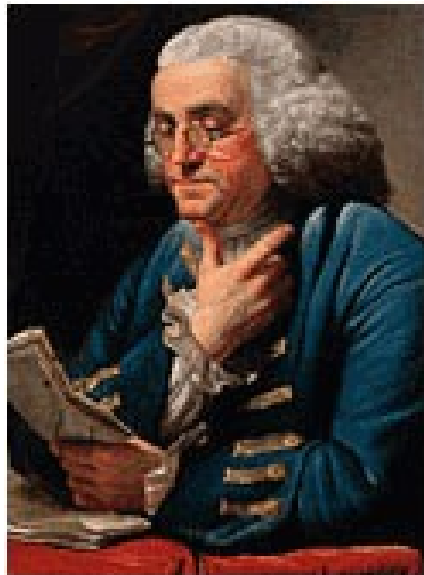


# Benjamin Franklin's Junto



May 9, 2006

## INITIAL FORMATION

Benjamin Franklin started the Leather Apron club in 1727, when he was 21 years old. He was a regular at a Philadelphia club called the Every Night club where prominent merchants and businessmen met informally to discuss the business of the day. His congenial nature attracted many unique and learned individuals, and from this group Franklin chose members for his Leather Apron club. The group, initially composed of 12 members, called itself the Junto, Latin for “the meeting”.

Franklin describes the formation and purpose of the Junto in his autobiography:

I should have mentioned before, that, in the autumn of the preceding year, [1727] I had form'd most of my ingenious acquaintances 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, all expressions of positiveness in opinions, or direct contradiction, were after some time made contraband, and prohibited under small pecuniary penalties.

The members of the Junto were drawn from diverse occupations and backgrounds, but they all shared a spirit of inquiry and a desire to improve themselves, their community, and to help others. The names of the original twelve are:

Benjamin Franklin – the group’s leader and founder; printer

Hugh Merideth – Franklin’s business partner; printer

Steven Potts

George Webb

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Joseph Breintnall – merchant, scrivener,  
amateur historian and poet

Thomas Godfrey – Glazier,  
mathematician, inventor

Nicholas Scull – surveyor, bibliophile

William Parsons – surveyor, cobbler,  
astrologer

William Maugride – cabinetmaker

William Coleman – Merchant’s clerk

Robert Grace – Gentleman, intellectual,  
provided access to a large family  
library



## THE JUNTO'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The purpose of the group was to to debate questions of morals, politics, and natural philosophy, but also to exchange knowledge of business affairs. In time, Franklin and other members of the club would grow to become very successful businessmen, and some historians make a point of emphasizing their connection to the Junto.

Philadelphia historians Scharff and Westcott record that the Junto was...

a secret association, of people from the several ranks of society, which was at once an intelligence office and a star chamber, a business protective union and an inquisition, a gossip club and a propagator of political opinion, a whispering gallery and a vehmegericht. It is easy to conceive how many advantages a skillful and plausible man like Franklin could secure to his business through such an association, in addition to the stores of useful knowledge about men and things he would be able to accumulate through it.

However, this ignores the group's benevolent accomplishments for social improvement. For example, Benjamin Franklin noted that the inhabitants of his native city, Boston, were far better prepared to fight fires than the citizens of Philadelphia. Upon returning home from a trip, he consulted the Junto, and asked for their suggestions on better ways to combat fires. They sought to raise public awareness about the city's dire need to improve fire-fighting techniques. Franklin suggested a "Club or Society of active men belonging to each Fire Engine; whose business is to attend all fires with it whenever they happen." He further noted that via practice and regular meetings, the firefighters' skills would be much improved. The Junto further urged that chimney sweeps should be licensed by the city and be held responsible for their work. Under Franklin's goading, a group of thirty men came together to form the Union Fire Company on December 7, 1736. Their equipment included "leather buckets, with strong bags and baskets (for packing and transporting goods), which were to be brought to every fire. The blaze battlers met monthly to talk about fire prevention and fire-fighting methods. Homeowner's were mandated to have leather fire-fighting buckets in their houses.

