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The Correspondence of Benjamin Franklin and His Grandson B. F. Bache

KAREN C. DUVAL

When Benjamin Franklin left Philadelphia for France in October 1776, he took along his sixteen-year-old grandson, William Temple Franklin, who would remain in Paris, serving as his secretary, for the entire eight-and-a-half-year mission. Also in tow was another grandson and Temple's cousin, Benjamin Franklin Bache. Benny, as he was usually called, was born in August 1769. No letters survive to indicate why Benny, who had just turned seven, was being sent abroad. His departure, following the death of his sister Sarah at eight and a half months, must have been an emotional one. But high aspirations for the young boy's education evidently persuaded his parents to let him go off, leaving behind only a brother, William, three and a half years old.

The records are also silent on what schooling if any Benny had had, but a letter Franklin wrote to Temple at his father's house in New Jersey, on 19 September 1776, is suggestive:

Benny had written as I told you, but his Letter it seems was not sent. It was thought to be too full of Pothooks and Hangers, and so unintelligible by the dividing Words in the Middle, and joining Ends of some to Beginnings of others, that if it had fallen into the Hands of some Committee it might have given them too much Trouble to decypher it, on a Suspicion of its containing Treason, especially as directed to a Tory House. He is now diligent in learning to write better, that he may arrive at the Hour of Corresponding with his Aunt after you leave her.¹

The Tory House, of course, was that of Temple's father, William Franklin, the Loyalist governor of New Jersey, by then estranged from his own father, Benjamin, over their political differences. But such a letter as Benny's fallen into the hands of a documentary editor would be a prize, a choice piece of evidence to unravel, decode, and interpret. We at the Papers of Benjamin Franklin

would certainly have included it in our volumes, pothooks, hangers, and all as they occurred, with a footnote or two for the reader. Alas, it was not sent. Like much of the rest of the Ben Franklin–Benny Bache correspondence, we are left with a first- or second-hand description. But even that becomes an important part of the story, as indeed the letter just quoted tells us something about the Baches' sense of propriety and what expectations they might have had of a European education for their seven-year-old son as they saw him off that October.

Once in France Benny was soon enrolled in a boarding school at Passy, where he remained for two years, in the company of another American, Charles Cochran, son of a South Carolina shipyard owner, and for the last year John Quincy Adams and Jesse Deane, all close in age. For this early period there is no correspondence between Benny and his grandfather or even with his cousin Temple. The story must be teased out of Franklin's and Temple's correspondence with family members back home. To fill out the picture further we have relaxed to some extent our policy at the Franklin Papers of rarely printing Franklin's receipted bills because these are our only internal source of information on Benny's education for this period. But for details of the curriculum and school day, we must direct our readers to the John Q. Adams Diary and to the Adams family correspondence.²

In the spring of 1779 Franklin decided to withdraw Benny, age nine, from the boarding school at Passy and to send him off to Geneva. We first learn of this in a letter Franklin writes on 21 April 1779 to young John Quincy Adams, who is on his way back to America with his father: "Benjamin whom you so kindly remember would have been glad to hear of your Welfare; but he is gone to Geneva. As he is destined to live in a Protestant Country, & a Republic, I thought it best, to finish his Education, where the proper Principles prevail."³

There is nothing in the Franklin correspondence to prepare, and little to explain, this new plan. Perhaps Franklin had come recently under the influence of Helvétius, the late husband of his friend and neighbor, for it was Helvétius, in *De l'esprit*, who expressed the intimate relationship between the state and education: "In

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every country the art of forming man is so closely tied to the form of government, that it may not be possible to make any considerable change in public education without making comparable changes in the very constitution of the state.”⁴ Yet when Franklin wrote to Benny’s father about the change, on 2 June 1779, fully six weeks after Benny’s departure, his tone was almost casual:

He had made as much proficiency in his learning as the boarding school he was at could well afford him, and after some consideration where to find a better for him I at length fixed on sending him to Geneva. I had a good opportunity by a gentleman of that city who had a place for him in his chaise, and has a son of about the same age at the same school. He promised to take care of him, and enclosed I send you the letters I have since received relating to him and from him. He went very cheerfully, and I understand is very happy. I miss his company on Sundays at dinner. But if I live and I can find a little leisure I shall make the journey next spring to see him, and to see at the same time the old 13 United States of Switzerland.⁵

Franklin never made the trip nor did he seem to revise his estimation of the Geneva republic when political unrest broke out in the early spring of 1781, lasting well into the following year. Franklin’s motivation for sending Benny away remains opaque, never fully reasoned through, always to be inferred.

