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Published in the USA
 Bylye Gody
 Issued since 2006.
 E-ISSN: 2310-0028
 2026. 21(1): 113-118
 DOI: 10.13187/bg.2026.1.113

Journal homepage:
<https://bg.cherkasgu.press>



Sir Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870): an American Politician and the 6th Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar

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Abstract

The article is devoted to an analysis of the life and multifaceted activity of Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870) — an American politician, civil servant, Clerk of the United States House of Representatives, and one of the most influential figures of nineteenth-century American Freemasonry. Particular attention is paid to his role in the history of the American Order of Knights Templar, in which he held the highest office of Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States during the difficult period of the American Civil War.

The study examines the principal stages of French's biography, including his early education, the formation of his professional career, service in legislative and administrative institutions, activities as Commissioner of Public Buildings, and participation in the development of telegraphic communication in the United States. A separate section is devoted to French's literary legacy, especially his diaries *Witness to the Young Republic*, which constitute a valuable source for the political and cultural history of the country.

The source base of the research includes published materials of Masonic organizations, museum exhibits, personal documents, and reference and biographical resources. The application of biographical, historiographical, and historical-genetic methods made it possible to reveal the interconnection between Benjamin B. French's governmental, literary, and Masonic activities. The article demonstrates that his contribution transcends the framework of an individual biography and reflects broader processes in the formation of American political culture and Masonic tradition in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Benjamin Brown French, 1800–1870, Freemasonry, Knights Templar of the United States, politician, Grand Master, biography.

1. Introduction

The personality of Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870) occupies a special place in the political, administrative, and Masonic history of the United States in the nineteenth century. A civil servant, Clerk of the United States House of Representatives, and a representative of the era of the formation of federal institutions, he simultaneously played a significant role in the development of American Freemasonry, attaining the highest office of Grand Master of the Order of Knights Templar of the United States. This study is devoted to an analysis of the principal stages of his biography, including his public service, literary activity, and Masonic career. On the basis of diverse sources, the article examines Benjamin B. French's contribution to political culture, intellectual life, and the ideological formation of the American Masonic Order of Knights Templar.

2. Materials and methods

The materials for this study are divided into four groups of sources:

1. Collections of published materials, such as *Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights*

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Templar. 21st Triennial Conclave in Chicago, Illinois ([Proceedings..., 1880](#)).

2. Materials and exhibits of the Museum of the History of the American Order of Knights Templar (Houston, USA). The museum holds a book formerly owned by Benjamin Brown French bearing his bookplate, as well as his portrait in the uniform of the Grand Master of the Masonic Order of Knights Templar.

3. Personal sources, including the politician's diaries *Witness to the Young Republic. A Yankee's Journal, 1828–1870*, published at the end of the twentieth century ([French, 1989](#)).

4. Reference and biographical materials, in particular the official website of the District of Columbia, where French is listed in the category "Photographs of Washington, D.C." ([French, 2025](#)); the article by J.J. McDonough and J.E. Tucker devoted to French's diaries ([McDonough, Tucker, 1990](#)); and other sources.

The research methodology includes a combination of the following historical methods: the biographical method, applied to the study of individual episodes of Benjamin B. French's life; the historiographical method, used to analyze the content of materials related to his biography; the historical-genetic method, employed to identify causal relationships within specific biographical episodes.

3. Results

Benjamin B. French was born on September 4, 1800, in Chester, New Hampshire ([French, 1989: 1](#)). From childhood he demonstrated outstanding intellectual abilities and an inclination toward literary creativity. He received a solid general and academic education. From his youth and throughout his life, French collected a personal library. For example, on January 19, 1818, at the age of seventeen, he added to his library William Duncan's *Cicero's Select Orations* ([Duncan, 1811](#)), marking it with his own handwritten bookplate ([Figure 1](#)). This volume is currently exhibited at the Museum of the History of the American Order of Knights Templar (Houston, USA).

