



The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin (1709-1790) was the prototype American—an American even before America existed. In fact, he is often called “The First American.” He is also the ultimate example of a Renaissance Man, a person with many talents and areas of knowledge. Franklin was an adept politician, helping to draft the Declaration of Independence and serving as the Colonies’ ambassador to France, who joined

them in their fight for independence. He was a brilliant scientist and inventor, creating inventions like bifocals, the lightning rod, the Franklin stove, and conducting (pun intended) experiments with electricity. He was a social innovator, developing public institutions like the fire station, sewer lines, paved streets, and the public library. At times he is a lofty proponent of virtue, outlining thirteen virtues that all people should live by. At others he is a witty scoundrel, penning humorous essays such as “Fart Proudly,” encouraging the scientific community to investigate ways to improve the smell of human flatulence.

Franklin was born in Boston as one of seventeen children, but he rose from poverty to eminence through the power of perseverance and hard work. The following are excerpts from his *Autobiography*.

My elder brothers were all put apprentices to different trades. I was put to the grammar school [school for learning Latin] at eight years of age, my father intending to devote me, as the title of his sons, to the service of the church. My early readiness in learning to read, (which must have been very early, as I do not remember when I could not read,) and the opinion of all his friends that I should certainly make a good scholar, encouraged him in this purpose of his....But my father in the meantime, from a view of the expense of a college education, which, having so large a family, he could not well afford, and the mean living many so educated were afterward able to obtain...altered his first intention, took me from the grammar school, and sent me to a school for writing and arithmetic, kept by a then famous man, Mr. George Brownell, very successful in his profession generally, and that by mild, encouraging methods. Under him I acquired fair writing pretty soon, but I failed in the arithmetic, and made no progress in it. At ten years old I was taken home to assist my father in his business, which was that of a tallow chandler [candlemaker] and soap boiler....Accordingly, I was employed in cutting wick for the candles, filling the dipping mold and the molds for cast candles, attending the shop, going of errands, etc. [Candles were made by dipping wicks in the fat a number of times, and also by setting the wicks in a mold and pouring the fat around them.]

I disliked the trade, and had a strong inclination for the sea, but my father declared against it. However, living near the water, I was much in and about it, learned early to swim well and

to manage boats....From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books....This bookish inclination at length determined my father to make me a printer, though he had already one son (James) of that profession. In 1717 my brother James returned from England with a press and letters to set up his business in Boston. I liked it much better than that of my father, but still had a hankering for the sea. To prevent the apprehended effect of such an inclination, my father was impatient to have me bound to my brother. I stood out some time, but at last was persuaded and signed the indentures [paperwork] when I was yet but twelve years old. I was to serve as an apprentice till I was twenty-one years of age, only I was to be allowed journeyman's wages during the last year. In a little time I made great proficiency in the business, and became a useful hand to my brother. I now had access to better books. An acquaintance with the apprentices of booksellers enabled me sometimes to borrow a small one, 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. *Note: Franklin would later turn his frustration with borrowing books into the idea of a public library, where books could be borrowed by anyone.*

After Franklin's brother is imprisoned for publishing a critique of the local government, Benjamin decides it is a good time to assert his independence and leave his brother's printing press.

When [my brother] found I would leave him, he took care to prevent my getting employment in any other printing house of the town, by going round and speaking to every master, who accordingly refused to give me work. I then thought of going to New York, as the nearest place where there was a printer, and I was rather inclined to leave Boston when I reflected that I had already made myself a little obnoxious to the governing party, and, from the arbitrary proceedings of the Assembly in my brother's case, it was likely I might, if I stayed, soon bring myself into scrapes, and, further, that my indiscreet disputations about religion began to make me pointed at with horror by good people as an infidel or atheist. I determined on the point, but, my father now siding with my brother, I was sensible that, if I attempted to go openly, means would be used to prevent me. My friend Collins, therefore, undertook to manage a little for me. He agreed with the captain of a New York sloop [one-masted sailboat] for my passage, under the notion of my being a young acquaintance of his that had got into trouble, and therefore I could not appear or come away publicly. So I sold some of my books to raise a little money, was taken on board privately, and, as we had a fair wind, in three days I found myself in New York, near three hundred miles from home, a boy of but seventeen, without the least recommendation to, or knowledge of, any person in the place, and with very little money in my pocket.

