, is a new mode of barbarity, which your nation alone had the honor of inventing; and the sending of American prisoners of war to Africa and Asia, remote from all probability of exchange, and where they can scarce hope ever to hear from their families, even if the unwholesomeness of the climate does not put a speedy end to their lives, is a manner of treating prisoners that you can justify by no other precedent of custom, except the black savages of Guinea.

We are, your Lordship's most obedient, Humb's
Servants,

B. FRANKLIN, S. DEANE

Stormont's insolent reply:

The King's Ambassador receives no letters from Rebels, except when they come to ask Mercy.

Franklin took Stormont's response in stride and taught the Parisians to despise him. For example, when Stormont reported that the colonists had lost 4,000 men in battle and their general killed, Franklin responded that "truth was one thing and Stormont another." So well did this witty rejoinder travel, that clever Parisians were soon using *stormont* as a synonym for an untruth.¹⁵ Franklin didn't stop there. When Edward Gibbon, Member of the British Parliament and author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was found to be at an inn to which Franklin had traveled, the latter asked the former, by note, for the honor of a meeting. Gibbon politely declined out of loyalty to his king. To this, Franklin reportedly replied that he had the greatest respect for Gibbon nonetheless, and offered, should he ever write about the decline and fall of the British Empire, to furnish him with much useful material in his possession. As one can imagine, these tumults made clear to friend and foe alike that Franklin was not well regarded by the British.

As the enmity between the British and American Ambassadors, demonstrated in widely circulated newspapers and oft repeated barbs, was fairly common knowledge on both sides of the ocean, when a nasty rumor arrived on the American side of the Atlantic—that Stormont's displeasure had been embodied in an act of violence on Dr. Franklin—a rumor that could not be ignored.

Communications Corrupted, Amplified, and Echoed

While Franklin and Deane were successfully negotiating the Treaty of Alliance with the court of Louis XVI, some terrible news was sailing across the sea to Philadelphia and Boston. Dr. Benjamin Franklin was the victim of an assassination attempt, orchestrated by Lord Stormont, and he was dying from his wounds, if not already dead. By February of 1778, this rumor had reached the members of the Continental Congress, and a flurry of concerned letters traveled between the members of Congress and their friends and family. Gerry, writing to Sam Adams, indicates that Samuel Purviance, a prominent Baltimore merchant and active supporter of the Patriot cause, was the trusted source of the shocking report:

. . . By a Vessel arrived at South Quay in Maryland, We are informed that our worthy Friend Doctor Franklin

is dangerously ill of a Wound which he received in his Bed from an assassin supposed to be employed by Lord Stormont. The Master informed Mr. Samuel Purviance, whose Letter to a Gentleman in this place I have seen, that he left France the 8th Decr., that the News arrived the Day of his sailing, & that advices were received of the Surrender of General Burgoyne's Army, & loss of the Philadelphia, at the same Time.¹⁶

The rumor continued to circulate amongst the Pennsylvania delegates, although some had their doubts:

*Thomas McKean to Sarah McKean, Feb. 10, 1778,
York, Pennsylvania*

My dear Sally,

. . . Doctor Franklin is said to be assassinated in his bed in a village called Pacy, abt. four miles from Paris; tho' this account contains all the particular circumstances attending this horrid deed, I doubt abt. the truth of it. Our affairs seem prosperous. By the King of G.Bs speech, which I have sent you in the last paper, he appears to be frightened. Let me hear from you as often as opportunities offer, and believe that I am, my dear Sally, Your affectionate, Tho M:Kean.¹⁷

*John Henry to Thomas Johnson, February 14, 1778,
York, Pennsylvania*

What think you of Dr. Franklins assassination; with some Gentlemen here, the tale has the appearance of probability, with others it is esteemed a fact. I hope both opinions are groundless. His death will stagnate our system in France and probably shatter some of the Doctors flattering hopes of serving his country through the sides of France.¹⁸

*Francis Dana to Elbridge Gerry, February 16, 1778,
Valley Forge, Pennsylvania*

. . . I had heard of the infamous attempt upon the venerable Doctr. Franklyn's life, before the arrival of your letter. I hope he will survive it.¹⁹

Certainly, the news had reached Boston by February 23 when the *Boston Gazette* reported it as fact, adding new and lurid details:

A Letter from Bordeaux of December 12, mentions, That the illustrious Patriot Dr. Benjamin Franklin, has been assassinated in his Bed Chamber at the Instance of Lord Stormont. The Villain left him for dead; but one of the Doctor's Ribs prevented the Stab from being instantly fatal, and he lay in a languishing Condition when the Vessel sail'd that brings this Account.²⁰

Finally, correspondence between Samuel Cooper, Congregationalist minister of Boston's Brattle Street Church, and Abigail Adams shows that, in Boston, the rumor was still circulating as a distressing fact the very day that the Town of Franklin was being recognized by the legislature:

*Samuel Cooper to Abigail Adams, March 2, 1778,
Boston, Massachusetts*

My dear Madam

. . . I deferr'd till this Time answering your Letter, in Hopes of an exact Copy of the Account you refer to, but have not been able to procure it; I remember, however, all the material Circumstances distinctly. Mr. Purveyance, a Gentleman of Character in Maryland, writes to his Friend at Congress, that Capt. Moore had arriv'd there from France, which he left the 12th. Decr.; that on the Day before he sail'd the Governor of the Place where he was receiv'd Dispatches from Paris, among which was an Account that Dr. Franklin had been assassinated by an Emissary, as was suppos'd, of

Lord Stormont, who got into his Chamber, stabb'd him with a Knife, left him for dead, and made his Escape; but the Knife striking upon a Rib, it was hoped the Wound was not mortal. The Governor's Secretary gave this Account to Capt. Moore. Nothing can be more just than your Reflection on the Horror of this Deed. How many keenly feel the Weapon that pierc'd the Bosom of a Franklin!²¹

The certainty of Franklin's death would weaken and then evaporate entirely over the coming months; but, in the meantime, the deed was done, and Franklin's municipal existence had begun.

A New Town Incorporated

The process of creating new towns was well established in Colonial Massachusetts.²² Settlements such as Plymouth, originally conceived as having only the vaguest of western borders, gradually spawned one new town after another from its great tract of land. Separate incorporation was ultimately sanctioned, or not, by the General Court and usually required a clear desire amongst those separating to do so, as well as satisfaction among those in the town giving up its area that, at the very least, assets and debts were fairly apportioned. Wrentham itself had been amicably set off from its "mother town," Dedham, in 1673.

With travel time and difficulty in attending worship services, the residents of the western areas of Wrentham began petitioning for a separation. This was not immediately granted. They earned the privilege of having their own meeting house through which municipal and church affairs were periodically rotated. Finally, in 1737, amidst continued dissatisfaction, the General Court granted the area a "second precinct" status but not full municipal separation. The Second Precinct's independence would wait for another thirty-nine years.

Nineteenth-century Franklin historian Mortimer Blake explained the mysterious process by which a town's name, originally expected to be Exeter, was changed at the last instant, with "Exeter" crossed out and "Franklin" scribbled in an adjacent space. Blake speculated that it was Benjamin Franklin's diplomatic prowess and the signing of the treaty with France on January 6, 1778, that prompted

the unexpected change.²³ But, in fact, news of the treaty was still at sea on March 2 when the vote of incorporation occurred. But what was circulating publicly in Boston at that very moment, according to the *Boston Gazette*, was the lamentable “fact” of America’s leading statesman wounded or more likely dead at the hand of an assassin.

Although Franklin town records from March 1778 to May 1794 are missing, in the weeks leading up to the presentation to the General Court, there is no discussion of a town name, only of the business at hand, namely separating from Wrentham. Throughout that process of deliberation, the proposed new town was referred to only as the Second Precinct of Wrentham:

Wrentham Second Precinct December 7, 1777

The Precincts Comtee met and ordered the precincts clerk to set up a notification to warn the freeholders and other inhabitants qualified by law to vote in town affairs to meet at their meetinghouse on said precinct on Monday 29th Decem. In [illegible] at ten o’clock in the morning then and their if they see cause to act on the following perticulars, viz. to see if it be the mind of the precinct to petition said Town of Wrentham as soon as may be to see if they will by vote of sd town give liberty to the inhabitants of said precinct to be set off into a distinct township according to the Bounds that they [illegible] incorporated into a precinct . . .

Wrentham Second Precinct, December 29, 1777

. . . voted in the affirmation.

Wrentham Second Precinct, February 17, 1778

The precincts comtee met and ordered the precinct clerk to notify the freeholders and other inhabitants of said precinct qualified by law to vote in town affairs to meet at their meeting house in said precinct on Friday the twentyeth day of February . . . to see if it be in the mind of the precinct to accept the vote of this town respecting the petition of said precinct praying that they

may to set off into a distinct township, to choose a comtee . . . further to proceed and manage said business.

