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tub which was owned by your great-great-grandmother was long since converted into spoons and cream pots for her descendants.

*Sallie Wood*  
*Sallie Sayward Barrell Keating Wood*

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**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, PRINTER-PLENIPOTentiary**

*By Richard Cary*

In these days of shaken relations between the United States and France—almost unbelievable in the light of our long, uninterrupted history of political and cultural affinity—it gladdens the heart to come across evidences of a once adamantine reciprocity of faith. Such an iota is the promissory note for 800,000 livres tendered to the *Trésor de Sa Majesté* by Benjamin Franklin in the name of a threadbare Congress during the grim years of the American Revolutionary War. What makes this document doubly extraordinary is that Franklin not only filled in some thirty words in his own hand and signed it twice but also printed the official form in his ministerial home at Passy, France.

Several entrancing anecdotes about young Ben as printer's devil, artfully perpetuated in his memoirs, are as strongly entrenched in the national consciousness as Washington's cherry-tree and dollar-over-the-Potomac legends. The principles acquired by Franklin in his odyssey through a succession of printshops and their salutary effect upon his development as philosopher and man of the world remain green in the memory of many Americans, whether derived from the inevitable prim-

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1 Now in Colby College Library through the kindness of Mr. Perc S. Brown of Orinda, California.
Pertinacious attempts by Ben’s father to turn him into a preacher, a soap-boiler, chandler, and cutler proved ineffectual for want of interest. The boy’s fondness for reading (and the fact that his older half-brother owned a printery) next suggested an apprenticeship in that trade, which he accepted with some reluctance. Here he learned the fundamentals of typesetting and press operation, while pseudonymously contributing short pieces to his brother’s beleaguered newspaper. In October of 1723, after five years of acrimonious discord, Ben fled to Philadelphia and took his famous walk up Market Street, munching a huge baker’s roll. He obtained a job with Samuel Keimer, whose rundown establishment stirred thoughts of improvement and expansion in Ben’s brain, and waked his first ambition to become a proprietor. Encouraged by Sir William Keith, English governor of Pennsylvania, to purchase presses in London, Ben set sail with every confidence of the governor’s support. He was not long in discovering that a politician’s promise is gaudier than his performance. Stranded without funds in a foreign city, Ben cast about for work and found it in the small but select printing house of Samuel Palmer in Bartholomew Close.

Under this roof Franklin came into full brush with printing as an art rather than a mere business. Palmer was an artisan and scholar in his chosen field. He took pride in the beauty of his productions, designed and cast his own type, and was writing a comprehensive history of printing. While under his aegis Franklin set type for a distinguished edition of Wollaston’s The Religion of Nature. He also grasped the opportunity to observe in Thomas James’s nearby type foundry the processes of creating new letters and devices, of making molds, of casting, trimming and polishing original types. Desire for ampler wages caused Franklin to shift to the larger shop of John Watts in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. But this too redounded
to his esthetic advantage, for Watts was a printer of uncommon sensitivity and a prime mover in the formation of the great Caslon & Company.

The upshot of Franklin’s English experiences became quickly apparent on his return to Philadelphia. Eager to capitalize on Ben’s accrued skills, Keimer hired him back with the title of foreman but, more pointedly, as instructor to the augmented staff of workmen. Ben set the cluttered shop to rights, devised molds and cast types—thereby becoming the first type founder in America. When Keimer contracted to print paper money for the Province of New Jersey, Franklin wrote: “I contrived a copperplate press for it, the first that had been seen in the country; I cut several ornaments and checks for the bills.” Shortly afterward he parted company with Keimer and entered a partnership with Hugh Meredith, which was notable for quality in workmanship and punctuality of delivery. By 1730 Meredith had withdrawn. Over the door of the new firm hung at long last the coveted shingle, “B. Franklin, Printer.”

Free now to conduct his affairs totally on his own judgment, Franklin prospered steadily. Much of the issue from his presses served to gratify the popular clamor for inexpensive almanacs, hymnals, religious tracts, and basic school texts. There were numerous pamphlets on medical and polemical themes, newspapers such as the Pennsylvania Gazette and the Philadelphische Zeitung, and periodicals such as the General Magazine and Poor Richard’s Almanack. Aside from their primary function, these gained repute for their pleasing format and comparative lack of typographical errors. Moreover, Franklin touched a pinnacle of excellence in his arrangements of title pages for reprints of novels, classical poetry (e.g., Cato’s Moral Distichs, 1735), and civic documentaries (A Collection of All the Laws of the Province of Pennsylvania, 1742).2 From the standpoint of taste as well as utility he consistently eclipsed his competitors. Impeccably exemplifying his own precept, “Keep thy shop, and thy shop will keep thee,” Ben Franklin retired from active participation in the business of printing in 1748, comfortably fixed.

