VASSAR COLLEGE

INTER-DEPARTMENTAL ONLY

DATE April 15, 1983

FROM Elizabeth A. Daniels

TO Virginia Smith, Dixie Sheridan, Geri Herron, Jim Challey, and physicists

SUBJECT The statue of Benjamin Franklin in fron of Sanders Physics Laboratory

It might interest those in the present generation at the college to know how the statue of Benjamin Franklin got there, where it came from. I have been lent the papers of Burgess Johnson by his daughter Mrs. Ronald Carreker. There the story is told.

Mr. Johnson was brought here by Henry Noble MacCracken to teach English(journalism) and be head of Public Relations. He was here from 1916 to 1926 or so, after which he went to Syracuse. While here, he also held down a part-time job as editor for Harpers. He arranged his office in Main Building (where the Faculty Dining Room is now) with furnishings of antique printing presses and the statue of Ben Franklin, acquired as described below. When he left, he had the statue placed in front of the newly- built (1924) Physics Building, and he took the printing presses with him to Syracuse.

In his ~~autobiography~~ As Much As I Dare, Ives Washburn, New York, 1944 he says, page 139:

Franklin Square, at the physical periphery of New York's literary shop, seemed to me spiritually its hub. Here the musty old shrine that housed the Harper publications gazed across the elevated railway tracks toward the Police Gazette and the Gazette winked back. The statue of Benjamin Franklin that stood in a niche above the Harper doorway had seen Dickens and Thackeray go in and out beneath his feet, and a host of great American artists and writers , down through the decades.

And then on page 193:

During my earliest days at Vassarm Harper & Brothers moved from the old building on Franklin Square to new quarters on East 33rd Street, leaving the statue of Benjamin Franklin to stand in his ancient niche without the backing of literature and art. Into the lofts behind him the leather trade had come, and the stench from piles of untanned hides rose from the inner courtyard and pervaded the winding stairs and the central tower. I found myself wondering about Benjamin; and on one of my trips to New York I dropped in at the new Harper offices and asked what they were going to do about him. They said there was no room for him anywhere on East 33rd Street and that after all he was a part of the building they had left, which was now the property of J.P. Morgan & Company. I suggested that the leather trade could not be greatly interested, and asked whether Vassar might have him. They said that was a question for Mr. Morgan to settle and they would transmit with their recommendations any begging request I cared to make. I followed their suggestion and the nub of my argument was that anyone who had read the life of Franklin would know he would rather rest on the Vassar campus than any other place in the world.

My argument proved effective, so I had him lowered to a waiting truck and carried to Poughkeepsie, where for some time he stood just inside the doorway of my office, a startling figure more than life size. [That door was in the public relations office which was then approximately where the faculty luncheon is now.] My students helped me to remove layer after

layer of ancient paint until we came down to the [illegible] which proved to be of pewter. Today he stands on a psdestal outside the physics building, gazing down benevolently, and perhaps with a hint of more personal interest, upon successive generations of Vassar girls.