

Benjamin Franklin: The First American

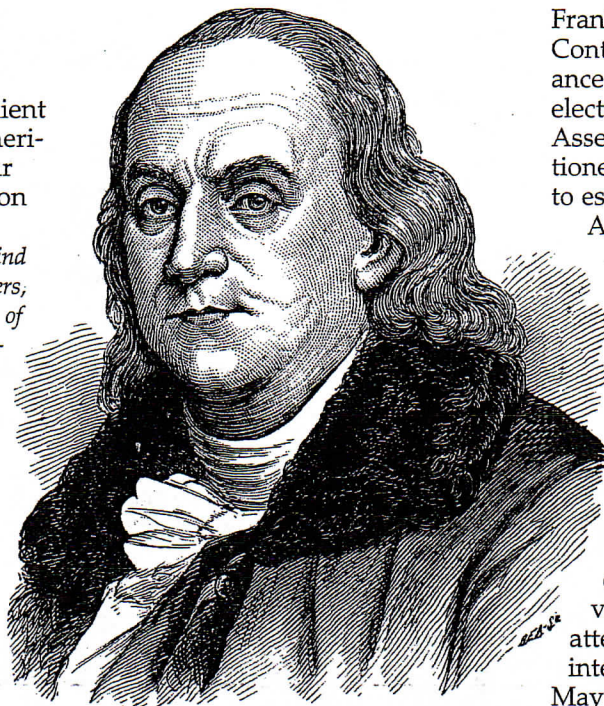
Michael Sletcher sings the praises of one of America's founding fathers

WHEN THE FRENCH immigrant J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782, he asked the salient question, "What then is the American, this new man?" Crèvecoeur attempted to answer the question himself:

He is an American, who leaving behind all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds... The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles.

Crèvecoeur might have shortened his answer by simply stating that Benjamin Franklin was this new American. Was it not Franklin, after all, who acted upon new principles and forged a new identity for himself, defying the ancient prejudices and manners of the old world? Franklin, more than any other founding father, embodied the character of the new nation. He had overcome poverty and the prejudices of the time, while at the same time defining the future course of American history. In short, he was the embodiment of America's future, and as the tercentenary year of his birth draws to an end, it is worth reconsidering just how important he was to the founding of the United States.

The Making of a Politician
On 1 January 1748, Franklin had acquired a small fortune as a printer, enough to retire at the young age of 42 and pursue his interests in science and politics. He had served as the clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly since 1736, as postmaster of Philadelphia since 1737, and had helped to form the first Pennsylvania militia a decade later to defend the



province against Spanish, French and Indian incursions. But it was only after retirement, when he had more free time, that he devoted himself endlessly to public life. In October 1748, for example, he was selected councilman, and justice of the peace for Philadelphia the following year. In 1751, the same year

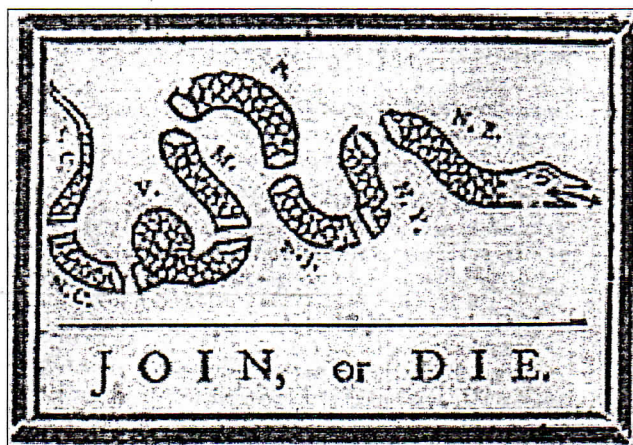
Franklin formed the Philadelphia Contributionship (the first insurance company in America), he was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly and successfully petitioned the Assembly for a charter to establish the first hospital in America. By 1753, he was appointed joint deputy postmaster-general of North America, and successfully reformed the postal service so that mail was delivered more frequently and, for the first time, the post office made a profit.

