

## BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

### Autobiography

Benjamin Franklin, a great and typical American, and one of the most influential founders of the young republic, was born at Boston, Mass., on January 17, 1706. The story of his first fifty years is related in the vigorous and inspiring "Autobiography," published in 1817. But the book does not carry the story further than the year 1758, which was just the time when he took a foremost place in world-politics, as official representative of the New World in the Old World. He came in that year to England, where he remained five years as agent of the colony of Pennsylvania. Again in London, as agent for several colonies, from 1764 to 1775, Franklin fought for their right not to be taxed by the home country without having a voice in matters which concerned themselves; and from 1776 to 1785 he represented his country in Paris, obtaining the assistance of the French government in the War of Independence. On his return to America in 1785 Franklin was chosen President of the State of Pennsylvania. He died on April 17, 1790. Franklin's correspondence, during these important years in Europe, as well as the letters of the last five years of his life, have been ably edited by John Bigelow, and form, in some sort, a continuation of the "Autobiography," published in 1874. The "Autobiography" is published in a number of inexpensive forms.

### I.--Early Education

Our family had lived in the village of Ecton, Northamptonshire, for 300 years, the eldest son being always bred to the smith's business. I was the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back. My father married young, and carried his wife and three children to New England, about 1682, in order that they might there enjoy their Non-conformist religion with freedom. He married a second time, and had in all seventeen children.

I had but little schooling, being taken home at ten years to help my father's business of tallow-chandler. I disliked the trade, and desired to go to sea; living near the water in our home at Boston, I learned to swim well, and to manage boats. From a child I was fond of reading, and laid out all my little money on books, such as Bunyan's works, which I sold to get Burton's "Historical Collections"; and in my father's little library there were Plutarch's "Lives," De Foe's "Essays on Projects," and Mather's "Essays to do Good." This bookish inclination determined my father to bind me apprentice to my brother James, a printer in Boston, and in a little time I became very proficient. I had access to more books, and often sat up most of the night reading. I had also a fancy to poetry, and made some little pieces; my brother printed them, and sent me about the town to sell them.

I now took in hand the improvement of my writing by various exercises in prose and verse, being extremely ambitious to become a good English writer. My time for these exercises was at night and on Sundays. At about 16 years of age, meeting with a book on the subject, I took to a vegetable diet, and thus not only saved an additional fund to buy books, but also gained greater clearness of head. I now studied arithmetic, navigation, geometry, and read Locke "On the Human Understanding," the "Art of Thinking," by Messrs. du Port Royal, and Xenophon's "Memorable Things of Socrates." From this last I learned to drop my abrupt contradiction and positive argumentation, and to put on the humble inquirer and doubter.

My brother had begun to print a newspaper, "The New England Courant," the second that appeared in America. Some of his friends thought it not likely to succeed, one newspaper being enough for America; yet at this time there are not less than five-and-twenty. To this paper I began to contribute anonymously, disguising my hand, and putting my MSS. at night under the door of the printing-house. These were highly approved, until I claimed their authorship.

But I soon took upon me to assert my freedom, and determined to go to New York. A friend of mine

agreed with the captain of a sloop for my passage; I was taken on board privately, and in three days found myself in New York, near 300 miles from home, a boy of but seventeen, and with very little money in my pocket. The printer there could not give me employment, but told me of a vacancy in Philadelphia, 100 miles further. Thither, therefore, I proceeded, partly by land, and partly by sea, and landed with one Dutch dollar in my pocket.

There were two printers in the town, both of them poorly qualified. Bradford was very illiterate, and Keimer, though something of a scholar, was a mere compositor, knowing nothing of press-work. Keimer gave me employment. He had been one of the French prophets, and could act their enthusiastic agitations. He did not profess any particular religion, but something of all on occasion, and had a good deal of the knave in his composition. I began to have acquaintance among the young people that were lovers of reading; and gaining money by industry and frugality, I lived very agreeably, forgetting Boston as much as I could.

