
Introduction:

Worlds of Learning in the Age of Franklin

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The good Education of Youth has been esteemed by wise Men in all Ages, as the surest Foundation of the Happiness both of private Families and of Common-wealths.

Benjamin Franklin,
Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania, 1749

In 2006, the University of Pennsylvania Libraries marked the tercentenary of Benjamin Franklin's birth by mounting a major exhibition examining Franklin's educational ideas and plans. The exhibition surveyed the many conceptions of "education" circulating in the Delaware Valley from the beginnings of William Penn's colony in the 1680s through the early decades of the Republic in the 1820s. It drew upon vast archival resources available in the region, including manuscript copybooks and documents, spellers and primers, prints, samplers, and scientific artifacts. It also made a preliminary effort, presented here, to photograph and gather information about the many early school buildings that survive in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

The eight essays in this catalogue explore in detail the question of what education meant in Franklin's time and what its legacy might be. Which populations benefited, and which were left out? How representative was Franklin, and how much a maverick thinker? How successful was he in planning and managing the institution he helped to organize, which would evolve into the modern University of Pennsylvania? And how does our understanding of his ideas change when we learn more about the varied projects for learning which emerged during this period—in homes, clubs, and all manner of schools and academies, formal and informal, large and small, urban and rural? Taken together, the essays and the exhibition offer, we hope, new insights into the educational history of the early middle Atlantic region and an incentive to researchers to explore it in further detail.



A starting point for both the exhibition and a number of the essays is Franklin’s *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensikvania*, which he printed in October 1749 (Figure 1.2).¹ Franklin’s slender text is an educational call to arms. Sounding much like a modern-day urban mayor, school superintendent, or commissioner of education, Franklin appeals to the citizenry of Philadelphia to resist “ignorance” and promote the public good by opening a school that will protect and train its children for the future. He explicitly links the “private” realm of the family to the public world of the “common-wealth,” asserting that a solid educational plan will guarantee the security and stability of both. No proponent of an ivory tower education, Franklin argues that the school he envisions must produce students who will not only be individually accomplished but also able to “serve the Publick with Honour to themselves, and to their Country.” Youth, he writes, must constantly be taught that “true Merit” consists of “an *Inclination* join’d with an *Ability* to serve Mankind.”²

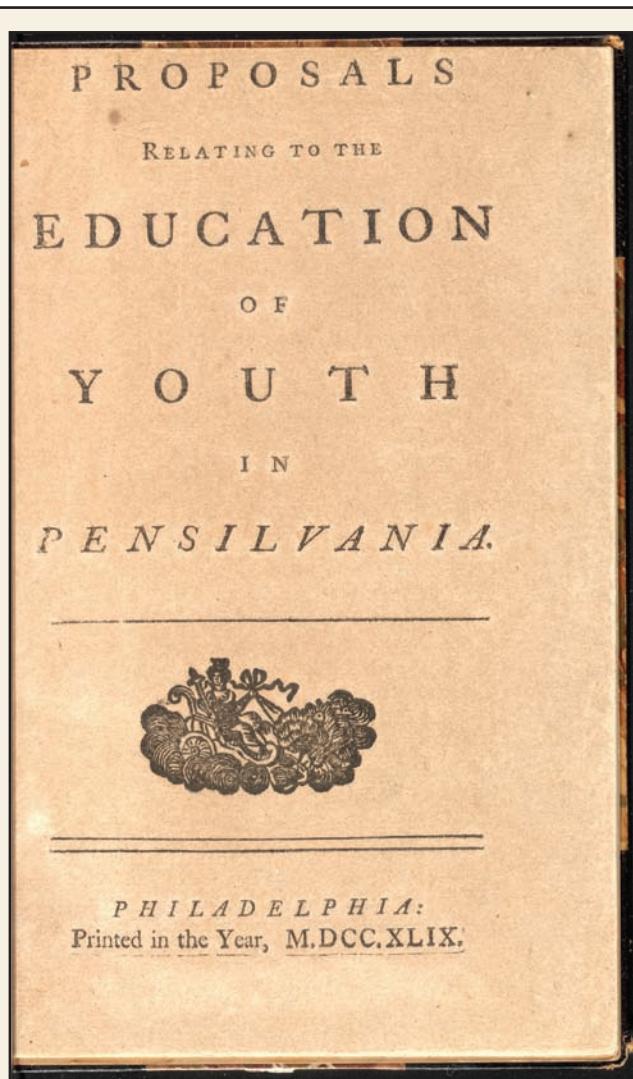


Figure 1.2.

