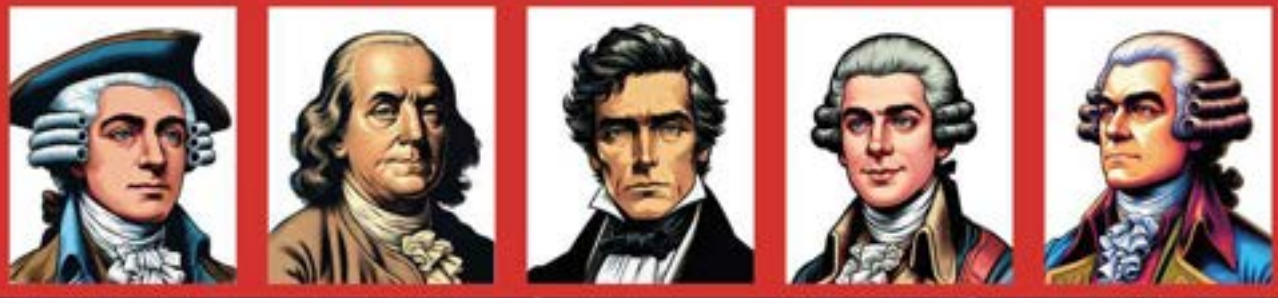
What a Character!

FAMOUS AMERICAN STATESMEN

Notable Lives from History



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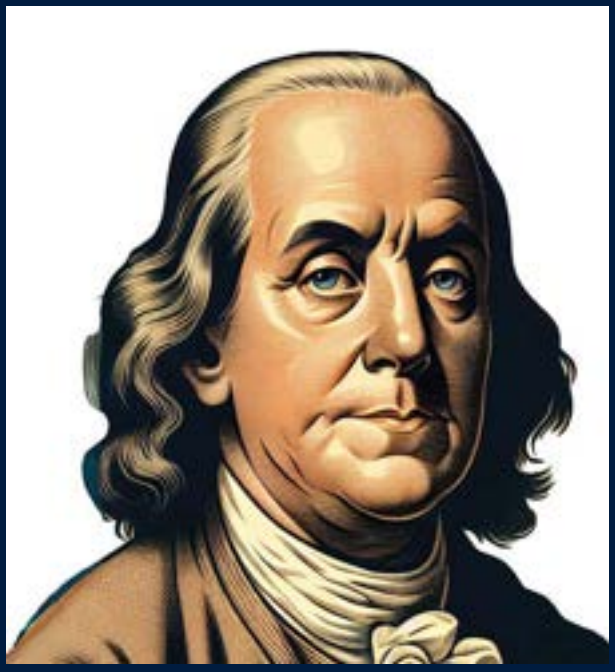

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Benjamin Franklin –

Statesman, Inventor, and Patriot

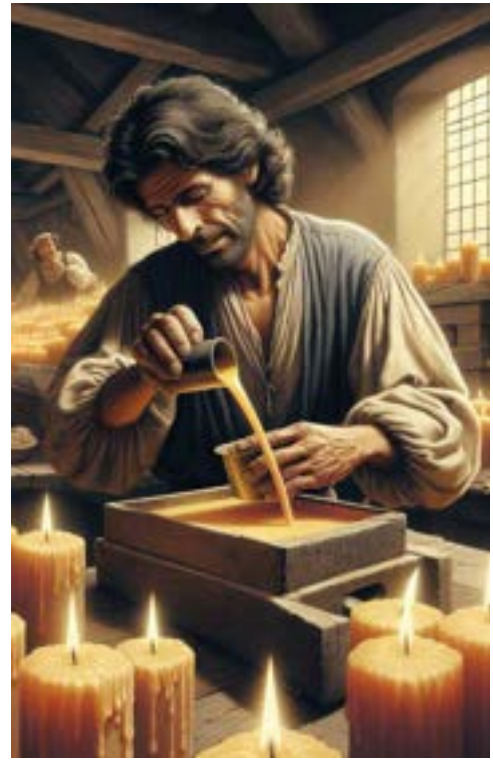
January 17, 1706 – April 17, 1790

Who Was Benjamin Franklin?

Benjamin Franklin was one of the most significant men in early America. He was well known throughout the world for his wisdom and many achievements. A printer by trade, Ben Franklin was an author, an inventor, a statesman, and a scientist. He was instrumental in helping our country obtain its freedom. When the United States became an independent nation, Benjamin Franklin was there, making sure it started out and stayed on the right track.

