

# The House that Franklin Built

by Page Talbott

The house most widely associated with Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) is the one that he built for his family in Philadelphia, in a quiet, spacious courtyard off Market Street between Third and Fourth Streets. Newly returned from his seven-year stay in London in late 1762, Benjamin Franklin decided it was time for

a house of his own, having previously resided with his family in smaller rented dwellings in the neighborhood.

Like Jefferson at Monticello, Franklin had a hand in the design of the house, though he spent the actual building period as colonial agent in England. His wife, Deborah (1708–1774), oversaw the construction, while Franklin sent back Continental goods and a steady stream of advice and queries. Although occupied with matters of business, civic improvement, scientific inquiry, and affairs of state, he was never too busy to advise his wife and daughter about fashion, interior decoration, and household purchases. Franklin's letters to his wife about the new house—and her responses—offer extraordinary detail about its construction and embellishment. The house was razed in 1812 to make room for a street and several smaller houses, but these letters, together with Gunning Bedford's 1766 fire insurance survey, help us visualize this elegant mansion, complete with wainscoting, columns and pilasters, pediments, dentil work, frets and cornices.<sup>1</sup>

On his return to Philadelphia in November 1762, Franklin and his wife had the opportunity to plan and start building their first house, only a few steps from where they had first laid eyes on each other. Franklin imagined that he would remain in Philadelphia, and that his new house would be home for his remaining days. The Franklins' new three-story house was set in the center of a courtyard well off Market Street. Measuring thirty-four feet square with ten rooms, the spacious brick residence—built by the prominent Philadelphia carpenter Robert Smith, under the supervision of Franklin's friend: carpenter, builder, and merchant Samuel Rhoads—was still under construction when Franklin was obliged to return to England in December 1764.

Franklin next saw his handsome house, completed and furnished,



eleven years later. Though he regretted that he could not oversee the project, he was closely involved in its embellishment and furnishing. Franklin's concentration on domestic details may seem remarkable, but while he was absent from Philadelphia, as he was for nearly thirty years, he sought to maintain both control of and connection to his household. In a letter of August 1765 to Deborah, he indicated his interest in continued involvement even though he was so far from Philadelphia: "I wish you would give me a particular Account of every Room, who and what is in it, 'twould make me seem a little at home." Almost every letter home intimated that Franklin expected to come home imminently. In September 1765, Franklin wrote, "As to oiling the Floors, it may be omitted till I return; which will not be till next Spring." Alas, he remained in London until 1775, and by then Deborah was dead.

Lacking floor plans, Franklin requested details so that he might order the necessary fittings for the house, such as curtains, furniture and carpets (Fig. 1). In a letter to Deborah he asked for "the Breadth of the Pier, that I may get a handsome Glass for the Parlour. I want also the Dimensions of the

Sash Panes in the Buffets of the little North Room: and the Number of them. Also the Dimensions of the Windows for which you would have me bring Curtains, unless you chuse to have the Curtains made there." When he sent the fabric, he also sent instructions for how it was to be hung: "The blue Mohair Stuff is for the Curtains of the Blue Chamber. The Fashion is to make one Curtain only for each Window. Hooks are sent to fix the Rails by at Top, so that they may be taken down on Occasion."<sup>2</sup>

As with the other rooms, the decoration of this "Blue Chamber"—the largest room on the third floor—was described in a letter Deborah Franklin wrote to her husband in the fall of 1765. In addition to the musical instruments housed in this room (a harpsichord, Welch harp, bell harp, viol de gamba, and Franklin's unique invention, the armonica), Deborah recorded a "gilt sconse, a carde table[,] a seet of tee Chaney [tea china]...the worked Chairs and Screen[,] a verey hansom mohogany Stand for the tee kittel to stand on and the orney mental Chaney [ornatemenal china]."

Two years later, Deborah informed her husband that "Billey (their



**PREVIOUS PAGE, RIGHT**  
**Fig. 1:** Sketch of the first floor of Franklin Court, ca. 1765. Possibly by Benjamin Franklin. Ink on paper, 12 x 7½ inches (30.3 x 19.5 cm). American Philosophical Society.

**PREVIOUS PAGE, LEFT**  
**Fig. 2:** Side chair, Philadelphia, ca. 1748. Attributed to Solomon Fussell (c. 1704–1762). Walnut and spruce, 41¼ x 21¼ x 21 inches (106 x 54 x 53 cm). Owned by Benjamin Franklin; descended in the family of Benjamin Franklin Bache. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Promised gift of Robert L. McNeil Jr.

