



## Archeology Program

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### Independence NHP Archeology at Franklin Court

*How do you celebrate the enduring legacy of Benjamin Franklin, one of our most familiar inventors, scientists, and "inquiring minds" of the revolutionary era? To celebrate the 300th anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birthday, archeologists assessed the archeological research that has been done at Franklin Court in Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. The archeological collections provide insight into Franklin at home with his family and reveal a little more about his fascination with science.*

As part of the commemorations for the 300th anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Franklin, on January 17, 1706, the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Consortium commissioned an assessment of the archeological investigations conducted at the site of Franklin's Philadelphia home where he lived for the last 26 years of his life. This property, Franklin Court, is part of Independence NHP. Franklin Court is a major resource for millions of people to experience a personal connection with the life and times of Franklin by visiting the site of his house and grounds and viewing his possessions and other objects from the 18th century.



Steel "ghost structure" outlines the the shape of Franklin's house, with portals looking down into archeological resources (photograph P. Harholdt, 2004)

The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Consortium, a non-profit organization, was established to reaffirm Franklin's enduring legacy in his 300th birthday year. The consortium was founded in 2000 by the American Philosophical Society, The Franklin Institute, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the University of Pennsylvania.

### Archeology at Franklin Court

The property known today as Franklin Court was the site of a 'mansion' built between 1763-5 at Franklin's direction. Franklin's wife and daughter lived in the home while he served in England as an agent representing several colonies. Franklin resided at the house in 1775-1776, critical years of the nation's founding, but left again to serve as a diplomat in France. Franklin lived at the house during the final years of his life, from 1785 to 1790. The house was demolished by his heirs in 1812 to make way for income-earning row houses. The structure's walls were knocked into the building's cellar and a roadway was constructed on top, sealing the house ruins. The house site was excavated during several phases of research (1953-5, 1960-61 and 1969-73).



Archeologists look for archeological evidence from Franklin's household (NPS photo)

The archeological evidence recovered from this site, consisting of architectural and domestic material culture remains, comprises one of the largest bodies of primary evidence related to Franklin and his household. Unlike the myriad of likenesses made by others in statuary and portraiture, and unlike the recollections of him recorded by others, this body of evidence includes Franklin's own possessions which, in part, speak to the private life of Franklin and his family. These collections provide a unique complement to the information gained from documents about his public life written by Franklin himself and by others. Since 1976, an archeologically-themed exhibit and education complex at the park have interpreted Franklin's life and achievements.

### The Franklin Court Archeological Assessment Project

The Tercentenary archeological assessment, carried out in cooperation with Independence

NHP, was designed to support three commemoration initiatives: an international loan exhibition *Benjamin Franklin, In Search of a Better World*, a Frankliniana database, and educational outreach materials disseminated over the Internet <[www.benfranklin300.org](http://www.benfranklin300.org)>. The website serves as a central clearinghouse for information from a wide range of organizations planning events around the 300th birthday.

The archeological study constitutes part of a legacy contribution to Independence NHP by the Tercentenary Consortium in honor of Franklin. The aim of the study is to assess, not re-analyze, previous research findings. Inevitably, however, in reflecting a more mature discipline some 30-50 years following the original research, the project revised previous findings in light of 21st century historical and archeological developments.

To carry out the study, site excavation documentation, artifact collections, and the large body of public interpretation developed for the site, were examined and assessed. The archeological resources that were studied included, among other materials, field notes, photographic records, formal reports, and park administrative history documents. The interpretive materials on Franklin that were examined included exhibit displays, oral interpretations, educational enrichment resources, and web page content. In-house (NPS) evaluations and external academic analyses of the interpretations were also surveyed to identify successful interpretive strategies and to identify interpretation needs for presenting Franklin material culture. Many of the resources examined had not been accessed for research purposes for three or more decades and several unrecognized and or untapped resources were identified.

### Study Results

The study re-interpreted previously identified artifacts, and identified new sources of information, and previously overlooked artifacts within the collections. Once irrelevant information, namely, the site documentation of the archeological process, was found to be useful for telling new Franklin-related stories. The new findings range from confirmation of a Franklin-provenience for excavated objects (e.g., a set of marble steps once part of his house) to the identification of resources useful for interpreting the making of Franklin Court as a nationally significant site (the involvement of African and Native Americans in the excavations). These new findings emerge just as Franklin the man is being reassessed for a new age, including a reassessment of Franklin's role as an abolitionist.

