

JAMES PENISTON SCULPTURE

1370 S. 46th Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19143
jepsculpture.com • info@jepsculpture.com • (215) 287-4549

For Immediate Release
October 5, 2007

Philadelphia Dedicates Bust of Benjamin Franklin In Historic Old City

Schoolchildren Gave 1.5 Million Pennies to Help Fund 9-Foot Bronze Sculpture

PHILADELPHIA, PA. — Eyes alight, Benjamin Franklin turns from his work to greet visitors – or so it seems in the monumental bronze bust dedicated Oct. 5 in historic downtown Philadelphia.

The nine-foot “Keys To Community” sits in a courtyard at 4th and Arch Streets, where it replaces the much-loved but deteriorated “Penny Franklin” sculpture. Firefighters drew a veil from the work with a fire engine, and city officials dedicated it in a public ceremony.

In 2003, the city’s arts commission held a contest to replace old Penny, selecting Peniston’s proposal for a bronze bust that echoed the community-built spirit of the older work. The sculptor gave talks about Franklin at two dozen elementary schools, whose students donated more than 1,000 old keys to be worked into the sculpture’s surface.

Children from some five hundred Philadelphia-area schools also contributed nearly 1.5 million pennies — a total of nearly \$15,000 — toward the work. The penny drive was organized by the Philadelphia Fire Department, which traces its lineage to Franklin’s Union Fire Company and which provided partial funding for the work.

During the casting of the sculpture at Laran Bronze in Chester, Pa., several firefighters cast brass nameplates into the molten bronze, each representing a fallen colleague. City officials also cast several pennies from the Penny Franklin sculpture. All told, one ton of bronze was poured to form the sculpture.

“The pennies and keys will allow a generation of Philly kids to point to the sculpture and say, ‘I helped make that,’” Peniston said. “I began by trying to get children thinking about the notion of community, and how communities form. When I talked about Ben Franklin, I would say, ‘He started all these institutions we still use today: the fire department, the library. How do you think he did that? Did he build them brick by brick, by himself?’ The kids would say, ‘No, he must have had the help of many people.’”

“Once the children had that idea, I asked them to contribute one key for this project. The hope is that when they see this sculpture they will realize that it didn’t take any great effort from any one of them, but that without all of them, it wouldn’t have happened. It’s an introduction to democracy, or at least to volunteerism.”

ABOUT THE SCULPTOR

James Peniston’s commissioned works range from the tabletop to the monumental, and include the 7-foot sculpture of genetics pioneer Gregor Mendel at Villanova University. Born in 1973 in St. Louis, Peniston studied at Haverford College. He honed his skills at an artisanal foundry, where his work included the preliminary full-scale sculpting of Ray

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Kaskey's eagles for the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. He has taught in several programs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

ABOUT THE LOCATION

“Keys to Community” sits in a historic courtyard one block from Franklin’s grave and three blocks from Independence Hall. In the 1750s, the ground was occupied by the city’s largest building: the Philadelphia Academy, which Franklin helped establish. Today it is next to the firehouse of the Engine 8, Ladder 2 company.

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Contact: Bradley Peniston, info@jepsculpture.com, (202) 487-8870.