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**THE LIFE
AND TIMES OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**
COURSE GUIDE



Professor H.W. Brands
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin

Professor H.W. Brands
Texas A&M University



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The Life and Times of
Benjamin Franklin
Professor Donald H.W. Brands



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About Your Professor

H.W. Brands

Professor H.W. Brands of Austin, Texas, a prolific and award-winning writer, is currently Distinguished Professor of History and holder of the Melbern G. Glasscock Chair in American History at Texas A&M University.

Brands was born in Portland, Oregon. He attended Stanford University, receiving a B.A. in history in 1975. He was a traveling salesman for a year before taking up teaching at Jesuit High School in Portland, where he taught history and mathematics for five years.

Meanwhile Brands earned graduate degrees from Reed College (M.A. in liberal studies, 1978) and Portland State University (M.S. in mathematics, 1981). In 1981 he relocated to Austin, Texas, where he received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Texas in 1985.

He worked as an oral historian at the University of Texas Law School for a year, then became a visiting assistant professor of history at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1987 he joined the history faculty at Texas A&M University in College Station, where he has been ever since, with the exception of a semester as a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

Brands is the author of many books including *Woodrow Wilson 1913-1921: The American Presidents Series* (Times Books), *The Age of Gold* (Doubleday), *The Strange Death of American Liberalism*, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, *TR: The Last Romantic*, *What America Owes the World*, *The Reckless Decade*, and *The Devil We Knew*.

Brands is a contributor to the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Boston Globe*, the *National Interest*, the *American Historical Review*, the *Journal of American History*, the *Political Science Quarterly*, and *American History*.

He has also written for the *Oxford Companion to the Second World War*, *Oxford Companion to Military History*, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Foreign Relations*, and the *American Heritage Encyclopedia of American History*.

Brands is frequently interviewed by the American and foreign press, including PBS, ABC, MSNBC, A&E/History Channel, BBC, NPR, Australian Broadcasting Company, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

The First American was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the *Los Angeles Times* Prize, as well as a *New York Times* bestseller. *What America Owes the World* was a finalist for the Lionel Gelber Prize.



Introduction

Chandler, balladeer, poet, printer, writer, humorist, satirist, swimmer, businessman, inventor, philosopher, soldier, administrator, scientist, politician, lady's man, musician, humanitarian, philanthropist—it's almost easier to list the things Franklin was *not* than try to explain the pursuits and interests of his many-faceted life.

In this course we will study in some detail the life of Benjamin Franklin and his influence on both American and world history. From his early days as a printer's apprentice to very nearly his last days, Benjamin Franklin's thirst for knowledge and his desire to share what he knew brought him into the forefront of a changing world. His contributions through inventions, scientific investigation, and political thought still echo over two-hundred years after his passing.

A man of his time and of his place, Benjamin Franklin sought not only to enlighten himself, but also to help shed a new light of reason and self-government to all who would pay heed.

**Lecture 1:
Out of Boston: 1706–1723:
Birth to Age 17**

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 1.

Introduction

The eighteenth century was a period of great worldwide innovation, discovery, and change. One of the great reflections of this change could be seen in America, where a group of thirteen colonies that began the century as parts of the empire of Great Britain came to see themselves as a united, independent, and separate nation. At the heart of this political change—and clearly reflecting the scientific and social change of his century—was Benjamin Franklin. To study Franklin's life is to learn not only the history of a single man, but to understand some of the most monumental changes in all of history.

I. Franklin is an important person to study today because of the way he reflected America during the century of the nation's founding.

- A. His life coincides with the eighteenth century, a critical period in American history, revealing the times from both a public and personal angle.
 - 1. He was born in the first decade of the century and died in the century's final decade.
 - 2. Born in an age of superstition, he died in the age of reason.
- B. His life's journey (from Boston to Philadelphia to London to Paris and back to Philadelphia) tracks the high points of American history during this period, helping us to understand how America became the nation that it was to become.
- C. Various aspects of Franklin's character set standards for what would later be perceived as the American character.
 - 1. Practicality
 - 2. Ambition
 - 3. Optimism
 - 4. Self-improvement
- D. He was the most engaging of the Founding Fathers.
 - 1. He comes across as the only one most contemporary people feel they could clap on the shoulder, buy a beer for, and shoot the breeze with.
 - 2. Other Founding Fathers appear to be made of marble; Franklin is flesh and blood.
- E. Nearly everyone has some conventional notions of Franklin.

II. Boston at the beginning of the eighteenth century was still a community dominated by the Puritan ethics and superstitions of its founders.

- A. The Salem witch trials from the previous century still haunted the community.
 - 1. These actions had been discredited by the time of Franklin's birth.
 - 2. But many who had taken part were still alive and still fearful of witches.
- B. Cotton Mather and other Puritan elders governed with a firm, holy hand.
- C. A town by the sea, with the world coming and going, it was the busiest seaport in North America.
 - 1. It was the hub of commerce for the region.
 - 2. People like Franklin grew up with an awareness that they were part of a wider world.
- D. A very literate community, it was the best place in the colonies for printers.
 - 1. Multiple copies of Sunday sermons needed reproduction.
 - 2. Preachers like Mather published their sermons regularly.

III. Franklin's family had left England for religious reasons.

- A. Josiah, a candlemaker, married Abiah, his second wife, after the death of his first wife.
 - 1. Franklin was descended from dissenters on both sides
 - 2. This background shaped Franklin's own later penchant for dissent.
- B. Franklin was born January 1706.
 - 1. He was the eighth child of his mother.
 - 2. He was the fifteenth child (tenth son) of his father.
 - 3. Being one of the youngest of a very large family, Franklin realized he had to get along with people to make his way in the world.
- C. Franklin claimed he could not remember a time when he couldn't read.
 - 1. His talent for learning made his father think he would make a good minister.
 - 2. Franklin was pulled out of formal schooling after two years when Josiah decided the investment wasn't worth the expense.
 - 3. His lack of formal education made Franklin more open to learning everything and to teaching himself new things throughout his life.

IV. Franklin came to his life's vocation as a printer almost by accident.

- A. He threatened to run away to sea if he was forced to continue working in his father's candleshop.
 - 1. His eldest brother had been lost at sea.
 - 2. Josiah feared this might happen to Ben.
- B. Eventually apprenticed to his brother James, a printer, Ben found an occupation that perfectly matched his skills and temperament.

1. Printing required a mastery of reading and writing.
 2. It required manual dexterity in setting type.
 3. It required physical strength and stamina.
 4. It needed an artistic eye.
 5. It required a business sense.
- C. Ben had a strained, if effective, working relationship with his brother.
1. James demanded respect as both master and elder brother.
 2. Ben was not always compliant.
 3. Ben's earliest published writing appeared in James's paper.
 4. Ben's teenage poetry was popular enough that it was used to sell newspapers.
 5. Ben realized he was more talented than James and wanted a larger role in producing the paper.

V. Ben's desire for an increased role in printing the newspaper led to trouble in the shop.

- A. Ben created the persona of Silence Dogood to discuss life in New England.
1. Readers loved Silence Dogood's letters.
 2. Circulation boomed.
 3. James, unaware that his own brother had written under this pseudonym, publicly called for more letters.
- B. After six months, James discovered Ben's ruse; fisticuffs followed.
- C. Ben appealed to his father, who backed James.

VI. His dispute with James caused Ben to flee Boston.

- A. Convinced that he was smarter than James, but would always be under his thumb, Ben tried to break his indenture.
- B. James, anticipating this, persuaded fellow printers to blacklist Ben.
- C. Ben also chafed at Puritan orthodoxy, sensing trouble if he stayed in Boston.
- D. Ben and his friend cooked up a story of having gotten a girl pregnant, finding a ship's captain sympathetic to this type of situation.
- E. In September 1723, at seventeen, Franklin fled Boston to seek his fortune in the wide world.

Summary

Benjamin Franklin was born at a time and in a place where great change was imminent. As a reflection of that time and place—and through his own genius and work ethic—he grew to embody what by the end of the eighteenth century would be considered the American spirit.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How much do you think Franklin's lack of formal education contributed to his lifelong love of learning?
2. Which aspects of Franklin's youthful personality were most responsible for his success?
3. Would Franklin have achieved the same kind of international acclaim in life had he stayed in Boston?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 1989.

———. *Papers of Benjamin Franklin: January 6, 1706 through December 31, 1739, Vol. 1*. Leonard W. Labaree (ed.) New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

Lecture 2:
Among Friends: 1723–1726:
Age 17 to 20

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapters 2 and 3.

Introduction

In Philadelphia, Franklin found a city nearly perfectly suited to his temperament and work ethic. Despite some brief false starts, particularly in the area of work, he soon settled into his new life in the city that would forever after remain most closely connected to his name.