Benjamin Franklin, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensikvania* (Philadelphia: [B. Franklin], 1749). Curtis Collection of Franklin Imprints, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

Those youth, according to the *Proposals*, must be exposed to a curriculum that conjoins the philosophical, the scientific, and the practical. Franklin's list of "those Things that are likely to be *most useful* and *most ornamental*" for students includes writing, drawing, mathematics, modern literature, history, oratory, commerce, and engineering. He also calls for them to learn natural history through hands-on methods like planting and gardening and, supporters of collegiate athletics will note approvingly, argues that "to keep them in Health . . . they be frequently exercis'd in Running, Leaping, Wrestling, and Swimming, &c." In thirty-two pages, Franklin sets out a powerful blueprint which, he asserts, would allow Pennsylvania to "obtain the Advantages arising from an Increase of Knowledge, and prevent as much as may be the mischievous Consequences that would attend a general Ignorance among us."³

The *Proposals* occupy a central place in the canon of American educational texts alongside the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey. Despite the fact that today's University of Pennsylvania scarcely resembles the small Fourth Street academy and college* of the eighteenth century, Penn Professors Matt Hartley, Ira Harkavy, and Lee Benson show in their Afterword to this volume that University leaders still look to Franklin's words for inspiration and guidance as they manage their institution.⁴ These three scholars, in fact, strongly advocate using the *Proposals* as a yardstick against which to measure the school's progress. They argue that Franklin's commitment to rendering education a tool for "useful social improvement" is his greatest legacy and should help shape today's university curricula.

For them, Franklin's pamphlet has direct relevance to modern debates over the direction of educational policy. Indeed, the *Proposals* represents one of the earliest American manifestations of a phenomenon which Marvin Lazerson, a scholar of contemporary education movements, has labeled the "education gospel." As Lazerson defines it, the education gospel is "a system of belief that social, economic, civic, and moral problems can be solved through schooling."⁵ Although Franklin might resist the religious connotations of the term "gospel," the *Proposals* do convey a sense that, like so many advocates today, he believed that schooling could reform and improve American society by providing a path to economic opportunity for the citizenry and, conversely, that a failure to educate youth properly might undermine social stability or even cause a breakdown in the social order.

The meaning and impact of Franklin's text in the eighteenth century, though, remains a more contested subject. At one end of the critical spectrum lies the evaluation of historian Bernard Bailyn who, writing in 1960, hailed the *Proposals* as a visionary statement in American intellectual history. Bailyn argues that Franklin's plan to train students "for the broadest possible range of enterprise" represented nothing less than "a revolution in formal instruction" and claims that, if implemented in full, Franklin's manifesto would have made American education unique in the Atlantic world and far more democratic than what was offered to students in Europe. Franklin's English School, intended to prepare students for "any business, calling, or profession," was actually too revolutionary for his fellow colonials, "too much of a new thing

*A note on nomenclature: Franklin called in the *Proposals* for the establishment of an "Academy," roughly equivalent to a modern secondary school. The Academy consisted initially of two "schools" or classes: an English and a Latin School (Mathematical and German Schools were added later in the century). The Academy and an associated, free, charity school, both supervised by the same Trustees, opened in 1751 and were known as the Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia. The Trustees opened the College, also called the Philosophical School, in 1754, and in 1755 a charter established the new name for the institution: the College, Academy, and Charitable School of Philadelphia (School becomes "Schools" in some documents). In 1779, the Pennsylvania Assembly replaced the Trustees and changed the institution's name to the University of the State of Pennsylvania. The Act of 1789 restored the Academy and College under the first set of Trustees. These two parallel institutions operated simultaneously in Philadelphia until 1791, when they merged, becoming the University of Pennsylvania.

even for eighteenth-century America.”⁶ Bailyn’s claim about the exceptional nature of the *Proposals* has been echoed in more recent accounts. Billy Smith, in an evaluation of Franklin’s civic projects produced for the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary, calls Franklin “an educational radical” whose institution sought to emphasize practical training for a variety of careers and was not simply devoted, as other colonial colleges had been, to “serving the privileged.”⁷

