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The
YOUTHFUL
FRANKLIN



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FRANKLIN

*An address delivered
at the unveiling of
a statue to Benjamin
Franklin at the Univer-
sity of Pennsylvania,
on June 16, 1914*

by
JAMES M. BECK, LL.D.
of the Philadelphia and New York bars

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FOREWORD

THE Franklin Printing Company, successor to Benjamin Franklin, printer and philosopher, being interested in anything that pertains to the history of our founder, presents an address by the Honorable James M. Beck at the unveiling of the statue of Benjamin Franklin, by Professor R. Tait McKenzie, at the University of Pennsylvania, June 16, 1914. Mr. Beck is acknowledged one of the great students of Franklin, and we feel that this address is of sufficient merit to warrant reproduction in permanent form. We are glad to be able to present it to the admirers of this great American Printer in a form which we believe will be worthy of preservation.

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The
YOUTHFUL
FRANKLIN

Mr. Provost and Gentlemen of the University:

I CONGRATULATE you on a notable achievement. You have "buildded better than you knew." By this noble gift the class of 1904 has not only attested its loyalty to Alma Mater but has given to the future sons of Penn a lasting lesson and a potent inspiration. Who can number the students of the future, as yet unborn, who, standing where we now stand, will gaze upon this faithful effigy of the youthful Franklin and, taking fresh courage, will press more eagerly to the mark of their high calling? Here we see the youthful Franklin "in his habit as he lived." No higher praise can be given the sculptor than that his work is worthy of its subject. Does not this Franklin with his staff in one hand and his meagre possessions in the other, with uplifted eyes, alert, vigorous carriage and smiling, resolute face, nobly symbolize the youth of America, as they end their apprenticeship, and bravely face on the threshold of manhood the rude challenge of the world?

It is true that Franklin was not a college student. His only elementary training was the reading of borrowed books by the flickering light of a tallow dip. His only college was the printing shop; his graduation was flight from harsh and intolerable treatment, and his diploma may have been an advertisement calling upon the public to apprehend a fugitive apprentice. As now portrayed in lasting bronze, he typifies not only the unnumbered American boys, who have faced an unknown future with undaunted resolution and proud elation of spirit, but especially that sturdy breed of self-made men, in which

America has been so productive and of which Franklin was the first and greatest example.

No ship ever brought so rich a cargo to Philadelphia as the little sloop from Bordentown which disembarked the youthful Franklin on Market Street wharf one hundred and ninety years ago. Why narrate the story of that first entrance into Philadelphia? The world knows it almost by heart. With his genius for simple narration—worthy of Bunyan or Defoe—Franklin has told us how he first trod its streets, when with a huge roll of bread under each arm, and his capacious pockets stuffed with his surplus wardrobe, he sought work and opportunity. Whether it was the genius of the narrator, or the dramatic contrast between this humble beginning and those later days when he stood the guest of honor at the Court of Versailles, and shared the honors of the Academy with Voltaire, I know not, but Franklin's simple account of his entry into Philadelphia has so deeply touched the imagination of men that it is a household tale throughout civilization. Whittington turning back to London at the sound of Bow-bells, the Pilgrim leaving the City of Destruction and passing onward to the Delectable Mountains, the shipwrecked Crusoe finding the footprints on the sand, are hardly more familiar to men of all nations and classes than the runaway apprentice challenging destiny in Penn's "green country town."

Probably few, if any, on Market Street wharf that peaceful Sunday morning gave more than a passing glance to the penniless youth. There was one to greet him, invisible to the mortal eyes but plainly visible to the eye of imagination. Franklin himself, albeit the most far-sighted of the children of men, only dimly saw that welcoming figure. It was the Spirit of the Illimitable Future. Vaguely he may have heard her greeting:

"Welcome, Benjamin Franklin, to the rare Band of the Immortals! This day you are making history. You shall vindicate the simple faith of your Puritan father,

who, with the open Bible on his lap, said to you when as a child you stood at his knees:

'Seest thou a man diligent in his calling, he shall stand before kings.'