I. The journey south from Boston taught Franklin some life lessons.

- A. When his ship became becalmed, he learned a lesson in flexibility when he was forced to fall off the vegetarian wagon.
- B. He learned the difference between religious colonies and commercial colonies when he found no work as a printer in New York, since the local burghers were too busy making money to read.
- C. When a printer suggested that his son, in Philadelphia, might have work, Franklin showed his survival ability when he nearly drowned in the Hudson, got soaked while walking across New Jersey, and rowed down the Delaware.

II. The city of the Friends matched Franklin's temperament nicely.

- A. He arrived inauspiciously in October 1723.
 - 1. He had only a dollar in his pocket, not knowing a soul in the city or the province.
 - 2. He was legally a fugitive.
- B. Philadelphia—the brainchild of William Penn and a refuge for Quakers and other dissenters—was the perfect spot for a freethinker like Franklin.
- C. From the very beginning, Franklin found Philadelphia different from Boston.
 - 1. He found a haven for dissenters by following Quakers to their meeting, where they let him sleep through services.
 - 2. He followed his nose to a bakery, where he discovered that the bread was different than in Boston.
 - 3. He bought three puffy rolls, then wandered up Market Street, dirty and wet and cold from the journey, with dirty linen hanging from his pockets.
 - 4. He passed the home of John Read, where fifteen-year-old Deborah Read noticed him. She would later become his wife.

-
- D. Franklin sized up the two printers in town, unimpressed.
 - 1. Franklin chose to work with Samuel Keimer, an eccentric but pleasant man.
 - 2. He took a room with John Read, his future father-in-law.

III. His lack of enthusiasm for his job in Philadelphia led Franklin on a brief London detour.

- A. William Keith, the governor of the province, was impressed with Franklin and encouraged him to establish his own print shop.
- B. Franklin tried to get capital from Josiah in Boston, but his father was unimpressed.
- C. Keith suggested that Franklin travel to London to purchase type and other supplies on Keith's credit.
 - 1. Franklin arrived in London at the age of eighteen.
 - 2. He discovered that Keith had no London credit.
- D. Stranded in the great capital of the greatest empire on earth, Franklin discovered a taste for the pleasures of the big city.
 - 1. He partook of theater, taverns, and houses of prostitution ("foolish intrigues with low women").
 - 2. He found work among London printers, which extended his education in his craft.
- E. He tried to avoid paying into a beer fund, wanting to save the money.
 - 1. He disliked what the heavy drinking did to his fellows' work.
 - 2. They sabotaged his own work and he eventually gave in on this point.
- F. He engaged in the intellectual life of London.
 - 1. He composed "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain."
 - 2. He made a name for himself among dissenters.
- G. His teaching of swimming to make some extra money made him a favorite of the gentry.

IV. Despite the pleasures of London, Franklin was eager to return to America.

- A. After saving his money, he bought passage for America.
- B. During a long and difficult voyage, he continued his education.
 - 1. He examined sea life.
 - 2. He studied his fellow passengers.
 - 3. He observed eclipses of the sun and moon.
- C. Finally reaching the estuary of the Delaware River, he received an offer of faster passage for the final leg. "We accepted of their kind proposal, and about ten o'clock landed at Philadelphia, heartily congratulating each other upon our having happily completed so tedious and dangerous a voyage. Thank God!"

Summary

In running from his situation in Boston, Franklin chanced upon the city of Philadelphia, which was perfectly suited to his personality and goals. Despite having to overcome some initial obstacles, Franklin would forever after be closely associated with the city he made his home.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What role does accident and chance—such as Franklin's inability to find work in New York—play in history?
2. What other historical figures do you closely associate with a particular city? What does this association tell you about both the figures and the cities?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Cohn, Ellen R., et al., eds. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin—Volume I*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press & American Philosophical Society, 2002.

Franklin, Benjamin. *A Dissertation on Liberty, Necessity, Pleasure, and Pain*. New York: Reprint Services Corp., 1985.

Thevenot, Melchisedec. *Art of Swimming Sixteen Ninety Six*. Manchester, NH: Ayer Company Publishers; 3rd ed., 1972.

Lecture 3:
Poor Richard: 1726–1733:
Age 20 to 29

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 4.

Introduction

Despite the disappointment of his failed London trip, Franklin returned to Philadelphia determined to make it as a printer. Through a combination of hard work, business savvy, and knowledge of public desires, he soon achieved the financial and employment independence he had craved since his days as an apprentice with his brother in Boston.

I. Franklin arrived back in Philadelphia full of energy and ambition but short of money.

- A. Franklin was almost twenty when he returned to Philadelphia from London.
 - 1. He was full grown, of somewhat greater than average height.
 - 2. Broad shouldered, with thick arms from carrying all the lead type and cranking the press screw, he had all the energy in the world.
 - 3. He was very ambitious about plans to start his own printing business.
 - 4. He lacked the capital he needed to go into business on his own.
- B. He found a partner named Meredith, whose father had some money and wanted to set up his son.
 - 1. Meredith's money and Franklin's savvy helped the partnership land some government contracts, including one for printing paper currency.
 - 2. Franklin began to build a reputation as an effective printer.
- C. Meredith squandered the reputation of the press.
 - 1. Lazy, often drunk, he became a drag on the business.
 - 2. Franklin puzzled about how to relieve himself of this burden.
 - 3. He agreed to buy out Meredith for thirty pounds sterling, a new saddle (Meredith was heading to North Carolina), and the assumption of some debts.

II. Full owner of his own print shop at last, Franklin established himself as a respected businessman in Philadelphia.

- A. Now his own man, his future resting on himself alone, Franklin threw himself more than ever into his work.
 - 1. He cultivated clients, impressing all Philadelphia with his work habits.
 - 2. He came to work early.
 - 3. He worked long hours.

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4. He covered all aspects of the business.
- B. He purchased *The Pennsylvania Gazette* from his old employer, and recent competitor, Samuel Keimer.
1. It was a local paper, but Franklin had larger ambitions.
 - i. He reprinted news from around the colonies and the empire.
 - ii. He wrote pieces he hoped would be similarly reproduced.
 2. He understood the gifts required of a good editor.
 - i. "The author of a gazette (in the opinion of the learned) ought to be qualified with an extensive acquaintance with languages, a great easiness and command of writing and relating things cleanly and intelligibly, and in few words; he should be able to speak of war both by land and sea, be well acquainted with geography, with the history of the time, with the several interests of princes and states, the secrets of courts, and the manners and customs of all nations."
 - ii. Franklin felt that a paper must be edifying, but it must also be "as agreeable and useful an entertainment as the nature of the thing will allow."
 3. This combination of edification and entertainment made for a popular paper.
- C. Franklin hoped to improve the tenor of life in Philadelphia with his paper, but he never forgot that printing was a business, not a political activity.
1. He continued doing much of his own writing, including letters.
 2. He accepted a wide variety of advertising.
 3. He practiced fairness in presenting the views of others: "Printers are educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the public, and that when truth and error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch of the latter. Hence they cheerfully serve all contending parties that pay them well."

III. Franklin added to his reputation by developing *Poor Richard's Almanack*.

- A. Always on the lookout for ways to boost readership and revenue, he recognized the popularity of almanacs.
- B. In December 1732 the *Gazette* ran a notice announcing the first publication of *Poor Richard's*.
- C. Franklin's almanac added to a useful, popular form of periodical.
1. He included important practical information about tides, moons, and frosts.
 2. He presented astrological information for a public looking for explanations about the causes and effects of the world.
 3. He competed directly against popular almanackeer Titus Leeds.
 - i. "Richard Saunders" predicted the imminent death of Titus Leeds.

- ii. This encouraged an angry response from Leeds.
 - iii. Franklin humorously turned the table on Leeds.
4. Franklin added his own contributions to the almanacker's art and to American folk wisdom by filling up empty spaces on pages.
- i. His sayings, while not always original, made the pithy pithier and the pointed more provocative: "Great talkers, little doers." "Gifts burst rocks." "Hunger never saw bad bread."
 - ii. He addressed the battle of the sexes: "When man and woman die, as poets sung/His heart's the last part moves, her last the tongue." "One good husband is worth two good wives, for the scarcer things are, the more they're valued."
 - iii. He skewered the professions: "A countryman between two lawyers is like a fish between two cats." "Never spare the parson's wine nor the baker's pudding." "God heals, and the doctor takes the fee." "Eyes and priests bear no jests."
 - iv. His *nom de plume* allowed him to be as earthy as he wanted: "Neither a fortress nor a maidenhead will hold out long after they begin to parley." "The greatest monarch on the proudest throne is obliged to sit upon his own arse." "Force shits upon reason's back."
5. Part of the almanac's success came from Franklin's willingness to tweak himself and his fellow almanackers.
- i. "Ignorant men wonder how we astrologers foretell the weather so exactly, unless we deal with the old black Devil," Saunders told readers. In fact, the astrologer's work was far simpler than that. "Tis easy as pissing abed. For instance, the stargazer peeps at the heavens through a long glass; he sees perhaps Taurus, or the great bull, in a mighty chase, stamping on the floor of his house, swinging his tail about, stretching out his neck, and opening wide his mouth. 'Tis natural from these appearances to judge that this furious bull is puffing, blowing, and roaring. Distance being considered, and time allowed for all this to come down, there you have wind and thunder."
 - ii. Franklin sent up the whole business of the almanacker predicting the weather in a way that got hoots in kitchens and workshops around the colony. "He spies perhaps Virgo (the Virgin). She turns her head round, as it were to see if anybody observed her. Then crouching down gently, with her hands on her knees, she looks wistfully for a while right forward. He judges rightly what she's about; and having calculated the distance and allowed time for its falling, finds that the next spring we shall have a fine April shower."

