

**Franklin, Benjamin** (6 Jan. 1706-17 Apr. 1790), natural philosopher and writer, was born in Boston, Massachusetts, opposite the Congregational Old South Church, where the Reverend [Samuel Willard](#) baptized him the same day. The youngest son and fifteenth child of Josiah Franklin, a tallow chandler and soap maker who emigrated from England in 1683 to practice his Puritan faith, Benjamin had eleven living brothers and sisters. Five were Josiah's children by his first wife, Anne Child, and six were by his second wife, Abiah Folger, Benjamin's mother. Two sisters were born later.

At age eight Franklin studied at the South Grammar School (later Boston Latin), his father intending him as "the tithing of his sons" for the ministry. But the expense and the subsequent poor living of many ministers made his father withdraw him at the school year's end. The following year, 1715-1716, he attended George Brownell's English school, completing his only formal education. He worked in his father's hot, pungent shop, boiling fats and making candles and soap, but hated the trade and wanted to become a sailor. His father had lost one son to the sea and kept Franklin home. Josiah took him to watch various artisans at work, but none of the trades interested him. In March 1717 his brother James, a printer, returned from England and by the fall of 1718 set up his own printing shop. Since Franklin loved to read and since he wrote poetry as a child, his father apprenticed him to James. In 1718, at the age of twelve, Franklin signed a nine-year indenture.

Franklin read everything in his father's small library and made friends with booksellers' apprentices in order to borrow books from them. He became a vegetarian partly to save money to buy books. Having purchased an odd volume of the *Spectator*, Franklin taught himself prose style by outlining the essays and later composing them in his own words. He compared the originals with his versions and corrected them.

In 1721 [James Franklin](#) started his own newspaper, the *New England Courant*. Benjamin set the type for the paper, printed it, delivered it to the customers, and heard their comments. Aged sixteen, he emulated his brother's friends, the Couranteers, and wrote for the paper. "But being still a Boy, and suspecting that my Brother would object to printing any Thing of mine in his Paper if he knew it to be mine, I contriv'd to disguise my Hand, and writing an anonymous Paper I put it in at Night under the Door of the Printing-House" (*Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: A Norton Critical Edition* [hereafter *Autobiography*], ed. Lemay and Zall, p. 15). Franklin's pseudonym "Silence Dogood" alluded to the Reverend [Cotton Mather's](#) *Bonifacius; or, Essays to Do Good* and his recent sermon, *Silentarius*. The first essay series in American literature, Silence Dogood opened with two numbers depicting a vain, opinionated minister's widow; number four satirized Harvard College; and number seven travestied the typical New England funeral elegy.

While the fourteen Silence Dogood essays were appearing, the Massachusetts general assembly imprisoned James for suggesting that the local officials deliberately delayed sailing out to battle pirates. The sixteen-year-old Benjamin therefore managed the paper for four weeks, 12 June to 7 July 1722. When James again offended the authorities in January 1723, the Massachusetts assembly (by one vote) prohibited him from publishing the newspaper without prior review. James defied the order, printed the *Courant*, and went into hiding from 24 January to 12 February 1723, leaving Benjamin again in charge. The adolescent "made bold to give our Rulers some Rubs in it" (*Autobiography*, p. 16). Since only James Franklin was forbidden to print the

paper without prior review, the *Courant* appeared under the name Benjamin Franklin beginning 11 February 1723. In case the authorities should question the artifice, Benjamin's indenture was returned to him with a full discharge, though he signed another, secret one.

### **Arrival in Philadelphia (1723)**

The siblings quarreled, and James, who "was otherwise not an ill-natur'd Man," often beat his apprentice. Franklin reflected in his *Autobiography*, "Perhaps I was too saucy and provoking" (p. 17). When a fresh argument between the two broke out in September 1723, Benjamin left the shop, believing his brother could not prosecute him with the secret indenture. Warned off by James, no other Boston printer would hire Benjamin; so he ran away, sailing on 25 September 1723 for the nearest printing establishment, New York. Failing to find work there, the seventeen-year-old went on to the only other town in English-speaking North America with a printing press, Philadelphia, arriving about eight or nine o'clock Sunday morning, 6 October, with one Dutch dollar and about twenty pence in copper. The *Autobiography's* description of his journey, arrival, and first hours in Philadelphia is a touchstone of American literature.

Franklin found work with [Samuel Keimer](#), who was just setting up a printing shop, and lodged next door with John and Sarah Read and their children, one of whom, Deborah, was to be his future wife. Seven months later, befriended by Pennsylvania governor [William Keith](#), who promised to award him the public printing, the eighteen-year-old returned to Boston to ask his father for a loan to start a printing shop. Josiah turned him down. Back in Philadelphia, Governor Keith pledged to lend Franklin the money to buy the press and types but suggested he go to London to make the purchases and to arrange for supplies from the stationers, booksellers, and printers. Franklin and Deborah courted and planned to marry, but after the death of her father, on 3 July, her mother insisted the youngsters wait until Franklin's return. He sailed for London on 5 November 1724 with his friend James Ralph and a Quaker merchant, Thomas Denham.

Arriving in London on Christmas Eve 1724, Franklin learned that Governor Keith, with "no credit to give," had duped him. The youth had neither money nor prospects. He found employment at Samuel Palmer's printing shop, 54 Bartholomew Close, where in February 1725 Franklin set in type the third edition of William Wollaston's *Religion of Nature Delineated*. He then wrote an ironic rejoinder, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, burlesquing the arguments for the existence of God. With no publisher, no author, and no bookseller indicated, the pamphlet was archetypal clandestine literature. *A Dissertation* won him notoriety among London libertines, and William Lyons, who had spent six months languishing in jail for his own freethinking book, befriended him, introducing him to the notorious Bernard Mandeville, author of *The Fable of the Bees*, and to Henry Pemberton, a friend and popularizer of Isaac Newton. In the fall of 1725 Franklin left Palmer's printing house for John Watts's larger establishment near Lincoln Inn Fields. Denham proposed the next spring that Franklin return with him to Philadelphia to work as his clerk and shopkeeper while learning the mercantile business. Franklin agreed and sailed with Denham on 23 July 1726.

Denham rented a store on Water Street. Franklin "attended the Business diligently, studied Accounts, and grew in a little Time expert at selling" (*Autobiography*, p. 41). In February 1727 he fell ill with pleurisy and nearly died. Denham too fell ill, lingered on, and finally died on 4 July 1728. About the end of March 1727 Franklin recovered and returned to work as the manager of Keimer's printing shop, while Keimer ran the stationery store. That fall Franklin formed the Junto, a society for mutual improvement that met every Friday night and included his friends Joseph Breintnall, William Coleman, Robert Grace, and Hugh Meredith. In the late spring of 1728 Meredith and he borrowed money from Meredith's father to set up their own printing shop. They did so on 1 June 1728. Before winter, Keimer learned that Franklin and Meredith intended to start a newspaper to challenge [Andrew Bradford's](#) *American Weekly Mercury*. Keimer immediately announced plans for his own paper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. In resentment, Franklin began, on 4 February 1729, writing an essay series, the "Busy Body," to popularize Bradford's paper and to ensure Keimer's failure. The last "Busy Body" Franklin wrote (suppressed after a few newspapers came off the press) demanded the assembly pass a paper currency issue and threatened uprisings if it did not. He continued the campaign by writing, on 10 April 1729, *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency*, the first highly successful printing from his own press. Though Franklin said the "Rich Men dislik'd it," the pamphlet influenced public opinion, and the Pennsylvania assembly passed a paper currency bill.

## **Pennsylvania Gazette and Poor Richard**

That fall the partners bought the failing *Pennsylvania Gazette* "for a Trifle" from Keimer. Franklin immediately made it famous by writing an editorial analysis of the vicious controversy between Governor [William Burnet](#) and the Massachusetts assembly. Franklin and Meredith petitioned the Pennsylvania assembly on 18 February 1729 to print for the province, but the lucrative contract was again awarded to Bradford. On 14 October 1729 [Andrew Hamilton](#), a distinguished lawyer who had become Franklin's friend and patron, was elected Speaker of the Pennsylvania assembly, and on 30 January 1730 the assembly chose Franklin and Meredith as the province's official printers. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1730, Meredith's father found he could not pay for the printing press and types. Suit was brought against him and the young partners. Since Meredith wanted to return to farming, Franklin borrowed money from his Junto friends Grace and Coleman to buy out Meredith and pay off the debt.