Early Days

Benjamin Franklin was born on January 17, 1706, in Boston, Massachusetts. He had 16 brothers and sisters. His father was a soapmaker and candlemaker. As a boy, Ben was full of fun. His friends often followed his lead. One day, he and his friends found a pile of building stones close to the water's edge. Ben had an idea. He persuaded his friends to help him build a wharf from which they could go fishing. That evening, the boys hauled the stones down to the water.



They left for home, having put a fine-looking wharf in place. They could hardly wait to go fishing on it the next day. However, when workmen who were building a new house

arrived in the morning, they were extremely upset to see their stones reformed into a fishing wharf. Immediately, they tried to find out who had done it. They discovered Ben Franklin was the leader. Ben defended his actions. He told his father it was a good wharf and the boys needed it. His father said, "The stones were not yours to take, Ben, and what is not honest cannot be truly useful."[1] So Ben learned a lesson he would never forget — that "honesty is the best policy."[2] Of course, the boys had to make it right and carry all those heavy stones back to where they had found them.

Schooling

Ben went to the local grammar school when he was eight years old. He was at the top of the class in reading and writing. He did not attend school for long, unfortunately. When he was 10 years old, he had to leave school and go to work for his father. His father was a hard worker, but he didn't make much money and couldn't send Ben to college. No one could have guessed that one day Ben would be awarded degrees by various colleges and universities. He later said, "The door to learning is never closed."[3]

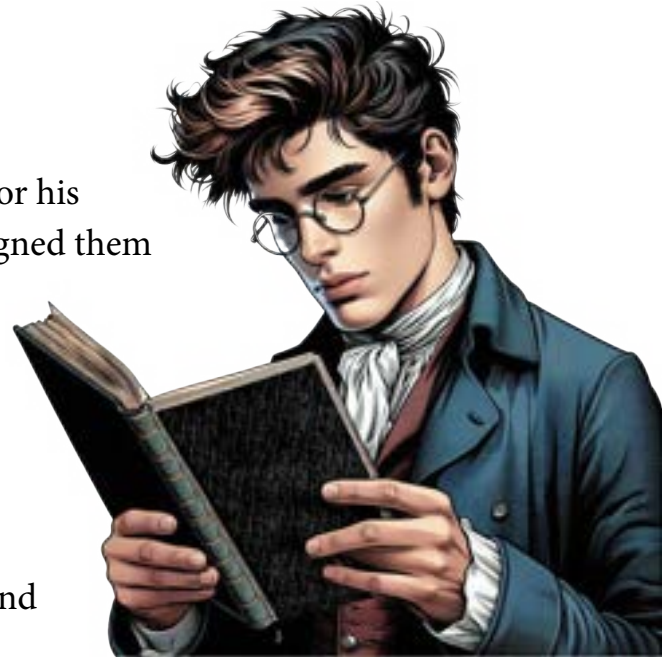
Ben did not enjoy candlemaking, though, and soon his father decided to **apprentice** him to his older brother James, who was already a succesful printer. Apprenticeship meant that Ben would have to work for James until he was 21 years old. It was hard work, and James was not easy to work for, but Ben applied himself to learn the job. He spent all of his spare time improving his mind. He often stayed up reading late into the night.

Ben made a deal with James concerning meals. James had been buying food for Ben, but Ben asked for the money instead, to buy food for himself. Since he ate simply, he could save half of what his brother gave him. With the money Ben saved, he bought books. Ben also made better use of time. He would eat a few raisins and bread, or rice and boiled potatoes while the other printers went to eat lunch at the boarding house. With his extra time, Ben, of course, would read.

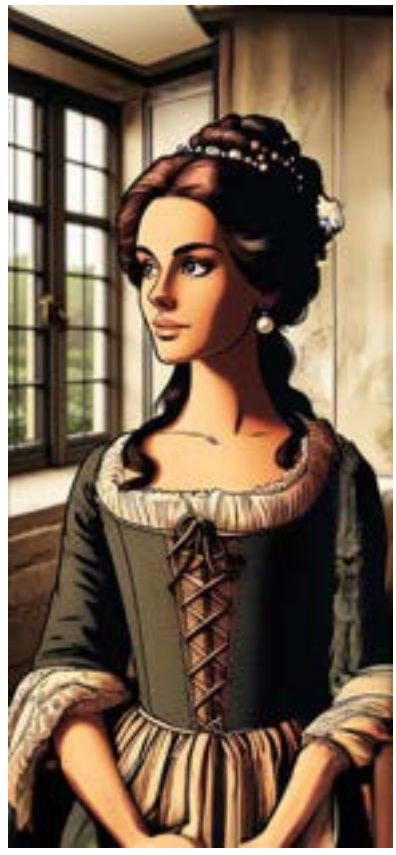
apprentice: Make one learn a trade from a skilled worker

