

Three may
keep a secret,
if two of them
are dead.

Poor Richard's Almanack

IN FRANKLIN'S FOOTSTEPS An Interview with Ralph Archbold

by William C. Kashatus

Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky (circa 1816) by American neoclassical artist Benjamin West (1738-1820). Detail of a chalk portrait of

Greater hero worship may be accorded to other historical figures, but Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) has, for better or worse, been more commonly identified with the American national character. His remarkable success as a printer, as well as the popularity of his essays, aphorisms, and almanacs, allowed him to spread his notions of industry and frugality among the common people. In the process, he became a lightning rod for controversy, as well as a rallying point for the American way of life. Even today, his achievements remain legendary.

Franklin was a world-renowned scientist whose fundamental contributions improved the understanding of electricity and the Gulf Stream. His invention of the stove that bears his name and bifocals gave evidence that he was equally at home with the practical as well as the theoretical. In June 1752, he performed his famous kite experiment. His insatiable curiosity and considerable ambition prompted him to establish a host of civic and charitable institutions, including Pennsylvania Hospital; a volunteer fire company; a subscription library; the American Philosophical Society; the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania); the first fire insurance company; and Pennsylvania's first military unit. No less impressive were his contributions to the political culture of the fledgling nation.

His Albany Plan of 1754 provided a blueprint for colonial confederation and a precedent for unity after the American Revolution. From 1757 to 1762, he served as the General Assembly of Pennsylvania's representative to Great Britain, and later as the colonies' emissary to France. During the Revolutionary War, Franklin was the center of a whirlwind of activity. When appointed postmaster general by the Continental Congress, he turned over his salary for the relief of wounded patriot soldiers. Serving on many local and congressional committees, he worked tirelessly to procure lead and gunpowder for the army. In 1776, he signed the Declaration of Independence and two years later negotiated and signed the Treaty of Alliance with



Ralph Archbold, as Philadelphia's official Benjamin Franklin, greets visitors as they discover the city's historic neighborhoods.

France to further the American cause. Not only did he serve as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, but that year he was also elected president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

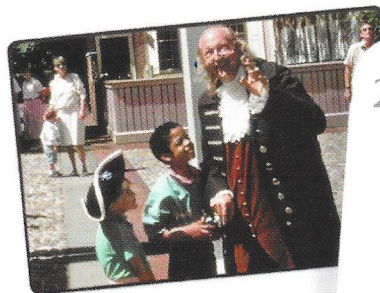
His sheer presence gave credibility to the debates of the federal convention that forged a new constitution for the young nation (see "The Call for the Constitution" by Paul E. Doutrich, Spring 1987). Although he had no love for debate, he sat patiently during the deliberations and watched as

younger men learned what he already seemed to know. Perhaps his premier biographer, Carl Van Doren (1885-1950), who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1939 for his study, captured the essence of Franklin best when he described the founding father as a "harmonious human multitude," who would have been "great in any age and in any place" because of his "extraordinary amalgam of mind and will, talent and art, strength and ease, wit and grace" (see Benjamin Franklin, Image maker" by William C. Kashatus III, Fall 1990).

Now, more than two hundred years after his death, the quick wit and timeless wisdom of Benjamin Franklin is brought to life by historical interpreter Ralph Archbold. Archbold's convincing portrayal of Philadelphia's

founding father has won him appearances on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and

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Archbold, as Franklin (right), creates excitement as he strolls through Independence National Historical Park and nearby streets, prompting both residents and visitors to enjoy the historic city.

Whereas all Government ought to be instituted and supported for the Security and Protection of the Community as such and to enable the Individuals who compose it to enjoy their Natural Rights and the other Blessings which the Order of Nature has bestowed upon Mankind. And whenever these great Ends of Government are not obtained the People have a Right by common Consent to change it and take such Measures as to them may appear necessary to promote their Safety and Happiness. And Whereas the Inhabitants of this former State have in Consideration of Protection only tacitly acknowledged Allegiance to the King of Great Britain, and the said King has not only withdrawn that Protection but commenced and still continues to carry on with unabated Cruelty a most cruel and unjust War against them, employing therein not only the Troops of Great Britain but foreign Mercenaries, Savages and Slaves for the avowed purpose of reducing them to a total and absolute Submission to the despotic Domination of the British Parliament (with many other Acts of Oppression more fully set forth in the Declaration of Congress) whereby all Allegiance and Fidelity to the said King and his Successors are dissolved and at an end, and all Powers and Authority derived from him cease in these Colonies. And Whereas it is absolutely necessary for the Welfare and Safety of the Inhabitants of this Colonies that they be henceforth free and Independent States: That just permanent and proper forms of Government be chosen by them derived from, and founded on the Authority of the People only, agreeable to the Principles of the Honorable American Congress.