My inclinations for the sea were by this time worn out, or I might now have gratified them. But, having a trade, and supposing myself a pretty good workman, I offered my service to the printer in the place, old Mr. William Bradford [not to be confused with the Mayflower Pilgrim leader], who had been the first printer in Pennsylvania, but removed from thence upon the quarrel of George Keith. He could give me no employment, having little to do and help enough already; but says he, "My son at Philadelphia has lately lost his principal hand, Aquila Rose, by death; if you go thither I believe he may employ you." Philadelphia was a hundred miles

farther; I set out, however, in a boat for Amboy, leaving my chest and things to follow me round by sea.

In crossing the bay we met with a squall that tore our rotten sails to pieces, prevented our getting into the Kill [the strait between Staten Island and New Jersey] and drove us upon Long Island. In our way, a drunken Dutchman, who was a passenger too, fell overboard. When he was sinking, I reached through the water to his shock pate [shaggy head], and drew him up so that we got him in again. His ducking sobered him a little, and he went to sleep, taking first out of his pocket a book, which he desired I would dry for him....When we drew near the island we found it was at a place where there could be no landing, there being a great surf on the stony beach. So we dropped anchor, and swung round toward the shore. Some people came down to the water edge and hallooed to us, as we did to them; but the wind was so high and the surf so loud that we could not hear so as to understand each other. There were canoes on the shore, and we made signs, and hallooed that they should fetch us; but they either did not understand us or thought it impracticable, so they went away, and night coming on, we had no remedy but to wait till the wind should abate. In the meantime, the boatman and I concluded to sleep if we could, and so crowded into the scuttle with the Dutchman, who was still wet, and the spray beating over the head of our boat leaked through to us, so that we were soon almost as wet as he. In this manner we lay all night, with very little rest; but the wind abating the next day, we made a shift to reach Amboy before night, having been thirty hours on the water, without victuals, or any drink but a bottle of filthy rum, the water we sailed on being salt.

In the evening I found myself very feverish, and went in to bed; but, having read somewhere that cold water, drunk plentifully, was good for a fever, I followed the prescription, sweat plentifully most of the night, my fever left me, and in the morning, crossing the ferry, I proceeded on my journey on foot, having fifty miles to Burlington, where I was told I should find boats that would carry me the rest of the way to Philadelphia.

It rained very hard all the day. I was thoroughly soaked, and by noon a good deal tired, so I stopped at a poor inn, where I stayed all night, beginning now to wish that I had never left home. I cut so miserable a figure, too, that I found, by the questions asked me, I was suspected to be some runaway servant and in danger of being taken up on that suspicion. However, I proceeded the next day, and got in the evening to an inn, within eight or ten miles of Burlington, kept by one Dr. Brown. He entered into conversation with me while I took some refreshment, and, finding I had read a little, became very sociable and friendly. Our acquaintance continued as long as he lived. He had been, I imagine, an itinerant doctor; for there was no town in England, or country in Europe, of which he could not give a very particular account.

