



Franklin & Marshall College



The first members were JOSEPH BREINT-NAL, a copyer of deeds for the scriveners, a good-natur'd, friendly, middle-ag'd man, a great lover of poetry, reading all he could meet with, and writing some that was tolerable; very ingenious in many little Nicknackeries, and of sensible conversation.

THOMAS GODFREY, a self-taught mathematician, great in his way, and afterward inventor of what is now called Hadley's Quadrant. But he knew little out of his way, and was not a pleasing companion; as, like most great mathematicians I have met with, he expected universal precision in everything said, or was forever denying or distinguishing upon trifles, to the disturbance of all conversation. He soon left us.

NICHOLAS SCULL, a surveyor, afterwards surveyor-general, who lov'd books, and sometimes made a few verses.

WILLIAM PARSONS, bred a shoemaker, but loving reading, had acquir'd a considerable share of mathematics, which he first studied with a view to astrology, that he afterwards laugh'd at it. He also became surveyor-general.

WILLIAM MAUGRIDGE, a joiner, a most exquisite mechanic, and a solid, sensible man.

HUGH MEREDITH, STEPHEN POTTS, AND GEORGE WEBB I have characteriz'd before. [The three men were employees in Franklin's printing business.²]

ROBERT GRACE, a young gentleman of some fortune, generous, lively, and witty; a lover of punning and of his friends.

And WILLIAM COLEMAN, then a merchant's clerk, about my age, who had the coolest, clearest head, the best heart, and the exactest morals of almost any man I ever met with. He became afterwards a merchant of great note, and one of our provincial judges.

___ Franklin, *Autobiography*

Benjamin Franklin's **JUNTO CLUB & LENDING LIBRARY** *of Philadelphia*

founded 1727 & 1731

At age 21, with his printing business established in Philadelphia and his circle of friends expanding, Benjamin Franklin formed a weekly discussion group with twelve men who shared his drive for learning and conversation. Named the Junto (derived from the Spanish *to join*), the club met every Friday evening in a tavern or house to discuss "Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy [science]." Soon the group gathered books from the members' personal libraries into a lending library for the Junto — the beginnings of the first lending library in the colonies.

from Franklin's Autobiography

I should have mentioned before that in the autumn of the preceding year [1727], I had form'd most of my ingenious acquaintance into a club of mutual improvement, which we called the JUNTO. We met on Friday evenings. The rules that I drew up required that every member, in his turn, should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss'd by the company; and once in three months produce and read an essay of his own writing on any subject he pleased. Our debates were to be under the direction of a president and to be conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute, or desire of victory; and, to prevent warmth [heatedness], all expressions of positiveness in opinions, or direct contradiction, were after some time made contraband and prohibited under small pecuniary penalties [monetary fines]. . . .¹

Our club, the Junto, was found so useful and afforded such satisfaction to the members that several were desirous of introducing their friends, which could not well be done without exceeding what we had settled as a convenient number, *viz.* [namely], twelve. We had from the beginning made it a rule to keep our institution a secret, which was pretty well observ'd; the intention was to avoid applications of improper persons for admittance, some of whom, perhaps, we might find it difficult to refuse. I was one of those who were against any addition to our number, but, instead of it,

National Humanities Center, 2008: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds. Full text of Franklin's autobiography online from the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center at etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Fra2Aut.html. Some spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

¹ The excerpts presented here are ordered by topic (Junto and lending library) and not as they appear in Franklin's *Autobiography*, which he wrote over several decades, and in which he discusses the Junto and library several times.

² "Hugh Meredith, a Welsh Pensilvanian, thirty years of age, bred to country work; honest, sensible, had a great deal of solid observation, was something of a reader, but given to drink. Stephen Potts, a young countryman of full age, bred to the same, of uncommon natural parts, and great wit and humor, but a little idle. . . George Webb, an Oxford scholar, whose time for four years he had likewise bought [indentured servant] . . ."

made in writing a proposal that every member separately should endeavor to form a subordinate club, with the same rules respecting queries, etc., and without informing them of the connection with the Junto. The advantages proposed were: the improvement of so many more young citizens by the use of our institutions; our better acquaintance with the general sentiments of the inhabitants on any occasion, as the Junto member might propose what queries we should desire, and was to report to the Junto what pass'd in his separate club; the promotion of our particular interests in business by more extensive recommendation, and the increase of our influence in public affairs, and our power of doing good by spreading thro' the several clubs the sentiments of the Junto.

The project was approv'd, and every member undertook to form his club, but they did not all succeed. Five or six only were completed, which were called by different names, as the Vine, the Union, the Band, etc. They were useful to themselves and afforded us a good deal of amusement, information, and instruction, besides answering, in some considerable degree, our views of influencing the public opinion on particular occasions

About this time, our club meeting not at a tavern but in a little room of Mr. Grace's set apart for that purpose, a proposition was made by me that, since our books were often refer'd to in our disquisitions upon the queries, it might be convenient to us to have them altogether where we met, that upon occasion they might be consulted; and by thus clubbing our books to a common library, we should, while we lik'd to keep them together, have each of us the advantage of using the books of all the other members, which would be nearly as beneficial as if each owned the whole. It was lik'd and agreed to, and we fill'd one end of the room with such books as we could best spare. The number was not so great as we expected, and tho' they had been of great use, yet some inconveniences occurring for want of due care of them, the collection, after about a year, was separated and each took his books home again.³

And now I set on foot my first project of a public nature, that for a subscription library. I drew

Franklin's Questions for the Junto

Franklin compiled questions for Junto members to ask themselves on the morning of each weekly meeting.