Summary

Many qualities later generations have come to associate Franklin with can clearly be seen in his efforts to establish himself in business in his early days in Philadelphia. In particular, his hard work and business savvy enabled him to establish a reputation as a man who could be trusted to get things done.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was Franklin's greatest strength as a businessman?
2. What role should a newspaper play in improving the lives of the people in the area it serves?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Franklin, Benjamin. *Poor Richard's Almanack*. New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1984.

Lecture 4:
The Art of Virtue: 1728–1737:
Age 22 to 31

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapters 4 and 5.

Introduction

One of Franklin's most intriguing personal "experiments" had to do with his efforts at creating a type of personal virtue for himself. He felt that through a rational, logical approach, he could turn himself into a moral person without the need for formal religion.

I. Franklin felt moral and ethical beliefs did not need to be tied to formal religion.

- A. Having rejected the Puritan theology of his boyhood, Franklin was left to find a basis for good behavior in himself and others.
 - 1. He rejected the theology of predestination and other Puritan beliefs.
 - 2. He retained much of Puritan ethics, especially as applied to work.
 - 3. Justifying the contradictions between what he believed religiously and what he was unable to reconcile with his personal, more enlightened vision of the world became an important ongoing conflict in Franklin's life.
- B. Franklin's underlying philosophy did not believe in sin, original or otherwise.
 - 1. He did not believe in disembodied evil.
 - 2. He did not feel there was a "dark side" of humanity.
- C. Franklin also had difficulty believing in the orthodox vision of revelation.
 - 1. He did not believe the Bible and other holy books were "divinely inspired."
 - 2. He gradually came to view these works as a summary of human wisdom.
 - 3. This led to his fundamental conclusion about the link between revelation and action: "I entertained an opinion that though certain actions might not be bad because they were forbidden by it [revelation], or good because it commanded them, yet probably those actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial to us."
 - 4. In other words, man—not God—was the measure of morality, so men could control their own actions and behave "morally" for their own personal happiness.
 - 5. This philosophy marks Franklin as one of the first American humanists.

II. Franklin decided to perform an experiment on himself to see if he could cultivate virtue through personal attitude rather than through divine intervention.

- A. He considered what caused people to err into immorality.
 - 1. He concluded that people had an insufficient understanding of the costs and benefits of their behavior.
 - i. They had difficulty distinguishing short-term benefits from long-term benefits.
 - ii. They couldn't see the distinction between personal benefits and community benefits.
 - 2. He perceived that people also acted against their larger greater pleasure simply out of bad habit: laziness, forgetfulness, uncharitableness.
- B. Since he saw reasons for slipping into immoral behavior, Franklin determined that people could become virtuous by inculcating good habits.
 - 1. By practicing order, a person could become orderly—until it no longer took any effort.
 - 2. Showing moderation in food and drink required tuning one's tastes to moderation.
 - 3. Diligence would pay off in material success, which would reinforce further diligence.
- C. Franklin's experiment began with four "commandments" for conducting his life.
 - 1. They dealt with both the state of his soul and the state of his daily life.
 - 2. His code of ethics was devised to make life on Earth happier, not out of concern for any heavenly afterlife.
 - 3. This was an eminently practical code of behavior, well suited to one starting out in life on his own.
 - 4. The "commandments" reflected Franklin's practicality.
 - iii. Frugality to eliminate burdens of debt
 - iii. Truth to reflect rationality
 - iii. Industry to lead to success in business
 - iv. Tact and kindness in dealing with others
- D. Franklin's "experiment" continued with an outline of what he saw as twelve cardinal virtues that emphasize traits that lead to success.
- E. Franklin decided the best way to cultivate these virtues was to keep a scorecard: a tablet with rows and columns for marking down his failures during the course of a week to make good behavior habitual.

III. To Franklin's surprise, virtue proved elusive.

- A. His time wasn't his own. Thus, order came hard.
- B. His own gifts made virtue less valuable to him personally than it might have been to another person.

- C. Success one week didn't carry over automatically to the next: temptation was never absent.
- D. He was concerned that people would consider him a prig.
- E. He rationalized falling off the wagon by considering it better to have tried and failed than to not have tried at all.
- F. But he added that the effort wasn't a waste of time. "As those who aim at perfect writing by imitating the engraved copies, though they never reach the wished for excellence of those copies, their hand is mended by the endeavour."

Summary

Franklin's efforts to create a moral code of behavior for himself reflected the growing importance of the enlightenment in shaping individual thoughts at that time. Rather than becoming concerned by his failure to achieve success in shaping this philosophy on himself, he looked upon the entire experience as an opportunity to increase the human store of knowledge.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Does an individual's philosophy come primarily from temperament or from teaching?
2. What virtues or commandments do you feel are essential to an effective moral code?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 1989.

———. *Benjamin Franklin's the Art of Virtue: His Formula for Successful Living*, 3rd ed. Battle Creek, MI: Acorn Publishing, 1996.

Lecture 5:
Practical Citizenship: 1739–1747:
Age 33 to 41

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 6.

Introduction

One of the most attractive of Franklin's personality characteristics was the way in which his character continued to evolve during the course of his long life—right until his death. In conjunction with his efforts to make himself a better person, Franklin realized the importance of his environment. His efforts to improve the community of Philadelphia reflected a growing American attitude for creating an environment that allowed individuals to excel in their chosen activities.

I. Franklin had an ability to align his own self-interest with the interests of the community in which he lived.

- A. Franklin's life contained two abiding questions.
 - 1. Who am I?
 - 2. Where do I fit?
- B. Even while trying—and failing—to achieve individual perfection, Franklin pursued initiatives designed to improve the community in which he lived.
 - 1. When Boston could not meet the demands he placed upon it, he moved from there at age seventeen.
 - 2. At this stage of his life, by making Philadelphia a better place to live, he made the community a fit place for him to ensure his own happiness.
 - 3. The fit between Franklin and Philadelphia would last for approximately forty years.
- C. Making a city into a proper environment for a happy and moral life wasn't an easy task, as Franklin's conception of congeniality changed over time.
 - 1. In 1723, he had been happy for any place willing to take him in and not ask questions about where he was from and why he had left there.
 - 2. As he became successful in business, his horizons began to broaden, and he looked for intellectual challenges he hadn't considered pressing before.

II. Franklin looked in the community for the things he did not find at home.

- A. His marriage was affectionate, but not really a model of domestic bliss.
 - 1. He met Deborah on his first day in Philadelphia.

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2. He got to know Deborah when he took a room at her father's house.
 3. A gradual understanding of a future marriage grew within the family.
 - i. Her mother wanted him to make his way in business first.
 - ii. Franklin's trip to London led to negligence in his relationship with Debbie.
 - iii. He became distracted by "the low women of London."
 - iv. Not knowing when he would return, Debbie married another man.
 - v. Franklin did not much care.
 - vi. Debbie was abandoned by her husband.
 - vii. Though she couldn't get a divorce, she reconnected with Franklin.
 - viii. Not knowing whether she was legally married, Franklin and Debbie became common-law husband and wife.
 - ix. Sometime during his courtship of Debbie Read, Franklin became the father of William, by another woman.
 - x. Debbie took on William as her stepson.
 - B. Though she was a hard-working partner, Debbie's ambitions didn't extend much beyond Market Street.
 1. Franklin's ambitions continued to grow.
 2. He became a man about town, then about the colonies, while Debbie remained the simple, uneducated girl she had always been.
 - C. Trouble between Debbie and William put a strain on their marriage.
 - D. Their first son's death cast a shadow over the household.
 1. For more than a decade Debbie feared she would not see a child of her own survive.
 2. The birth of daughter Sarah in 1743 eased some problems at home.
 3. The presence of William—now a teenager—kept tensions high.

III. Not completely happy with the situation at home, Franklin became dedicated to improving the city of Philadelphia.

- A. Franklin was a constant improver. He aimed to improve himself and his surroundings.
- B. The Junto, a group of young men in positions comparable to Franklin, met on Friday evenings in a local tavern.
 1. They considered issues of the day.
 2. They worked to improve themselves and their community.
 3. They networked with other businessmen.
 4. The group served as a combination book club and Rotary Club.
 - i. Discussed assigned readings
 - ii. Wrote essays on assigned topics
- C. Franklin helped establish the Library Company, which became the first lending library in America.