A principal difficulty inherent in the Benny-Ben correspondence derives from the fact that their exchange is set within the larger frame of the Franklin correspondence. Franklin is the center around which most editorial questions must be focused. Letters to Franklin from Benny’s preceptor and from the mother of a schoolmate provide valuable descriptions of the boy so far from home, but we do not print letters between Benny and his parents or even those between him and his cousin Temple, or his friend Charles Cochran, who remained behind at the boarding school in Passy. All communication from beyond the Passy-Geneva axis comes to us, the readers of this correspondence, filtered mainly through Franklin. Where appropriate, details from the excluded letters are smuggled into footnotes, other sources are cited, and in future volumes we will undoubtedly poach material from the journal Benny began in August 1782. But of the letters exchanged between the grandfather and his young charge over the four and a half years that Benny was at

Geneva, between the ages of nine and almost fourteen, only forty-four letters remain, thirty-five from Benny and nine from Franklin. Of all these only eight are in direct response to identifiable letters, while four others refer generally to earlier letters. We can infer the existence of ten other letters that have not survived, thereby helping to date several of Benny’s undated letters. But the total number is not great, and in a volume covering four to six months of correspondence, some six hundred printed letters, the dialogue between grandfather and grandson is muted and does not make for easy eavesdropping. Nonetheless, with Benny’s removal to Geneva a new voice enters the story.

Moreover, while the gaps and the imbalance in the distribution of letters may fail to provide a complete and vivid picture of Benny’s daily life, a pattern does emerge, one that carries meaning for the time, the place, and these people. Franklin had evidently instructed his grandson to write monthly, for most of Benny’s letters are or can be dated toward the end of a month. When a month or two goes by with no letter, we can reasonably assume that a letter has been lost. Indeed, Marignac, Benny’s preceptor in Geneva, confided in a note to Franklin that he had to remind Benny regularly of his duty to his grandfather.⁶ Franklin’s letters to Benny were much less regular, subject to the rhythm of his own busy life and other incoming mail. Two of our volumes include four and five letters from Benny, but none to him from Franklin.

The source of the documents we print tells another part of the story. Franklin often had copies made of their correspondence to send home to Benny’s parents, sometimes on different ships in the hope that at least one copy would escape the hazards of wartime transatlantic mail. The result is that while some letters fail to survive, a few come down to us in duplicate copies. And there is one letter from Franklin that survives only in a French translation in Benny’s hand, about which I’ll say more later.

Mercifully, by the time Benny departed for Geneva he had had two and a half years of schooling in Passy. Benny had arrived at the “hour of corresponding” with neither pothooks nor hangers to obscure his meaning. His handwriting at age nine is no more cramped or spiky than many another French hand encountered in the Franklin correspondence. More problematic, though, is his fluency in speaking and writing in two languages. The first three letters from Benny after his arrival in Geneva on 19 April 1779 illustrate this point dramatically as he passes from French to an uncertain English and back again to French. The first one is a breathless, unpunctuated recitation in French.⁷

My dear good papa, I take the liberty of writing to inform you of my health as well as my journey where we endured a few misfortunes we arrived at Geneva on Monday and I entered the boarding school the following day where I will do what I can to work well and to satisfy you I hope that I will receive an answer as soon as you are able I quite regret not to be able to write you more, for if I could, I would. I am well enough I hope that you are also Mr Cramer sends you his compliments. Your very humble and very obedient son B. Franklin Bache.⁸