"You shall far surpass that strange prophecy. As the unconscious incarnation of an avenging democracy you will, as you stand erect in pompous courts, represent a mighty revolt against tyranny, which will cost one king the better half of his kingdom and another both crown and head. Still another monarch will refuse to meet you, saying 'that it was his trade to reign and he would not endanger the craft by playing with Franklin's Lightning.' A self-educated printer, you will found a great University, receive degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrews, Yale and Harvard while the learned societies of the world will crave the honor of your fellowship. You will captivate the imagination and win the admiration of the world for all time by a series of scientific experiments so noble in conception and far reaching in results as to rank your name with Copernicus, Galileo and Newton. A modern *Œdipus*, you will solve the sphinx-like enigma of the skies and open to man the infinite vistas of electricity. You will take high rank in that smaller circle of the myriad-minded men who have been supremely great in many varying activities, for when you shall walk the Elysian fields your true companions in immortality will be Leonardo da Vinci, Michel Angelo, Francis Bacon and Goethe."

Even we of this later age can appreciate but imperfectly all that the future whispered in the ears of the penniless boy. Franklin's fame expands with the majestic advance of America and the ever widening boundaries of science and thus baffles the imagination.

I shall not attempt any formal eulogium. Not only do the limitations of an out-door speech forbid, but the subject defies adequate statement in any speech. Fifteen years ago I attempted at the dedication of the Franklin statue on the Post Office plaza in this city to summarize

in a formal oration his stupendous genius and varied achievements. After speaking for a full hour I had barely scratched the surface of his unequalled career. In diplomacy, a Talleyrand; in invention, an Edison; in philanthropy, a Wilberforce; in science, a Newton; in philosophy, an Erasmus; in local politics, a Hans Sachs; in statecraft, a Richelieu; in humor, a Swift; in style, an Addison; in the power of narration, a Defoe; in the unequalled sweep of his versatility a Leonardo da Vinci. What a man! Where in history is his equal in the varied scope of his talents and achievements? His closest analogue seems to be Erasmus. Like the great philosopher of Rotterdam, Franklin was the first author, scientist, humorist and philosopher of his time. Like Erasmus, his strongest weapon was the printing press, his favorite medium, humor. Like Erasmus, he was almost alone as the well-poised conservative of a revolutionary age.

Suffice it to say that "tried by the arduous greatness of things done," Franklin thought more, said more, wrote more and did more that was of enduring value than any man yet born under American skies.

I fully appreciate that there are some detractors of Franklin—especially in this city—who refuse to recognize the inspiring volume of his life because it contains some *errata*, of which we chiefly know through his own open and penitent avowal. His morals were those of his age, no better, no worse. Are we to shut our eyes to the wholesome sunshine of his influence, because even this mighty luminary had its spots? To a few fugitive Rabelaisian writings and frankly avowed errors of youth we oppose his consistent and life-long struggle for a useful and noble life. I content myself by citing testimony, to which Americans never can be indifferent. When the great philosopher was lying on his death-bed, Washington thus wrote him: "If to be venerated for benevolence, if to be admired for talents, if to be esteemed for

patriotism, if to be beloved for philanthropy can gratify the human mind, you must have the present consolation to know that you have not lived in vain; and I flatter myself that it will not be ranked among the least grateful occurrences of your life to be assured that so long as I retain my memory you will be recollected with respect, veneration and affection by your sincere friend, George Washington."

For this reason this statue represents more truly than any other of which I have knowledge, the spirit and history of America. It is the effigy of one of the greatest and most typical of Americans. As Thomas Carlyle once said on beholding a statue of Franklin: "There is the true father of all the Yankees." He was the first great product of the American commonwealth. His career, unequalled in length and usefulness, spanned the mighty transition period from the primitive colonial era to this wonder-working age of steam and electricity.

His famous predecessors in American history were expatriated Europeans and no more Americans than Clive was an Indian because he lived in India. The navigators and pathfinders of our colonial period had laid in the unbroken wilderness of the New World the firm foundations of a democratic commonwealth, whose basic principle was to be equality of opportunity, and it was destined to give birth to a finer breed of men, the true *gens aeterna*, the Americans. Of this mighty race, Franklin was the first fruit. When Washington, an unknown lad of sixteen years, was surveying the Fairfax estate and before Hamilton, Jay, Warren, John Paul Jones, Knox and Marshall were even born, Franklin had become famous throughout the world by his discovery of the nature of lightning. He was a mighty power in the Colonies, moulding the character, thoughts and aspirations of the pioneers by the lever of his printing press, when the elder Adams was leaving Harvard, and Jefferson, Hancock, Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee were little chil-

dren in arms. Long before the fervid oratory of Adams and Patrick Henry, Franklin was the recognized leader of the colonists. It was as their champion that he stood at the bar of the Commons, making the members of that body, as Edmund Burke afterwards said, seem like a lot of schoolboys, and it was in their cause that he stood erect in the Cockpit and met with unmoved countenance the malicious vituperation of Wedderburn. When the Colonies were a discordant congeries of separate and jealous governments, he first suggested a concrete plan for an organic union at the Council of Albany in 1754 and this was the true germ of the Constitution of the United States.

