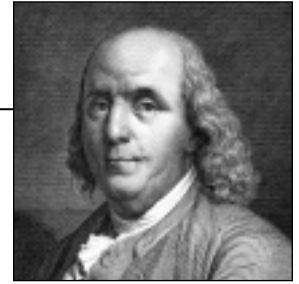


Benjamin Franklin

Founding Father

Though he was born into poverty, with little formal education, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) taught himself and worked hard. Eventually he became so successful he was admired throughout the United States and Europe.



As the fifteenth out of seventeen children, Benjamin Franklin did not get much personal attention, but there was no doubt he was loved. His father was a candle maker and soap maker. He scraped together what little money he had to send Benjamin to school for two years. However, by the time he was ten, he was working in his father's shop.

Ink in the Blood In spite of his lack of formal education, Franklin knew that the secret to success was education. So he began reading all the books he could find. He often borrowed them from neighbors. Though his father at first wanted him to be a candle and soap maker, he later decided that Ben should be a printer. That way, he could be around reading material all the time.

When Franklin was 12, his father sent him to work with his older brother James, a printer who also lived in Boston. By the time he was a teenager, Franklin was an excellent writer and editor. The constant stream of books he read made him well-educated.

After reading some of the articles in the newspaper James printed, Franklin decided he could do better. Writing under the name Mrs. Silence Dogood, he charmed the readers of Boston. He wrote wonderful observations and funny stories about life. However, when James found out that it was his little brother writing the articles, he received a thrashing.

James printed some political articles the officials in Boston didn't like. He was thrown in jail for a month. During that time, young Ben was left in charge of the paper.

On His Own At the age of 17, Franklin had had enough of his older brother's violent temper. He

ran away to New York City, and then to Philadelphia. He covered 400 miles by boat and on foot, most of it in a driving rain. When he finally reached Philadelphia, it was a Sunday morning. Ben was soaking wet, with his extra clothes hanging out of his pockets. From a baker he bought two loaves of bread. He tucked one under his arm and began chomping the other.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Thus I went up Market-street as far as Fourth-street . . . by this time many clean-dressed people . . . were all walking the same way. I joined them, and thereby was led into the great meeting-house of the Quakers . . . I sat down among them, and, after looking round awhile and hearing nothing said, being very drowsy thro' labor and want of rest the preceding night, I fell fast asleep, and continued so till the meeting broke up, when one was kind enough to rouse me.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *Autobiography of Ben Franklin*

Hard Worker Whatever the people of Philadelphia first thought of him, their opinion changed. He developed a reputation as one of the hardest workers anyone had ever met. Franklin proved that through hard work and sacrifice, he could achieve any goal he set his mind on.

Some people tried to take advantage of Franklin. One rich man promised to send him to England to buy printing materials. When Franklin got to London, he found the man did not have the money to buy the materials. Instead of getting mad, Franklin saw it as an opportunity to learn the printing business in England. By 1730, he was back in Philadelphia as the owner of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

Franklin also published a book of advice, farming information, recipes, and home cures called *Poor Richard's Almanac*. He filled empty spaces in the almanac with sayings he made up. These proverbs have become famous and are still quoted. *An apple a day keeps the doctor away. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise. What people waste on one bad habit could be better spent raising two good children.*

Public Servant By 1766, Ben had saved enough money from his printing business to retire. Though he was 60, he was far from ready to give up on life. He was now able to dedicate himself to public service and scientific experiments. In 1731, he started the first public library with some friends. He believed that access to books was crucial to every person. He also invented the first safe stove for heating homes. He refused to patent it because he believed others should copy it and sell it cheaply to the poor. Then, in 1752, came his famous kite experiment. This proved that lightning was electricity.

He also made trips to England to ask for better treatment of the American colonies. In 1754, he made the suggestion that the colonies should unite and learn to work together. It was this suggestion that would develop into the United States of America more than twenty years later.

By the time of his retirement in 1766, relations between the colonies and England were growing worse. The end of the French and Indian War in 1763 signaled the beginning of the American Revolution. To pay for the war, England began to heavily tax the colonies. Within ten years the cry was, “No taxation without representation.”

Revolution In the spring of 1776, Franklin was a delegate at the Second Continental Congress. When it came time to declare independence from England, Franklin and John Adams advised Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the document.

Like all the others who signed the Declaration of Independence, Franklin knew that if the colonies lost the war, his signature would guarantee that he would be hanged as a traitor to England.

Before the ink was dry on the Declaration, Franklin was on a ship to France to seek support for

the American cause. He arranged money, weapons, and officers to help the American troops and their commander, General George Washington. The colonies won the war in 1782. It was Franklin who was asked to represent the United States in signing the Treaty of Paris to officially end the war.

Last Days By 1787, people in the United States could see that the government under the Articles of Confederation wasn't working. Men like Washington, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton pushed for a Constitutional Convention. It was held in Philadelphia. Franklin often welcomed delegates to his home. Though he was 81 and quite ill, he was always ready with a joke or funny story to keep people relaxed.

He was also chosen as a delegate to the convention. He was so sick that he had to be carried to the meetings each day. In paintings of the convention, he is shown slumping a little and gripping his cane in pain. However, he never complained. He said it was important to “let thy discontents be thy secret.” In 1789, the Constitution was adopted. A year later, at the age of 84, Ben Franklin died.

Review Questions

1. What career did Benjamin Franklin learn from his brother, and how did this career contribute to his education?
2. What sorts of information did *Poor Richard's Almanac* contain?
3. What was Franklin's role during the Revolutionary War?

Critical Thinking

4. **Summarizing** What were some of Franklin's major activities and contributions?
5. **Analyzing Points of View** Why was Franklin's signature on the Declaration of Independence sure to make him either a hero or a traitor?
6. **Making Inferences** What do Franklin's activities and achievements suggest about him?