According to these interpretations, Franklin’s ideas must be located on the cutting edge of educational thought in the colonial period, in particular because of their challenge to the elite bias of traditional schooling. That elite, however, proved resistant to Franklin’s message, and the Academy and College he had helped found became, under the leadership of Provost William Smith, the very kind of institution that Franklin despised. Support for this view comes from a brief tract that Franklin wrote near the end of his life. In his “Observations Relative to the Intentions of the Original Founders,” Franklin lamented that the prominence of the College and of the Latin School in the Academy had been achieved at the expense of the English School, which was, for him, the most innovative part of the entire educational scheme. Franklin accused his fellow trustees of violating the original Constitutions of the Academy, which he had helped craft in 1749, by “injudiciously starving the English part of our scheme of education” through inattention and lack of financial resources, while at the same time favoring the Latin School. “There is in mankind an unaccountable prejudice in favor of ancient customs and habitudes,” Franklin concluded sadly, and this prejudice had kept his school plans from succeeding in the way he had intended.⁸

For other scholars, however, this reading of Franklin as a radical educational thinker appears farfetched, his comments late in life notwithstanding. They see the project of the *Proposals* as one of several calculated career moves which Franklin undertook in the late 1740s, after his retirement from active participation in his printing business, as he sought to carve out a place for himself within the ranks of Philadelphia’s establishment. Gordon Wood is the most forceful recent proponent of this thesis. According to Wood, Franklin had by 1748 “come to believe that only those who were free of the need for money should be involved in public affairs” and that his retirement would allow him to take his rightful place as a member of the Philadelphia gentry.⁹ Franklin, in Wood’s view, shared the values of the colonial elite and sought to join, not challenge it.

Franklin was, of course, well aware of his own non-elite background, and, as George W. Boudreau has argued, he carefully deployed his status as “a Tradesman” when appealing to the wealthy to support his plans for the Academy.¹⁰ Given his position as an outsider, Franklin would likely have seen little value in alienating the elites by proposing a school plan to which they could not agree. The *Proposals* do at times read more like a careful appeal for patronage than a manifesto for change. In fact, Franklin’s plan was not particularly novel. Lawrence Cremin, in his standard grand narrative of American education, argues that, “however fresh these ideas may have seemed to contemporaries and however characteristically American they may seem in retrospect, they were less than wholly original.”¹¹ As Cremin shows, Franklin bases his ideas on theories of education that were circulating widely in English circles, borrowing extensively from John Milton, Charles Rollin, and especially John Locke. Carla Mulford points out in her essay in this volume that Franklin owed a clear debt to a tradition of “educational liberalism” dating back to the mid-seventeenth century. Franklin does not hide these intellectual debts in the *Proposals*; instead, he goes to great lengths to display his knowledge of previous authors, resulting in a text laden with footnotes and unusual in Franklin’s *oeuvre* for its scholarly tone (see Figure 1.3). By showing how well he had mastered the central educational treatises of his time, Franklin may have hoped to impress Philadelphia’s leaders as someone to whom they should listen.

Furthermore, as Mark Frazier Lloyd points out in this volume, Franklin was a pragmatist, quick to reshape his approach in order to make the project work. Despite his later regrets, Franklin does not appear initially to have taken a stand against the favoritism shown the Latin School at the expense of the English. Instead, he may well have been gratified to see the interest shown by the elites in his *Proposals*, made manifest by their willingness to send their sons to the newly-formed Academy. Their support for the school could be taken as evidence of their growing desire, like that of Franklin himself, to participate more fully in the learned life of the English metropole. Franklin's school would thus serve, in the words of Carl Bridenbaugh, as a marker of Philadelphia's "social maturity" and as a badge demonstrating its population's desire to provide new "educational and intellectual opportunities" for its citizenry, who would assume their place as members of the British empire, not merely as denizens of remote "cities in the wilderness."¹² Richard Bushman echoes Bridenbaugh's sentiment, arguing that the Academy and College appealed to a group of gentry and would-be gentry in the Middle Colonies who, increasingly, viewed education as a necessary sign of "refinement" for themselves and their children.¹³