Writing

Ben began writing pieces for his brother's newspaper but signed them as Mrs. Silence Dogood. He did not want to let his brother know he was the real author of the articles. He would just slip them under the print shop door. People loved them, and



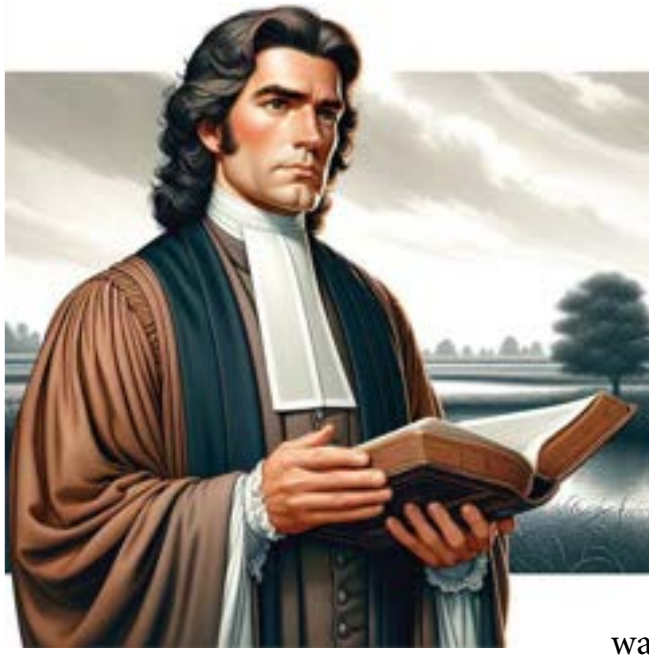
everyone wondered who Silence Dogood was. Ben eventually told James, but sadly, James grew jealous of the attention and praise Ben received. He treated Ben very harshly.



In the fall of 1723, Ben left James' print shop and headed for New York, 200 miles from home. He decided he would make his own way in the world. Ben could not find a job in New York, so he tried Philadelphia. He was tired and dirty from traveling when he got there. His coat pockets were stuffed with extra clothes. Upon arriving in town, he bought three large rolls from the baker. He walked down the street, eating one and carrying the other two under his arms. Young Deborah Read, who lived in Philadelphia, was standing in the doorway of her father's home and saw him walking down the street. He was an amusing sight. She had no way of knowing he would one day be her husband. He finally got a job with a printer in Philadelphia. After several years and more hardships, he opened his own print shop there.

Ben's Many Accomplishments

Ben did marry Deborah Read. Together, they worked hard to make their print business succesful. Ben began writing an almanac called *Poor Richard's Almanack*. It contained loads of practical tips, weather



forecasts, word puzzles, and useful information. He gave tips on gardening, planting crops, and housekeeping. The *Almanack* included many of Ben's sayings which became famous, such as: "There are no gains without pains," "He who lies down with dogs wakes up with fleas," "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."[4] Ben and Deborah began to grow wealthy. They were very generous with their money. They gave to charities, including the famous **evangelist** George Whitefield, to help support his **orphanage**.

Benjamin Franklin did much to make Philadelphia a better place to live. He donated money for **cobblestones** to line the muddy streets. He also developed a street cleaning system, started the first Pennsylvania militia, published the first novel ever in America, and owned and published the leading newspaper of its time. Along with all this, he built the first electrical battery, organized the first fire department and the first postal system, helped start the first public library in the American colonies so people could check out books to read, and helped to build a hospital. Later, he even founded the University of Pennsylvania.

evangelist: Traveling preacher of the Gospel

orphanage: Home to raise children who have no parents

cobblestones: Small round stones placed along the edges of streets

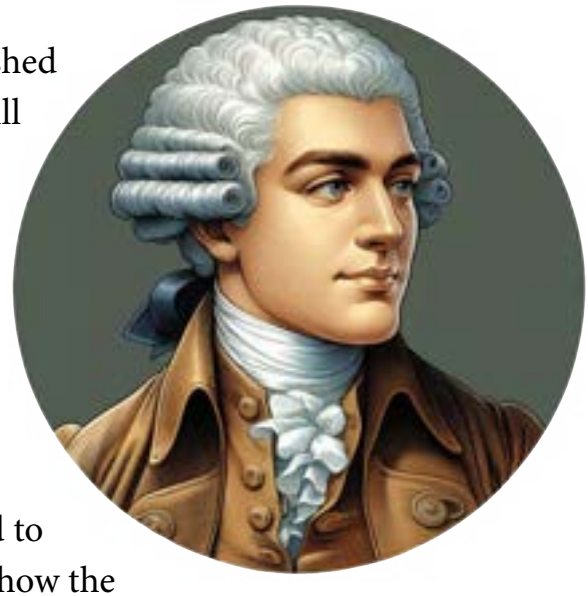
Ben invented the famous Franklin stove to heat houses efficiently, as well as the first lightning rod to keep houses from burning down if struck by lightning, **bifocal** glasses so people could see better, and a glass harmonica and other musical instruments. Along with all these things, he also improved carriage wheels, windmills, water wheels, and so much more that it would fill many pages to tell. He never applied for patents for his inventions. Patents were permits securing for a term of years the right to exclude others from making, using, or selling an invention. This was because he wanted people to benefit from them; he did not make them to earn money for himself.

