

**AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE  
ORIGIN AND FORMATION OF THE  
AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL  
SOCIETY HELD AT PHILADELPHIA FOR  
PROMOTING USEFUL KNOWLEDGE**

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An historical account of the origin and formation of the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for promoting useful knowledge by Peter Stephen Du Ponceau & J. Francis Fisher

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**PETER STEPHEN DU PONCEAU & J. FRANCIS FISHER**

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AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

HELD AT PHILADELPHIA  
FOR PROMOTING USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

BY  
PETER STEPHEN DU PONCEAU  
*President of the Society*

WITH THE  
COMMUNICATION OF J. FRANCIS FISHER, Esq.  
AND THE  
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE TO WHICH  
THESE PAPERS WERE REFERRED  
READ OCTOBER 15, 1841

AND  
THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE  
ON THE  
DATE OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE SOCIETY

ACCEPTED MAY 1, 1914

PHILADELPHIA  
THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

1914

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HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE ORIGIN  
OF THE  
AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

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It is generally known that the American Philosophical Society, as at present constituted, was formed at the latter end of the year 1768, by the union of two associations which existed at that time, one of which was called "The American Society held at Philadelphia for promoting and propagating useful knowledge," and the other "The American Philosophical Society"; but its history does not begin at that period: in order to have a full view of it, we ought to trace to their origin the two Societies by the union of which it was formed, follow them in their progress to the time of their junction, and what is not less interesting, we should be informed of their different views, their different interests, and the means by which their union was effected.

This is the more necessary, that although little more than seventy years have elapsed since that union took place, different opinions already prevail, as to the origin of one of the two Societies which, sacrificing their little jealousies to the honor of their country and the advantage of Science, agreed to unite their



efforts for the advancement of knowledge; and like a band of brothers to join in forming the Society which I have now the honor of addressing. Some are of opinion, that the "American" Society which I call thus for shortness' sake, and to distinguish it from the other which I shall call the "Philosophical," was no other than the celebrated *Junto*, established by the illustrious Franklin in 1727, and of which he gives so interesting an account in his autobiography, while others think that it was a different Association, of uncertain origin, but more recent than that of the other Society.

Among those who entertain the latter opinion, or rather who have doubts upon the subject, are men whose sentiments are entitled to the highest respect, men of profound learning and established reputation, justly deserved, to whom I should not have alluded, if one of them had not expressed his doubts in a work destined to go to posterity.<sup>1</sup>

It is not my intention to give to this sketch a polemical character, but in treating this subject historically, I shall be obliged to give the reasons which have produced in my mind the fullest convictions that the "American" Society was no other than the *Junto* established by Franklin, which, when it was united to the "Philosophical" Society, had only changed its name, extended its views, and increased the number of its members, without ceasing to be a continuation of the original association.

<sup>1</sup> Sparks' "Franklin," 578.

The contrary opinion, or rather doubt, is of recent date. Ever since I had the honor to be a member of this Society,<sup>1</sup> I felt a great interest in its history; I had frequent conversations with men who took a part in its formation, and particularly with the venerable Bishop White, whose loss we still deplore, and who was a member of the "American" Society. He loved to talk upon the subject. He informed me of many details respecting the union of the two Societies, which are not to be found in their records, some of which I have given in this sketch, that the memory of them may be preserved; but neither he, nor any body else at that time doubted of the "American" Society having been a continuation of the *Junta*, which, extending its views and desirous of enlarging its sphere of action, thought proper to modify its rules and to adopt a new name; this fact, until a very late period, was admitted by all.

To this traditional testimony we may add that of Franklin himself, to show that the *Junta* continued in existence until the time of its union with the "Philosophical" Society. While absent in Europe on public business, he never lost sight of his favorite *Club*, as he called it; in his letters to his friend Hugh Roberts, which Mr. Sparks has preserved for us, he never fails to mention it with affection, as will appear from the following extracts:

On the 16th of July 1753, he writes: "My respects to Mrs. Roberts, and all our old friends of the *Junta*."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Du Ponceau was elected a member July 15, 1791.

<sup>2</sup> Sparks' "Franklin," 77.

On the 16th of September 1758—"I do not quite like your absenting yourself from the good old Club, the *Junto*. I exhort you, therefore, to return to your duty."<sup>12</sup>

On the 26th February 1761—"You tell me you sometimes visit the ancient *Junto*. I wish you would do it oftener. Since we have held that Club till we have grown gray together, let us hold it out to the end."<sup>13</sup>

On the 7th of July, 1765—"I wish you would continue to meet the *Junto*, notwithstanding that some effects of our political misunderstandings may sometimes appear there. It is now, perhaps, one of the oldest Clubs, as I think it was formerly one of the *best*, in the King's dominions. It wants but about *two* years of *forty* since it was established."<sup>14</sup>

And lastly, 27th Feb. 1766—"Remember me affectionately to the *Junto*."<sup>15</sup>

It may be asked, perhaps, whether the Society which was joined to the "Philosophical," and then bore the name of the "American" Society, was really the old *Junto* mentioned in the above extracts. This objection can be easily answered. By the articles of union agreed upon between the two Societies, on the 20th of December 1768, it is stipulated

Art. 7: "That the *books* and all the curiosities, etc. of the former Societies, be deposited in the Cabinet

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.