

Biography of Benjamin Franklin

Student Name _____ Date _____

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston on January 17, 1706. He was the tenth son of soap maker, Josiah Franklin. Benjamin's mother was Abiah Folger, the second wife of Josiah. In all, Josiah would father 17 children.

Josiah intended for Benjamin to enter into the clergy. However, Josiah could only afford to send his son to school for one year and clergymen needed years of schooling. But, as young Benjamin loved to read he had him apprenticed to his brother James, who was a printer. After helping James compose pamphlets and set type which was grueling work, 12-year-old Benjamin would sell their products in the streets.

Apprentice Printer

When Benjamin was 15 his brother started The New England Courant the first "newspaper" in Boston. Though there were two papers in the city before James's Courant, they only reprinted news from abroad. James's paper carried articles, opinion pieces written by James's friends, advertisements, and news of ship schedules.

Franklin as printer

Benjamin wanted to write for the paper too, but he knew that James would never let him. After all, Benjamin was just a lowly apprentice. So Ben began writing letters at night and signing them with the name of a fictional widow, Silence Dogood. Dogood was filled with advice and very critical of the world around her, particularly concerning the issue of how women were treated. Ben would sneak the letters under the print shop door at night so no one knew who was writing the pieces. They were a smash hit, and everyone wanted to know who was the real "Silence Dogood."

After 16 letters, Ben confessed that he had been writing the letters all along. While James's friends thought Ben was quite precocious and funny, James scolded his brother and was very jealous of the attention paid to him.

Before long the Franklins found themselves at odds with Boston's powerful Puritan preachers, the Mathers. Smallpox was a deadly disease in those times, and the Mathers supported inoculation; the Franklins' believed inoculation only made people sicker. And while most Bostonians agreed with the Franklins, they did not like the way James made fun of the clergy, during the debate. Ultimately, James was thrown in jail for his views, and Benjamin was left to run the paper for several issues.

Upon release from jail, James was not grateful to Ben for keeping the paper going. Instead he kept harassing his younger brother and administering beatings from time to time. Ben could not take it and decided to run away in 1723.

Escape to Philadelphia

Running away was illegal. In early America, people all had to have a place in society and runaways did not fit in anywhere. Regardless Ben took a boat to New York where he hoped to find work as a printer. He didn't, and walked across New Jersey, finally arriving in Philadelphia via a boat ride. After debarking, he used the last of his money to buy some rolls. He was wet, disheveled, and messy when his

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future wife, Deborah Read, saw him on that day, October, 6, 1723. She thought him odd-looking, never dreaming that seven years later they would be married.

Franklin found work as an apprentice printer. He did so well that the governor of Pennsylvania promised to set him up in business for himself if young Franklin would just go to London to buy fonts and printing equipment. Franklin did go to London, but the governor reneged on his promise and Benjamin was forced to spend several months in England doing print work.

Benjamin had been living with the Read family before he left for London. Deborah Read, the very same girl who had seen young Benjamin arrive in Philadelphia, started talking marriage, with the young printer. But Ben did not think he was ready. While he was gone, she married another man.

Upon returning to Philadelphia, Franklin tried his hand at helping to run a shop, but soon went back to being a printer's helper. Franklin was a better printer than the man he was working for, so he borrowed some money and set himself up in the printing business. Franklin seemed to work all the time, and the citizens of Philadelphia began to notice the diligent young businessman. Soon he began getting the contract to do government jobs and started thriving in business.

In 1728, Benjamin fathered a child named William. The mother of William is not known. However, in 1730 Benjamin married his childhood sweetheart, Deborah Read. Deborah's husband had run off, and now she was able to marry.

In addition to running a print shop, the Franklins also ran their own store at this time, with Deborah selling everything from soap to fabric. Ben also ran a book store. They were quite enterprising.

Join or Die

In 1729, Benjamin Franklin bought a newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette. Franklin not only printed the paper, but often contributed pieces to the paper under aliases. His newspaper soon became the most successful in the colonies. This newspaper, among other firsts, would print the first political cartoon, authored by Ben himself.

During the 1720s and 1730s, the side of Franklin devoted to public good started to show itself. He organized the Junto, a young working-man's group dedicated to self- and-civic improvement. He joined the Masons. He was a very busy man socially.

Poor Richard's Almanack

But Franklin thrived on work. In 1733 he started publishing Poor Richard's Almanack. Almanacs of the era were printed annually, and contained things like weather reports, recipes, predictions and homilies. Franklin published his almanac under the guise of a man named Richard Saunders, a poor man who needed money to take care of his carping wife. What distinguished Franklin's almanac were his witty aphorisms and lively writing. Many of the famous phrases associated with Franklin, such as, "A penny saved is a penny earned" come from Poor Richard.