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2 Reproduced in John Clyde Oswald, Benjamin Franklin, Printer (Garden City, N. Y., 1917), 74, 82.
This is not to say that he ceased all connection with the trade. He maintained several commercial partnerships through the years and—more as a hobby than a vocation—followed developments in "the art that preserves the arts" to his final days. Indeed, he sought to extend his influence beyond the grave by endowing one of his grandsoms with a fully equipped establishment. Fascinated by both the mechanical and graphic possibilities of printing, Franklin early attained the skills of a master craftsman, adopted improvements to the press, experimented with inks, papermaking, engraving and stereotyping. Dissatisfied with the pedestrian typefaces available on this side of the Atlantic, he imported supplies from the best English and continental type foundries. For decades he corresponded with the peerless letter-founders, William Caslon and John Baskerville, and evolved some characteristic types of his own. To insure advances in the future, he sent his grandson Benjamin Franklin Bache to study with François Didot, most creative French printer of his era.

Franklin's most significant period of efflorescence in respect to the printing arts came during his long sojourn in France as an American official from 1776 to 1785. In September of 1776 he was named by Congress as one of a commission of three to present to the King of France a "Plan of Treaties" which solicited his political and financial backing. Upon his appointment Franklin is reported to have leaned toward Benjamin Rush and said: "I am old and good for nothing; but as the merchants say of their remnants, I am but a fag-end, you may have me for what you please." He was actually about to undergo, in his seventies, an electric recrudescence of spirit and talents.

After the outbreak of the Revolution, what America needed most was money to conduct its military operations and recognition of independence by a major power in order to boost its international status. General Washington was already bewailing the insufficiency of gunpowder and, of all the European states approached for loans, only Spain responded, at France's impulsion. Although French sympathy tended toward any op-
ponent of her natural foe, England, the government at Paris was piqued over the illegal use of its ports by American privateers in open violation of its technical neutrality. Additionally, French diplomats—schooled to the last degree of intrigue—were appalled by the careless treatment of confidential documents, purportedly scattered on American embassy tables at the mercy of ubiquitous spies. These were among the problems that Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee hopefully proposed to overcome on their current mission.

On October 27, 1776, Franklin sailed from Philadelphia with two of his grandsons: William Temple Franklin, who was disdainful of printer's ink; and Benjamin Franklin Bache, who was to absorb and carry on his elder's tradition. They survived the vicissitudes of high seas and hostile cruisers, landing in France around December 1, and arriving at the capital some twenty days later. Here Franklin was lionized by the elite of nobility, fashion, statesmanship, and culture as the representative genius of the New World, an insuperable combination of native wit and universal wisdom. In due course he proceeded to Passy, a village situated between Paris and Versailles, and set up residence in the Hôtel de Valentinois, where he was to live during his entire tenure of eight and a half years.

The Hôtel, a compound of connected buildings, pergolas, and pavilions, stood on high ground overlooking the Seine and the Île des Cygnes. Franklin occupied the smaller of the two main houses, surrounded by gardens, terraced rows of lime trees, and a statuary group portraying the rape of Proserpine. (How many hours of amusement this last must have afforded bawdy Poor Richard can only be conjectured.) Amid these tranquil surroundings the sprightly septuagenarian invoked and sustained an unbroken round of diplomatic, social, and avocational activities.

With New York City under British occupation and Washington's troops on the run, the cause of American emancipation seemed glum. Franklin wrote a brochure on the size of the English national debt and another on the comparative credit ratings of Great Britain and America in 1777. They were translated into four languages and disseminated to the fiscal

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8 Described in full detail by Luther S. Livingston in Franklin and His Press at Passy (New York, 1914), 4-6.
centers of Europe, but they inspired no reliance in the upstart nation and eventuated in no loans. When it appeared that even the patronage of France might falter, news arrived of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in December 1777. By next February the French sovereign had recognized the United States of America and had agreed to a defensive alliance and a treaty of commerce. Thereupon Franklin was appointed minister plenipotentiary to the French court, with the procurement of financial aid his most vital task. In this he succeeded signally despite the fact that—as he wrote John Jay—"the Court here is not without its embarrassments on account of money." By 1782 Franklin could report to Robert Livingston that over and above the series of loans contracted at favorable rates of interest, the United States had been the recipient of French gifts and subsidies to the extent of twelve million livres.

III

To temper the grueling obligations of affairs of state, Franklin indulged his partiality for chess, for music, and for the companionship of such titillating ladies as Madame Helvetius and Madame Brillon. (John Adams said spitefully of him around this time, "He loves his ease, hates to offend.") He consorted with the leaders of literature, philosophy, science, and the arts, officiating at the Masonic funeral service of Voltaire in 1778. So strong grew his esteem for M. le Veillard, Mayor of Passy, that he bestowed on him the manuscript of the Autobiography, which was first published as Mémoires in Paris, 1791. In still another vein, to provide pleasure for himself, delectation for his friends, and service to his government, Franklin called once more upon his undiminished proficiency as a printer. That he never lost his pride in the trade of his youth is attested by a visit he made to Didot's plant. Stepping up to a press, the renowned diplomat ran off several sheets with aplomb and assured the dumbstruck printers, "It is my former business."

Franklin's early biographers leave the impression that his private press at Passy was a trifling matter that ground out a handful of bagatelles and "occasionally a tract or handbill." The more methodical researches of Luther S. Livingston (see footnote 3) have brought its truly considerable output into
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sharper focus. It becomes clear from a thorough examination of Franklin's letters and records that he began to buy printing materials soon after he settled in the Hôtel de Valentinois. Type was at first ordered from the house of Fournier; later, in larger quantities, from Caslon & Company. Entries in Franklin's cashbook for wages to a fondeur and three helpers verify that additional type was cast on the premises. Receipts have been found for two presses purchased from M. Fagnion. A letter of recommendation reveals that Maurice Meyer, "a good compositor," had been employed in the house.

Livingston lists more than a dozen varieties of imprints produced at Passy. Ranging from personal dinner invitations to reprints of books for connoisseurs, they fall into three main categories. The first comprises the slender, elegant bagatelles which Franklin concocted for his urbane friends—the often anthologized "The Ephemera" (1778), "The Morals of Chess" (1779), "The Whistle" (1779), "The Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout" (1780), "The Handsome and the Deformed Leg" (1780), and others—some of which he may have written initially in French. The second group includes political pamphlets and broadsides, preeminently the spurious "Supplement to the Boston Independent Chronicle," a propagandistic hoax involving eight packages of assorted scalps removed from inhabitants of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia by the Seneca Indians and labeled for transmission to England as gifts for the king. The third division of presswork is referable to Franklin's positions of commissioner and minister. To subdue French criticism of laxity in American security measures, most legal documents, relevant ordinances, presidential or congressional proclamations, and instructions to officials emanating from his office were turned out on Franklin's press; also, to circumvent counterfeiters, such fill-in forms as passports, bonds, bank orders, and promissory notes. It is with one of the last that we are especially concerned here.

Reproduced on page 122 is the Colby copy of Number 15 in the series of promissory notes arranged by Benjamin Franklin with the government of France during his stay at Passy. Dated July 18, 1781, it pledges the thirteen United States jointly and severally to repay His Majesty's royal treasury in French coin the sum of 800,000 livres, plus interest at 5%, by January
N° 15 — Pour 80 000 livres.


La présente ne devrait servir que d’une seule et même pièce avec l’ampliation que nous en avons délivrée aujourd’hui.

Franklin
1, 1788. Printed in a Cicero italic closely resembling the one created for Franklin by Fournier, this form has a decorative headband in black and an inch-and-a-half strip of red, yellow, and green marbling as its right margin. The sheet (9¾ x 7½ inches) is actually the borrower's retained left half of the aggregate form. It has been separated from its duplicate on the right by cutting through the marbled center strip, leaving an irregular edge which can be matched when the two halves are later rejoined. Franklin cautiously recertified this procedure in three lines of handscript immediately below the consummated form, and signed with a triumphant flourish.

It is to be appreciated that our Revolution cost France some 772 million livres and that she charged the United States 5% interest—in a few cases only 4%—while paying 7% herself. Such international altruism, with so little to gain in this instance except American independence and English discomfiture, is historically remarkable. The major portion of this gigantic sum, dispensed as outright gifts and subsidies, was never repaid. Interest on the loans was forgiven until 1783, and no effort was made toward payment of principal until 1789. France's own Revolution in 1790 precipitated the need for settlement, but it was not until 1815 that the debt was wholly discharged.

IV

In May 1785, Franklin was notified by Congress that his term as minister to France was effectively concluded. The fonts so diligently assembled in the Hôtel de Valentinois during his almost nine-year regime were packed in cases and shipped "down the Seine some weeks before I left Passy," which was on July 12. They arrived in Philadelphia in February and were held in bond by Customs. Fifteen boxes were

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4 This process of "indenture" is serviceably illustrated by Louis C. Karpinski and Charles Bache in "How France Aided American Liberty," Dearborn Independent, XXV (July 4, 1925), 4, where both halves of promissory note Number 10 are presented side by side. Except for the date (February 15, 1781) and the amount (750,000 livres), Franklin's retained left half of this note is identical with Colby's Number 15. The right half of Number 10 deposited with the French government varies in that Franklin signed elaborately just below the printed text, then appended the three standard handwritten lines and a simpler signature.
in time sold to Francis Child of New York; of the remainder, no destination has been ascertained.

Indubitably among the choicest of their day in this country, some of these types were assertedly handcast by Franklin himself. It is none too radical, therefore, to assume that Franklin may have fed the sheets of these promissory notes into the press himself. He manifested unfading love for the profession of printing throughout his kaleidoscopic career and left behind two unequivocal affidavits for posterity. In his twenty-second year he indited this prospective epitaph:

THE BODY
OF
BENJAMIN 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 LOST,
FOR IT WILL (AS HE BELIEVED) APPEAR ONCE MORE,
IN A NEW AND MORE ELEGANT EDITION
REVISED AND CORRECTED
BY
THE AUTHOR

And, preparing his will six decades later, this editor-author-civic organizer-diplomat-statesman-scientist and philosopher par excellence introduced himself as “I, Benjamin Franklin, of Philadelphia, Printer . . .”