**Fig. 3:** Dressing table, attributed to William Savery (1722–1787), Philadelphia, 1745–1755. Curly maple, poplar, white cedar, and brass, 30 x 35¾ x 22 inches (76.2 x 90.2 x 55.9 cm). Owned by Benjamin Franklin; probably descended in the family of either Benjamin Franklin Bache or Deborah Bache Duane. Purchased by William S. Vaux at the Great Central Fair in aid of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, Philadelphia, 1864. Collection of Jay Robert Stiefel, Philadelphia.



**Fig. 4:** Marble-top mixing table, Philadelphia, 1750–1760. Mahogany, 28 x 32 ¼ x 21 inches (71 x 83 x 53.5 cm). Used for mixing drinks, among other functions, this table descended in the family of William Bache. Private collection. Photography Courtesy of Sotheby's.



**Fig. 5:** Side chair, Philadelphia, ca. 1765. Walnut, 40 ¼ inches high (102.2 cm). Descended in the family of William Bache. Private Collection. Photography: Courtesy of Sotheby's.

son William Franklin) “don’t like the Blew room at all, so it is not finished tell you come home.” In response, Franklin wrote, “I suppose the blue Room is too blue, the Wood being of the same Colour with the Paper, and so looks too dark. I would have you finish it as soon as you can, thus. Paint the Wainscot a dead white; Paper the Walls blue, and tack the gilt Border round just above the Surbase and under the Cornish. If the Paper is not equal Coloured when pasted on, let it be brush’d over again with the same Colour: and let the Papier machée musical Figures be tack’d to the middle of the Ceiling; when this is done, I think it will look very well.” To think that this wondrous room was installed in mid-18th century Philadelphia! In fact, papier machée figures, made “in imitation of carving,” were advertised frequently in local papers and sold by upholsterers, such as Plunket Fleeson, and by carvers, such as Martin Jugiez—both patronized by Franklin.

Franklin’s British purchases for the new house were primarily the smaller items that could easily be shipped: fabric, china, silver, cloth, prints. The furniture was mostly from their earlier home—such as the “old black wolnot chairs” in Deborah’s chamber—and, later, items that Deborah herself purchased from local Philadelphia cabinetmakers. Among the earliest examples of well-documented furniture purchased by Deborah and Benjamin Franklin are a dressing table and a set of three chairs in the Queen Anne style popular in Philadelphia in the 1740s and 1750s. The chairs may be the “three best crookt foot” chairs listed in the 1748 ledger of Philadelphia cabinetmaker Solomon Fussell, who provided goods and services to Franklin for at least nine years (Fig. 2). Likewise, Franklin’s maple dressing table was made in the fashion of the 1740s, perhaps by Fussell’s former apprentice William Savery (Fig. 3).

Several examples of furniture with a Franklin provenance and made in Philadelphia between 1765 and 1775—the years when he was abroad—are known today. These include a marble-top mixing table, a dining or side chair, and a high chest. All are in the elegant Chippendale style and feature claw-and-ball feet and carved cabriole legs. Both the table and chair descended in the family of Franklin’s grandson William Bache (Figs. 4 and 5). Perhaps the mixing table is the one that Deborah purchased in 1766 at the sale that she herself expedited on behalf of the estate of her deceased sister-in-law. The high chest (Fig. 6) is perhaps the “large Cheste” that Deborah describes in Franklin’s chamber, filled with “all the writing that was in your room down stairs.”

Among the English-made furnishings that Franklin purchased in London are several items that have descended in his family and are now in both public and private collections. Franklin purchased a desk in 1772 from John Mayhew, a prominent London cabinetmaker and furniture designer (Fig. 7).<sup>3</sup> Silver bought by Franklin in London included a tankard, a tea caddy, and an inkstand. The tankard was purchased secondhand by Franklin in 1755 from the family of the fifth Earl of Antrim (Fig. 8). With his letter of 4 July 1771 Franklin sent Deborah “two plated Canisters and a Sugar ditto, which I hope will be agreeable to you. I bought them lately from Sheffield” (Fig. 9).<sup>4</sup> Like most of



**Fig. 6:** High chest of drawers, Philadelphia, 1770. Mahogany, sabicu, yellow pine, poplar, and brass, 97 ¾ x 45 ½ x 23 inches (248.3 x 115.6 x 58.4 cm). Owned by Benjamin Franklin; descended in the family of Benjamin Franklin Bache. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Va. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph H. Hennage.



**Fig. 7:** Flat-top or “partners” desk, John Mayhew (1736–1811), London, 1772. Mahogany, oak, and brass, 28 5/8 x 61 3/8 x 28 1/2 inches (72.5 x 155.8 x 72.4 cm). Owned by Benjamin Franklin. The desk is the only example of Franklin’s furniture that can be documented to a specific maker, thanks to an entry in his account book — Mayhew charged Franklin £10. Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Photography by Peter Harholdt.

