

The Indelible Ben Franklin

IN SO MANY WAYS, FRANKLIN LEFT HIS MARK ON THE CITY HE LOVED

BY JOANN GRECO

IN 1723, BEN FRANKLIN ARRIVED in Philadelphia from Boston, by way of New York, sea-tossed and foot-weary. Walking through the riverside streets, the bedraggled 17-year-old followed a crowd of “clean-dressed people” into a Quaker meeting house. Lulled by the silence, he promptly fell asleep.

“Compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there,” Franklin wrote in his autobiography. Soon enough, Franklin was indeed on his way to taking Philadelphia by storm, molding it into a city of firsts and priming it to become the capital of the newly formed United States of America.

Before settling in Philadelphia, Franklin enjoyed an 18-month stay in London, where, he later wrote, he made many “ingenious” acquaintances and read considerably. Armed with a new gloss of sophistication and an encyclopedia’s worth of ideas, Franklin was only 20 years old when he returned. He would stay for the next 30 years, making his mark on the city and forging an unbreakable connection.

As Philadelphia celebrates the 300th anniversary of Franklin’s birth, his indelible impact is everywhere. It’s there in the

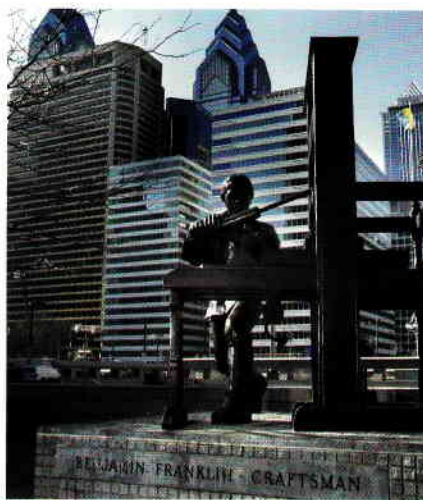
municipal landmarks that bear his name: the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Franklin Square and the Franklin Institute of Science.

It’s there in little things, too: from the creamy white blossoms of the fragrant *Franklinia alatamaha* tree at Bartram’s Garden to the ubiquitous “Franklin busybody,” attached to windows all over town. Both pay tribute to Franklin’s sense of discovery and ingenuity. The first is a tree saved from extinction by his great friend, botanist John Bartram. The second is

a mirrored contraption supposedly designed by a dallying Franklin so he could spot his wife without opening his window as she approached from down the block.

Most tangibly, Franklin’s presence is felt in the sculptures and statues that dot Philadelphia’s downtown, massive works hewn from powerful materials, each striving to illustrate some bit of Franklin’s many personae and accomplishments.

Unrelentingly curious scientist and experimenter, brilliant statesman, imaginative inventor, giant civic presence. Franklin was all of these, yes, but he identified himself foremost as a printer. Joseph Brown’s *Benjamin Franklin — Craftsman* (or *Young Ben Franklin*) near City Hall pays tribute to this Franklin, a man both literally and figuratively of letters. The 10-foot bronze shows a determined Ben working the press, his shirtsleeves rolled up.

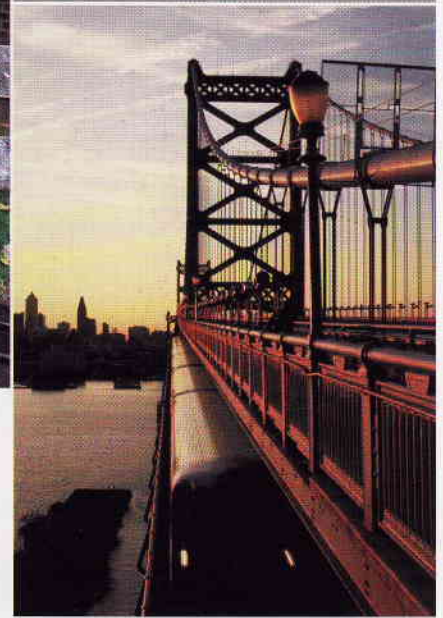


Joseph Brown’s bronze *Benjamin Franklin — Craftsman* honors Franklin’s skill and success as a young Philadelphia printer (above); Franklin’s steady gaze in an engraved 18th-century portrait (opposite).

Looking at it, we’re reminded that, while the older Franklin may have been oft-indolent and a gout sufferer, Franklin in his younger years was a bit of a fitness nut: an early adopter of vegetarianism, an inveterate walker, and an enthusiastic swimmer who is credited with inventing swim fins.