- D. He was a founding member of the Union Fire Company.
 - 1. He practiced fighting fires.
 - 2. Purchased equipment needed to effectively keep fires from spreading.
 - 3. Pledged to fight looting.
- E. His interest in science and all aspects of human endeavor led him to establish the American Philosophical Society.
 - 1. The group coordinated activities of philosophers around the country.
 - 2. They provided a forum to share information with other members.
- F. He helped found the Academy of Philadelphia (forerunner of the University of Pennsylvania).
 - 1. He wanted a local, non-sectarian option to educate young Americans.
 - 2. He was concerned with preventing a “brain drain” of best young citizens to foreign countries.
- G. He invented the “Franklin stove,” but refused to patent it, so everyone could benefit.

Summary

By the mid-1740s, after Franklin had been in Philadelphia a little more than twenty years, he was generally considered the leading citizen of the city and the province. As James Logan, a lion of the Philadelphia establishment, said of Franklin’s latest efforts on behalf of his adopted city, “He is the principal mover and very soul of the whole.”

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What role does community play in the life of individual citizens?
2. How much of Franklin's civic energies can be attributed to disappointment in his personal and married life?

Suggested Reading

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Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Americans: The Colonial Experience, Vol. 1*. New York: Random House, 1972.

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Lecture 6:
Stealing Lightning from the Heavens: 1748–1752:
Age 42 to 46

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 6.

Introduction

The activities that won Franklin his world reputation came in the area of science and philosophical pursuit. After retiring from the business world at a relatively young age, he became the world's leading authority on electricity, eventually winning his generation's equivalent of today's Nobel Prize.

I. Franklin decided to take an early retirement in 1748 at age forty-two.

- A. Though often cited as the prototype of the American capitalist, Franklin lacked the true spirit of capitalism.
 - 1. He never truly valued money as an end in itself.
 - 2. He thought many things were more interesting than simply making money.
- B. As his business grew, he had engaged a partner, David Hall, who proved efficient and trustworthy.
 - 1. Franklin turned the operation of the business over to Hall in 1748.
 - 2. While he retained half of the profits, he was able to pursue what he felt were more worthy goals.
- C. He explained: "I am settling my old accounts and hope soon to be quite a master of my own time, and no longer, as the song has it, at every one's call but my own. . . . I am in a fair way of having no other tasks than such as I shall like to give myself, and of enjoying what I look upon as a great happiness, leisure to read, study, make experiments, and converse at large with such ingenious and worthy men are pleased to honour me with their friendship or acquaintance, on such points as might produce something for the common benefit of mankind, uninterrupted by the little cares and fatigues of business."

II. Enlightenment science contributed to the general development of colonial activity.

- A. In Franklin's day, philosophy still included science.
 - 1. His American Philosophical Society was chiefly concerned with scientific research.
 - 2. Philosophers attempted to find practical answers to life experiences rather than simply general meanings for human existence.
- B. Science was still the domain of amateurs, typically men like Franklin, with a measure of wealth and the leisure to indulge their curiosity about the world.

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- C. The key to modern science was its willingness to question assumptions.
 - 1. Knowledge was treated as tentative, able to be disproved through careful observation.
 - 2. Scientists devised experiments to reveal the validity or invalidity of premises and hypotheses.
 - D. The eighteenth century was the era of the Enlightenment, where the scientific method separated inquiry from religion.
 - 1. Religion preferenced revelation and faith.
 - 2. Science took nothing on faith, but sought to reason and test as the key to knowledge.

III. Franklin was well equipped to tackle the questions of electricity.

- A. He was the ideal Enlightenment scientist (or philosopher).
 - 1. He was skeptical of everything.
 - 2. He was a keen observer.
 - 3. He could frame questions that went to the heart of puzzling phenomena.
- B. Electricity was particularly susceptible to his talents.
 - 1. Electrical phenomena had been known for millennia, but only recently had investigators begun examining them systematically.
 - 2. It remained as much vaudeville (had that genre existed then) as science, with “electricians” touring the colonies giving demonstrations.
 - 3. Franklin attended such a demonstration and decided to put his talents to use in that area.
 - 4. The field was immature, meaning that a novice could get up to speed in fairly short order.
 - 5. The apparatus required was not inordinately expensive, meaning that he could fund his research from his own pocket.

IV. Through reason and scientific inquiry, Franklin came up with remarkable discoveries about electricity.

- A. Franklin’s contributions to the field fell into two categories.
 - 1. He provided a vocabulary summarizing current knowledge.
 - 2. With static electricity generators, batteries, and capacitors, he reproduced experiments he had read about, as well as devising experiments of his own.
 - i. He originated the terms “positive” and “negative” to unify theories that heretofore had hypothesized two different kinds of electricity.
 - ii. In the process he electrocuted chickens for dinner and almost electrocuted himself.
 - iii. More spectacularly, he unified observations in the laboratory with those in the real world, confirming the essentially electrical nature of lightning.

- B. In 1750 Franklin proposed his famous experiment to the British Royal Society.
 - 1. It was first conducted successfully in France.
 - 2. Before Franklin got word of the success, he performed a variant himself, employing a kite.
- C. The lightning experiment, in addition to Franklin's other contributions, won him international acclaim.
 - 1. The Royal Society awarded Franklin its Copley Medal.
 - 2. The French crown declared that Franklin deserved the "esteem of our nation."
 - 3. The rest of continental Europe sung his praises.

Summary

Though he took the worldwide plaudits he gained from his electrical experiments with a grain of salt, at age forty-seven, the poor boy from Boston couldn't help taking pride in knowing he was one of the most famous men on Earth. His fame in the area of science would make Franklin a memorable historic figure, regardless of whether he had ever become involved with the American Revolution.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Was Franklin's early retirement consistent with his own personal moral code about the importance of hard work to a successful life?
2. Does the fact that Franklin never wrote up his results of the kite experiment call into doubt whether he actually ever performed the experiment?
3. What are some of the key similarities and differences between science in Franklin's day and science today?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

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**Lecture 7:
Join or Die: 1752–1757:
Age 46 to 51**

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 10.

Introduction

Despite Franklin's desire to spend his retirement in the study of scientific questions, and despite the successes he achieved in his studies in the area of electricity, he would soon become distracted from his philosophical pursuits. Rather than being pulled from his scientific studies by business, however, he was instead drawn more clearly into the public sphere of politics.

I. World politics in the mid-eighteenth century affected America.

- A. Since the late seventeenth century, Britain and France had been locked in a contest for control of North America.
 - 1. This rivalry grew out of the earlier rivalry touched off when Spain and Portugal set out from Iberia seeking new routes to the (East) Indies.
 - 2. Tiny Portugal lost ground once its larger European neighbors got into the race.
 - 3. Spain had been eclipsed when most of its Grand Armada sank off the coast of England in 1588.
 - 4. While Spain still controlled most of Central and South America, north of Mexico the contest was between Britain and France.
- B. France and Britain fought four wars between the 1690s and the 1760s.
 - 1. In each case the British North American colonies felt the weight of French attacks, especially the attacks of Indians allied to France.
 - 2. During most of Franklin's adult life, the question of colonial defense was the most pressing issue of provincial politics.

II. Franklin's entrance into politics was not wholly through his own choice.

- A. Franklin's talents and inclinations inevitably led people to see his political potential.
- B. Franklin hesitated to enter politics, feeling he had the wrong temperament.
- C. He was drafted to run for the Philadelphia town council and later was elected to the provincial assembly.
 - 1. He got into disputes over whether the Penn family (the "proprietors") were paying their fair share of colonial expenses, especially relating to defense.
 - 2. Franklin spearheaded committees that criticized the Penns and their handpicked agents, the provincial governors.

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- D. The failure of colonial defense prompted Franklin to propose a provincial militia.
 - 1. It provided the people of Pennsylvania with a sense of security.
 - 2. It led the Penns to fear a provincial revolution.
 - 3. Franklin was deemed the ringleader and consequently most dangerous.
 - E. As part of his defense work, Franklin was appointed to negotiate with various Indian tribes.
 - 1. Franklin recognized that the Indians had been regularly cheated out of their land.
 - 2. He urged that the province and the imperial government live up to their commitments.
 - 3. He also recommended in the strongest terms that Indian traders be prevented from supplying the Indians with liquor, which corrupted them and made them prey to those who would defraud them.

