

PHILADELPHIA
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cloud had passed over it without any effect; when, at length, just as he was beginning to despair of his contrivance, he observed some loose threads of the hempen string to stand erect, and to avoid one another, just as if they had been suspended on a common conductor. Struck with this promising appearance, he immediately presented his knuckle to the key, and (let the reader judge of the exquisite pleasure he must have felt at that moment) the discovery was complete. He perceived a very evident electric spark. Others succeeded, even before the string was wet, so as to put the matter past all dispute, and when the rain had wet the string he collected electric fire very copiously. This happened in June 1752, a month after the electricians in France had verified the same theory, but before he heard of anything they had done."¹⁹

Priestley, writing what he could have learned only from Franklin, and writing under Franklin's eye, could hardly have invented these minute circumstances. Nor is Franklin, with his powerful and exact memory, likely to have been wrong. If he had wanted—what was quite out of character for him—to claim more credit for originality than he deserved, he might as well have said he flew the kite before his theory had been verified in France. Instead, he allowed the French a month's priority. Yet there is this mystery about the matter: Franklin, who knew how startling the discovery was, and who had a genius for promptly making drama out of news, kept the electrical kite a secret till October. He mentioned it to none of his correspondents. He wrote nothing about it in the *Gazette*, and apparently did not tell Kinnersley, who lectured on electricity in Philadelphia during September without reference to this latest triumph.

Can Franklin deliberately have kept his secret till October so that he might publish at the same time, or almost the same time, in his newspaper and in his almanac the two most important pieces of his year's news? That is what he did. On 19 October his first account of the *Electrical Kite* appeared in the *Gazette*. The same issue advertised as in the press the new Poor Richard for 1753, which contained Franklin's first positive statement of *How to Secure Houses, etc., from Lightning*.

"As frequent mention," he wrote in the *Gazette*, "is made in public papers from Europe of the success of the Philadelphia