

Project Starfish/Capstone

19 May 2016

Benjamin Franklin: Statesman and Legend

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1706. Benjamin Franklin had many talents, virtues, and contributions to society. He is known for being a founding father of the United States as an independent nation and has the unique distinction of having signed all three of the major documents that freed the colonies from British rule: the Declaration of Independence, The Treaty of Paris, and the United States Constitution (Morgan 2016). He was an inventor, educator, moral man, public servant and postmaster.

He was raised in a religious home; however, it was not a Quaker home as has been largely believed. His father was a member of Boston's Old South Church who raised his son on the teachings of New England Calvinism. Franklin's father wanted him to become a minister. When his father could no longer pay for schooling, Franklin was forced to work for his older brother, James, who was a Boston printer (Fea 2011). Although he didn't become a minister, his religion stuck with him throughout his adult life. Franklin believed in a God who possessed great wisdom, goodness, and power. He wrote:

I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by His Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him, is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this...As for Jesus of Nazareth...I think the system of Morals and Religion as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw...but I have...some Doubts to his Divinity; though it is a Question I do not dogmatism upon, having never studied it, and think it is needless to busy myself with it now, where I expect soon an Opportunity of Knowing the Truth with less Trouble (*Religion and Early Politics*).

When he got older, he started to question his religion and created his own set of commandments or virtues. Franklin was still sympathetic to his Christian religion and went to church services sometimes, if only for a little while. Franklin believed religion wasn't necessary in order to have a virtuous and ethical life. Despite his religious indecision, Franklin went on to be a very successful member of early Philadelphia society by contributing to the postal system, the penal system and the literary community (Kershaw 2012).

Franklin was named postmaster for all of the colonies in 1753. At the time, it took a long time for mail to get to where it was going. Before Benjamin Franklin became the postmaster, mail was only delivered twice in the winter. Franklin was able to get the mail delivered every week by having the mail travel by stagecoach. Since the fee for mailing was determined by distance, Franklin made a machine to measure the distance.

Before Franklin's innovation in the postal system, people had to go to collect their mail and pay for it at that time of pick-up (Ellis 2016). Through his leadership in the post office, Benjamin Franklin brought the colonies together (Ellis 2016). In naming Benjamin Franklin as the first Postmaster General, Congress helped to create an institution that greatly helped the new nation (*History of the United States Post Office*).

At the same time that Benjamin Franklin was serving the colonial postal system, he also helped to establish a much quoted reference book: *Poor Richard's Almanac*. *Poor Richard's Almanac* was written between the years of 1732-1758. The Almanac was mostly a book of quotations and it also had calendars, weather, and the occasional mathematical exercises. Benjamin Franklin wrote under a pseudonym Richard Saunders. Franklin didn't write very many of his own proverbs. He wrote about one out of every ten; the rest he found in books. Franklin was very famous for writing *Poor Richard's Almanac* because he wrote it for the common people

"who bought scarce any other books" (Lapore 2016). Franklin kept his house and print shop on Market Street where he sold his almanac for two pence each. Over the course of his life, Franklin used dozens of pennames with Poor Richard being the most famous. Some of Franklin's famous proverbs are: "Nothing dries sooner than a tear. He that bests understands the world, least likes it. The masterpiece of man is to live to the purpose. Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" (Franklin 1914).

Perhaps one of Benjamin Franklin's most enduring legacies was his participation in the creation of the first penal system in the new United States. In 1787, four years after the American Revolutionary War, Philadelphia was prime location for discussion of the new nation. During the summer, delegates such as Alexander Hamilton and James Madison were gathered at Independence Hall to draft what would later become the Constitution. A couple of blocks away from Independence Hall, at the home of Benjamin Franklin, another group of leaders gathered to debate a different matter: prison reform (Woodham).

The roots of America's modern prison system go back to an idea hatched in Benjamin Franklin's living room. The group of Philadelphians, many of whom belonged to the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, read a pamphlet calling for the construction of a:

House of repentance in which solitude could work to soothe the minds of criminals - an enlightened alternative, the group believed, to inhumane public punishments like the gallows, the pillory, the stocks, the whipping post, and the wheelbarrow (Starbenz 2015).

More than 30 years later, the ideas discussed that day led to the creation of The Eastern State Penitentiary, widely considered one of the first modern prisons (Starbenz 2015). The

legacy Benjamin Franklin left on the penal system through the Eastern State Penitentiary was the idea of solitary confinement and the reformation of prisoners.

Benjamin Franklin died in 1790, in Philadelphia, PA. In looking back over the life span of this seemingly simple man, in our lives today, Benjamin Franklin is still with us. His ideals in religion, ethics, and morals are still viable today. Benjamin Franklin gave us our modern, humane, government controlled prison system. People still read *Poor Richard's Almanac* for the quotations and the book can be found in libraries for reference in early American history. The efficiency Benjamin Franklin instilled in the post office helps our mail and packages get where it is supposed to go on time. Benjamin Franklin was more than an inventor, educator, moral man, public servant or postmaster. Benjamin Franklin is one of America's greatest leaders, a statesman and legend.

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