We the Representatives of the Freemen of Pennsylvania in General Convention met for the Express purpose of forming such a Government, considering the goodness of the great Governor of the Universe (who alone knows to what degree of Liberty, Happiness, and Prosperity may obtain by perfecting the Arts of Government) in permitting the People of this State by common Consent and without Violence to assemble to form for themselves such just Laws as they have thought best for governing their future Society, and being fully convinced that it is our Indispensable Duty to establish such Original Principles of Government as will best promote the general Happiness of the People of this State and their Posterity, and provide for future Improvements without participating in any Justice against any particular Class, Sex or Denomination of Men whatever. Do by Virtue of the Authority vested in us by our Constitutive Oath, Declare and Establish the following Declaration of Rights, and frame of Government to be the Constitution of this commonwealth, and to remain in force therein forever unaltered, except in such Articles as shall hereafter on Experience be found to require Improvement, and which shall by the same Authority of the People fully Delegated as this frame of Government doth be amended or improved for the more Effectual obtaining and securing the great Ends and Design of all Government herein before Mentioned.

Benjamin Franklin 89

A house without woman or firelight, is like a body without soul or sprite.

Poor Richard's Almanack

the Disney Channel. Archbold is the recipient of the Council of Peers Award of Excellence, the highest honor of the National Speaker's Association, and the Invest in America Eagle Award, presented to him by Malcolm Forbes. Philadelphia Magazine bestowed him with a "Best of Philly Award" for his portrayal of Franklin. His blue chip corporate clients—among them a number of Pennsylvania firms and industries—include the Franklin Institute, Blue Cross of Pennsylvania, PECO Energy, DuPont Corporation, General Motors Corporation, Air Products Inc., American Stock Exchange, United States Army, General Electric Corporation, National Association of General Contractors, and the University of Pennsylvania. Styling his portrayal after his research at well known Franklin collections across the nation, Archbold's natural attributes—wispy, shoulder-length hair, a portly waistline, and charming disposition—have enabled him to become the City of Philadelphia's official Ben Franklin.

Archbold is one of a growing number of interpreters who participate in living history interpretation, one of the most popular educational and entertainment movements in the nation whose members include the National Park Service, Revolutionary War and Civil War reenactors, and individual educators, historians, and curators among others.

Unlike traditional or academic history, living history focuses on empathy as well as understanding, encouraging observers to have their own experience with an historical figure. The challenge for historians like Archbold is to understand and present Franklin as honestly and as accurately as possible. This involves integrating the historical figure's own words and his or her own experiences into their portrayal, but in a unique way that engages rather than intimidates audiences.

In this interview, conducted in Philadelphia's Society Hill on a sunny July morning, Ralph Archbold discusses his three decades of involvement with living history and his interpretation of Ben Franklin, the Keystone State's most famous founding father.

How did you become interested in Benjamin Franklin?

My interest in Franklin didn't really start until the early 1970s. Until that time, I only knew a little bit about him, even though there were a number of coincidences between my own life and his. For example, we share the same birth date—January 17—as well as some of the same interests. Like Franklin, I also had a little candlemaking business when I was young as well as a neighborhood newspaper that I published and a lending library for my friends. But it wasn't until I was thirty-one years old and began performing him at Greenfield Village, near my hometown of Dearborn, Michigan, that I took a keener interest in him.

