



Dr. Franklin's Plan

ON A SUNDAY IN LATE OCTOBER 1776, SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD Benjamin Franklin sailed for France in the American 16-gun sloop *Reprisal* to take up his duties as one of his new nation's commissioners to the Court of Versailles. He did so in the certain knowledge that if *Reprisal* was taken by a British warship, he would be hanged for high treason. His signature was on the inflammatory Declaration of Independence, a document he had just helped craft.

Franklin had been home in Philadelphia barely a year and a half after spending almost two decades representing first Pennsylvania and, eventually, several colonies at the court of King George II of England, and when the king died, his son George III. The experience had made him more familiar with the ways of Europe than anyone else in the new American government. The only way the war for independence was going to work was if the French helped fund it. It would be his task to squeeze from the most autocratic monarch in Europe the money to pay for a democratic revolution. He had no idea as he sailed that the task would keep him in France for almost ten years. His ultimate success in securing the assistance of the French, aid that would result in the capitulation of the British forces under Gen. Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781, would culminate with his negotiation of the Treaty of Paris, confirming the existence of the United States.

When he arrived in France, he was arguably the most famous man in the European sphere. Fashionable women wore bracelets and rings set with his profile. John Adams, who worked with Franklin in France, wrote of that time some years later, saying, "there was scarcely a peasant or a citizen, a *valet de chambre*, coachman or footman, a lady's chambermaid or a scullion in a kitchen, who was not familiar with [Franklin's name], and who did not consider him as a friend to human kind."

To this popular acclaim was added the weight of recognized scientific genius, and this and his friendships among the aristocracy of intellect in Europe gave him a potent network. Coupled with an understanding of how to sway public opinion that was centuries ahead of its time, such connections and fame made Franklin a formidable proponent and adversary. And he was impervious to flanking character attacks. Warned of being spied on (as he was throughout the war), he replied, "I have long observ'd one Rule which prevents any Inconvenience from such Practices. It is simply this, to be concern'd in no Affairs that I should blush to have made

publick, and to do nothing but what Spies may see & welcome."

His modest dress and workman's background, together with his benign and quiet manner, were deceptive to those used to grand gestures and obfuscating talk. "I served," Jefferson would say much later, "with General Washington in the legislature of Virginia before the Revolution, and during it with

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FORMED A PLAN FOR
HIMSELF—AND FOR
THE COUNTRY HE
HELPED FOUND

◆ BY STEPHAN A.
SCHWARTZ

Dr. Franklin in Congress. I never heard either of them speak ten minutes at a time, nor to any but the main point which was to decide the question. They laid their shoulders to the great points, knowing that the little ones would follow of themselves."

Franklin came late to the idea of independence, but early to the colonies as a distinct union. Once he had embraced independence, he had passionately held to a clear vision of the kind of country he wanted it to be: a democratic republic whose political power flowed from its citizens. To build such a society he had many years before devised a

Dated 1789, this portrait of Benjamin Franklin is by Philadelphian Charles Wilson Peale, who shared his subject's interest in science.

plan with three simple, practical steps: the creation of “virtuous” citizens, the formation of small groups with a common purpose and commitment to the collective good, and the establishment of networks that grew from these groups. “I have always thought,” he once wrote, “that one Man of tolerable Abilities may work great Changes, and accomplish great Affairs among Mankind, if he first forms a good Plan, and . . . makes the Execution of that same Plan his sole Study and Business.”

As early as 1751 he had outlined how a union of the colonies might be achieved. Three years later, he wrote the Albany Plan of Union during a conference called to conclude a treaty with the Six Nations, a long-enduring confederation of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora tribes. In this document and in three subsequent letters, Franklin presented arguments that would define the War of Independence 20 years before it happened.

No other Founder even came close to Franklin’s direct level of familiarity with the cultures, beliefs and byways of the diverse and contradictory land and people that would become the United States of America. When, in 1753, he was made deputy postmaster general of North America, he took up the appointment with delight. In an age when travel was difficult, problematic, frequently uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous, he loved it. He rode well, loved good food—although he would eat anything put before him—and was wonderful company. A compulsive scientist, insatiably curious, he could not cross an ocean without measuring currents, could not look at a stream without considering the fish that swam within, nor ride a horse without considering horse, weather and the species of tree they both might find shelter beneath.