Civic Contributions

Franklin continued his civic contributions during the 1730s and 1740s. He helped launch projects to pave, clean and light Philadelphia's streets. He started agitating for environmental clean up. Among the chief accomplishments of Franklin in this era was helping to launch the Library Company in 1731. During this time books were scarce and expensive. Franklin recognized that by pooling together

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resources, members could afford to buy books from England. Thus was born the nation's first subscription library. In 1743, he helped to launch the American Philosophical Society, the first learned society in America. Recognizing that the city needed better help in treating the sick, Franklin brought together a group who formed the Pennsylvania Hospital in 1751. The Library Company, Philosophical Society, and Pennsylvania Hospital are all in existence today.

Fires were very dangerous threat to Philadelphians, so Franklin set about trying to remedy the situation. In 1736, he organized Philadelphia's Union Fire Company, the first in the city. His famous saying, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," was actually fire-fighting advice.

Those who suffered fire damage to their homes often suffered irreversible economic loss. So, in 1752, Franklin helped to found the Philadelphia Contribution for Insurance Against Loss by Fire. Those with insurance policies were not wiped out financially. The Contributionship is still in business today.

Electricity

Franklin's printing business was thriving in this 1730s and 1740s. He also started setting up franchise printing partnerships in other cities. By 1749 he retired from business and started concentrating on science, experiments, and inventions. This was nothing new to Franklin. In 1743, he had already invented a heat-efficient stove — called the Franklin stove — to help warm houses efficiently. As the stove was invented to help improve society, he refused to take out a patent.

Among Franklin's other inventions are swim fins, the glass armonica (a musical instrument) and bifocals.

In the early 1750's he turned to the study of electricity. His observations, including his kite experiment which verified the nature of electricity and lightning brought Franklin international fame.

The Political Scene

Politics became more of an active interest for Franklin in the 1750s. In 1757, he went to England to represent Pennsylvania in its fight with the descendants of the Penn family over who should represent the Colony. He remained in England to 1775, as a Colonial representative not only of Pennsylvania, but of Georgia, New Jersey and Massachusetts as well.

Early in his time abroad, Franklin considered himself a loyal Englishman. England had many of the amenities that America lacked. The country also had fine thinkers, theater, witty conversation — things in short supply in America. He kept asking Deborah to come visit him in England. He had thoughts of staying there permanently, but she was afraid of traveling by ship.

Stamp Act

In 1765, Franklin was caught by surprise by America's overwhelming opposition to the Stamp Act. His testimony before Parliament helped persuade the members to repeal the law. He started wondering if America should break free of England. Franklin, though he had many friends in England, was growing sick of the corruption he saw all around him in politics and royal circles. Franklin, who had proposed a plan for united colonies in 1754, now would earnestly start working toward that goal.

Franklin's big break with England occurred in the "Hutchinson Affair." Thomas Hutchinson was an English-appointed governor of Massachusetts. Although he pretended to take the side of the people of Massachusetts in their complaints against England, he was actually still working for the King. Franklin got a hold of some letters in which Hutchinson called for "an abridgment of what are called English

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Liberties" in America. He sent the letters to America where much of the population was outraged. After leaking the letters Franklin was called to Whitehall, the English Foreign Ministry, where he was condemned in public.

A New Nation

Franklin came home. He started working actively for Independence. He naturally thought his son William, now the Royal governor of New Jersey, would agree with his views. William did not. William remained a Loyal Englishman. This caused a rift between father and son which was never healed.

Franklin was elected to the Second Continental Congress and worked on a committee of five that helped to draft the Declaration of Independence. Though much of the writing is Thomas Jefferson's, much of the contribution is Franklin's. In 1776 Franklin signed the Declaration, and afterward sailed to France as an ambassador to the Court of Louis XVI.

Franklin in France

The French loved Franklin. He was the man who had tamed lightning, the humble American who dressed like a backwoodsman but was a match for any wit in the world. He spoke French, though stutteringly. He was a favorite of the ladies. Several years earlier his wife Deborah had died, and Benjamin was now a notorious flirt. In part via Franklin's popularity, the government of France signed a Treaty of Alliance with the Americans in 1778. Franklin also helped secure loans and persuade the French they were doing the right thing. Franklin was on hand to sign the Treaty of Paris in 1783, after the Americans had won the Revolution.

Now a man in his late seventies, Franklin returned to America. He became President of the Executive Council of Pennsylvania. He served as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and signed the Constitution. One of his last public acts was writing an anti-slavery treatise in 1789.

Franklin died on April 17, 1790 at the age of 84. Twenty thousand people attended the funeral of the man who was called, "the harmonious human multitude."