

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on May 8, 2023.

Ben Franklin: Now Sage

Last November, this column carried the article entitled “Ben Franklin Did This Too?”. It was about the young Ben Franklin, then in his twenties, the Junto Club that he organized in those early years, the first-ever-in-America subscription Library that grew out of that, and the resulting incorporation of it as the Library Company of Philadelphia, still in existence today. Just a smattering of all that this giant did in a lifetime, and yet he did it. That was the point.

Well, with respect to Libraries, he was not done. Again referring to Walter Isaacson’s “Benjamin Franklin: An American Life” (2003), late in life Franklin rivaled Thomas Jefferson in having his own personal collection of thousands of books. I have previously written numerous times about Jefferson’s Monticello Library, which collection he sold later in his life to the Library of Congress. Franklin, after many years of living in Europe as one of our revolutionary country’s emissaries, established, upon his return home to Philadelphia in 1785, his own Market Street Library of 4,276 volumes.

He was between participations in two major events. While in France, he, with John Jay and John Adams, had negotiated the end of the Revolutionary War with Britain, which was fully formalized in 1783. After his voyage back to Philadelphia, he was to become a key participant in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. In between, he added a three-story wing to his existing house on Market Street and had constructed for him two new houses, one of which became grandson Benny’s printing shop. Franklin turned 80 on January 17, 1786 and suffered from gout and kidney stones. Yet, he was still building something.

As part of his adding on to the old house, he made the entire second floor a personal Library for his collection, with access to his old bedchamber and with shelving that went floor to ceiling. He is quoted as saying, “I hardly know how to justify building a library at an age that will soon oblige me to quit it, but we are apt to forget that we are grown old, and building is an amusement.” It is never a bad time to have access to a Library!

This Library had more than just books. It reflected Franklin’s lifelong high reputation as a renowned scientist and technologist. In it, according to Isaacson, were his equipment from experiments in electricity, a glass model that showed the flow of blood through the body, a rudimentary James Watt copying machine, and various other pieces of apparatus. He also had a mechanical arm of his invention in place to access books on high shelves. The Library was as well an exhibit place for his musical instruments, including armonicas (glass bowls in graded sizes), a harpsichord, a viola, and bells.

There are so many striking aspects of America’s Founding Fathers. Some of them were such complete students of the world and time in which they lived. Benjamin Franklin was one such and was well traveled, too. It is interesting that in his earliest adult years and still into his late sage years he is so strongly associated with a large and varied Library. Libraries were in the 18th century, and are now, symbols of learning and sources for pleasure. They stand for building intellectual capacity, and it can be no

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surprise when we learn that such great minds as Ben Franklin depended on them and relished having them, housing books for their own personal edification in the course of living in their own time.

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