Franklin's former betrothed, Deborah Read, had married John Rogers in August 1725, exactly nine months after Franklin sailed from Philadelphia. Rogers proved to be a poor husband who, rumor reported, had another wife elsewhere. Deborah soon left him and returned to live with her mother. Rogers absconded in December 1727. William, ([William Franklin](#)), Franklin's illegitimate son, was born in 1728 or 1729. His mother is unknown. On 1 September 1730 Franklin and Deborah Read Rogers joined together in a common-law marriage because John Rogers might still be alive. They took William into their home and brought him up as their son. Two years later Francis Folger Franklin was born, only to die of smallpox at age four. Eleven years after the birth of Francis, Franklin's third and last child, Sarah, was born. Deborah and the children attended Philadelphia's Anglican Christ Church.

Admitted a Freemason in January 1731, Franklin attended his first meeting in February. In June 1734 he was elected grand master, a sign of his local rise to prominence and the respect he enjoyed. Franklin remained active in the Philadelphia Freemasons until 1757 and attended Masonic meetings on his travels in the colonies and in various countries.

On 1 July 1731 Franklin drafted an "Instrument of Association" for the Library Company of Philadelphia, America's first subscription library. He served as its president, acted for a time as its librarian and for years as its secretary, contributed books to it, printed its first extant catalog (1741) for free, and nurtured it throughout his life. In the fall of 1731 Franklin sponsored his journeyman Thomas Whitemarsh as his printing partner in Charleston, South Carolina. The act was revolutionary in the closed circuit of colonial American printers. Previous patrons of independent printers were family members, helping their sons or close relatives to start printing businesses. Franklin's system of partnerships was generous--and, he hoped, would be profitable. He gradually established more than half a dozen printing partnerships.

By 1732 the indefatigable Franklin had taught himself to read, write, and translate German fluently. He gradually studied French, Spanish, Italian, and Latin, attaining a reading knowledge of them all. In the fall of 1732, finding that Bradford had arranged to print all the local almanacs, Franklin started his own, *Poor Richard*, predicting in the preface the death of Titan Leeds, the best-known almanac maker of the Middle Colonies. *Poor Richard* instantly became famous and soon sold almost 10,000 copies annually. The prefaces were more entertaining, the rustic, naive astrologer persona more engaging, the proverbs (often revised by Franklin) more memorable, and the contents more valuable than those of other almanacs. *Poor Richard* and the *Pennsylvania Gazette* became the mainstays of Franklin's successful publishing business. Even after he retired from printing in 1748, he continued to supply the copy for *Poor Richard* until 1757, when he wrote the last almanac, *Poor Richard Improved . . . 1758*, on his voyage to England. Reprinted under the title *The Way to Wealth* (at first as *Father Abraham's Speech*), the prefatory skit in the last almanac became his best-known writing before the *Autobiography*.

## Franklin's "Virtues"

By 1 July 1733 Franklin had devised a scheme of thirteen useful virtues and a chart recording the violations that he recorded in part two of the *Autobiography*. Franklin's "virtues" were intended to correct his particular faults. Two virtues were directed at his tendency to be overweight and to prattle, pun, and joke too often (p. 68). He included the list and the chart in the *Autobiography* because he thought the method could be valuable for others. Franklin commonsensically concluded that though he fell far short of the ideal envisioned, "yet I was by the Endeavour made a better and a happier Man than I otherwise should have been" (p. 73).

Franklin proposed a fire protection society in the Junto, publicized the necessity of being prepared to fight fires in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (4 Feb. 1735), and organized the Union Fire Company, Philadelphia's first, on 7 December 1736. He suggested in the Junto about 1735 reforming the night watch and hiring regular watchmen, but this reform was not adopted until 9 February 1751. To hinder counterfeiting of paper currency, he devised a new printing technique

(reproducing images of plant leaves) and used it on the New Jersey paper currency of 1736. On 21 October 1743 Franklin intended to observe an eclipse of the moon, but a hurricane prevented it. Reprinting news of the eclipse, he found that it was observed in Boston and that the hurricane had struck there the next day. That observation led him to theorize that though the winds in "all our great Storms" blew from the northeast, the storm itself moved up from the south. Typically, he did not publish the theory at the time but waited until he had confirmed it by repeated observations. Fascinated by the whirling winds in the great storms, he analyzed the nature of whirlwinds and waterspouts, correctly theorizing that they had vacuums at the center and ingeniously comparing their motion to the circular motion in draining a tub of water. During the winter of 1740-1741 he designed the Pennsylvania fireplace and in 1744 wrote a pamphlet to popularize an improved version. Its purpose was part conservation and part efficiency: "My common Room, I know, is made twice as warm as it used to be, with a quarter of the Wood I formerly consum'd" (*Papers of Benjamin Franklin* [hereafter *Papers*], ed. Labaree et al., vol. 2, p. 437).

On 15 October 1736 the Pennsylvania assembly elected Franklin its clerk. Besides taking the minutes, the clerk was the legislature's historian and record keeper. The position allowed him to keep up his interest "among the Members, which secur'd to me the Business of Printing the Votes, Laws, Paper Money, and other occasional Jobs for the Public, that on the whole were very profitable" (*Autobiography*, p. 84). On 5 October 1737 he was appointed postmaster of Philadelphia. That office too helped his printing business. "Tho' the Salary was small," the postmastership "facilitated the Correspondence that improv'd my Newspaper, increas'd the Number demanded, as well as the Advertisements to be inserted, so that it came to afford me a very considerable Income" (*Autobiography*, p. 85).

Other projects failed. Franklin started America's first German-language newspaper, *Philadelphische Zeitung* (6 May 1732), which soon languished. In partnership with Johann Böhm, he published the *Philadelphier Teutsche Fama* in 1749 and 1750, but Böhm died in July 1751. The next month Franklin started America's first bilingual newspaper, *Hoch Teutsche und Englische Zeitung*, which was discontinued after thirteen issues. He projected the first American magazine in 1740, but his would-be editor, John Webbe, took the idea to his printing rival Bradford, and they produced the *American Magazine* three days before Franklin's *General Magazine* appeared. The times were premature for any American magazine, however, and both folded.

The Great Awakening came to Philadelphia with the arrival of [George Whitefield](#) on 2 November 1739. "It was wonderful to see the Change soon made in the Manners of our Inhabitants; from being thoughtless or indifferent about Religion, it seem'd as if all the World were growing Religious; so that one could not walk thro' the Town in an Evening without hearing Psalms sung in different Families of every Street" (*Autobiography*, p. 87). Franklin admired Whitefield because he sponsored humanitarian causes.

## **Experiments with Electricity**

Franklin organized and publicized, on 17 March 1742, a project to sponsor botanist [John Bartram](#)'s exploratory trips throughout the colonies and the frontiers to collect American plants, but the funds raised were insufficient. The following year Franklin wrote *A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge*, the founding document of the precursor of America's first scientific society, the American Philosophical Society. In April 1745 the London merchant Peter Collinson, a member of the Royal Society, sent the Library Company a pamphlet describing the new German investigations in electricity. Franklin and his friends [Ebenezer Kinnersley](#), [Philip Syng](#), and Thomas Hopkinson practiced the experiments with the Leyden jar (an early capacitor) and designed their own experiments for the next two years. On 25 May 1747 Franklin sent Collinson a letter describing the revolutionary research. He proved that there were not two kinds of electricity (the current theory) but only one; to explain the seemingly two kinds, he applied the terms *plus* and *minus*, or *positive* and *negative*, to electricity. Franklin demonstrated that in electrifying objects nothing new was created or lost but that the electricity was rearranged. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist [Robert A. Millikan](#) called Franklin's law of the conservation of charge "the most fundamental thing ever done in the field of electricity" (Lokken, p. 38).

