

# Benjamin Franklin

(1706–1790)

Few people have been so energetically devoted to improvement as Benjamin Franklin. Born in Boston, one of seventeen children, he rose from poverty to eminence even though he had to leave school early in order to work. By the time he was twenty-four, Franklin was a prosperous merchant, owner of a successful print shop, and publisher of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. He helped found the Academy of Philadelphia (which became the University of Pennsylvania), the American Philosophical Society, and the first public library in America. Franklin was a scientist and an important inventor: His research, especially on electricity, resulted in his election to England's Royal Society. In addition, he invented an open heating stove (called a Franklin stove), bifocal eyeglasses, a type of harmonica, and a rocking chair that could swat flies.

Franklin also possessed uncommon talents as a diplomat and negotiator, and he used these skills in the service of his state and his country. Franklin lived in London in the 1750s and '60s, representing the interests of Pennsylvania as an agent of the Pennsylvania Assembly. A decade later he was back in London lobbying for the Colonies in their dispute with Britain, hoping to bring about a reconciliation that would prevent war. Franklin's wit and charm made him enormously popular in London for many years; he once said that he was invited out to dinner there six nights a week. But by 1774, when he was sixty-eight, the stress between Britain and the Colonies had become too great. The king's Privy Council publicly attacked Franklin for his policies, and the British press called him an "old snake." Franklin finally relinquished his hopes for peace and sailed for America in 1775.

When Franklin arrived home, he was greeted with news that the first battles of



Benjamin Franklin (1777) after Jean Baptiste Greuze. Oil on canvas (28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" × 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>").

the Revolutionary War had been fought at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts.

"The shot heard round the world" had been fired. After helping to draft the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Franklin left for Paris to negotiate the treaty that brought the French into the war on America's side.

In Paris, Franklin was even more popular than he had once been in England. He played the role of the sophisticated but homespun American to the hilt. When the Revolution was over, he helped negotiate the peace. In 1787, Franklin served as a member of the Constitutional Convention. His death three years later was cause for international mourning.

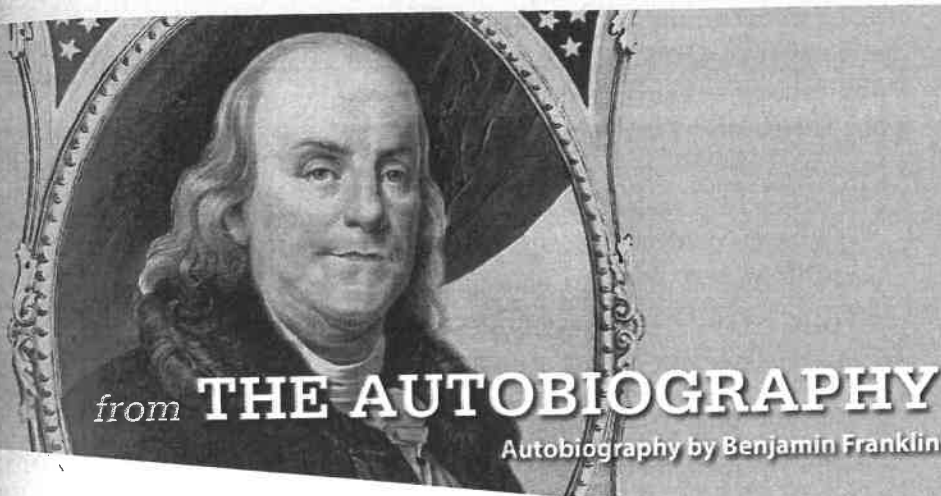
Franklin's practicality, like the success story of his life, is typically American, but it has not been universally admired throughout the nation's history. The American novelist Herman Melville deplored Franklin's lack of imagination: "Jack-of-all-trades, master of each and mastered by none—the type and genius of his land. Franklin was everything but a poet."

