Part One

EARLY YEARS IN BOSTON

Franklin was born on January 17, 1706, in Boston in the colony of Massachusetts. His father, Josiah Franklin, was a tallow chandler (maker and seller of soap and candles). His mother, Abiah Folger, was Josiah's second wife. Benjamin was the 15th of Josiah's 17 children, and Abiah's 8th child. The Franklin family had little money, like most New Englanders of the time, and could not afford to give their children much education. When Benjamin was ten years old, his father took him out of school and taught him to make soap and candles. Disliking the business, however, he went to work for a cutler, or knife-maker. At age 12 he was apprenticed as a printer to his brother James, who had recently returned from England with a new printing press.

Franklin stayed with his brother for five years, learning the printing trade. In 1721, James Franklin established a weekly newspaper, the New England Courant, and Benjamin, at the age of 15, was busily occupied in delivering the newspaper by day and in composing articles for it at night. These articles, published anonymously, won wide notice and acclaim for their pithy observations on the current scene. Because it chose to challenge the Puritan establishment, the New England Courant frequently incurred the displeasure of colonial authorities. In 1722, as a consequence of an article considered particularly offensive, James Franklin was imprisoned for a month and forbidden to publish his paper, and for a while the paper appeared under Benjamin's name.

PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON

In October 1726 Franklin went to Philadelphia (he had been there before) and went back to work as a printer's assistant. Two years later he set himself up in the printing business with
borrowed money. In September 1729 he bought the Pennsylvania Gazette, a dull, poorly edited weekly newspaper. By his witty style and careful selection of news, Franklin made it both entertaining and informative. In 1730 he married Deborah Read, a Philadelphia woman whom he had known before his trip to England. They had two children: a son, Francis, who died of smallpox in childhood, and a daughter, Sarah, whom they called Sally.

PROJECTS AND EXPERIMENTS

During his time in Philadelphia Franklin engaged in many public projects. In 1727, with a number of his acquaintances, he organized a group called the Junto that met weekly for debate, conversation, and companionship. The Junto attracted some of Philadelphia's best minds, and it lent its support to many of Franklin's proposals to improve the city. Members of the Junto pooled their books to create a shared collection, which formed the basis for the first subscription library in America. Founded in 1731, it was chartered in 1742 as the Library Company of Philadelphia. Library subscriptions provided funds to buy books that then could circulate among subscribers. Through the Junta, Franklin also promoted his ideas for creating a fire department and a police force—the first in the colonies.

Franklin first published Poor Richard's Almanack, a collection of practical advice and humorous sayings, in 1732 under the pen name Richard Saunders. Both a product and a reflection of colonial America, the almanac proved to be a great success, and Franklin published it regularly for the next 25 years. Its homespun wisdom mirrored the simple virtues of a largely rural society: thrift, industry, and humility. As Poor Richard, Franklin advised and amused his readers with such maxims as: "The sleeping fox catches no poultry," "The used key is always bright," and "Experience keeps a dear [costly] school, yet fools will learn in no other." The introduction to the last issue of the almanac, an essay called "The Way to Wealth," became one of Franklin's best-known writings.

In 1736 Franklin gained his first political appointment, as clerk of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The next year he was appointed deputy postmaster of Philadelphia. About this time, he organized a volunteer firefighting company in Philadelphia to which members paid dues and agreed to help one another in the event of fire. He also introduced methods for the improvement of street paving and lighting. In 1743 he founded the American Philosophical Society, an organization for the promotion of useful knowledge in science and the humanities.

Franklin retired from the printing business in 1748 to devote his time to inventions. He always believed that knowledge should have practical applications. He had already invented an open stove that warmed houses efficiently. The so-called Franklin stove worked better, however,
after it was improved by others. He also devised ways of reducing excessive smoke from heating stoves.