Wrentham Second Precinct, February 20, 1778

. . . Wrentham, February 16, 1778, at a general town meeting of the Freeholders . . . were unanimously of opinion that said inhabitants be set off as a separate township by certain bounds mentioned in said petition . . . considering the many inconveniences that attend the transacting the publick and necessary business of the town while together in one body inclines this precinct to except the terms above proposed and determin to conduct accordingly, which was voted and consented to propose to the precinct that they choose a comtee to petition the General Court to set us off into a distinct township.²⁴

The records for this period end with the meeting held on February 20, 1778, and although there is no record of a name selection, at some point, according to draft documents submitted to the General Court, between that date and February 26, the name Exeter was chosen. One week later, the draft of the bill to incorporate the town was presented to the House of Representatives with the originally chosen name scratched out and the name Franklin added and underlined.

*State of Massachusetts Bay, House of Representatives,
February 27, 1778*

An act for Incorporating the westerly part of the Town of Wrentham in the county of Suffolk, into a town by the name of ~~Exeter~~ Franklin

- Where as the inhabitants of the westerly part of the Town of Wrentham in the county of Suffolk have represented to the court the difficulties they labour under in their present situation and apprehend by themselves of sufficient number and ability request that they may be incorporated in a separate town.

-Be it Therefore Enacted By the Council and House of Representatives in General Court Assembled and by the Authority of the Same That the Westerly part of said Town of Wrentham separated by a line as follows . . . Hereby is Incorporated into a Different and Separate Town by the name of ~~Exeter~~ Franklin

-Be it also enacted by the authority aforesaid that Jabez Fisher, Esq. Be he hereby is authorized and required to [illegible] his warrant to one of his principal inhabitants of said Town of ~~Exeter~~ Franklin authorizing and requiring him to notify and warn the Freeholders be allowed to vote in their first meeting for the choice of officers and such other meetings as may be called in said Town of ~~Exeter~~ Franklin. In Council March 2, 1778. This Bill having had two [illegible] readings passed a concurrence to be Incorporated.²⁵

Given that it was the elected leaders of the soon-to-be Town of Franklin who were engaged in this work in Boston, they no doubt believed their judgment would be sustained by their neighbors. Even better, it was likely their town would be the first to honor this Massachusetts native and presumed martyr to the American cause.

While documentary evidence proving this rumor to have been the source of the town's sudden name change remains lacking, further research led to the discovery of a consequential letter between Benjamin Franklin and his nephew, Boston merchant Jonathan Williams Sr.

A Letter of Magnitude

Boston and most of Massachusetts avoided much of the damages then being inflicted on other states by the British fleet and armies, and, after Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in 1781, the pathway was open to a formal peace treaty ending the war two years later.

At some point, according to early town historians, including Blake, the townspeople wrote to Franklin in France, asking for a bell for their planned new meeting house. Franklin, for his part, responded

by offering a collection of books for the common betterment instead, “sense being preferable to sound.” But even this narrative also seems to have been composed of suppositions made at a later date.

In fact, according to a series of letters between Franklin and his family and friends, it was an acquaintance between his nephew, Jonathan Williams Sr., and some citizens of the Town of Franklin that inspired Williams to reach out to his uncle and make an appeal on behalf of the “Commitee.”²⁶ In a letter dated January 15, 1784, Williams explains the reason why, he appears to have been told, the town took Franklin’s name:

Boston, Jan 15, 1784

Honored Sir

I hope you will excuse me, for the Liberty I take in advising you, of the Town of Franklin, and how it Came to be thus Named, apart of the people of wrentham which Town was too Large, a parish of 40 years Standing **prefered a petition to the General Court 1778 at the very time, that we or they, heard that you was Assasinated,** in Commeration of Doctr Franklin the people there unanimous, in Nameing there Town by the Name of Franklin, which Name and Person they highly Esteemed.²⁷

The timing of the rumor’s trajectory towards Boston and the citizens of West Wrentham’s path to Boston’s General Court seems to imply a sudden name change by a committee stunned by news of Franklin’s assassination, but William’s letter clearly names the action and the motive—to commemorate Franklin’s death—and this information appears to spring directly from his communication with those most involved in the matter, those who would know.²⁸