At length my brother-in-law, master of a sloop, heard of me, and wrote exhorting me to return, to which I answered in a letter which came under the eyes of Sir William Keith, governor of the province. He was surprised when he was told my age, and said that I ought to be encouraged; if I would set up in Philadelphia he would procure me the public business.

Sir William promised to set me up himself. I did not know his reputation for promises which he never meant to keep, and at his suggestion I sailed for England to choose the types. Understanding that his letters recommendatory to a number of friends and his letter of credit to furnish me with the necessary money, which he had failed to give me before the ship sailed, were with the rest of his despatches, I asked the captain for them, and when we came into the Channel he let me examine the bag. I found none upon which my name was put as under my care. I began to doubt his sincerity, and a fellow passenger, on my opening the affair to him, let me into the governor's character, and told me that no one had the smallest dependence on him.

I immediately got work at Palmer's, a famous printing-house in Bartholomew Close, London. I was employed in composing for the second edition of Wollaston's "Religion of Nature," and some of his reasonings not appearing to me well-founded, I wrote a little metaphysical piece entitled "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain." This brought me the acquaintance of Dr. Mandeville, author of the "Fable of the Bees," a most facetious, entertaining companion. I presently left Palmer's to work at Watts, near Lincoln's Inn Fields, and here I continued for the rest of my eighteen months in London. But I had grown tired of that city, and when a Mr. Denham, who was returning to Philadelphia to open a store, offered to take me as his clerk, I gladly accepted.

We landed in Philadelphia on October 11, 1726, where I found sundry alterations. Keith was no longer governor; and Miss Read, to whom I had paid some courtship, had been persuaded in my absence to marry one Rogers, a potter. With him, however, she was never happy, and soon parted from him; he was a worthless fellow. Mr. Denham took a store, but died next February, and I returned to Keimer's printing-house.

## **II.--Making His Way**

I had now just passed my twenty-first year; and it may be well to let you know the then state of my mind with regard to my principles and morals. My parents had brought me through my childhood piously in the dissenting way, but now I had become a thorough Deist. My arguments had perverted some others, but as each of these persons had afterwards wronged me greatly without the least compunction, and as my own conduct towards others had given me great trouble, I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful. I now, therefore, grew convinced that truth, sincerity, and integrity between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life; and I formed written resolutions to practice them ever while I lived.

I now set up in partnership with Meredith, one of Keimer's workmen, the money being found by Meredith's father. In the autumn of the preceding year, I had formed most of my ingenious acquaintance into a club of mutual improvement, which we called the Junto; it met on Friday evenings for essays and debates. Every one of its members exerted himself in recommending business to our new firm.

Soon Keimer started a newspaper, "The Universal Instructor in all Arts and Sciences and Pennsylvania Gazette," but after carrying it on for some months with only ninety subscribers he sold it to me for a trifle, and it proved in a few years extremely profitable. With the help of two good friends I bought out Meredith in 1729, and continued the business alone.

I had turned my thoughts to marriage, but soon found that, the business of a printer being thought a poor one, I was not to expect money with a wife. Friendly relations had continued between me and Mrs. Read's family; I pitied poor Miss Read's unfortunate situation, and our mutual affection revived. Though there was a report of her husband's death, and another report that he had a preceding wife in England, neither of these were certain, and he had left many debts, which his successor might be called on to pay.

But we ventured over these difficulties, and I took her to wife September 1, 1730. None of the inconveniences happened that we had apprehended; she proved a good and faithful helpmate, assisted me much by attending the shop; we throve together, and have ever mutually endeavoured to make each other happy.

I now set on foot my first project of a public nature, that for a subscription library. By the help of our club, the Junto, I procured fifty subscribers of forty shillings each to begin with, and ten shillings a year for fifty years. We afterwards obtained a charter, and this was the mother of all the North American subscription libraries now so numerous, which have made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries.

### **III.--The Scheme of Virtues**

It was about 1733 that I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found that I had undertaken a task of great difficulty, and I therefore contrived the following method. I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which expressed the extent which I gave to its meaning.

