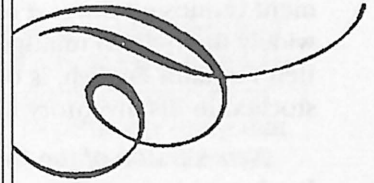


**BEN FRANKLIN, PRINTER:  
SELECTIONS FROM THE INDIANA  
UNIVERSITY LILLY LIBRARY COLLECTION**

*by William F. Meehan III*



The Body of  
B. Franklin,  
Printer;  
Like the Cover of an old Book,  
Its Contents torn out,  
And stript of its Lettering and Gilding,  
Lies here, Food for Worms.  
But the Work shall not be wholly lost:  
For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more,  
In a new & more perfect edition,  
Corrected and amended  
By the Author.

— An epitaph Franklin wrote in jest in 1728,  
at the age of twenty-seven

Ben Franklin's career as a printer occupies an important part of a life distinguished by remarkable accomplishment. Often overshadowed by his scientific inventions and civic activity, Franklin's pursuits as a printer reveal an industrious, clever, and resourceful

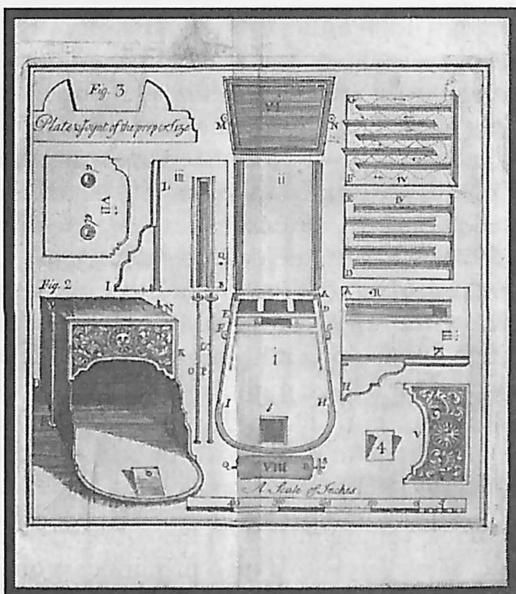
business owner whose sway affected printing throughout colonial America, particularly from Philadelphia to Charleston. His work as official printer for Pennsylvania, beginning in 1730, demonstrates his gift for winning friends and influencing lawmakers, as well as his ability to deliver quality work. Typical of printers in Colonial America, Franklin also sold books, and the title page of his imprints is a clarion call to bibliophiles still today: "Printed and Sold by B. Franklin." The second printer to set up shop in Philadelphia, Franklin became one of the trade's leading members, his venture combining roles as type founder, papermaker, binder, and woodcut artist.

Franklin's career as a printer began as an apprentice at the age of seventeen in his older brother James' shop in Boston. Five years later, in 1723, Franklin arrived in Philadelphia and began work in the print shop of Samuel Keimer before heading to London and working for several printers. Franklin returned to Philadelphia and worked a short time with Keimer before setting up his own shop in 1728. Franklin formed several partnerships, the most productive association with his successor David Hall lasting from 1748 to 1766, although Franklin had retired from the day-to-day operations of the shop in 1757. Franklin's imprint appears on more than three hundred books.

To celebrate his achievement as a printer, the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington took advantage of the tercentenary of Franklin's birth in 1706 to assemble an exhibition of books he printed. The items, all from the Lilly Library collection, were displayed in the exhibit, "Ben Franklin, Printer," and represent significant examples of Franklin's printing during the years 1730 to 1783. Provenance is noted when applicable.

*Pennsylvania. General Assembly. Law to Session of January 12, 1729-30. George II. Tertio [Naturalization Act]. Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin and H. Meredith. 1730. Folio. From the library of George A. Poole Jr.*

From Franklin's first press, this is one of the earliest imprints with his name on it and one of the few surviv-



Franklin Stove, Courtesy, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

ing titles produced by the Franklin and Meredith partnership in 1728 to 1731. Franklin, who was named Pennsylvania's official printer in 1730, printed the act in the collection of laws for the session, but the government requested the text reprinted to publicize more widely the right of immigrants to own land. The type, Ben Franklin English, is one of the six styles Franklin stocked in his inventory until 1742.

*New Version of the Psalms of David.* Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate. Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin. 1733. 12vo.

This edition of the *Psalms*, an imperfect copy, is the only Franklin imprint in which the cloverleaf watermark of the Rittenhouse Mill appears. The paper apparently was supplied by Andrew Bradford, the Philadelphia printer who owned the local mill and commissioned Franklin for the job. Franklin, who also used imported paper purchased from local merchants in the book, included Bradford's name on the title page as a seller, evidently as part of the deal.