With the French incursions into the Ohio Valley and along the western borders of Virginia and Pennsylvania, Franklin soon shifted his attention from provincial to intercolonial politics. In early May 1754, he wrote and published an editorial in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* promoting the idea of colonial unification, in which he inserted a political cartoon of a snake cut into pieces with the caption, "JOIN, OR DIE." A month later, after the British government had called for an intercolonial conference with the objective of reaffirming Britain's alliance with the

Six Nations and arranging a common defense of the frontier, Franklin, as one of the delegates, drafted his plan of union while en route to Albany, New York.

According to the details of that plan, the colonies would be united under "one General Government", with the colonial assemblies sending representatives to the "Grand Council" and the Crown appointing a "President General".

Together they would oversee the general defense of British North America and pay for it by drawing on tax money, which, according to



Franklin's famous snake cartoon which he published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in May 1754. It was the first political cartoon in an American newspaper and first symbol of colonial unification.

the individual wealth of each colony, would be paid into the "General Treasury". After some revisions, the delegates at Albany passed Franklin's plan, but it was defeated by the colonial assemblies because they feared it gave too much power to Britain.

In London, British officials also rejected the plan, but because they feared it gave too much power to the colonies and might result in colonial independence. By December, Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts informed Franklin of the British counterproposal of a colonial union, which Franklin rejected on the grounds that it did not give the colonists the right to choose their own representatives, and also because Parliament did not have the right to tax the colonies without representation. In

a letter of 4 December 1754, long before the Stamp Act crisis, Franklin informed Shirley: "That it is suppos'd an undoubted Right of Englishmen not to be taxed but by their own Consent given thro' their Representatives."

Franklin's vision of colonial unification eventually found its expression in the "Articles of Confederation" and the Constitution of 1787, but in the meantime, he turned his attention to the defense of the frontier and the outcome of the French and Indian War. After a short stint as colonel in the Pennsylvania militia, the Assembly sent him to England, where he petitioned Parliament and the king to tax the proprietary lands of the Penn family.

At first Franklin had little success fulfilling his commission, but shortly after he arrived in 1757, he noticed that the British people and government were ill-informed about the colonies. And so he wrote "A Defense of the Americans", in which he defended the character and manners of American colonials, and *The Interest of*

Great Britain Considered, in which he promoted the economic and strategic advantages of Canada and influenced the British decision to claim Canada instead of Guadeloupe at the conclusion of the French and Indian War.

Franklin returned to Philadelphia in the summer of 1762, but he was soon back in England after the Pennsylvania Assembly commissioned him to petition the king about changing Pennsylvania's form of government from a proprietorship to royal province.

Immediately upon his arrival on 10 December 1764, Franklin was forced to devote much of his time to opposing Lord

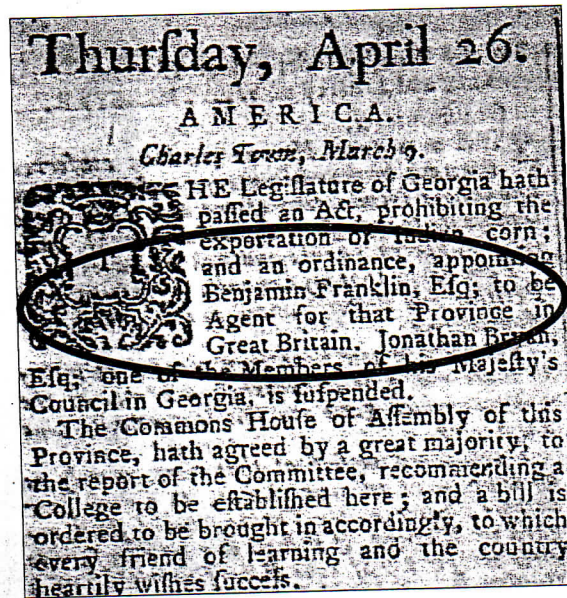


Above; Newspaper article c. 1772 announcing that Franklin had been appointed as a colonial agent to Georgia in Britain, see circled. Left; Benjamin Franklin being arraigned in 1774 by a committee of Lords for disloyalty to the Crown. Within days, he was dismissed as deputy postmaster-general of the Colonies.

Grenville's stamp tax. Parliament eventually repealed the Stamp Act, but for the next decade, Franklin found himself embroiled in one political crisis after another. With each successive attempt by Parliament to tax the colonies, Franklin defended the right of Americans to tax themselves and was consequently appointed an agent for Georgia, New Jersey and Massachusetts.

As colonial agent, Franklin, in late 1772, obtained the private letters of Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson and Lieutenant-Governor Andrew Oliver with the British Undersecretary of State Thomas Whatley, which he

then sent to Thomas Cushing, Speaker of the Massachusetts Assembly. The Assembly immediately petitioned King George III for Hutchinson's and Oliver's removal, and with Franklin's subsequent confession that he had been the one to send the letters to



Cushing, it was simply a matter of time before the British authorities queried him on the Hutchinson affair.

Independence

In what might be described as the defining moment when Franklin first considered the possibility of becoming a revolutionary, the Privy Council summoned the American agent to the Cockpit in Whitehall on 29 January 1774. For an hour, Solicitor-General Alexander Wedderburn castigated Franklin as a rogue and criminal while high British officials, many of whom Franklin knew quite well, sniggered and jeered. During

the session, Franklin, wearing a Manchester velvet suit, stood there stone-faced and silent, leaving no expression for what was the great public humiliation of his life.

For the next year, Franklin, who had been dismissed as deputy postmaster-general for North America, sought reconciliation with the mother country, but nothing came of it. On 20 March 1775, he sailed home with his grandson Temple, the illegitimate child of his son William who was the royal governor of New Jersey. He was immediately chosen a Pennsylvania delegate to the Second Continental Congress and joined the ranks of the radical faction. He participated in various committees and drafted his articles for confederation, which placed more emphasis on a central government than the "Articles of Confederation" and the Constitution of 1787, though most members of Congress did not support American independence and thought the articles too radical at the time.

By the following February, Franklin, now 70 years old, was appointed by Congress to accompany a small delegation to Canada and convince the French-Canadians to support the English colonies. Franklin made the long journey, suffering large boils, swelling of the legs, bouts of dizziness and the gout, but the mission was doomed from the outset with the American army's treatment of French-Canadians after the sieges of Montreal

and Quebec in 1775, and the English colonists' bigotry towards Catholicism after the Quebec Act of 1774. Franklin, nonetheless, made the hazardous journey and returned by the beginning of June, seriously ill. Soon he was serving on the committee for drafting a declaration of independence.

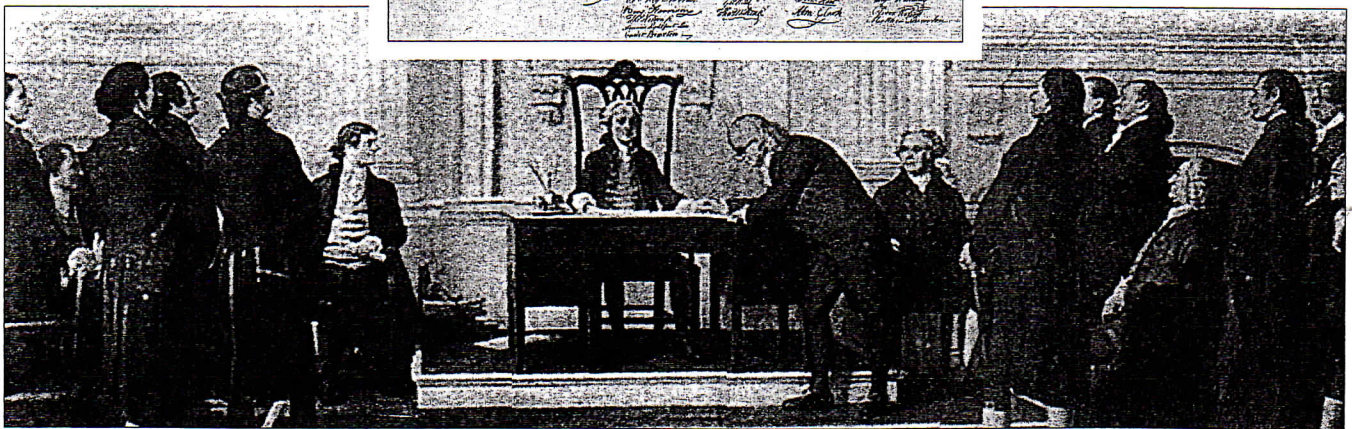
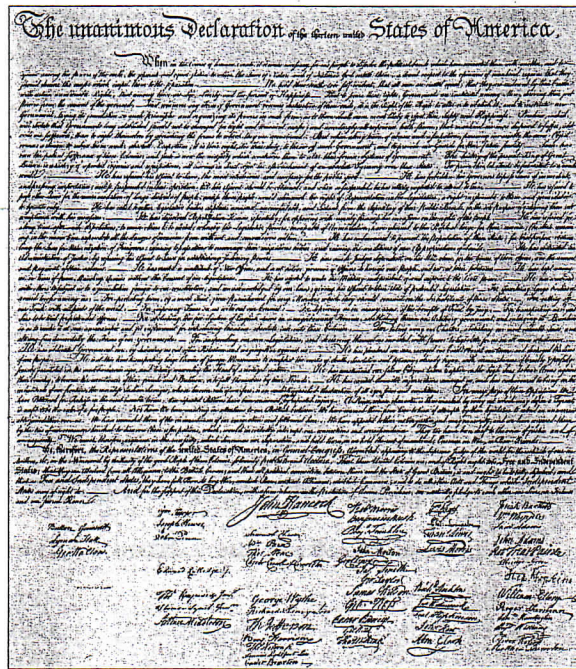
Although Thomas Jefferson is better known as the founding father who drafted the Declaration, it was Franklin and John Adams who edited and revised Jefferson's draft of the document before it was submitted to Congress. After Congress adopted the Declaration on 4 July 1776, Franklin was appointed president of the Pennsylvania State Convention and oversaw the framing of the state Constitution of 1776, the most democratic of all the state constitutions. Shortly thereafter, he received a congressional

commission, together with Silas Deane and Arthur Lee, to travel to France and obtain French aid for the revolutionary war.

Franklin arrived in France on 3 December 1776, and proceeded to Paris, where he met secretly with Charles Gravier, Count de Vergennes, the French foreign minister. The French welcomed him as an international celebrity. His simple dress and tastes, which Franklin knew the French philosophes had associated with Pennsylvania and Quakerism, appealed to the French, and despite the fact that he had come from the most metropolitan area in North America, Franklin played the role of the simple man, the rustic philosopher who wore no powdered wigs but rather his thin grey hair under a fur cap "which comes down my Forehead almost to my Spectacles."

For much of 1777, Franklin was patient about receiving French support. He knew that the French would refrain from openly supporting the Americans and thereby offending the British. At the same time, he knew that the French had an interest in reclaiming their possessions lost in the late French and Indian War, which had stripped Canada and parts of the West Indies from France and left Britain the dominant power in North America.

While the French refrained from openly supporting American independence, they discreetly opened their ports to



Franklin signs the Declaration of Independence, shown above, which Congress adopted on 4 July 1776, as peers look on.

