The Past, Present, and Future of the American Philosophical Society

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“What is past is prologue.”
The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 1.
When did it begin?
A PROPOSAL for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America.

The English are piqued of a long Tract of Continent, from Maine to Georgia, extending North and South their different Climates, having different Soils, producing different Plants, Mines and Minerals, and capable of different Improvements, Manufactures, &c.

The first Drudgery of Sending new Colonies, which confirms the Attention of People to more Necessaries, is now pretty well over; and there are many in every Province in Circumstances that set them at Ease, and afford Labour to cultivate the four Arts, and improve the common Stocks of Knowledge. To both of these who are Men of Speculation, many Hints must from time to time arise, many Observations occur, which if well-examined, purified 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 be so conversant, as to be acquainted with each other, so that many useful Particulars remain uncommunicated, sit with the Discoverers, and are lost to Mankind; it is, to remedy this Inconvenience for the future, proposed,

That One Society be formed of Virtuous 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, and foremost by Sea, and with all the Islands by Sea, and having the Advantage of a good growing Library, be the Centre of the Society.

That at Philadelphia there be always at least seven Members, one a Physician, a Botanist, a Mathematician, aChemist, a Mechanician, a Geographer, and a general Natural Philosopher, besides a President, Treasurer and Secretary.

That these Members meet once a Month, or oftener, at their own Exposures, to communicate to each other their Observations, Experiments, &c. in no restraint, lest such Letters, Communications, &c. should be lost to other Members, to direct the Dispersing of Copies of such Communications as are valuable, to other distant Members, in order to procure their Sentiments thenceforward.

That the Subjects of the Correspondence be, All new discovered Plants; Herbs, Trees, Roots, &c.; their Virtues, Uses, &c.; Methods of Improving them, and cultivating such as may be useful, but particular to these Plantations; more general, Improvements of vegetable Drugs, as Cynara, Wines, &c.; New Methods of Curing or Processing Drugs. All new-discovered Plants in different Countries, as Mints, Muskrats, Quercus, &c. New and useful Improvements in any Branch of Mathematicks; New Discoveries in Chemistry, such as Improvements in Distillation, Stewing, Affining of Oreg, &c. New Mechanical Inventions for saving Labour; as Mills, Carriages, &c. and for Raising and Conveying of Water, Drying of Meadows, &c. All new
What a web we weave when first we practice to retrieve ... 

• That is, the histories of Philadelphia’s historic institutions – and their buildings – are richly intertwined.

• And, to some degree, with the several contributions of Benjamin Franklin.
Historic Examples I

• The APS first met “in various buildings, the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania), the Christ Church Schoolhouse, Carpenters’ Hall, and, on occasion, the homes of officers (Carter 1993). Its original and surviving permanent home is Philosophical Hall, on the east side of Fifth Street just south of Chestnut Street, built with a loan from Franklin in 1789.

• The Library Company of Philadelphia, founded in 1731, found a home in the State House (later Independence Hall) around 1739, in Carpenters’ Hall in 1773, and in its own Fifth Street building, opposite Philosophical Hall in 1790. The present APS Library Hall (1959) is in part a replica and on the same site as the original Library Company of Philadelphia.
Historic Examples II

• Philosophical Hall’s permanent or occasional tenants in 1841 were the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, the Athenian Institute, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (“An Account of the APS by John Vaughan,” Friends of the Library, 1972)

• The Athenaeum of Philadelphia was founded in 1814, originally as a private library for periodicals, maps, and reference books that would have extensive open hours, which were lacking at the LCP and APS. But it was at Philosophical Hall until 1847, when John Notman’s magnificent building was completed.
Library Hall, Past and Present

1882

1959
Enough of buildings (for now)

• Early APS members included just about all of the “founding fathers,” several of whom were elected both in 1781 and 1790.

• Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Rittenhouse, Rush, Peale, etc., etc.

• Franklin was surely an influential founder of the APS, as of the nation, but his influence was limited to the proposal, the resurrection of 1769, and financing Philosophical Hall.

• David Rittenhouse (first to measure the distance from the earth to the sun during the 1769 transit of Venus) was the second APS President, but died in 1796, succeeded by Thomas Jefferson.
Princess Dashkova
First Woman APS Member, 1789
Thomas Jefferson and the APS

• Jefferson was APS President during (and after) the time he was either Vice President or President of the United States, 1797-1814.
• Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence
• The Michaux Expedition, 1793
• The Louisiana Purchase, 1803
• The Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-06
• Native American languages (and anthropology)
• Astonishing inattention to the APS years in Jefferson biographies
• Patrick Spero, *The Other Presidency* (2018)
Charles Willson Peale, 1756-1841