People flocked to Franklin's house to see the experiments. He suggested that Kinnersley tour the colonies giving lectures on electricity and wrote out two lectures for him, "in which the Experiments were rang'd in such Order and accompanied with Explanations in such Method, as that the foregoing should assist in Comprehending the following" (*Autobiography*, p. 131). On 29 April 1749 Franklin wrote a letter to Kinnersley theorizing that clouds became electrified and that lightning was electrical in nature. On 2 March 1750 Franklin proposed lightning rods to the scientific community. Several months later, on 29 July, he devised a sentry box experiment to prove that lightning is electrical and therefore that lightning rods could protect actual houses. Since the sentry box experiment needed to be performed on a tall tower, Franklin intended to wait until the steeple on Philadelphia's Christ Church was constructed.

Franklin's letters on electricity were gathered and published in London as *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1751). The brief book was translated into French by Thomas François D'Alibard, who set up the sentry box apparatus atop a tall tower at Marly, France, where on 10 May 1752 electricity from the air charged the Leyden jar (as Franklin had hypothesized). Before learning of the French proof, Franklin imagined that he might be able to obtain the same evidence by flying a kite at the approach of a thunderstorm. In June 1752, as dark clouds came up, he tried the kite experiment. He knew the hemp string attached to the kite would conduct electricity. Franklin ran the string from the kite to a Leyden jar, insulating himself by holding a silk ribbon to the string. When he observed the fibers on the hemp string stand out, he realized the experiment had succeeded. It must have been one of the most satisfying moments of his life. Franklin had proven electricity to be a basic element of nature. In late July he learned of the sentry box experiment's success in France. "This engag'd the public Attention everywhere" (*Autobiography*, p. 133). Franklin became the most famous natural philosopher since Isaac Newton, and, in the popular mind, more so, since Newton's theories were not generally understood nor their profound significance widely recognized. In 1756 Immanuel Kant dubbed Franklin the "Prometheus of modern time" (*Papers*, vol. 20, p. 490).

Franklin had to abandon his electrical experiments in late 1747 when French and Spanish privateers attacked ships and settlements on the Delaware River and the French and Indians

assaulted Pennsylvania's frontiers. Because the Quakers, many of whom were pacifists, controlled the Pennsylvania assembly, the authorities could not raise a militia to defend the colony. Franklin therefore wrote *Plain Truth* (17 Nov. 1747), setting forth the province's defenseless and alarming situation and urging that private citizens take steps if the government would not. On the verso of the title page, he printed America's first cartoon used in a political situation, with the moral that God helps those who help themselves. He proposed and raised a militia association in which the volunteers elected their own company officers and the company officers elected the higher officers. The association proved immediately successful. When the company officers met, on 1 January 1748, they elected Franklin colonel, but he refused, pleading military inexperience, and served instead as a common soldier. The association made him a popular local hero, thus provoking the jealousy of Thomas Penn, Pennsylvania's main proprietor. He wrote that Franklin "is a dangerous Man and I should be very Glad he inhabited any other Country, as I believe him of a very uneasy Spirit. However as he is a Sort of Tribune of the People, he must be treated with regard" (*Papers*, vol. 3, p. 186). With the conclusion of King George's War (1740-1748) by the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle on 18 October 1748, the association gradually dissolved.

## Public Offices and Civic Duties

On 1 January 1748 Franklin formed a partnership with David Hall and retired from printing. The poor boy from Boston had become the best-known and most prosperous printer, editor, and publisher of colonial America, but Franklin did not care to amass a fortune. The idealist wanted to devote his time to scientific research and civic affairs. The partnership with Hall was to last eighteen years, at which time the business would become Hall's. As the 1 October 1748 election approached, Franklin's friends urged him to run for the assembly, but he said he would not serve if chosen. The common council of Philadelphia, however, which elected its own members, chose Franklin a councilman on 4 October. On 30 June 1749 he was named a justice of the peace for Philadelphia, and on 9 May 1751, in a special election to replace William Clymer, who had died, he was elected from Philadelphia to the Pennsylvania assembly. Because Franklin had been the clerk of the Pennsylvania assembly since 1736, he was intimately familiar with its workings and was immediately assigned to the most important committees. Known as a superior writer, he chaired the committees that replied to the governor's messages. His public offices culminated in his being appointed joint deputy postmaster general of North America on 10 August 1753. As postmaster of Philadelphia from 5 October 1737, he had been permitted to receive mail free and had helped friends like John Bartram by having their mail directed to himself. Now he could send and receive mail free throughout the colonies. In the prerevolutionary period, he used this privilege and at the same time propagandized American principles by endorsing the covers of his letters "B. FREE Franklin."

In 1749 he wrote *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*, distributed it gratis, and "set on foot a Subscription for Opening and Supporting an Academy. . . . The Care and Trouble of agreeing with the Workmen, purchasing Materials, and superintending the Work fell upon me" (*Autobiography*, pp. 98-100). The academy became the Academy and College of Philadelphia and later the University of Pennsylvania. In 1751 Franklin's friend Dr. [Thomas](#)

[Bond](#) decided to establish a hospital in Philadelphia and enlisted Franklin. He wrote two essays on the subject in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (8 and 15 Aug. 1751) and helped raise subscriptions for the hospital. When they began to flag, he petitioned the legislature for additional funds. The county legislators objected that it would only benefit the city and claimed that even the Philadelphians were not really supporting the plan. Franklin then devised the first matching grant. He proposed a bill making the grant conditional: when the hospital's subscribers had raised £2,000, then the legislature would add 2,000 more. The Pennsylvania Hospital, America's first, opened 6 February 1752.

On 26 July 1751 Franklin proposed that the members of the several fire companies then existing join together in an insurance company. They did so and on 7 September 1751 formed the Philadelphia Contributionship. On a post office tour through New England, mid-June through September 1753, he received an honorary master of arts degree from Harvard (25 July) and Yale (12 Sept.). On 30 November he was awarded the Copley Medal of the Royal Society, at that time the most distinguished prize for scientific achievement in the world. The Royal Society unanimously elected him to membership 29 April 1756. On another post office tour to Virginia, William and Mary College granted him its first honorary master's degree, 20 April 1756. The Society (later Royal Society) of Arts elected him a corresponding member 1 September 1756.

## Literary Achievements

Though for his contemporaries his scientific achievements eclipsed his literary achievements, Franklin nevertheless by the mid-eighteenth century had an international reputation as a writer of hoaxes, satires, essays, and letters. His salacious "Old Mistresses Apologue" (or "Reasons for Preferring an Old Mistress to a Young One"), written 25 June 1745, was considered too risqué for publication in nineteenth-century America. "The Speech of Miss Polly Baker, before a Court of Judicature, at Connecticut in New England, where she was prosecuted the fifth Time for having a Bastard Child; which influenced the Court to dispense with her Punishment, and induced one of her Judges to marry her the next Day" (17 Apr. 1747) was among the most popular hoaxes or satires of the eighteenth century. The *American Weekly Mercury* published "An Apology for the young Man in Gaol, and in Shackles, for ravishing an old Woman of 85 at Whitemarsh, who had only one Eye, and that a red one" (15 Sept. 1743), and the *New York Gazette* printed his poetic travesty of [Sir William Gooch](#)'s speech on the burning of Virginia's capital (1 June 1747). All these pieces, like Franklin's mock biblical parables (1755), circulated widely in manuscript copies in England and America before some printer (never Franklin) published them.

In addition to belletristic writings satirizing such topics as the double standard for men and women, Franklin also wrote the best American propaganda objecting to England's treatment of the colonies. His outraged hoax "Rattlesnakes for Felons" (9 May 1751) proposed sending rattlesnakes to Great Britain in return for the transported convicts dumped in America. His great 1751 essay "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c." replied to Great Britain's Acts of Trade and Navigation. It roused young [John Adams](#) to

contemplate the future independence of the United States and influenced the theories of both Adam Smith on capitalism and Thomas Malthus on population.

## **Urging Unification of the Colonies**

Inspired by the union of the Iroquois or Six Indian Nations that had "subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble" (*Papers*, vol. 4, p. 119), Franklin optimistically thought that the colonies would unify. Three years later, alarmed by the French incursions into the Ohio Valley and along the Pennsylvania and Virginia frontiers, Franklin wrote an editorial (4 May 1754) urging unification of the colonies and printed it under a cartoon showing a snake cut into pieces, with the caption underneath reading "JOIN OR DIE." The first political American cartoon in a newspaper, it was the first symbol of the unified American colonies. That summer, representing Pennsylvania, he attended the Albany Conference, called by the British authorities, to urge the Six Nations to remain with the English and to arrange a common defense of the frontier against the French troops and their Indian allies. Franklin drafted a plan of union as he journeyed to the conference. On 2 July the conference voted to form a union of the colonies, and on 10 July it adopted, with revisions, Franklin's plan (see *Papers*, vol. 5, pp. 374-87, for a masterly discussion). But the colonies rejected it because they thought it had too much prerogative, and the Board of Trade rejected it because its members feared a union of the colonies might lead to their independence.