A Library Founded

In his January 15 letter, Williams goes on to say that the town was building a meetinghouse and that the citizens expressed the desire for a bell for this new meetinghouse and future steeple:

. . . the Town or people are Now about Boulding a New Meeting House, and I find they would Bould a Stepel if they had a prospect of Getting a Bell. I happn'd to be in Company with two of the most respect abled of the Committe, they Express a wish that Doctr Franklin Would present them a Bell, as it would be received by the Town from him in preference to anybody in the World. I find the house is to be 60 foot Long, 42 foot Wide, about 26 foot high. Franklin Town is 25 Miles from Boston in the Way to providence—as I don't know whether you will think proper to take Notice of this Letter therefore I Shall Say Nothing about it. We are Well my Love to Benny I am as Ever Your Dutiful Nephew

Jona Williams

NB I am told that your Bill on the Late doctr Cooper Will be paid out of his Estate

Addressed: His Excellency Benjamin Franklin Eqr at Passy In France.²⁹

No letter of reply has yet been uncovered, but nine months later, Franklin's sister Jane Mecom was made aware of Franklin's intention to present the Town of Franklin with a gift of books, from letters sent to Jonathan Williams from her brother:

Dear Brother

I propose to Send this by the Marquis La Fayette He is Much Honored and Caressd among us. . . .

I observe in won of your Leters to cousen Williams your Intention to Present to Franklin Town a number of Books as a Foundation for a Parish Library hoping the Franklins will Prefer Sense to Sound, I can doubt but such a Library will consist of some Authers on Divine Subjects I therefor hope you will not think it too Presuming in me to Propose won, Viz Discourses on Personal Religion in two Volumes by Samuel Stennett

D D Printed in London by R Hett in 1769 I borrow'd them and Read them with a grat deal of Pleasure and I think you your self would if you could find time tho there may be many things in them not altogether Agreeable to your Sentiments, which I sopose may be the case with Every Volume you Read on any Subject . . . your Affectionat Sister

Jane Mecom³⁰

Finally, on March 18, 1785, Franklin wrote to Dr. Richard Price, Welsh philosopher, mathematician, and close political and personal friend of Franklin's. This letter set in motion the creation and gift of a small library that would further seal the town's bond with Dr. Franklin.

Passy, Mar. 18. 1785.

My dear Friend,

My Nephew, Mr. Williams, will have the honour of delivering you this Line. It is to request from you a List of a few good Books to the Value of about Twenty-five Pounds, such as are most proper to inculcate Principles of sound Religion and just Government. **A new Town in the State of Massachusetts, having done me the honour of naming itself after me, and proposing to build a Steeple to their Meeting House if I would give them a Bell, I have advis'd the sparing themselves the Expence of a Steeple at present, and that they would accept of Books instead of a Bell, Sense being preferable to Sound.** These are therefore intended as the Commencement of a little Parochial Library, for the Use of a Society of intelligent respectable Farmers, such as our Country People generally consist of. Besides your own Works I would only mention, on the Recommendation of my Sister, Stennet's Discourses on personal Religion, which may be one Book of the Number, if you know it and approve of it. With the highest Esteem and Respect, I am ever, my dear Friend, Yours most affectionately

B Franklin

Revd Dr Price³¹

The library, which contained the works of such renowned thinkers as John Locke, Joseph Priestley, and Dr. Price himself, arrived in Franklin sometime in June of 1786. Benjamin Franklin received an effusive letter of thanks from the town's pastor, Nathanael Emmons, on behalf of his parishioners:

Franklin June 22d. 1786.

Sir,

We beg leave to present to your Excellency, our most grateful Acknowledgments, for the very handsom Parish Library, which You have been pleased to bestow upon the Minister and the Parishioners of this Town, as a particular mark of your approbation and regard. This choice and valuable Collection of Books, your Excellency will permit us to say, not only flatters our Understanding and Taste, but displays the brightest feature in your great and amiable Character. We only regret, that Modesty should deny us the celebrated Productions of the greatest Phylosopher and Politician in America. Since Providence hitherto hath delighted to smile on all your great and noble Efforts, we cannot but hope, your generous exertion to diffuse useful and divine Knowledge among us, will be productive of the happiest effects, and completely answer your warmest wishes. May all the seeds of Science, which You have sown in this, and various other parts of the world, grow up into a living Laurel, to adorn your illustrious Head in the Temple of Fame. And, in the meantime, may the sincere and affectionate Esteem of this Town, as well as the accumulated Honours, which You have merited and received from the united Republics of Liberty and of Letters, serve to smooth the last Passages of your

eminently useful and important Life. We have the honour to be, with the deepest Gratitude and Respect, your Excellency's most obliged, and most obedient, humble Servants.

by Order,

Nathanael Emmons
Hezekiah Fisher
Committee

His Excellency, Benjamin Franklin, Esqr.