III. Franklin recognized the need for union to defend the North American colonies.

- A. Lack of unity on the part of the colonies allowed the French and the Indians to play one colony against another, diminishing the security of all.
- B. The problem was exacerbated by cost-cutting in London.
 - 1. British taxpayers resented having to defend the distant frontier against Indians who were simply reacting to the provocation of speculators, traders, and other colonists.
 - 2. As a result, there were never enough soldiers to protect the frontier—which in those days was often not more than a day or two's ride from the centers of population.
- C. Upon the outbreak of the last of the four wars called the French and Indian War in America, Franklin proposed a colonial union.
 - 1. At a congress held in Albany in 1754, he collaborated with Thomas Hutchinson in promoting a plan of union.
 - 2. Franklin's draft called for a "grand council" of delegates from each colony (chosen according to population, as later in the U.S. House of Representatives).
 - 3. The executive would be a "president general," who would conduct diplomacy and be commander-in-chief during war.
 - 4. The separate colonies would retain their individual governments (as would the states under the Constitution of 1787).
 - 5. The Albany Congress approved the plan.
 - i. Franklin helped publicize the union with a famous cartoon (the first political cartoon in American history) showing a snake cut into several pieces, labeled for the separate colonies.
 - ii. The cartoon's caption was "Join, or Die."

- D. The Congress referred the plan to the colonies and to the British Parliament. “How they will relish it, or how it will be looked on in England,” Franklin told a friend, “I know not.”
- E. In fact, nothing came of Franklin’s union plan—at that point.
 - i. Provincial jealousies and imperial politics got in the way.
 - ii. In this plan, Franklin planted a seed that would sprout again, with far greater effect, two decades later, in the events leading up to the Revolutionary War.

Summary

Though reluctantly drafted into political life, Franklin undertook his new duties with the same energy and clear thinking he had previously shown in business and scientific enquiry. His recommendations for a union to protect the colonies from frontier threats were a clear precursor to the type of unity that would be necessary in the coming decades as America moved toward revolution.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What makes a person an effective leader?
2. How were Franklin's early efforts to create a secure union among the colonies similar to the activities he undertook in improving the city of Philadelphia as a young businessman?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 8:
A Personal Stamp Act Crisis: 1757–1765:
Age 51 to 59

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapters 11 through 16.

Introduction

By the time he was fifty years old, Franklin's social and political involvement had moved from concerns about improving Philadelphia to efforts for securing Pennsylvania to, finally, an interest in what he could do to improve life in all of the British American colonies. While he still considered himself a loyal subject of Great Britain, like many other people in the colonies at this time, he was beginning to develop an identity that was distinctly American. The imperial problems that would eventually lead to the American Revolution continued to move Franklin toward a position favoring colonial independence during the period following the French and Indian Wars.

I. Britain won the French and Indian Wars, but eventually lost the peace that followed.

- A. In 1763, Britain and her American colonies (and their Indian allies) won the war against France and her Indian allies.
 - 1. The Americans celebrated, expecting that the expulsion of France from North America would at last leave their frontiers in peace.
 - 2. Colonists hoped to see the way opened to additional settlement in the Ohio Valley and elsewhere beyond the Appalachian mountains.
- B. The British government saw things differently.
 - 1. The war had been very expensive, and the first order of business in London was putting imperial affairs on a sound footing.
 - 2. This required cutting costs and increasing revenues.
- C. To cut costs, Britain determined to pull troops back from the frontier.
 - 1. This required—or seemed to require—reducing the occasion for clashes between colonists and Indians.
 - 2. London drew a line at the crest of the Appalachians, beyond which the colonists were not allowed to settle.
 - 3. This Proclamation of 1763 seemed to the colonists a denial of all that they had fought for.
- D. To increase revenues, Britain enacted new taxes.
 - 1. The Sugar Act of 1764 reduced the rate on molasses imported into the American colonies.
 - i. It promised to increase the revenues, as now it would be cheaper to pay the duty than to smuggle.
 - ii. The Act also called for stiffer enforcement.

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2. The more controversial Stamp Act of 1765 taxed licenses, deeds, newspapers, almanacs, playing cards, dice, and other items used by ordinary people in everyday life.
 - i. This tax angered ordinary citizens.
 - ii. It angered newspaper editors and lawyers.
 - iii. The new tax was more obvious than simply increasing an old tax.

II. Franklin observed the imperial reorganization with concern but not alarm.

- A. A Pennsylvania political controversy led to Franklin's service as a colonial agent.
 1. In January 1757, almost at the moment he turned fifty-one, Franklin's colleagues in the Pennsylvania Assembly appointed him their agent to the British Parliament.
 2. His initial task was to argue for reform of the charter under which the Penn family governed (or misgoverned, in the colonists' eyes) Pennsylvania.
 3. Ironically, the Assembly wanted Franklin to push for an increase of royal control.
- B. En route to London, Franklin penned one of his two most famous works.
 1. It was an attempt to retire "Poor Richard" with a kind of "greatest hits" collection.
 2. It became commonly reprinted under the title *The Way to Wealth*.
 3. This short pamphlet was widely successful.
 4. This gave Franklin a reputation as a money-grubbing grind.
- C. Franklin's initial reception in England was difficult.
 1. The Penns threw hurdles in his path.
 2. The British government was unimpressed by his scientific fame.
- D. On the whole he found London most congenial.
 1. He formed close friendships with fellow scientists and others who had come to admire him from a distance.
 2. He might well have relocated to London permanently—his friends urged him to do so—had Debbie not refused to join him.

III. The emerging political crisis over Britain's imperial control of the colonies altered Franklin's role as a colonial agent.

- A. Amid the emerging struggle between the colonies and Parliament, Franklin's original reason for going to London was forgotten.
 1. Hardliners in Parliament wanted the colonies to pay still more.
 2. Radicals in America refused to pay anything.
 3. Franklin's temperament suited him to act as a mediator.
 - i. He lobbied against the Sugar Act, but wasn't surprised that it passed over his opposition.

- ii. He told the Parliament that it was making a mistake with the Stamp Act, which trampled on the colonists' rights as Englishmen to have a say in their own taxation. Again his dissent was ignored.
 - iii. He hoped to have the measure repealed, but until it was, he thought to make what use he could of it. "We might as well have hindered the sun's setting. That we could not do. But since 'tis down, my friend, and it may be long before it rises again, let us make as good a night of it as we can."
 - iv. He nominated a friend to be a stamp commissioner, and was pleased when he got the job.
- B. Franklin was shocked when he discovered the depth of American opposition.
- 1. Riots broke out up and down the Atlantic seaboard.
 - 2. Stamp commissioners were browbeaten and forced to resign.
 - 3. Thomas Hutchinson's house was demolished by rioters in Boston.
- C. Franklin was branded a collaborator by some of the radicals.
- 1. An angry mob in Philadelphia vowed to level his house.
 - i. Debbie rallied friends to her and his defense, and they managed to avoid the wrath of the rioters.
 - ii. "I honour much the spirit and courage you showed," he wrote her. "The woman deserves a good house that is determined to defend it."
 - 2. Beneath his congratulations to Debbie, he knew he had made a grave political misstep.
 - 3. The only way to rectify his error was to redouble his efforts to repeal the act that started all the trouble.

Summary

Sent to London to deal with issues of concern only to Pennsylvanians, Franklin soon found himself in the midst of a much larger, more impassioned dispute having to do with all the colonies. Though initially slow to gauge the depth of feeling on each side of the taxation issue, Franklin understood the need to increase his diplomatic efforts when he realized the dangerous passion that the subject was inspiring.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How might the history of the American Revolution been different if Debbie had come to London to live with Franklin?
2. Did Franklin's personality as an apostle of reason limit his effectiveness among advocates who preferred passion?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Coldham, Peter W. *American Migrations, 1765-1799: The Lives, Times and Families of Colonial Americans Who Remained Loyal to the British Crown Before, During and After the Revolutionary War*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 2000.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Way to Wealth*. Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1986.

Morgan, Edmund S., and Helen M. Morgan. *The Stamp Act Crisis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

Lecture 9:
The Cockpit: 1765–1774:
Age 59 to 68

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapters 17 through 21.

Introduction

As he reached his later years, Franklin—like the American colonies—was forced to reconsider the nature of his identity. A diplomat in Britain during the time when tensions were greatest, Franklin tried unsuccessfully to serve as a mediator between the two sides, before finally realizing that his real identity—and his true loyalties—must lie with America.

I. The stakes of empire were high.

- A. No one, and especially not Franklin, knew precisely what was at stake in the unrest that had been fomented by the Stamp Act.
 - 1. Tax riots were fairly common in Britain.
 - 2. It was easy to conclude in Britain that life would go on.
 - 3. Americans felt that their rights as British citizens were under threat.
 - 4. Lack of representation made things more serious from the colonists' standpoint.
- B. Franklin was a great enthusiast of the British empire, and he felt the political rift could still be mended.
 - 1. He may have been the most famous British subject of his day.
 - 2. His son William was the colonial governor of New Jersey.
 - 3. His vision was of America growing within the empire.
 - 4. His work on population growth indicated that the colonies would soon be the larger, stronger part of the British empire.
 - 5. Franklin saw the future as a union of equals within the British empire.
- C. This vision prompted him to remain a great imperialist and try to do whatever he could to keep the empire from falling apart.