The following winter, when Franklin was in Boston on post office business, Governor [William Shirley](#) showed him a tentative plan of union proposed by the Board of Trade. Franklin objected that the British plan did not give the colonists the right to choose their own representatives and also protested the proposal to have Parliament tax Americans. The following day, 4 December 1754, he wrote that it was "an undoubted Right of Englishmen not to be taxed but by their own Consent given thro' their Representatives." On 22 December, in reply to Governor Shirley's suggestion that the colonists elect members of Parliament, Franklin said that if all the past Acts of Trade and Navigation were repealed and if the colonies were given "a reasonable number of Representatives," then the colonists might be satisfied. But Franklin and Shirley both knew that Great Britain would never take either step. Franklin argued that if there were any difference between the merits of the English and the colonists, then "those who have most contributed to enlarge Britain's empire and commerce, encrease her strength, her wealth, and the numbers of her people, at the risque of their own lives and private fortunes in new and strange countries, methinks ought rather to expect some preference" (*Papers*, vol. 5, p. 451). Franklin's patriotic Americanism was a new, bold note in the political discourse of the eighteenth century.

## **Franklin's First Mission to England (1757-1762)**

After the rout of General [Edward Braddock](#) by the French and Indians near Pittsburgh on 9 July 1755, the English troops fled to Philadelphia. With the Pennsylvania frontier defenseless and the Indians raiding the borders, Franklin drew up a bill for establishing a voluntary militia, which the Pennsylvania assembly quickly passed. Because Governor [Robert Hunter Morris](#) knew that

Franklin was popular and that volunteers would join if he commanded, Morris made Franklin the military and civilian commander of the frontier on 5 January 1756. Franklin led 500 soldiers out to the frontier and built a fort before he was summoned to Philadelphia for a special assembly meeting. The company officers elected him colonel on 12 February; this time he accepted the command. Governor Morris commissioned him on 24 February, but the Board of Trade and Privy Council vetoed the militia bill (7 July 1756) as too democratic. As a result of the proprietors' continuing refusal to tax the proprietary lands in common with other Pennsylvania property, the assembly resolved to petition the king. On 3 February 1757 the assembly appointed Franklin its agent. Fearing the sea, Deborah refused to sail with him to England, but Franklin accepted. In London, on 27 July 1757, Franklin met Lord Granville, president of the Privy Council, who told him that the king's instructions to the governors were law and that "the King is the Legislator of the Colonies" (*Autobiography*, p. 143). Franklin, however, knew that the colonial legislatures made their own laws, though these had to be approved by the king. Franklin found the British public and the authorities ignorant about America. He thereupon began a campaign to enlighten them. His first major attempt, "A Defense of the Americans," appeared in the *London Chronicle* (12 May 1759). It was the grandest statement of Americanism in the colonial period. Franklin wrote a constant stream of American propaganda throughout his years in England, 1757-1762 and 1764-1775. In this first mission, his pamphlet arguing the economic and strategic importance of Canada to the colonies and to Great Britain (*The Interest of Great Britain Considered* [1760]) was his longest and most influential writing.

Franklin's mission to England changed when he consulted the famous London physician and friend of Pennsylvania's Quaker leaders Dr. John Fothergill, whose advice the assembly had directed him to ask. Fothergill and other prominent English Quakers said he should first try for an accommodation with the proprietors. That negotiation dragged on inconclusively, but in Pennsylvania Governor William Denny passed an act, 17 April 1759, taxing the proprietors' estates. The Penns tried to have the act disallowed. Despite the arguments of lawyers hired by Franklin, the Board of Trade on 24 June 1760 recommended the act be annulled. Franklin appealed to the king in council, and, after personally guaranteeing that the proprietary estates would be taxed with perfect equity, he won the case for the assembly. Thus Franklin's first mission to England had some success, though the Penns continued to oppose acts taxing their lands.

In England Franklin became close friends with William Strahan, a member of Parliament, with Margaret Stevenson (Franklin's landlady), her daughter Mary (Polly) Stevenson, and their circle of friends and relatives. He spoofed himself, "Dr. Fatsides . . . the Great One," and the activities of the Stevenson circle in a wonderful parody of court gossip, "The Craven Street Gazette" (22 Sept. 1770). Franklin also joined two informal clubs. One, consisting primarily of scientists, philanthropists, and explorers (the future captain James Cook occasionally attended), met on Mondays. The other, dubbed the Club of Honest Whigs, met on Thursdays and included dissenting ministers like [Joseph Priestley](#) and Richard Price, as well as James Boswell, who recorded in his *Life of Johnson* (1791) Franklin's definition of humankind: "Man is a tool-making animal."

Occasionally, instead of attending the Honest Whigs, Franklin went to the Club of the Royal Philosophers (later called the Royal Society Club). The official organizations that Franklin

frequented were the Royal Society of London, the Associates of Dr. Bray (a small philanthropic organization that Dr. Samuel Johnson visited, 1 May 1760, while Franklin was its chairman), and the Society of Arts (which promoted new crops and improved farming techniques).

When time permitted, he continued his scientific interests, inventing a clock with only three wheels; designing a damper for stoves and chimneys, 2 December 1758; and gradually improving his new musical instrument, the glass armonica. After Franklin received the honorary degree of doctor of laws from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, 12 February 1759, his contemporaries usually called him Dr. Franklin. Oxford conferred on him the honorary degree of doctor of civil law, 30 April 1762. During his years in England, Franklin tried to take an annual vacation. In 1759 he toured northern England and Scotland, meeting David Hume, Adam Smith, [William Robertson](#), and Lord Kames. In 1761 he toured the Austrian Netherlands and the Dutch Republic.

During his first English mission, Franklin was elected annually to the Pennsylvania assembly. He left England in the late summer of 1762 and arrived back in Philadelphia on 1 November. Just after Franklin left England, his son William was appointed governor of New Jersey and then married. Some scholars have believed that Franklin, when asked by Lord Bute if he could render Franklin a service in reply for influencing government policy with *The Interest of Great Britain Considered*, asked that Bute reward his son. Franklin found troubles at home. In the fall of 1763 the proprietary party gained strength from an alliance of Scotch-Irish and Germans on the frontiers. When a frontier mob (the "Paxton Boys") massacred a group of friendly Christian Indians in Lancaster, Franklin scathingly denounced the action in *A Narrative of the Late Massacres* (30 Jan. 1764). When the Paxton Boys marched on Philadelphia to kill the Christian Indians there, the government floundered. Franklin organized Philadelphia's defense, met with the leaders of the rioters, and persuaded them to present a list of their grievances and to disperse. In this crisis he again demonstrated dramatic leadership and personal bravery.

## **Petition for a Royal Government and the Stamp Act**

Throughout the early eighteenth century, some Pennsylvania assemblymen, disgusted with proprietary government, favored petitioning for royal government. In the spring of 1764 Franklin and the assembly majority adopted that policy. On 24 March 1764, after Pennsylvania governor John Penn again refused to pass an act taxing proprietary lands, the assembly passed twenty-six resolves condemning the proprietors and proprietary government. Franklin publicized the resolves with his *Explanatory Remarks* (29 Mar.) and urged the people to petition for a royal government in *Cool Thoughts* (12 Apr.). On 26 May [Isaac Norris](#) resigned as the assembly's Speaker, pleading illness, and Franklin was elected Speaker of the Pennsylvania House. The proposed change to a royal colony frightened the electorate. The secular Franklin paid little attention to the religious apprehensions and prejudices of his contemporaries, but many dissenters (Quakers, Moravians, Presbyterians, and Baptists) in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania feared that a change to a royal government would eliminate religious freedom and lead to establishing Anglicanism as Pennsylvania's official religion. Franklin's political opponents claimed that he favored royal government because he coveted the governorship; that he had

bilked the public monies while he was the assembly's agent in England; that William Franklin's mother was his maidservant Barbara whom he had mistreated and buried in an unmarked grave; that he was prejudiced against the Germans; and that he was an Indian-lover. The most bitterly contested assembly election in colonial Pennsylvania began at 10 a.m. on 1 October 1764 and continued until 3 p.m. on 2 October. Franklin lost by eighteen votes.

The anti-proprietary party retained its majority, however. It appointed Franklin on 26 October 1764 to join Richard Jackson as the assembly's agent to England. The purpose of Franklin's second English mission (1764-1775) was to petition the king for a change from proprietary to royal government in Pennsylvania. But British imperial politics intervened. During Franklin's brief tenure as Speaker of the Pennsylvania House, 26 May to 1 October 1764, news of the impending Stamp Act reached the colonies. The Massachusetts House of Representatives requested the speakers of the other colonial assemblies to oppose the act. On 12 September Franklin presented the request to the Pennsylvania assembly. It promptly instructed Jackson, Pennsylvania's agent, to oppose the Stamp Act and to argue that only the Pennsylvania legislature had the right to impose taxes in Pennsylvania. When Franklin arrived in London on 10 December 1764, the Stamp Act demanded attention. On 2 February 1765 he and the other colonial agents met Minister George Grenville to protest the proposed duties. Grenville said that the colonies must bear some expense for Britain's defending them and challenged the agents to present a more equitable tax. Since Franklin knew the colonies needed a paper currency, he suggested that the British government issue an American paper currency and use the low interest rate charged for borrowing the money to pay Britain. He and [Thomas Pownall](#) met Grenville on 12 February and proposed the plan, but Grenville, "besotted with his Stamp Scheme," ignored them (*Papers*, vol. 13, p. 449).

The Stamp Act passed the House of Commons on 27 February 1765 and received the royal assent on 22 March, to take effect on 1 November. Franklin had lost. But he supposed the Stamp Act could be tolerated. He wrote the young Philadelphia patriot [Charles Thomson](#) (11 July 1765), "I took every Step in my Power, to prevent the Passing of the Stamp Act," but "We might as well have hinder'd the Suns setting." Out of touch with the mounting American resentment, Franklin accepted defeat. When asked by Grenville to nominate some local person of integrity to be stamp distributor for Pennsylvania, Franklin suggested his friend John Hughes. That compounded his mistake. Virginia's House of Burgesses passed a series of anti-Stamp Act Resolves on 30 May 1765 denying that the British had the right to tax Virginians. Emboldened by the Virginia Resolves, other colonies followed. Mobs threatened the stamp distributors. Because of rumors that Franklin had supported the Stamp Act, his Philadelphia home was threatened the night of 16 September. Deborah armed herself, ready to fight, causing numerous friends to show up in her support. On 1 November, the day the Stamp Act was to take effect, courts throughout the colonies refused to convene. American colonial administration collapsed.

## **Preeminent Spokesman for the American Colonies**

Galvanized by American resistance, Franklin became a one-man propaganda machine, writing dozens of pieces against the Stamp Act. He designed an anti-Stamp Act cartoon, gave copies to

every member of Parliament, and sent his messages on cards bearing the design. On 13 February 1766 he testified before a committee of the whole of the House of Commons against the Stamp Act, leading to its repeal on 22 February. His answers to the questions posed by the members of Parliament constituted a triumphant display of political knowledge and of Americanism. To the suggestion that military forces should be sent to America, he boldly answered, "They will not find a rebellion; they may indeed make one" (*Papers*, vol. 13, p. 142). Publication of his *Examination* established him as the preeminent spokesman for the American colonies.

In late 1765 Franklin had petitioned the Privy Council for Pennsylvania's change from a proprietary to a royal government, but the reply was continually postponed. On 10 June 1766 he requested permission to return home, but the Pennsylvania assembly instead reappointed him joint agent with Jackson. On 11 April 1768 the Georgia assembly appointed him its agent; on 8 November 1769 the New Jersey assembly did the same; and on 24 October 1770 the Massachusetts assembly followed suit. Throughout his second agency, Franklin continued writing superb American propaganda: the "Grand Leap of the Whale" (3 May 1765); "Causes of the American Discontents before 1768" (7 Jan. 1768); "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One" (11 Sept. 1773); and "An Edict by the King of Prussia" (22 Sept. 1773).

Franklin predicted American independence, but he also said that every year brought America increasing strength, and if there must be war, it was best to postpone it as long as possible. In the summer of 1766 Franklin traveled to Germany, where he was elected to its Academy of Sciences. In 1767 he visited France and was presented to Louis XV at Versailles (6 Sept.). In 1769 Franklin revisited France, making further acquaintances among the physiocrats. In the fall of 1771 he toured Ireland and Scotland with Richard Jackson, staying with David Hume in Edinburgh and with Lord Kames at Blair-Drummond. In Ireland especially, the great difference between the few rich "Landlords, great Noblemen and Gentlemen, extremely opulent, living in the highest Affluence and Magnificence," and the overwhelming majority of the people "extremely poor, living in the most sordid Wretchedness in dirty Hovels of Mud and Straw, and cloathed only in Rags," disgusted him. He wrote (13 Jan. 1772), "That in the Possession and Enjoyment of the various Comforts of Life, compar'd to these People every Indian is a Gentleman: And the Effect of this kind of Civil Society seems only to be, the depressing Multitudes below the Savage State that a few may be rais'd above it."

Whenever he had time, Franklin continued his intellectual interests. He described a series of experiments, 10 May 1768, on the relationship between canal water depths and the speed of canal boats. He devised a phonetic alphabet, taught it to Mary Stevenson, and corresponded, 20 July 1768, with her in it. That fall (29 Oct.), he had maps of the Atlantic engraved that contained the course of the "river in the ocean," the Gulf Stream. In Philadelphia, the renewed American Philosophical Society elected him its president on 2 January 1769, reelecting him annually until his death. He supervised the publication of the revised and enlarged fourth English edition of his *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1769). The Batavian Society of Experimental Science, Rotterdam, elected him to membership on 11 June 1771. The Académie royale des sciences, Paris, elected him a foreign associate on 16 August 1772. Later that year he produced a list of forty-five human emotions that could be expressed in music. He repeatedly experimented with the interaction of oil and water. The modern scientist Charles Tanford said that in his

experiments Franklin "actually correctly determined the scale of magnitude of molecular dimensions, the first person ever to do so, but he did not recognize it" (*Ben Franklin Stilled the Waves* [1989], p. 80). Franklin suggested that John Viny manufacture wheels made of one piece of wood and gave him suggestions for improving the design, which Viny patented.

In Philadelphia, Franklin's daughter Sarah married [Richard Bache](#) in 1767. In 1769 the first of the eight Bache grandchildren, [Benjamin Franklin Bache](#), the future Jeffersonian publisher of the Philadelphia *Aurora*, was born. [Deborah Franklin](#) had suffered a stroke that previous winter, partially recovered, became worse, and died on 19 December 1774. From the time of his return to England in 1764, Franklin had been overseeing the education and care of his son's illegitimate child, William Temple Franklin.

## Moving Toward American Independence

Learning that England's repressive measures toward Massachusetts had been urged by Massachusetts governor [Thomas Hutchinson](#) and Lieutenant Governor [Andrew Oliver](#), Franklin obtained their correspondence with Thomas Whately, undersecretary of state, and sent the letters to the Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, [Thomas Cushing](#). Franklin believed that the correspondence would lessen the rage of the Massachusetts radicals against the British authorities. Instead, the letters exacerbated the strife between the governor and the assembly, which resolved to petition for Hutchinson's and Oliver's removal. At the same time, Hutchinson surreptitiously obtained a copy of Franklin's 7 July 1773 letter to Cushing in which he urged the colonial assemblies to resolve never to "grant aids to the Crown in any General War till" the rights of the Americans "are recogniz'd by the King and both Houses of Parliament. . . . Such a Step I imagine will bring the Dispute to a Crisis; and whether our Demands are immediately comply'd with, or compulsory Means are thought of to make us Rescind them, our Ends will finally be obtain'd" (*Papers*, vol. 20, p. 282). Hutchinson sent this letter to Lord Dartmouth, the colonial secretary, who judged it treasonable. Dartmouth asked General [Thomas Gage](#), military commander in chief in America, to obtain the original so that Franklin could be prosecuted, but Gage could not. The Hutchinson-Oliver letters were published in Boston in June 1773. It has never been determined how Franklin obtained them. William Whately (John Whately's brother), however, accused [John Temple](#) of purloining the letters. The two dueling on 11 December 1773. As Whately recovered from the minor wounds he received, it appeared that the two would fight again. To prevent it, on 25 December 1773 Franklin published a statement that he knew must bring down upon him the British authorities' wrath: "I alone am the person who obtained and transmitted to Boston the letters in question."