His *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, pam-



A crowd gathers at Philadelphia’s Market Street wharf to greet Franklin on his return from France in 1785, after he had signed the treaty that ended the American Revolution.

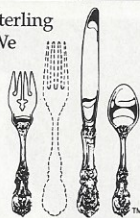
phlets and newspapers had molded public opinion for decades by the time he sailed for France. His work to establish a hospital, an insurance company, fire companies, libraries, learned societies, a college, sanitation programs and police departments had transformed Philadelphia and had shown the kind of society America could be. After 1752, when he carried

out the famous kite experiment that showed lightning to be electricity, his scientific research took him to a plateau of celebrity completely new in the American colonies.

Yet his life had been very different from that of most of the other Founders. He was a “leather apron man,” in the slang of his day, was proud of it, and never forgot it.

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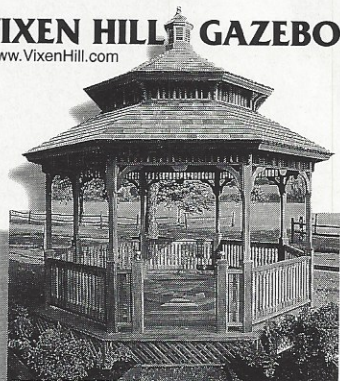
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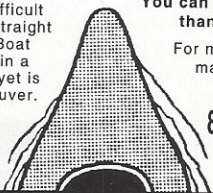
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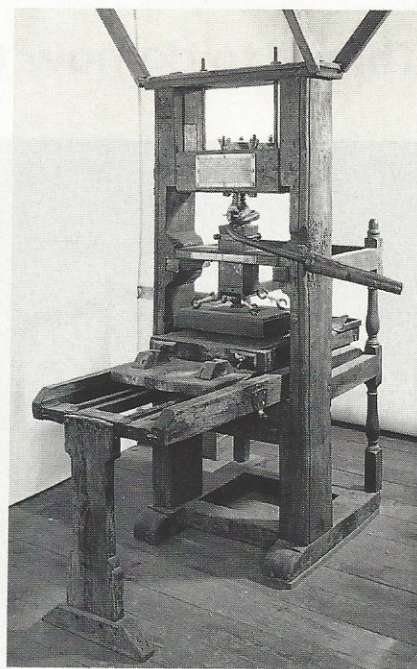
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Franklin was born January 17, 1706, in Boston. His father, Josiah Franklin, was nearly 50, a deeply religious Congregationalist and a soap and candle maker who had emigrated from the village of Ecton in the English midlands. His mother, Abiah Folger, was 38. Benjamin would be her eighth child. We know very little about her beyond Franklin's words in her epitaph. He called her a "discreet and virtuous woman."

Intending that Benjamin go into the ministry, his father sent him to Boston Latin School, where he excelled. But after a year his father withdrew him and sent him to a local schoolmaster who taught tradesmen's boys a little grammar, writing and mathematics so that they could help their masters when apprenticed. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin said that the decision was made "from a View of the Expence of a College Education which, having so large a Family, he could not well afford, and the mean Living many so educated were afterwards able to obtain. . . ."

At age 12 he went as an apprentice to older brother James, owner of a printing house, to learn the printing trade. ("Dr." Franklin would be created in middle age when he received an honorary doctorate from the University of St. Andrews in 1759, and one from Oxford in 1762.)

Had we encountered him during his time with James, we would have seen a stocky, energetic boy, attired in the deerskin breeches that, along with thick, blue wool knee stockings, long-sleeved speckled shirt and thick, well-greased shoes, made up the uniform of a printer's apprentice. He already had a taste for books, and James seems to have encouraged his reading. He had read Plutarch and Defoe. He seems also to have been familiar with Swift, Pope, Addison and Steele. During this time he was first exposed to the English philosopher John Locke's writings on personal freedom and the natural rights of



This printing press, believed to have been used by Franklin in London, is on display at the National Museum of American History.

man, concepts that would so deeply affect many of the Founders.

He inherited his father's intense interest in the spiritual questions of life, but not his father's beliefs. He decided that while he was a Deist, he was not going to be a churchgoer. He began using the time people were at church to work on his reading and writing. However, he saw churches as the one institution, in a new world that had very few, that could support virtue, which he saw as critical to a citizen's inner growth and the creation of a civil society.

