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Benjamin Franklin and the Sartorial Identity of Early America

By: Margot Rashba

Abstract: In 1776, Benjamin Franklin arrived in France charged with the mission of acquiring assistance for the American Revolution from the French monarchy. This choice was not made without purpose as Franklin was well known in France as a man of genius, the discoverer of electricity, a direct descendant of thinkers and scientists like Newton and Galileo. Franklin projected an image of Quaker simplicity, an identity that not only did not wholly represent himself but also catered to the French's preconceived ideas of America.

This paper explores how Franklin used dress and fashion to propagate a somewhat disingenuous image of himself and of American culture as a whole. The Treaty of Alliance that he orchestrated directly impacted the early republic's own evolving national and sartorial identity. This paper also highlights the effect that dress can have in a shifting political environment, particularly in France where luxury and social hierarchy could be determined by the company you kept and the clothes you wore. The early republic's sartorial identity was conflicted for on one hand, homespun clothing represented patriotism and commitment to the revolution, on the other hand luxury goods and emulation of French fashion signaled access to Europe's lifestyle and status. John Adams' and Franklin's differing experiences in France reveal that Adams was the one who more clearly embodied the 'simple Quaker' that Franklin was clearly not. America would continue to struggle to define its sartorial identity, a dilemma that played out in the newspapers of the early republic as they sought to curb the evils of luxury. Ultimately, this paper contributes to existing literature by illustrating how fashion and dress provide a methodology with which to analyze how key political figures like Franklin were able to alter the identity of the early republic with the simple decision of deciding what to wear.

Key words: *Benjamin Franklin, Revolutionary War, France, fashion, John Adams*

The American Revolution altered much about the nature of society and culture in the budding United States. The Revolution upended daily life as the colonies broke with the models they had used to govern their lives, social spheres, and economic ventures. This search for a new American identity played out in the sartorial realm, as America would look to new influences to inform the fashion identity of the nation. Benjamin Franklin's mission to France in 1776 to secure an alliance for the American cause defined the nature of the relationship between America and France in the Revolutionary period. This relationship would shape America's identity as it struggled to reconcile the luxury that it craved with the homespun republicanism that espoused the Revolutionary period. Upon his arrival in France, Franklin projected an image of Quaker simplicity that not only did not wholly represent Franklin himself but catered to the French's preconceived ideas of America. This image would serve to aid Franklin in his political endeavors as he cultivated a social circle within the French elite. After the alliance, the debates on fashion and luxury would continue to dominate the public forum in Philadelphia and in America more broadly. Benjamin Franklin's actions in France would prove to be the beginning of these discussions of luxury and the influence of foreign powers in America. His actions and distinct choice of clothing highlight the importance of fashion as a political tool that has the ability to shape and affect the decisions of key political actors.

Benjamin Franklin would seem to be an unlikely candidate for a fashion influencer given his pronouncements on virtue and luxury and its role in the making of a successful republic. As early as 1722, Franklin, writing as Silence Dogood, remarked on the 'Pride of Apparel' and its vices. He noted, "This Sort of Pride has been growing upon us ever since we parted with our Homespun Cloathes..."¹ Further, this pride in luxury causes deleterious effects on how people view each other as apparel will, "draw after them Crowds of Imitators, who hate each other while

they endeavour after a Similitude of manners. They destroy by Example, and envy one another's destruction."² This early debate on the nature of fashion as means of encouraging vice remains a theme in both Franklin's own writings and in those of Revolutionary America. Further, his denouncement of luxury, "rested on a notion of civic sobriety and a view of the tensions between material advance and social stability."³ Material advance and civic mindedness would be at odds in a republic that formed its foundation upon the renouncement of luxury goods.

This tension between luxury and the homespun would continue into the revolutionary period, as fashion and commercial goods were one of the defining points of conflict in the build-up to the Revolution. The passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 significantly aggravated the relationship between the colonies and the metropole. The colonists' protest of this act manifested in the form of a revolt against commercial goods, for if England was going to tax imports, the colonies would respond by not buying them. The British had consistently restricted the ability for the colonies to produce their own industrial and commercial goods, as the metropole used the colonies as a market for materials produced in Britain.⁴ The colonists' decision to break this flow of goods would have profound consequences not only economically but also in the nature of the identity of the colonies. The lifestyle of the colonies in this period was dependent on British goods, "and on the events in which finery of fashion, furniture, and food could be displayed and consumed."⁵ The boycott movement used pamphlets, newspapers, and public demonstrations to convince people to abandon English products. T.H. Breen has argued that, "18th century Americans communicated perceptions of status and politics through items of everyday material culture through a symbolic universe of commonplace 'things' which modern scholars usually take for granted but for which their original possessors were objects of great significance."⁶ This

seminal argument highlights the importance of commercial goods like clothing and dress to national consciousness and the mobilization of the boycott.

The response to the lack of consumption of British fashion manifested itself in the creation of the domestic manufacture of homespun clothing. Homespun clothing was created in the homes of the rebelling colonists as a direct opposition to British style and luxury. Further, “a patriot donned these unrefined products of household labor to renounce imperial hubris and to promote its antithesis.”⁷ Homespun was created with labor and money in the home itself, not as decorative and luxurious pieces, but to convey a political message, in theory uniting the rebels in outward and visible protest. Clothing had become, “a litmus test for nationalism and patriotism in the early republic.”⁸ Homespun clothing changed the social messaging of dress, for the choice to wear homespun became political ideology. Even the dialogue around virtue was centered on consumption for now, “a virtuous man or woman was one who voluntarily exercised self-restraint in the consumer marketplace.”⁹ While this manifestation of the virtuous Patriot may not have applied to all members of the early republic, this attitude reflects the ideology pushed by those that supported the Revolution.