In 1747 Franklin began his experiments in electricity with a simple apparatus that he received from a friend in England. His experiments involved capturing electrical charge, and he came up with the notion of positive and negative electrical charges. Although he was not the first to suggest the connection between lightning and electricity, he proposed an effective method of demonstrating this link. His proposal to erect an iron rod on a high tower or steeple and draw electricity from a storm was published in London and carried out in England and France before he performed his celebrated but dangerous experiment with a kite in 1752. While clouds rolled by the airborne kite, electricity presumably traveled down the kite string to a metal key attached at the end, and a wire drew sparks from the key. Some doubt remains about whether Franklin actually performed the kite experiment, because he failed to mention it for some time. The European demonstrations, however, made Franklin famous. Franklin also published instructions on how to protect houses with lightning rods.
Part Two
PUBLIC OFFICE

In 1750 Franklin was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly, in which he served until 1764. He was appointed deputy postmaster general for the colonies in 1753; in that job he improved postal service between Philadelphia and New York and instituted a new accounting system to prevent local postmasters from pocketing postal money. As the delegate from Pennsylvania, Franklin attended a 1754 congress that met at Albany for the purpose of uniting the colonies in the face of the threatened French and Indian War (1754-1763). Realizing the need for a common defense, he proposed the Albany Plan, a strategy for colonial cooperation in many ways prophetic of the 1787 United States Constitution. Under this plan, the thirteen colonies would unite under a single government, with the power to levy taxes on the colonists, and to maintain its own army for defense. But the plan was too far in advance of public thinking to win ratification. In later years Franklin believed that the adoption of this plan would have prevented the American Revolution; at the time, it would have required too many concessions from both the King of England, as well as the colonial state legislatures, and didn’t get the necessary support.

DIPLOMAT OF THE REVOLUTION

The day after his arrival in America, Franklin was chosen a member of the Second Continental Congress. The Continental Congress voted to have a postal system and chose Franklin to be the first postmaster general. It also sent him to Canada as part of a commission to persuade Canada to join the revolution against Britain. He was nearly 70 years old when he made this difficult winter journey, and the mission was a failure. Upon his return from Canada, Franklin became one of the committee of five chosen to draft the Declaration of Independence. He was also one of the signers of that historic document, reportedly advising the assembly with characteristic wit: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

In September 1776 the Continental Congress chose Franklin and two other Americans, Arthur Lee and Silas Deane, to seek economic assistance from France for waging the war against Britain. Franklin’s scientific reputation, his integrity, and his wit and gracious manner made him extremely popular in French political, literary, and social circles. Against the vigorous opposition of the French minister of finance, Jacques Necker, he managed to obtain liberal grants and loans from Louis XVI of France. While in France, Franklin also encouraged and assisted American privateers operating against the British navy, especially John Paul Jones.

The victory over British forces at Saratoga in 1777 was a triumph for the Americans, and it convinced France that supporting America might be backing the winning side against its
longtime enemy, Britain. As a result Franklin negotiated a treaty of commerce and defensive alliance with France in February 1778. This treaty represented, in effect, the turning point of the American Revolution. French aid enabled the newly formed United States to win the war. Seven months after the treaty was concluded, Congress appointed Franklin the first minister plenipotentiary (ambassador with full powers) from the United States to France.

Franklin was well received in France. He wore fur caps everywhere he went—such caps were seen as a symbol of the Wild West that America represented to France. These caps were so popular he sent back to America for a large supply of them, so he would always have them to wear. He was very popular there, and wrote to his daughter, "My picture is everywhere, on the lids of snuff boxes, on rings, busts. The numbers sold are incredible. My portrait is a best seller, you have prints, and copies of prints and copies of copies spread everywhere. Your father's face is now as well known as the man in the moon."

In 1781 Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay were appointed to conclude a treaty of peace with Great Britain. The final treaty was signed at Versailles on September 3, 1783 (see Paris, Treaty of), almost two years later. Franklin stayed in France until 1785 and was accorded many honors.