Benjamin West's rather fanciful vision of Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky (opposite); a bronze Franklin reads the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on a bench on the University of Pennsylvania campus (left); the Benjamin Franklin Bridge spans the Delaware River (below).



Franklin loved to solve problems, whether to smooth the way for his own recreations, such as swimming and reading (he invented bifocals), or to facilitate his professional life as, say, postmaster (he invented an odometer and attached it to his carriage to help him discover more efficient routes). This passion served as a guiding force in all his endeavors.

It was in his role as public servant extraordinaire that this trait took on its greatest significance. As every schoolchild learns, Franklin was critical in establishing the nation's first fire insurance company, hospital and public library — not to mention America's first nontheological liberal arts university.

Several sculptures around town recognize these accomplishments. Francesco Lazzarini's 1792 statue of a toga-clad Franklin leaning on a stack of books now stands outside the Library Company of Philadelphia, the descendant of the nation's first library. In 1731, at a session of Junto, the salon he had formed, Franklin thought that "it might be convenient to us [members] to have them [our books] altogether where we met, that upon occasion they might be consulted." This became the "mother of all the North American subscription libraries, now so numerous," Franklin noted, adding that "these libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges."

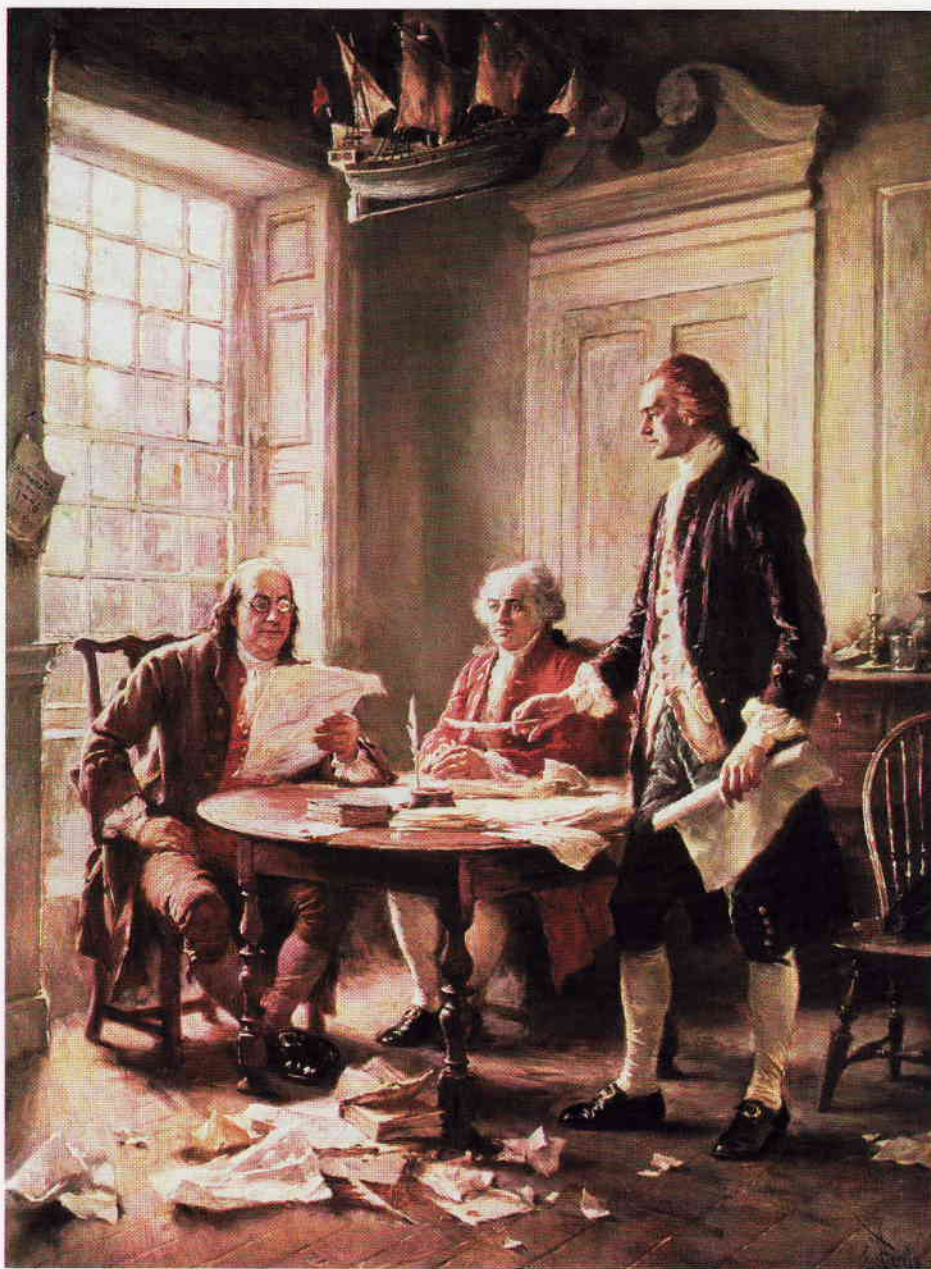
Franklin's dedication to enlightenment led to the 1749 printing of his *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania*. Franklin outlined an institution that would offer practical as well as classical instruction in order to prepare youth for real-world pursuits. The resulting institution, now known as the University of Pennsylvania, acknowledges its founder with George Lundeen's 1987 bronze of a convivial Franklin sitting on a bench, reading. The open seat next to him presents a favorite photo op for students and visitors.