Franklin took easily to the patterns of science. He resolved to make his own life his first experiment. In 1722, at 16, not long before he left Boston, Franklin quite consciously changed his life. After reading *The Way to Health* by Thomas Tryon, he became a vegetarian for a while, began a regular exercise program and may have been the only man in Philadelphia who tried to bathe regularly. He also became concerned with ventilation, proper breathing and good air. (When he was 81, he told his friend Dr. Benjamin Rush that he had "never snuffed, chewed, or smoked.")

These decisions flowed in part from the idea that respecting his body made him a better, more productive person. Better individuals made better citizens, and better citizens made for a more civil society. It was a view shaped by the Enlightenment's philosophers, who reasoned that the human species was infinitely perfectible.

To advance his knowledge, Franklin was willing to learn from anyone. Cotton Mather, the most influential Puritan in Massachusetts, was already famous for his involvement with the Salem witch trials when he published *Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good* in 1710. Its words had a profound effect on Franklin. "You must come forth to any Publick Service, whereof you may be capable, when you are call'd unto it. . . . That Fault of not Employing ones Parts for the Publick, One calls, 'A Great Sacrilege in the Temple of the God of Nature,'" wrote Mather. Three-quarters of a

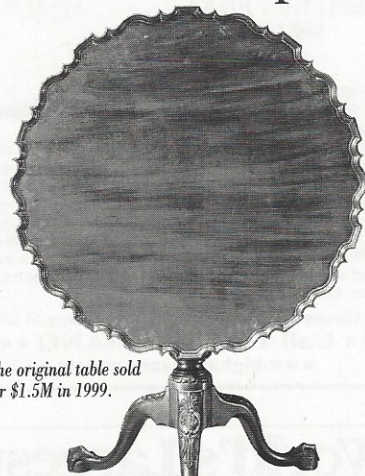
century later, having lived a life of public service, Franklin would write Mather's son, Samuel: "If I have been, as you seem to think, a useful citizen, the public owes the advantage of it to [your father's] book."

He even used Mather's book title as an inside joke to create the surname for his first literary alter ego, a fictional middle-aged widow named Silence Dogood. Her 14 letters, published in his brother's newspaper, the *Courant*, represent his first major public writing. By the time he had gotten to the eighth letter, published on July 2, 1722, the 16-year-old Franklin had gone beyond the gossipy humor with which he had begun the letters and embarked on what would become a lifelong working out of his philosophy in print: "WITHOUT Freedom of Thought," he wrote, "there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech; which is the



In June 1752, Benjamin, with his son William, actually then 21, demonstrated that lightning is electricity—winning the elder Franklin international fame and scientific immortality.

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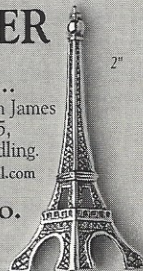
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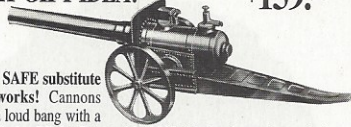
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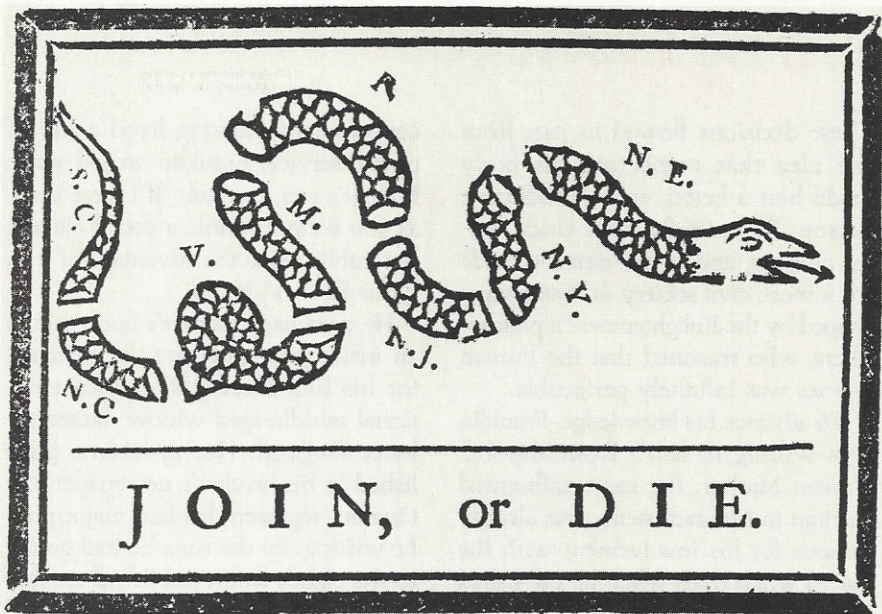
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Learning of French encroachment down the Ohio River in 1754, Franklin published in his *Gazette* this cartoon—perhaps the first—urging the colonies to unite.