American ships and provided small sums of financial aid to the revolutionary cause. Franklin continued to negotiate with Vergennes, but it was only after news of the American victory at Saratoga reached France on 4 December 1777, that the French were willing to sign a treaty of "Alliance" and a treaty of "Amity and Commerce". In an act of revenge for his public humiliation before the Privy Council, Franklin signed the treaties on 6 February 1778, wearing the same Manchester velvet suit he had worn on the day he appeared in the Cockpit at Whitehall. The French, shortly thereafter, sent a minister plenipotentiary to the United States, and Congress responded by appointing Franklin as American plenipotentiary to France.

As minister plenipotentiary, Franklin performed a variety of duties, which included borrowing money for Congress and the states, issuing passports, promissory notes, loan office certificates and letters of marque for American privateers. At the same time, he oversaw American propaganda, the affairs of the Continental Navy, the purchase of arms and supplies for the Continental Army, American intelligence in Europe and the humane treatment and exchange of American prisoners.

With the British defeat at Yorktown (October 1781) by the Americans and French expeditionary force under the command of Rochambeau, and the subsequent rise of the Rockingham ministry in Parliament, the British and Americans were ready to negotiate. A master diplomat, Franklin possessed the ability of presenting contrasting views to different audiences. When talking to the French, for example, he hoped to receive continuing financial support and reassured Vergennes that America would not negotiate a separate treaty with Britain. When talking to the British, from whom he hoped to obtain concessions, he left the

impression that he might sign a treaty without French consent. Franklin, who had congressional instructions to communicate any Anglo-American negotiations to the French, ignored Congress and told the British representative on 19 April 1782, that they must cede all of Canada to the United States before negotiations could take place. On July 10, while still ignoring congressional instructions, he revised his demand of surrendering Canada to an "Advisable" article and put forward the four



A mezzotint of Benjamin Franklin by German printmaker J.L. Rugendas, c. 1780.

articles he considered "necessary to be granted", which included (1) an acknowledgment of American independence, (2) a settlement of British-American colonial boundaries, (3) a confinement of Canada to its old borders, and (4) American access to the Newfoundland fisheries. Lord Shelburne, now the prime minister of Britain, accepted Franklin's necessary articles and negotiations began in earnest.

In the final draft of the peace treaty, now known as the Treaty of Paris (1783), Britain accepted Franklin's four articles, recognizing American independence, grant-

ing the US fishing rights in the Grand Banks and in the Gulf of the St. Lawrence, and retaining the borders of its loyal colonies (viz. Quebec). The United States, for its part, agreed to "earnestly recommend" to the state legislatures that they "provide for the restitution of all estates, rights, and properties" of Loyalists, and prevent any "future loss or damage" to them, either in "person, liberty, or property". The United States was now an independent country, which Franklin had helped to create while excluding France and other European powers whose influence might have affected the direction and stability of the new nation in the first years of independence.

Retirement

Shortly before Franklin left France in July 1785, he wrote that he would "now be free of Politicks for the Rest of my Life. Welcome again my dear Philosophical Amusements." He was now 79 and arrived in Philadelphia the following September, but the adoring public would not let him retire. Within a month, his "Fellow Citizens having in a considerable Body express'd their Desire" that he would "take a Post in their publick Councils", believing that he might be able to reconcile the contending parties, he "had not sufficient Firmness to refuse their Request." On October 11, he won his seat in the Council and was subsequently

chosen by a near unanimous vote, except his own and one other, president of the Supreme Executive Council (i.e. governor of Pennsylvania), a position he would hold annually for the next three years. As president, Franklin's main accomplishments were restoring the charter of the Bank of North America, reforming the penal code — thereby making only treason and murder a capital offense — and removing an addition to the 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution, which had required all voters to swear an oath of allegiance to the state constitution.

While president, Franklin also contributed to the framing of the federal Constitution. On 28 March 1787, he was chosen as a Pennsylvania delegate to the Constitutional Convention and put forward the "Great Compromise", calling for a bicameral legislature by which the House of Representatives was represented by population, and the Senate by each state equally. Franklin also argued, though unsuccessfully, for a more inclusive franchise and nonpayment of officers. On September 17, he concluded the Convention with a pro-ratification speech: "I agree to this Constitution, with all its faults... I consent, Sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best."