- Radical revolutionary
- Artist
- Inventor
- Entrepreneur
- Lived in Philosophical Hall with large family
- Peale’s Museum from his home to Philosophical Hall to Independence Hall
John Vaughan, 1756-1841

- Wine merchant
- Philanthropist
- Lived in Philosophical Hall, after Thomas Sully
- Treasurer, 1791-1841
- Librarian, 1803-1841
Peter Stephen DuPonceau, 1760-1844

• Teenage revolutionary with von Steuben
• Lawyer, linguist (Native American and Chinese)
• President, 1827-1844
• Revived Jefferson’s Native American Language Project
Peter Stephen DuPonceau in 1839

by

Robert Cornelius
Later in the 19th Century

- U.S. Pacific exploring expedition, 1838-1842
- Elisha Kent Kane exploring the Arctic, 1850-51 and 1853-54
- Haddonfield dig of 1858 by William Parker Foulke finds Hadrosaurus
- Photographing Western tribes by Ferdinand P. Hayden, 1867
- Maria Mitchell (astronomer), Mary Somerville (mathematician-astronomer), and Elizabeth Agassiz (natural history) elected to APS, 1869
- Phillips Fund (for Native American studies) established, 1895
- First annual meeting, 1901
And Two More Late 19th Century Heroes of the APS, sort of …

Alexander Dallas Bache

Louis Agassiz
But enough of the Past

THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY:
CELEBRATING 275 YEARS
OF PROMOTING USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

To mark the 275th anniversary, this timeline highlights key events that helped define the APS during its illustrious history.

https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/labs/timeline-275/#
APS in the 20th and 21st Centuries

- The Penrose Bequest, 1931
- Research grants, 1933
- Library Hall, 1959
- Franklin Hall, 1981-87
- Richardson Hall, 1999
- The Museum, 2002
- Membership from 540 to 840, 1987-2017
Philadelphia: Repurposing Failed Banks

Richardson Hall

Franklin Hall
The APS Today

- Members
- Meetings and Travel
- Research
- Publications
- Museum
- Library
- Communication
- Administration
- Development
  - Friends of the APS – Education Outreach and Public Lectures
APS Members

• 830 Elected Resident Members and 150 International Members
• Members in every field of endeavor
  • Mathematical and physical sciences
  • Biological sciences
  • Social sciences
  • Humanities
  • Professions, Arts, and Affairs
• Women are about one quarter of Members
• Several occasional prizes with honoraria
A Few Favorites from the Recent Past
Herman Goldstine

Baruch Blumberg
Todd Williams and Billie Tsien

I.M. Pei
Meetings and Travel
And a Few New Members

Hopi Hoekstra
Orly Ashenfelter
Frances Arnold
Research

- 200+ grants and fellowships each year
- 200+ peer reviewers
- $6,000 limit
- Every field of study
- Pre-doc, post-doc and early career
- Phillips - Native American
- Lewis & Clark – Fieldwork
American Philosophical Society

LEWIS AND CLARK FUND FIELD SCHOLARS, 2005–2017

455 projects funded
$1,606,700 in total funding awarded
228 projects led by male researchers
226 projects led by female researchers
Field research funded on every continent except Antarctica

Disciplines include:
- Ecology 22%
- Anthropology 18%
- Biology 9%
- Archaeology 9%
- Evolution 7%
- Geology 6%

For more information on the Lewis and Clark Fund or to apply for a grant, please visit https://www.amphilsoc.org/lewis-clark.
Publications: *Proceedings*

- Continuously operating, since 1771, oldest scholarly press in America
- Proceedings quarterly
  - Open submission
  - Meeting presentations
  - Biographical memoirs
Transactions
Memoirs

The Cabinetmaker's Account
John Head's Record of Craft & Commerce in Colonial Philadelphia, 1718–1753

JAY ROBERT STIEFEL

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY PRESS
In Franklin's Footsteps
375 Years at the American Philosophical Society

Mapping a Nation
Shaping the Early American Republic

2018

2019
Library

- Open to all
- 13 million manuscripts
- 250,000 books
- 40 fellows annually
- Bibliography project
- Center for Digital scholarship
- Conferences
  - Networks
  - Libraries
  - Revolutions
- Core Collecting Areas
  - American history
  - Science, technology, and medicine
  - Native American languages
- Treasures
  - Franklin
  - Jefferson
  - Lewis & Clark
We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.
Jefferson Treasures, Michaux
Jefferson Treasures, Lewis & Clark
The APS Tomorrow

• International Symposium on the Future of Learned Academies ... and more to come
• Integration of the Library and Museum
• Space for the Future – Library, Offices, Storage
• Library-Museum Research Activities
  • Center for Native American and Indigenous Research
  • History of Science Program, complementing CHSTM
  • David Center on the American Revolution
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