Right of every Man, as far as by it, he does not hurt or controul the Right of another: And this is the only Check it ought to suffer, and the only Bounds it ought to Know.

"This sacred Privilege is so essential to free Governments, that the Security of Property, and the Freedom of Speech always go together. . . . Whoever would overthrow the Liberty of a Nation, must begin by subduing the Freeness of Speech. . . ."

In 1727 he proposed to a group of friends in Philadelphia that they join together to start what he called the "Junto." It was his first experience with the power of small associations. To create opportunities, he used the junto model again and again, spinning off clones when a small group grew too large. The groups could become a loose network of independent societies. The plan was particularly effective in the creation of fire companies, but he started a city watch and libraries with it as well.

At 22 he compiled a list of "virtues." He ranked his list according to how hard he thought it would be for him to attain each virtue, hardest last, and then set about working on them, one by one. The order is revealing. At the head of the list was Temperance; easy

for a man who had already decided against excessive drinking or eating. Then: Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility and, finally, the two really tough ones for him: Chastity and Humility.

In youth, biographer Carl Van Doren says, Franklin "went to women hungrily, secretly, and briefly." Before he entered into a marriage with Deborah Read Rogers, he fathered a child. The mother's identity was never known. Franklin acknowledged and reared the boy he named William.

Franklin was 24 when he and Deborah, a carpenter's daughter, were married by common law in September 1730. She was "a sturdy, handsome, high-coloured woman, untaught and sometimes turbulent, little interested in her husband's studies or speculations but devoted to him."

In 1732 a son, Francis, was born, only to die at age 4 from smallpox. Franklin would always mourn him. In 1743 a daughter, Sarah, known as Sally, was born; Franklin adored her.

There is no evidence that he was unfaithful to Deborah at any time in this period of their lives in Philadelphia, and he acknowledges in many places the debt he felt for all her sup-




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port of him. She called him "Pappy."

Once Franklin began to travel for the post office, however, they were apart for months at a time. During these trips around the colonies, he may have had affairs with younger women, although with whom or how many, we do not know.

Franklin's contemporaries thought him sensual, and he had a reputation for sexual innuendo. When John Jay's wife was visiting with Franklin in Passy while Jay was in England working on the peace treaty negotiations, Franklin took three magnets, and indicating one as Jay, the other his wife, he showed how the two magnets were drawn to each another. But introducing the third, which he described as a certain English lady, he showed how her attraction could become the stronger. Both Jay and his wife were amused by the story.

Franklin never saw Deborah again after he sailed to England in 1764 to continue his service as Pennsylvania's colonial agent. She died, at 66, in 1774, while Franklin was in London wrestling with the final deterioration of the colonial relationship.

His struggle with humility, which he had placed last on his list of virtues, turned out much more successfully than his attempts at chastity. One of the central influences that helped him in this was Freemasonry. He first learned of this secret society as a poor, young journeyman printer working in London. When the Lodge of St. John, the first in the colonies, was formed in Philadelphia, in 1727, he was becoming a man of considerable substance, master of a printing house and publisher of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, which he had purchased in 1729. He was inducted into the society in 1731.