Franklin forwarded to Lord Dartmouth the Massachusetts petition to remove Hutchinson and Oliver. A preliminary hearing took place 11 January 1774. News of the Boston Tea Party reached London on 20 January. The British authorities became furious with Massachusetts and its agent. The hearing on the Massachusetts petition before the Privy Council took place in the Cockpit (a room at Whitehall, the site of which had formerly been used for cockfighting) on 29 January. British solicitor general Alexander Wedderburn excoriated and denounced Franklin in an hour-long diatribe, demanding that he be marked and branded as a criminal and calling him

not "*a man of letters*" but (in a well-known classical allusion) "*homo trium literarum*" i.e., a man of three letters, *fur*, or thief. "The muscles of" Franklin's "face had been previously composed, so as to afford a placid tranquil expression of countenance, and he did not suffer the slightest alteration of it to appear during the continuance of the speech" (*Papers*, vol. 21, pp. 49, 41). Britain's greatest officials, many of whom, like Wedderburn, Franklin knew well, sneered and snickered while he stood silent, America's scapegoat. It was the most dramatic ignominy of Franklin's life.

Two days later Franklin was dismissed as deputy postmaster general for North America. The American post office had never been profitable before Franklin took it over and it has never been since. During 1774 and early 1775, even as he petitioned against the Boston Port Bill (which became law 31 Jan., closing Boston's port), he wrote increasingly bitter satires against England while still attempting to reconcile Great Britain with the colonists. In an effort to forestall the Boston Port Bill, he personally guaranteed payment of the cost of the tea dumped in the Boston harbor. All his efforts failed, including his collaboration with William Pitt, earl of Chatham, in January 1775. He left England, his second mission officially an abysmal failure.

While Franklin was at sea, the battles of Lexington and Concord (17 and 18 Apr. 1775) ignited the war. He arrived at Philadelphia on 5 May. The next day the Pennsylvania assembly unanimously chose him a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. He immediately became Congress's most radical leader, drafting articles of confederation by 21 July 1775 that asserted America's sovereignty and gave greater powers to the central government than the U.S. Constitution did in 1787. But Congress was not yet ready for such bold action. John Adams reported to his wife Abigail ([Abigail Adams](#)) on 23 July that Franklin "does not hesitate at our boldest Measures, but rather seems to think us, too irresolute, and backward" (Adams, *Family Correspondence*, vol. 1 [1963-], p. 253). Congress appointed him in the fall to a committee to confer with General [George Washington](#) in Massachusetts and, on 29 November, chair of a standing committee of secret correspondence to deal with foreign affairs. His propagandistic writings of the period include an "Account of the Devices on the Continental Bills of Credit" (20 Sept. 1775), the popular satiric song "The King's Own Regulars" (27 Nov. 1775), and the hoax "Bradshaw's Epitaph" (14 Dec. 1775), which concluded with the words that [Thomas Jefferson](#) adopted as his personal motto: "rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

## **The Declaration of Independence**

On 16 January 1776 Franklin again argued for an "instrument of confederation" in Congress but was defeated. On 19 February 1776 he urged the four New England colonies to enter into a confederation, which they would subsequently offer the other colonies an opportunity to join, but the New England colonies decided to wait. Appointed commissioner to Canada by Congress with [Charles Carroll of Carrollton](#), [Samuel Chase](#), and [John Carroll](#), S.J., he undertook the mission at age seventy, though sick with large boils, swollen legs, and frequent dizziness. The mission (26 Mar. to 30 May) to convince the Canadian colonists to join with the Americans failed. On his return, Franklin served on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. Since Thomas Jefferson was named first, he chaired the committee and decided to draft the document himself,

though Franklin added to and revised it. Congress voted for independence on 2 July and then debated, altered, and finally adopted the Declaration of Independence on 4 July 1776. Elected to the Pennsylvania state convention on 8 July, Franklin was chosen its president, 16 July. Under his guidance, Pennsylvania enacted the most egalitarian of all state constitutions, with a unicameral legislature elected annually.

In a draft for Pennsylvania of a Declaration of Rights, Franklin asserted that the state had the right to discourage large concentrations of property and wealth in single individuals as a danger to the happiness of the majority. The Pennsylvania convention rejected his radical suggestion. During congressional debates on the Articles of Confederation, 30 July to 1 August 1776, he unsuccessfully advocated proportional rather than equal representation of states in Congress. Congress appointed Franklin, Adams, and [Edward Rutledge](#) a committee to confer with Lord Howe on Staten Island (11 Sept.), but they failed to reconcile English and American differences. In the fall, Franklin drafted a "Sketch of Propositions for a Peace," suggesting that Britain cede Canada to an independent United States. Elected by Congress a commissioner to France with [Silas Deane](#) and [Arthur Lee](#), Franklin sailed from Philadelphia on 27 October 1776, taking his grandsons William Temple Franklin and Benjamin Franklin Bache with him.

## Commissioner to France

Franklin landed at Auray, France, on 3 December 1776 and proceeded to Paris where on 28 December he met secretly with the comte de Vergennes, French foreign minister. The American commissioners formally requested French aid on 5 January 1777, and on 13 January they received a verbal promise of two million livres. At the end of February, Franklin moved to the nearby village of Passy where he lived throughout the French mission.

Franklin had a scalp irritation that was exacerbated by wearing a wig, so he rarely wore one. He knew that since Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) and Montesquieu's *L'esprit des lois* (1748), the French associated virtue and simplicity with Pennsylvania and Quakerism. Accordingly, he dressed plainly, partly because it reflected his homespun taste. On 8 February 1777 he wrote to his flirtatious friend Emma Thompson: "Figure me . . . very plainly dress'd, wearing my thin grey strait Hair, that peeps out under my only Coiffure, a fine Fur Cap, which comes down my Forehead almost to my Spectacles. Think how this must appear among the Powder'd Heads of Paris."

Franklin was idolized. John Adams wrote: "His name was familiar to government and people, to kings, courtiers, nobility, clergy, and philosophers, as well as plebeians, to such a degree that there was scarcely a peasant or a citizen, a *valet de chambre*, coachman or footman, a lady's chambermaid or a scullion in a kitchen, who was not familiar with it, and who did not consider him as a friend to human kind" (*Autobiography*, p. 245).

On 4 December the American commissioners learned of the British defeat at Saratoga, giving impetus to the negotiations for a loan and for an alliance. On 28 January 1778 they reported that France had granted the Americans six million livres. And on 6 February they signed treaties of

"alliance for mutual defense" and of amity and commerce with France. The treaty shocked Great Britain, for now it would have to wage war against a major European power with a great navy as well as against its rebellious colonies. To the treaty signing, Franklin wore the same brown velvet suit he had worn 29 January 1774 when denounced by Wedderburn before the Privy Council. Thus he symbolically declared the treaty his revenge. The American commissioners were formally received and presented to Louis XVI on 20 March.

Franklin escorted Voltaire to the Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters on 7 April 1778, was inducted to the Lodge shortly thereafter, and served as its grand master in 1779 and 1780. At the demand of the members present for a meeting of the French Academy, 29 April 1778, Franklin and Voltaire embraced and kissed one another. The jealous Adams recorded the French exclaiming: "Oh! it was enchanting to see Solon and Sophocles embracing!" (Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, vol. 4 [1961], p. 81).

Having three American commissioners in Paris was a mistake. Lee and Adams resented Franklin's fame. Fortunately, France sent a minister plenipotentiary to the United States; Congress, obliged by protocol to choose a similar diplomatic officer for France, elected Franklin (21 Oct. 1778) minister plenipotentiary. To facilitate the production of passports, loan certificates, promissory notes, and other documents, he purchased type and a press and printed such items (the earliest so far found is dated 2 Aug. 1779), as well as his bagatelles, himself. Franklin borrowed another three million livres for war supplies from France. Despite Franklin's being minister plenipotentiary, Adams deluged Vergennes with officious letters. Exasperated, the French foreign minister gave copies to Franklin, demanded that Franklin send them to Congress, and declared that he would no longer receive communications from Adams. Franklin had to comply. Adams thereupon became bitterly hostile to Franklin and to France.

As minister plenipotentiary, Franklin borrowed funds from France for the confederation of states, issued letters of marque for American privateers, managed the interests of the Continental navy overseas, and negotiated for humane treatment and exchanges of American prisoners of war. He often attended court on Tuesdays with the other ministers, entertained Americans at dinner most Sundays, helped numerous American prisoners of war who had escaped (including Israel Potter, 14 Feb. 1777, whom [Herman Melville](#) later memorialized), cashed hundreds of American loan office certificates, oversaw the purchase and shipping of arms and other supplies for the Continental army, coordinated and often wrote American propaganda for English and European distribution, acted as head of American intelligence in Europe, and cultivated friendly relations with a host of influential French intellectuals and politicians. He was the most essential and successful American diplomat of all time.

Too busy to carry out many scientific experiments, Franklin nevertheless suggested experiments to others. Learning that ships used in the salt trade lasted longer than others, he conceived a method for prolonging the life of lumber by seasoning it in salt. He devised a method to test the conductivity of different metals. A magnificent display of the aurora borealis (3 Dec. 1778) prompted him to write a series of "Suppositions and Conjectures" on the phenomenon. He described his new invention, bifocal glasses, on 23 May 1784.

## Negotiation for Peace

Congress, on 11, 14, and 15 June 1781, appointed Franklin, [Henry Laurens](#), and Thomas Jefferson to join [John Jay](#) and John Adams as commissioners to negotiate peace, with instructions requiring them to act only with the knowledge and concurrence of France. After the surrender of General [Charles Cornwallis](#) to Washington at Yorktown (19 Oct. 1781), Britain lost hope of defeating the colonies in a land war. When the marquis of Rockingham ([Lord Rockingham](#)) became prime minister in 1782, he initiated peace talks. From March to June, Richard Oswald, a London merchant with American sympathies and an old friend of Franklin, negotiated with Franklin who suggested, on 18 April, that Britain should cede Canada to the United States. Had Franklin been the only commissioner, he might have been able to settle the peace in June 1782, securing Canada. But when Jay arrived in Paris on 23 June, he insisted on prior recognition of American independence as a condition for formal peace negotiations, thus delaying the talks while the war at sea slowly changed to favor the British.

On 10 July Franklin proposed to Oswald the "necessary" terms for peace, ignoring Congress's instructions to communicate them first to Vergennes. Oswald's new commission from Britain (21 Sept. 1782) effectively recognized the United States and overcame Jay's hesitation. A draft of the articles for the treaty was prepared and sent to England, again without informing Vergennes. Adams arrived in Paris 26 October and joined the negotiations. British envoy Oswald and the American commissioners signed the preliminary articles of peace on 30 November 1782. When Vergennes complained in December of the American failure to consult the French, Franklin, on 17 December, diplomatically admitted the impropriety, expressed gratitude to France, and asked for another loan. Vergennes assured him of a further six million livres. On behalf of Congress, Franklin, Adams, and Jay signed the definitive treaty of peace on 3 September 1783.

During the war, Franklin issued documents asking American vessels to give safe passage to English humanitarians, explorers, and scientists, the most famous of whom was Captain James Cook (10 Mar. 1779). At the conclusion of the war, when consulted by the papal Nuncio in Paris about organizing the Roman Catholic church in the United States, Franklin suggested Maryland's John Carroll, S.J., as its head. Fascinated by the early balloon ascensions, Franklin reported them in great detail to the Royal Society. Asked by a scoffing observer, "What use is it?" Franklin gave the greatest defense ever made of pure research, "What use is a new-born baby?" (Van Doren, p. 700). On 12 May 1784 the formal ratification of the peace treaty with Great Britain was exchanged, and the next day Franklin requested to be relieved from his post to return home. Jefferson arrived in Paris on 30 August 1784 to join Franklin and Adams in attempting to make treaties with the European nations and Barbary States. On 2 May 1785 Franklin received permission to leave France. "I shall now be free of Politicks for the Rest of my Life. Welcome again my dear Philosophical Amusements." Franklin left Passy 12 July 1785. He had begun to suffer from a bladder stone in August 1782, and by now it was large and painful. He spent most of the voyage delighting in his "philosophical amusements," writing the extraordinary *Maritime Observations*, which suggested dozens of reasonable improvements for convenience, safety (two kinds of floating anchors, watertight separate compartments), and swiftness in sailing;

composing an essay "On the Causes and Cure of Smoky Chimneys"; and drafting his "Description of a New Stove."

## **Return to Philadelphia (1785)**

Franklin arrived at Philadelphia on 14 September 1785, was elected to the supreme executive council of Pennsylvania on 11 October, chosen its president on 18 October, and served in that position (in effect, governor) for three years. In January 1786 he fashioned an instrument for taking down books from high shelves. He designed a chair with a seat that unfolded to become a ladder, another chair that had a writing arm on one side (the common school seats imitated it), and a rocking chair with an automatic fan. He was named president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (23 Apr. 1787). From 28 May to 17 September Franklin served as a Pennsylvania delegate to the Constitutional Convention. Though he early on argued that representation should be proportional to population, on 3 July he moved the "Great Compromise," whereby representation was proportional in the House of Delegates but equal by state in the Senate. He argued, on 7 and 10 August, for extending the right to vote as widely as possible, specifically condemning property qualification as necessary either for the franchise or for office holding. His closing speech supporting the Constitution was the most effective propaganda for its ratification. Franklin's presence and argument contributed more than any other element to harmonize the delegates and to persuade thirty-nine of the forty-two members present to sign the formal document.

On 14 October 1788 Franklin ended his service as president of the supreme executive council of Pennsylvania, terminating his career in public office. Despite his gout and bladder stone, he still, as of 25 November 1788, enjoyed "many comfortable Intervals, in which I forget all my Ills, and amuse myself in Reading or Writing, or in Conversation with Friends, joking, laughing, and telling merry Stories" (*The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* [hereafter *Writings*], ed. Smyth, vol. 9, p. 683). He wrote and signed the first remonstrance against slavery addressed to the American Congress (12 Feb. 1789), but Congress said it had no authority to interfere in the internal affairs of the states. He observed to Jean Baptiste Le Roy (13 Nov. 1789) that "In this world, nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes." On 23 March 1790 he brilliantly satirized a defense of slavery. He died at his home in Philadelphia of pleurisy. He was buried in Christ Church burial ground, Philadelphia, beside his wife Deborah and their son Francis. The French assembly voted to wear mourning for three days. The U.S. House of Representatives passed but the Senate defeated the motion to wear mourning for a month (for an analysis of the politics involved, see *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. [Julian P. Boyd](#), vol. 19 [1950-], pp. 78-108).

## **The Metamorphoses and Paradoxes of Franklin's Life**

Metamorphoses marked Franklin's life. The runaway Boston Puritan (1706-1723) became the London libertine (1725); the impecunious apprentice became the most successful printer, publisher, and editor of colonial America (1728-1748); the prosperous businessman became the

world's most famous scientist (1748-1757); the scientist became the world's best-known American (1757-1775); the American became the revolutionary and, simultaneously, the most cosmopolitan European (1775-1785); and finally, the shape-shifter was nearly universally regarded as the sage (1785-1790).

Yet these changing identities do not begin to do Franklin justice. Nor can his hundred pseudonyms (each brilliantly chosen for the specific occasion), from "Silence Dogood" and "Old Janus" to "Poor Richard" and "Homespun," to "FART-HING" and "Samuel Gerrish," begin to capture the range of his writings. As a young man, he wanted to become a great writer. David Hume believed (10 May 1762) that Franklin had achieved that stature and called him a "Great Man of Letters." But most of his popular writings came later. He wrote the most delightful bagatelles in the English and French languages. And though his *Autobiography* is the most popular autobiography of the modern world and among the greatest works in the genre, it does not begin to reveal all the complexities of his literary genius. Franklin was the greatest letter writer of the eighteenth century, with more variety, tones, and moods than anyone else. He is the only major American writer whose achievements are more diverse than his fictional creations. Nor can the numerous epithets that his contemporaries and later scholars gave him quite sum him up, though each has an element of truth. And yet there is something archetypically American about Franklin, the self-made man, the fix-it-yourself person, the gadgeteer, the creator and joiner of clubs and associations, the friendly stranger, and the person who, more than any other great American, thoroughly identified with the common man.