The names of virtues were: Temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, chastity, and humility. My list contained at first only twelve virtues, but a friend having informed me that I was generally thought proud, I determined endeavouring to cure myself of this vice or folly among the rest; and, though I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue, I had a good deal of success with regard to the appearance of it. My intention being to acquire the habitude of all these virtues, I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of them successively, thus going through a complete course in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. I had a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues; the page was ruled into days of the week, and I marked in it, by a little black spot, every fault I found by examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

I was surprised to find myself much fuller of faults than I had imagined, but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish. After a while I went through one course only in a year, and afterwards only one in several years, till at length I omitted them entirely; but I always carried my little book with me. My

scheme of order gave me most trouble. It was as follows.

5--8 a.m. What good shall I do this day? Rise, wash, and address Powerful Goodness. Contrive day's business, and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study, and breakfast.

8 a.m.--12 noon. Work.

12--1 p.m.--Read, or overlook my accounts, and dine.

2--6 p.m. Work.

6--10 p.m. Put things in their places. Supper. Music or diversion, or conversation. Examination of the day. What good have I done this day?

10 p.m.--5 a.m. Sleep.

In truth, I found myself incorrigible with regard to order, yet I was, by the endeavour, a better and a happier man than I should have been if I had not attempted it. It may be well that my posterity should be informed that to this little artifice, with the blessing of God, their ancestor owed the constant felicity of his life.

I purposed publishing my scheme, writing a little comment on each virtue, and I should have called my book "The Art of Virtue," distinguishing it from the mere exhortation to be good. But my intention was never fulfilled, for it was connected in my mind with a great and extensive project, which I have never had time to attend to. I had set forth on paper the substance of an intended creed, containing, as I thought, the essentials of every known religion, and I conceived the project of raising a united party for virtue, by forming the virtuous and good men of all nations into a regular body, to be governed by suitable good and wise rules. I thought that the sect should be begun and spread at first among young and single men only, that each person to be initiated should declare his assent to my creed, and should have exercised himself with the thirteen weeks' practice of the virtues, that the existence of the society should be kept a secret until it was become considerable, that the members should engage to assist one another's interests, business, and advancement in life, and that we should be called "The Society of the Free and Easy," as being free from the dominion of vice and of debt. I am still of opinion that it was a practicable scheme.

In 1732 I first published my Almanack, commonly called "Poor Richard's Almanack," and continued it for about twenty-five years. It had a great circulation, and I considered it a proper vehicle for conveying instruction among the common people. Thus, I assembled the proverbs containing the wisdom of many ages and nations into a discourse prefixed to the Almanack of 1757, as the harangue of a wise old man to the people attending an auction. I considered my newspaper also as a means of instruction, and published in it extracts from moral writers and little pieces of my own, in the form sometimes of a Socratic dialogue, tending to prove the advantages of virtue.

I had begun in 1733 to study languages. I made myself master of French so as to be able to read books with ease, and then Italian, and later Spanish. Having an acquaintance with these, I found, on looking over a Latin Testament, that I understood much of that language, which encouraged me to study it with success.

Our secret club, the Junto, had turned out to be so useful that I now set every member of it to form each of them a subordinate club, with the same rules, but without informing the new clubs of their connection with the Junto. The advantages proposed were, the improvement of so many young citizens; our better acquaintance with the general sentiments of the inhabitants on any occasion, as the Junto member was to report to the Junto what passed in his separate club; the promotion of our particular interests in business by more extensive recommendation; and the increase of our influence in public affairs. Five or six clubs were completed, and answered our views of influencing public opinion on

particular occasions.

#### IV.--Public Life

My first promotion was my being chosen, in 1736, clerk of the General Assembly. In the following year I received the commission of postmaster at Philadelphia, and found it of great advantage. I now began to turn my thoughts a little to public affairs, beginning, however, with small matters, and preparing the way for my reforms through the Junto and subordinate clubs. Thus I reformed the city watch, and established a company for the extinguishing of fires. In 1739 the Rev. Mr. Whitefield arrived among us and preached to enormous audiences throughout the colonies. I knew him intimately, being employed in printing his sermons and journals; he used sometimes to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard. Our friendship lasted till his death.