Addressed: His Excellency Benjamin Franklin, Esqr.
President of the State of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
Honoured by Dr. Mann.

By December of 1790, all 116 volumes of this small parish library were freely available for loan to the grateful citizens of Franklin. As for the meetinghouse bell, in 1806 a donation was made of a bell and clock for the newly completed steeple and belfry. Some overly enthusiastic painters splattered the bell with paint and made the decision to correct the mistake by painting the entire bell, to the point where the ring was "fatally smothered."³² Due to this loss of both sense and sound, substantial funds were raised and a new bell was purchased by the town in 1831.

A Broader Influence

This impact of delayed communication did not end with the naming of a town or the establishment of a library. It may have also directed the path of Horace Mann, often regarded as the father of public education in America. Born in Franklin on May 4, 1796, Mann was a poor farmer's son whose childhood was spent laboring on that farm, leaving very little time for formal schooling. He did, however, have access to his town's library. Although Mann recalls finding the collection to be outdated, militant, and generally not appropriate for children, it offered the only learning opportunity for young Horace beyond his

meager schooling. Decades later he explained in a letter to a friend:

Until the age of fifteen, I had never been to school more than eight or ten weeks in a year. I said we had but few books. The town, however, owned a small library. When incorporated, it was named after Dr. Franklin As an acknowledgment of the compliment, he offered them a bell for their church; but afterwards, saying that, from what he had learned of the character of the people, he thought they would prefer sense to sound, he changed the gift into a library. Though this library consisted of old histories and theologies, suited, perhaps, to the taste of the “conscript fathers” of the town, but miserably adapted to the “prescript” children, yet I wasted my youthful ardor upon its martial pages”³³

Mann—educator, reformer, and humanitarian—completely transformed public education in America by the time of his death in 1859. Part of his reformation of American education was the introduction of school libraries. In his 1840 lecture to the Massachusetts Board of Education, “On District School Libraries,” Mann shares his philosophy of the value of libraries:

A library will produce one effect upon school children, and upon the neighborhood generally, before they have read one of the books, and even if they should never read one of them. It is in this way: The most ignorant are the most conceited. Unless a man knows that there is something more to be known, his inference is, of course, that he knows everything. Such a man always usurps the throne of universal knowledge, and assumes the right of deciding all possible questions.

Now those children who are reared without any advantages of intelligent company, or of travel, or of books—which are both company and travel—naturally fall into the error of supposing that they live in the center of the world, that all society is like their society, or, if different from theirs, that it must be wrong . . . when this

class of persons go out into the world and mingle with their fellow men, they are found to be alike useless on account of their ignorance, and odious for their presumption. A library, even before it is read, will teach people that there is something more to be known.³⁴

Conclusion

As noted, the slow and often untrustworthy movement of information in past times, in this instance during the American Revolution, has often caused misfortune and mischief. In the case of Franklin, MA, it brought about an unexpected and fortuitous choice of a municipal name, one subsequently employed dozens of times around North America and the world. The false rumor of Benjamin Franklin's demise left a town bearing his name and thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, a liaison of sorts between the namesake and the named that yielded an extremely consequential gift of books. The subsequent determination of how to preserve, manage, and share these tomes with the citizens of the Town of Franklin led to policies that established Franklin Public Library as the first free lending library in America.

Vicki Buchanio Earls is a library professional, local historian, and genealogist who serves as Reference Librarian at Franklin Public Library in Franklin.

Notes

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2. James A. Carr, "The Battle of New Orleans and the Treaty of Ghent," *Diplomatic History* 3, no. 3 (1979): 273–282, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24910113>.
3. Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 25–26.
4. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 79.