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## BACKGROUND

**Benjamin Franklin** (1706–1790) was the oldest of the founders. He was 69 when he was sent as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress where he assisted Thomas Jefferson in drafting the Declaration of Independence. But by that time, he'd already had a remarkable life, finding success as a printer, publisher, scientist, inventor, businessman, philosopher, postmaster, and statesman. He was also a prolific writer, producing volumes of essays, travel journals, newspaper articles, almanacs, speeches, and more. His autobiography, however, was his masterpiece, and it is still popular today.



## SETTING A PURPOSE

As you read, look for details that reveal Franklin's practical nature, even as he shows his faith in reason, order, and human perfectibility—common ideas in the 18th century.

1 **I**t 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.

## Notice & Note

Use the side margins to notice and note signposts in the text.

## MONITOR COMPREHENSION

**Annotate:** Mark the words in the first paragraph that Franklin uses to describe the project.

**Analyze:** What questions do you have about Franklin's project so far?

**contrive**  
(kən-trīv') v. to plan skillfully; to design.



## NOTICE & NOTE

### EVALUATE PRINT AND GRAPHIC FEATURES

**Annotate:** Mark where Franklin's list of virtues begins.

**Analyze:** Why does Franklin organize the virtues in this way?

#### trifling

(trī'fling) *adj.* frivolous; inconsequential.

2 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.

3 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. **Tranquillity.** Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. **Chastity.** Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. **Humility.** Imitate Jesus and Socrates.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> **Socrates** (sōk' rə-tēz): Greek philosopher (470?–399 BC) who believed that true knowledge comes through dialogue and systematic questioning of ideas.



4 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. Temperance first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the **unremitting** attraction of ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, Silence would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave *Silence* the second place. This and the next, *Order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. *Resolution*, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues; *Frugality* and Industry freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing **affluence** and independence, would make more easy the practice of Sincerity and Justice, etc., etc.

Form of the pages.

TEMPERANCE							
eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.							
	S.	M.	T.	W.	T.	F.	S.
T.							
S.	.	.		.		.	
O.	..	.	.		.	.	.
R.			.			.	
F.		.			.		
I.			.	.			
S.							
J.							
M.							
C.							
T.							
C.							
H.							

**MONITOR COMPREHENSION**

**Annotate:** Mark the sentence in paragraph 4 describing the process Franklin chose.

**Paraphrase:** Reread the sentence slowly and carefully. Then, describe Franklin's process in your own words.

**unremitting**  
(ūn rī-mīt'ing) *adj.* constant; never stopping.

**affluence**  
(āf'loo-əns) *n.* wealth.

**EVALUATE PRINT AND GRAPHIC FEATURES**

**Annotate:** Mark the area of the chart that shows Franklin succeeded in being temperate for most of the week.

**Analyze:** Does the information in the chart suggest Franklin will succeed on his project? Explain.



## NOTICE & NOTE

### EXTREME OR ABSOLUTE LANGUAGE

**Notice & Note:** Mark the statement in paragraph 6 that contains extreme or absolute language.

**Interpret:** Explain whether Franklin is stating an uncompromising position or an exaggeration.

**eradicate**  
(i-rād'ī-kāt) v. tear up by the roots; eliminate.

Conceiving then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Golden Verses,<sup>2</sup> daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

5 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.

6 I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every<sup>3</sup> the least offense against *Temperance*, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I supposed the habit of that virtue so much strengthened, and its opposite weakened, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go through a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to **eradicate** all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and, having accomplished the first, proceeds to a second, so I should have, I hoped, the encouraging pleasure of seeing on my pages the progress I made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots, till in the end, by a number of courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after thirteen weeks' daily examination. . . .

7 The precept of *Order* requiring that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*, one page in my little book contained the following scheme of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day.

8 I entered upon the execution of this plan for self-examination, and continued it with occasional intermissions for some time. I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish. To avoid the trouble of renewing now and then my little book, which, by scraping out the marks on the paper of old faults to make room for new ones in a new course, became full of holes, I transferred my tables and precepts to the ivory leaves of a memorandum book, on which the lines were drawn with red ink, that made a durable stain, and on

<sup>2</sup> **Pythagoras** (pī-thäg'ər-əs). . . **Golden Verses:** Pythagoras was a Greek philosopher.

<sup>3</sup> **every:** even.