My business was now continually augmenting, and my circumstances daily growing easier. Spain having been several years at war against Great Britain, and being at length joined by France, our situation became one of great danger; our colony was defenceless, and our Assembly was composed principally of Quakers. I therefore formed an association of citizens, numbering ten thousand, into a militia; these all furnished themselves with arms and met every week for drill, while the women provided silk colours painted with devices and mottoes which I supplied. With the proceeds of a lottery we built a battery below the town, and borrowed eighteen cannon of the governor of New York.

Peace being concluded, and the association business therefore at an end, I turned my thoughts to the establishment of an academy. I published a pamphlet; set on foot a subscription, not as an act of mine, but of some "public-spirited gentleman," and the schools were opened in 1749. They were soon moved to our largest hall; the trustees were incorporated by a charter from the governor, and thus was established the University of Pennsylvania. The building of a hospital for the sick, and the paving, lighting, and sweeping of the streets of the city, were among the reforms in which I had a hand at this time. In 1753 I was appointed, jointly with another, postmaster-general of America, and the following year I drew up a plan for the union of all the colonies under one government for defence and other important general purposes. Its fate was singular; the assemblies did not adopt it, as they thought there was too much prerogative in it, and in England it was judged to be too democratic. The Board of Trade therefore did not approve of it, but substituted another scheme for the same end. I believe that my plan was really the true medium, and that it would have been happy for both sides of the water if it had been adopted.

When war was in a manner commenced with France, the British Government, not choosing to trust the union of the colonies with their defence, lest they should feel their own strength, sent over General Braddock in 1755 with two regiments of regular English troops for that purpose. He landed at Alexandria and marched to Fredericktown in Maryland, where he halted for carriages. I was sent to him by the Assembly, stayed with him for several days, and had full opportunity of removing all his prejudices against the colonies by informing him of what the assemblies had done and would still do to facilitate his operations.

This general was a brave man, and might have made a figure as a good officer in some European war. But he had too much self-confidence, too high an opinion of regular troops, and too mean a one of both Americans and Indians. Our Indian interpreter joined him with 100 guides and scouts, who might have been of great use to him; but he slighted and neglected them and they left him. He said to one of the Indians, "These savages may indeed be a formidable enemy to your raw American militia, but upon the king's regular and disciplined troops, sir, it is impossible that they should make any impression." In the first engagement his force was routed in panic, and two-thirds of them were killed, by no more than 400 Indians and French together. This gave us the first suspicion that our exalted ideas of the prowess of British regulars had not been well founded. Besides, from the day of their landing, they had

plundered, insulted, and abused our inhabitants. We wanted no such defenders.

After this the governor prevailed with me to take charge of our north-west frontier, which was infested by the enemy, and I undertook this military business, although I did not conceive myself well suited for it.

My account of my electrical experiments was read before the Royal Society of London, and afterwards printed in a pamphlet. The Count de Buffon, a philosopher of great reputation, had the book translated into French, and then it appeared in the Italian, German, and Latin languages. What gave it the more sudden celebrity was the success of its proposed experiment for drawing lightning from the clouds. I was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and they presented me with the gold medal of Sir Godfrey Copley, for 1753.

The Assembly had long had much trouble with the "proprietary," or great hereditary landowners. Finally, finding that they persisted obstinately in manacling their deputies with instructions inconsistent, not only with the privileges of the people, but with the service of the crown, the Assembly resolved to petition the king against them, and appointed me agent in England to present and support the petition. I sailed from New York with my son in the end of June; we dropped anchor in Falmouth harbour, and reached London on July 27, 1757.

Source:

Franklin, Benjamin. "Autobiography." *The World's Greatest Books, Vol. IX*. Ed. Arthur Mee and J.A. Hammerton. 1910. Electronic.