

On Franklin's birthday, a crucial lesson from 'the first American'

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OPINION



Born in 1706, the fifteenth child of a Boston candle maker, Benjamin Franklin was our country's [first international celebrity](#), lauded throughout Europe as the quintessential American. [Reportedly](#), everyone in his era "had an engraving of M. Franklin over the mantelpiece." A bestseller in the nineteenth century, his [Autobiography](#) was as exciting to children then as an adventure movie is to today's youth — and more enlightening.

January 17th, his birthday, is a fitting time to ask: Why was Franklin an American icon? What can we learn from his character and achievements?

Let's examine his *Autobiography* for answers.

He said that, as a child, a proverb from King Solomon profoundly influenced his life: *Seest thou a man diligent in his calling, he shall stand before kings.* "I from thence considered industry as a means of obtaining wealth and distinction."

Franklin demonstrated his inexhaustible industry early. "I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books." With merely two years of formal schooling, he didn't wait for someone to hand him student loans and a college education; he educated himself.

At age 12 he was indentured to his brother, a printer. He made the best of his servitude: "I now had access to better books." Highly respectful of other people's property, he borrowed books "which I was careful to return soon and clean. Often I sat up in my room reading the greatest part of the night, when the book was borrowed in the evening and to be returned early in the morning lest it should be missed or wanted."

At 17, Ben escaped from beatings by his brother and fear of conflict with Boston authorities over his already controversial writings. Alone and poor, he traveled down the coast seeking printing work. He endured a near-shipwreck and a 50-mile walk in torrential storms. Bedraggled and hungry, he arrived in Philadelphia, startling

young Deborah Read, who stared askance at his “most awkward, ridiculous appearance.” Deborah later became his wife!

Instead of waiting for help from others, young Ben took initiative. He found work, survived mainly on bread and water, and lodged himself humbly, using his meager money to buy more books. *While still a teenager*, Ben became so well-read that prominent people, including the governors of two colonies, sought his conversation.

Although misled by a supposed backer and relieved of hard-earned money loaned to unreliable friends, Ben never gave up. He established himself as a printer and publisher, creating the widely read *Pennsylvania Gazette*, then *Poor Richard's Almanack*. By putting enterprising young men into the printing business in other colonies, he created a form of franchising.

Years of toil and frugality paid off. Franklin finally accumulated enough wealth to retire early and explore other interests. His scientific and political feats are legendary. Sometimes called the greatest experimentalist of the eighteenth century, he turned his scientific research into useful inventions — the lightning rod, Franklin stove, and bifocals are just a few. Known as “the first American” for his campaign to unify the colonies, he was the only person to have [signed all four documents](#) pivotal to our founding: the Declaration of Independence; the Treaty of Alliance, Amity, and Commerce with France; the Treaty of Peace between England, France, and the United States; and the Constitution.

His feats in civil society are equally remarkable. Instead of petitioning the government to solve social problems, Franklin took a do-it-yourself approach. His vast list of accomplishments includes starting the first lending library in North America, establishing an academy that became the University of Pennsylvania, organizing the Philadelphia fire department, and devising a lottery to raise money for the Pennsylvania militia.

Once a slave owner, Franklin formed an abolitionist society also tasked with aiding freed blacks in becoming self-sufficient, productive citizens.

Through Franklin's example, privately solving civil problems became the norm for nineteenth-century America. *Private people* funded universities, hospitals, museums, and other institutions.

Unfortunately, Franklin also unwittingly opened the door to the welfare state. Despite tremendous success raising private money for worthy causes, he engineered government funding for Pennsylvania Hospital. This kind of precedent has resulted in a deluge of public handouts for special groups promoting museums, shelters, sports arenas, and countless other projects.

(Contrast that to James Madison's [principled defense of property rights](#), insisting that government has no power to spend taxpayers' money on objects of benevolence.)

Nevertheless, Franklin defined the American Dream, the uniquely American way of life — free, self-reliant, creative, and productive. He was the archetypical self-made man, in the first country where the self-made man could thrive — America.

Franklin's pamphlet “[Information to Those Who Would Remove to America](#)” (1784) illustrates how his own values of self-reliance and industry also shaped the new nation. In giving advice to potential immigrants, Franklin explained that there were no lucrative public offices in America, “the usual effects of which are dependence and servility, unbecoming freemen.” Such offices lead to “faction, contention, corruption, and disorder among the people.” In Franklin's America, government played a minimal role in life. A man seeking to live off public salary, Franklin said, “will be despised and disregarded.”

In America, “every one will enjoy securely the profits of his industry.” And “if he does not bring a fortune with him, he must work and be industrious to live.” Franklin contrasted hard-working Americans with the indolent

European nobility. He proudly repeated an American saying of the time, “God Almighty is himself a mechanic!” In short, “America is the land of labor, and by no means” a place “where the fowls fly about ready roasted, crying, *Come eat me!*”

Today, statistis push freemen towards “dependence and servility” by denigrating the wealth they produce as “unfair,” by stifling their free enterprise, by confiscating the fruits of their labor, by luring them with government handouts, and by encouraging public employment.

The self-made man is the highest achievement of the individual. America, the first country founded to protect the individual’s life and property, was the highest achievement of government. *This* is the lesson we must take from Franklin’s life and vigorously protect once again.

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All Franklin quotations are taken from his Autobiography and his pamphlet, “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America.” A recent Liberty Fund colloquium on Benjamin Franklin organized by Jerry Weinberger, professor of political science at Michigan State University, spawned the idea for this article.

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