Franklin Medals

“As I was born in Boston, New England, and owe my first instruction in literature to the free grammar schools established there; I, therefore, give one hundred pounds sterling to my executors to be by them, the survivors or survivor of them, paid over to the managers or directors of the free schools of my native town of Boston, to be by them or those persons or person who shall have superintendence of the said schools, put out to interest forever, which interest shall be laid out in six silver medals and given as honorary rewards annually by the directors of said free schools, belonging to the said town, for the encouragement of scholarship, in such a manner as the discretion of the selectmen of said town shall deem meet.”

—Benjamin Franklin in his will

As a child, Benjamin Franklin attended the Latin School. Although his time there was short, Franklin bestowed a sum of money to the Town of Boston in memory of the school upon his death in 1790. The money was intended to reward and support academic achievement in Boston’s Public Schools, then known as ‘free schools.’

Two years after his death, the school committee honored Franklin’s wishes by putting together a sub-committee “to ascertain the expense of procuring medals, to carry into effect the intention of the late Dr. Franklin in his donation.” The sub-committee was populated by prominent Bostonians: William Tudor Esq., Rev. John Clark, and Mr. Charles Bulfinch. The committee acquired twenty-one medals and recommended that three be given to the Latin School, three to each of the three Grammar Schools, and three to each of the three Writing Schools for their top students. The first medals were awarded that same year.

Franklin did not stipulate that the medals should be awarded only to male students, however, it was decided that this was his intention because girls were not admitted to school fulltime when his will was written. Soon, parents and school committee members took umbrage and advocated for rewarding the scholarship to girls as well. Medals given to boys were called “Franklin Medals,” while girls were awarded “City Medals.”