

JOHN BIGELOW

FRANKLIN: A
SKETCH

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Franklin: A Sketch

FRANKLIN

Franklin, Benjamin (1706-1790), one of the most eminent journalists, diplomatists, statesmen, and philosophers of his time, was born in the city of Boston, and in the colony of Massachusetts Bay, on the 17th of January 1706. He was the youngest of ten children, and the youngest son for five consecutive generations. His father, who was born at Ecton, in Northamptonshire, England, where the family may be traced back for some four centuries, married young, and emigrated to America with three children in 1682. From his parents, who never knew any illness save that of which they died (the father at eighty and the mother at eighty-five), he inherited an excellent constitution, and a good share of those heroic mental and moral qualities by which a good constitution is preserved. In his eighth year Benjamin, who never could remember when he did not know how to read, was placed at school, his parents intending him for the church. That purpose, however, was soon abandoned, and in his tenth year he was taken from school to assist his father, who, though bred a dyer, had taken up, on his arrival in New England, the business of tallow-chandler and soap-boiler. The lad worked at this, to him, most distasteful business, until his twelfth year, when he was apprenticed to his elder brother James, then just returned from England with a new printing press and fount of type, with which he proposed to establish himself in the printing business. In 1720-31 James Franklin also started a newspaper, the second that was published in America, called *The New England Courant*. Benjamin's tastes inclined him rather to intellectual than to any other kind of pleasures, and his judgment in the selection of books was excellent. At an early age he had waded himself familiar with the *Pilgrim's Progress*, with Locke *On the Understanding*, and with some odd volumes of the *Spectator*, then the literary novelty of the day, which he turned to good account in forming the style which made him what he still remains, the most uniformly readable writer of English who has yet appeared on his side of the Atlantic. His success in reproducing articles he had read some days previously in the *Spectator* led him to try his hand upon an original article for his brother's paper, which he sent to hire anonymously. It was accepted, and attracted some attention. The experiment was repeated until Benjamin had satisfied himself that his success was not an accident, when he threw off his disguise. He thought that his brother treated him less kindly after this disclosure; but that did not prevent James from publishing his paper in Benjamin's name, when, in consequence of some unfortunate paragraphs which appeared in its columns, he could only obtain his release from prison, to which the colonial assembly had condemned him, upon on that he "would no longer print the *New England Courant*." The relations of the two brothers, however, gradually grew so inharmonious that Benjamin determined to quit his brother's employment and leave New England. He sold some of his books, and with the proceeds, in October 1723, he found his way to the city of Philadelphia, where, 400 miles from home, at the immature age of seventeen, without an acquaintance, and with only a few pence in his pocket, he was fortunate enough to get employment with a Jew printer named Keimer. Keimer was not a man of business, and knew very little of his trade, nor had he any very competent assistants. Franklin, who was a rapid composer, ingenious and full of resources, soon came to be recognized by the public as the master spirit of the shop, and to receive flattering attentions from prominent citizens who had had opportunities of appreciating his cleverness. Among others, Sir William Keith, the governor of the province, who may have possessed all the qualifications for his station except every one of the few which are quite indispensable to a gentleman, took him under his patronage, and proposed to start him in business for himself, and to give him the means of going to England and purchasing the material necessary to equip a new printing office. Franklin, rather against the advice of his father,

whom he revisited in Boston to consult about it, embraced the governor's proposal, took passage for London, which he paid with his own money (the governor being more ready with excuses than coin), and on reaching London in December 1724, where he had been assured he would find a draft to cover his expenses, discovered too late that he had been the dupe of Keith, and that he must rely upon his own exertions for his daily bread. He readily found employment at Palmer's, then a famous printer in Bartholomew Close, where, and afterwards at Wall's printing house, he continued to be employed until the 33d of July 1736, when he again set sail for Philadelphia in company with a Mr Dunham, whose acquaintance he had made on his voyage out, and who tempted him back by the offer of a position as clerk in a commercial business which he proposed to establish in Philadelphia. While in London Franklin had been engaged in setting up the type of a second edition of Wollaston's *Religion of Nature*. The perusal of this work led him to write and print a small edition of a pamphlet, which he entitled *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*. Had he deferred printing it a few years, it would probably never have been heard of, for he lived to be rather ashamed of it. It procured him, however, the acquaintance of Dr Mandeville, author of the *Fable of the Bees*, whom he described as a most facetious and entertaining companion. Only a few months after Franklin's return to Philadelphia, the death of Mr Dunham put an end to his career as a merchant. While awaiting something more favourable, he was induced by large wages to return to his old employer Keimer. This led to his making the acquaintance of a young man of the name of Meredith, whom he afterwards described as a "Welsh Pennsylvanian, thirty years of age, bred to country work, honest, sensible, who had a great deal of solid observation, was something of a reader, but given to drink." He was learning the printer's art, and offered to furnish the capital to establish a new printing office – his father being a man of some means – if Franklin would join him and direct the business. This proposal was accepted, the types were sent for, a house was rented at £20 a year, part of which was sublet to a glazier who was to board them, and before the expiration of a year from his return to Philadelphia, Franklin, for the first time in his life, was in business for himself. "We had scarce opened our letters and put our press in order," he says, "before George House, an acquaintance of mine, brought a countryman to us whom he had met in the street inquiring for a printer. All our cash was now expended in the variety of particulars we had been obliged to procure, and this countryman's five shillings, being our first-fruits, and coming so seasonably, gave us more pleasure than any crown I have since earned, and the gratitude I felt towards House has made me often more ready than perhaps I should otherwise have been to assist young beginners."

Almost simultaneously, in September 1729, he bought for a nominal price the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a newspaper which Keimer had started nine months before to defeat a similar project of Franklin's which accidentally came to his knowledge. It had only 90 subscribers. His superior arrangement of the paper, his new type, some spirited remarks on a controversy then raging between the Massachusetts assembly and Governor Burnet (a son of the celebrated Bishop Gilbert Burnet) brought his paper into immediate notice, and his success, both as a printer and as a journalist, was from that time forth assured and complete. The influence which he was enabled to exert by his pen through his paper, and by his industry and good sense, bore abundant fruit during the next seventeen years, during which he was at the head of journalism in America. In 1731 he established the first circulating library on the continent; in 1732 he published the first of the *Poor Richard's Almanacs*, a publication which was continued for twenty-five years, and attained a marvellous popularity. The annual sale was about 10,000 copies, at that time far in excess of any other publication in the colonies, and equivalent to a sale at the present time of not less than 300,000. In the next ten years he acquired a convenient familiarity with the French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin languages.

In 1736 Franklin was chosen a clerk of the general assembly, and was re-elected the following year. He was then elected a member of assembly, to which dignity he was re-elected for ten successive years, and was appointed one of the commissioners to treat with the Indians at Carlisle. In 1737 Colonel Spotswood, then postmaster-general, appointed him deputy postmaster at Philadelphia.

About this time he organized the first police force and fire company in the colonies, and a few years later initiated the movements which resulted in the foundation of the university of Pennsylvania and of the American Philosophical Society, in the organization of a militia force, in the paving of the streets, and in the foundation of a hospital; in fact, he furnished the impulse to nearly every measure or project which contemplated the welfare and prosperity of the city in which he lived. It was during this period, and in the midst of these very miscellaneous avocations, that he made the discoveries in electricity which have secured him undisputed rank among the most eminent of natural philosophers. He was the first to demonstrate that lightning and electricity were one. The Royal Society, when an account of his experiments, which had been transmitted to a scientific friend in England, was laid before it, made sport of them, and refused to print them. Through the recommendation of his friend they were printed, however, in an extra number of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, of which the publisher ultimately sold five editions. A copy chancing to fall into the hands of Buffon, he saw their value, and advised their translation and publication in France, where they immediately attracted attention. The "Philadelphia experiments," as they were called, were performed in the presence of the royal family in Paris, and became the sensation of the period. The Royal Society of London found it necessary to reconsider its action, published a summary of the experiments in its *Transactions*, and, as Franklin afterwards averred, more than made him amends for the slight with which it had before treated him, by electing him an honorary member, exempting him from the customary payments, and sending him for the rest of his life a copy of the *Transactions*. Since the introduction of the art of printing, it would be difficult to name any discovery which has exerted a more important influence upon the industries and habits of mankind.