A FRAMER OF THE CONSTITUTION

In 1785 Congress finally yielded to Franklin’s long-standing request to relieve him of his duties in France. He returned to Philadelphia, where he was immediately chosen president of the executive council of Pennsylvania. He was reelected in 1786 and 1787. In 1787 he was elected a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, held in Philadelphia, which drew up the Constitution of the United States. Franklin favored a single-chamber legislature and an executive board, and he opposed paying salaries to executive officials. Although the convention passed over his proposals, the final document received his support, and he used his influence in ensuring that Pennsylvania ratified the Constitution. One of Franklin’s last public acts was to sign a petition to the U.S. Congress, on February 12, 1790, as president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, urging the abolition of slavery and the suppression of the slave trade. Two months later, on April 17, Franklin died in his Philadelphia home at 84 years of age.
Part Three

Excerpts from Poor Richard’s Almanac

Judge, then, how much I must have been gratified by an incident I am going to relate to you. I stopped my horse lately where a great number of people were collected at a venue of merchant’s goods. The hour of sale not being come, they were conversing on the badness of the times; and one of the company called to a plain, clean old man with white locks, "Pray, Father Abraham, what think you of the times? Won’t these heavy taxes quite ruin the country? How shall we ever be able to pay them? What would you advise us to?" Father Abraham stood up, and replied: "If you would have my advice, I will give it you in short; for 'a word to the wise is enough,' and 'many words won’t fill a bushel,' as Poor Richard says." They all joined desiring him to speak his mind, and gathering around him he proceeded as follows:

Friends and neighbors, the taxes are indeed very heavy, and if those laid on by the government were the only ones we had to pay, we might the more easily discharge them; but we have many others, and much more grievous to some of us. We are taxed twice as much by our Idleness, three times as much by our Pride, and four times as much by our Folly; and from these taxes the commissioners cannot ease or deliver us by allowing an abatement. However, let us hearken to good advice, and something may be done for us. "God helps them that help themselves," as Poor Richard says in his almanac of 1733.

It would be thought a hard government that should tax its people one-tenth part of their Time, to be employed in its service, but idleness taxes many of us much more, if we reckon all that is spent in absolute sloth or doing of nothing, with that which is spent in idle employments or amusements that amount to nothing. Sloth, by bringing on diseases, absolutely shortens life. "Sloth, like rust, consumes faster than labor wears; while the used key is always bright," as Poor Richard says. "But dost thou love life? then do not squander time, for that's the stuff life is made of," as Poor Richard says.

How much more than is necessary do we spend in sleep! Forgetting that "the sleeping fox catches no poultry," and that "there will be sleeping enough in the grave," as Poor Richard says. If time be of all things the most precious, "wasting of time must be," as Poor Richard says, "the greatest prodigality;" since, as he elsewhere tells us, "lost time is never found again," and what we call "time enough! always proves little enough." Let us, then, up and be doing, and doing to the purpose; so by diligence shall we do more with less perplexity. "Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all things easy," as Poor Richard says; and "He that riseth late must trot all day, and shall scarce overtake his business at night; while laziness travels so slowly that poverty soon overtakes him," as we read in Poor Richard; who adds, "Drive thy business! let not that drive thee!" and: "Early to bed and early to rise Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise."
Part Four

Franklin’s Foundation for Ethics

Before I enter upon my public appearance in business, it may be well to let you know the then state of my mind with regard to my principles and morals, that you may see how far those influenced the future events of my life. My parents had early given me religious impressions, and brought me through my childhood piously in the Dissenting way. But I was scarce fifteen, when, after doubting by turns of several points, as I found them disputed in the different books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself. Some books against Deism fell into my hands; they were said to be the substance of sermons preached at Boyle's Lectures. It happened that they wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the Deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough Deist....

What reason does Franklin give, for saying that something is good or bad (forbidden or commanded to be done)?

I grew convinced that truth, sincerity and integrity in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life; and I formed written resolutions, which still remain in my journal book, to practice them ever while I lived. Revelation had indeed no weight with me, as such; but I entertained an opinion that, though certain actions might not be bad because they were forbidden by it, or good because it commanded them, yet probably these actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial to us, in their own natures, all the circumstances of things considered. And this persuasion, with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian angel, or accidental favorable circumstances and situations, or all together, preserved me, thro' this dangerous time of youth, and the hazardous situations I was sometimes in among strangers, remote from the eye and advice of my father, without any willful gross immorality or injustice, that might have been expected from my want of religion. I say willful, because the instances I have mentioned had something of necessity in them, from my youth, inexperience, and the knavery of others. I had therefore a tolerable character to begin the world with; I valued it properly, and determined to preserve it....

