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Address to the 2002 California Masonic Symposium

by Alain BAUER

Grand Master of The Grand Orient de France

Hiram the Architect or Abraham and Alchemy

by Jean-Charles NEHR

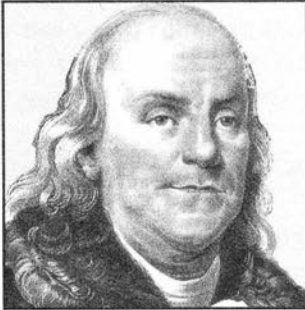
An American—Freemason—in Paris, Benjamin Franklin

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An American —Freemason— in Paris: Benjamin Franklin W.M. of a Grand Orient Lodge in 1778-1779



par Pierre MOLLIER

“Late December 1776, when Benjamin Franklin set foot on French territory to broker an alliance with the country, he was not entirely unknown. He already had many personal friends and relationships in France... At the time, [he] embodied the scientific, moral and political values of the Enlightenment for a number of Frenchmen.”¹ Through his own personal style and a concerted strategy, the famous American was extremely tactful in his diplomatic efforts. He took care to maintain many friendly relationships among the Parisian elite of the day. A committed Freemason since 1734, he was even Worshipful Master of a Pennsylvania Grand Lodge. He naturally contacted the Parisian Masons. Masonry, of course, was completely uninvolved in political issues. Several years earlier, however, when he was the U.S. representative in London, he had also maintained an excellent relationship with the London Grand Lodge and its dignitaries. Freemasonry had existed in Paris since the 1720s, and in 1728, a colorful former English Worshipful Master, the Duke of Wharton, was appointed Worshipful Master of the Freemasons in France. Throughout the eighteenth century, the Lodges were marked by periods of tremendous energy and recurrent crises. In the 1760s, the First Grande Loge de France was deeply shaken by the consequences of disputes over the degree systems. In 1771-1773, it undertook a far-reaching internal reform based on a return to original values (the sovereignty and independence of the symbolic degrees, representation of all the Lodges, election of all the officers and so on) and then became the Grand Orient de France. The creation of the Grand Orient is often viewed as a takeover of Freemasonry by the liberal aristocracy and intellectual elite that had drifted away from the Lodges around 1760. In 1777, when Franklin moved to Paris, the Grand Orient was in the process of reorganizing French Masonry, and the Lodges were once again growing.

*Did Franklin sponsor Voltaire
with the Freemasons?*
.....

Franklin was very involved in one of the major events of the Enlightenment in France under the reign of Louis

XVI: Voltaire's final trip to Paris several weeks prior to his death. The most famous Frenchman, then 84, had been living in Ferney near the Swiss border and had not returned to the capital in twenty years. Sensing his impending death, he wanted one last look at the theater of his youth and his literary successes. Despite his age, he was in fairly good health and his friends convinced him to make this long trip, the pretext being the marriage of his protégé, Mademoiselle de Varicourt, to the Marquis de Villette. But for Voltaire's friends, supporters and every Parisian who had adopted the ideas of the "Philosophers" and the Encyclopedists, what was certain to be Voltaire's last trip to Paris would be a major demonstration in support of the concepts of the Enlightenment that he had spearheaded for over a half a century. The patriarch arrived in Paris on February 10, 1778, and he was immediately the center of much attention as well as of a symbolic battle. The king's priest denounced this from the pulpit:

"The glory with which they feign to cover the brazen leader of an ungodly sect, the destroyer of religions and morals."²

Counting on Voltaire's fear of death, the clergy tried to obtain a retraction from him and a declaration of his Catholic faith. In a moment of weakness, Voltaire seemed to give in. Then, once he had recovered from the tiring journey, the old man once again pledged his support to the Philosophical Party. The receptions held at the Académie Française and the Académie des Sciences were organized as celebrations to the man himself. Crowds of people followed his carriage through the streets of Paris, acclaiming him with cries of "Long live Voltaire!" This was the ambience in which Franklin visited Voltaire. He introduced his grandson to the great man, asking him to bless the boy; the patriarch of the Enlightenment placed his hand on the child and said, in English, "God and Liberty."³ The two men seem to have gotten along very well and their embrace at the Académie des Sciences session created a sensation. In fact, Franklin and Voltaire had a connection that went beyond their common battle for liberty; several days earlier they had forged an even stronger bond, that of the Masonic brotherhood.

Indeed, on April 7, 1778 an event—which was theoretically secret—occurred that would be one of the major episodes of the Philosophical Party in France under King Louis XVI. That day, the most famous of Frenchmen, Monsieur de Voltaire became a Freemason in the Neufs Sœurs Lodge ("Nine Sisters"). Through this belated entry into Freemasonry, which he had, on occasion, ridiculed, the patriarch of the Enlightenment ostensibly demonstrated the comradeship between the Lodges and the Enlightenment. Benjamin Franklin's role in this operation was crucial. A Mason for over fifty years, he had held important positions within the Order. It was therefore no coincidence that during his stay in Paris he attended the Neuf Sœurs Lodge. In so doing, he mixed business with pleasure. Business, because the representative of American interests in Paris could meet a number of intellectuals who were influential in Parisian opinion. And pleasure, as several of his friends were also members. Franklin was a frequent visitor to the Salon held by his neighbor Madame Helvétius in her Auteuil home. "Notre Dame d'Auteuil," as her admirers

like to call her, hosted one of the most prestigious intellectual circles of the time. Franklin was one of her very close friends; he supposedly even asked the philosopher Helvétius' widow for her hand in marriage!

The role of the Lodges in the French Enlightenment during the eighteenth century and—as a result—in the preparation of the Revolution is one of the most controversial issues among historians. Most of the Lodges contributed to the spread of new ideas in an unconscious way only. Masonic practices—the election of the Lodge officials and the fact that the Brethren wrote their own regulations—laid the foundations for a democratic and liberal social conscience that led to profound transformations in the society of the Ancien Régime. Several Lodges, however, clearly positioned themselves on the side of the Philosophical Party, the first and foremost being, of course, the Neuf Sœurs. Franklin therefore joined a Lodge that already had a strong identity. From its creation in 1776 to the Revolution in 1789, its members included no less than twenty men who also belonged to the Académie des Sciences or the Académie Française, not to mention other members such as the Montgolfier brothers, Mirabeau, Houdon and even the Marquis de Sade! It brought together the entire intelligentsia of what historians call “the second Enlightenment,” in other words, the movement that stretched from *L'Encyclopédie* (1773) to the French Revolution (1789). Created as a tribute to the memory of Helvétius, it immediately adopted the ideas of materialistic philosophy. The founder and tireless organizer was the astronomer Jérôme Lalande, who was known as the “dean of the atheists.” Were Helvétius and Lalande truly atheists and materialists? Or—more probably—were they deistic, like Voltaire? In any case, they were motivated by a clear conviction, also held by the Philosophical Party, that the Roman Catholic Church used its overwhelming power and obscurantism to try to control mankind, and was one of the chief obstacles to progress for humanity. It was therefore everyone's duty to oppose the fanaticism and superstitions of the Catholic clergy. The best way to conduct this battle was through study, and by encouraging the sciences and philosophy. The Lodge regulations were clear on this point from the beginning:

“The Neuf Sœurs Lodge, by making the Masonic virtues the basis and support of its institution, felt compelled to also associate the culture of the sciences, the letters and the arts.”⁴

*Franklin must have felt comfortable with
this sensibility that was so similar to his own.*

.....

Gébelin (1725-1784) and Lalande, finally managed to convince Voltaire to accept the initiation offered by the Neuf Sœurs.⁵ The ceremony was held on April 7 in the presence of a large number of distinguished guests. Because of his age, the famous member elect was excused from performing the physical trials but, according to the French custom, he was questioned about various philosophical issues; his answers were admired by all. Voltaire, surrounded by Franklin and Court de Gébelin, took

According to a report from the period, it was Franklin who, along with Antoine Court de

his oath from the hand of Worshipful Master Lalande, from whom he then received the masonic instruction of the degree. Various members of the Lodge gave speeches concerning the arts and sciences. The ceremony ended with a large Masonic, social banquet. Several days later, he visited the Duc de Chartres, the Worshipful Master of the Grand Orient. He spent the remaining few weeks of his life in meetings and receptions that were actually propaganda events for the Party of Philosophers. After a triumphal three months, the great man passed away in Paris on May 30, 1778. But this did not end the scandal, as the Catholic Church refused to allow him to be buried in Paris. Failing a religious ceremony, his friends decided to organize a tribute to this great man in a dignified, but alternative fashion. The Neuf Sœurs Lodge organized a large funeral service in the memory of the most famous—and most recently inducted—of its Brethren. Franklin was one of the chief organizers of this Masonic ceremony, which was also a celebration of the Enlightenment. A regular visitor to the Lodge, he seems only to have become officially affiliated with it the day after Voltaire's initiation. The first document in his archives is an invitation to a party organized by the Lodge and sent to him on June 29, 1778. Antoine Court de Gébelin, the secretary, wrote this note to Franklin:

"It is with great pleasure that I fulfill this mission I have been asked to perform by the Neuf Sœurs Lodge. The Lodge kindly requests that you grace the festivities planned at the Ranelagh de Passy on July 1 with your presence."⁶

Whether he officially joined the Lodge during these festivities or not, the fact remains that within several days, the news of his affiliation to the Neuf Sœurs had spread through the Parisian Masonic world. Brethren Lallement wrote to him in the name of the Paix Lodge, stating:

"Highly Respected Brethren, if jealousy could infiltrate the soul of the Masons, all the Lodges in Paris could this day fall prey to this sentiment, to compete with the Neuf Sœurs over the advantage it now holds in having you as one of its members: but the only thing that can compensate the other Lodges for this is the act that you have just taken, which by joining French Masonry opens up to you all the Temples erected in this capital for the good of humanity."⁷

A chronicler of the time wrote an ironic report on seeing Franklin:

"Despite the many affairs for which he is responsible, he still finds enough time to play at the chapel and follow the Freemason meetings like the most idle of Brethren."⁸

The tribute to Voltaire was prepared with great care, as reported by a writer:

"We have no doubt that Dr. Franklin, affiliated with the same Lodge, the heir to Voltaire's apron, a friend and admirer of the deceased, will attend and distinguish himself zealously on this memorable day."⁹

The event was finally held on November 21, 1778, in the Grand Orient building on Rue du Pot-de-Fer. Franklin fulfilled the important role of Senior Warden and, at the end of the ceremony, laid a wreath of flowers before a portrait of Voltaire in the name of the Lodge. More than 200 Brethren attended this meeting. During the banquet that followed, toasts were made to the thirteen states of North America!

This commemoration for Voltaire unleashed the anger of the Catholic Party. The active participation by Franklin—who was so famous in Paris and usually so careful—was extremely significant in terms of his commitment to the Philosophical Party. But the Masonic reality had many facets and, alongside the works of the spirit, the Lodge could also be fruitful for contacts favorable to the American cause. Several days after the venerable ceremony, a prominent figure from the south of France, Brethren Bevos, wrote to Franklin:

“Sir and Very Dear Brethren, it was a great pleasure for me to see you at the Neuf Sœurs the day we celebrated Voltaire’s apotheosis; by chance, I was placed between you and the poet Rocher, who gave us such beautiful verses. My heart would like to reveal its intentions; and given the commission by a Chamber of Commerce in Languedoc to discover the production of our friends, the 13 states, I would like to request an audience.”¹⁰

The Lodge of the Enlightenment is a place of fraternal and philosophical exchange—the “Center of Union,” as stipulated by *Anderson’s Constitutions*—but also, from time to time a place of commercial exchange.

*Franklin Worshipful Master
of the Neuf Sœurs*
.....

All these events increased Franklin’s involvement in this curious Lodge where, in addition, he also had many friends. The publishers of Franklin’s paper also note that his archives contain several dozen invitations from the Lodge.¹¹ The scheduled events are a good illustration of the type of work conducted by the Neuf Sœurs. Hence, in late January of 1779, Franklin received the following invitation:

“Truth ∴ Union ∴ Strength

Dear Brother

The W ∴ L ∴ of the Neuf Sœurs, is invited for the 6th day of the 12th month 5778 year of the true light at exactly 5 o’clock for business.

You are kindly requested to come add to the tenderness of the brotherly union. And for the 12th day of the 12th month at 10 in the morning, there will be a reception, concert at a specific time, banquet, etc.

I am, by the numbers only known by the Freemasons, your honored and beloved brother.

Gébelin

Secretary of the W ∴ L ∴

Of the Neuf Sœurs

Rue Poupée Saint-André

If you cannot attend the Banquet, please inform the Secretary two days prior to the meeting

Do not forget to bring your regalia”¹²

But the multiple events at the Lodge in favor of the Enlightenment and its political stands in favor of the American states earned the Neuf Sœurs a number of enemies within the Grand Orient, which considered it to be too disruptive. The

Grand Orient ended up suspending the Lodge on the pretext of having accepted women. The Lodge therefore wanted to place at its head an unassailable figure who could defend it and have the disciplinary measures imposed by the Masonic authority lifted. This was the context in which Benjamin Franklin became Worshipful Master on May 21, 1779. Chroniclers of the time noted the appropriateness of choosing the inventor of the lightning rod to divert the Grand Orient's wrath. On August 18, 1779, the Lodge organized a large Masonic event to



L'APÔTRE DE LA LIBERTÉ IMMORTALISÉ

ALLEGORIE DÉDIÉE À UN AMI DE LA CONSTITUTION FRANÇOISE PAR L'AUTEUR, ET PRÉSENTÉE À L'ASSEMBLÉE NATIONALE.

