



Ben Franklin

1706–1790

Benjamin Franklin was born on January 17, 1706, to Josiah Franklin and Abiah Folger. He was the youngest of ten children. Josiah's first wife Anne, died, leaving him with three young children whom Abiah raised and loved as her own. The Franklin home, filled with thirteen children, was in Boston, Massachusetts, across from the Old South Church on Milk Street.

Josiah Franklin was a soap and candle maker and insisted all of his sons learn a trade. He hoped that his youngest, Benjamin, would become a minister. Ben entered school at the age of 8. He did very well in reading and writing but had great difficulty in mathematics and was removed from school. This ended any chance he had of becoming a minister. Benjamin did not enjoy working with his father. Knowing how Ben loved to read and write, his father established him as an apprentice in Ben's brother James' print shop. Ben was contracted to work for James for nine years. This opportunity opened many doors for him in the world of literature and philosophy. When James established his own newspaper, *New England Current*, in 1721, Ben aspired to become a writer and have his brother publish his works. James was less certain that a 16 year old could possibly be successful as a writer. As a result, Ben drafted several letters under the pseudonym, Silence Dogood, and slipped them into the editor's office to be published. (Throughout Ben's life, he commonly used various pseudonyms for publishing purposes.) The letters were interesting and humorous. The public enjoyed reading the letters, and the *New England Current* continued to publish them until Dogood's identity was revealed. This caused many problems between the two brothers. Ben left his position at the print shop and his family for a new life in Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia, Ben found employment at Samuel Keimer's print shop and lived at a local boarding house. In 1729 Ben bought Samuel's shares of the print shop and took over the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. In 1730 Ben took a common-law wife, Deborah Read, the daughter of the boarding house owner. They raised five children, one of whom, Little Franky, died at the age of 4 from smallpox. In 1732 Ben published his first Almanac, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, under the pseudonym, Richard Saunders. It contained wise sayings such as, "Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy wealthy and wise," and "An apple a day keeps the doctor

away.” Ben believed all women should be educated in business matters. He valued useful languages such as French, Italian, and Spanish over the “old world” Latin.

The start of Benjamin Franklin’s political career began in 1736. He was elected Clerk of the Legislature and appointed Postmaster General in 1737. As Postmaster General, he arranged mail service from New York to Montreal, Quebec. He also established twenty-four-hour service among major cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. He voiced several ideas to better daily life in Philadelphia such as creating a tax to fund the first volunteer fire department, Union Fire Co.; instituted the first fire insurance company in 1752, and established an orphanage with George Whitefield. He established a lottery, used the proceeds to fund the defense of the city, and chartered the Academy of Pennsylvania (present-day University of Pennsylvania). He developed the Franklin stove in 1748, which was a safe and efficient way to heat homes while limiting fire hazards.

In 1748 Ben Franklin retired from the printing business and focused on political and scientific interests. Although Ben never had any formal scientific training, his own curiosity led to the invention of several items used today. Ben believed lightning was a natural form of electricity and could be channeled for many uses. He developed the lightning rod to protect homes from the threat of fire and was able to conduct electricity from a bolt of lightning using a kite, a key, and silk fabric in the famous 1752 experiment. Benjamin is responsible for the development of scientific words such as *battery*, *charge*, *positive*, and *negative*. He investigated weather patterns across the United States. He created the odometer; bifocals; the catheter; and the glass armonica, a popular instrument Mozart and Beethoven used. While serving on the legislature, Ben aided the British during the French and Indian War with supplies and tactical advice. During the height of the conflict between England and the colonies, Ben spent ten years in England attempting to mediate negotiations. While in Ben was in England, his wife Deborah died.

On his return to the colonies in 1775, Ben was chosen to represent Pennsylvania in the Second Continental Congress and was appointed to remain postmaster of the colonies and Chair of the Committee of Safety, which was established to defend the colonies. Benjamin was full of ideas and wrote *The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union* hoping to unify the colonies under one national confederation. Many thought his ideas were too visionary, and dismissed the document. Ben was an active member of a secret committee rallying European allies. In 1776 Franklin was sent north to acquire another ally, French Canada, but to no avail. Immediately following his trip, Thomas Jefferson, John

Adams, and Benjamin Franklin drafted the *Declaration of Independence*. Jefferson was the chief writer of the document the Second Continental Congress adopted on July 4, 1776. To Franklin's surprise, his earlier document *The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union* was the basis of colonies' unification. He was disappointed the eagle was chosen to be the symbol of the new nation, not the turkey as he had suggested. Franklin was one of five American representatives at the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and remained as the Ambassador to France. The end of the war brought to the forefront the nine-year disagreement between Ben and his son, William, the Royal Governor of New Jersey. Through the American Revolution, William remained loyal to England. In a letter to his son before his death, Ben wrote that nothing pained him more than the time lost with his only son. The two never fully reconciled. This also created a great disagreement between William and his own son, William Temple Franklin.

In 1785, Thomas Jefferson relieved the ailing Ben of his duties as ambassador, so he could return to Philadelphia. In 1787 Ben was a delegate from Pennsylvania during the Constitutional Convention and the drafting of the *Constitution of the United States*. Franklin's last political statement was to write an article comparing the horrible conditions of slavery to primal civilizations of the past.

Thomas Jefferson was Ben's last visitor. With his family surrounding him, Ben died on April 17, 1790, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His funeral was on April 21, 1790 and 20,000 people attended. France and England held a national period of mourning in his honor. Benjamin Franklin lived and dressed simply. He believed a rich intellect was far more valuable than expensive clothes, and no form of labor was beneath his dignity. Benjamin Franklin was an American hero, inventor, writer, politician, known for his wit and humor. He saw himself as only a simple, common man.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Ben Franklin

1706–1790

Discussion Questions:

1. What career did Franklin follow? What interests did Franklin have?
2. Why did Franklin commonly publish articles using pseudonyms?
3. Why were Franklin's published works well-received?
4. When he was elected to the Pennsylvania Legislature, what two major roles did Franklin fulfill?
5. Name some of Franklin's inventions. Which was the most valuable? Why?