Greenfield is a historical village that is very popular, and it was there that I began portraying Benjamin Franklin as a summer job. My performance was only fifteen minutes long and I did it throughout the day. Shortly after, I was approached by a dinner theater, which asked me to be a narrator for a series

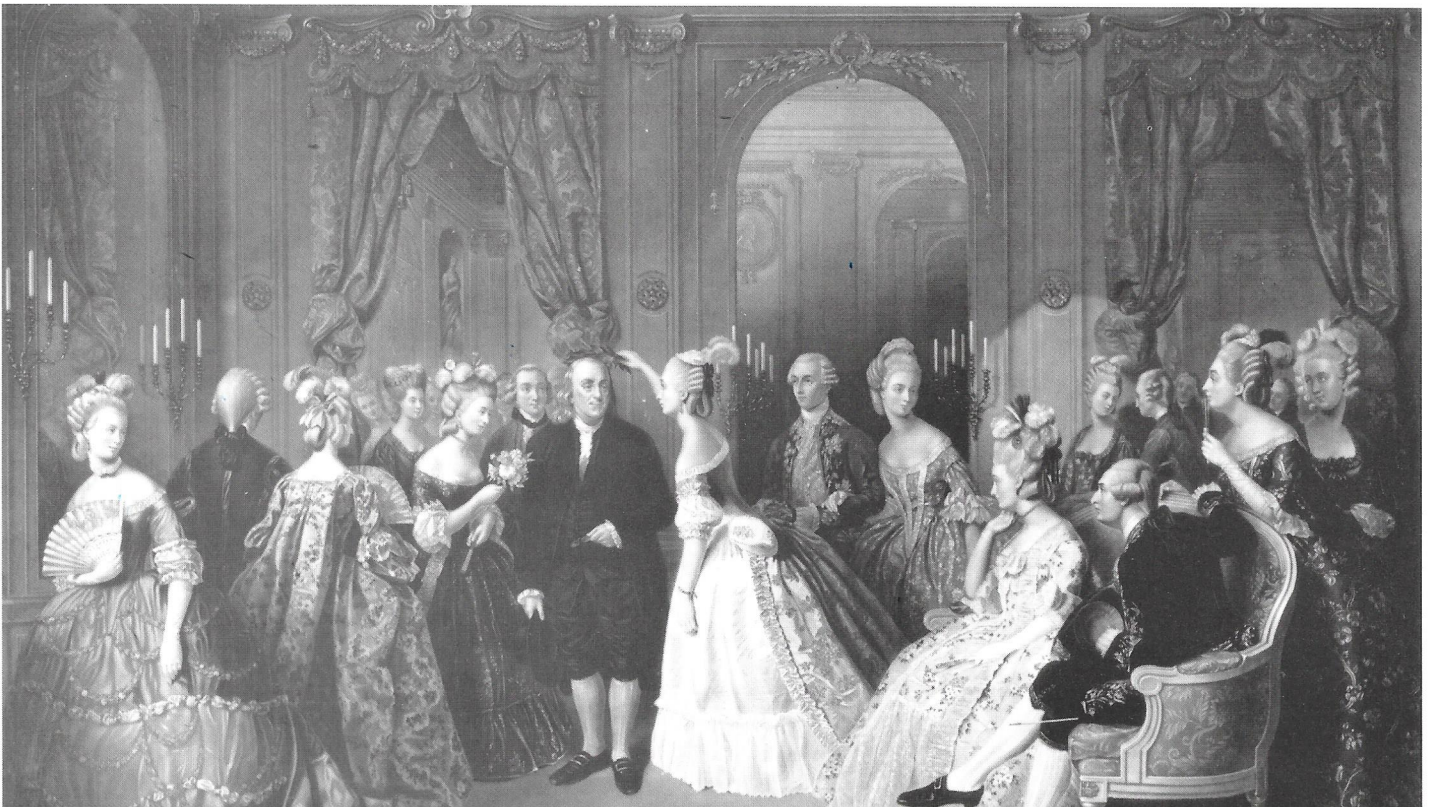
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Pennsylvania's Declaration of Rights of 1776 (above) is signed on every page by Franklin, president of the committee that created it. Archbold (right) is in demand at both private and public events.



Archbold imparts Franklin's adventures and wisdom under a mulberry tree (above) on the very spot where a mulberry tree stood for Franklin to sit under. Franklin as depicted in an engraving (below) by W. O. Geller, after a painting by Baron Jolly Bruxelles, entitled Franklin Surrounded by Ladies of the Court (about 1830).



of historical vignettes. The response was so overwhelming that the performance ran four nights a week for a year and a half. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I was performing for school groups.