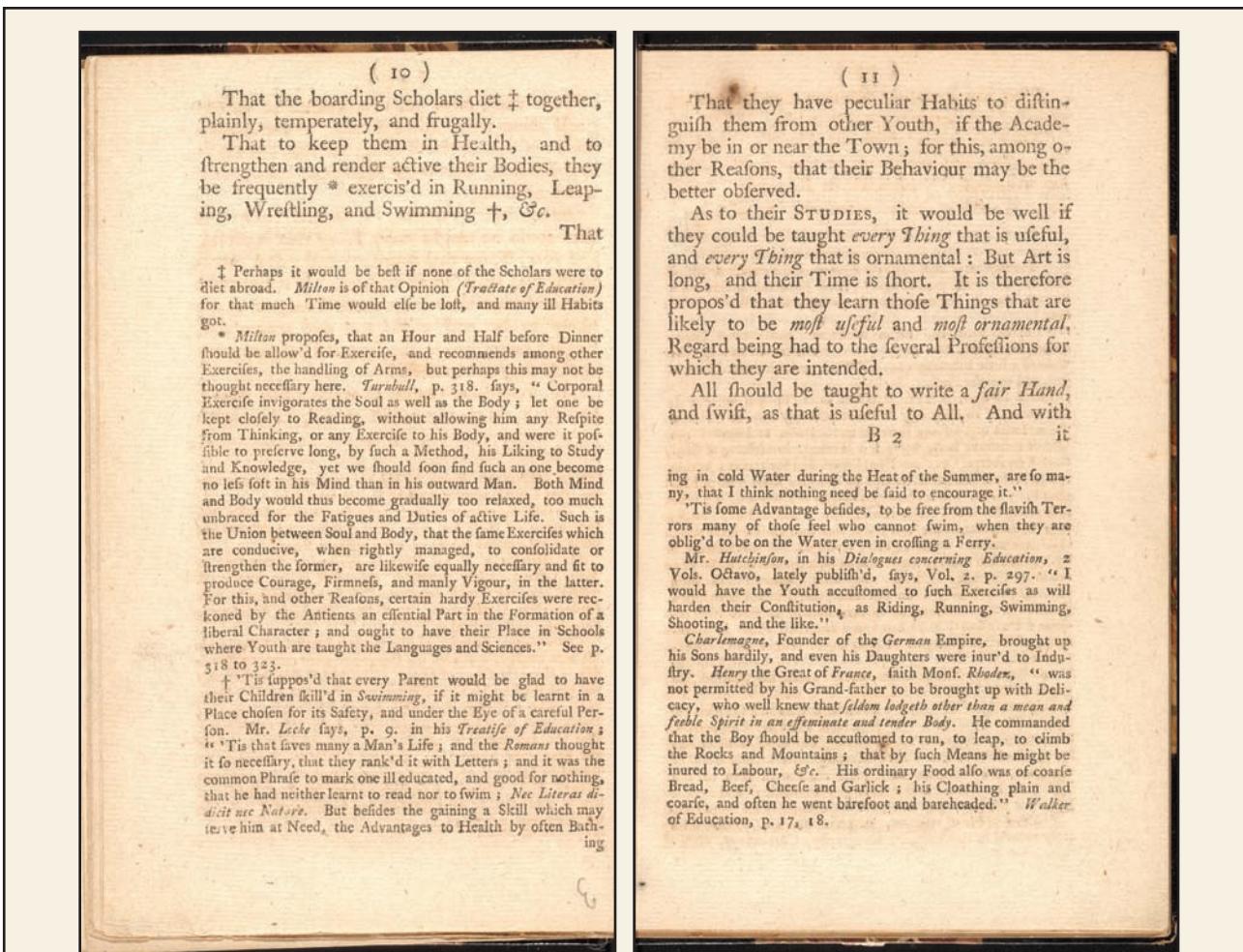
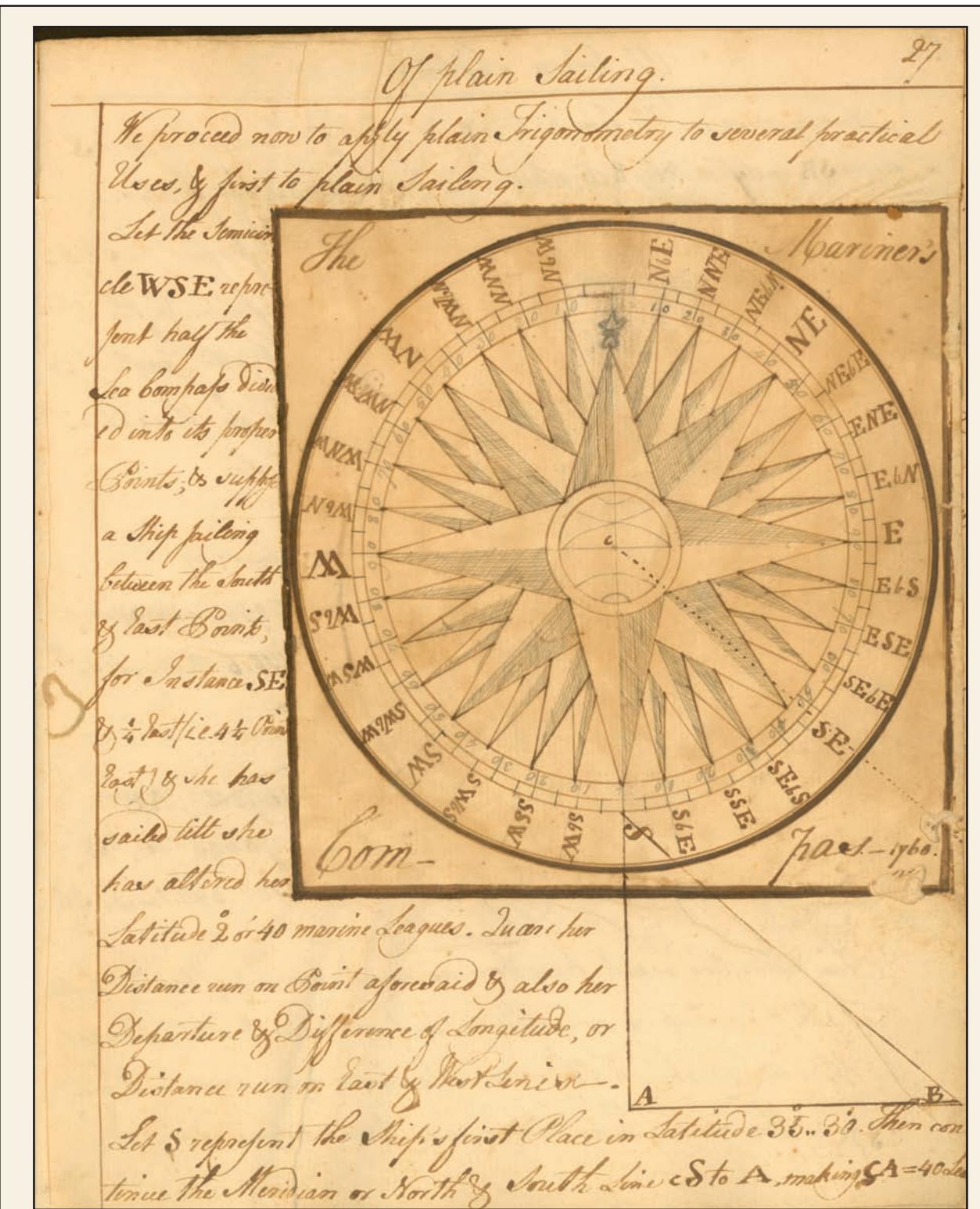