1. Have you met with any thing in the author you last read, remarkable, or suitable to be communicated to the Junto? particularly in history, morality, poetry, physic, travels, mechanic arts, or other parts of knowledge.
2. What new story have you lately heard agreeable for telling in conversation?
3. Hath any citizen in your knowledge failed in his business lately, and what have you heard of the cause?
4. Have you lately heard of any citizen's thriving well, and by what means?
5. Have you lately heard how any present rich man, here or elsewhere, got his estate?
6. Do you know of any fellow citizen, who has lately done a worthy action, deserving praise and imitation? or who has committed an error proper for us to be warned against and avoid?
7. What unhappy effects of intemperance have you lately observed or heard? of imprudence? of passion? or of any other vice or folly?
8. What happy effects of temperance? of prudence? of moderation? or of any other virtue?
9. Have you or any of your acquaintance been lately sick or wounded? If so, what remedies were used, and what were their effects?
10. Who do you know that are shortly going voyages or journeys, if one should have occasion to send by them?
11. Do you think of any thing at present, in which the Junto may be serviceable to *mankind*? to their country, to their friends, or to themselves?
12. Hath any deserving stranger arrived in town since last meeting, that you heard of? and what have you heard or observed of his character or merits? and whether think you, it lies in the power of the Junto to oblige him, or encourage him as he deserves?
13. Do you know of any deserving young beginner lately set up, whom it lies in the power of the Junto any way to encourage?

³ Later in his Autobiography, Franklin again recounts starting the Junto: "At the time I establish'd myself in Pennsylvania, there was not a good book-seller's shop in any of the colonies to the southward of Boston. In New York and Philad'a the printers were indeed stationers; they sold only paper, etc., almanacs, ballads, and a few common school-books. Those who lov'd reading were oblig'd to send for their books from England; the members of the Junto had each a few. We had left the alehouse, where we first met, and hired a room to hold our club in. I propos'd that we should all of us bring our books to that room, where they would not only be ready to consult in our conferences, but become a common benefit, each of us being at liberty to borrow such as he wish'd to read at home. This was accordingly done, and for some time contented us."

up the proposals, got them put into form by our great scrivener, Brockden, and, by the help of my friends in the Junto, procured fifty subscribers of forty shillings each to begin with, and ten shillings a year for fifty years, the term our company was to continue. We afterwards obtain'd a charter, the company being increased to one hundred: this was the mother of all the North American subscription libraries, now so numerous. It is become a great thing itself, and continually increasing. 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. . . .

[This section from a later portion of Franklin's Autobiography.]

Finding the advantage of this little collection, I propos'd to render the benefit from books more common, by commencing a public subscription library. I drew a sketch of the plan and rules that would be necessary, and got a skilful conveyancer, Mr. Charles Brockden, to put the whole in form of articles of agreement to be subscribed, by which each subscriber engag'd to pay a certain sum down for the first purchase of books, and an annual contribution for increasing them. So few were the readers at that time in Philadelphia, and the majority of us so poor, that I was not able, with great industry, to find more than fifty persons, mostly young tradesmen, willing to pay down for this purpose forty shillings each, and ten shillings per annum. On this little fund we began. The books were imported; the library wag opened one day in the week for lending to the subscribers, on their promissory notes to pay double the value if not duly returned. The institution soon manifested its utility, was imitated by other towns, and in other provinces. The libraries were augmented by donations. Reading became fashionable; and our people, having no publick amusements to divert their attention from study, became better acquainted with books, and in a few years were observ'd by strangers to be better instructed and more intelligent than people of the same rank generally are in other countries.

14. Have you lately observed any defect in the laws of your *country*, [of] which it would be proper to move the legislature for an amendment? Or do you know of any beneficial law that is wanting?
15. Have you lately observed any encroachment on the just liberties of the people?
16. Hath any body attacked your reputation lately? and what can the Junto do towards securing it?
17. Is there any man whose friendship you want, and which the Junto or any of them, can procure for you?
18. Have you lately heard any member's character attacked, and how have you defended it?
19. Hath any man injured you, from whom it is in the power of the Junto to procure redress?
20. In what manner can the Junto, or any of them, assist you in any of your honourable designs?
21. Have you any weighty affair in hand, in which you think the advice of the Junto may be of service?
22. What benefits have you lately received from any man not present?
23. Is there any difficulty in matters of opinion, of justice, and injustice, which you would gladly have discussed at this time?
24. Do you see any thing amiss in the present customs or proceedings of the Junto, which might be amended?

Any person to be qualified [for Junto membership], to stand up, and lay his hand on his breast, and be asked these questions; viz.

1. Have you any particular disrespect to any present members? *Answer.* I have not.
2. Do you sincerely declare that you love mankind in general; of what profession or religion soever? *Answ.* I do.
3. Do you think any person ought to be harmed in his body, name or goods, for mere speculative opinions, or his external way of worship? *Ans.* No.
4. Do you love truth's sake, and will you endeavour impartially to find and receive it yourself and communicate it to others?
Answer. Yes.

Benjamin Franklin, *Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces*, ed. Benjamin Vaughan (London: 1779), pp. 533-536.