bifocal: Lenses for both close and distant vision

Ben the Statesman

The people of Pennsylvania loved and trusted Ben Franklin. He was elected clerk of the Assembly of Pennsylvania and later, a lawmaker in that same assembly. For ten years, he was re-elected to help make laws for the colony. At this time, it was just a colony, not a state. In 1754, he was sent to make a treaty with the

Iroquois people. He had accomplished all this while Patrick Henry was still a boy and George Washington was still a surveyor.



When conflict started with England, Benjamin Franklin, with his years of wisdom, was a perfect choice to send there. His mission was to try to **negotiate** peace with Great Britain. Ben tried to explain to the British government how the colonists felt about the various taxes being forced upon them. At first, most of the colonists wanted to remain under the leadership of King George III. Ben was sent to **appeal** to the king and **Parliament**. He wrote articles explaining how the taxes were harmful to the colonists. He spoke before Parliament on behalf of the colonies. He was finally able to get them to **repeal** the Stamp Act. His job wasn't done yet, though. He remained in England for eight more years trying to get fair treatment for the colonists. It was a long, long time to be away from his family! He spent hours talking with the great English statesman William Pitt, who spoke up in Parliament on behalf of the colonists. Pitt introduced a bill in Parliament trying to get Parliament to treat the colonists with respect, but it did not pass. It looked like all attempts at avoiding a war would fail.

negotiate: Reach an agreement on

appeal: Make a serious request

Parliament: The ruling body of England

repeal: Take away

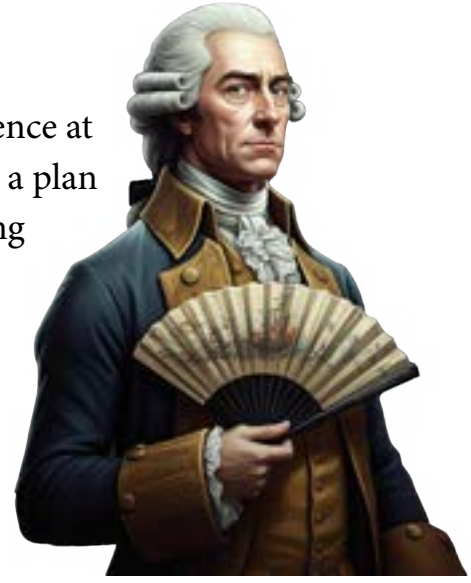
Important Jobs

Ben traveled back to Philadelphia in time to be a part of the First Continental Congress. He was one of the five men chosen to give **input** on the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Soon, however, he was sent back to Europe, this time to France, to try to raise financial support for the colonies. England had a strong navy and army. America was brand new and had none of those resources. They needed a friendly nation to help.

input: Advice

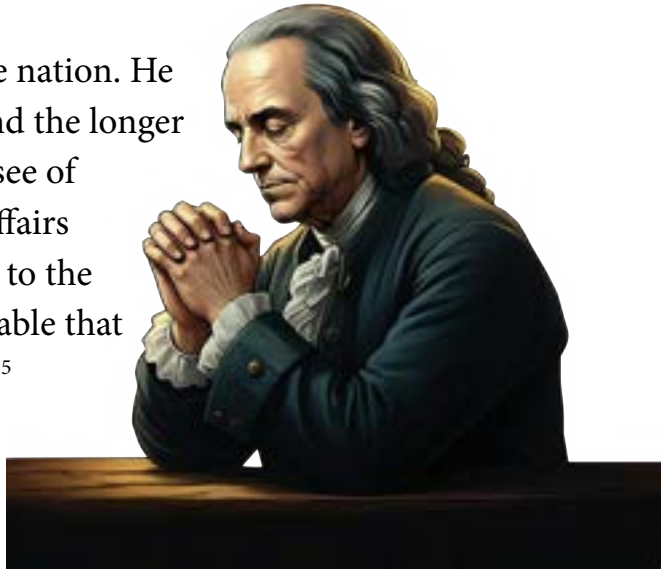
France and England were enemies and had fought each other during the French and Indian War in America years before. Ben persuaded the King of France to give financial help to the American colonial army. Many French officers went to America to help, including the Marquis de Lafayette. At the crucial time, King Louis even sent soldiers and part of his navy to help trap the English army at Yorktown, Virginia. With the help of the French and the mighty hand of God, America won her freedom, and the United States of America was born.