Figure 1.3.

Franklin, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania*, 10–11.

Curtis Collection of Franklin Imprints, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.



Figures 1.4a and 1.4b (right).

Jaspar Yeates, "The Mariner's Compass" and "A Plan of Part of Petty's Island in the River Delaware," in "Trigonometry, Plain Sailing, Surveying, With Heights and Distances," student notebook, College of Philadelphia, May 1, 1760, 27, 50. UPA 3, no. 1654, Curriculum Collection, University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

As the work of Bushman and others has shown, the Academy and College had a significant impact upon Philadelphia and the region. How much of the credit for that influence belongs to Franklin himself is another matter for debate, one that both Lloyd and Boudreau take up in this volume. By 1755 the institution consisted of three branches: the Academy (for students who, today, might be in middle and high school); a College, for a small number of advanced students; and a Charity School, which provided a free, basic education to younger students who could not afford the expensive Academy tuition. In certain ways, the school did realize Franklin's vision of giving students an education that combined "useful" and "ornamental" knowledge. Lecture notebooks—still an understudied source of information about the early curriculum—show students at work mastering a variety of subjects: mathematics and geography, Latin and Greek, logic and ethics. Jasper Yeates (1745–1817), later a lawyer and judge on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, was one of a number of students who progressed through the various schools; he began in the English School in 1752, moved into the Latin School in 1755, and three years later entered the College, from which he was graduated in 1761.¹⁴ Fourteen volumes of Yeates's notebooks have survived, and they show us a student comfortable with rhetoric, Greek conjugations, and moral and natural philosophy, as well as one who, with other students, made trips to Petty's Island on the Delaware River to study surveying and navigation (see Figures 1.4a and 1.4b). Yeates's work suggests that students at the school were indeed exposed to a widely varied curriculum that would have prepared them for "several Professions," as Franklin had wished.

