An Architectural Summary
of
Franklin Court
and
Benjamin Franklin's House

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This report is an architectural summary of the available documentary and archaeological facts related to the physical appearance of Franklin Court, in Independence National Historical Park. It includes a conjectural plot plan of the Court, and conjectural floor plans of Benjamin Franklin's own house which stood in the middle of the Court. Written on these plans at the appropriate location are quotes from the documentation gathered so far by the National Park Service Historians and Archeologists.

Three particularly valuable documentary sources have been included in facsimile for handy reference: two 18th century sketches of the first and second floor plans of Franklin's house, and the Philadelphia Contributionship Fire Insurance Survey of the house made in 1766.

I was asked in March 1969, by the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, Division of Historic Architecture, to represent them on a team to investigate whether the known data would indicate that a reasonably accurate reconstruction of the Franklin Court complex was possible.

To present an objective architectural summary of what we know about Franklin Court, I found it essential to also suggest what we don't know.

There is a tantalizing quantity of pertinent description which has survived in correspondence, and in the enclosed survey and sketches. For example, the surveyor's mention of "A Rich Chimney piece" indicates the relative position of the Franklin House "Old Dining Room" in the rank of elegance of Philadelphia Architecture. But such a description falls far short of indicating the very form of the architectural element. The design of this chimney piece must, from the standpoint of an architect in the Branch of Restorations, be listed as an unknown. All such "unknowns" have been included with the annotated "known" facts on the drawing to which they pertain.
I hasten to add that even these rudimentary conjectural plans are subject to personal interpretation, and never will be otherwise unless further historical or archeological documentation can be more definitive.

On the plot plan (sheet No. 1) I have indicated areas where additional archeological investigations should be made. These are areas which have possibly been undisturbed since 1812 when the Franklin structures were torn down; yet were not available to be included in the 1953 and 1961-2 NFS archeological investigation programs.

It has been a great pleasure to be assigned to this team. The Historians and Archeologists, who have assembled the material which I have drawn upon, have had their reward for the good job they did in the fascinating pursuit. My pleasure has not only been the challenge of the jig-saw puzzle aspect of putting together the plans, but of course the pleasure of reading these delightful hints to Franklin's family life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My personal answer to the question assigned: whether the known data would indicate that a reasonably accurate reconstruction of the Franklin Court complex was possible -- is, no.

Anyone's answer to this question must relate to that individual's standards or aspirations for presenting Benjamin Franklin to people.

In facing the unknowns and what would be called for if a reconstruction were attempted, I am overwhelmed with the conjectural decisions which would have to be made by the architect.
Let us consider "A Rich Chimney piece" in the "old Dining Room," even when it is in fact further modified by presumably being flanked by "fluted Collums & half pilasters with intabliture." When the architect has conjecturally decided how high the ceilings might have been, and fixed a possible dimension for the width of the room, he must then choose a size for the fireplace openings, and then a possible width for the chimney masonry mass. Having done this, he would perhaps turn to architectural books which may have been owned by the 18th century architect Robert Smith, who may have dictated the design of such important elements in the house. And from these books he could choose a plate which shows possibly three chimney pieces. The question then to be asked would be -- which of the three might the 18th century Robert Smith have chosen for Benjamin Franklin's dining room? Having made this choice, he would then start sketching to see how this choice would fit with the chosen dimensions, and how it would compose with fluted engaged flat (or possibly round?) columns, with half pilasters flanking them, and all under a full entablature of an architectural order of his choice.

And when he has made all these basic decisions, there are a myriad of other decisions of construction methods, moulding profiles and the carving which probably made the insurance surveyor add the adjective "Rich."

The aspect of this process which in my opinion would make a reconstruction of Franklin's house unreasonable, is the extreme degree to which the assigned architect's choice would enter the project. Based on the architect's knowledge of the local 18th century building practices, the house would be an amalgam of Delaware Valley 18th century architecture.
I personally would not want to commit to three dimensional materials, and ostensibly a factual presentation, that which I knew was a selection of numerous conjectural alternatives.

