

B. Free Franklin

Presented by Richard V. Bergen

William O. Ware Lodge of Research, December 8, 1983

This may seem like a rather strange title for a presentation to a Lodge of Research – at least to some of you. To others, particularly those interested in hobbies related to the Postal Service, it is probably “old hat.”

Benjamin Franklin, (i. e. Bro. Benjamin Franklin) was a prolific letter writer, perhaps even as prolific as Brother George Washington. The franking privilege, which both possessed, permitted them to send and receive letters free, an important factor in both their careers.

The franking privilege wasn't restricted to official business. They could correspond free about anything with anyone.

Franklin had the free mail privilege in several posts. In colonial days, he was postmaster at Philadelphia in 1737, although that post probably did not then carry the franking privilege with it.

Between 1753 and 1774, Franklin was Deputy Postmaster General for North America, a post that did have the franking privilege. Franklin exercised his privilege from both sides of the Atlantic until he was removed in 1774.

Franklin represented Pennsylvania and other colonies in London from 1757 to 1762, and again from 1764 to 1775.

Franklin changed his franking signature from “Free – B. Franklin” to “B. Free Franklin” sometime during the 1760s. Philatelists have speculated over the years as to the reasons behind this change. Some have felt that the “B. Free” was meant to be read “Be Free,” implying that the colonies should be freed from the yoke of English rule; others, that it was a method of protection against the misuse of franking signatures by forgers.

Letters in the 1700s were folded letters (without envelopes). The franking signatures were normally written at the lower left, with the “Free” elsewhere on the address leaf.

When there was a vacant space above the signature, a swindler would inscribe an I. O. U., check, or promissory note above the signature trim away the other writing and have a negotiable fake.

Long before Franklin started franking, English lords and public officials with the franking privilege began to box their signatures in with other writing (such as “Free” or the address or with heavy lines) so the nature of the signature would be obvious.

So, if Franklin learned the practice in England, the question is when and why he changed his franking signature from “Free – B. Franklin” to “B. Free Franklin.”

It does seem inconceivable that a man of Franklin’s intelligence, in a post as sensitive as his station – literally in the mouth of the British lion – would give any hint of a desire for colonial freedom ten years before the Declaration of Independence.

A third possible reason for Brother Franklin changing his franking signature to read “B. Free Franklin” may have been purely philosophical. Those of us participating in a Lodge of Masonic Research may find this to be the most satisfying answer of all.

Franklin spelled out in his autobiography a philosophy of freedom of religion and thought and suggested those subscribing to this concept be called the “Society of the Free and Easy.” Free, as being, by the general practice and habit of virtues, free from dominion of vice, free from debt, “which exposes a man to confinement and a species of slavery to creditors.”

Franklin was appointed Postmaster General of the Continental Congress in July of 1775 after he had returned from England in May to be made a Pennsylvania delegate to that body on the very next day following his return.

The Continental Congress passed a resolution granting themselves the franking privilege in November of 1775, so Franklin would have had “double” franking privilege after that date.

Franklin didn’t get to use his dual franking privilege very long. He was shortly sent to France to promote American interests there, arriving in December of 1776. He remained there until 1785, serving as one of the negotiators at the Treaty of Paris which ended the American Revolution.

Brother Franklin still had one more shot at the franking privilege. In February of 1787, the Continental Congress enacted that a constitutional convention was to meet in Philadelphia to “revise the Articles of Confederation.” In April, it extended the franking privilege to the delegates to that convention “in the same manner as is allowed to the members of Congress.”

The convention, of course, rather than revising the Articles of Confederation, wrote what is now our federal constitution. It sat from May 25 until September 17, 1787, and Franklin was in constant attendance.

Happily, the convention met at the “State House” (Independence Hall), not far from the home of the 81 year-old Franklin. In this post, he could have franked mail for the last time.

Located at 316 Market Street in Philadelphia, in one of the five row houses once owned by Brother Benjamin Franklin, is located the “B. Free Franklin” Post Office and Museum. Letters mailed through this Post Office carry a facsimile of this signature as a postage cancellation. This Post Office, a part of Franklin County, Independence National Historical Park, is the only colonial theme post office operated by the U. S. Postal Service and is staffed by career postal employees. It was dedicated on July 26, 1975 to commemorate the bicentennial of Benjamin Franklin’s appointment as first Postmaster General of the United Colonies by the Second Continental Congress.

