

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S ORIGINAL LETTERS ABOUT BALLOONS.

BY ABBOTT LAWRENCE ROTCH.

The publication of my paper, "Benjamin Franklin and the First Balloons," elicited the following letter to the Society from our English associate, Mr. A. H. Church:

"You may be interested to hear that the originals of two of the letters of Benjamin Franklin, F. R. S., are preserved in the archives of the Royal Society. They are in Guard-Book No. 73—a volume which contains letters and papers received by the Society between Nov. 6, 1783 and March 4, 1784.

The letter of Aug. 30, 1783, occupies 5 pages. It is a holograph textually reproduced on pp. 260—263 of Vol. XVIII. of the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*. But the original contains a foot-note or second postscript, also in Franklin's own handwriting, which has not been printed. It runs thus:—

'A Pamphlet is printing in which we are to have a full & perfect Acc^t. of the Experiments hitherto made, &c.

'I will send it to you.

'M. Montgolfier's Air to fill the Globe has hitherto been kept secret; some suppose it to be only common Air heated by passing thro' the Flame of burning Straw, and thereby extremely rarefied. If so, its Levity will soon be diminish'd, by Condensation, when it comes into the cooler Region above.'

The 6th and 7th pages of this manuscript are blank but between them has been inserted a small quarto leaf giving on the recto a description in French of the dimensions, weight, lifting-power, air-displacement, &c. of the balloon. This account is completed on the verso, on which also occurs this note, in autograph:

'Sept. 2. I add this paper just now given me. B. F.'

The other letter is that of Oct. 8, 1783, and occupies two pages. The name of the addressee and the subscription are in Franklin's autograph but the body of the letter is in a less flowing and more clerky hand."

In the Notes appended to the letters which I printed, it is stated that both Bigelow and Smyth, in their compilations of Franklin's writings, give the letter of August 30, 1783, with the second postscript and the calculations relating to the balloon. It now appears that these are contained in the original letter preserved by the Royal Society of London. It seems likely that Mr. Bigelow had access to this letter but Professor Smyth states that he used the draft in the library of the University of Pennsylvania for the body of the letter and the first postscript, completing the document from a press-copy in the possession of Dodd, Mead & Co. of New York. This copy was since purchased by me, and, as I have already pointed out, does not include these additional data which are now cited by Mr. Church from the letter in London. Nevertheless, it is probable that my press-copy is from this letter and that either the latter portion was not copied, or if copied, that the thin sheet has been lost.

In order to verify Professor Smyth's reproductions of three of Franklin's letters concerning balloons, which differed in certain details from my copies, Professor Morris Jastrow, librarian of the University of Pennsylvania, kindly allowed me to inspect the Franklin documents which were purchased for his library in 1903. Here are rough drafts of three letters that subsequently were written out fairly and copied in a press. Two of these letters, namely, those of August 30 and October 8, 1783, we now know to be in the archives of the Royal Society, and the third, dated November 21, 1783, the late Gaston Tissandier, of Paris, claimed to have had in 1887. Thus of the five original letters of which I possess copies, the existence of only those of November 30 and December 1, 1783, still remains unknown.

Mr. Church states that the letter of October 8, 1783, is not a holograph, and the similar handwriting in my copy

indicates that it is a facsimile. In fact it may be assumed that the five press-copies which I reproduced in the last volume of our *Proceedings* were made from the letters as sent, the discrepancies noted between three of them and the letters printed by Professor Smyth being due to his adoption of the drafts with numerous erasures and interlineations, besides occasional differences of expression. The collection at the University of Pennsylvania contains but one autograph letter about ballooning, written to Sir Joseph Banks on December 15, 1783, and textually reproduced by Professor Smyth.

Through the courtesy of Dr. I. Minis Hays, secretary of the American Philosophical Society, I consulted the proof-sheets of his catalogue of the Franklin papers owned by that Society. The collection of letters is voluminous but the catalogue, which specifies every subject mentioned by Franklin in his correspondence, revealed nothing worthy of mention concerning balloons.

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