To many, Franklin's most singular achievement remains his proof that lightning consists of electrical charges. Isamu Noguchi's *Bolt of Lightning* commemorates this discovery in a site the artist chose himself, between the Benjamin Franklin Bridge and Franklin Square.

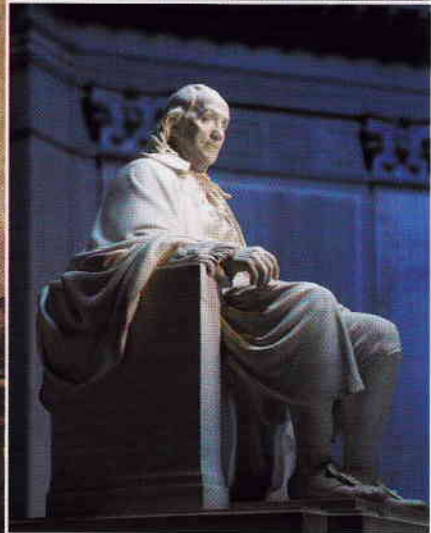
Rising more than 100 feet into the sky, the stainless steel structure gracefully melds images of Franklin's potent brew: key, lightning flash and kite.

Noguchi's subtle, conceptual tribute isn't the only one that searches to convey a sense of Franklin's spirit. Even the massive Franklin National Memorial, a 30-ton marble piece in the grand rotunda of the Franklin Institute, is about essence more than anything else. Sculptor James Earle Fraser said he wanted to portray a Franklin "ready to turn the full force of his keen mind on any problem that concerned him."

And Alexander Generalis' lighthearted metal sculpture of Franklin's head sees inspiration in a merry prankster who — from the age of 16, when he assumed the guise of a middle-aged widow in the "Silence Dogood" letters, until his late sixties, when he wrote an "Edict by the King of



Ben and friends litter the floor while working on the Declaration of Independence (left); the marble Benjamin Franklin National Memorial, at the Franklin Institute, stands some 20 feet tall (below); among Franklin's array of inventions was the electrical battery (opposite).



Venturi's *Ghost Structure*, painted steel outlines of Franklin's house and print shop, will have to do. These shadow buildings, combined with restorations of five buildings containing an eighteenth century printing office, an architectural and archaeological exhibit, an operating post office and a postal museum, provide a fine sense of the way Ben lived his last years in Philadelphia. (Franklin left Philadelphia in 1757 to fulfill diplomatic duties in

Prussia," a veiled plea for American independence — delighted in hoaxes and puzzles. Floating above a highway that runs through town, Generalis' Franklin sports flowing locks and tiny glasses.

The arc of Franklin's professional life from printer/publisher/journalist to civil servant, from inventor to founding father, certainly survives in Philadelphia's institutions and monuments. For a hint of what his private life was like, architect Robert

London and Paris. He stayed away, except for brief spates, until 1785.)

In his last years, Franklin did not slow down. He advised Noah Webster and Robert Fulton on their little projects (oh, a dictionary, a steam engine), concluded that lead was poisonous and should no longer be used in printing, denounced slavery and served as a delegate to the U.S. Constitutional Convention. He died in 1790 and, via a cortege that drew 20,000 people, was laid to rest at Christ Church's burial ground. We can pay tribute to him there today, but walking around the city that he worked so hard to develop is a better way. In doing so, we realize that, in so many ways, Franklin is still with us.

JoAnn Greco writes from her home in Philadelphia, where she also co-owns and operates Dessert, an all-dessert cafe. Any day now, she expects to be switching to bifocals.

(FROM LEFT) ©RETTMAN/ CORBIS; ©BILL HEINSOHN