He was the mentor of his countrymen. He prepared them for their later struggle with the mother country by inculcating lessons of thrift and independence. The homely and epigrammatic wisdom of "poor Richard," which seems to us in these days of luxury and opulence so penny wise, was in that day of little wealth and small beginnings essential to the well being of America. Indeed Father Abraham's advice to a discontented people could be read with profit even by this generation. It is still true that while we are sorely taxed by our governments, national and local, we are taxed twice as much by our idleness, thrice by our pride and fourfold by our follies.

He was then, as he remains today, intellectually the greatest American, and this may be said without any depreciation of Washington, whose moral grandeur has justly given him the first place in our affections and whose dramatic struggle on the field of battle appeals most to our imagination. In the epic of our independence Nestor must give place to Agamemnon, our "king of men." But in those larger considerations, which outleap nationality and have a universal appeal to all races, classes and creeds, Franklin was, and still is, at least intellectually, the greatest of Americans.

Even in the matter of purely patriotic achievement, Franklin's invaluable contribution to the cause of independence can be measured by the fact that his name alone among all his contemporaries is to be found upon the four great documents which made us a free people, viz., the Declaration of Independence, the Treaty of Alliance with France, the Treaty of Peace with England, and last, but not least, the Constitution of the United States.

To that great document, which so far has given a practical realization of the highest ideals of American liberty, and which is probably the greatest state document yet penned by man, Franklin's contribution was inestimable. Apart from the compromise measures which he proposed, which saved the Convention from disintegrating without its glorious result, it was the potent power of Franklin's personality, with its shrewd union of political sagacity and tactful *savoir fair*, which so reconciled the discordant members of the convention that they finally agreed to sign the document for submission to the people.

This was the last and perhaps the most useful of his achievements. Conscious that, like Moses, he could on account of age only behold the promised land from afar and not enter therein, it was with the prescience of an inspired prophet that at the close of the great convention he pointed to the half disc upon the speaker's chair and said in substance that while he had often wondered in the course of the four months' deliberations whether that picture of the sun represented it as rising or setting, he now knew that it symbolized "a rising sun." Yes, it has been hitherto an ascendant sun in the constellation of the nations, and let us pray God that the darkening clouds of socialism and even anarchy are not in our day to obscure this beneficent luminary of civilization.

Franklin was not only the first and intellectually the greatest of Americans, but he was also the most typical. Both his virtues and his failings were characteristic of the American character as it has since developed. His

shrewdness, utilitarianism, philosophic good humor, poise of judgment, tolerant spirit, democratic temperament, inventive genius, intellectual inquisitiveness, love of industry and pride in achievement are all characteristically American qualities.

The two Americans who seem to me to come most directly from the very heart of America, and best typify the average American character, are Franklin and Lincoln. Both unite in their personalities the qualities of good humor, generous tolerance, philosophic optimism, intellectual versatility, freedom from conventionality, simplicity of ideas, and last, but not least, common sense. Franklin, like Lincoln, was the very genius of common sense. The great philosopher was possibly more versatile than profound. Certainly his was a telescopic, not a microscopic, vision. He was wonderfully clever and resourceful, but not a master of details. He resembled Erasmus rather than Darwin, Hans Sachs more than Goethe.

He accomplished all he did by his freedom from intellectual conventionality and his sustained and intelligent application of common sense to the problems that confronted him. That is not only a rarer but a higher gift than many suspect. Common sense is the instinctive appreciation of the nice relation which things bear to each other, without which the most learned man may be, like King James, justly characterized as "the wisest fool in Christendom." With common sense a man, who like Franklin has but a meagre education and whose learning has been distributed—in this day of specialization we would say dissipated—over an almost infinite field of thought may yet accomplish veritable miracles.

Oh, for a breath of Franklin's sanity and common sense in this hysterical generation, when the whole world seems topsy turvy, when many classes are in revolt against the institutions which make for stability, when women are growing masculine in the frenzied and violent advocacy of new privileges and men are becoming feminine in sub-

mitting to intolerable wrongs, when the councils of men are darkened with vain imaginings and legislators, administrators and, alas! even judges are fleeing in abject cowardice before the rising dust of an advancing windstorm! Franklin had too keen a sense of humor to be swept away by this spirit of hysteria and too fine a sense of justice to accept the present-day cowardly surrender of principle to political expediency. If he had been able, as he humorously hoped, to float in a state of suspended animation in a cask of Madeira for more than a century and then revisit the scene of his achievements, what would not be to-day his amazement, admiration and, we must add, disgust? The greatness of the nation, which he had helped to bring into existence, would satisfy even his universal spirit. The growth of his beloved city would delight him beyond power of expression. The expansion of science would stagger even his comprehension, but I fear he would have only contempt for the petty politicians in city, state and nation, who betray the most sacred principles of liberty, to which he gave the mighty labors of his life, to gratify the base passions of the mob.

He sympathized with people and especially with the working classes, of which he himself as a printer was a shining example, but his ideal of the worker was to work and not to idle. He would have scorned a movement, whether by law or otherwise, which would sink the industrious and skillful worker to the level of the idle and the thriftless, and he would have regarded with equal loathing the intellectual demagogues, who play upon the passions of the masses, and the sordid grafters, who betray the great cause of civic improvement to enrich themselves.

He was a man of the people, simple in his tastes, companionable to high and low and with scant regard to the prejudice of class—a cross indeed between the intellectual Erasmus and the democratic Hans Sachs. When loaded down with honors received from titled and

royal hands, he could still remember his modest beginning and the days of his early married life, when he was clothed in homespun of his wife's spinning. When in his later years he had ceased for nearly forty years to be a printer by occupation and was universally acclaimed as among the first, if not the first man of his age, he proudly described himself as "Benjamin Franklin, printer, of Philadelphia."

To that city he was as Prospero in the wondrous island of Shakespeare's fancy. He was its wonder worker and even to this day its noblest institutions are born of his thaumaturgic genius. If he could not, like Prospero, conjure "Jove's lightnings" and "call forth the mutinous winds and twixt the green sea and the azured vault, set roaring war," he could at least curb the destructive fury of the lightning and solve its baffling mystery. His Ariel was his swift intelligence; his working wand, science; his magic mantle, imagination. In him was that rarest of combinations, a prescient and sweeping imagination coupled with the finest common sense and poise of judgment.

He was a believer neither in the simple nor the strenuous, but in the sane life. He not only preached philosophy, he practiced it. Like Horatio, he was one who

"in suffering all that suffers nothing;

A man that fortune's buffets and rewards

Hast ta'en with equal thanks. And blest are they

Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,

That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger

To sound what stop she please."

Franklin was also a typical American in his love of work—not as a mere means to an end, but for the love of work, the joy of achievement. He was the most useful and industrious citizen that Philadelphia or America has ever known. His period of public service, which reached

nearly seventy years, was unexampled in length. No burden seemed to be too great for him, no sacrifice too severe. He loved to do things. To him the work-a-day world was a glorious arena and he disdained to triumph *sine pulvere*.

This is, or at least was, the American spirit. Our very name implies it. The word "America," or Italian "Amerigo," is derived by Humboldt from two Gothic words, "Amal," meaning "work," and "Ric," the root of "to conquer." All conquering work! This was ever Franklin's ideal. Even when he seemed most idle, his brain was germinating mighty thoughts. His broad tolerant nature had contempt only for the thoughtless and the idle. When like Prospero he laid down his wand and mantle, he could look with just complacency upon the mighty results of his tireless industry, a great city vivified, a nation brought into being, science expanded, and the whole human race benefited because he had lived. Well may we paraphrase that stone-worker of Westminster Abbey and say:

"O rare Ben Franklin!"

But this statue of Franklin best typifies the spirit and achievements of America because it represents the "youthful Franklin." In this it is unique. The venerable and patriarchal Franklin has so powerfully impressed the imagination of man that every public effigy of him, of which I have any knowledge, represents him in his mature age. This, however, is the Franklin in the "May morn of youth," the time which on high authority is said to be "ripe for exploits and mighty enterprises." To maintain a just equilibrium in society, the conservative judgment of age is doubtless necessary, but without the radical spirit, the indomitable energy and courage of youth, the best of history had not been.

All that Franklin subsequently became was latent in him as he stood a boy of seventeen on Market Street wharf. It was more than merely latent. By tireless

industry and unwearying study under adverse conditions, he had prepared himself for his future work in the greatest of all universities, the University of Gutenberg. In this age, when the average boy seems to have lost his love of reading, unless we except the ephemeral newspaper or current magazine, it is well to be reminded that his wonderful career was largely due not only to his self-acquired wealth of ideas but his self-taught and unequalled power of expression. It is most fitting that this Franklin should be represented in the "kingly state of youth," especially as it will stand in the classic shades of this historic university as an incentive to future generations of young Americans.