More appropriate in my opinion, would be a treatment of Franklin Court which states only what we know in three dimensional materials, yet includes a presentation of all of Franklin's enlightened life through other media.

Would it be more effective to present within the preserved and reconstructed shells of the Market Street houses, those objects, etc. which illustrate the varied facets of his life, displayed in spaces which would be used by the visitor as an introduction to a two dimensional celluloid and sound, 1970's portrayal of the man: his life in Franklin Court and Philadelphia, but also his life as it extended in ideas and deeds across the world and forward in time to us?

Physically such a presentation could be within a structure attached to the Market Street houses straddling Franklin's 1787 passageway, yet allowing the passageway to freely enter the Courtyard as always.

Without literal attempt, Franklin's garden could be respected by the use of Plane trees, flowering shrubs and "a very large Mulberry."

And on the house site itself could be presented a model of our conjectural idea of the original Franklin Court, surrounded with an exhibit of artifacts and documentation pertaining to the Court and house, and shafts which would allow the visitor to look down at the few intelligible archaeological survivals.
I think that with such a presentation the visitor could exit to Chestnut Street feeling fulfilled -- having been inspired with the unbelievable scope of this man's life, and having been elated by the close "touch" of the honest presentation of that which we know to have been his.
Sketch Plan of the First Floor of Benjamin Franklin's House, pre-1786

Franklin Papers, Vol. 4½, pt. 1, p. 110
American Philosophical Society Library

Ink sketch on back of a laid paper letter addressed "To Doctor F." [Franklin] from John Huske (a Bostonian and subsequently a member of Parliament) on a political subject, written c.1766 [opinion of APS MSS Librarian Mr. Murphy Smith].

Franklin probably drew the sketch, as the ink writing immediately above it is his hand. The unusual upper case B has similar elaborations to those of a French stencil set owned by Franklin and now deposited at the American Philosophical Society.

The original sketch was full size 1 13/16" E-W dimension x 2 1/16" N-S dimension.

Independence National Historical Park negative No. 7826.
Sketch Plan of the Second Floor of Benjamin Franklin's House, pre-1786

Franklin papers, Vol. 66, p. 124
American Philosophical Society Library

Pencil sketch on back of a laid paper receipt written by Benjamin Franklin in ink:

"Receiv'd May 17, 1764 of Benjamin Franklin,
Eleven Pounds for Four Reams of Money Paper
at 55/pr Ream
P me / £11.0.0

[Signature] Jacob [Gagy]."

Franklin probably drew this sketch. He was in Philadelphia when he wrote the receipt. As there would have been no reason for him to take the receipt with him when he departed in Nov. 7, 1764 for England, we can say that he probably drew the plan sometime between May and November 1764.

The original sketch was full size 16 3/8" square.

Independence National Historical Park negative No. 7827.
Jan. 9, 1766

A house house belonging to Benjamin Franklin, situate on the north side of High Street between the 28th and 29th streets where his family dwell.

36 feet square - 3 stories high - 14 1/2 inch walls - 3 rooms on a floor - partitions in the east most part of each floor 9 inch brick wall. The same floor is in the west most part Studd'd & plastered with half plaster. A deep room below, unprovided. A round - four pediment - will be provided a rich chimney piece, fluted pilasters at half pilasters with inlaid tiles. The other side of the rooms and passage below - inclosed pediment high, with fret and cymatium cornice. Through out the rooms has a chimney piece with tabernacle frame pediment. The south the second story room inclosed pediment high, fret cymatium and plain. Double cornice through the whole. A chimney piece in one of the rooms with tabernacle frame pediment. The chimney Breast Inclosed a shallow and single cornice throughout. The third story, Gavel plastered away out in roof.

Two stories of stairs Ramp? Bracketed and plain under long go - bracketed, plain in middle and out.

Mobilion room - 2 large rooms house with loop window each and a new kitchen in celler.

Gunning Read

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Fig. 2. Fire Insurance Survey of Franklin's House, 1766. Courtesy of The Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire.