

Benjamin Franklin

delphia and subsequently an alderman. In 1752 he was elected by his fellow-citizens a member of the General Assembly. In 1753 he was made Postmaster-General of the colonies. In 1757 he was sent by the Assembly to England as agent of the colony to look after the interests of the colonists as against the Penns, the so-called "proprietarys" of the colony. He remained in England in this employment for five years.

In 1764 Franklin went to England again in a similar capacity and this time he remained eleven years, during which period he represented not only Pennsylvania but Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Georgia. If any influence in the world could have sufficed to restrain the king and government of Great Britain from alienating the affections and loyalty of their colonies in America Franklin would have been able to exert that influence. But even he failed, and not only failed but at last was treated ignominiously. In 1775 he returned to Philadelphia, and at once was in the very thick of all those movements which led to the declaration of independence and the war against Great Britain. He was a member of the Congress of 1775 and served in no less than ten committees in it. He was a member of the Congress of 1776, and was one of the committee of five appointed to draw up the Declaration of Independence, and was one of the signers of that declaration. He was also president of the convention that was formed to organize a republican government for the province of Pennsylvania. In September, 1776, he was chosen one of three commissioners to go to France to represent in that country the newly formed American republic, and, if possible, to secure its recognition by the government of France. In

1778 (March 20) he had the satisfaction of being formally received by the king of France and of being a chief participant in the ceremony by which the United States of America was first recognized by France as an independent nation. Remaining on at his post, he was, in February, 1779, made sole commissioner or envoy plenipotentiary of the republic at the court of France. During the period of this representation he succeeded in borrowing for the republic from the French nation, for the purpose of carrying on the war of the revolution and organizing and sustaining the new government, no less a sum than 26,000,000 francs. No man in America or out of it could have done this but Franklin. In 1781 he was appointed joint commissioner to settle terms of peace with England, and on November 30, 1782, he, with Adams, Jay, and Laurens, affixed his name to the document by which peace was assured, and his country acknowledged by Great Britain to be free and independent. And though now 76 years old and longing for rest he was not yet permitted to return to his home. He had to remain on for three years longer. And when, at last, in 1785, he did return home he found that his country was still desirous of his services. For three years he was president of the newly constituted commonwealth of Pennsylvania, at each election being chosen unanimously. And, greatest honor of all, he was a member of the convention of 1787, the convention that finally determined the constitution of the republic; and not only so, but it was he who, more than any one else, by his wisdom, by his prescience, and by his faculty of conciliation, was able to devise, and to get accepted in that convention, the clauses which settled the points of contention that were so terribly in dis-

pute—points which if not settled would have broken up the republic at its very beginning. This was when he was in his 82d year. But, still working and planning for the republic, he lived three years longer yet. When he died—April 17, 1790—he had entered upon his 85th year and his time of life was full. Yet the republic mourned for him as if he still had been in the prime of youth.

But no summary of details such as the above can give an adequate idea of either the interest or the importance of Franklin's life. It was a life that, for all he was so practical, was full of romance and light and color and agreeable charm. Wherever he was, with whatever class it was his business to associate, he made hosts of friends, and won general favor no less by his pleasing manner than by the pleasing interestingness of his conversation. But it was his thorough good sense that most impressed itself upon those with whom he had to deal. His neighbors and fellow-citizens soon saw that when he recommended a scheme that scheme was both deserving and certain of success. They knew at once that it would have for its object the benefit of the people. They knew, too, that under his practical direction it would soon accomplish all that it was intended to accomplish. They had proof of this not only in the way he managed his own affairs but also in the way he managed those of the public. For example, when he took over the postoffice of Philadelphia it was full of irregularities, but he soon corrected all these. Again, when he took over as Postmaster-General the management of the postal system of all the colonies, there was no surplus revenue for the home government, and the service was irregular and incomplete. Franklin traveled all over the main postal

routes, visited all the main postoffices, and soon, not only had a service that was satisfactory to the colonists, and that gave him a good salary besides, but had one that furnished a good revenue to the home government as well.

