

CINCINNATI FOURTEEN



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Benjamin Franklin *and the Society of the Cincinnati*

News of the formation of the Society of the Cincinnati reached Paris in the fall of 1783, but in the first few months, that news consisted mostly of speculation, rumor and misinformation. Many French officers and government officials, as well as members of the diplomatic corps, mistakenly assumed the Society had been created by congress, and that its insignia was a military decoration analogous to the French Order of St. Louis and its equivalent for Protestants, the Order of Military Merit. The first accurate information about the Society arrived with Pierre L'Enfant, who reached Paris in mid-December, bearing letters from George Washington to various French officers as well as a commission from the new Society to have the first insignia produced in Paris.

Benjamin Franklin, United States minister to France, had heard about the Society by the end of 1783, and had read criticisms of the new organization in American newspapers, including ones delivered to him by Capt. John Barry. L'Enfant wrote Franklin a brief note alluding to the Society on January 16, 1784. Then on January 26, Franklin received a copy of the Institution of the Society from John Paul Jones. Jones also gave Franklin a copy of Aedanus Burke's highly critical *Considerations on Society or Order of Cincinnati*, originally published in Charleston, South Carolina, and quickly reprinted elsewhere.

Burke charged that the Society was "a deep laid contrivance to beget, and perpetuate family grandeur in an aristocratic Nobility, to terminate at last in monarchical tyranny." Franklin does not seem to have shared Burke's belief that the Society was a sinister conspiracy to undermine the American Revolution and impose a hereditary nobility on the new nation. In any case, Franklin's position as the senior American diplomat in Europe required him to be more circumspect in expressing his views.

Reading the Institution and Burke's blast against the Cincinnati clearly stimulated Franklin's thinking, and led him to draft a critique of the Society disguised as a letter to his only daughter Sarah Bache. Franklin never wrote to his daughter about politics or public life and never mailed this overtly political essay to her. Nor did he ever send it to the United States or encourage its publication there in any form.

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Franklin intended to share his opinions with the Paris salons and French intellectuals. In early March he sent it to the abbe Morellet with the request that he translate the letter into French. Morellet did so, but cautioned Franklin not to make it public. Franklin readily agreed, but in July 1784 he shared it with the comte de Mirabeau, who included sections of the letter without attribution in his *Considerations sur l'ordre de Cincinnatus* (London, 1784).

Franklin's opinions on the Cincinnati bore little resemblance to the shrill, paranoid denunciations of Aedanus Burke and his imitators. Franklin did not subscribe to the view that the founders of the Society were attempting to subvert American republicanism and erect an aristocracy on its ruins. He properly regarded the Society as benign, but saw in the Society's hereditary principle an opportunity to attack the pretensions of Europe's hereditary aristocracy.

By 1784 Franklin was a political radical, intellectually engaged with overturning the established order of European society. He regarded the American Revolution in a broader context than most Americans, and saw it as a first step toward the reorganization of Western society on the basis of liberty and equality. He looked forward to a society in which all social distinctions would be based on accomplishment and merit rather than convention. Overturning American conventions based on hereditary privilege had been relatively easy, because social distinctions in British America had been fewer than in Europe and the social hierarchy far flatter, with few extremes of poverty—slavery the glaring exception—and none of the ostentatious wealth and conspicuous consumption that characterized European aristocrats.

Franklin had no apprehensions about the Cincinnati imposing a hereditary aristocracy or monarchy on the ruins of American republicanism, but he saw in the hereditary aspect of the Cincinnati an opportunity to ridicule the idea of hereditary status, the main prop of aristocratic privilege in Europe—and to do so in an entirely subversive way, by criticizing his own countrymen instead of the hereditary aristocrats of Europe who were his real targets. That Franklin never sought to have his satirical attack on the Cincinnati published in America makes his real targets abundantly clear. Unlike Aedanus Burke and his followers, Franklin had no interest in seeing the Cincinnati outlawed.

Franklin's satire was inspired by his recent reading in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences et les arts des Chinois* (15 volumes, Paris, 1776–1791) by Joseph Marie Amiot, a French Jesuit priest who resided at the imperial court in Beijing from 1750 until his death in 1793. Little known today, Amiot's *Mémoires* provided the West with its first detailed account of the life and thought of imperial China. "This world is the reverse of our own," Amiot advised Lord Macartney, a British ambassador. The *Mémoires* are filled with descriptions of social inversion, including the practice of honoring the parents, rather than the progeny, of distinguished men.