In 1765, Franklin was in Britain, serving his second term as Pennsylvania’s agent in London.¹⁰ Parliament had clearly greatly underestimated the reaction of the colonists to the passage of the Stamp Act and sought answers from Franklin, calling him to appear before the House of Commons in 1766. In this examination, Parliament chiefly sought to understand the reaction of America towards the Stamp Act. The dialogue inevitably turned to domestic manufacture of homespun cloth as a form of protest. Franklin was asked:

Q. Don’t you think cloth from England absolutely necessary to them? A. No, by no means absolutely necessary; with industry and good management, they may very well supply themselves with all they want. Q. Will it not take a long time to establish that manufacture among them? and must they not in the mean while suffer greatly? A. I think

not. They have made a surprising progress already. And I am of opinion, that before their old clothes are worn out, they will have new ones of their own making.¹¹

Franklin stated the ease with which the colonists would be able to transition to domestic manufacturing, a firm renouncement of the previous respect given to Britain's goods.¹² For Franklin states that before 1763, "[The colonists] had not only a respect, but an affection for Great-Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce."¹³ This examination proved pivotal for Franklin's own career as it, "established Franklin's reputation as a political genius."¹⁴ This reputation would follow him as he journeyed to France in 1776.

The debate over homespun clothing would continue throughout the course of the Revolution particularly in Philadelphia, which would be the seat not only of the war effort but also of a growing society of consumer goods and luxury items like clothing. For, "by the early 1770s [Philadelphia] stood as the largest, most refined, and most fashionable city in the colonies, its position signified by the rise of conspicuous consumption and high style."¹⁵ Fashion helped people locate hierarchy in the midst of the social landscape, even determining commercial and cultural inclusion.¹⁶ This period of 'conspicuous consumption' was problematic especially given that part of the Revolution's propaganda and messaging was tied in its commitment to simple, domestically manufactured clothes.¹⁷ In the capital of this emerging republic there was an outright defiance towards the patriotic ideals of simple virtue. This conflict inevitably involved women, whose male partners sought to project the blame for their own morally questionable attire onto their wives. Displays of wealth and luxury, "were politically embarrassing and dangerous...because they signified disloyalty to the American cause in the nation's capital."¹⁸ Homespun clothing was not as easily adapted into American culture as Franklin had made it seem in his Examination to Parliament.

The way forward for the elite was to, “become the fashionable by rejecting fashion.”¹⁹ The refusal to give up luxury items from Europe signaled the tensions between the sartorial identity of the Philadelphia elite with the image of the new America that the leaders of the rebellion sought to create. Kate Haulman describes this process as a culture war, or “a struggle between competing visions of society, shaped by the ways in which certain hot-button topics, such as religion, morality...and the arts intersect with the institutions of the nation-state.”²⁰ The luxurious lifestyle of the Philadelphia elite seemed to be irreconcilable with the simplicity and plain attire of the Patriot. This tension serves to highlight the paradoxical nature of the messaging coming from the early Republic. Was America defined by simplicity or by the consumption of luxury goods? What image would this new nation seek to put forward to the world?

Franklin partook in this debate on the effects of consumerism that were sweeping the early Republic. Franklin possessed his own ideas of virtue embodied in his publication of *The Way to Wealth* in 1758 that contained moral axioms and advice in the form of the persona of Poor Richard. In one of the prefaces to *The Way to Wealth* it is noted that, “He [Franklin] had recognized the intimate relation between the private virtues and civic virtues, of liberty with morals..”²¹ This emphasizes the idea that moral precepts had political significance, and further that the moral health of a people was paramount to its success. The connection of luxury to the moral health of the nation continued to dominate the rhetoric of the early republic into the 1780s. Franklin continued to elucidate his views on luxury through the mouthpiece of Poor Richard. He noted, “When you incline to buy China Ware, Chinces, India Silks, or any other of their flimsey slight Manufactures; I would not be so hard with you, as to insist on your absolutely *resolving against it*; all I advise, is, to *put it off* (as you do your Repentance) *till another Year*.”²² Franklin emphasized the importance of virtues as the way to a healthy life noting, “*Simplicity, Innocence,*

Industry, Temperance, are Arts that lead to Tranquility, as much as Learning, Knowledge, Wisdom and Contemplation.”²³ These words of wisdom from Poor Richard on the effects of consumer culture would create a persona of the simple, virtuous colonist that came to define Franklin himself.

Franklin’s other early writings also paint a picture of his opinions on luxury. He wrote “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries” in 1755, a work printed and sold in Boston. This prescient writing noted that, “Britain should not too much restrain Manufactures in her Colonies...To distress is to weaken, and weakening the children weakens the whole family.”²⁴ This remark predicted that consumer goods would be the catalyst to induce conflict with Britain and the colonies. He further noted that, “Foreign luxuries and needless manufactures imported and used in a nation, do, by the same reasoning, increase the people—of that nation that furnishes them, and diminish the people of the nation that uses them.”²⁵ Franklin believed that luxury could become a public vice and that in order to improve, a society must prize industry and production over consumption.²⁶ Franklin’s words, while penned well before the 1770s, indicate the problems that grew in Philadelphia. Luxury sowed discord within the new nation as its members struggled to restrict themselves of European goods in order to remake a new identity. Franklin, while touting the values of virtue and simplicity, was still very much in tune with the effect both morally and politically that consumer goods like clothing could have on a people and a nation. It is this savviness that he brought to the court of France in his diplomatic mission.