Franklin was an ideal citizen. While he loved his own business, and took every pains to make money out of it, he never failed to serve the people publicly when asked to do so, or to serve them privately of his own motion if he saw that his service so rendered would be productive of benefit. As is well known, it was he who organized the first police and fire protection for his adopted city. It was he, too, who established, or at least was most instrumental in establishing, those splendid institutions the University of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Hospital, and the Public Library of Philadelphia. It was he also who founded the American Philosophical Society. At one time, when the general commanding the British forces in America (General Braddock) wanted a great number of wagons for transport, and when there seemed no way of getting them except by confiscation, it was the patriotic Franklin who took upon himself the whole trouble of getting them, even going so far as personally guaranteeing the payment for them, and doing all this without the hope of one penny of commission, interest or reward. Similarly, before he set out for Paris, when the war of the revolution was going on, he lent to congress every pound he could raise for the purpose of helping to carry on the war. And while in Paris he defrayed his own expenses, with little certainty of ever getting his disbursements back again. Nor was he less an ideal citizen in the attitude he took in regard to the sacredness of public service. He asked for no public office, either representative or executive. His

elections and his appointments were all made not upon his own suggestion. And though he valued his public offices highly, and on the other hand did not neglect his own interests while he held them, yet he valued his own self-respect too highly to seek them of his own accord; and in all his dealings with the public interest it was in every case his country first and himself second.

It is, however, with Franklin as a man of science that we are most concerned here. And yet Franklin the scientist is but the same as Franklin the statesman, the journalist, or the man-of-letters. His whole life was a constant effort to increase his knowledge and improve his powers, and a constant endeavor to apply his knowledge and his powers in some practical way to the benefit of his fellows. This is the explanation of his career as a scientist. He became interested in electricity as a matter of curiosity, as hundreds of other persons in the world at that time had become interested in it. But he saw that little practical use was being made of such knowledge of it as had already been obtained. He saw, too, that the common explanation of electricity—namely, that it was created when the electrical body was rubbed—was not in accordance with common sense. So in his simple, homely way he endeavored to examine the phenomena of electricity and see if they could not be explained by principles that would commend themselves to his common sense. This he was soon able to do. He was soon able to establish the facts that electricity is not created by the operator, and that on the other hand it cannot be destroyed, that it only can be made manifest. He also was able to establish conclusively what he had guessed from the beginning (and what others besides him had guessed, but never had been able to estab-

lish), namely, that the electricity excited in glass by rubbing it with silk, or in sealing-wax or amber by rubbing it with flannel, is identical with that fearsome phenomenon in the heavens which we call lightning. He made a kite of silk and furnished it with a long, slender pointed rod of steel, and sent it up in the sky in a thunder shower, and was able to obtain from a steel key at the lower end of the string that held the kite sparks and currents of sparks, just as he was able to obtain them from his electrical machine. Not only so, but he was able to charge with these sparks Leyden jars, and to do with the sparks so obtained exactly what he could do with sparks obtained from an electrical machine, or from rubbed sulphur, amber, sealing-wax, or glass. And not only this, but he was further able to show that the electricity obtained from the clouds in thunder storms is of two kinds, just as ordinary electricity is of two kinds—namely, one kind like the electricity obtained from glass rubbed with silk, and the other like the electricity obtained from amber or sulphur or wax rubbed with flannel. But Franklin's practical nature could not be content with the discovery of mere scientific facts like these. He at once set about seeing what useful invention could be devised from his new knowledge, and so contrived the lightning-rod as a protection from destruction by lightning of houses and ships.

These experiments of Franklin's were begun in 1746, but it was not until 1749 that he made his famous experiments identifying electricity and lightning. He had sent accounts of his earlier experiments to the Royal Society of London, but they were not looked upon by that body as being of much importance, and when he suggested that electricity and lightning might be identical his suggestion

was received with derision as something ridiculous. The great experiments of 1749 by which that identification was established were therefore made with some secrecy; for Franklin, as every one is, was sensitive to ridicule. But he was soon able to turn the tables on those who derided him. Though the Royal Society had declined to publish his earlier experiments he had found publication for them in the Gentleman's Magazine of London; and they had scarcely been published before they began to attract attention throughout all Europe. When, therefore, the experiments of 1749 were published the name of Franklin was in every one's mouth. "The Philadelphia experiments," as they were called, were the rage. People of society as well as people of science, crowned heads as well as students and philosophers, made haste to repeat them, and when Franklin went to England in 1757 it was to find himself a famous man. Learned societies of every sort, not only in England but throughout all Europe, made haste to enroll him among their numbers. The University of Edinburgh and the University of Oxford bestowed upon him their honorary degrees. The Royal Academy of Sciences of Paris made him one of their eight foreign members. The Royal Society of London, repenting their earlier injustice, elected him first a member and then a fellow, and this without the requiring of the customary fee. They also granted him their Copley medal, and announced to him that they would send him their "*Transactions*" as long as he lived. And thus in every respect was Franklin's life full of renown and honor. At home he was respected for his character, loved for his personal qualities, admired for his abilities, and, because of his wisdom and discretion, entrusted with the most difficult and