*Poor Richard, 1734. An Almanack for the Year of Christ 1734.* Richard Saunders. [Benjamin Franklin]. Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin. First edition. [1733.]

*Poor Richard Improved 1757.* Richard Saunders. [Benjamin Franklin]. Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin and D. Hall. [1756.] From the Library of J.K. Lilly.

With all sorts of practical information, almanacs were indispensable to colonial Americans, and Franklin, combining his resourceful skills as a "scrib-

bler" and entrepreneur, turned his publication into an unrivaled commercial success. He wanted the almanac to entertain readers, in addition to being useful, and the combination gave rise to a commercial hit.

The first *Poor Richard* appeared in 1733. Richard Saunders, the imaginary astrologer who authored the practical information, adages, and aphorisms, is one of the personae Franklin assumed as a journalist. Franklin altered the salutation of the preface to "Courteous Reader" from "Courteous and Kind Readers," in the 1734 edition. The almanac became such a favorite of colonial Americans that Franklin started issuing a pocket edition in 1740. With the 1746 edition, Franklin changed the title to *Poor Richard Improved*. Franklin began using monthly panels, probably his own woodcut ornaments, in the 1749 *Poor Richard*, the first edition printed in his partnership with Hall, which lasted until 1766. When he sailed for England in 1757, Franklin handed editorial responsibility for the almanac over to Hall.

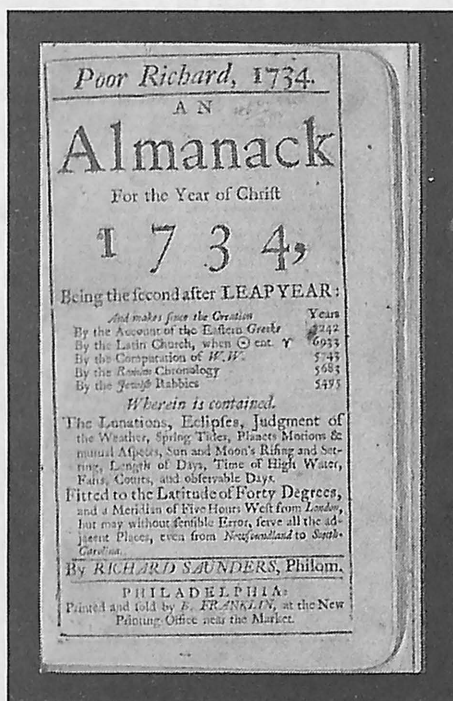
*Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield.* Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin. 1740. 8vo. From the Library of George A. Poole Jr.

Franklin published these letters, by one of the Great Awakening's most popular figures, separately in successive issues of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. But Franklin knew Whitefield was a good bet and decided to publish them together in book form. Franklin's imprint appeared in approximately 226 religious books by several authors from 1727 to 1748, but Whitefield is the only one of them Franklin published. Franklin was a skilled woodcut artist, and this title page ornament appears in only eleven of his imprints.

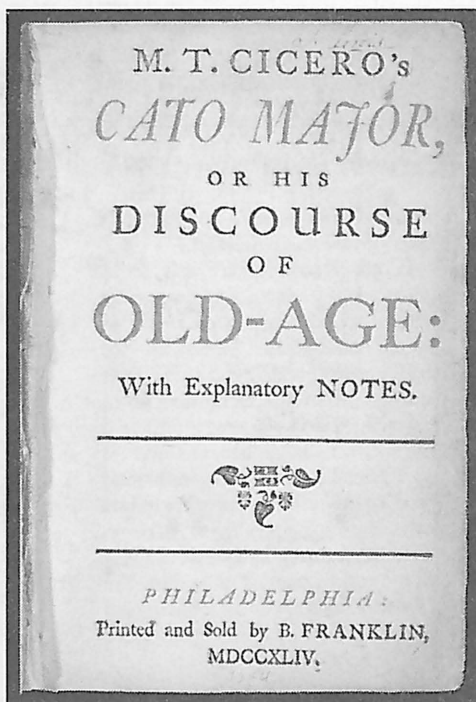
*Cato Major.* Marcus Tullius Cicero. James Logan, translator. Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin. 1744.

This copy is a first issue of the first edition of the book generally regarded as the finest example by Franklin's press. Printed out of admiration for his aging friend James Logan, who translated the work from Latin, *Cato Major* is one of the few books that Franklin produced at his own expense. After *Poor Richard*, Miller (1974) writes in the definitive *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing 1728-1788: A Descriptive Bibliography*, it is "probably Franklin's best known publication; many think it his most handsome piece of printing, and for a large number of important collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the only Franklin imprint worth having in their collection" (p. 182).