When I spoke on Franklin fifteen years ago in this city, I recalled that he regarded all rhetoric as mere "sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal" unless it served some useful purpose. I then ventured to make several suggestions, of which at least one bore immediate fruit. With your indulgence I shall again refer to them.

I first suggested that as Franklin had rendered some of his greatest services to America and to civilization in the city of Paris that a replica of the Boyle statue should be erected in that queenly city on the Seine as a token of good will from America to France. The lamented John H. Harjes of Paris accepted this suggestion, and it was through his generous gift that a replica of Franklin sits in patriarchal dignity in an admirable position near the Trocadero and within sight of Passy, wherein he passed so many useful and happy years. May I now suggest that a replica of the McKenzie statue could be fittingly given by this famous University, especially at this time when we are celebrating the centenary of peace between England and America, to the city of London to commemorate the fact that in that great metropolis Franklin also worked for a time as a journeyman printer and later rendered distinguished services as the agent of the Colonies.

I next suggested that the sacred remains of Franklin

and his wife, now in a neglected cemetery which must some day yield to the needs of modern improvement, should be reverently exhumed and given more fitting sepulture. Would it not be most in keeping with Franklin's ideals and character to give his remains a final resting-place within this great institution whose proudest boast is that it is the University of Franklin?

Finally, I urged that the truest monument to Franklin should be Philadelphia itself, and especially the great institutions which Franklin founded, of which this University is beyond question the greatest. He loved this city with a consuming love. It was not the place of his birth, but it was the city in which most of his conscious life was spent, and it was the scene of his greatest achievements. He was its most useful citizen. However far afield his public duties carried him, he always regarded and described himself as "Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia." He gave both to his native and adopted cities trust funds, which he asked each people to accept as "a testimony of my earnest desire to be useful to them after my departure." He expressed a wish that the accumulations of his bequest should from century to century be used for such public buildings as would "make living in the town more convenient to its people and render it more agreeable to its strangers."

If the present generation would only have a revival of his spirit of individual initiative and enlightened ambition the possibilities of this city and its great University are unlimited.

In proportion to what Philadelphia might have been, it is a city of wasted opportunities. With an inefficient and archaic form of government, and at times dominated by the most sordid of grafters, it has often reminded me of Gulliver bound down to the earth by petty Lilliputians. By the Lilliputians I mean the curbstome politicians, who too often dominate its councils. I would apologize to the people of Lilliput for the comparison, if that city

had ever existed, for while they were small in stature, Swift nowhere indicates that they were dishonest. Our professional politicians are the Lilliputians. Philadelphia and its noble body of citizenship is the sleeping Gulliver, who will one day awake and break the petty bonds which check its growth. It might have remained the capital of the nation, had not its petty politicians of that day sold the birthright of this historic city of America for a mess of pottage. This opportunity, which would have made it one of the four great capitals of the world, was lost forever, as so many other opportunities have since been, by the shameful way in which the future of the city has at times been sold for personal advantage.

Time has not ceased to run and many centuries are yet before this noble and historic city. Let it but have the genuine and lofty purposes of its Franklin, let it but imitate his spirit of individual initiative and indomitable courage, let it but have his genius for concentration, consolidation and co-operative citizenship, and it will come to pass that Philadelphia will gain that high rank among the cities of the world to which it is so clearly destined.

When in the infancy of Philadelphia and shortly after Franklin first walked its streets, Thomas Penn visited his colony, the leading men of the little city presented him a petition in which they asked him so to foster education and culture that Philadelphia would become under his enlightened patronage "the Athens of America."

Thus early did our forebears "hitch their wagon to a star." This also was Franklin's ideal for his adopted city and while he lived it was indeed "the Athens of America." If it has fallen away from that high estate, it is because there have been too few Franklins in succeeding generations and too much of the dry rot of excessive family pride. With the development of our municipal government we have forgotten the spirit of individual initiative and have left the noblest projects for the ad-

vancement of our city to sordid politicians rather than to our true intellectual leaders.

The time is past when Philadelphia can become the commercial metropolis of this country. What of it? There is something more in life than traffic or commerce. If Florence had only developed the commercial spirit, it would not be today a Mecca for all who prefer culture to mere money-making.

