

# SCIENCE

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COUNT RUMFORD—SCIENTIST AND  
PHILANTHROPIST<sup>1</sup>

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BENJAMIN THOMPSON, the future Count Rumford, was born on March 26, 1753, in his grandfather's farmhouse, which still stands in North Woburn, Mass. When Benjamin was about a year and a half old his father died. A year or so afterward his mother married again, and the boy went to live with his stepfather. A small inheritance from his grandfather was used toward the support and education of the boy. He attended school in the village and also in Byfield and Medford. He was fond of mathematics and, like his forerunner, Isaac Newton, he was interested in practical things and was skilful in making mechanical devices. His opportunities as a school-boy must have been well utilized because the handwriting, spelling and grammar of these early days, at least before the age of thirteen, are almost faultless.

Being too good, or too bad, for a farmer, he was apprenticed when thirteen years old to an importer in Salem. But he did not like clerking any better than farming. One authority says he was more interested in the mechanical appliances behind the counter than in the customers before it. And it is also said he even played the fiddle in the store when he was sure the sounds would not betray him. But he was not idle. A minister, noting his interests, taught him algebra, geometry, astronomy and even higher mathematics, so that before the age of fifteen he was able to calculate an eclipse accurately—"correct within four seconds," he says. At this time, too, he gave attractive evidence of his natural ability as a designer, draughtsman and engraver. His work in this field ranged from initials and devices on the handles of knives of his acquaintances to an elaborate bookplate for himself. Like most boys of his age, he was interested in chemistry and fascinated by spectacular experiments. On one occasion he came near losing his eyesight, if not his life, by the premature explosion of some chemicals he was grinding in a mortar for the preparation of fireworks "of extraordinary and unparalleled brilliancy" to celebrate the news of the repeal of the Stamp Act. Letters to his friend Loammi Baldwin show that even at this early age he was also interested in light, heat and color—phe-

<sup>1</sup> An address delivered March 26, 1928, at Woburn, Mass., on the 175th anniversary of the birth of Count Rumford.

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EDITED BY

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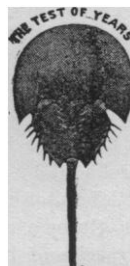
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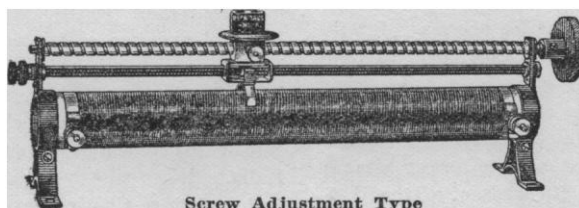
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