Franklin’s furnishings, the tankard and canisters were left to his daughter Sally and descended in her family. The inkstand, on the other hand, was a gift from Franklin to Polly Stevenson, his landlady’s daughter, and remained in her family into the twentieth century (Fig. 10).

Franklin also sent home numerous prints from London, including “Prints of the Earl of Bute,” engraved by William Wynne Ryland (1732–1783) after the full-length portrait by Allan Ramsay, and at least two sets of engravings by Robert Strange (1721–1792) after paintings by Domenichino, Guido Reni and Nicolas Poussin. With a “face as well known as that of the moon,” Franklin also amused his family by sending home various portraits of himself. Two of the best known—those by David Martin and Benjamin Wilson—were painted in England and sent home to Philadelphia, as were a large number of mezzotints by Edward Fisher after the well-known portrait of Franklin by Mason Chamberlin.

When a bitter Franklin returned to Philadelphia on May 5, 1775, fresh from his humiliation in the chambers of the British Parliament, he arrived in a city preparing for war. During his brief stay—he was only home for eighteen months—Franklin continued to make improvements to his house. Beginning in mid-May 1775, payments were made to a stonecutter, bricklayer, pump maker, and to the carver and gilder Martin Jugiez. Perhaps this payment reflects the completion of the music room decoration, which had earlier caused Deborah so

much anxiety. Franklin also purchased “Branches for the Drawing Room” (sconces). In October 1776, Franklin left for France to represent American interests at the court of Louis XVI.

Upon returning to Philadelphia in 1785 after his latest (and final) service overseas, Franklin determined that his three-and-a-half-story house could not accommodate his many possessions, nor was it large enough for his family that now consisted of daughter Sally and her husband Richard Bache and their seven children, who had moved into the house in 1767. He resolved to build an addition.

Describing his plans to his sister Jane Mecom in Boston, he wrote: “I propose to have in it a long Room for my Library and Instruments, with two good Bedchambers and two Garrets.... I hardly know how to justify building a Library at an Age that will so soon oblige me to quit it; but we are apt to forget that we are grown old, and Building is an Amusement.”<sup>5</sup>

Franklin had been denied the opportunity to witness the building of the original house; now he was able to supervise every detail, and when he died five years later, in 1790, these new rooms were full of his favorite possessions: his vast library of books, his scientific instruments, his beloved armonica, and numerous comfortable chairs. And, with this addition, he had “gain’d... a Drawing-Room or Dining-Room... in which new Room we can dine a Company of 24 Persons.”<sup>6</sup>

Infirm and often in pain, Franklin continued to conjure up conven-



**Fig. 9:** Tea caddy, Sherburn, Tudor & Leader (partnership 1763–72) London, 1771. Sheffield plate,  $3\frac{3}{8} \times 3\frac{3}{8} \times 2\frac{5}{8}$  inches (9.9 x 9.1 x 6.7 cm). Owned by Benjamin Franklin; descended in the family of William Bache. Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia. Photography by Peter Harholdt.


iences that would assist daily living, including “an Instrument for taking down Books from high Shelves” and a library chair with a concealed ladder beneath the hinged seat (Fig. 11).

In his final years, Franklin regularly received visitors at Franklin Court. One was botanist Rev. Manassah Cutler (1742–1823) who wrote a detailed description of “the largest, and by far the best, private library in America.” Cutler was astounded by the array of curiosities, “including his great armed chair, with rocker and a large fan placed over it, with which he fans himself, keeps off flies, etc., while he sits reading, with only a small motion of his foot....”<sup>7</sup>

A technophile his entire life, Franklin had long been interested in devices that simplified or enhanced life. Upon his return to Philadelphia he had installed in his “Bath room” a special round “tepid bath” with spigots for hot and cold water and a newly-designed heating unit. To assist himself as he grew weaker, he installed a pulley device whereby he could unlock his bedroom door without getting out of bed. Furthermore the doors of the chambers were “lined or edged with green baize, to prevent noise when shutting.”

When his addition was complete, Franklin wrote his sister in Boston, describing the house and suggesting future alterations. His optimistic foresight, however, did not alter the fate of the house. Soon after Franklin’s death, his daughter and her family moved out of Philadelphia. In 1812, the house was razed, but it had long since been emptied of Franklin’s furniture, some having gone to his daughter and grandchildren, others sold at public auction.

The space where Franklin’s “mansion house” stood is now occupied by the “Ghost Structure,” designed in 1974 by the Philadelphia archi-

tectural firm of Venturi and Rauch. The frame of the house is represented with steel beams, and the actual archaeological remains of the building are visible through a series of glazed viewing boxes. 