Warming to his topic, Franklin skewered, with an equal measure of mathematical precision and evident delight, the idea of honor descending through several generations of a family. He demonstrates that after several generations, the blood of the original members is much diluted, and with it any claim a future member might have to the honor of his ancestor. Franklin's target in this passage is the idea of hereditary nobility. The Society of the Cincinnati is merely a

When Franklin sat for this portrait by David Martin in 1767, he was attired like a scholarly but otherwise conventional eighteenth-century gentleman. By the 1784 he had abandoned such conventions, signaling his rejection of the traditions of aristocracy, including the idea of hereditary honor.

Pennsylvania Academy Fine Arts.
Gift of Maria McKean Allen and
Phebe Warren Downes through
the bequest of their mother
Elizabeth Wharton McKean.



convenient foil for an attack on the pretensions of European aristocrats to superior virtue due to descent from some illustrious ancestor.

What Franklin missed, of course, was that the founders of the Society had enjoined their posterity to *merit* the honor by carrying out the mission articulated in the Institution: “to perpetuate . . . the memory of that vast event.” Membership alone neither confirms nor conveys honor to future generations. It simply provides

descendants of the officers of the Revolution with the *opportunity* to honor their ancestors by perpetuating the memory of their sacrifices and celebrating their achievements. Even a thinker as progressive as Franklin could not have foreseen the unique role the Society of the Cincinnati would play in future generations.

The Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati made Franklin an honorary member in 1789, a fitting honor for the civilian who had done more than

any other to secure the independence of the United States. By then Franklin was in declining health. He died in Philadelphia at the home of his daughter on April 17, 1790. His funeral procession was the largest ever seen in Philadelphia. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* for April 28, 1790, estimated that at least 20,000 people witnessed the spectacle. Franklin's fellow printers had the honor of marching first behind the casket, followed by the members of the American Philosophical Society and the physicians of Philadelphia. The Society of the Cincinnati followed close behind.

The text of Franklin's letter below is from the new and definitive edition of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, volume 41 (September 16, 1783–February 29, 1784), pages 503–511, edited by Ellen R. Cohn, *et al.*, and published by the Yale University Press in 2014. This text, which is based on Benjamin Franklin's own retained copy, differs slightly from the frequently published text, which is based on the printed version edited by Franklin's son William Temple Franklin. The differences are chiefly in punctuation, spelling and paragraph breaks, but William Temple Franklin—a Loyalist during the Revolutionary War, deleted his father's aspersion on Royalists and made a few other minor changes. This is the text of the letter as Benjamin Franklin wrote it.

Passy, January 26, 1784
My Dear Child,

Your care in sending me the news-papers is very agreeable to me. I received by Captn. Barney those relating to the *Cincinnati*. My opinion of the institution cannot be of much importance. I only wonder that, when the united wisdom of our nation had, in the Articles of Confederation, manifested their dislike of establishing ranks of nobility, by authority either of the Congress or of

any particular State, a number of private persons should think proper to distinguish themselves and their posterity, from their fellow citizens, and form an order of hereditary Knights, in direct opposition to the solemnly declared sense of their country. I imagine it must be likewise contrary to the good sense of most of those drawn into it, by the persuasion of its projectors, who have been too much struck with the ribbands and crosses they have seen hanging, to the buttonholes of foreign officers. And I suppose those who disapprove of it, have not hitherto given it much opposition, from a principle somewhat like that of your good mother, relating to punctilious persons who are always exacting little observances of respect, that, "*if People can be pleased with small matters, it is a pity but they should have them.*" In this view, perhaps I should not myself, if my advice had been asked, have objected to their wearing their ribband and badge themselves according to their fancy, though I certainly should to the entailing it as an honour on their posterity. For honour, worthily obtained, as that for example of our officers, is in its nature a personal thing, and incommunicable to any but those who had some share in obtaining it. Thus among the Chinese, the most antient, and from long experience the wisest of nations, honour does not *descend*, but *ascends*. If a man from his learning, his wisdom, or his valour, is promoted by the emperor to the rank of Mandarin, his parents are immediately entitled to all the same ceremonies of respect from the people, that are established as due to the Mandarin himself; on the supposition that it must have been owing to the education, instruction and good example afforded him by his parents, that he was rendered capable of serving the public. This *ascending* honour is therefore useful to the state, as it encourages parents to give their children a good and virtuous education. But the *descending honour*, to a posterity who could have no share in obtaining it, is not only groundless and absurd, but often hurtful to that posterity, since it is apt to