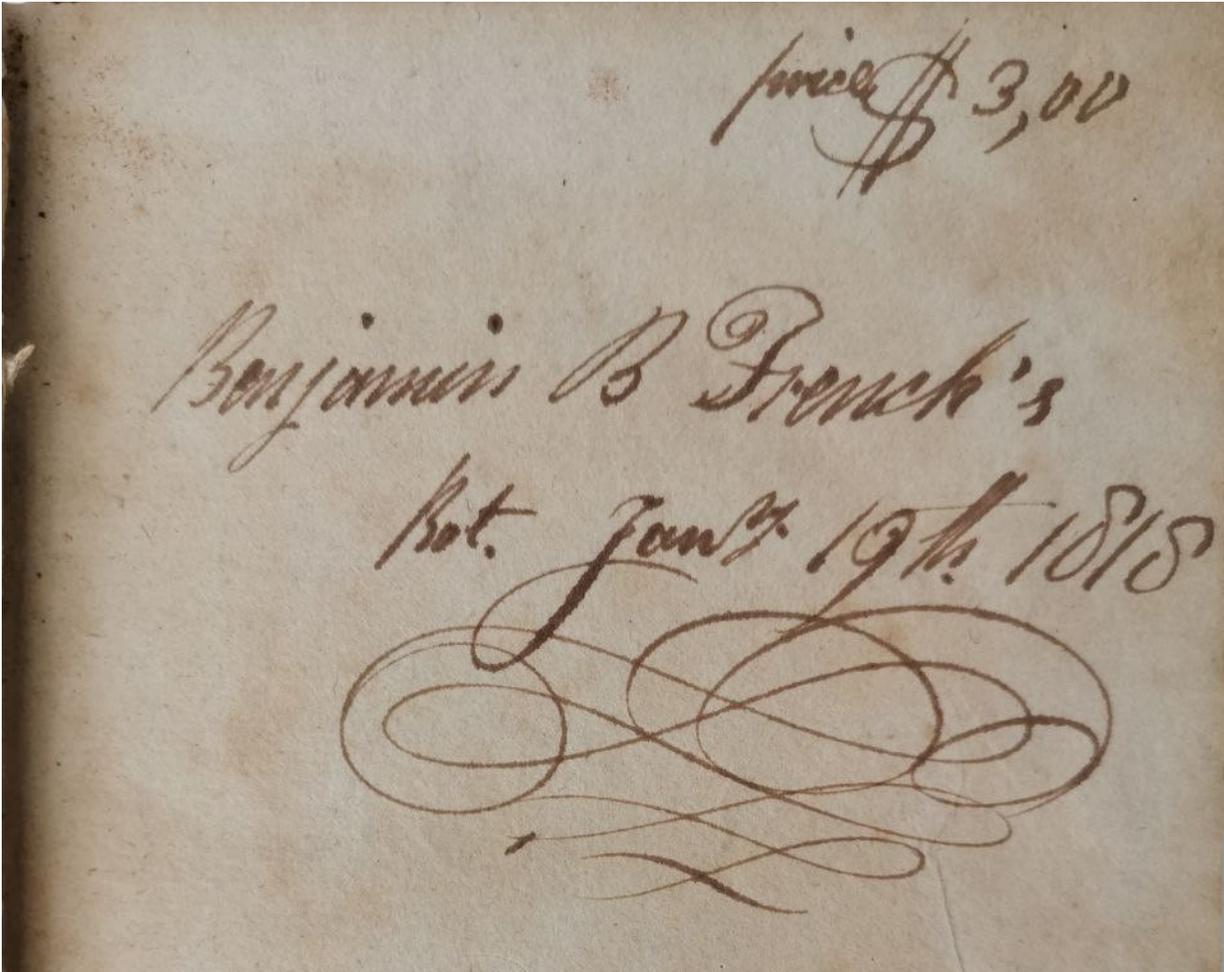


Fig. 1. Bookplate of Benjamin B. French. 1818 ([Duncan, 1811](#))

In 1825 Benjamin B. French married Elizabeth Richardson (1806–1861), with whom he lived for more than thirty years until her death in 1861.

In 1828 French was appointed Assistant Clerk of the New Hampshire State Senate, where he served until 1830, after which he became a Representative in the New Hampshire Legislature, holding that position

from 1831 to 1833 (French, 1989: 3). In 1833 he transferred from the legislature to the Clerk's Department of the United States House of Representatives.

After many years of service, Benjamin B. French (Figure 2) was appointed Clerk of the United States House of Representatives in 1845, a position he held until 1847. Following this appointment, he moved from New Hampshire to Washington, District of Columbia. At the same time, he was appointed Commissioner of Public Buildings, responsible for the maintenance, reconstruction, and general management of federal buildings. In this capacity, using salt-print and albumen photographic processes, French produced a significant number of photographs documenting the construction of the dome of the United States Capitol and other public buildings in Washington, D.C.

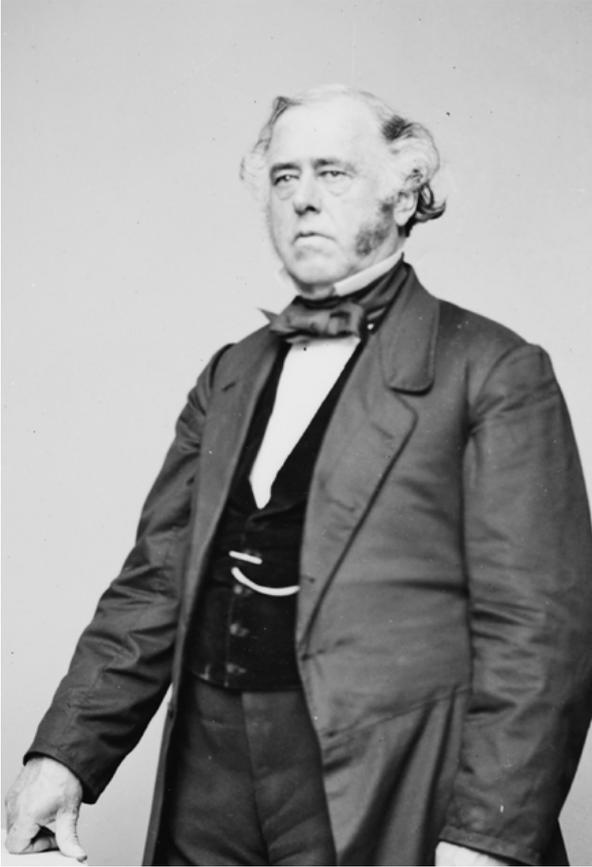


Fig. 2. Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870)

In 1847 French became President of the Magnetic Telegraph Company, serving until 1850. Telegraphic communication represented a major innovation in public communication, and French, who actively supported technological progress, took part in this important phase of the scientific and technological revolution (French, 1989: 7).