In 1754 a war with France was impending, and Franklin, who by this time had become the most important man in the colony of Pennsylvania, was sent to a congress of commissioners from the different colonies, ordered by the Lords of Trade to convene at Albany, to confer with the chiefs of the Six Nations for their common defence. Franklin there submitted a plan for organizing a system of colonial defence which was adopted and reported; it provided for a president-general of all the colonies to be appointed by the crown, and a grand council to be chosen by the representatives of the people of the several colonies. The colonies so united, he thought, would be sufficiently strong to defend themselves; and there would then be no need of troops from England. Had this course been pursued, the subsequent pretence for taxing America would not have been furnished, and the bloody contest it occasioned might have been avoided. The Lords of Trade, however, feared that any such union of the colonies would reveal to them their strength; and the project of union, though accompanied with a recommendation from the governor of the province of Pennsylvania, when it was brought into the assembly, as it was during Franklin's casual absence from the hall, was rejected. This Franklin thought a mistake. "But such mistakes," he said, "are not new; history is full of the errors of states and princes. Those who govern, having much business on their hands, do not generally like to take the trouble of considering and carrying into execution new projects. The best public measures are there fore seldom adopted from previous wisdom, but forced by the occasion." Instead of allowing the colonists to unite and defend themselves, the home Government sent over General Braddock with two regiments of regular English troops, whom the colonists were expected to maintain. The proprietaries, Thomas and Richard Penn, sons of William Penn, and the hereditary governors of the colonies, however, "with incredible meanness," instructed their deputies – the governors they seat out – to pass no act for levying the necessary taxes unless their vast estates were in the same act exempt. They even took bonds of their deputies to observe these instructions. The assembly finally, "finding the proprietaries obstinately persisted in manacling their deputies with instructions inconsistent not only with the privileges of the people but with the service of the crown," – we are quoting the language of Franklin, – "resolved to petition the king against them," and appointed Franklin as their agent to go to England and present their petition. He arrived in London on the 27th July 1757, not this time as

a poor printer's boy, but as a messenger to the most powerful sovereign in the world from a corporate body of some of his most loyal subjects.

Franklin lost no time, after reaching London, in waiting upon Lord Grenville, then president of the council, and held with him a conversation which he deemed of so much importance that he made a record of it immediately upon returning to his lodgings. Nor did he exaggerate its importance, for in it were the germs of the revolt and independence of the North American colonies. "You Americans," said Grenville, "have wrong ideas of the nature of your constitution; you contend that the king's instructions to his governors are not laws, and think yourselves at liberty to regard or disregard them at your own discretion. But those instructions are not like the pocket instructions given to a minister going abroad for regulating his conduct in some trifling point of ceremony. They are first drawn up by judges learned in the law; they are then considered, debated, and perhaps amended in council, after which they are signed by the king. They are then, so far as they relate to you, the *law of the land*, for the king is the legislature of the colonies." Franklin frankly told his lordship that this was new doctrine, – that he understood from the colonial charters that the laws of the colonies were to be made by their assemblies, approved by the king, and when once approved the king alone could neither alter nor amend them. Franklin admits that he was alarmed by this conversation, but he was not as much alarmed as he had reason to be, for it distinctly raised the issue between the king and a fraction of his people which was to require a seven years' war to decide. Franklin next sought an interview with the brothers Penn to lay before them the grievances of the assembly. Finding them entirely inaccessible to his reasonings, he supplied the material for an historical review of the controversy between the assembly and the proprietaries, which made an octavo volume of 500 pages. The success of Franklin's mission thus far was not encouraging, for he appealed to a class largely interested in the abuses of which he complained. Meantime, Governor Denny, who had been recently sent out to the province by the proprietaries, tired of struggling with the public opinion which was surging about him in Pennsylvania, and in disregard of his instructions, assented to the passing of laws which taxed equally the entire landed property of the province, and assumed that the assembly was the proper judge of the requirements of the people it represented. An equivalent in paper money was issued upon the faith of this tax. The proprietaries were very angry with the governor, recalled him, and threatened to prosecute him for a breach of his instructions. But they never carried their threat into execution.

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