Friday, November 13, 2015

Friends:

When Benjamin Franklin founded the American Philosophical Society in 1743, it was his intention to bring together accomplished men and women of a curious mind to “promote useful knowledge” while appreciating good fellowship. Charles Gillispie was, without question, everything that Franklin had in mind when envisioning a Society Member.

He was elected to membership in the APS at the young age, by Society standards, of 54 in 1972, in recognition of his distinguished studies in the history of French science and technology from the late Monarchical period through the Revolution and the Napoleonic eras. Charles added to our understanding of science and its history most significantly by being chief editor of the Dictionary of Scientific Biography. In these days of the Internet, one has to be of a certain age to appreciate the monumentality of the project. For basic information on the lives and work of scientists through the ages, it is still unsurpassed and remains a frequently used resource among the Society’s Library staff and visiting researchers.

Charles, usually with his beloved Emily by his side, attended every one of the Society’s biannual Meetings from 1973 to 2008. Alas, it is conduct of one of these Meetings that precludes APS leadership from being here with us today to express their respect and appreciation for Charles personally. He himself spoke at two such Meetings. The first occasion, in 1976, was entitled “The Liberating Influence of Science in History.” His second presentation, in 1984, detailed America’s first balloon flight – “Federal Flight 1, Philadelphia – Woodbury, 10:00 a.m., January 9, 1793.” Charles also willingly gave his time to the Society – serving for three decades on its Committee on Library. With this last, and with his particularly keen eye for collection development, we are delighted that Charles chose to donate his own papers to the Library where they will be available to future scholars while also acknowledging the Society’s evolving role in documenting not just the history of science but also the historiography of science.

The Society is demonstrably better for its long association with Charles Gillispie. And, while he will be missed, Charles remains an inspiration to excellence, to scholarship, and to civility for all of us and for generations to come. Franklin would be proud!

On behalf of the Members and staff of the American Philosophical Society,

Sincerely,

Keith Stewart Thomson
Executive Officer