Once inside the brotherhood, Franklin discovered it almost exactly mirrored his own beliefs. Its ascending degrees, like his list of virtues, were designed to help a man build a

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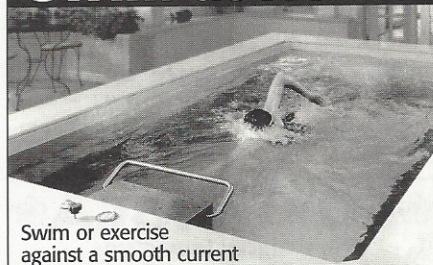
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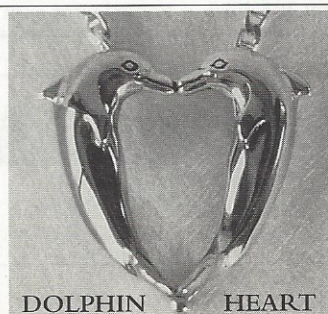


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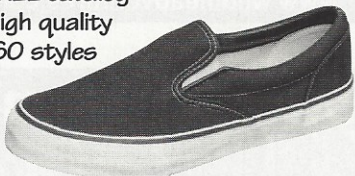
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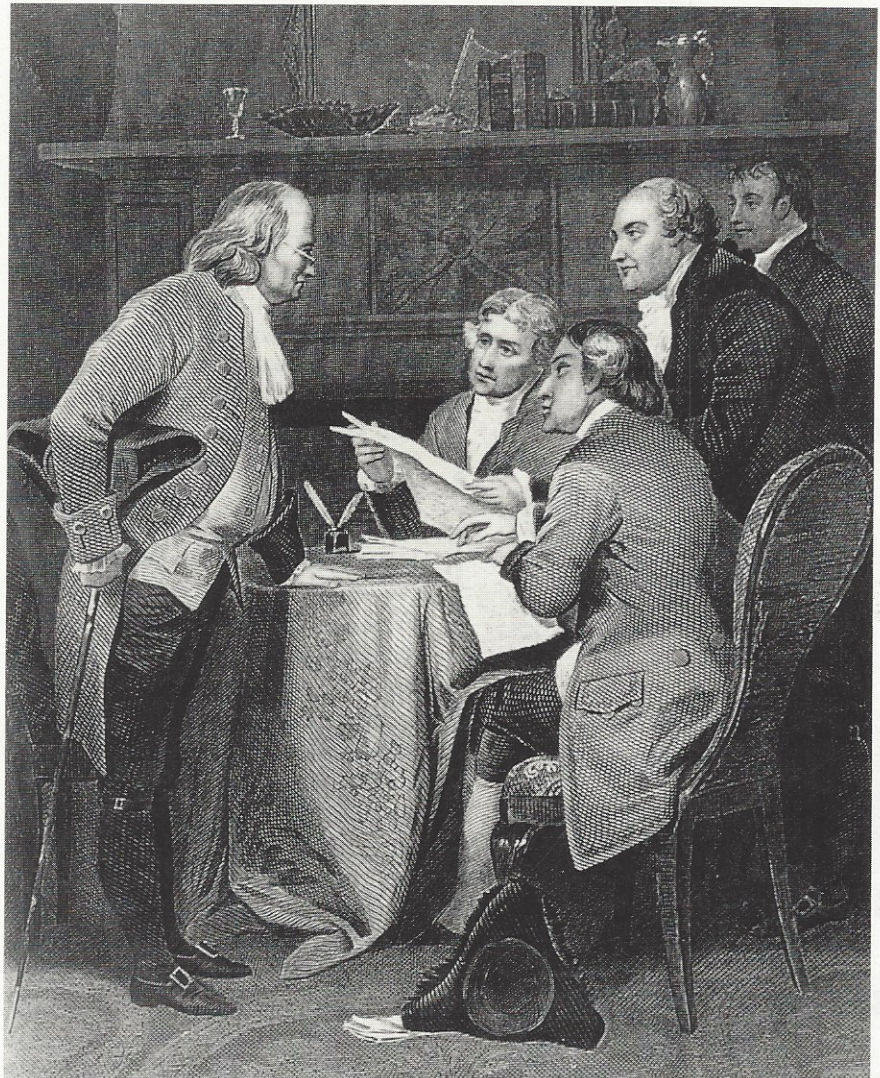


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In 1776 Benjamin Franklin was appointed with Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman and Robert B. Livingston to draft the Declaration of Independence from Britain.

life that was "four square and true" through hard work and fair dealing.

Had we visited him at that time, working in his printing house on Market Street in Philadelphia, we would have seen a prospering tradesman with both the charm and toughness of a self-made entrepreneur, proud, brilliant, a little aggressive, a bit too self-promoting, but endlessly well-intentioned and hardworking. And everyone agreed he had a presence about him. He seemed bigger than his five foot nine or ten. Although he sometimes spoke hesitantly, his voice was pleasant, and he was already using the disarming flow of humorous stories and snatches of songs that marked the conversation of

his later years. Once committed, he was decisive and tenacious.