At his house I lay that night, and the next morning reached Burlington, but had the mortification to find that the regular boats were gone a little before my coming, and no other expected to go before Tuesday, this being Saturday; wherefore I returned to an old woman in the town of whom I had bought gingerbread to eat on the water, and asked her advice. She invited me to lodge at her house till a passage by water should offer; and, being tired with my foot traveling, I accepted the invitation. She, understanding I was a printer, would have had me stay at that town and follow my business, being ignorant of the stock necessary to begin with. She was very hospitable, gave me a dinner of ox cheek with great good will, accepting only of a

pot of ale in return; and I thought myself fixed till Tuesday should come. However, walking in the evening by the side of the river, a boat came by, which I found was going toward Philadelphia, with several people in her. They took me in, and, as there was no wind, we rowed all the way, and about midnight, not having yet seen the city, some of the company were confident we must have passed it, and would row no farther. The others knew not where we were; so we put toward the shore, got into a creek, and landed near an old fence, with the rails of which we made a fire, the night being cold, in October, and there we remained till daylight. Then one of the company knew the place to be Cooper's Creek, a little above Philadelphia, which we saw as soon as we got out of the creek, and arrived there about eight or nine o'clock on the Sunday morning, and landed at the Market Street wharf.

I have been the more particular in this description of my journey, and shall be so of my first entry into that city, that you may in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there. I was in my working dress, my best clothes being to come round by sea. I was dirty from my journey; my pockets were stuffed out with shirts and stockings, and I knew no soul, nor where to look for lodging. I was fatigued with traveling, rowing, and want of rest; I was very hungry; and my whole stock of cash consisted of a Dutch dollar and about a shilling in copper. The latter I gave the people of the boat for my passage, who at first refused it, on account of my rowing; but I insisted on their taking it, a man being sometimes more generous when he has but a little money than when he has plenty, perhaps through fear of being thought to have but little.

Then I walked up the street, gazing about, till near the market house I met a boy with bread. I had made many a meal on bread, and, inquiring where he got it, I went immediately to the baker's he directed me to, in Second Street, and asked for biscuit, intending such as we had in Boston; but they, it seems, were not made in Philadelphia. Then I asked for a threepenny loaf, and was told they had none such. So not considering or knowing the difference of money and the greater cheapness, nor the names of his bread, I bade him give me threepenny worth of any sort. He gave me, accordingly, three great puffy rolls. I was surprised at the quantity, but took it, and, having no room in my pockets, walked off with a roll under each arm, and eating the other. Thus I went up Market Street as far as Fourth Street, passing by the door of Mr. Read, my future wife's father; when she, standing at the door, saw me, and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward, ridiculous appearance. Then I turned and went down Chestnut Street and part of Walnut Street, eating my roll all the way, and, coming round, found myself again at Market Street wharf, near the boat I came in, to which I went for a draught of the river water; and, being filled with one of my rolls, gave the other two to a woman and her child that came down the river in the boat with us, and were waiting to go farther.

Thus refreshed, I walked again up the street, which by this time had many clean-dressed people in it, who were all walking the same way. I joined them, and thereby was led into the great meetinghouse of the Quakers near the market. I sat down among them, and, after looking round awhile and hearing nothing said, being very drowsy through labor and want of rest the preceding night, I fell fast asleep, and continued so till the meeting broke up, when one was kind enough to rouse me. This was, therefore, the first house I was in, or slept in, in Philadelphia...

Eventually, after a series of misadventures and setbacks, Franklin creates a newspaper publishing business in Philadelphia and finds his way into politics.

It was about this time 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 either 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 I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded at length that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and 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 fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. **TEMPERANCE.** Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. **SILENCE.** Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. **ORDER.** Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. **RESOLUTION.** Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. **FRUGALITY.** Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. **INDUSTRY.** Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. **SINCERITY.** Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. **JUSTICE.** Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. **MODERATION.** Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

10. **CLEANLINESS.** Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.
11. **TRANQUILITY.** Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. **CHASTITY.** Rarely use venery [sex] but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. **HUMILITY.** Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

My intention being to acquire the habitude of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone through the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arranged them with that view as they stand above....

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I ruled each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I crossed these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day....