The book's allure rests with the rubrication on the title page, as well as with a typo that appears on page 27, line 5. A shop employee noticed that "ony" was printed instead of "only" and stopped the press to



Courtesy, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana



Courtesy, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

make the correction, thereby creating two states of the first impression. The Lilly's copy is a first-state imprint. Franklin mixed two sizes of paper and two impositions in the printing process, a bibliographic discovery in the late 1970s by Edwin Wolf 2nd, who was librarian at the Library Company of Philadelphia. With one exception, the Caslon type used in *Cato Major* was Franklin's preferred typeface starting in 1742.

*An Account of the New Invented Pennsylvania Fire-Places.* [Benjamin Franklin]. Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin. 1744. 4to. From the Library of J.K. Lilly.

Franklin printed his essay to publicize the fireplace he invented, known now as the Franklin Stove. The plates, imported from Germany, were engraved in Boston, most likely by James Turner, from illustrations drawn by Lewis Evans. Franklin thought the depiction of the flow of air unclear in one illustration, a profile of the chimney and fire-place on page 17, and apparently had it outlined in ink by hand in the shop. A foldout illustration of the stove and its parts is tipped in at the end of the book, following page 37.

*The Pennsylvania Gazette.* October 28, 1756. No. 1453. Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by B. Franklin and D. Hall.

The weekly newspaper that Franklin started in 1729 was central to Franklin's printing business and essential to his success. The *Gazette* was characteristic of weeklies in the 1700s, consisting of local and foreign news summaries, political commentary, advertisements and notices, and letters. Although it was the second

newspaper in Philadelphia, the *Gazette* had better coverage of current news and was written in a more effective style than Andrew Bradford's paper, the first in the port city on the Delaware River.

Franklin's triumph as a newspaper publisher and editor was his impartial political reporting that was fair to both sides of an argument and free of controversy. "I myself have constantly refused to print any thing that might countenance Vice, or promote Immorality ... I have also always refus'd to print such things as might do real injury to any Person," Franklin writes in his essay "Apology for Printers," printed in the June 10, 1731, issue of the *Gazette*. Franklin maintained an open-press policy on the belief that he could refuse to print potentially libelous commentary but, in turn, also offer to print a separate pamphlet, without his imprint and at the writer's expense. His example was followed by printers throughout the colonies.

The Lilly owns three issues of the *Gazette* printed by Franklin, two in 1744 and one in 1746; twenty-two issues printed by Franklin and Hall between 1750-1757; and numerous issues printed by Hall from 1757-1774. The *Gazette* is the first use of Caslon type in Philadelphia.

*Des Hoherleuchteten Theologi. Herrn Johann Arndts. Weiland General-Superintendenten Des Fürstenthums Lüneburg, ec. Sämtliche Sechs Geistreiche Bücher vom Wahren Christendume, Das ist: Bio: William F. Meehan III is Senior Fellow for Archives at the University of Louisville. He curated "Ben Franklin, Printer," an exhibition that ran 9 January-17 February 2006 in the Lilly Library at Indiana University. Von Heilsamer Busse, Hertzlicher Neue und Leid über Die Sünde, Wahrem Glauben, auch Heiligem Leben und Wandel Der Rechten Wahren Christen. Reue Auflage mit Kupfern, Samt Richtigen Anmerkungen, Kräftigen Gebetern über Alle Capitel, und Einem Sechsfachen Register.* Johann Arndt. Philadelphia: Gedrukt und verlagt bey Benjamin Fräncklin und Johann Böhm. 1751. 8vo.

Franklin's *Philadelphische Zeitung*, the first German-language paper in colonial America, lasted only two issues in 1732 and was reissued in 1756-1757. But the *Sechs Bücher*, the largest book printed in Philadelphia up to that time—measuring 13.5 mm thick and numbering 1,356 pages—is a landmark achievement of the German press in colonial America and a masterpiece of the three-year partnership Franklin formed with Böhm, which ended in 1752 when Böhm died. One of the rarest of Franklin's imprints, this copy contains only sixty of sixty-four plates.

The book was first printed at Frankfurt in the early seventeenth century and became the principal work of emblematic devotional literature in Germany. The emblems and the accompanying letterpress were

machined separately and carry their own set of signatures, a method common in the printing of large illustrated books in Germany but rare in colonial American print shops. The engraved plates apparently were imported from Germany. The contemporary binding, in brown sheepskin over wooden boards, features clasps.

