Jefferson and Franklin
An enlightened friendship
By George W. Boudreau

Thomas Jefferson and his “great and dear friend” Benjamin Franklin, whose work and ideals Jefferson respected and championed for a half century after their first meeting, stand like two pillars of the American Enlightenment. They were brought together in the process of nation making as well as in philosophical inquiry. The two likely knew that posterity would continue to link them centuries after they first met in mutual protest against parliamentary taxation and an uncaring king.

They were particularly connected by the intellectual movement we call the Enlightenment, an era that stressed camaraderie and conversation. Through printed materials and their writing skills, both men were connected to enlightened thinkers around the world. Both sought the company of other inquiring men and women, drawing together friendly cohorts in their homes. Both dabbled in scientific inquiry and eventually mastered aspects of the natural world far beyond their initial expectations. Both wrote, filling cases and volumes with letters that continue to give us an enticing glimpse into their minds. They translated their enlightened studies into architectural expressions late into their long lives. Franklin created a house filled with spaces for experiment and study, and then built rental residences that used the foremost techniques of scientific building and safety. Jefferson delved into neoclassicism and shaped and reshaped a unique planter’s mansion that was part museum, part abode, and never quite completed. And both participated in — and eventually questioned — the prevailing worldwide economic system of slavery. Franklin’s printing press churned out advertisements for enslaved people and ads for those who had run away to freedom. He owned as many as nine people who toiled in his Philadelphia and London homes. Throughout his lifetime, Jefferson owned more than 600 enslaved people who worked his fields and maintained his households in America and Europe.

A Friendship Forms

In another moment of history, they might never have met. Franklin was born in Boston in 1706 and ran away to Philadelphia at age 17 in 1723. He combined carefully cultivated skill and intelligence with hard work and luck to become a force in his adopted city by the 1730s. His fascination with the natural world and what philosophical inquiries could mean to a man in his lifetime, Jefferson contributed to his rising status and fame by the 1750s. In 1757, he became a transatlantic traveller, sent to the mother country to convince the errant sons of William Penn that they owed safety and money to the settlers of their father’s colony. Franklin failed in that mission, but for the remainder of his life he would be a beloved character on both sides of the ocean, leading to a reputation as America’s first great diplomat.

Jefferson was a generation younger than Franklin, born in 1743 — five months before Franklin’s daughter Sarah, his youngest child. And Jefferson was born a world away from Franklin, into the planter class of Georgian Virginia, a world dominated by a single-crop economy and served by the enslaved labor force that grew it. Franklin was a man of towns; Jefferson an inhabitant of plantations. Yet in their different times, locations and levels of wealth, the two men embraced both an expanding mental world of natural philosophical inquiry and a concomitant comprehension of humanity’s rights in the natural world. That perspective resulted in their fateful meeting in Philadelphia in 1775.

Sadly, neither man was a diary keeper, so we have no account of their first encounter and whether the two had much grasp of each other’s reputation at the moment they met. Jefferson was 32, an emerging force in Virginia colonial politics who had sided with the rising faction who saw King George III’s policies as tyrannical. Franklin was almost 70, famous for his electrical experiments but recently outcast from England for releasing the letters of Governor Thomas Hutchinson to English political leaders calling for the suspension of colonists’ rights. Chastised and humiliated before the Privy Council, Franklin had returned to his adopted home a widower and a revolutionary. He found Philadelphia to now be the center of a widening political split in the empire and a magnet drawing like-minded men to protest the king and Parliament.
As far as we know, the two met in the Pennsylvania State House after Jefferson joined the Virginia delegation to the Second Continental Congress in 1775. Franklin had spent decades working in the confines of the building we now call Independence Hall. It is possible that their newborn friendship was kindled in one of the nearby parlors that hosted numerous dinners or receptions for congressional delegates, or over a beverage at City Tavern (or Smith’s), an establishment that had been erected during Franklin’s time in London and where Jefferson’s accounts show he frequently bought drinks for himself and his comrades.

Writing the Declaration

The real work that cemented Franklin and Jefferson into history was their selection to write a formal declaration of independence following the Virginia Resolution in 1776. As the frequently told story goes, member John Adams thought he was too disliked to pen the document, and Franklin refused to write anything that would be edited by a committee. Jefferson, noted for his powerful writing — especially after his role in the authorship of “On the Necessity of Taking Up Arms” a year earlier — was chosen to write the Declaration. Jefferson’s “expression of the American mind” was a compilation of what enlightened Americans believed to be the nature of government and the abuses of a king who had ignored his people’s protests for over a decade. The younger man sought his elder’s advice on wording before it was laid before the Continental Congress, writing on June 21, 1776, “Will Doct. Franklyn be so good as to peruse it and suggest such alterations as his more enlarged view of the subject will dictate? The paper having been returned to me to change a particular sentiment or two, I propose laying it again before the committee tomorrow morning, if Doct. Franklyn can think of it before that time.” Franklin offered edits, with Jefferson famously accepting Franklin’s term “self evident” in substitution for his “sacred and undeniable” in the Declaration’s argument that “all men are created equal.” Franklin similarly offered sage advice to soothe Jefferson’s bruised ego as the delegates picked away at his prose, a lifelong editor disclosing that everyone needs an editor, whether they liked it or not.

On the International Stage

The relationship that had been kindled in Philadelphia grew in Paris when Jefferson joined Franklin and John Adams in negotiating with the French. From his arrival in France in 1776, Franklin had masterfully presented himself as a living embodiment of the Enlightenment and the progress open to humanity. In his fur hat and Quaker-influenced clothing, Franklin had played a role that drew ire and jealousy from Adams. Jefferson was more impressed. “The succession to Dr. Franklin at the court of France, was an excellent school of humility,” Jefferson wrote in February 1791 to Franklin’s eulogist and frequent provocateur, the Reverend William Smith. Jefferson had no interest in contesting Franklin’s personal popularity with the people or the court, instead seeing living in Paris as an opportunity to study the world of print and the built environment.

To Smith, Jefferson wrote the frequently presented thesis of their friendship: “On being presented to any one as the Minister of America, the commonplace question, used in such cases, was ‘c’est vous, Monsieur, qui remplace le Docteur Franklin?’ ‘It is you, Sir, who replace Doctor Franklin?’ I generally answered ‘no one can replace him, Sir; I am only his successor.’”

A Lasting Bond

They met only once more, when Jefferson visited his home at Franklin Court in 1790 to see his ailing friend on what would be his deathbed. Franklin was surrounded by his daughter’s children, doing their lessons under his philosophical gaze. Jefferson recorded the meeting in his 1821 autobiography: “at Philadelphia I called on the venerable and beloved Franklin, he was then on the bed of sickness from which he never rose. my recent return from a country in which he had left so many friends, and the perilous convulsions to which they had been exposed, revived all his anxieties to know what part they had taken, what had been their course, and what their fate. he went over all in succession, with a rapidity and animation almost too much for his strength.” Changing the subject, Jefferson inquired about Franklin’s own never-completed memoir, and Franklin gave a portion of the original manuscript to his friend, which Jefferson returned to Franklin’s grandson after Franklin’s death. Jefferson ceased work on his autobiography with this narrative and his concern that William Temple Franklin had never seen the papers of his “immortal grandfather” published. The bond between the two founders remained strong, five decades after their enlightened friendship began.