



Franklin, Benjamin

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), one of America’s Founding Fathers, promoted the cause of independence perhaps more than anyone else. Rising from poverty to become an author, scientist, and statesman, the self-made Franklin is to many the model American.

Born in Boston on January 17, 1706, to Josiah Franklin, a chandler (candle and soap maker), and his wife, Abiah (Folger), Benjamin Franklin early on came to love reading. Josiah could not afford to send Benjamin to grammar school for more than a year, and so he was apprenticed to his brother James, a printer. Though still under obligation as an artiled apprentice, at seventeen Franklin ran away to Philadelphia, where his printing knowledge, tirelessness, and magnetic personality brought him success. In 1724, when business took him to London, Franklin sought work at the press of Samuel Palmer, who was famous for printing deist tracts and essays. Here Franklin worked out his own deist belief in an impersonal God who desires his creatures to be charitable, hardworking, and frugal. Franklin later also became a Freemason.

Two years after returning to Philadelphia in 1728, Franklin and a colleague started a printing business. His growing means allowed him to enter into a common-law marriage with Deborah Read and also take custody of his illegitimate son, William. In an age when church was no longer the center of social activity, Franklin fostered the development of numerous private associations, including the Junta, a discussion club for middle-class artisans, whose shared book collection (much of which was Franklin’s) became the first subscription library in America. In 1732 he began publishing *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, a widely read compilation of folk wisdom and practical suggestions for farming. His successful ventures helped secure Franklin the post of clerk for the Pennsylvania assembly in 1736 and that of postmaster the following year.

Inventor and Problem Solver

Ever curious and practical, Franklin loved solving problems. To deal with fires caused by lightning strikes, which often destroyed churches and other tall buildings, Franklin organized the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia—the first of its kind—in 1736. His experiments with electricity in summer 1746 ultimately led (after his famous kite experiment in 1752) to the lightning rod. Franklin’s electrical experimentation extended to the coining of such terms as *battery*, *charge*, and *conductor*. By 1748 he had amassed enough of a fortune to retire, become a gentleman, and concentrate on scientific curiosities and civic improvements.

Political Life and Revolution

Franklin was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1751, and in 1753 Parliament appointed him deputy postmaster general for the colonies. With the beginning of the French and Indian War in 1754, Franklin became convinced that a united colonial government, in service to Britain, would be the colonists' best defense against the hostile forces they might have to face. Wary of encroachment on their liberties, representatives of the colonies rejected Franklin's plan, known as the Albany Plan of Union, that same year.

As British and American troops fought the French and their Indian allies, Parliament drafted tax codes to pay for the war effort. In 1764 a diplomatic mission to London ended with Franklin's acquiescence in the Stamp Act, which was imposed on the colonists without recourse to their local assemblies. Franklin's insistence that it was wrong for Parliament to levy excise taxes (taxes on stamps, newspapers, and so on) led to the act's repeal two years later. However, these taxes were soon replaced by tariffs, the Townshend duties. These duties were reduced to a tax on tea, thanks to Franklin's attacks on them in newspaper articles.

In 1772 a member of Parliament gave Franklin a series of letters from the royal governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, full of advice on how to temper the colonists by "abridging" their "English liberties." Franklin forwarded these letters to friends in Boston, who—contrary to Franklin's wishes—saw that they were widely published. The Hutchinson letters led to the Boston Tea Party, and Franklin was fired as royal colonial postmaster.

In 1775, in an open letter to William Strahan—published in newspapers but never sent to its addressee—Franklin announced his support for independence. This letter settled any doubts as to Franklin's intentions and influenced many to join the Revolutionary cause. (Though in the letter Franklin declares Strahan his enemy, the two remained friends, as they had been for decades.)

You are a Member of Parliament, and one of that Majority which has doomed my country to destruction. You have begun to burn our towns, and murder our people. Look upon your hands! They are stained with the blood of your relations! You and I were long friends: You are now my enemy, and I am,

Yours,

B. Franklin

UNPOSTED LETTER TO WILLIAM
STRAHAN, JULY 5, 1775

Back in Philadelphia

After ten years in Europe, Franklin returned to Philadelphia in 1775, even as the first shots were being fired in Concord, Massachusetts. He was immediately chosen a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. After the Battle of Bunker Hill and the burning of Charleston, South Carolina, the seventy-year-old Franklin wrote an open letter to his friend William Strahan, a member of Parliament, in which he clarified his intention to press for the colonies' independence.

Ambassador to France (1776–1785)

In 1776 the anonymously published pamphlet *Common Sense*, written by Thomas Paine and edited by Franklin, galvanized pro-independence sentiments. Franklin also edited Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence (he famously altered Jefferson's phrasing "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable" to the rationalized "to be self-evident"). Later that year, the congress sent Franklin, though he was beset with gout, on a secret mission to Paris to secure aid.

Like many of the other Founders, Franklin was a deist, not an orthodox Christian. Although a man of the Enlightenment who jettisoned Christian doctrines that were not "reasonable," he upheld the importance of a civil religion as a means of controlling people's passions. His Puritan parents were troubled by his beliefs; so at age thirty-two he wrote to reassure them.

... I think vital Religion has always suffer'd, when Orthodoxy is more regarded than Virtue. And the Scripture assures me, that at the last Day, we shall not be examin'd what we thought, but what we did; and our Recommendation will not be that we said Lord, Lord, but that we did GOOD to our Fellow Creatures.

LETTER TO JOSIAH AND
ABIAH FRANKLIN, 1738

In France, Franklin was treated as a celebrity. After being there nearly a year, on February 5, 1778, he secured an alliance with Louis XVI. Franklin remained in Paris and continued to press the French for critical support. Then in 1781 the congress appointed him to the committee that would negotiate peace with Britain should victory be achieved.

After the British surrender at Yorktown, Franklin, together with John Jay and John Adams, set to work. After much intrigue—among themselves as well as with the French and the British—Franklin and his colleagues signed the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783.

Last Years

Franklin returned to Philadelphia in 1785. In May 1787 he was named a Pennsylvania delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. At this gathering, the elder statesman (Franklin was then eighty-one) nominated George Washington as convention chairman.

After the convention Franklin devoted the remainder of his life to abolitionism. He served as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, which educated freed blacks to speed their assimilation into society. Franklin died on April 17, 1790.

AARON D. WOLF

See also: [ADAMS, JOHN](#); [ALBANY CONVENTION](#); [ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION](#); [CONTINENTAL CONGRESSES](#); [DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE](#); [JAY, JOHN](#); [JEFFERSON, THOMAS](#); [PAINE, THOMAS](#); [PENN, WILLIAM](#); [STAMP ACT](#); [TOWNSHEND ACTS](#); [WASHINGTON, GEORGE](#).

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