

the other may be six or eight feet above the highest part of the building. To the upper end of the rod fasten about a foot of brass wire the size of a common knitting-needle, sharpened to a fine point; the rod may be secured to the house by a few small staples. If the house or barn be long, there may be a rod and point at each end, and a middling wire along the ridge from one to the other. A house thus furnished will not be damaged by lightning, it being attracted by the points and passing through the metal into the ground without hurting anything. Vessels, also, having a sharp-pointed rod fixed on the top of their masts, with a wire from the foot of the rod reaching down, round one of the shrouds, to the water, will not be hurt by lightning."

Again a question: Why were these two epoch-making announcements so circumspectly worded? Franklin described the kite experiment, but said only that it had succeeded in Philadelphia, not that he himself had performed it. (In all his later writings he mentions it but once, in that section of the *Autobiography*, written in 1788, which refers to D'Alibard and de Lor: "I will not swell this narrative with an account of that capital experiment, nor of the infinite pleasure I received in the success of a similar one I made soon after at Philadelphia, as both are to be found in the histories of electricity."²¹) Speaking of lightning rods, Franklin said that a method of securing houses had been discovered, not that it had been put into practice by him, or in America. So far as his words in *Poor Richard* go, he might have been depending on the report from France that the experiments of the best naturalists there confirmed his theory of points as "a preservative against thunder." This he could have read in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for May, which he had seen by 14 September²² and possibly earlier.

Every simple explanation of the kite mystery leaves it still confused. Franklin, it has been guessed by cynics, invented the whole story. This is quite out of keeping with his record in science, in which he elsewhere appears always truthful and unpretending. It has been guessed by kinder sceptics that Franklin, talking with Priestley after fifteen years, mistook the month in which he had made his discovery: that he made it as he said, but in September. The important thing about his recollection is not that he flew the kite in June but that he flew it before he knew of the experiments