“I wish . . . the Cincinnati . . . would direct the badges of their order to be worn by their fathers and mothers, instead of handing them down to their children.”

make them proud, disdaining to be employed in useful arts, and thence falling into poverty, and all the meannesses, servility and wretchedness attending it; which is the present case with much of what is called the *Noblesse* in Europe. Or if, to keep up the dignity of the family, estates are entailed entire on the eldest male heir, another pest to industry and improvement of the country is introduced, which will be followed by all the odious mixture of pride, and beggary, and idleness, that have half depopulated and decultivated Spain; occasioning continual extinction of families by the discouragements of marriage, and neglect in the improvement of estates. I wish, therefore that the Cincinnati if they must go on with their project, would direct the badges of their order to be worn by their fathers and mothers, instead of handing them down to their children. It would be a good precedent and might have good effects. It would also be a kind of obedience to the fourth commandment, in which God enjoins us to *honour* our father and mother, but has nowhere directed us to honour our children. And certainly no mode of honouring those immediate authors of our being can be more effectual, than that of doing praise worthy actions, which reflect honor on those who gave us our education; or more becoming than that of manifesting by some public expression or token, that it is to their instruction and example we ascribe the merit of those actions.

But the absurdity of descending honours is not a mere matter of philosophical opinion, it is capable of mathematical demonstration. A man's son, for instance, is but half of his family, the other half belonging to the family of his wife. His son too, marrying into another family, his share in the Grand son is but a fourth; in the great grandson by the same process it is but an eighth. In the next generation a sixteenth; the next a thirty-second; the next a sixty-fourth; the next an hundred and twenty-eighth; the next a two hundred and fifty-

sixth; and the next a five hundred and twelfth. Thus in nine generations which will not require more than 300 years, (no very great antiquity for a family), our present Chevalier of the Order of Cincinnatus's share in the then existing knight, will be but a 512th part; which, allowing the present certain fidelity of American wives to be insured down through all those nine generations, is so small a consideration, that methinks no reasonable man would hazard, for the sake of it, the disagreeable consequences of the jealousy, envy, and ill will of his countrymen.

Let us go back with our calculation from this young noble, the 512th part of the present Knight, through his nine generations till we return to the year of the institution. He must have had a father and mother, they are two; each of them had a father and mother, they are four. Those of the next preceding generation will be eight; the next sixteen, the next thirty two; the next sixty four; the next one hundred and twenty eight; the next two hundred and fifty six; and the ninth in this retrocession five hundred and twelve, who must be now existing and all contribute their proportion of this future Chevalier de Cincinnatus. These, with the rest, make together as follows.

2
4
8
16
32
64
128
256
<u>512</u>
<u>1022</u>

One thousand and twenty two men and women contributors to the formation of one knight. And, if we are to have a thousand of these future knights there must be now and hereafter existing

“The bald eagle . . . is by no means a proper emblem for the brave and honest Cincinnati of America.”

one million and twenty two thousand fathers and mothers who are to contribute to their production, unless a part of the number are employed in making more knights than one. Let us strike off then the 22000 on the supposition of this double employ, and then consider whether, after a reasonable estimation of the number of rogues and fools, and Royalists and scoundrels, and prostitutes, that are mixed with and help to make up necessarily their million of predecessors, posterity will have much reason to boast of the noble blood of the then existing set of Chevaliers of Cincinnatus. The future genealogists too of these Chevaliers in proving the lineal descent of their honor through so many generations, (even supposing honor capable in its nature of descending,) will only prove the small share of this honor which can be justly claimed by any one of them, since the above simple process in arithmetic makes it quite plain and clear, that, in proportion as the antiquity of the family shall augment, the

right to the honor of the ancestor will diminish; and a few generations more would reduce it to something so small as to be very near an absolute nullity. I hope therefore that the order will drop this part of their project, and content themselves, as the Knights of the Garter, Bath, Thistle, St. Louis, and other orders of Europe do, with a life enjoyment of their little badge and ribband, and let the distinction die with those who have merited it. This I imagine will give no offence. For my own part, I shall think it a convenience when I go into a company where there may be faces unknown to me, if I discover, by this badge, the persons who merit some particular expression of my respect; and it will save modest virtue the trouble of calling for our regard, by awkward roundabout intimations of having been heretofore employed as officers in the continental service.