II. The rift between Britain and the American colonies was widening.

- A. Franklin's view was hardly the consensus, certainly not in America.
 - 1. The radicals increasingly held the upper hand, compelling those who disagreed to keep silent.
 - 2. The Stamp Act riots were less against the British than against disagreeing Americans—like Franklin's friend John Hughes, the stamp commissioner.
 - 3. Besides the rioting, the chief weapon of the resisters was the boycott.
 - i. It was designed to hit Britain where it hurt, in the ledger book.

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- ii. Boycotts weren't self-enforcing; again, dissenters were intimidated.
- B. Radical tactics worked.
- 1. In 1766, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act.
 - 2. But it also passed the Declaratory Act, affirming the right of Parliament to tax the colonies.
- C. In 1767 Parliament approved a new set of taxes, called the Townshend duties, after Charles Townshend.
- 1. Americans paid less in taxes than other British citizens.
 - 2. British perception was that their debt was a result of defending the colonies.

III. Franklin saw his position as that of a conciliator.

- A. He continued to seek a middle ground.
- 1. Sometimes he wrote for the London papers, often anonymously.
 - 2. He testified before Parliament, downplaying the role of the radicals in America and avowing the loyalty of the colonies to Britain.
- B. He drew a distinction between internal and external taxes, saying only the external taxes were widely resented.
- 1. Internal taxes were levied and had to be paid within the American colonies.
 - 2. External taxes on imports could be avoided.
- C. This proved to be a tactical error when Townshend devised his list of external taxes.

IV. Colonial resistance increased with the levying of new taxes.

- A. Franklin was embarrassed when the new taxes were resisted almost as vehemently as the Stamp Act taxes.
- 1. Clearly, Americans resented all taxes.
 - 2. Franklin was seen as out of touch with colonial feeling.
 - 3. That feeling was ostensibly "no taxation without representation."
- B. Hard-liners in Britain were intent on showing the Americans who was boss.
- 1. They offered representation for the colonies.
 - 2. Americans refused representation, because what they really wanted was no taxes.
 - 3. Franklin feared real trouble. "The friends of both countries wish a reconciliation; the enemies of either endeavour to widen the breach. God knows how it will end."
- C. Things escalated in 1770 with the "Boston Massacre."
- 1. Five Bostonians were killed.
 - 2. Franklin decried the violence and tried to calm things, but to little avail.
- D. Events escalated further with the "Boston Tea Party" of 1773.

V. Escalating events led to a fateful decision by Franklin.

- A. Relaxation techniques such as cold air baths brought Franklin only minor relief.
- B. Attempting to find a way out of the impasse, Franklin tried something daring—and perhaps unethical.
 - 1. He leaked letters from Thomas Hutchinson and Peter Oliver in Massachusetts to the British government, arguing that the English liberties of the colonists would have to be curtailed.
 - 2. Franklin's aim was to defuse the radical argument that the entire government was against the Americans.
 - 3. He felt the letters would put the blame on these few bad apples, who might be replaced.
- C. Franklin was either naïve or simply wrong.
 - 1. The letters were published—against his recommendation.
 - 2. They inflamed the radicals in America.
 - 3. They also inflamed British opinion against the unidentified leaker.
- D. When he identified himself as the leaker, Franklin was invited to a session of the Privy Council, held in the Cockpit.
 - 1. The session, in January 1774, just after Franklin's sixty-eighth birthday, was a two-hour diatribe against Franklin by Alexander Wedderburn, the solicitor general.
 - 2. The attack was so slanderous that no newspaper would print it.
 - 3. Franklin refused to dignify the slanders with a response.
- E. The Privy Council session appeared to make up Franklin's mind.
 - 1. He walked into the session an Englishman.
 - 2. He walked out realizing that first and foremost he was an American.

Summary

Though he tried his best to act as a conciliatory voice in the growing dispute between Great Britain and the colonies over taxation, Franklin's time in London had left him out of touch with public feeling in the American colonies. As his efforts led to more and more spectacular failures, Franklin came to realize that he was no longer perceived as a British citizen, but rather as an American colonist, an identity he at last decided to embrace.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What were the real concerns of Americans during the period leading up to the Revolutionary War?
2. Was Franklin's leaking of the letters of Hutchinson and Oliver an act consistent with his moral vision of himself and how he should act in the world?
3. What do you think was going through Franklin's mind as he silently listened to the diatribe against him by Alexander Wedderburn in the Cockpit?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

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Lecture 10:
The Most Dangerous Man in America: 1774–1776:
Age 68 to 70

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 22.

Introduction

His dressing down before the Privy Council had convinced Franklin that his loyalties were to America and not to the British government. Now convinced that a parting of the ways was probably inevitable, he made final efforts at conciliation before at last returning to America and helping to lead the call for independence.

I. Franklin remained in London for several months, hoping against evidence that the yawning gulf between the colonies and the mother country could be bridged.

- A. The government's majority in Parliament wasn't overwhelming.
- B. Britons were as dismayed as loyal colonists at the direction of affairs.
 - 1. Lord Howe believed a solution could be achieved if both sides gave ground.
 - 2. Franklin negotiated with Howe in secret to develop a plan of compromise.
- C. But the hardliners in Parliament refused to budge, as Franklin discovered in a scornful session.
 - 1. Lord Sandwich called for immediate rejection of the Franklin/Howe compromise plan.
 - 2. He accused Franklin of being a British enemy.
- D. Franklin now had a clear impression that the British perceived Americans as being separate from the English.

II. The colonies decided to go to war.

- A. The British response to the Boston Tea Party—the “Intolerable Acts”—rallied the other colonies around Massachusetts.
 - 1. These acts were designed to punish Americans for not obeying the law.
 - 2. Soldiers sent to intimidate them felt to Americans like a foreign invasion.
- B. A Continental Congress gathered in Philadelphia in the autumn of 1774 to consider options.
 - 1. It was modeled after Franklin's Albany Congress.
 - 2. It decried the Intolerable Acts.
 - 3. It declared the colonial assemblies the only bodies that could legislate for the Americans.

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4. It revived the boycott of British goods.
 5. But it also reaffirmed American allegiance to the Crown.
 6. The intent was to mirror the relationship between Scotland and Britain.
- C. Meanwhile, the Colonial militia prepared for the worst.
1. Irregulars mustered to defend colonists from the British, rather than from the French or Indians.
 2. When the British forces in Boston tried to disarm the Massachusetts militia (the “minutemen”) a clash occurred at Lexington, and then Concord.
 3. The conflict spread all the way back to Boston during the British retreat.
- D. The Continental Congress returned to Philadelphia.
1. Delegates considered the situation in terms of this new turn of events.
 2. Turning to its only credible military leader, the Congress conferred command on George Washington.

III. In the midst of this upheaval, Franklin returned to Philadelphia.

- A. Things had changed during his years in London.
1. Debbie had died after an extensive illness.
 2. His son William was a distinguished British official in New Jersey.
- B. Franklin was known by reputation in America, but his return was met with skepticism.
1. Some thought he was too English after all his time in London.
 2. Never a strong public speaker, he was not impressive in debate.
- C. But he proved to be as radical as anyone in the Congress.
1. He had seen British corruption close up.
 2. Franklin’s feelings showed in a letter to William Strahan, one of his oldest English friends.
 - i. He outlined his anger over the way things were happening in Britain.
 - ii. He called his old friend an enemy.
 - iii. He wrote in a tone so angry that he finally decided not to send the letter to Strahan.

IV. Within the Congress, Franklin stood as strongly as anyone for freedom.

- A. He proposed the Articles of Confederation, based on his 1754 Albany Plan.
- B. He organized an American post office.
- C. He sat on a “secret committee” to find the weapons to fight a war.
- D. He traveled to Boston to consult with Washington on creating a Continental Army.
- E. He traveled to Canada in an effort to persuade that colony to join the Americans.

- F. He returned to Philadelphia in time to help draft the Declaration of Independence.
- G. He sent a letter rejecting an offer of reconciliation from Lord Howe, now in charge of British troops in America.
- H. He was dispatched to meet with Howe, who sought a personal interview.
 1. At the end of the meeting with Howe, the British commander told Franklin that if America fell he would lament it like the loss of a brother.
 2. Franklin replied, "My Lord, we will do our utmost endeavours to save your Lordship that mortification."

Summary

Franklin's return to Philadelphia marked his personal philosophical separation from Britain and was the final step toward his becoming fully American in his self-perception. Though now nearly seventy years old, Franklin threw himself into the quest for independence with the same energy he had shown in every other aspect of his life. His quiet conviction that independence was necessary helped move some people from the fence to support for colonial independence.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How did British division on what should be done about the troubles with America help the fight for independence?
2. How were Franklin's views on character and virtue reflected in the American decision to break away from Great Britain and battle for independence?
3. In what ways did Franklin's weaknesses as a charismatic leader shape the course of the revolution? How might things have been different had Franklin been a more dynamic public leader?