Franklin adopted the traditional Whig beliefs as a youth, but he became more politically radical as he grew older. There was always something subversive about him, partly because he viewed ultimate values as a continuously shifting set of hypotheses, partly because he saw all sides of a question, partly because he was supremely conscious of life's ironies, and partly because he was uncannily aware of humans' ultimate vanity. No man burlesqued himself more than Franklin: "a *Boo bee* he may be allow'd to be, namely *B.F.*" (*Papers*, vol. 1, p. 219).

Franklin had even more paradoxes than metamorphoses. A shrewd businessman, Franklin nevertheless allowed hundreds of people to owe him small debts (and scores to owe him large ones); yet there is no evidence that he ever prosecuted anyone for debt. Though offered a patent for the Franklin stove, he declined it and never sought to patent the lightning rod, bifocals, armonica, or any of his numerous successful designs--though, in some cases, others did. Max Weber found that some of Franklin's writings contained the spirit of capitalism "in almost classical purity," but he cared little about personal wealth. He came to distrust large accumulations of wealth by individuals, believing great capital in the hands of a single person injured society as a whole. He despised trade and avarice, he respected agriculture and the ordinary person, and he loved natural philosophy and those who did good for others.

When young, Franklin wrote prolifically on theology, ethics, and morality but gradually abandoned them for what we now call science. By 1743 he found "What is True?" an inadequate question. Instead, he asked "*How a Thing is true?*" Truth had different natures: the *verum physicum*, *metaphysicum*, and *morale*. He wrote of deism, "This doctrine, tho' it might be true, was not very useful" (*Autobiography*, p. 46). From the late 1740s to his death, Franklin spent most of his spare time pursuing science. In the opinions of the early nineteenth-century scientist

Sir Humphrey Davy and the modern philosopher of science [Thomas S. Kuhn](#), Franklin created electricity as a science. The Harvard scientist [John Winthrop](#) said that Franklin was good "at starting Game for Philosophers" (*Writings*, vol. 9, p. 652). He instigated scientific research by his early American friends like Joseph Breintnall, by his English friends like Joseph Priestley, and by his European friends like Jan Ingenhousz.

## A Great American

Franklin was a patriotic American from at least the early 1750s, well before the nation existed. Writing of the genesis of the U.S. Constitution at the end of his life, [James Madison](#) observed that Franklin's 1754 letters to Massachusetts governor William Shirley "repelled with the greatest possible force, within the smallest possible compass" Britain's claim to govern America. He said that "volumes" of all succeeding arguments on American rights to self-governance were here expressed "within the compass of a nut shell" (*Records of the Federal Convention*, vol. 3, p. 540n). Franklin was the oldest revolutionary. On 5 October 1775 Edmund Burke marveled: "What say you to your friend and brother Philosopher Franklin, who at upwards of seventy years of age [he was sixty-nine], quits the Study of the Laws of Nature, in order to give Laws to new Commonwealths; and has crossed the Atlantick ocean at that time of life, not to seek repose, but to plunge into the midst of the most laborious and most arduous affairs that ever were. Few things more extraordinary have happened in the history of mankind" (*The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 3 [1958-1978], p. 228).

The following year, 4 July 1776, when Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, Franklin was seventy, by far the oldest signer; Adams was forty; and Jefferson, thirty-three. Even Washington was only forty-four. Except for Franklin, young men led the American Revolution. At a time when his childhood friends, like the poet [Joseph Green](#), were attempting to provide for a financially secure old age in England, he loaned Congress all the money at his disposal, more than £3,000 and sailed to France on a leaky ship that foundered and sank on its return. When the marquis of Rockingham (6 Jan. 1777) thought of the recent British victories in America, he declared with chagrin that "Franklyn at *Versailles*" was "much more than a balance for the few additional acres" that "the arms of Great Britain" had won (*The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 3, p. 315).

Rockingham was right. After the Revolution, that master diplomat Vergennes testified in a confidential letter to Luzerne (French minister to the United States) on 15 February 1784 that the "calmness and prudence" of Franklin had inspired him "with confidence. I do not believe that the superior services which this minister has rendered his country will be requited; I can say that it will be very difficult for Congress to replace him" (Francis Wharton, *Diplomatic Correspondence*, vol. 1 (1889), p. 490). Jefferson testified that "the succession to Doctor Franklin, at the court of France, was an excellent school of humility. On being presented to anyone as the minister of America, the commonplace question used in such cases was 'It is you, sir, who replace Doctor Franklin?' I generally answered, 'no one can replace him, sir; I am only his successor'" (19 Feb. 1791). Only Franklin signed all three basic documents of the nation: the

Declaration of Independence, the peace treaty with Great Britain, and the Constitution of the United States.

Injustice of all kinds rankled Franklin (see "A Petition," signed "The Left Hand," 1785). He was a feminist before feminism. "Women . . . ought to be fix'd in Revolution Principles" (8 Feb. 1777). John Updike (*Odd Jobs* [1991], p. 258) found "the androgyny of Franklin's imagination" surprising. Though Franklin was not optimistic by nature, he had great common sense and so acted as if he could make a difference in his world (see "The Handsome and the Deformed Leg," Nov. 1780). He loved his friends and wanted to believe well of people. He had great curiosity, amazing versatility, astonishing genius, and, above all, an enormous capacity for self-discipline and sustained work. As he grew older, he grew more humanitarian and idealistic. In a worldwide slave society, Franklin owned, at various times, five slaves, but he gradually came to regard slavery as "an atrocious debasement of human nature" (*Writings*, vol. 10, p. 67). He wrote against the practice in the 1770s and became a leading abolitionist in the 1780s. At age eighty-one he was the most egalitarian member of the Constitutional Convention. In his last years he advocated reform of the criminal laws and roused others to the cause (14 Mar. 1785). He called for an end to the Spanish inquisition and inspired Ruiz de Padron to carry out its demise.

Poor Richard said: "If you would not be forgotten / As soon as you are dead and rotten, / Either write things worth reading, / Or do things worth the writing" (*Papers*, vol. 2, p. 194). Franklin did both. After he had become a world-renowned scientist, writer, and statesman, he returned to his early and favorite goal of doing good for mankind. Many contemporaries came to believe that he succeeded. William Pitt, earl of Chatham, said he was "an Honour not to the English Nation only but to Human Nature" (*Papers*, vol. 21, p. 582). Edmund Burke (28 Feb. 1782) called him the "Friend of Mankind." Franklin spent his first forty-two years as a tradesman and businessman and his second forty-two years as a natural philosopher, public servant, and statesman. He was the most practical and perhaps the sanest of all the idealistic visionaries who have committed their lives to doing good for humankind. In his forties he wrote, "The only Thanks I should desire is, that you would always be equally ready to serve any other Person that may need your Assistance, and so let good Offices go round, for Mankind are all of a Family" (*Papers*, vol. 4, p. 504). And at the end of his life, he said, "God grant, that not only the Love of Liberty, but a thorough Knowledge of the Rights of Man, may pervade all the Nations of the Earth, so that a Philosopher may set his Foot anywhere on its Surface, and say, 'This is my Country' " (*Writings*, vol. 10, p. 72).

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## Bibliography

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which locates the depositories of all materials printed. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, through vol. 29, plus the unpublished papers for the remainder of Franklin's life, are also available on CD ROM (1994). A number of additions to the *Papers* have been made by J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 1722-1776: New Attributions and Reconsiderations* (1986). Formerly, the most complete edition of Franklin was *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth (10 vols., 1905-1907). The *Papers*, the CD ROM, and Smyth's *Writings* are arranged chronologically. Textually, the best edition of Franklin's autobiography is *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text*, ed. Lemay and P. M. Zall (1981). Excellent annotated editions are *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Labaree et al. (1964), and *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Lemay and Zall (1986). The most complete selected edition is *Benjamin Franklin: Writings*, ed. Lemay (1987).

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