

Franklin, Benjamin (1706–1790)

Benjamin Franklin was a man of many talents. He was a diplomat, a patriot, and a scientist. He was also a writer and an inventor.

Early Years

Franklin was born on January 17, 1706, in Boston, Massachusetts. He went to school for only two years. He was not good at math. But he was an avid reader. When he was 10, he helped his father make candles. Later he worked for an older brother, who printed a newspaper. Franklin wrote a series of witty letters for the paper, commenting on life in Boston. He signed them Silence Dogood. His brother was unaware of who really wrote them. They were very popular with readers.

Businessman

When he was 17, Franklin went to Philadelphia. He worked for another printer. By the age of 22 he was in business for himself. He began his own newspaper. He also published his own almanac. Franklin called it *Poor Richard's Almanack*. The writer was said to be a poor astrologer named Richard Saunders. But Franklin really wrote it. Like other almanacs, his included information about such things as the tides and important dates. But he also included little pieces of advice. These were often in the form of witty sayings.

By the age of 42, Franklin was a rich man. He decided to retire from printing. He had married Deborah Read and had three children.

Civic Activities

Franklin was not idle in his retirement. He helped establish America's first circulating library and the American Philosophical Society. And he cofounded an academy. (This academy later became the University of Pennsylvania.) Franklin also served as postmaster for all the colonies.

Inventions

Benjamin Franklin invented many things. The first was a new kind of stove. It was called the Franklin stove. It was more efficient than an open fireplace. He also invented a musical instrument called the armonica. Other inventions included a combination writing desk and chair, and an odometer. (The odometer measured the distance that a wagon traveled.)

Man of Science

Franklin was very interested in electricity. He conducted many experiments. His most famous was the kite experiment. He wanted to prove that lightning and electricity were the same thing. So he flew a kite during a thunderstorm. When lightning hit it, an electrical current traveled down the wet string and sparked a metal key attached to the end of it. This experiment was very dangerous. But it gave him the proof he wanted.

Franklin's scientific interests went beyond electricity. He explored geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics, navigation, agriculture, medicine, earthquakes, weather, and fossils.

Statesman and Diplomat

In 1757 Franklin was sent to London to represent the colony of Pennsylvania. He later represented other colonies as well. He remained in London, except for a short visit home, for 18 years.

In London, Franklin argued for the rights of the colonies. For example, the colonists did not think Britain had a right to impose taxes on them. Franklin's efforts led to the repeal of the very unpopular Stamp Act. Nonetheless, the Revolutionary War broke out as he sailed home in 1775.

The American Revolution

By this time, Franklin was 70 years old. But he was active in the American Revolution. He was appointed to the Second Continental Congress. He also traveled to Canada to convince the Canadians to join the colonial fight for independence. And he was on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence.

Minister to France

In 1776 Franklin went to Paris to try to get France's support for the revolution. The French were not very interested. But they did want to hurt their longtime enemy, the British. Franklin told the French government that the British would be more powerful if the colonies were defeated. He talked to businessmen about how valuable trade would be with a free America. And he wrote about liberty and freedom in the French press.

In 1777 King Louis XVI provided gold and arms for the American army. At Yorktown a French fleet held off the British fleet while French and American troops forced Lord Cornwallis to surrender.

The fighting was over in 1781. Franklin began drafting terms on which the colonies would agree to peace. The final Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783.

His Final Years

When he was 80 years old, Franklin returned to America. He was elected president (governor) of Pennsylvania. Then, in 1787, he was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. The Convention drafted the Constitution of the United States.

In Franklin's last public paper, he supported the abolition of slavery. During most of his last year he worked on his autobiography. He never finished it. He died on April 17, 1790, at the age of 84. But his unfinished autobiography is still widely read today.

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