In 1776, Franklin was cast into a wholly different role that would affect the course of the American Revolution. He was charged with a mission to, “appeal to a monarchy for assistance in establishing a republic.”²⁷ France was the logical choice for an ally to the American cause given

its commercial and political rivalry with Britain. Further, the French had already been supplying the rebels through Beaumarchais, a virtual ‘fairy godmother’ of the war effort.²⁸ The choice of Franklin as a commissioner and representative of the rebels was a purposeful and calculated move. While in the colonies Franklin was known as a printer, publisher, and civic force, in France he was admired by Voltaire, known as the discoverer of electricity, a man of genius, and the effective successor to Newton and Galileo.²⁹ Franklin not only had this scientific and philosophical following, but this would also not be his first visit with French society as he had already been to France in the 1760s. In the 1760s, Franklin was a different man, adapting to French culture, even donning a French wig.³⁰ But by the 1770s, he was remaking his image anew. Before Franklin’s arrival in 1776, the French already had their own ideas of the colonies. They pictured this New World as a primitive and innocent Eden, based on the philosophy of thinkers like Rousseau and his depiction of the ‘noble savage.’³¹ This thinking overflowed into what they perceived people from America would be like, including Franklin, despite his previous visit.

Franklin’s arrival in France was highly publicized and met with great enthusiasm. But his political motives were less easily discernible. His mission was delicate given that Vergennes, the minister of foreign affairs, did not want to seem like the French were automatically going to be outwardly aiding the Americans. Victory over the British was not yet a done deal by any means; there was still much to discuss. In this delicate balance, social capital and credit had a particular purpose. In French culture, ‘credit’ was, “used to describe the informal workings of influence and reputation in politics, social life, religious faith, and cultural production.”³² There was a value placed on the performance of appearance as a means of acquiring social influence. The court of the ancien régime in the eighteenth-century was criticized for its hypocrisy of

appearance, which introduced the attitude that, “nonmaterial forms of credit were acceptable only when backed by virtue and righteousness and that self-interest and worldly concerns indelibly tainted the exchange of credit.”³³ Fashion and style of dress reinforced social hierarchy and not only communicated social connections but also displayed moral character. As, “everyone should appear what he was, but might also appear what he aspired to be.”³⁴ Franklin had walked into a world of social influence and possession of virtue communicated through clothing – a world that he would tap into using his own sartorial image.

France was the unanimous leader of the fashion world in the eighteenth century, a rule that was established during Louis XIV.³⁵ French style of dress not only included clothes but also the way of life in which fashion played a key part. Clothing in French society was a personal reflection of self-image, full of signals that lent itself to performance and adoption of roles.³⁶ Foreign visitors, especially from England, would be put off by these social signals through dress as it necessitated learning a whole new way of communication.³⁷ Franklin himself would give off his own sartorial signals that, combined with his pre-existing reputation, would become the talk of Paris.

Fashion was in constant flux at court. This was defined by a certain element of satire, as these changes were often those that caught the imagination of court, even the most trivial ornaments like how one wore a flower or a piece of lace.³⁸ While the fashion of France in this period may be associated with luxury and exaggeration, as the eighteenth century progressed, “simplicity and ease of movement became more and more of a priority in city clothing.”³⁹ The French were increasingly emulating the English style of dress, clothing that reflected more of the virtuous simplicity of country life.⁴⁰ This trend of country dress brought with it romantic attitudes about the region as well. In the literary world, this was embodied in the fictionalized

rural pasts and the natural beauty of the terrain.⁴¹ While England was on the way to becoming a leader in the fashion world in their own right, in this period France maintained their dominance. French dress for most of the eighteenth century was defined by its stiffness and formal elegance; however, this new wave from the country brought with it its style of dress. The French philosophes admired the liberal politics of England and so choosing to wear simple country clothing was a nod to this intellectual current as well.⁴² Franklin's image of a simple man from America, a rural paradise to the French, dovetailed into this trend towards more plain clothing.

Franklin arrived in France to great fanfare dressed as a Quaker, clothed in plain attire, the picture of his own fictional persona of Poor Richard. He was by no means a Quaker. His views on religion were quite complicated, but he primarily ascribed to his own personal creed of virtues to cultivate a righteous life. His way of thinking derived from an eighteenth-century form of Aristotelian tradition.⁴³ Franklin believed in the malleability of man, a fitting sentiment given that he molded his own identity to suit his interests. Despite this, he did not see fit to correct anyone on their pronouncements of his Quaker simplicity. Franklin's, "religion while in France was America, and he adapted his rituals to suit the Parisian faithful."⁴⁴ Within a few weeks of arriving in France, Franklin could have already read seven paragraphs about him in the paper, six of which were lies. However, Franklin, "above all [was] a man of press, [he] appreciated the value of misinformation."⁴⁵

In the winter of 1776-1777 Franklin sat for a portrait that was used for an engraving. These engravings were made into medallions that were distributed as a campaign to cultivate French support for the American cause.⁴⁶ Franklin chose his clothes carefully for this portrait, using a plain brown coat, white lining, and a limp cap of marten fur that defined Franklin's appearance in Paris. His own natural hair appeared to peek out of the sides of the hat, perhaps

indicating that if the hat were not there, his hair could be worn natural. While there was a fashion for wearing natural-hair that started in the 1760s, this trend was still relatively new to French society given the popularity of the extravagant macaroni high powdered wigs that characterized the 1770s. At this time, the wig was still an important part of a man's appearance and most wig makers were French.⁴⁷ Thus, Franklin's decision to wear his natural hair was part of a calculated decision meant to invoke simplicity but nevertheless was in tune with the nascent fashion trends of the time. Further, the growing importance of plainer style of dress now, "expressed wealth, position, and power through personal activity and achievement."⁴⁸ Franklin became the embodiment of this trend, as his own scientific accomplishments and renown as a philosopher were enshrined in his style of dress. His un-coiffed hair caused the French to compare him to a Plato or Cato. The fur cap even made its way into the style at the time as hair was sculpted in its shape.⁴⁹

Franklin's goal was to appear as both a man of simplicity but also one of profound learning. Thus, the signature point in this portrait was his spectacles, indicating his scientific prowess. Charles Nicolas Cochin, the engraver of the likeness, had him pose three-quarters, not looking in the direction that his head was aimed. This gives the impression that Franklin had three ways of looking at the world: two through his glasses and a third around himself, a kind of social vision that only he could see.⁵⁰ This persona had an express purpose: to ingratiate himself with the people of France in order to secure aid for the war effort. This costume worked with French pre-existing notions of simplicity in the New World combined with their knowledge of Franklin as a sage philosopher.

These artistic depictions blended his real and supposed attributes to become more myth than reality. Franklin evolved into, through his fashion choices, "a stereotyped symbol of liberty

and reason.”⁵¹ His own personality was associated with that of Poor Richard. However, there is an inherent problem with this characterization given that Poor Richard is not just a figure of prudence and simplicity. His philosophy is oftentimes contradictory, the sayings “bawdy and practical in the early years; paradoxically, moral and cynical in the later.”⁵² Franklin’s French associates may have missed the irony in that Franklin’s literary persona was not meant to be taken literally at all times.

Almost immediately upon arriving, Franklin became the fashionable person to invite to every conceivable event in Paris. Franklin was able to disguise the motives of his mission by preoccupying himself with the events of the elite. In 1777, the medallions and engravings of Franklin’s portrait would be the gift of the season, people placing his likeness on top of mantles and in rooms, “where he functioned as a sort of a household god.”⁵³ Many of the prominent figures that Franklin met with commented on his simple clothing and countenance. Abbé Flamarens noted his own perceptions of Franklin in 1777, paragraphs that were widely quoted and have been paraphrased ever since. He wrote, “Dr. Franklin, who arrived a short time ago from the English colonies, is much sought after and entertained, not only by his learned colleagues, but by everyone who can gain access to him.”⁵⁴ This statement highlights the fact that Franklin was becoming more than his scientific discoveries, he was one of the most highly prized visitors to Parisian social circles. His appearance is described by Flamarens: “This Quaker wears the full dress of his sect. He has a handsome physiognomy, glasses always on his eyes, very little hair, a fur cap, which he always wears on his head, no powder, but a neat appearance.”⁵⁵ This description indicates what the French noticed about Franklin, namely his unique hairstyle, the fur cap, and his Quaker dress. Flamarens seems convinced that Franklin was in fact a Quaker, proof that Franklin did little to dispel myths and falsehoods that were spreading

about his personality and appearance. Flamarens commented on the plethora of prints and engravings of Franklin that were a common occurrence in France, indicating that France was inundated with images of him.⁵⁶ Franklin knew the extent to which his image was circulated writing to his sister, Jane Mecom, “This Popularity has occasioned so many Paintings, Bustos, Medals & Prints to be made of me, and distributed throughout the Kingdom, that my Face is now almost as well known as that of the Moon.”⁵⁷

However, these images were less concerned with Franklin’s facial features than with what he was wearing. France came to know Franklin through the medallions but the artists were interested in his headgear. By 1778, there were several versions of the medallion all depicting slightly different facial features yet still the same coonskin hat. This indicates that his choice of garb was important to those that were portraying him, even more so than his face. His facial features were meant to convey intellectual prowess, as displayed in a 1778 bust by Houdon that emphasizes his features as, “at once frank and dispassionate, earthy and wise.”⁵⁸ The personality ascribed to him given his choice of clothing directly informed the way in which the French public came to know him.

Franklin frequented the homes and social gatherings of the elite, some of which did not have the most favorable opinions of Franklin. While the true author of these writings is unknown, it is rumored to have been Marquise de Créque when she saw Franklin at a dinner. While it is highly unlikely that she was the one behind these writings, it is the unfavorable opinion of Franklin that is notable. The author finds that Franklin’s personality had not quite lived up to his reputation of a philosopher of great renown. He or she notes, “the ennui of hearing him spoke of as a social paragon and a marvel of cosmopolitan civilization.”⁵⁹ Chevalier de St. Louis agreed, disparaging the signature spectacles and, “bursting into laughter on contemplating

the grotesque countenance” of Franklin at the dinner table. These negative opinions illustrate that while Franklin may not have been popular for everyone, he was still thought to be rustic and simple. This shows that his choice of appearance was consistent even among those that were less charmed by it.

Franklin’s own thoughts in 1777 are recorded in his autobiography. His autobiography, while insightful, was designed as political education. Franklin in the work is, “the model of the American character, the image of the self-made man.”⁶⁰ As a whole it is, “a highly selective version of Franklin’s personal experience.”⁶¹ Thus while these observations are useful for building a picture of the time, the work represents a tailored version of his own thoughts. This reflects a common trend of Franklin’s whether it be in fashion or in his literary works to create an identity for himself, regardless of its accuracy. He created images that lasted far beyond his own lifetime. For, “Franklin was fond of conceiving himself as a projector, and this fondness is one of the most markedly eighteenth-century aspects of his personality.”⁶²

Despite this, his autobiography contains correspondence that provides a crucial look into Franklin’s own thoughts during his initial months in Paris. In a letter to Mrs. Emma Thompson in January of 1777 he also described his “very plainly dressed” appearance taking care to emphasize his spectacles and “fine fur cap.”⁶³ He noted, “Think how this must appear among the powdered heads of Paris!” while also expressing a desire that “the gentlemen in France would only be so obliging as to follow my fashion, comb their heads as I do mine.”⁶⁴ This statement is particularly amusing, since the fashion in Paris did in fact follow after Franklin as the elite sought to copy his fur hat and hair. These observations from Franklin indicate that he was well-aware of the effect that his appearance was having on the French public.

Meanwhile, Franklin still was in France for a reason: the republic's survival depended on it. In 1777, there was much to dismay about given that Washington's men were in retreat and it seemed as if the cause was doomed to fail. Yet, the Battle of Saratoga renewed hope. After Saratoga, there was a push to sign a commercial treaty, yet this was nearly the same as a declaration of war against Britain. Vergennes favored an open acknowledgement of war in order to make this point clear. Franklin played a key role in these affairs, meeting with Vergennes regularly, albeit discreetly. After Saratoga, Franklin even sent a holiday gift of a newly printed *Poor Richard* to his friends.⁶⁵ Franklin used his original appearance to cultivate his social and political connections. The parties were not all for nothing. By 1778, there was a push for the formal Treaty of Alliance that bound the countries together. France had their own goals with the treaty, namely those that were useful to their imperial agenda. This included access to the continent's abundant natural resources like lumber, the use of America's harbors to safeguard the French navy, and mutual commercial privileges. This would in effect wrap America into the orbit of the French Empire.⁶⁶ The Treaty of Alliance called for the mutual defense of France or the Union, a specifically military agreement. However, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce was arguably more significant due to the promotion of trade and commercial ties between the two countries.⁶⁷ The colonies had escaped one European country's consumer goods only to become interwoven with another, all before its formal independence was won.

In 1778 a voice of observation and sometimes criticism came to France as John Adams arrived April 1st of 1778 to replace Silas Deane. There were distinct contrasts between the two men, as John Adams was on high alert to the influence of Europe on the new nation, especially coming from the French. He was disconcerted and a little peeved upon arrival given that the alliance had already been signed especially given that the treaty was based on a model that

Adams wrote in 1776.⁶⁸ John Adams was quite a bit jealous of the awe that the French had for Franklin, as he noted, “On Dr. Franklin the eyes of all Europe are fixed...neither Lee nor myself are looked upon of much consequence.”⁶⁹ Adams could not understand the importance of parties and French culture, having a hard time engaging with the social elite in a way that seemed to come naturally to Franklin. When Adams first arrived, Franklin immediately brought him on rounds to important people before Adams felt properly attired. This contrast would highlight their differences as, “one of them [was] self-conscious about his attire, the other confident that fashion would follow him, both of whom were right.”⁷⁰ Adams was irritated that while he struggled with basic French, Franklin was open to his own error, speaking with frequent mistakes but nevertheless conversing well. Adams remained a stranger to the ease and manner of French culture. Adams’ observations and arrival in France illustrated the extent to which Franklin fit in with French luxury while Adams was the one who more embodied the image of the simple American.

Adams would witness firsthand the admiration of the French for Franklin at the end of April 1778 at the Académie des Sciences where Voltaire and Franklin met together in front of their colleagues. Franklin could credit Voltaire with his image as well given that Voltaire in his writings established the legend of the good Quaker. It was not even enough for the two to just be in public, as the crowd shouted for them to embrace.⁷¹ This meeting represented the coming together of two icons as, “What Voltaire was to France, Franklin was to America, the symbol of mankind’s triumphal arrival at modernity.”⁷² Even for this occasion Franklin kept up his appearance of simplicity, wearing a yellow suit with a white hat that hardly fit in with the fashion of France.⁷³ Adams commented on this meeting in his diary as he noted, “The two Aged Actors

upon this great Theatre of Philosophy and frivolity then embraced each other by hugging one another in their Arms and kissing each other's cheeks, and then the tumult subsided."⁷⁴

In spite of witnessing the admiration of the French for Franklin firsthand, Adams continued to disagree with Franklin's work ethic and life of apparent luxury despite his cultivated image of rustic simplicity. Adams commented that Franklin was, "a great Phylosopher, a great Moralist...a great Statesman is more questionable."⁷⁵ Adams immediately noted the quality of his apartments, which were no doubt similar to Franklin's own. He commented, "Dr. Franklin had shewn me the Apartements and Furniture left by Mr. Deane, which were every Way more elegant, than I desired."⁷⁶ This observation was made by yet another American visitor, Elkanah Watson, during dinner at Franklin's apartments. He stated that he, "felt that Franklin's domestic establishment breathed grace and luxury."⁷⁷ This dinner included fine foods, wines, and company: hardly the behavior of a simple rustic American. In a letter to his cousin Samuel Adams, John Adams noted that, "Your old Friend is a Man of Honour and Integrity, although to be very frank and very impartial...he has some Notions of Elegance Rank and Dignity that may be carried rather too far."⁷⁸ These differences become more apparent when contrasting the daily behaviors of the two men.