In this manner, the Junto also made the following contributions:

1731 – first Public Library

1736 – first volunteer Fire Department

1751 – first Public Hospital in Pennsylvania

1749 – first business college; later to become the University of Pennsylvania in 1751

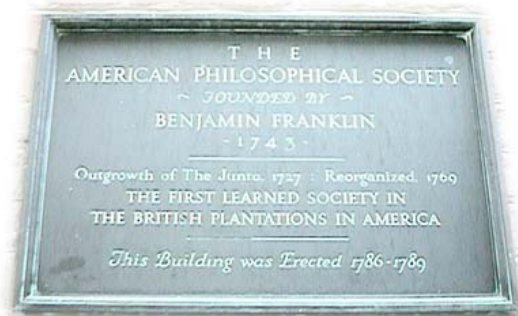


## THE QUESTIONS

This is the list of questions Franklin devised to guide the discussions at Junto meetings (from Franklin's papers, dated 1728, and included in some editions of his autobiography):

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, physics, 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 [on] 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?
14. Have you lately observed any defect in the laws, of which it would be proper to move the legislature 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?

## THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY



In 1739 John Bartram proposed, “a society or academy of the most ingenious and curious men be established in America to promote inquiries... sponsor lectures, and underwrite expeditions.” Bartram, while a singular scientist, did not have the force of personality or circle of friends to carry his idea out to completion, but Benjamin Franklin did.

Franklin wrote a circular entitled, "A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America," writing:

The first Drudgery of Settling new Colonies, which confines the Attention of People to mere Necessaries, is now pretty well over; and there are many in every Province in Circumstances that set them at Ease, and afford Leisure to cultivate the finer Arts, and improve the common Stock of Knowledge. To such of these who are Men of Speculation, any Hints must from time to time arise, may Observations occur, which if well-examined, pursued and improved, might produce Discoveries to the Advantage of some or all of the British Plantations, or to the Benefit of Mankind in general.

But as from the Extent of the Country, such Persons are widely separated, and seldom can see and converse, or be acquainted with each other, so that many useful Particulars remain un-communicated, die with the Discoverers, and are lost to Mankind; it is, to remedy this Inconvenience for the future, proposed that one society be formed of Virtuosi or ingenious Men residing in the several Colonies, to be called the American Philosophical Society; who are to maintain a constant Correspondence. That Philadelphia being the City nearest the Centre of the Continent Colonies, communicating with all of them northward and southward by Post, and with all the Island by Sea, and having the Advantage of a good growing library, be the Centre of the Society.

Thus, Benjamin Franklin, and a group of learned individuals came together on May 25, 1743 to form The American Philosophical Society. Here most believe the informal Junto gives way to a group of learned scientists, but members concerned themselves with improving farming methods, animal husbandry, mining techniques, mapmaking and surveying, and commerce.

The APS accomplishments include:

- Charted the path of Venus
- Prepared the scientific instructions for Lewis and Clark, and Rocky Mountain Expeditions
- Planned Lt. Charles Wiles' exploration of the South Seas and discovery of Antarctic Continent
- Today there are over 700 members, 200 from abroad

## HISTORICAL BACKDROP

Benjamin Franklin founded the Junto during a period in history called the Age of Enlightenment. During this time an intellectual movement advocated rationality as a means to establish an authoritative system of ethics, aesthetics, and knowledge. It was a movement away from tradition, superstition, and religious and societal dogmas. The ideas expressed in this age are believed to have provided the framework for the American and French revolutions.

King George I died in 1727 (the year the Junto was formed) and a new King was taking the crown of England.

Sir Isaac Newton's famous *Principia* was published around this time, which had a profound effect on the intellectual societies. Not only was this the birth of calculus, but his three laws of motion would remain unchallenged for over 200 years.

Prominent philosophers of the day were Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and David Hume; all of which note the importance of man's free will and defense of his rights, and the importance of natural philosophy. Recall Benjamin Franklin's group specifically wanted to discuss points of Natural Philosophy. Here the term "natural philosophy" meant the objective study of nature and the physical universe, and was not a philosophical idea in the modern sense. Notions of "Science" and "Scientists" date only to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Deism was a prominent religious belief during the Age of Enlightenment. Basically, a belief in God based on reason, experience, and the nature of the universe rather than on the basis of holy texts and divine revelation. And essentially, through the use of reason, God's existence is revealed by the observation of the order and complexity found within nature and our personal experiences. About the time the Junto was formed, Benjamin Franklin spoke of Deism, saying:

. . . Some books against Deism fell into my hands. . . It happened that they wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the Deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough Deist.

Later in life, however, Franklin would become more accommodating of Christianity, and express his view that God constantly intervened in the affairs of men, which was contrary to the Deist point of view.

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