Could you ever have imagined the success you now enjoy?

No, not really. I think my initial success was due to the fact that I began performing Franklin on the eve of the 1976 Bicentennial when people were eager to learn more about the nation's early history. Public interest was growing by leaps and bounds. So I created a troupe called "Poor Richard's Americans." We had George Washington, Annie Oakley, Mark Twain, Henry Ford—different figures from history who would tell their own personal story. It was a wonderful experience. By the early 1980s, corporate groups were flying me to Philadelphia and Boston to perform. Although there were plenty of actors who were already doing Franklin in those cities, they were not very good at doing the research or telling his story in an interpretive way. They were there for the audience to appreciate their performance and how much they looked like Franklin. Some even went to great lengths, taking as much as three hours to put on make-up and a wig. All I had to do was get up in the morning and brush my hair!

When I moved to Philadelphia in 1983, my career just took off. The move gave me the opportunity to be in a unique position to serve a need and the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau gave me the opportunity to do it. Over the years I've agreed to several contracts where my image is used for

promotional purposes. Of course, the one with the greatest exposure is on behalf of the City of Philadelphia. As a result, I am now the official Ben Franklin for the city and serve many of the conventions and meetings in the area.

My biggest client other than the City of Philadelphia is Franklin First, a bank in Wilkes-Barre, in northeastern Pennsylvania. The campaign there has been so successful that when the bank was sold a couple of years ago they not only kept the name, but renewed my contract for another three years. Other clients include the University of Pennsylvania and the Franklin Institute. Additionally, I am on television five or six times a month here in Philadelphia and much more frequently in the Wilkes-Barre area where I also find myself on billboards and on the sides of buses. I feel like a celebrity when I travel up there and people stop me for my autograph. I only have to remember that it is Ben Franklin they recognize—not Ralph Archbold.



Braddock and Franklin, by Frederick James (1845-1907), depicts Franklin's meeting with British Major General Edward Braddock. Archbold (above) created his interpretation of Franklin in 1983.



What are some of the more memorable experiences you've enjoyed over the years?

The bicentennial of the Constitution in 1987 was a big year. I had a lot of fun working with President Ronald Reagan, Chief Justice Warren Burger, and members of the Congress. Another enjoyable experience for me that year was meeting Franklin's descendants. But the most rewarding experience for me is sitting under the mulberry tree at Franklin Court in Independence Park each summer morning. That is real interpretation. What I'm doing there is just what Franklin did when he returned from France in 1785 and he received his visitors. I'm doing that with the visitors to Philadelphia. When they come by I question them. I want to know where they're from, what their interests are. Then I will talk about some experience Franklin had they they can relate to. If it's an older group, I might tell about the invention of the bifocals. If it's a group of youngsters, my experiments with electricity. If they indicate any interest in a specific area, I'll take it from there. You must know your audience.

How do you stay fresh and motivated while keeping a frenetic schedule?

I may do a hundred meetings and conventions a year and four hundred school programs as well. While it's the same show, I have a different audience every time. That's something I discovered six years ago. I really wasn't paying much attention to the audience so my performance began to get stale. I seriously wondered whether I had had enough of old Ben.

When you're always looking inward, or constantly worrying about yourself, then things do become boring. But as soon as you start looking at others and start enjoying them, you become rejuvenated.

I am more of an interpreter than an actor. My focus isn't on my performance as much as it is on getting others to love Benjamin Franklin and appreciating some of his ideas. That can be hard work because you have to challenge the "Disney image" they've grown up with. They've seen Robert Lawson's character of Franklin that Disney Studios made into a cute little movie called *Ben and Me*. I want to get beyond that image. I want people to understand the depth of Franklin, his role as a diplomat as well as a scientist.

One thing I learned early on in my interpretation is what is written to be read does not always perform well. In 1975, I met with Howard DiSilva, who performed Franklin in the film *1776*. He was everyone's image of Franklin, the leading impersonator at that time. He tried a one-man Franklin show and it just didn't work. He said the problem was that the script called for Franklin's words as he had written them and it just didn't work. You really need to translate the written word into the spoken word.