He then put forward the motion that the delegates sign the Constitution. As the last members were signing, Franklin looked towards the president's chair at the back of which was painted a rising sun and observed that painters had found it difficult to distinguish in their work a rising from a setting sun. "I have often and often, in the course of the session," he said to a few members near him, "and the vicissitudes of my hopes and fears as to its issue, looked at that behind the President, without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting; but now, at length, I have the happiness to know that it is a rising, and not a setting, sun."

Franklin's retirement as Pennsylvania's governor in October 1788 ended his political career, allowing him to pursue other interests. When he could not reach books on the high shelves in his library, he invented an instrument to take them down. He also invented a chair with a seat that unfolded to become a ladder, a chair with a writing arm on one side (later adopted in grammar schools) and a rocking chair with an automatic fan.

He also became an outspoken abolitionist. Although he had once owned domestic slaves, he had come to the conclusion that African-Americans were intellectual equals after he visited a Negro

school in Philadelphia during the early 1760s and took a more active role in the abolition movement after the revolutionary war. In April 1787, he was chosen president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and, a year before he died, he appealed to the public for funds and support for the abolition movement, while presenting Congress with the first remonstrance against slavery, though nothing came of it.

On 23 March 1790, less than a month before his death, Franklin wrote his last hoax, a parody on slavery which he published in the *Federal Gazette* two days later under the pseudonym of *Historicus*. In the hoax, a prominent Algerian Muslim defends the practice of the Barbary pirates enslaving Christians by answering the petition of an Algerian sect who oppose the enslavement of Christians. Who is going to "cultivate our lands", "perform the common labours of our city, and in our families", asks the Algerian, if not those "Christian dogs?" The parody compares the Algerian's speech with a recent defense of slavery in Congress by James Jackson, a representative from Georgia, and plays on the American abhorrence of Algerian pirates and their taking of Christian slaves.

The slavery hoax was Franklin's last publication during his lifetime. He died at home of pleurisy on April 17, surrounded by his friends and family (except William, his son who had taken the side of the Loyalists in the late war and was now an exile in London). He was buried at Christ Church, next to his wife who had died while her husband was an agent in England. An estimated 20,000 people in a city of about 30,000 followed or witnessed the funeral procession, the bells were muffled and tolled, eulogies were delivered at home and abroad, and legislatures wore the badge of mourning, including the French National Assembly. Franklin, the "first American", was now living among the dead, an apotheosis of American republicanism and its bright future. Even William Smith,

Franklin's old enemy, had to acknowledge his greatness, but John Adams, always jealous of his colleague, complained to his friend Benjamin Rush after hearing of Franklin's death:

The history of our revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiations, legislatures, and war.

Adams' prediction, however vindictive, was foretelling. Both Washington and Franklin now sit majestically, next to none, in the pantheon of the founding fathers. Yet, perhaps it is worth noting that, without the Revolution, Washington would be forgotten, whereas Franklin, as world-famous scientist, philosopher and wit, would be as well known as he is today. Even if we avoid counterfactual statements and narrow the lens of history to Washington's role in the Revolution, most of us do not acknowledge that it was de facto French aid — troops, navy, artillery, and money — secured by Franklin that defeated the British at Yorktown. As one British newspaper summed up the American Revolution on the eve of the final peace treaty, "It is hoped the philosophical world will once more profit by the abilities and genius of Dr. Franklin. The eminence he displayed as a natural philosopher, will long outlive his other actions, although in the heat of the present liberty influenza, he be considered as the saviour of America — For what would he, Washington, or all put together, have done without the interference of the French?" But the image of an American ambassador or that of a foreign power, especially the French, does not conjure up the best image of American heroism; in the end, it is the general, not Rochambeau nor Lafayette, but an American one, wearing a military uniform and riding a horse that conjures up the best image of the American revolutionary hero.