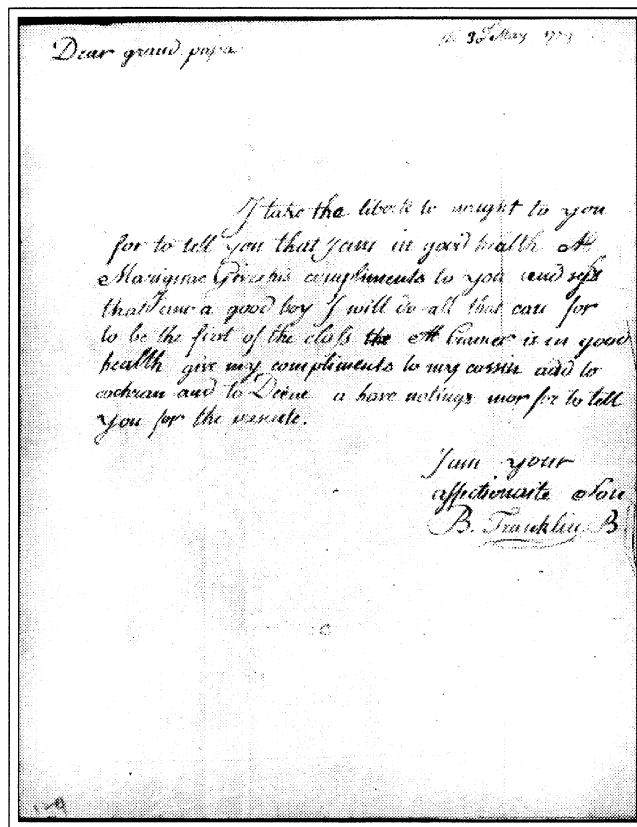
His second letter, on 30 May, is as dutiful as Franklin could wish, very brief, and in English, or what remains of Benny's native language, draped and stretched over the French syntax he learned at Passy:

Dear grand papa, I take the liberte to wright to you for to tell you that I am in good health M marignac Give his compliments to you and says that I am a good boy I will do all that can for to be the first of the class M. Cramer is in good health give my compliments to my cossin and to cochran and to Deaine A have notings more for to tell you for the presente. I am your affectionaite Son, B. Franklin B.⁹

Benny's next letter, of 25 October 1779, begins in English but rapidly degenerates into something in between the two languages that in places is incomprehensible.¹⁰ The second half of the letter, however, is written in a fluent, formal French, as are the next four or five letters. The style is so sophisticated and grammatical compared to the preceding letters that in the annotation we had to draw attention to the probable influence here of Benny's Swiss preceptor. But by June of the following year, 1780, Benny had so absorbed the style and grammar of what was now his first language that he won a first prize for Latin translation into French.¹¹ These first three letters, then, transcribed literally, provide a tangible sense of the linguistic progress Benny must have made during that first year to win his prize.

The difficulties Benny faced were not just linguistic. Within four months of his departure from Passy, Benny suffered the loss of Philibert Cramer, the eminent diplomat and publisher to whom Franklin had entrusted the nine-year-old boy and with whom Benny lived part of the time at Geneva. In a letter to Franklin (20 August 1779)

Cramer's sister-in-law described Benny's reaction to his death: "We have just lost the protector whom you had chosen for your child, that innocent creature has shown the most tender sensitivity, he has revealed to me a grief so profound and so genuine that I am taking him under my care until my husband recovers and can take charge."¹²



Letter from Benjamin Franklin Bache to his grandfather Benjamin Franklin, 30 May 1779. Reprinted by kind permission of the American Philosophical Society.

The following letter from Franklin, written the day before this one, brought more bad news to Benny—and, no doubt, little comfort.