Initially, I had some reservations about performing extemporaneously before an adult audience. I thought that they would want a lot of detail I just couldn't provide. But that wasn't the case. Sure, there were some people who wanted more detail and they would come to me after a performance. Basically what most people wanted to know was how Franklin felt about certain issues. What were his emotions? How was his life similar to theirs? What were his loves? What were his passions? They also want to hear stories. It doesn't matter if you're young or old. People really want to hear the small slices of life that bring a historical figure to life. Corporate groups are just like school groups in that sense. Both want to be inspired by Franklin. So I will give them his philosophy, sometimes his quotes from *Poor Richard's Almanack* or the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, or talk about his thirteen virtues that lead to success. Telling stories is really what I do in my interpretation of Franklin.

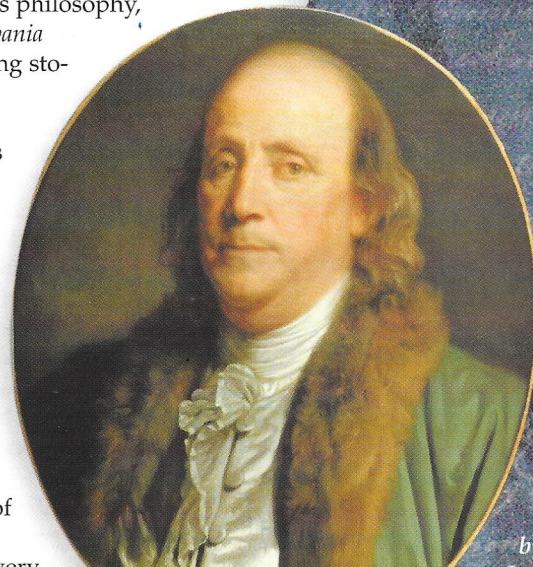
If history is, as scholars claim, a matter of interpretation, what is your interpretation of Benjamin Franklin?

My interpretation of Benjamin Franklin is constantly evolving. I cannot possibly do all of the research that needs to be done in order to portray a historically accurate Franklin. I rely upon many sources—as many books as I can get my hands on, and historians, whether they be from Independence National Historical Park, the University of Pennsylvania, or the American Philosophical Society. I'm a member of the Friends of Franklin, an organization dedicated to preserving the values and contributions of Franklin. The more you read, the more you research, the more you discover that you don't know for certain many things about the man. So, it's not just my interpretation, but rather the insight of many people.

My personal feelings about Franklin, however, are that he was very

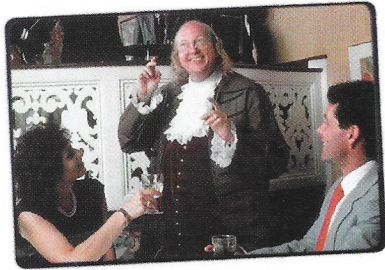
Be slow in
choosing a
friend, slower
in changing.

Poor Richard's Almanac



Portrait of
Benjamin Franklin
by Jean Batiste

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Children are entertained and educated by a Franklin maxim, "Little strokes fell great oaks," printed by a functioning Franklin printing press (above). Archbold stays in character (left) when portraying the founding father.

influence. The greatest vehicle he employed was his writing ability. With a clever little piece he could actually change minds. Although he was not listened to very much at the federal convention of 1787, he had an influence by just being there and giving credibility to the convention. I also think that his people skills, to be able to listen and say the right thing, to use his journalistic skills to synthesize, and then focus were among his greatest talents. Those skills were used many times throughout his life—during the Second Continental Congress, during his diplomatic missions in Europe, during the federal convention. That ability came, in part, from his shrewd business sense, in part from the survival techniques he acquired as a boy when he left Boston, and in part from his skills of observation and translation. All these things allowed him to influence the man sweeping the street as well as the Quaker banker. And that really was a broad range of influence.

How do you deal with Franklin's personal foibles and shortcomings, such as his poor relationship with his

...a very good listener as well as communicator through the written word. He had a unique skill for taking a complex issue and simplifying it so that it was clear, concise, readable by his audience, and understandable. He was largely self-educated, but realized the importance of education. He collected the wisdom of the ages in his *Almanack* and put it into language that his generation could understand. Carl Van Doren, his most famous biographer, said it best when he called Franklin a "harmonious human multitude."

What do you consider his greatest achievement?