L'amort de saint Du d'un Franklin, L'Amérique au Milton de
Au Mont pour le Remettre au sein de la Divinité, dans le continent
Où arrêter pour Rendre hommage à la Mémorie de Celui qui fut en Réservé
Des Mortels, l'accomplir au Cœur au Bras Vole instructeur l'univers que
Franklin, le grand Franklin Retenu, Sa Patrie
Le Maître de l'univers, le Maître de l'univers

Les Fers Brisés l'efforce de le Peler au pied Delle l'immortelle l'atrocité
Par un Monument à sa gloire au Dédicatoire y est placé la pierre saint
L'humanité l'efforce de le genre de La philosophie l'univers de l'univers au Plus grand
Le Dieu l'univers des Dieux l'univers de l'univers dans les Cieux

Le Peler l'univers au S. V. l'univers

L'univers l'univers au l'univers

The Apostle of Freedom Immortalized
Allegory commissioned by the French Assemblée Nationale

celebrate this new step. Here again, the original document speaks volumes about the ambience of this unique Lodge:

“Academic Festivities,
For the closing ceremony of
The Neuf Sœurs Lodge
At Wauxhall at the Foire Saint-Germain,
Wednesday, August 18, 1779
The inaugural speech at these Festivities will be presented by the
president. [*i.e. Franklin*]
This speech will be followed by a symphony
A Bre.: will then pronounce the elege to Montaigne
Music will follow

Several other pieces of literature, either verse or prose, such as a poem about Voltaire; le Repentir by Pymaglion; the Mois de Novembre etc. will also alternate with the vocal and instrumental musical performances.

The Festivities will end with a Banquet.

These Festivities will be an meeting, consisting of two hundred and fifty people, both Brethren and ladies

We shall enter from four to five o'clock. We shall start at exactly five o'clock. No one shall be allowed entry after.

[...] As these festivities are devoted entirely to the Arts, the Bre.: are requested to tell the Ladies that there shall be no dancing.

[...] Famous Artists, Members of the Lodges, have promised to send several of their works to decorate the room.

The Lodge shall meet at ten o'clock in the usual room, Rue du Pot-de-Fer [*i.e. the headquarters of the Grand Orient*]

[...] All the Bre.: both those of the Lodge as well as visitors, shall be decorated at these festivities with their sashes only, without their aprons or any other attribute.”¹³

Philosophy, poetry, music and banquet: what the program does not specify is that there would also be a “historical and political essay concerning the Anglo-Americans,” presenting flattering portraits of the key leaders of the new American Republic.

In 1780, Franklin was re-elected for a second year, and another American, Paul Jones, joined the Lodge. He had distinguished himself in navy battles against England. The Lodge organized a celebration in his honor on May 1, 1789.¹⁴ In 1780, while Franklin was still president, the Lodge created the “Société Apollinienne,” a sort of secondary Lodge devoted to cultural activities; this would become the “Musée de Paris.” This “Musée” was one of the centers of intellectual and scientific life in Paris in the 1780s. Courses in science, technical subjects and natural history, intended for the general public, were held in the French capital for the first time. Franklin, who had organized scientific and educational institutions in Pennsylvania, certainly shared his experience in the creation of this project.

The relationship between Benjamin Franklin and Antoine Court de Gébelin illustrates his participation in Masonic activities. Court de Gébelin was the secretary and one of the major figures of the Lodge, but he was also the author of a monumental and famous work, which at the time was nearly as successful as the *Encyclopedia*. This was *Le Monde Primitif analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne*. Initially it was to consist of thirty volumes—only nine were printed—and aimed to offer an interpretation of the history of humanity based on a comparison of religions and languages. Today, Court de Gébelin's theories appear to be somewhat farfetched, but he did nonetheless develop a comparative approach and linked ethnology and linguistics, two methods that would become major fields in the modern human sciences. The correspondence between the two men discussed both the Lodge activities and their scholarly activities. Court de Gébelin, working in the shadow of Rousseau, was fascinated with primitive cultures. Franklin then sent him a book by David Zeiberger about the Delaware Indians,¹⁵ and the two men pursued an exchange of views concerning the origins of the Indian languages and the possible links that may exist with the ancient cultures of old Europe.¹⁶ In the midst of this exchange, Court invited him to a Masonic meeting at which he also requested a recommendation for Father Robin, another member of the Neuf Sœurs, who was about to take a trip to the New World. On his return, Robin published several interesting works concerning America.