One example of a re-interpreted find involves a recovered during archeological excavations at Franklin Court in 1959. Identified decades ago by a paleontologist, this specimen has been on exhibit for 30 years and interpreted as an interesting fossil curio in Franklin's possession. Today, we can view this mastodon molar as a window into the social and political consequences of the evolving 18th century understanding of natural history. We now know that Franklin carried out comparative studies of mastodon teeth and elephant teeth that he requested from nearby fossil beds, and that he both sent and personally took mastodon specimens overseas. Furthermore, through the last 20 years of intellectual and social history scholarship, we know that study of fossils of extinct animals helped to undermine the Classical and Western medieval conception of the order of the universe—the idea of the 'Great Chain of Being.'

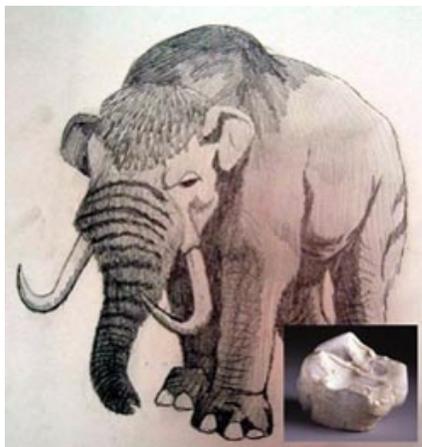


Illustration of Mastodon, with Franklin's mastodon tooth inset (Drawing S. Jeppson, 2005)

The mastodon also served as an important symbol of the new American nation: the great size and ferocity of the *Incognitum*, as the mastodon was then known, supported a powerful symbol for a new Republic. Today, this mastodon tooth can be interpreted as the tangible material residue of a society's basic values and beliefs about itself, and as evidence of Franklin's role in helping transform the 18th century world view.

The results of this archeological assessment are available in *Historical Fact, Historical Memory: An Assessment of Archaeological Evidence Related to Benjamin Franklin*, (2005) a report prepared by Patrice L. Jeppson for the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Consortium. The research in the study has been reported in several professional archeological conferences and journal articles. More information about the results of the study are available at <<http://archaeology.about.com/b/a/230248.htm>>. Copies of all research materials are on file at Independence NHP. Research findings related to the fossil mastodon tooth are on file in the NPS Paleontological Archives. Copies of the final report and presented research papers can also be obtained from the author.

See Also:

- [Independence NHP](#)
- the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Consortium, at <<http://www.benfranklin300.com/about.htm>>

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**Additional Reading**

Jeppson, Patrice L.  
 [2006a.—*In Press*] Which Benjamin Franklin - Yours or Mine?: Examining the responses to a new story from Franklin Court. In *Archaeologically-Based Heritage Formulation in Overtly Politicized Environments*, edited by Ran Boytner, Lynn Swartz-Dodd and Ann E. Killebrew. Forthcoming Special Issue of *Archaeologies, the journal of the World Archaeological Congress*.

[2006b.—*In Press*] Civil Religion and Civically Engaged Archaeology: Researching Benjamin Franklin and the Pragmatic Spirit. In forthcoming Barbara Little and Paul Shackel edited, *An Archaeology of Civic Engagement and Social Justice*. University of Florida Press.

2005a. Historical Fact, Historical Memory: An Assessment of the Archaeology Evidence Related to Benjamin Franklin. Historical Archaeology research undertaken for the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Consortium, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (380pp.)

2005b. The Mastodon Tooth from Benjamin Franklin’s House. Adult-directed podcast script. The basis for a podcast tour archived at <<http://archaeology.about.com/b/a/230248.htm>>.

2004a. “Not a Replacement, But a Valuable Successor...”: A new story from Franklin’s mansion in colonial Philadelphia. Aspects of research undertaken for the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Consortium. Paper presented at the *Society for American Archaeology*, Montreal, Canada.

Semonin, Paul  
 2000 American Monster: How The Nation’s First Prehistoric Creature Became a Symbol of National Identity. New York University, Press.

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