5. Frank Luther Mott, "Newspaper Coverage of Lexington and Concord," *The New England Quarterly* vol. 17, no. 4 (December 1944): 489–505.
6. Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, 113.
7. Patrick K. O'Donnell, *The Indispensables: The Diverse Soldier-Mariners Who Shaped the Country, Formed the Navy, and Rowed Washington across the Delaware* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021), 120–123.
8. "Bloody Butchery, by the British Troops: or, The Runaway Fight of the Regulars," *The News Media and the Making of America, 1730–1865*, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://americanantiquarian.org/earlyamericannewsmedia/items/show/21>.
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10. David Schoenbrun. *Triumph in Paris: The Exploits of Benjamin Franklin*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 78.
11. Stacy Schiff, *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 42–43.
12. William Cabell Bruce, *Benjamin Franklin, Self-Revealed: A Biographical and Critical Study Based Mainly on His Own Writings*, 2nd ed. (New York: GP Putnam & Sons, 1923), 2:14.
13. Edwin G. Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots: The Untold Story of American Prisoners During the Revolutionary War*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xi.
14. "Extracts from Rebel Papers", *The Newport Gazette*, Newport, RI, September 4, 1777, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83021183/1777-09-04/ed-1/seq-2/>
15. Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 577.

16. “Letters of the Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789: Volume 9 February 1, 1778 – May 21, 1778” Library of Congress, 1976–2000, accessed June 21, 2023, https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:2:/temp/~ammem_ig0h::

17. “Letters of the Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789: Volume 9 February 1, 1778 – May 21, 1778” Library of Congress, 1976–2000, accessed June 21, 2023, https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:6:/temp/~ammem_4Z3E::

18. “Letters of the Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789: Volume 9 February 1, 1778 – May 21, 1778” Library of Congress, 1976–2000, accessed June 21, 2023, https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:2:/temp/~ammem_CydT::

19. “Letters of the Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789: Volume 9 February 1, 1778 – May 21, 1778” Library of Congress, 1976–2000, accessed June 21, 2023, https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:1:/temp/~ammem_AHXO::

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21. “Adams Family Correspondence, volume 2,” Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-02-02-0318>.

22. Edward T. Price, in *Dividing the Land: Early American Beginnings of Our Private Property Mosaic* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 29–33. This book gives an excellent and very in-depth analysis of land and property distribution and laws in Colonial America.

23. Mortimer Blake, *History of the Town of Franklin, Mass.* (Franklin, MA: Committee of the Town, 1879), 43.

24. Records for the Town of Franklin, MA, 1736–1824, Office of the Town Clerk, Franklin, MA.

25. Draft of Bill Incorporating Franklin, Massachusetts, SC1/series 229. Passed Acts, Acts of 1777-8 c. 21, Massachusetts Archives. Boston, Massachusetts.

26. Blake, *History*, 90. The “Commite” mentioned in William’s letter is likely the meeting-house building committee mentioned in Blake’s *History of Franklin*.

27. “From Jonathan Williams, Sr.(unpublished).” The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Packard Humanities Institute, accessed April 10, 2022. <http://www.franklinpapers.org>. Emphasis added.

28. “From the Town of Franklin, Massachusetts (unpublished).” The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Packard Humanities Institute, accessed April 10, 2022. <http://www.franklinpapers.org>. The June 26, 1886 letter from the Town of Franklin to Dr. Franklin thanking him for the donation of books is signed by “two of the most respectable” of gentlemen: Rev. Nathanael Emmons, a renown and influential pastor throughout New England, who had been Franklin Congregational Minister since 1773; and Hezekiah Fisher, one of Franklin’s original town selectman (1778). Beneath their names is written “Committee.” If they were indeed Jonathan Williams’s connection to the town, the “Comitte” mentioned in his January 14, 1784, letter, they would have had firsthand knowledge of town business.

29. *Ibid.*

30. “From Jane Mecom (unpublished).” The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Packard Humanities Institute, accessed April 10, 2022. <http://www.franklinpapers.org>.

31. “To Richard Price (unpublished).” The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Packard Humanities Institute, accessed April 10, 2022. <http://www.franklinpapers.org>. Emphasis added.

32. Blake, *History*, 94.

33. John Livingston, *Portraits of Eminent Americans Now Living: with Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Their Lives and Actions* (New York: Cornish, Lamport & Co, 1854), 181–182. Little information is given by the author about this letter, which is quoted in a biographical sketch of Horace Mann, but these few words of introduction imply that the letter was in the possession of the author: “In a letter before us, written long ago to a friend, he says . . .”

34. Horace Mann, *Lectures on Education* (Boston: Wm. B. Fowle and N. Capen, 1845), 291–293.