Far from remaining a spectator after arriving in Paris—then capital of the world—to explore the ideas of the Enlightenment, Benjamin Franklin became one of the major figures of this intellectual revolution during the years he spent in France. Even before the United States of America had been formed, the country had contributed, through its representative, to the far-reaching and fundamental reflections on “the freedom of the moderns” in the West. Furthermore, this Masonry to which Franklin so wholeheartedly committed himself was very unusual in that it had such a strong intellectual bent and ventured toward the realm of politics. A study of Benjamin Franklin's Masonic life in Paris during the Enlightenment shows us how an interest in the history of Freemasonry is not a return to the past or a refusal of present problems, but indeed, represents quite the contrary: a desire to delve into the stimulating sources that are so promising for the future.

I would also add that this also demonstrates the benefits, for the entire world, of a real dialogue between France and the United States!



Bust of Franklin carried to the top of the Eiffel Tower

NOTES

1 See Nicole Fouché: *Benjamin Franklin & Thomas Jefferson, aux sources de l'amitié franco-américaine, 1776-1808*, Michel Houdiard Editeur, Paris, 2002, pp. 56 and 59.

2 *Mémoire de Bachaumont*, cited by par Amiable, p. 70. Louis Amiable (1837-1897) is the author of *Une loge maçonnique d'avant 1789, la R.:L.: Les Neuf Sœurs*, published soon after his death. This book remains the essential reference work concerning this exceptional Lodge. It should be noted that, although the eighteenth-century French Masonry archives are relatively abundant, there is virtually no information concerning Les Neuf Sœurs, with the exception of a small collection that was recently returned to the Grand Orient de France by Russia.

3 Anecdote related by Condorcet in *Vie de Voltaire*, cited by Amiable p. 144.

4 Cited by Amiable, p. 32.

5 According to Bésuchet - *Précis historique de l'Ordre de la Franc-maçonnerie...*, Paris, 1829 - who recounts a report by Cubières, who attended the ceremony at which he occupied the important role of the Senior Warden. Cited by Porset in his excellent work, *Voltaire Franc-maçon, célébration du troisième centenaire de la naissance de Voltaire*, Rumeurs des Âges, La Rochelle, 1995, p.24-25.

6 *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Editor William B. Willcox, Yale University Press, vol. 26, p. 697, Lettre from Court de Gébelin, June 29, 1778.

7 *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Letter from Lallemand, July 11, 1778, vol. 27, p. 75.

8 Cited by Amiable, p. 137.

9 *Mémoires Secrets*, vol. XII, September 26, 1778, cited by Amiable p. 81.

10 *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Letter dated December 28, 1778, vol. 28, p. 287.

11 Idem, p. 474.

12 Idem, vol. 28, p. 474.

13 Idem, Vol. 30, pp. 237-239.

14 Idem, Vol. 32, p 330.

15 *Essay of a Delaware-Indian and English Spelling Book...*, Philadelphia, 1776.

16 *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Letter from Court of Gébelin to Franklin, May 6, 1781, vol. 35, pp. 28-32, and Franklin's reply, pp. 34-36.





Tableau

Des nouveaux officiers de la R. Loge

Des 1^{re} Sœurs,

Extrait de la planche à tracer du 20^{me} jour
du 3^{me} Mois de l'an de la R. L. 5779.

3 ^e Vénérable	Fr.: D ^r Franklin
1 ^{er} Surveillant	Fr.: C ^{te} de Milly
2 ^d Surveillant	Fr.: Court de Gebelin
1 ^{er} Orateur	Fr.: de La Dixmerie
2 ^d Orateur	Fr.: Elie de Beaumont
3 ^e me Orateur	Fr.: Roucher.
Secrétaire	Fr.: Abbé du Roureau
Secrétaire adj.	Fr.: Chev. de Cubieres.
Tresorier	Fr.: Fain.
1 ^{er} Expert	Fr.: Le Changeux
2 ^d Expert	Fr.: Valeyre
3 ^e me Expert	Fr.: de Barrette
Garde des sceaux	Fr.: Grouvelle
Garde des Archives	Fr.: Garnier
Architecte	Fr.: St-far.
Hospitalier	Fr.: Marcadé
Aumônier	Fr.: Abbé Laboye
1 ^{er} inspecteur	Fr.: Cordier
2 ^d inspecteur	Fr.: Abbé Genay
3 ^e me inspecteur	Fr.: Nolte
Directeur des Concerts	Fr.: Baron de Bagge
Directeur adj.	Fr.: Clément