In 1853 President Franklin Pierce again appointed French as Commissioner of Public Buildings; however, in 1855 he resigned from public service.

In 1861 Benjamin B. French returned to service as Chief Marshal of the District of Columbia at the inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln, with whom he maintained close relations. His personal loyalty to Lincoln led him once again to the post of Commissioner of Public Buildings (French, 1989: 7), a position he retained under the subsequent presidency of Andrew Johnson.

In 1862 French married for the second time, to Mary Ellen Brady (1831–1905), with whom he lived until his death.

Some authors (notably Anthony Pitch; Pitch, 2008) suggest that Benjamin B. French attempted to physically restrain the assassin John Wilkes Booth, who fatally wounded President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865, at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.

French's literary output includes several works, the exact number of which remains disputed. Many anonymous works or those published under unidentified pseudonyms may, on stylistic grounds, plausibly be attributed to his authorship. His most famous work is *Witness to the Young Republic*, an extensive collection of diary entries written between 1828 and 1870 (French, 1989). A significant contribution to the study of these diaries was made by John J. McDonough. The methodological aspects of studying French's diaries are discussed in an article published in *The Newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records*

Commission, in which Jean E. Tucker interviews McDonough (McDonough, Tucker, 1990). This article also contains a rare photograph from the family archive, provided by Peter S. French, depicting Benjamin B. French in the uniform of the Grand Master of Knights Templar (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Benjamin B. French in the uniform of Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA. 1859

In 2025, a portrait of Benjamin B. French based on this photograph was painted by Lyudmila Nikolaevna Bogutskaya (born 1979) (Figure 4). The painting is currently exhibited at the Museum of the History of the American Order of Knights Templar (Houston, USA) and is the only known portrait depicting French in the uniform of the Masonic Order of Knights Templar.

Researchers also mention a ballad written by French about Luther Fuller (real name Augustus Fuller), known in literature under the fictional name John Maynard – the helmsman of the steamboat *Erie*, which caught fire and sank on August 9, 1841, resulting in the death of 254 people. Fuller became famous for remaining at the helm until the end in an attempt to save the vessel and its passengers. French was inspired to write this ballad by an article published in *The Sun* on August 30, 1845.

In 1870, the year of Benjamin B. French's death, his letter and poem dedicated to President Lincoln were published (French, 1870). This work, with commentary, was later published in the journal *Recorder* (Shevchenko, 2025: 90-92).

French's literary prose and poetry are characterized by eloquence, rich poetic imagery, and romanticism. He made a substantial contribution to the development of Masonic literature and its ideological foundations.

Finally, it is necessary to briefly outline Benjamin B. French's Masonic activity. He was initiated into a Masonic lodge at a relatively young age in 1825 and became a Master Mason in 1826. He held high offices both in his lodge and in the Grand Lodge of New Hampshire. After moving to Washington, D.C., he joined National Lodge No. 12, and in 1846 he was elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, being repeatedly re-elected.



Fig. 4. Portrait of Benjamin Brown French. 1859. Oil painting. Artist: Lyudmila Nikolaevna Bogutskaya (born 1979). 2025

In 1847 French was knighted in DeWitt Clinton Encampment (Brooklyn, New York). That same year he became Eminent Commander of Washington Commandery No. 1 (D.C.) ([Masonic Americana, 1985: 220](#)), a position he held for the following eleven years. In 1859, at the 14th Triennial Conclave, he was elected Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States ([Proceedings..., 1880: 261](#)). In 1862, at the 15th Triennial Conclave, he was elected for a second term ([Proceedings..., 1880: 261](#)), thus serving six years as Grand Master. His administration during the turbulent years of the Civil War was firm, decisive, and at the same time conciliatory:

“His administration, during a period of much excitement in the country, was marked by great firmness, mingled with a spirit of conciliation” ([French, 2025](#)).

Benjamin B. French was also a prominent member of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, serving until his death as Lieutenant Grand Commander of the Supreme Council for the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States.

Benjamin B. French died on August 12, 1870, in Washington, District of Columbia.

4. Conclusion

The conducted study allows us to conclude that Benjamin Brown French was one of the notable figures of American political and Masonic life in the nineteenth century. His career as a civil servant, participation in the development of federal infrastructure and communications, and literary activity were organically combined with active and responsible service to the Masonic Order of Knights Templar. As Grand Master during the Civil War, French demonstrated firmness, balance, and an ability to consolidate the fraternity in a time of national crisis. His diaries and literary legacy constitute a valuable source for the study of American statehood, Freemasonry, and the intellectual culture of the era.

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