*The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary, a non-profit organization supported by a lead grant of \$4 million from The Pew Charitable Trusts, was established to mark the 300-year anniversary of Benjamin Franklin’s birth (1706–2006) with a celebration dedicated to educating the public about Franklin’s enduring legacy and inspiring renewed appreciation of the values he embodied. In 2002, an Act of Congress also created the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Commission to study and recommend programs associated with his 300th birthday.*

*The Tercentenary has organized the international traveling exhibition Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World. The companion catalogue, edited by Page Talbott and published by Yale University Press, includes essays by prominent historians.*



**Fig. 8:** Tankard, Robert Gurney and Thomas Cooke (partnership 1727–1773?) London, 1748. Silver,  $7\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$  inches (19.7 x 13.8 x 13.8 cm). Owned by Benjamin Franklin; descended in the family of Richard Bache Jr.. Purchased by William Duane, then returned to the family of Richard Bache Jr., in which family it descended. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection, Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia. Photography by Peter Harholdt.



**Fig. 10:** Inkstand, Edward Aldridge and John Stamper (partnership 1753–1757) London, 1757–1758. Silver and glass, 3 ¼ x 7 ⅝ x 4 ⅛ inches (8.2 x 19.5 x 10.6 cm). Descended in the family of Polly Stevenson Hewson, who received it as a gift from Franklin. Private Collection.

The exhibition opened at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia in December 2005, and will subsequently travel to the Missouri Historical Society (St. Louis), The Houston Museum of Natural Science, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, the Atlanta History Center, the Musée des Arts et Métiers (Paris), and the Musée Carnavalet. The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary can be found online at [www.benfranklin300.org](http://www.benfranklin300.org).

1. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin [PBF]*, published by Yale University and the American Philosophical Society (APS) since 1959, currently number 38 volumes, with ten more volumes anticipated. The PBF, available in major research libraries, are the principal source of information about Franklin's house, and unless otherwise noted, are the source for all quotations used in this article. Another rich source is the more than 3000 index cards compiled by staff at Independence National Historical Park since the 1960s. We are grateful to Karen Stevens, archivist, for giving us access to this material.
2. For a history of Franklin Court, see Edward M. Riley, "Franklin's Home," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, v. 33, pt. 1 (1933), 148-60. Unfortunately no printed views or other depictions of Franklin's home exist.
3. "In Favr of Mayhew for a Writing Table £10.0.," June 1772. Franklin's Journal in London (1764–76), ms, APS. Perhaps this "writing desk" is the one scheduled to be sold at auction on October 21, 1790. *Pennsylvania Packet*, October 18, 1790. This desk was purchased by Israel Whelen, Sr. (1752–1806), and passed down to his son, Israel Whelen Jr. who donated it to Robert Town. Mr. Town left the desk to his brother Benjamin Town, the father of Rev. Edwin Town, who owned the desk in 1856. (Newspaper clippings dated July 4 and October 25, 1856, support this information). Along with other Franklin relics, this desk was exhibited at the 1864 Sanitary Fair in Philadelphia, at a display organized by Franklin's great-granddaughter Elizabeth Duane Gillespie.
4. Franklin had recently purchased "sundry plated ware had of Tudor, Sherburn & Leader of Sheffield." Account Book, entry for April 20, 1771, ms, APS. He had earlier purchased two "Saucepens, plated inside with Silver instead of tinning" from Sheffield. Benjamin Franklin to Deborah Franklin, February 27, 1760, *PBF* 9:27. He kept a third for his use in London, "to make my Watergruel." The mate to this tea caddy was sold at the Stan V. Henckels auction of the effects of Mrs. Elizabeth Duane Davis, June 6, 1924.
5. This addition, on the east side of the house, was 18 feet wide and 30 feet long. Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, September 21, 1786, Franklin-Mecom Correspondence, A.P.S. *Memoirs*, Vol. 27, 282–83.
6. Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, May 30, 1787, in Albert Henry Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Macmillan, 1905–07), v. 9, 589–90.
7. William Parker Cutler and Julia Perkins Cutler, *Life, journals and correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler, LL.D. by his grandchildren* (Cincinnati: R. Clarke, 1888), 1:267–70.



**Fig. 11:** Library chair with folding steps, London or Philadelphia, 1760–1780. Possibly designed by Benjamin Franklin. Mahogany, leather, and steel, 50 x 27 ½ x 34 ¼ inches (127 x 69.9 x 87 cm). Owned by Benjamin Franklin; given to the American Philosophical Society by Franklin's son-in-law Richard Bache in 1792. American Philosophical Society. Photography by Peter Harholdt.