While Adams woke up early to start with the demands of work, Franklin would take a more leisurely approach to starting the day. Franklin was the one of the pair that conjured that admiration of the ladies of Paris while Adams was woefully incapable of flattery and was fiercely loyal to his wife. Franklin dined with the social elite most of the week and was continuously overwhelmed with social calls the rest of the day, hardly attentive to his work. For Adams the concerts, the marble, silk, and velvet were far too much for his plainer sensibilities. Thus, "it remained to be seen who the more authentic puritan was: Franklin, who seemed never

to notice those splendors, or Adams, ur-wowser, who railed against them and who bragged...that no one could live as cheaply as him.”⁷⁹ Adams was the one who found the overwhelming experience of French living unbearable. Franklin found the intrigues of the social elite easy to navigate, while Adams could only bumble along. While Franklin himself may have believed in the value of little luxury and simple living he nonetheless took part in French luxuries with ease and gusto. Franklin’s actions that were observed by Adams revealed the extent to which he used the image of simplicity while simultaneously engaging in the frivolities of French culture. While the French had equated Franklin with Poor Richard it was Adams who truly embodied the persona.⁸⁰

Franklin’s simple Quaker appearance even had its flaws. Quaker dress emphasized clothing that was plain to avoid luxury and vanity in appearance. The colors usually tended towards grays, tans, and yellows, retaining this plainness even as other fashions became the norm. However, the clothing itself was often composed of the finest materials, such as high quality cotton and wool. Thus, while the appearance may be plain, the quality of the materials was high. Franklin commented specifically on the Quaker sect noting that, “their mode of instruction has the advantage; for it is always delivered in language adapted to audience, and consequently is perfectly intelligible.”⁸¹ This could apply to Quaker sartorial language as well, as Franklin used their plain and simple attire as a social language to convey his own virtuous appearance. The fur hat that was so signature to Franklin’s original attire also contains more nuance. For by the eighteenth century fur was associated with elegance and was worn for its appearance. In French society, fur was used for decoration rather than for comfort.⁸² While Franklin’s choice of hat may have been intended to convey a rustic appearance, the work that would have gone into creating such a luxury item would have been expensive. Franklin believed

in the value of virtue and simplicity and discouraged excess of luxury. Yet Franklin utilized fashion, luxury, and a disingenuous identity in order to achieve an alliance that would only serve to make these contradictions more difficult to navigate. These conflicts would manifest in the way in which Americans would also struggle to reconcile the influence of French culture and fashions after the alliance.

Early Americans viewed French fashion quite negatively before the alliance in 1778. In England and then British America, fashion was associated with women and therefore was metaphorically feminized. As a result, there were groups that threatened the masculine social order, “fops, fools, the French---all grotesquely effeminate in their characteristics.”⁸³ Fops were defined as those that had an excessive devotion to dress, and this preoccupation hinted to a moral failing or foolishness. This extreme devotion to fashion marked an individual as suspicious.⁸⁴ The macaronis that characterized the 1770s, although exaggerated, symbolized the climate of display and excess that defined the French to these early Americans. The French were tied to their culture which was equated with frivolity and depravity. However, the alliance with France, “complicated the relationship between fashion and political allegiance.”⁸⁵ The French that used to be the picture of effeminacy and of the fop would now be the ones who militarily saved the Revolution from utter failure. Franklin was aware of the nature of this ingrained prejudice and knew that there would be significant divides between the two peoples.⁸⁶ Yet, given the extravagance of Philadelphia there was a considerable inclination to latch onto a new European power as a reference point for culture and refinement. These ingrained prejudices would prove to waver upon the arrival of French troops to America.

The French troops were met with great enthusiasm with massive parties thrown for them throughout Philadelphia. The excitement around French troops extended well beyond

Philadelphia, for the French officers that mingled with wealthy Americans dazzled the colonists and became the prototype for a new type of refinement. The French language of culture as well as the literal language became the hallmark of a new kind of gentility.⁸⁷ When Lafayette arrived in 1780 to take his post, there would be much the same reaction to him as there was to Franklin's celebrity in France. Crossing the ocean did much for the two men, as for each the trip mitigated the less savory parts of their personality. Yet there is irony in their fame as well, as France would center around Franklin who was supposedly the philosopher and rustic countryman, while Americans would prop up Lafayette as the face of republican liberty, a man that was at bottom a French aristocrat.⁸⁸ This idolization of Lafayette and the French aristocracy more broadly was only a small portion of what was to come. The alliance would bring problems for the Americans given that the refinement and luxury of France was at odds with its republican virtue and homespun simplicity that was not only the face of the war but also of national allegiance itself.

