PREFACE

IN AN essay of the 1760s Edward Gibbon made the point that history reveals itself in little things, *petits traits*, as significantly as in the sonorous public pronouncements of the rulers of states and empires. While the present narrative may be parish history enacted on a small, rickety stage, in retrospect the actors have grown taller, for the major figures of the American revolutionary era in Massachusetts were involved in what they came to consider "their Academy." If preempting the adjective American for the title was presumptuous, it was the act of a creative minority with antennae extending into the future.

Today the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is a society of scientists, scholars, men of letters, executives, administrators, and artists whose number exceeds four thousand. The House of the Academy is located in Cambridge, where the institution was first conceived, but it has broadened geographically to include a midwest and a western center, physical testimony of the valiant efforts to break out of its Cambridge-Boston confines. In annual elections the Academy now chooses representatives of disciplines that were not even a glimmer in the eyes of the original founders, a heterogeneous group of divines, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and public officials mainly from the eastern part of what was still called in the 1780 act of incorporation the State of Massachusetts Bay.

Though the conception of the Academy owes much to John Adams, the pivotal figure around whom its early history revolves is its first president, James Bowdoin, and part of the book is devoted to this descendant of Huguenots who guided the institution in its formative period with a firm hand. Benjamin Franklin, the Philadelphian born in Boston, through his friend Bowdoin kept abreast of what was taking place "in a philosophical way" in his native town, and his image hovers benevolently over the Academy. While he supported the American Philosophical Society, the friendly rival in Philadelphia, his association with the patriot philosophers of Boston helped spread the fame of their Academy among the learned of Europe. The founding of a society for the promotion of knowledge in the midst of the Revolutionary War was a way of joining the comity of nations even before formal independence was achieved. The role of the president and prominent Fellows in suppressing Shays' "unnatural rebellion"—not an official commitment of the Academy itself—discloses the social alignment of the intellectual elite in a dark time and is included in this history.

We confess to an old-fashioned presupposition that somehow the initial stage of an institution bears within it the seed of its full flowering. This story of the establishment

of the Academy and the vicissitudes of its first decade aims to preserve the tone of its quaint provincial origins and freely gives itself over to the intrigues and extravagant projects of the early years. After a period of enthusiastic activity the Academy lost its bloom and went into a decline. In the ebb and flow of succeeding centuries it has mirrored the fortunes of the arts and sciences in this country. The beginnings reflect the revolutionary euphoria generated by the prospect of victory. Such moments in the lives of national collectives are always fleeting, but the experience of the first Fellows illuminates the mentality of those who in building a nation imitated their European counterparts and strove to surpass them.

Printed materials on the revolutionary era are accumulating exponentially. We have relied principally upon the unpublished records of the Academy, deposited in the Boston Athenaeum and the Academy, and the personal papers of many of the Fellows, housed in the Massachusetts Historical Society and very kindly made available to us. Other documents are dispersed in the Archives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Harvard University Archives, the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, the Essex Historical Institute in Salem, the Longfellow Library in Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, and the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. To the librarians and research staffs of these several institutions, in particular to Stephen Nonack, Head of Reader Services and Curator of Manuscripts at the Athenaeum, and Clark Elliott, Archivist of the Academy, we are greatly indebted for their cordial welcome and their helpfulness. We owe warm thanks to our friend Professor Paul Lucas, who encouraged us to complete our manuscript and played a vital part in its publication.

This study does not presume to be a full-scale biography of James Bowdoin II; nor is it an account of the advancement of science in eighteenth-century America. It is a story of how a group of patriots, moved by their reverence for knowledge and pride in their new country, founded what is now one of its oldest cultural institutions, and of the man who nurtured it in the first decade of its existence. Amid the triumphs of the early Republic, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences deserves an honorable place. It may be well, after more than two hundred years, to remember its origins in a spirit of admiration — though without piety.