The gentleman who made the voyage to France to provide the ribbands and medals has executed his



Le Dindon (The Turkey) and *Aigle* (Eagle), engraved by François-Nicolas Martinet (the former with the assistance of his brother Alexandre) for his *Ornithologie: Histoire des Oiseaux Peints dans Tous Leurs Aspects Apparents et Sensibles* (Paris: for the engraver, 1787-1796). Martinet's ornithological engravings were among the finest depictions of birds published before Audubon. His work was well known to Franklin, and indeed Martinet had provided a line engraving of Franklin based on the Chamberlin portrait for a 1773 edition of Franklin's works.

commission. To me they seem tolerably done; but all such things are criticised. Some find fault with the Latin, as wanting classical elegance and correctness; and since our nine universities were not able to furnish better Latin, it was pity, they say, that the mottos had not been in English. Others object to the Title, as not properly assumable by any but General Washington, and a few others who served without pay. Others object to the bald eagle as looking too much like a *Dindon* or turkey. For my own part I wish the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country. He is a bird of bad moral character. He does not get his living honestly. You may have seen him perched on some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing hawk; and, when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to his nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the bald eagle pursues him, and takes it from him. With all this injustice he is never in good case; but, like those among men who live by sharpening and robbing, he is generally poor and often very lousy. Besides, he is a rank coward: the little *king bird* not bigger than a sparrow, attacks him boldly and drives him out of the district. He is therefore by no means a proper emblem for the brave and honest Cincinnati of America, who have driven all the *king birds* from our country, though exactly fit for that order of knights, which the French call *Chevaliers d'Industrie*. I am on this account not displeased that the figure is not known as a bald eagle, but looks more like a turkey. For in truth, the turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America. Eagles have been found in all countries, but the turkey was peculiar to ours, the first of the species seen in Europe being brought to France by the Jesuits from Canada, and served up at the wedding table of Charles the ninth. He is besides, (though a little vain and silly 'tis true, but not the worse emblem for that) a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the

British guards who should presume to invade his farmyard with a red coat on.

I shall not enter into the criticisms made upon their Latin. The gallant officers of America may not have the merit of being great scholars, but they undoubtedly merit much as brave soldiers from their country, which should therefore not leave them merely to *fame* for their *virtutis premium*, which is one of their Latin mottos. Their *esto perpetua*, another, is an excellent wish, if they meant it for their country; bad, if intended for their order. The states should not only restore to them the *omnia* of their first motto, which many of them have left and lost, but pay them justly and reward them generously. They should not be suffered to remain with all their new created chivalry, *entirely* in the situation of the gentleman in the story, which their *omnia reliquit* reminds me of. You know every thing makes me recollect some story. He had built a very fine house and thereby much impaired his fortune. He had a pride however in showing it to his acquaintance. One of them after viewing it all, remarked a motto over the door OIA VANITAS. What says he is the meaning of this OIA? 'tis a word I don't understand. I will tell you said the gentleman: I had a mind to have the motto cut on a piece of smooth marble, but there was not room for it between the ornaments, to be put in characters large enough to be read. I therefore made use of a contraction antiently very common in Latin manuscripts, whereby the *m's* and *n's* in words are omitted, and the omission noted by a little dash above, which you may see there, so that the word is OMNIA, OMINIA VANITAS. O said his friend, I now comprehend the meaning of your motto, it relates to your edifice; and signifies, that, if you have abridged your *omnia* you have nevertheless, left your VANITAS legible at full length.

I am as ever your affectionate father
B F

Admitting Members Under the Rule of 1854



The Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania

When Dr. Scott R. Kerns' mother died in November 2010, he began reassessing his life and realized how little he knew about his family's history and heritage. And now, there was no one left to ask. Besides his mother and brother, he had only known his maternal grandmother. His parents had separated when he was eight years old and he had no further contact with his father.

All he knew about his father's family was that they originally had lived in Pennsylvania. "I decided that I need to know where I came from," said Kerns, a radiologist in Camden, South Carolina.