My dear Child, Do not think that I have forgotten you, because I have been so long without writing to you. I think of you every day, and there is nothing I desire more than to see you furnish'd with good Learning, that I may return you to your Father and Mother so accomplish'd, with such Knowledge & Virtue as to give them Pleasure, and enable you to become an honourable Man in your own Country. I am therefore very willing you should have a Dictionary, and all such other Books as M. du Marignac or M. Cramer

shall judge proper for you. Those Gentlemen are very good to you, and you are I hope very thankful to them, and do everything cheerfully that they advise you to do; by so doing you will recommend yourself to me, and all good People as well as me will love & esteem you for your dutiful Behaviour. Your Friends Cochran and Deane are well. Cochran gave me a Letter for you a long time since, which I mislaid, but having now found it, I send it inclos'd. The Small Pox is in that Pension, and 4 of the Scholars are dead of it. I will speak to Cochran to send you their Names. He has not yet had it. How happy it is for you that your Parents took care to have you inoculated when you were an Infant! which puts you out of that Danger.¹³

Franklin closed by saying, "I shall always love you very much if you continue to be a good Boy; being ever Your affectionate Grandfather, BF." We do not have Benny's response to this letter, nor is there another letter extant from Franklin to him for the next twelve months.

For that twelve-month period we do have eight letters to Franklin from Benny in which he reported dutifully on his scholarly efforts, announced his prize, promised to continue to try to do well, and pleaded for companions from Philadelphia or Passy. When Franklin finally responded he did not mince words:

I received a Letter the other day from my dear Boy, without Date. It always gives me Pleasure to hear from you, to be inform'd of your Welfare, and that you mind your Learning. It is now the Season for you to acquire that, at the Expence of your Friends, which may be of Use to you when they are dead and gone, and qualify you to fill some Station in Life, that will afford you a decent Subsistance. You see every where two Sorts of People. One who are well dress'd, live comfortably in good Houses, whose Conversation is sensible and instructive, and who are Respected for their Virtue. The other Sort are poor, and dirty, and ragged and ignorant, and vicious, & live in miserable Cabbins or Garrets, on coarse Provisions, which they must work hard to obtain, or which if they are idle, they must go without or Starve. The first had a good Education given them by their Friends, and they took pains when at School to improve their Time and increase their Knowledge; The others either had no

Friend to pay for their Schooling, and so never were taught; or else when they were at School, they Neglected their Studies, were idle, and wicked, and disobedient to their Masters, and would not be instructed; and now they Suffer. Take care therefore, my dear Child, to make a good Use of every moment of the present Opportunity that is afforded you; and bring away with you from Geneva such a Stock of Good Learning & Good Morals, as may recommend you to your Friends and Country when you return home, make glad the Hearts of your Father and Mother, and be a Credit to the Place where you receiv'd your Educations, and to the Masters who have been so good as to take the pains of Instructing you.¹⁴

When Benny wrote back without acknowledging receipt of this letter, which Franklin had had copied and sent to Benny's mother, Franklin sent him a copy, instructed him to translate it and to return the translation so that he might see whether or not Benny had understood. Benny went him one better and translated the letter of instruction as well, our only extant version of the lost original to which I alluded earlier.¹⁵

The following year, 1781, was an important one for Benny, though not necessarily for the exchange of letters with his grandfather. In the spring of 1781, Benny, then eleven years old, witnessed the early rumblings of civil unrest at Geneva. For the first time his letters reflected a world beyond the narrow confines of school, and he described with a certain nonchalance the changes in his daily existence brought on by the disturbances:

... I am enjoying myself at Geneva because Mr. Marignac has rented a little house in the country near the city to which we return every morning to go to the college and we go back every evening and we sleep there but one thing which has saddened me is that the fair has not taken place because of the affairs of Geneva but they have not frightened me in the least nevertheless Mr. Marignac had the goodness to take me to his brother's country house where I amused myself even though I was alone.¹⁶