On May 14, 1743, Franklin began work on his ultimate junto, the American Philosophical Society, which was modeled on the Royal Society, the leading intellectual association in Britain. We think of Franklin today principally for his experiments in electricity, particularly the indelible images of him flying a kite in a storm, but Franklin's contributions ranged across disciplines from climatology to oceanography to geology to medicine to what today we would call physics. By inviting the leading colonial natural scientists to join him in forming America's premiere intellectual society, he was exercising yet another variation

of his small-group model. As Masonry fed his spirit, so the American Philosophical Society and his memberships in the Royal Society (1756) and the French Academy of Science (1772) would come to feed his mind.

Back from his long embassy in France, in 1787 he was selected to be one of Pennsylvania's delegates to the Constitutional Convention. Immediately upon arriving in Philadelphia for the convention, George Washington paid an official call on Franklin, the only other man of comparable stature in the country.

Franklin was the oldest man at the Constitutional Convention, as he had been the oldest man in the Continental Congress in 1775. William Pierce of Georgia later wrote, "Dr. Franklin is well known to be the greatest philosopher of the present age. . . . he does not shine much in Public Council,—he is no Speaker, nor does he seem to let politics engage his attention. He is, however, a most extraordinary Man, and tells a story in a style more engaging than anything I ever heard. . . . He is 82 years old, and possesses an activity of mind equal to a youth of 25 years of age."

At the convention, Washington and Franklin acted as moderating forces. Washington spoke but once in formal sessions, and Franklin only infrequently. But each, in his own way, worked to see that the convention did not fly apart as the passionate debate over the nation's form of government went on.

One Friday afternoon, on the 13th of July 1787, during a break in the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention, lobbyist Manasseh Cutler called upon Franklin at his home on Market Street. Thanks to that visit we have a final word portrait of one of our history's most extraordinary figures. He was, said Cutler, "a short, fat, trunched old man, in a plain Quaker dress, bald pate, and short white locks, sitting without his hat under the tree. . . . His manners were

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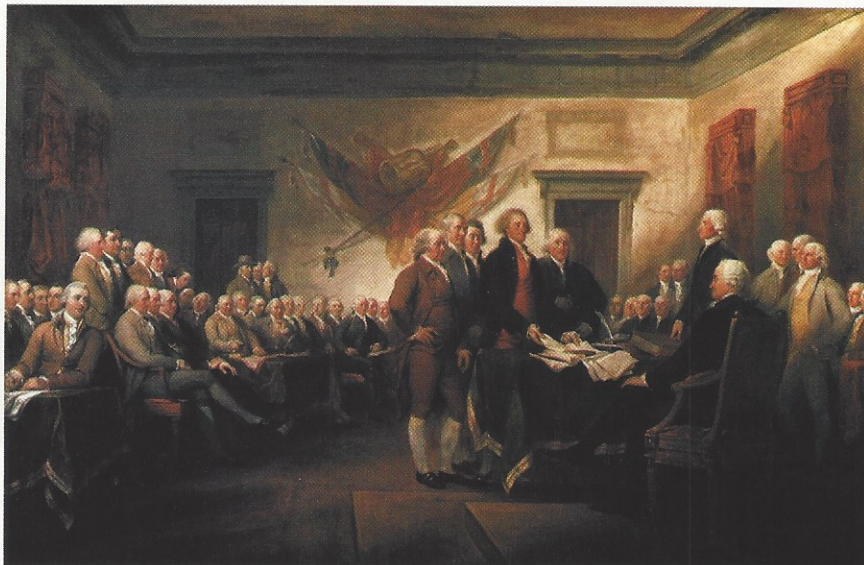
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At the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Franklin reputedly said, "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

perfectly easy, and everything about him seems to diffuse an unrestrained freedom and happiness. He has an incessant vein of humor, accompanied with an uncommon vivacity, which seems as natural and involuntary as his breathing."

Two years later, in 1789, Franklin's health was failing. With wisdom's long vision, he decided to amend his will. He stated his goal candidly: "I wish to be useful even after my Death, if possible, in forming and advancing other young men that may be serviceable to their Country. . . ."