The Postal Museum on the second floor features displays of rare postage stamps and unusual philatelic products, postal artifacts dating from the Revolutionary War period to the present day and includes the famed Pony Express Rider’s saddle mail pouch, the first mail boxes to receive mail, the earliest type cancellation equipment utilized by post offices and other memorabilia.

During 1983, The U. S. Postal Service issued two commemorative stamps honoring Brother Benjamin Franklin. Needless to say, Masonic cachet makers had a “field day” with these issues.

On March 24, a commemorative stamp was issued honoring the 200th anniversary of the “Treaty of Amity and Commerce” between the United States and Sweden. This treaty was negotiated by Brother Franklin and was the first significant example of world diplomacy by the fledgling nation. Masonic cover collectors sought not only first day cancellations from the “city of issue” (Philadelphia), but also “unofficial” first day cancellations from the “B. Free Franklin” post office and dual first day cancellations from Philadelphia and Stockholm (the Swedish Postal authorities having issued a Swedish counterpart on the same date).

On September 2, a commemorative stamp was issued honoring the 200th anniversary of the signing of the “Treaty of Paris, which marked the formal conclusion of the American Revolution. This had Washington, D. C. as its “first day city” and, again, a counterpart was issued on the same day by French Postal authorities in Paris. This dual-cancellation is also a dandy collector’s item. Brother Franklin was one of the negotiators and signers of this treaty, along with Brothers John Jay and Henry Laurens. The other American signer was John Adams, who was not a Mason.

Benjamin Franklin (1706 – 1790) – American statesman, scientist, philosopher, and author. Born January 17, 1706 in Boston, Massachusetts. Apprenticed to his brother, James, a printer, when only 12, he left him five years later after disagreements and settled in Philadelphia. First employed as a printer, he became proprietor of a printing business and published the “Pennsylvania Gazette,” 1730 – 1742 and gained wide recognition with his “Poor Richard’s Almanack” 1732 – 1757. In 1727 he organized the “Junto” club, which became the American Philosophical Society, and in 1731 laid the foundations for a library which developed into the Philadelphia Public Library. He was instrumental in improving the lighting of city streets, invented a heating stove about 1744 (which is still being made), and, becoming interested in

electricity, tried his famous “kite” experiments in 1752. In 1748 he sold his business to the foreman and retired to devote himself to public life.

Brother Franklin received his Masonic Degrees in St. John’s Lodge of Philadelphia in 1731 and became active in the work from the very beginning. He was Secretary of the Lodge from 1735 to 1738. He was elected Junior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania in June of 1732 and Grand Master in June of 1734. He was appointed Provincial Grand Master (the first native born) in 1749. In 1752, he was named to a committee for building “The Freemason’s Lodge” in Philadelphia, and in 1755 took a prominent part in its dedication as the first Masonic building in America. In 1734, he printed “Anderson’s Constitutions” as “Mason Book,” which was the first Masonic book printed in America. In 1759 he was a visitor to Lodge Saint David at Edinburgh, Scotland and in 1760 was present at the Grand Lodge of England, held at Crown and Anchor, London, as Provincial Grand Master. In 1788 he assisted at the initiation of Voltaire in the Lodge of the Nine Sisters in Paris and affiliated with that Lodge in the same year. A short time later, he officiated at the Masonic funeral services conducted by that Lodge for Voltaire. He was a member of the “Respectable Lodge de Saint Jean de Jerusalem” and was elected honorary Master of it. He was also elected an honorary member of the Loge des Bon Amis of Rouen, France.

We shall never know, of course, just what was in Franklin’s mind when he wrote his “B. Free Franklin” signature on his letters. We would perhaps like to think that even in his early years, he had a twinkle in his eye – and that as he wrote his signature, that it was the philosophy of the free man – as opposed to that of the free state – that brought the twinkle.

Presented by Richard V. Bergen
William O. Ware Lodge of Research
December 8, 1983