

Founders Online

[\[Back to normal view\]](#)FROM BENJAMIN FRANKLIN TO JAMES BIRKETT, 1 MARCH 1755
To James Birkett⁶

ALS: Yale University Library

Sir

Philada. March 1. 1755.

I am but just returned from a long Journey, after near 6 Months Absence, and find your Favour of Sept. 29.⁷ by which I have the agreeable Advice that you expect to be able to remit me something in Smith's Affairs very soon.⁸

As to the Thickness of Wire necessary or sufficient to conduct a large Quantity of Lightning; concerning which you desire my Sentiments; you will find something on that Head in Pages 124, and 125, of the enclos'd Pamphlet,⁹ which please to accept. And I may add, that in my late Journey I saw an Instance of a very great Quantity of Lightning conducted by a Wire no bigger than a common Knitting Needle. It was at Newbury in New England, where the Spire of the Church Steeple being 70 foot in height above the Belfrey was split all to pieces and thrown about the Street in Fragments;¹ from the Bell down to the Clock, plac'd in the Steeple 20 foot below the Bell, there was the small Wire abovemention'd which communicated the Motion of the Clock to the Hammer striking the Hour on the Bell. As far as the Wire extended, no Part of the Steeple was hurt by the Lightning, nor below the Clock as far as the Pendulum Rod reached; but from the End of the Rod, downwards, the Lightning rent the Steeple surprizingly. The Pendulum Rod was about the thickness of a small Tobacco Pipe Stem, and conducted the Whole without Damage to its own Substance, except that the End where the Lightning was accumulated, it appeared melted [as] much as made a small Drop. But the Clock Wire was [blown?] all to Smoke, and smuttet the Wall where it passed in a broad black Track, and also the Cieling under which it was carried horizontally. No more of it was left than about an Inch and half next the Tail of the Hammer, and as much joining to the Clock. Yet this is observable, that tho' it was so small, as not to be sufficient to conduct the Quantity with Safety to its own Substance, yet it did conduct it, so as to secure all that Part of the Building. Excuse this Scrawl which I have not time to copy fair. I am, with much Respect, Sir Your very humble Servant

B FRANKLIN

ps. I have just been reading a similar Instance taken from the Journal des Scavans, for 1676, page 113. viz.

“En 1676. le tonnerre écrasa le clocher de l'Abbaye de Saint Medard de Soissons; la foudre se porta à une grande Distance le long des fils d'archal qui communiquoient à l'horloge; elle fondit ces cordes metalliques sans faire d'autres desordres dans tout le trajet.”²

Addressed: To Mr James Birket Merchant Antigua per Capt Snook Q.D.C.

Endorsed: Philada. Benja Franklin dated Mar: 1st. 1755 Reced. 11th. April Followg. per Capt. Snook Answered 2d. June per Capt. Cuzzens³

[Note numbering follows the Franklin Papers source.]

6. James Birkett, partner in the merchant firm of Birkett and Booth of St. John's, Antigua. His name follows that of BF's nephew Benjamin Mecom in the census of inhabitants taken by order of Governor George Thomas, 1753. Vere L. Oliver, *The History of the Island of Antigua*, 1 (London, 1894), cii, ciii, cxi; Richard Pares, *Yankees and Creoles* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), *passim*. The firm's correspondence with John Reynell of Philadelphia is in Coates-Reynell Papers, Hist. Soc. Pa. Smyth (*Writings*, III, 243) mistakenly read the name James Parker. See also *Some Cursory Remarks Made by James Birket in his Voyage to North America 1750-1751* (New Haven, 1916).

7. Not found.

8. Thomas Smith (d. 1752), whom BF had set up as a printer at St. John's. See above, III, 322 n, and IV, 356.

9. *New Experiments and Observations on Electricity, Part III* (London, 1754), was paged continuously with parts I and II. See above, pp. 77, 432.

1. BF related this incident, which happened in February 1754, to Dalibard, June 29, 1755. John J. Currier, "Auld Newbury": *Historical and Biographical Sketches* (Boston, 1896), p. 437.

2. The account of lightning striking the abbey of St. Médard near Soissons was printed in *Journal des Scavans*, 1676, pp. 133–5. BF appears to have taken his account from an intermediate source, as his quotation is unlike the original report.

3. Not found.

Note: The annotations to this document, and any other modern editorial content, are copyright © the American Philosophical Society and Yale University. All rights reserved.

SOURCE PROJECT	Franklin Papers
TITLE	From Benjamin Franklin to James Birkett, 1 March 1755
AUTHOR	Franklin, Benjamin
RECIPIENT	Birkett, James
DATE	1 March 1755
CITE AS	"From Benjamin Franklin to James Birkett, 1 March 1755," <i>Founders Online</i> , National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-05-02-0141 . [Original source: <i>The Papers of Benjamin Franklin</i> , vol. 5, <i>July 1, 1753, through March 31, 1755</i> , ed. Leonard W. Labaree. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962, pp. 500–501.]

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) is part of the National Archives. Through its grants program, the NHPRC supports a wide range of activities to preserve, publish, and encourage the use of documentary sources, relating to the history of the United States, and research and development projects to bring historical records to the public.