It's difficult to identify any one achievement because Franklin was such a broad figure in terms of his experience and



A portrait of Benjamin Franklin, seated with a cane, was engraved by T. Phillibrown, an artist active between 1830 and 1860.

Where carcasses are, eagles will gather, and where good laws are, much people flock thither.

Poor Richard's Almanack

ference to his wife?

I handle the man's shortcomings with humor and a little irreverence, just as he would have done. When people challenge me, for example, on Franklin's poor treatment of his son William, the Royal Governor of New Jersey, I simply respond, "Well, he deprived me of everything I worked so hard to accumulate all those years. My position, my wealth—he wanted to take it all away from me. I couldn't understand how he could side with England during the War for American independence. When I approached him on the subject he said he was a loyalist.

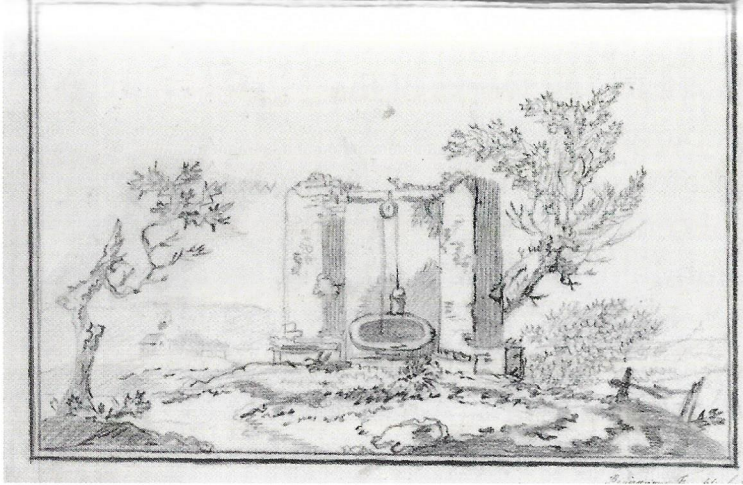
I said I, too, am a loyalist—I am loyal to America and I think you should be also. He said that he was loyal to the king. I thought about it for a moment, then I realized that my wife and I were not married when he was born, which explained a lot. Of course, you realize what that made him!

Women often come up to me, pointing a finger and say, "You went to Paris and stayed there all those years and you left your wife Deborah here in America. That is disgraceful!" And I simply respond, "Well, the fact that she passed away two years before I left gave me an indication that she didn't want to go!" Those kinds of responses make people stop and think for a while. It disarms them and soon the challenge dissipates into a smile.

Is Franklin difficult to portray because he created so many images—scientist, scholar, inventor, statesman, writer, publisher, philosopher—for himself? Which do you feel most comfortable with?

Franklin really isn't that difficult to portray. He is probably the easiest of the founding fathers to portray in a superficial manner because all you have to do is key in on one of those images. What *is* difficult is to capture the broad range of his talents and abilities. There are things about Franklin that almost border on the silly, there are others that are extremely serious, and still others that are quite profound. Again, you have to know your audience. When I am speaking to corporate groups I am very serious. When I'm talking about our Constitution, how these thirteen states came together, how Europe was watching what was going on here ready to recolonize this country, I am very serious. People get so caught up in that. Once I was speaking to a group of five hundred salespeople for the Nabisco Company. Most were under the age of thirty and really didn't have much interest in history. In fact, the reason for the convention was to promote teamwork, to get them to work together for the good of the company. The key for me was to present Franklin with conviction, with fervor, and to convince them that they were all part of Nabisco. That was the message I delivered, but I delivered it by focusing on the problems our nation overcame to unite. Within five minutes, they were like school children, sitting in silence and listening to me.

Any final words of advice for an aspiring living history performer?



Besides being a printer, inventor, philosopher, and statesman, Benjamin Franklin was also an artist; his sketch of his garden at Passy, his residence near Paris, is dated March 27, 1782.

heart. If you are telling stories for children, you are telling them for adults as well. More importantly, if you can get people to love the stories you tell as much as you love them, it will not only provide you with a lifetime annuity, but it is also very enriching to your soul. ❖

William C. Kashatus, of Paoli, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage. He also has a living history business of his own in which he portrays a wide range of figures including, Thomas Paine, William Penn, and William Franklin.

FOR FURTHER READING

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