For this same period we have only Franklin's letter of 16 April 1781, enclosing news of Benny's mother's patriotic activities and exhorting Benny to be diligent "that you also may be qualified to do Service to your Country,

and be worthy so good a Mother.²¹⁷

Later that year, on 29 September 1781, Benny described to Franklin his joy at the arrival of twelve-year-old Sammy Johonnot, grandson of Franklin's old friend the Reverend Samuel Cooper of Boston.¹⁸ Sammy, who had been in boarding school at Passy, had become something of a handful, and Franklin recommended sending him to Geneva. For Benny, Sammy's arrival was another break in the routine of school. His companionship was evidently unlike that offered by the other boys at the pension and also afforded Benny the chance to renew his practice of English. Two months later Benny reported the arrival of Robert Montgomery, an old playmate from Philadelphia.¹⁹ The contact with these two Americans seemed to give Benny a boost, for his letters became less formulaic, almost assertive. A bold request in February 1782, for *Le Voyageur français* (The French Traveler) in twenty-eight volumes, mentioned the pleasure he would derive from the work as well as its instructional value.²⁰ When he had to repeat his request for the book in July, he also asked for a hike in his allowance and in Sammy's.²¹ At the end of August, with still no word from Franklin, Benny announced that Franklin's silence on the matter of the books had been interpreted as consent: he had purchased the twenty-eight volumes. Benny rushed on to describe the authors he was explicating in class: "Telemachus, Terence, Sallust, the Cataline orations of Cicero, Lucian, a Greek author, the testament which is also a Greek author we learn the verses of Virgil and we explicate them and we are learning Greek grammar."²² The tone and the detail of these letters suggest that Benny, about to turn thirteen, had perked up considerably.

In November 1782 Benny wrote to Franklin a long-promised letter in English.²³ This first effort is a stilted catalog of his daily activities at school, but Benny persisted in writing to Franklin in English, and when a few months later Franklin refused him a gold watch, young Ben was confident enough then to offer a straightforward explanation for his request: "...you Refuse me a wach I dont Insist on asking it no more. I thought that I could obtain one for 2 reasons 1o Every Boy of my Society has one of gold or at lest Silver they ar of my age Me. Cramer's Son that is not as old as me has a gold one I talk to Mr Marignac about it he told me I did Very well Because I would find Very good watch's at Geneva but if you Believe one would not serve me I have nothing more to say having had the fever and not being yet very well I pray you to excuse the schortness of my letter."²⁴

Now, after a long period of "exile" in a foreign land and language, Benny's last seven letters to his grandfather

from Geneva are all written in English, as though to underscore his discovery of a more independent voice. Even as he struggled to remaster his native tongue, Benny's return to English conveys a growing confidence and an attempt, I think, to redress the moral imbalance his grandfather's letters must have made him feel on more than one occasion.

Unfortunately, these letters also mark the end of the correspondence with Franklin. In the summer of 1783, just before his fourteenth birthday, Benny rejoined his grandfather and cousin at Passy, where he remained until they all returned to Philadelphia in 1785. Given the importance of Franklin to Benny it would have been interesting to see the adolescent evolve in correspondence with his grandfather. But Benny continued to record his observations in a diary and in letters to his parents. Although we'll no longer have Benny's voice, we will be able to draw on this material in future volumes of the Franklin Papers.

Notes

1. Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven and London), 22:612–13.
2. See, for example, Robert J. Taylor et al., eds., *Diary of John Quincy Adams* (2 vols. to date; Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1981–), 1:34–5n; Lyman H. Butterfield, Richard A. Ryerson et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence* (6 vols. to date; Cambridge, Mass., 1977–), 3:272–3n.
3. Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven and London), 22:612–13.
4. Discourse IV, chapter xvii, paragraph one. The translation is my own.
5. Labaree, *Papers*, 29:600.
6. *Ibid.*, 35:367.
7. The translations here are my own.
8. *Ibid.*, 29:342.
9. *Ibid.*, 578.
10. *Ibid.*, 30:586–7.
11. *Ibid.*, 32:559, 561, 611.
12. *Ibid.*, 30:248.
13. *Ibid.*, 241.
14. *Ibid.*, 32:326–7.
15. *Ibid.*, 34:204.
16. *Ibid.*, 486.
17. *Ibid.*, 549–50.
18. *Ibid.*, 35:538.
19. American Philosophical Society, Bache Collection (hereafter APS), 20 Nov. 1781.
20. APS, 21 Feb. 1782.
21. APS, 27 July 1782.
22. APS, 30 August 1782.
23. APS, 15 Nov. 1782.
24. APS, 30 May 1783.