Was Franklin an atheist? What were his religious beliefs?

I had been religiously educated as a Presbyterian; and though' some of the dogmas of that persuasion, such as the eternal decrees of God, election, reprobation, etc., appeared to me unintelligible, others doubtful, and I early absented myself from the public assemblies of the sect, Sunday being my studying day, I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and governed it by
his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteemed the essentials of every religion; and, being to be found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected them all, though' with different degrees of respect, as I found them more or less mixed with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, served principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another. This respect to all, with an opinion that the worst had some good effects, induced me to avoid all discourse that might tend to lessen the good opinion another might have of his own religion; and as our province increased in people, and new places of worship were continually wanted, and generally erected by voluntary contributions, my mite for such purpose, whatever might be the sect, was never refused....

Why did Franklin not like the sermons of a particular minister in Philadelphia?

Though I seldom attended any public worship, I had still an opinion of its propriety, and of its utility when rightly conducted, and I regularly paid my annual subscription for the support of the only Presbyterian minister or meeting we had in Philadelphia. He used to visit me sometimes as a friend, and admonish me to attend his administrations, and I was now and then prevailed on to do so, once for five Sundays successively. Had he been in my opinion a good preacher, perhaps I might have continued, notwithstanding the occasion I had for the Sunday's leisure in my course of study; but his discourses were chiefly either polemic arguments, or explications of the peculiar doctrines of our sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting, and unedifying, since not a single moral principle was inculcated or enforced, their aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good citizens.
Part Five

United Party for Virtue

What reasons does Franklin give for the inability of factions and parties to secure peace in the world?

HAVING mentioned a great and extensive project which I had conceived, it seems proper that some account should be here given of that project and its object. Its first rise in my mind appears in the following little paper, accidentally preserved, viz.:

"That the great affairs of the world, the wars, revolutions, etc., are carried on and affected by parties.

"That the view of these parties is their present general interest, or what they take to be such.

"That the different views of these different parties occasion all confusion.

"That while a party is carrying on a general design, each man has his particular private interest in view.

"That as soon as a party has gained its general point, each member becomes intent upon his particular interest; which, thwarting others, breaks that party into divisions, and occasions more confusion.

"That few in public affairs act from a mere view of the good of their country, whatever they may pretend; and, though' their actings [actions] bring real good to their country, yet men primarily considered that their own and their country's interest was united, and did not act from a principle of benevolence.

"That fewer still, in public affairs, act with a view to the good of mankind.

"There seems to me at present to be great occasion for 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, which good and wise men may probably be more unanimous in their obedience to, than common people are to common laws.

"I at present think that whoever attempts this aright, and is well qualified, can not fail of pleasing God, and of meeting with success. B. F."

How does Franklin describe his creed? Does he think most religions would find it acceptable, or reject it?
Revolving this project in my mind, as to be undertaken hereafter, when my circumstances should afford me the necessary leisure, I put down from time to time, on pieces of paper, such thoughts as occurred to me respecting it. Most of these are lost; but I find one purporting to be the substance of an intended creed, containing, as I thought, the essentials of every known religion, and being free of every thing that might shock the professors of any religion. It is expressed in these words, viz.:

"That there is one God, who made all things.

"That he governs the world by his providence.

"That he ought to be worshiped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving.

"But that the most acceptable service of God is doing good to man.

"That the soul is immortal.

"And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice either here or hereafter."

What happened to Franklin’s project?

....I communicated it in part to two young men, who adopted it with some enthusiasm; but my then narrow circumstances, and the necessity I was under of sticking close to my business, occasioned my postponing the further prosecution of it at that time; and my multifarious occupations, public and private, induced me to continue postponing, so that it has been omitted till I have no longer strength or activity left sufficient for such an enterprise; though I am still of opinion that it was a practicable scheme, and might have been very useful, by forming a great number of good citizens; and I was not discouraged by the seeming magnitude of the undertaking, as I have always thought that one man of tolerable abilities may work great changes, and accomplish great affairs among mankind, if he first forms a good plan, and, cutting off all amusements or other employments that would divert his attention, makes the execution of that same plan his sole study and business.