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Lecture 11:
Paris by Storm: 1776–1778:
Age 70 to 72

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapters 24 through 26.

Introduction

Once the revolution had begun, the Continental Congress attempted to take advantage of Franklin's international reputation to drum up support for the American cause. To this end, he was sent to Paris to engage the French as allies in the American struggle for independence. Franklin quickly became a celebrity among the French leaders and people, a position that he used to secure the help the revolution would need for eventual success against the greatest military power in the world at that time.

I. Odds were strongly against America at the start of the revolution.

- A. It was a brave and bold thing to declare independence.
 - 1. It meant taking on the greatest empire in the world.
 - 2. Leaders risked a noose, or worse, drawing and quartering.
- B. America had a few advantages.
 - 1. A defensive war always favors the defender.
 - 2. Internal lines of communication had been established.
 - 3. Soldiers were familiar with the terrain.
- C. America had greater disadvantages.
 - 1. No navy.
 - 2. No weapons (and a law that made weapons manufacturing illegal).
 - 3. No industry.
 - 4. No money.
 - 5. Sharply divided public opinion.
 - i. Many remained loyal to Britain.
 - ii. The most bitter fighting through much of the war was between loyal colonists and patriots.
- D. America's largest disadvantage was a lack of allies.
 - 1. Franklin was dispatched to Paris to rectify this situation.
 - 2. France was Britain's longtime enemy and seen as a likely ally.

II. Merely getting away from America was one of the biggest challenges Franklin faced.

- A. British warships scoured the coast, especially off the ports.
 - 1. Their goal was to interdict commerce.

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2. They were looking to capture any official-looking parties.
- B. Franklin was particularly wanted.
1. His face was well known—better than that of any other American.
 2. He was deemed particularly a traitor, having spent so long in England.
- C. He was an old man, nearly seventy-one.
1. He suffered from gout and other ailments of age.
 2. Younger men such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson declined to join him on the voyage.
- D. Franklin was willing to do whatever the cause required: “I have only a few years to live, and I am resolved to devote them to the work that my fellow citizens deem proper for me; or speaking as old-clothes dealers do of a remnant of goods, ‘You shall have me for what you please.’”
- E. To comfort him on the voyage, and in Paris, Franklin took along his grandsons, Temple and Benny.
1. Temple’s company signified the estrangement between Franklin and William, who remained loyal to Britain.
 - i. William eventually wound up in an American prison.
 - ii. Franklin refused to intercede on his behalf.
 2. Having lost his son to politics, Franklin wanted to keep an attachment to family.
- F. The voyage nearly killed Franklin—it “almost demolished me.”
1. It was relatively quick, but stormy.
 2. He suffered rashes, boils, and gout.
 3. He seriously doubted he could survive a return trip.

III. Franklin’s arrival in France created an immediate sensation.

- A. He (and the boys) landed on the French coast in mid-winter.
1. Rumors abounded regarding his purpose in coming.
 - i. Some thought he was defecting.
 - ii. His grandsons made it look like he was there to stay.
 2. As he moved slowly toward Paris, the speculation increased.
- B. When he arrived, he was greeted like the celebrity he was in France.
1. His face was everywhere.
 2. Everyone wanted to meet the great man.
- C. A vogue for Franklin and America quickly developed.
1. He arrived in a fur hat; soon fur hats were all the rage.
 2. He was on the best guest lists; hostesses fell over themselves inviting him to receptions and dinners.

IV. Franklin proved successful in the business he had come to conduct.

- A. Franklin appreciated the public attention, but he knew it was the King, not the public, who had the ultimate say in providing the help he sought.
 - 1. He needed a treaty of alliance with France.
 - 2. He needed money to keep the war going.
 - 3. With money and an alliance, the Americans stood a chance. Without them, probably not.
- B. Franklin's initial efforts helped find volunteers to serve with the American army.
 - 1. He was so flooded with volunteers, he soon didn't know what to do with them.
 - 2. Washington told him to stop sending them.
- C. Franklin's importance to the American cause was underlined by the steps the British took to spy on him.
 - 1. Edward Bancroft was a friend and protégé from London; he became Franklin's secretary in Paris.
 - 2. He reported on Franklin to the British government.
 - 3. He also reported on the British to Franklin, making him a double agent.
 - 4. Franklin took a good-natured attitude toward spying.
- D. The decisive event in shaping French support for the revolution was the battle of Saratoga, in the autumn of 1777, which showed that the Americans could stand up against the British.
 - 1. The news electrified Paris and paved the way to initial success in Franklin's diplomatic mission.
 - 2. In early 1778 he got his treaty of alliance, provoking war between Britain and France.

Summary

Though he still needed to address American concerns for money, Franklin's negotiation of the initial treaty of alliance paved the way for the ultimate success of the American Revolution within his first two years in Paris. He achieved this success largely by playing on his celebrity status with the French people and using his skill in negotiating conciliatory paths.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What qualities did Franklin possess that made him indispensable for the job of negotiating an alliance with France?
2. Which is more important in deciding the outcome of wars: military strength or diplomacy?

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Lecture 12:
To Be Seventy Again: 1778–1783:
Age 72 to 77

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 6.

Introduction

Franklin's alliance with the French guaranteed that the United States wouldn't lose the war quickly, but it didn't guarantee that the new country would win. The Americans remained painfully short of cash, munitions, and ships. Franklin knew his initial diplomatic successes would be useless unless he also succeeded in the task of supplying these needs for the revolutionaries in America.

I. Upon completion of the Treaty of Alliance, Franklin immediately took on the task of convincing France to help supply America's other great needs.

- A. Franklin pleaded with Vergennes for the money to keep the war going and the weapons with which to fight it.
 - 1. Vergennes was generally sympathetic to the American cause.
 - 2. He had to deal with a monarch who distrusted revolution.
- B. Negotiations with France were delicate.
 - 1. France wanted the Americans to cause trouble for the British.
 - 2. British anger could turn to France following a colonial loss.
 - 3. King Louis XVI didn't want to encourage revolution within his own nation.
- C. Franklin had to find a way between French hostility to Britain and Louis's suspicion of revolutionaries.
 - 1. He appealed to the rising French bourgeois.
 - 2. The pressure put on Louis XVI by this rising group helped gain financing for American troops.
 - 3. He emphasized civic virtue—liberty—as the primary purpose of the revolution.
- D. Franklin oversaw the activities of American privateers based in France, serving as liaison between John Paul Jones, the American naval captain, and French forces under the Marquis de Lafayette.
- E. He arranged prisoner exchanges and sought to ameliorate the plight of Americans in British prisons.

II. Whenever possible, Franklin used his personal popularity as an aid in managing the French attitude toward the revolution.

- A. Franklin had little leverage with the French king, who wanted to keep the Americans alive but not too strong.

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- B. The longer he was in Paris, the more popular he became.
1. When Voltaire returned after decades of exile, supporters of the two men insisted that they meet. A meeting was staged at the French Academy of Sciences to the delight of the French public.
 2. A widower by this time, Franklin was especially popular with the ladies.
 - i. Rumors of Franklin's conquests were much exaggerated—by himself.
 - ii. But there was truth to some of the rumors.
- C. Franklin had two favorites among his French lady friends: Madame Brillon (whom he called "Brillante") and Madame Helvétius.
1. Brillon was married, but her husband was having an affair known to all—except her.
 - i. Franklin flirted shamelessly with her, writing her letters explaining why she must let him make love to her.
 - ii. She enjoyed the flirtation and responded in kind.
 - iii. The relationship apparently never went beyond flirtation—a game they both enjoyed.
 2. Franklin was more serious about Helvétius, a widow closer to his age.
 - i. Her habits shocked John Adams and even more Abigail Adams.
 - ii. Franklin pursued Helvétius.
 - iii. He described to her a dream in which his Debbie and her husband were carrying on in heaven. He said upon his return to Earth: "Here I am! Let us avenge ourselves!"

III. Franklin was instrumental in finally securing the peace with Great Britain.

- A. In America, the Continental Army managed to pull itself together at Valley Forge.
1. They gradually fought off the British.
 2. The end came at Yorktown, in 1781, when French ships guaranteed that the redcoats could not escape and Washington won a brilliant victory.
 - i. British public opinion turned against the war.
 - ii. While Britain could continue fighting, the war became politically unpopular back home.
- B. Franklin had the task of leading the team to negotiate the peace treaty.
1. His fellow commissioners were John Jay and John Adams.
 - i. Adams couldn't stand Franklin.
 - ii. Franklin's reality did not match the image Adams had developed of him.
 - iii. He was envious of Franklin's fame.
 - iv. Their temperaments simply clashed.