He gave to Boston and Philadelphia each "One thousand Pounds Sterling." This money was to be loaned in small sums to "young married Artificers, under the Age of twenty-five Years, as have served an Apprenticeship in the said Town; and faithfully fulfilled the Duties required in their Indentures, so as to obtain a good moral Character from at least two respectable Citizens. . . ." Franklin clearly saw each set of three people—a young "Artificer" and two "respectable Citizens"—forming a small group. In this way individuals would join in small groups, strengthening their cities, their states and, ultimately, their nation.

The trusts would live on until dissolved in 1991, still in accordance with

Franklin's careful instructions. For 200 years they improved the lives of thousands of young families in Boston and Philadelphia, and they do so still, because the \$6.5 million in the trusts when they were dissolved was used to support educational programs for the same people Franklin had originally designed them to serve. His trusts anticipated the modern micro-lending programs of the famous Grameen Bank and similar efforts, which have had an empowering effect in many of today's nations.

By the fall of 1789 there was a sense that Franklin was dying, and people great and small began to say goodbye. One of the most moving farewells is in a letter Washington wrote. It says a lot about these two men who had grown old in their country's service, in the process forging a remarkable relationship, in spite of their very significant differences. The letter ends:

"If to be venerated for benevolence—if to be admired for talent—if to be esteemed for patriotism—if to be beloved for philanthropy, can gratify the human mind, you must have the pleasing consolation to know that you have not lived in vain; And I flatter myself that it will not be ranked among the least grateful occurrences of your life to be assured that so long


as I retain my memory—you will be thought on with respect, veneration and Affection by Your sincere friend
George Washington”

Franklin’s last great effort was dedicated to eliminating slavery from his new country. He had owned slaves, advertised their sale in his newspaper and even traded in human beings. But by 1751 he had begun to think the institution was philosophically and economically unsound. In 1787 he helped reinvigorate the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the first such society in America, by becoming its president.

When he wrote his will at the end of a life filled with honors and celebrity, he defined himself as: “I, Benjamin Franklin, of Philadelphia, printer, late Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States of America to the Court of France, now President of the State of Pennsylvania. . . .”

Franklin died about 11 o’clock Saturday night on April 17, 1790, three

months past his 84th birthday. His was the largest funeral that had ever been held in America. It was estimated that 20,000 people witnessed the procession and ceremony.

On April 22, James Madison moved that the House of Representatives wear mourning for a month. It passed unanimously without discussion. The Senate, though, would not agree. Jefferson took the matter to Washington, who rejected it, asking, if the practice were once begun, where the line would be drawn. “I told him,” Jefferson later wrote, “that the world had drawn so broad a line between him and Dr. Franklin, on the one side, and the residue of mankind, on the other, that we might wear mourning for them, and the question still remain new and undecided as to all others.” It is an appraisal two centuries of hindsight has only strengthened. 

Virginia-based writer Stephan A. Schwartz is working on a biography of George Mason.

FRANKLIN’S APHORISMS

A selection from his *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. (Note: The proverbs in the Almanack were not all Franklin’s own. He borrowed freely from “the wisdom of many ages and nations.”)

“Genius without Education is like Silver in the Mine.”

“Having been poor is no shame, but being ashamed of it, is.”

“Love your Enemies, for they tell you your Faults.”

“He’s a Fool that makes his Doctor his Heir.”

“Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”

“He that waits upon Fortune, is never sure of a Dinner.”

“To serve the Publick faithfully, and at the same time please it entirely, is impracticable.”

“Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards.”

“Search others for their virtues, thy self for thy vices.”

“Kings and Bears often worry their Keepers.”

“When the Well’s dry, we know the Worth of Water.”

“Little Strokes, Fell great Oaks.”

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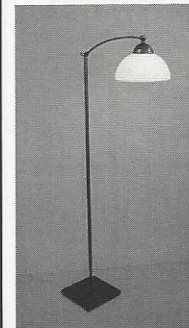
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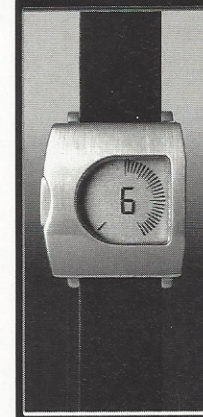
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