In the 1780s and 90s, the influx of French culture and fashion was only increased and accentuated due to refugees fleeing the more radical wave of the French Revolution. Nowhere was this felt more acutely than Philadelphia, for as a wealthy major port city, refugees would be drawn there. The arrival of these refugees served as a catalyst, accelerating a cultural reorientation that was already under way. There were other aspects that contributed to this including the influence of wealthy Philadelphia families like the Bingham and the growing trade with France and its colonies.⁸⁹ The break with Britain and subsequent alliance with France would cause the United States to look to their new ally for cultural cues and fashions.

The 1790s saw the complete immersion of French culture in Philadelphia life, particularly in the elite. French designs and imagery were imported into the homes of the wealthy. The refugees that came from radical France included famous high-born aristocrats like

Talleyrand, Noailles, and Moreau. These refugees may have lacked money but they were rich in the language of cultural refinement and luxury. The refugees, including those that were not as high-status, “were mobilizing their national reputation for culture, fashion, and gentility; they were marketing French refinement.”⁹⁰ In early days of the Revolution the elite of Philadelphia were hesitant to cast off their European goods in favor of the simplicity of homespun clothing. Ultimately the culture of non-consumption was ineffective in the 1760s and 70s as the appeal of Europe’s luxury items proved to be too great.⁹¹ Philadelphia was thus primed for the arrival of French luxury and the culture of gentility that came along with it. This new reliance on French culture would change the sartorial image of the new republic.

The debate over consumer goods continued in the public forum after the war in newspapers like *The Pennsylvania Gazette* that sought to rid the early republic of the perils of fashion. *The Pennsylvania Gazette* was full of economic, political, and cultural anxieties that centered on clothing.⁹² Further, it was used as a, “mouthpiece for local manufacturing societies and advertised their domestic products.”⁹³ It is ironic that Franklin himself had been the owner of the newspaper, though not in this time period, that released the very debates on consumer goods that he had helped to create. The statements in the *Gazette* centered on fashion and foreign consumer goods as detrimental to not only the economy but also the moral health of the nation. On May 25th 1786 the *Gazette* published, “We might have been a very flourishing country had not the love of luxury, the desire of engrossing land, the general disregard to virtue and moral obligation prevented.”⁹⁴ A piece from 1779 noted that, “disinterested patriotism and public spirit were vanished, and a selfish principle of love of riches...luxury and dissipation succeeded them.”⁹⁵ These articles point to fashion and luxury as being the direct cause of the moral

degradation of the republic. At a time where the republic itself was still a very fragile entity, these concerns were quite palpable.

This rhetoric is reminiscent of Franklin's own comments on the nature of virtue and luxury, namely that it corrupts the moral fortitude of its population. A piece from August of 1787 noted, "A refined civilization is not principally an immense apparatus of wealth and luxury: such a corrupt national taste will indeed be fatal."⁹⁶ This article targets effeminate fops in particular stating that if people will not restrain themselves than the government should do it for them.⁹⁷ This comment is notable as it calls for the government policing of national taste for the purpose of cultivating patriotism and virtue in its citizens. Yet this was already proven to be largely ineffective in the Philadelphia population in the early days of the Revolution. The intervention of French taste and culture after the alliance allowed for vices, in this writer's view, to persist.

The Pennsylvania Gazette also assessed the effect that the preference for foreign tastes had on the domestic economy and manufacture. A piece from January of 1787 noted, "the usual manufactures of the country have been little attended to," arguing that the nation itself had enough to sustain it without indulging in "fantastical and expensive fashions, and intemperate living; by these means our property has been lessened, and *immense sums in specie have been exported.*"⁹⁸ In some ways this backlash stemmed from the postwar economic hardship that affected the new nation.⁹⁹ Consumer goods like fashion items from Europe were an easy scapegoat for these domestic problems. The alliance and the subsequent influx of European capital and goods was thus jeopardizing, in the minds of some, the domestic economy that had been fought for during the Revolution. Franklin had held fast to the belief in avoiding luxury and the importance of virtuous living for the moral health of the republic. Yet his own political

actions in France that were in part shaped by his choice of clothing unleashed a whole new image and debate for the early republic.

This debate even emerged in a discussion of Washington's appearance before Congress in 1789. The author of this piece in the *Gazette* was particularly concerned about Washington's dress as a poor reflection of a nation's leader given that he was clothed in foreign manufacture. They comment, "When we see a citizen, who has frequently exposed his life in the cause of freedom, dress in the manufactures of foreign nations, have we not reason to suppose, that he either does not understand the welfare of his country, or that he totally disregards it?"¹⁰⁰ This accusation associates the wearing of foreign dress as a slight against the people themselves and the labor that goes into the creation of domestic goods. If the leader of the nation makes the choice to wear clothes from a foreign nation, it sends a negative message to the public. Franklin's simple clothing sent a message of a serene, American, Quaker philosopher to the people of France. Yet Washington's foreign attire instead was associated with a disregard for the welfare of the American people. The author continued to note the benefits of simple clothing as it is associated with wisdom and by virtue the lifting up of America as a nation. They comment, "How glorious will be the triumph of free America, when we shall behold the guardians of the union appareled in the produce and labour of their country!"¹⁰¹ The leaders of the nation itself if clothed in simple manufacture contributed directly to the political health of the republic. These deeper associations of clothing with certain personality traits are reflected in Franklin's own actions in France.