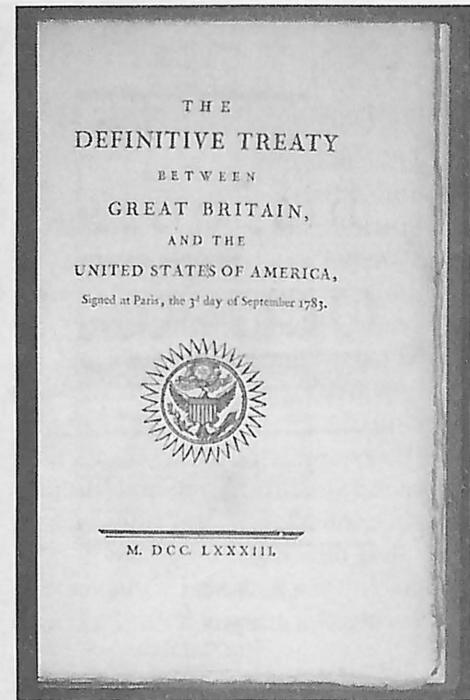
*Constitutions Des Trieze Etats-Unis de L'Amérique. A Philadelphie, Et se trouve à Paris, Chez Ph.-D Pierres [et] Pissot, père et fils [i.e. Printed at Paris by Pierres for Benjamin Franklin]. 1783. 4vo.*

*Definitive Treaty Between Great Britain and the United States of America, Signed at Paris, the 3rd Day of September 1783.* [Printed at Paris by Philip Denis Peirres for Benjamin Franklin]. 1783. 8vo.

During his time in France as a member of an American diplomatic delegation, Franklin, affectionately known there as La Famous, Le Brilliant, and Monsieur Papa, established a press at Passy and produced works that crown his life's achievements. This copy of the *Constitutions*, which belonged to George III and is handsomely bound in contemporary red morocco, with full gilt spine, gilt edges, and Royal arms of Great Britain stamped on front and back covers, is the first printing of the French translations of the state constitutions as a collection and one of 100 copies produced. The Arms of the United States on the title page is believed to be its first appearance in a printed book. Included in the volume are the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and three treaties.

Franklin's service as a statesman culminated with his appointment as one of three commissioners responsible for negotiating peace with Great Britain. The treaty, which secured Great Britain's recognition of United States independence, is considered the pinnacle of Franklin's grand life.

In addition to this material, the Lilly Library collection of nearly two dozen books printed by Franklin includes Alexander Arscott's *Some Considerations Relating to the Present State of the Christian Religion* (1732), which is part of the George A. Poole Jr. collection at the Lilly and the first American edition of a book owned by only two other research libraries, the New York Historical Society and the New York Public Library; *Charters of the Province of Pensilvania and City of Philadelphia* (1742) contains a list and summary of all the laws in force in the colony and is part of the George A. Poole Jr. collection; *Iroquois Indians. A Treaty Held at the Town of Lancaster in 1744* (1744) is a stitched folio and one of several treaties Franklin printed; and Lewis Evans' *Geographical, Historical, Political, Philosophical and Mechanical Essays* (1755), which was printed by Franklin and Hall and the first book in colonial America to be accompanied by a map, which was issued separately.



Courtesy, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

The acquisition of some additional books printed by Franklin would enhance the Lilly collection. Among the books the Lilly might consider adding are *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature and Necessity of Paper-Currency* (1729), which Franklin also wrote and which, influenced the government's decision to print money; *Delaware. Kent County. General Loan Office. This Indenture. Mortgage Bond* (1730) is the earliest printed bond of its type and printed on Royal half-sheet; *The General Magazine* (1741) lasted only six volumes, from January to June, and contains a woodcut ornament used in no other Franklin imprint; Samuel Richardson's *Pamela Vol. II* (1742) is the first American edition and the fifth edition of the popular British novel first published in London in 1740; *A Catalogue of Choice and Valuable Books to be Sold by B. Franklin, April 11, 1744* (1744) contains the first use in the colonies of Ben Franklin's Bourgeois type, which was his favorite type in that year; and the *Pennsylvania Gazette* issues 14 August–11 September 1746 (issues #922 to #926) represent the only use of Ben Franklin Bourgeois type in the newspaper.

Franklin, who died in 1790, left a legacy of unequalled accomplishment that endures today. Throughout his fulfilling life, however, Franklin always considered himself a printer, and many fine examples of his craft can be enjoyed by patrons of the Lilly Library.

## REFERENCE

Miller, C.W. (1974). *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia printing 1728-1766: A descriptive bibliography*. Philadelphia, PA: The American Philosophical Society.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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