honorable employments. Abroad he was looked upon, not only as the greatest man of his nation, but as one of the greatest men of the age—as uniting in himself, indeed, the wisdom of the sage, the observing and reasoning talent of the philosopher, the polish, the tact, the discretion, the shrewdness of the born diplomatist, the abounding common sense and practical discernment of the successful man of affairs, and the distinguishing intellectual qualities of the accomplished literarian. And with this estimation of his contemporaries, both fellow-countrymen and men of other nations, the estimation of all subsequent times substantially agrees.

## IV. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

1706-1790

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### *BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY*

BY JOHN EBENEZER BRYANT, M. A.

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Few men in the history of nations have deserved greater honor at the hands of their countrymen than Benjamin Franklin. Few men have received greater. It is over a hundred years since he died, and to-day his name and fame are more renowned than ever they were. Study and scrutiny of his life and deeds only make clearer and more indubitable the claims of his memory to the respect and admiration, the veneration and affection, of all his compatriots to the latest generation. It is true his character was not faultless. But his imperfections were those of common humanity, and, indeed, were only such as served to bring him within the range of the sympathies of common humanity. But he was so utterly without pretense and affectation that his imperfections were seen, as it were, through a full transparency. Nothing in him was hidden. Yet because of these imperfections attempts were made in his lifetime to lessen the public appreciation of his worth. Such attempts have been made even in our

own day. All these attempts have but increased the admiration of humanity for one who was great with a greatness that was apprehended by every one. For this was and is the essential characteristic of Franklin's renown. In all his multifarious and splendid achievements there was nothing the meaning and merit of which were not at once intelligible to the people. Even as a philosopher the end and aim of all his inquiries was the useful application of nature's laws so as to conduce to the common benefit. So likewise as a servant of the people, a public-spirited citizen, a statesman, an agent of the colonies, an ambassador of the republic, his one desire was to promote the popular welfare. So also as a writer, a journalist, a pamphleteer, a controversialist. Consummate skill in steering clear of visionary ideals, consummate power in seeing and grasping the immediately available common good—such were the distinguishing characteristics of Franklin. As such he was understood and believed in and followed and honored as no other man of his time was. And as such he is believed in and followed and honored to-day.

The details of Franklin's life scarcely need mentioning, for perhaps no life is better known to all worthy citizens of the republic than his. Born in Boston, January 17, 1706, the tenth and youngest son of a good and sober-minded couple who destined him as a tithe-offering to the church, but who by stress of circumstances were obliged to put him at an early age to labor in their own business—that of soap and candle making—his life, from the very beginning, was accustomed to industry, frugality, and morality. It was accustomed, too, to an intellectual outlook; for the father used to discuss with his children

at table, not trivial household affairs, but graver matters requiring both thought and speculation. Young Benjamin Franklin never knew the time when he could not read; and though he had but little formal education he grew up to be fond of books and of improving his mind by the acquisition of good, sound knowledge. At twelve years of age he became apprenticed to his brother, who was a printer and who soon started a newspaper, the second in America. Benjamin Franklin wrote for this paper—at first secretly, afterwards openly—and was for some time, indeed, its nominal editor and publisher. But his brother using him harshly, he left him and left his home—in fact, “ran away.” This was in his 17th year. He went to Philadelphia, where he obtained employment as a printer. In 1724 he went to London, England. There he remained eighteen months, working at his trade and perfecting himself in it in every particular. In 1726 he returned to Philadelphia, where he was soon able to start business on his own account. By assiduity and discretion his business prospered, and it was not long before his press was the most distinguished and the best patronized in America. In 1729 he bought out and practically started the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and this paper he edited and published until 1765. In 1732 he published the first issue of “*Poor Richard's Almanac*,” a publication that he continued for twenty-five years, securing for it a sale of 10,000 copies annually, which in that day was as remarkable as a sale of fifty times that number would be in our day. In 1736 he was chosen a clerk of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania. In 1737 he was made postmaster of Philadelphia. Not long afterward he was made a member of the Common Council of Phila-