The conversation around clothing ultimately reveals inherent contradictions in the early republic's attitude towards luxury and foreign dress. On one hand, the new nation espoused homespun republicanism in order to generate unity for the cause of independence. Domestic

manufacture was a means of promoting a patriotic image that worked directly against the British imperial machine of consumer goods. Yet on the other hand, the Philadelphia elite simultaneously cultivated an environment of conspicuous consumption centered around European goods. This early time of luxury was only accentuated after the alliance with France which brought with it both French dress and refinement. The debates that played out in the public press, “exposed a central paradox of American economic thought: though imported goods were necessary to the growth of the economy...by the end of the 18th century the consumption of certain goods, specifically apparel, came to be perceived as a sinister force threatening the economy and endangering the nation.”¹⁰² These debates over fashion were then anything but trivial.

Benjamin Franklin could have hardly predicted the sartorial debates that would emerge due to his political machinations in France. His arrival was built on image, one that he carefully crafted, distributed, and maintained his entire stay in France. Franklin’s writings on virtue and luxury are clear, yet even he noted in a letter to Benjamin Vaughan in July of 1784, “I have not, indeed yet thought of a Remedy for Luxury I am not sure.”¹⁰³ While Franklin may have embodied the persona of Poor Richard to the French, he fit in quite well with the refinement and luxuries of a fashionable and intellectual celebrity. Franklin knew the importance of the gaze of others as he observed, “But the *Eyes of other People* are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine houses, nor fine Furniture.”¹⁰⁴ Franklin understood that it was the opinion of others that shaped the need for clothing as social hierarchy, economics, politics, and even morality were wrapped up in the nature of one’s attire.

These contradictions in Franklin’s own character reflect the tensions that the early republic faced when confronted with foreign goods and influence after the alliance with France.

Franklin intentionally planned his own actions in France but unintentionally shaped the debates on luxury and fashion in the early republic due to the alliance that he directed. America was a part of imperial Britain, once this influence was removed, the nation latched onto their ally as a source of refinement. This affected the very social fabric of the elite that orchestrated many of the political landmark events in early American history. Clothing can send very distinct messages and these messages are, in the words of Rhys Isaac, the ‘tableaux vivants’ of a culture. For these implicit messages can communicate even more than words do, working to create a powerful collective identity.¹⁰⁵

Other founding fathers would recognize the importance of the identity of the republic as Jefferson would seek to create an empire of virtuous farmers who would consume little but the bare necessities and who manufactured most goods from the household. Hamilton provided a very different image, one that recognized the importance of global trade and the benefits of a, “stylish, civilized republic.”¹⁰⁶ America would continue to struggle over the nature of its sartorial identity, a struggle that was reflected in these ongoing disputes over the nature of the new nation. Benjamin Franklin’s actions in France would prove to be the beginning of these discussions of luxury and the influence of foreign powers in America. His actions and distinct choice of clothing highlight the importance of fashion as a political tool that has the ability to shape and affect the decisions of key political actors. Benjamin Franklin became a propagator of American identity as the treaty, which he had worked to secure utilizing a somewhat disingenuous image of himself, directly impacted the evolving nature of the early republic’s own national and sartorial identity. Fashion and dress provide a methodology to analyze how key figures were able to impact the views of others with simple decisions like the wearing of spectacles, or the addition of a coonskin hat. A

focus on fashion elucidates new narratives in the early republic that emphasize the level to which consumer goods and sartorial imagery shaped and molded the identity of early America.

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¹² Franklin was involved in the beginnings of a silk industry in Philadelphia in 1725 through the American Philosophical Society, which opened an establishment for reeling silk. While the war disrupted this industry, efforts re-emerged in the early 1790s. While these beginnings were not largely successful, the silk industry definitively grew in the nineteenth century. For more information on this topic see <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/silk-and-silk-makers/> as well as *The Silk Industry in America: A History* by Linus Pierpont Brockett.

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¹⁴ Hayes and Bour, *Franklin in His Own Time*, xiv.

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¹⁶ Haulman, "Fashion and the Culture Wars of Revolutionary Philadelphia," 626.

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²⁴ Benjamin Franklin, "Observations Concerning the Increase on Mankind, Peopling Countries," 1755, 219.

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²⁶ Kevin Slack, *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2017), 179.

²⁷ Stacy Schiff, *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America*, First edition. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 2.

²⁸ Schiff, *A Great Improvisation*, 11

²⁹ Schiff, *A Great Improvisation*, 14-15.

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- ³⁰ This would not be the first time that Franklin reinvented himself. In 1748, after Franklin's retirement from printing he had Robert Feke paint a portrait of him as an aristocrat rising to the next level of society. This portrait serves as another example of Franklin using visual sartorial culture to convey his status. See <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2018/01/benjamin-franklin-s-retirement-and-reinvention> for more details.
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- ³² Clare Haru Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 1.
- ³³ Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex*, 93.
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- ³⁹ Delpierre, *Dress in France in the Eighteenth Century*, 18.
- ⁴⁰ Delpierre, *Dress in France in the Eighteenth Century*, 33.
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- ⁴⁷ Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 166.
- ⁴⁸ Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 207.
- ⁴⁹ Schiff, *A Great Improvisation*, 39.
- ⁵⁰ Wilson, *Figures of Speech*, 41.
- ⁵¹ Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries*, 16.
- ⁵² Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries*, 44.
- ⁵³ Schiff, *A Great Improvisation*, 43.
- ⁵⁴ Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries*, 61.
- ⁵⁵ Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries*, 61.
- ⁵⁶ Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries*, 61-62.
- ⁵⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Viking Press, 1945), 472.
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