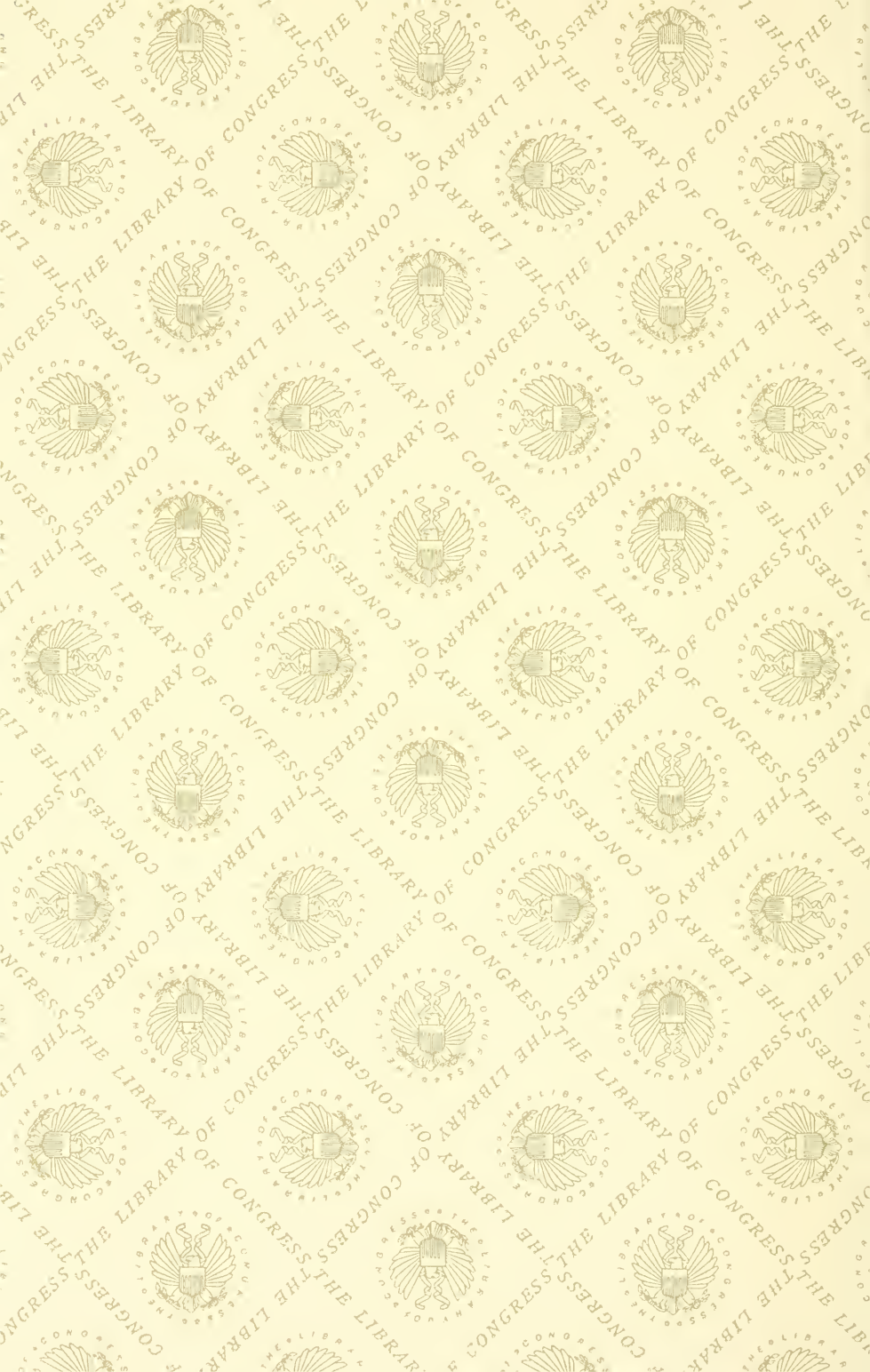
Men and brethren, is it too much to hope that Philadelphia may again have in full measure the spirit of her Franklin? As a master builder he was a true Florentine and a worthy yoke-fellow of the great Leonardo and Michel Angelo. Let this generation be actuated by his civic enterprise and it will then build in the lofty spirit of the Commune of Florence six centuries ago, when it ordered its illustrious leader, Arnolfo, "to make a design for the renovation of Sancta Reparata in a style of magnificence which neither the industry nor power of man can surpass," giving as a reason "that this Commune should not engage in any enterprise unless its intention be to make the result correspond with that noblest sort of heart which is composed of the united will of many citizens."

Such was the spirit of Franklin! Such should be the spirit of Philadelphia!

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