FORM OF THE PAGES

TEMPERANCE							
<i>Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.</i>							
	S.	M.	T.	W.	T.	F.	S.
Temperance							
Silence	*	*		*		*	
Order	**	*	*		*	*	*
Resolution			*			*	
Frugality		*			*		
Industry			*				
Sincerity							
Justice							
Moderation							
Cleanliness							
Tranquility							
Chastity							
Humility							

Franklin's Autobiography was one of the first autobiographies written for a non-religious purpose. Its simple purpose was to tell Franklin's life story in order to instruct others how to live better, and its success encouraged others to do the same. In our day and age, the autobiography is a popular art form.

Franklin lived long enough to attend the Constitutional Convention and add his name to the signatories of the Constitution of the United States of America. At the time of his death, at 81 years of age, Franklin was esteemed by his countrymen just as highly as George Washington himself.

QUESTIONS

1. Does Franklin deserve his reputation as one of the greatest Americans? Explain.
2. Why do you think Franklin chose to leave Boston in secret?
3. What does Franklin's arduous trip from Boston to Philadelphia show about his character? Explain. (Consider the virtues that he has listed.)
4. Do you think all of Franklin's *Autobiography* is truthful? Do some of his actions sound too good to be true? Is he creating a fictional character called "Myself" and making him into a better version of himself than lived in real life? Explain.
5. Franklin's *Autobiography* helped solidify the idea of the American Dream, that one can go from "rags to riches" through talent and hard work. How is Franklin's life an example of the American Dream? Explain.
6. Which of Franklin's thirteen virtues do you think is the most important? Explain.
7. What are five virtues that you could work to improve in your own life? Explain.
8. Why do you think Franklin worked so diligently to improve America?

POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK

Other than his Autobiography, one of Franklin's greatest successes as a writer was the publication of Poor Richard's Almanack. In Franklin's day every house had an almanac, which calculated the tides, the phases of the moon, claimed to forecast the weather for the next year, and also provided recipes, jokes, and aphorisms. Below are some famous sayings from Franklin's witty almanac.



1. Well done is better than well said.
2. One today is worth two tomorrows.
3. A good example is the best sermon.
4. Love your neighbor, yet don't pull down your hedge.
5. If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.
6. Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.
7. Tart words make no friends. A spoonful of honey will catch more flies than a gallon of vinegar.
8. He that lieth down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.
9. Glass, china, and reputation are easily cracked and never well mended.
10. Fish and visitors smell in three days.
11. If you would know the value of money, go and try to borrow some. He that goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing.
12. If a man would have half his wishes, he would double his troubles.
13. A small leak will sink a great ship.
14. Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterward.
15. Nothing brings more pain than too much pleasure; nothing more bondage than too much liberty.
16. Little strokes fell great oaks.
17. Those who in quarrels interpose must often wipe a bloody nose.
18. Remember that time is money.
19. There was never a good war or a bad peace.
20. Genius without education is like silver in the mine.
21. A penny saved is a penny earned.
22. A man without a wife is but half a man.
23. Speak little; do much.

24. Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
25. God helps them that help themselves.
26. The rotten apple spoils his companion.
27. A place for everything, everything in its place.
28. Anger is never without a reason, but seldom with a good one.
29. Creditors have better memories than debtors.
30. Even peace may be purchased at too high a price.
31. He that displays too often his wife and his wallet is in danger of having both of them borrowed.
32. He who falls in love with himself will have no rivals.
33. Honesty is the best policy.
34. If you know how to spend less than you get, you have the Philosopher's Stone.
35. Never leave that till tomorrow which you can do today.
36. Take time for all things: Great haste makes great waste.
37. No gains without pains.
38. Be slow in choosing a friend, slower in changing.
39. A slip of the foot you may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over.
40. The doors of wisdom are never shut.

QUESTIONS

1. Which of these sayings have you heard before?
2. How is Franklin's humor evident in these sayings?
3. Which saying do you agree with the most? Explain why.
4. **Connect:** Make an illustrated poster of one of these sayings.