

DIRTY OL' BEN'S LUST FOR LIFE

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

NOW THAT BEN Franklin's 300th birthday celebration is just around the corner, Philadelphia has planned a celebration that will feature a traveling exhibit, storytelling, walking tours, a ballet and a performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra, among other star-spangled events.

Of course, each of these festivities will highlight the more noble characterizations of Franklin that have become steeped in three centuries of folklore: "printer," "writer," "scientist," "inventor," "civic leader," "diplomat" and "Founding Father." Old Ben would have wanted it that way, too.

But there is another, less savory aspect of Philadelphia's "first citizen" that has been swept under the Franklin stove and must, for the sake of historical equity, be told:

Ben had quite a reputation with the women. At best, he was a hopeless flirt. At worst, a whore master.

There's been plenty of speculation that Franklin, who admitted to consorting with "low women"



Ben Franklin at the French court, with some of the "jolies femmes."

at age 18, had many affairs. At least one of these sexual encounters produced a son, William, who later became the royal governor of New Jersey. Some historians believe that Ben's flirtations produced three other offspring: Marianne and Cecilia Davies, and Judith Osgood.

Who could blame him for his wandering eye, though? Deborah

Read, his common-law wife, was a plain, fat, hot-tempered nag. No doubt she inspired Poor Richard's witty aphorism: "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half-shut afterwards."

Franklin appears to have been a regular cheat. He even shared his secrets on how to avoid getting caught. "If you persist in thinking a commerce with the

sex is inevitable," he writes to a twentysomething Cadwallader Colden in a June 25, 1745, letter, "you should prefer old women to young ones because there is no hazard of children," "they are more prudent and discreet," "the pleasure of corporal enjoyment is at least equal and frequently superior" and "they are so grateful!"

On at least one occasion, however, Ben was caught with his pants down. It happened in 1767, when he was visiting London. Charles Willson Peale, a young art student who would later become the famous portrait artist at his Craven Street apartment. Told that he was upstairs in the study, Peale quietly climbed the stairs and discovered the American statesman kissing a young wench who was sitting on his knee with her hands between his legs. Peale backed down the steps and made a quick sketch of the two lovebirds. Today that early piece of erotica can be found among

the rare treasures of the American Philosophical Society.

As Ben aged, his power to attract women apparently grew stronger. Serving as U.S. ambassador to France during the Revolution, Franklin met his match in the older ladies of the court who were seasoned practitioners in the art of flirtation. Madame Brillon was his favorite, though she never allowed him more than a kiss. Historians maintain that such relationships were an astute diplomatic ploy on Franklin's part to encourage French support for the Revolution.

But what about all the younger "jolies femmes" of Paris who hovered around Franklin like a swarm of butterflies, addressing him as "mon cher Papa"? At receptions they stood in line to sit on his lap, tousle the few strands of hair on his bald head and coo in his ear.

Old Ben, hands ever wandering, was ecstatic because, like Poor Richard, he knew that "happy's the wooing that's not long a doing!" ★

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