2. The treaty was complicated by the need to include agreements with Britain, France, and Spain.
3. Franklin opened the bargaining with a breathtaking demand: recognition of independence, reparations, and Canada.
4. He got independence and territory to the Mississippi, but not Canada.
5. In 1783, Franklin signed the peace treaty with Great Britain, acknowledging, "There never was a good war or a bad peace."

Summary

In his mid-seventies, Franklin showed a shrewdness of character in the way he handled his diplomatic objectives in France. Playing to French perceptions of himself, he used his immense personal popularity with the public to apply subtle pressure that helped coerce Louis XVI into providing the colonies with the monetary and material support that enabled America to defeat Britain in the Revolutionary War.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How much did Franklin play with perceptions of his own reputation in order to achieve his political objectives in France?
2. Was Franklin's negotiating strategy with the British the most effective means of achieving the concessions he wanted in the peace treaty?

Suggested Reading

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Lecture 13:
Eldest Statesman: 1783–1787:
Age 77 to 81

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapters 27 through 29.

Introduction

Having achieved his greatest diplomatic success with the negotiation of the peace treaty with Great Britain that officially ended the Revolutionary War, Franklin looked to end his life of official public service. However, his great personal popularity, both in France and at home, made it impossible for him to completely leave public life.

I. Franklin believed his job was finished at the signing of the peace treaty with Great Britain.

- A. Congress kept him on as ambassador to France.
 - 1. The United States still needed French support, both politically and financially.
 - 2. Franklin remained popular and respected in France.
 - 3. Before the revolution, he had agreed to devote whatever was left of his life to the cause of American independence.
- B. Meanwhile his health deteriorated.
 - 1. Gout plagued him.
 - 2. Even worse was a kidney stone that passed to his bladder and caused excruciating pain when he moved.
 - 3. He could walk slowly but couldn't ride in a carriage, which jolted him.
- C. He continued to work on U.S.-French relations.
 - 1. He believed the United States owed a debt of gratitude to the French.
 - 2. He refused to separate national morality from personal morality.
- D. Even after he was released by Congress from his obligations, his French admirers, especially Helvétius, implored him to stay in Paris.
 - 1. Not sure he could survive the journey, he was tempted to stay.
 - 2. He wanted to return home to savor the American victory.
 - 3. Philadelphia was his home.
 - 4. He finally decided to go back to America to see his daughter and a grandchild he had never met.
 - i. Descriptions of his grandchild reminded him of Franky.
 - ii. He needed to feel a connection to his family once more.
- E. The queen loaned him her litter, so he could be carried to the coast.
 - 1. This assured a gentle trip.

2. It also helped get Franklin—a bad example to French people in his representation of liberty—out of the country.

F. He sailed across the Channel, as a test run, to England.

1. There he met, for the last time, with William, who wanted to reconcile.

2. Franklin rejected a reconciliation, citing William's refusal to follow his principal duty to his family (that is, his father's wishes) during the revolution.

3. He asked more of William than he had given to his own family.

II. His return home in 1785 did not provide Franklin with the retirement he had envisioned.

A. His fellow Pennsylvanians and Americans wouldn't let him retire.

1. Partisan politics wracked Pennsylvania.

2. Both parties nominated Franklin for chief executive of Pennsylvania.

3. He was elected to three one-year terms before being allowed to retire.

B. He devoted increasing energies to his daughter and grandchildren.

C. He remodeled his house and put up two other buildings, including a print shop for grandson Benny.

III. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 was Franklin's final public service on the national stage.

A. As president of Pennsylvania, he hosted the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

B. Franklin was suggested as president of the convention, but he declined, suggesting Washington instead.

1. He was concerned his poor health would hinder his attendance.

2. He recognized that Washington's position as the only true national hero would give the proceedings full credibility.

C. Franklin attended nearly all sessions.

1. He interjected rarely, always through delegates who spoke on his behalf.

2. His intervention was always respected and became crucial to the final document.

i. His suggestion to open sessions with a prayer was rejected, but he made his point about acting with humility.

ii. He recommended that the president receive no salary, another failed measure that made a point about service for the good of the country.

iii. He suggested the grand compromise of the convention, the one that produced the modern Congress, with the Senate representing the states and the House the people.

- D. Though he disagreed with parts of it, Franklin strongly urged all delegates to get behind the final product and present a unanimous front to other nations.
- E. His benediction on the effort lent it credibility to the public and to the world.

Summary

A full generation older than most of the other Founding Fathers, Franklin was still one of the most respected figures in America as the new nation took shape. His popularity and the respect he inspired made it virtually impossible for him to retire and remove himself from public life.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Was Franklin justified in his reaction to his son William after the war?
2. How might the shape of American government have differed if Franklin had decided to spend the remainder of his life in Paris after the revolution?

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Lecture 14:
In Peace with Them All: 1787–1790:
Age 81 to 84

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is H.W. Brands's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 30 and epilogue.

Introduction

Even after he left public life, Franklin spent the last few years of his life active in causes that he felt threatened the nation he had helped to establish. His legacy continued long after his death, ensuring a position in history that remains secure to this day.

I. Franklin remained active till the end of his life.

- A. Franklin finally retired after the Constitutional Convention.
 - 1. He puttered around his house.
 - 2. He was always happy to show off his new library to visitors.
 - 3. He maintained his interest in science.
- B. Though he left the practice of politics to others, he couldn't resist indirect involvement.
 - 1. He continued a decades-long movement toward support of the abolition of slavery.
 - 2. He forwarded an abolitionist petition to Congress.
 - 3. When a Georgia congressman came to the defense of slavery, Franklin penned his final satirical piece, as from the words of "Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim," condemning attacks on the enslavement of Christians: "Let us then hear no more of this detestable proposition, the manumission of Christian slaves."
- C. He also reflected on deep questions of the meaning of life.
 - 1. Educated in the Congregationist Church, he had swung toward atheism in his younger days.
 - 2. He gradually became dissatisfied with atheism and moved toward Deism.
 - i. He believed in some creative intelligence that established laws of the universe.
 - ii. He did not believe in an active, intervening god.
 - 3. When a friend inquired of his religious creed late in his life, and particularly his view of Jesus, he responded in a way that showed his evolving belief.
 - i. He believed in a single, creative God.
 - ii. He believed God governed the world through divine provenance.
 - iii. He believed doing good was the most acceptable form of worship.

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- iv. He believed the soul of man is immortal and would be judged.
 - v. He believed Jesus's system of morals was the best ever devised, but that it had been corrupted by later followers.
- D. His health continued to decline.
- 1. His stone hurt more than ever, prompting him to take opium for the pain.
 - 2. The opium made his breathing shallow, which contributed to a pulmonary infection.
 - 3. Friends and dignitaries—Jefferson, Benjamin Rush—visited the dying man; others—Washington—wrote. “If to be venerated for benevolence, if to be admired for talents, if to be esteemed for patriotism, if to be beloved for philanthropy, can gratify the human mind, you must have the pleasing consolation to know that you have not lived in vain.”
- E. On April 17, 1790, at age eighty-four years and three months, Franklin died.

II. Even in death, Franklin managed an ingenious bequest.

- A. He left an estate valued at several thousand British pounds.
- 1. He established revolving funds devoted to Philadelphia and Boston.
 - 2. These funds were loaned out to young journeymen for five years.
 - 3. This would be paid back with interest.
 - 4. He envisioned it lasting for two centuries.
 - 5. Funds still existed in 1990, at which time the money was distributed for civic uses in the two cities.
- B. Many years earlier, Franklin had written perhaps the most famous epitaph in American history.
- C. Upon his death, he chose a simpler version: “Benjamin and Deborah Franklin 1790.”

III. Franklin's legacy continued long after his death.

- A. His individual life became the basis for the American character.
- 1. He was the example of a poor boy who had made good by his own efforts, becoming a brilliant and world-esteemed success.
 - 2. Franklin became the archetype of the self-made man, which itself became what most Americans considered distinctive about their country.
- B. His legacy includes the creation of the American republic, in which he had played such a large part.
- 1. His efforts to recognize his own identity led him to do all he could for his country as an Englishman.
 - 2. When he could no longer view himself as British, Franklin helped to create an American identity.

C. Finally, his legacy included a recognition of the role of civic virtue in acquiring and maintaining independence.

1. From his first days in Philadelphia, Franklin had appreciated the connection between individual development and the development of the community.
2. He understood this during the American Revolution and during the later years of his life, when he gave himself to Congress to use him for what he was worth.

Summary

Franklin's lifetime defined a movement in America toward an individual identity. His legacy ended with a challenge to his posterity to pursue virtue with the same devotion that Franklin had shown in his own life. On leaving the Constitutional Convention, he was asked what the delegates had produced. His response clearly showed the connection between his view of individual responsibility and the new world he had helped create through his actions: "A republic, if you can keep it."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How was Franklin's work within the abolitionist movement consistent with the character values he had outlined early in his life?
2. Is Franklin's later vision of God in any way consistent with the views he held earlier in life?
3. In what ways can Franklin's legacy still be seen in America today?

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