That inquiry sparked a passion for research and launched a persistent push through online genealogical resources to uncover the many roots of his family's tree. Kerns estimates he has devoted at least one hour a day to his historical quest over the last four years, totaling more than 1,400 hours

New members John Stevens, Dean Kinsey, Seth Duncan, Lawrence Slocum and Phil Miller show off their diplomas, joined by President Tom Etter, immediate past president Chuck Coltman, and Vice President Jim Pringle.



His dogged pursuit yielded family ties to two different officers who served in the Pennsylvania Continental Line: Capt. William Cox of the Tenth Regiment and Capt. Samuel Moore of the Third Regiment.

Those two ancestors were enough for both Scott Kerns and his brother, Brian L. Kerns of Alexandria, Virginia, to join the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati in October 2013 as the first members inducted under the Rule of 1854. In October 2014, three more members joined under the Rule of 1854: Channing Moore Hall III of Williamsburg, Virginia; Capt. Lawrence L.G. Slocum of Newport, Rhode Island; and John L. Stevens of Orlando, Florida.

Pennsylvania adopted the Rule of 1854 in 2013 after finally revising the state society's 1792 corporate charter. The original hand-written incorporation document had included the entire text of the Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati, which specified that only descendants of original members were eligible for membership. Strict interpretation of that language excluded descendants of approximately one-third of the 180 Pennsylvania officers who had served but had not joined the Society. The Rule of 1854, previously adopted by all the other state societies, opened the rolls to representatives of all eligible Continental officers, not just to representatives of original members.

of research time, most of it online. Starting with Ancestry.com, Kerns now has traced two-thirds of his 128 ancestral lines, some back to the 1600s, including finding his link to James Claypool, who helped William Penn establish the Pennsylvania colony.

"It was just a matter of chipping away," Kerns said. "It's amazing how many records are kept and stored online. I couldn't have done this ten years ago."

Channing Hall got a nudge to join the Society from Ferdinand H. "Tripp" Onnen of the Maryland Society, a fellow alumnus of Washington and Lee University who knew of Hall's connection to Dr. George Glentworth, a surgeon in the Pennsylvania Hospital Department who had tended to the wounded marquis de Lafayette during the Battle of Brandywine. Hall had made an inquiry in 2007 to the Pennsylvania Society about joining, but was told that he was ineligible because Dr. Glentworth had not joined the society



Scott, Suzie, Angela and Brian Kerns celebrated Scott and Brian's admission—the first Pennsylvania Society admissions under the Rule of 1854.

after the war. Hall had run into the Rule of 1854 issue.

Hall was offered a spot in the Maryland Society, but never tackled the required research. With the fortune of good timing, Hall's application arrived after Pennsylvania had adopted the Rule of 1854.

John L. Stevens had never heard of the Society of the Cincinnati until he attended a 2013 family reunion at the Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, where he heard a legend that he might be related to Alexander Hamilton.

"I became very intrigued with the Society after hearing more about it," Stevens said. "I began to do more research into the criteria for acceptance. I knew I needed an eligible descendant and I started to dig deep into my own genealogy." But he hit many dead-ends in his online research, finding ancestors who either were already represented or who had not served a full three years or until the end of the war.

"I began to document my family tree in a more narrow pattern," Stevens explained. "I was hoping to find something that I missed and I knew I was getting closer." After more than one hundred hours of online research, Stevens found Col. John

Cox of the Quartermaster Corp, the father of his great-great-great-grandmother. "I am very proud to say that John Cox is an American patriot who fits perfectly within the Society" having served under Nathanael Greene and running an iron works that supplied the Continental Army with cannon, shot and other essential supplies. Stevens also credits assistance from Ann Durst, Clarke Griffin, and Col. Clifford B. Lewis, who heads the membership committee of the Pennsylvania Society.

Cliff has compiled a list of 1854 eligible officers, which came in handy when John J. Slocum, Jr., asked if there was a way his younger son, Lawrence, could join the Society. The elder Slocum is a member of the Rhode Island Society and his eldest son, John J. Slocum III, is his successor, both representing Capt. Henry Bicker, Jr. Capt. Bicker's father, also Henry Bicker, was a colonel in the Pennsylvania Line, and was not represented. Lawrence Slocum is now a member under the Rule of 1854. John Slocum, the father, noted the irony of the situation. "Curiously," he said, "a father represents a son, and a son represents a father because of Pennsylvania's decision to recognize the Rule of 1854."

Randolph Philip Smith