Constitutional Convention



Benjamin Franklin had tremendous influence at the Constitutional Convention, laying out a plan for governing the new nation. For four long months, through the oppressive heat of the summer of 1787, the members of the Convention sat day after day. There was much discussion by the members and disagreements about how to proceed. Ben suggested that they pray each day

to ask God's guidance in forming the nation. He said, "Sir, I have lived a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"[5]



By this time, Ben Franklin was an old man of 81. He had a disease called gout in his feet that made it hard for him to stand. When he had something to say, he wrote it down and asked James Madison to read it for him. Some of those speeches he made were preserved in this way by Madison. One of the disputes was that the large states felt they should have the most say in the government. It was Franklin who helped settle the problem by suggesting that each state should have equal representation in the Senate, while in the House of Representatives, the membership should be according to the population.

When it came time for a vote, Franklin made a long speech that ended with: "On the whole sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would, with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own **infallibility** and, to make manifest our **unanimity**, put his name to this instrument."[6]

infallibility: Inability to be wrong

unanimity: Agreement

While no one was satisfied with everything, in the end, most everyone did as Franklin suggested and put their names on the

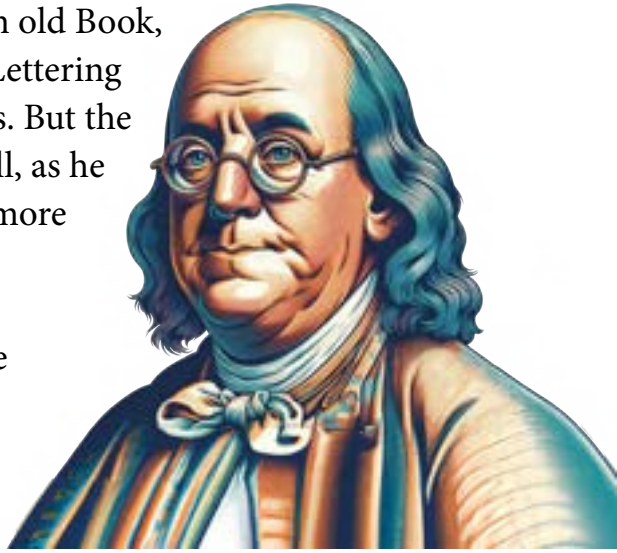
document. Ben Franklin was cheerful and hopeful. After signing his name to the document, he stood watching the other members as they signed. He looked toward the president's chair where Washington sat to preside over the meeting. On its back was a picture of a half-risen sun. He commented, "I have often and often, in the course of the session and the **vicissitudes** of my hopes and fears as to its issue, looked at the sun behind the president without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now, at length, I have the happiness to know that it is a rising, not a setting sun."[7] The United States of America began to take her place among the nations of the earth. Her light of liberty would shine brightly.

vicissitudes: Negative changes

His Final Years

Franklin thought he would go home and enjoy farming, but the citizens of Pennsylvania had another idea. In 1787, they elected him for the third time as president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. Every citizen voted for him; Franklin was the only exception — he did not vote for himself. He answered the call to duty, however. He never accepted any pay for serving in that office. In 1788, he was elected as the president of the first anti-slavery society in America. When he was 84 years old, he wrote the first petition against slavery and submitted it to Congress. Franklin worked to the end of his life. His list of accomplishments is massive.

The last year of his life was spent mostly in his bed. Loved ones surrounded him. Friends wrote to him from all over the world. People visited him and made his life a pleasure despite his pain. At eleven o'clock on April 17, 1790, Benjamin Franklin died, with his eyes fixed on a picture of Christ, who he once said came to teach us to love one another. The whole world mourned for this gentleman, so loved and admired by all. He wrote his own **eulogy**: "The Body of B. Franklin, Printer, like the Cover of an old Book, Its Contents torn out, And stript of its Lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be **wholly** lost; For it will, as he believ'd appear once more, In a new & more perfect Edition, Corrected and amended By the Author. ~ Ben Franklin."[8]

eulogy: Something written about one who died

wholly: Completely