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Benjamin Franklin: An American Innovator

To many historians, Benjamin Franklin was a jack of all trades and a master of many too. Benjamin Franklin was involved in many activities that promoted the formation of our nation and the furtherance of science. Many of Ben Franklin's inventions seem commonplace in the 21st Century because of their widespread use. Although Franklin's inventions may seem somewhat simplistic to a modern society, in contrast many of his unique lifetime achievements still stand out today. His life experience can be examined in three stages, his childhood, his young adulthood and his old age.

Benjamin Franklin was born on January 17, 1706 (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). His father was a dyer. This career was not very lucrative. When he could no longer make a living as a dyer he became a candle maker. This occupation was considered socially lower (Clark 11). Franklin had a happy and unremarkable upbringing in his hometown of Boston (Clark 12). As an offering or tithe to God, his father planned for Ben to enter service for God through the Church (Franklin, "Autobiography" 4). This was rather symbolic since in Christianity a tithe is a required tenth of all that you own that is given to the church. "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD" (Lev. 27.30). Even as a child, Franklin had a natural ability to be a leader and creative thinker. He came up with an idea to build a wharf in a pond using the stones that were intended for the construction of a house and then he directed his playmates in that construction

(Franklin, "Autobiography" 5). His inquiring mind never rested. As a child he devised swimming fins to increase his speed in the water (It's the Little Things). When he was young he loved to read. "From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was [spent on] books" (Franklin, "Autobiography" 7). Ben's quest for personal knowledge continued throughout his entire life. When he turned twelve, he went to work at his brother James print shop (Miller). Shortly after he started to work for his brother, he wrote a poem about a shipwreck. His brother enjoyed the poem and published it (Miller). In Colonial Times, printers played a vital role in society. Printers published government documents and many personal documents; everyone went to the printer (Miller). While he worked for his brother, Ben was continually mistreated by James. James was a free thinker and often expressed his thoughts in the press. The inflammatory remarks he made in the press caused James problems that led to his imprisonment. Even though Ben kept the press going during James' imprisonment, once James returned home, he continued to beat Ben (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). After some time working as an apprentice for his brother, Franklin could no longer handle the abusive relationship he had with his brother and he left his job at the press and Boston in 1723 (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). When he left Ben was also free from his indentured status with his brother, because of a legal move James made to elude the closure of his printing press (Clark 22-23).

When Franklin left home he headed for New York. Once he was there he unfortunately could not find employment as a printer (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). Eventually, he traveled to Philadelphia. Serendipitously the first thing he did upon his arrival to Philadelphia was get something to eat. As he left the bakery, Franklin

met his future wife, Deborah Read (Franklin, “Autobiography” 16). He began working as an apprentice printer in Philadelphia, and acquired some lodgings with Deborah Read’s family (Franklin, “Autobiography” 17). While he was living at the Read house, Deborah began to express interest in marrying Benjamin (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). At the time, Ben felt his financial stability was inadequate to support a wife (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). As time passed he attempted to rectify this situation by impressing the governor of Philadelphia. The governor consequently agreed to help Ben set up his own business in London (Clark 26). Unfortunately after Ben arrived in London, he learned that the governor did not send the promised word of credit and Franklin had been hoodwinked (Franklin, “Autobiography” 26). Franklin had to work in London for some time to support himself and finance a return trip back to America (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). Eventually, he worked his way back to Philadelphia. He returned in 1726, and even with all these harsh experiences was only twenty years old (Clark 31). Back in Philadelphia, he found employment as a printer’s helper (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). His new employer was very intimidated by Franklin’s superior skill, which he developed in London, and fired him. After reconsideration he rehired Ben and gave him the responsibility of printing currency for New Jersey (Clark 34). After impressing the New Jersey government, Franklin gained his own contract to print currency and started his own press (Clark 34). A dark side of Franklin during his young adulthood was that he fathered a child named William by an unknown mother (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). Franklin wrote for Bradford’s paper in an attempt to put Keimer’s paper out of business and eventually Keimer sold his paper to Franklin who changed the name of the paper from Universal

Instructor in all Arts and Sciences: and Pennsylvania Gazette to The Pennsylvania Gazette (Clark 37-38). As time passed, Franklin's former employer went out of business. This left only one other printing press in addition to Ben's in Philadelphia (Franklin, "Autobiography" 42-43). This printer, Bradford, did not have a great interest in printing but he owned the post office (Franklin, "Autobiography" 44). Soon after acquiring the Pennsylvania Gazette he started another newspaper in German to Serve Pennsylvania's many German settlers (Miller). To the townspeople, Franklin appeared to always be working (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). In 1730, Franklin, now financially stable, finally married Deborah Read. Deborah had married earlier but she was free to remarry after her husband deserted her (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). It is believed that her husband, Mr. Rogers, abandoned her either because he was already married or because he died shortly after his disappearance (Clark 42). In the 1730's Franklin was instrumental in forming many new organizations. He helped form the Library Company, the first North American subscription library (Franklin, "Autobiography" 45). The Franklins were very enterprising owning and operating several businesses (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). In 1733, he began to publish Poor Richard's [Almanac]; the title of the almanac was actually spelled "Almanack" on the cover (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). On the subject of bad spelling Franklin once said, "You need not be concerned, in writing to me about your bad spelling; for, in my opinion, as our alphabet now stands, the bad spelling, or what is called so, is generally the best, as conforming to the sound of the letters and of the words" (Franklin, "Bad Spelling" 324). This almanac contained witty sayings along with typical almanac items such as calendars, weather forecasts, moon phases and planting advice (Miller).

One such saying was, “The use of money is all the advantage there is in having money” (Franklin, “Poor Richard’s Almanac for 1737” 354). On December 7, 1736, Benjamin’s proposed fire brigade was finally set up (Clark 52). In 1743, Franklin helped to found the American Philosophical Society, which was America’s first learned society (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin).

At the age of 42, Franklin retired from his various businesses and printing press (Miller). When he retired, Ben refused to become sedentary like many people. Instead, he concentrated on science, experiments and inventions (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). From 1746 to 1752, Ben and his friends carried out experiments which proved that lightning is electricity and that electricity is more fluid-like than the previously thought idea of dual separate forms of positive and negative forces (Clark 90). At this time, he began devising the lightning rod perfecting this invention in 1753 (It’s the Little Things). This successful experimentation brought Franklin prominence and awards for his science contributions (Clark 90). In 1751 he formed the Pennsylvania Hospital and by 1752, Benjamin Franklin helped form the Philadelphia Contribution for Insurance Against Loss by Fire (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). As the 1750’s rolled on, Franklin used his influence to enter the political arena and became a politician for the Colonies. He served as a representative in England for Pennsylvania, Georgia, New Jersey and Massachusetts. During this time he helped to repeal the Stamp Act (Clark 186-193). He also uncovered the “Hutchinson Affair,” coined from a set of letters written by Thomas Hutchinson, the royal Governor of Massachusetts. In the letters, Hutchinson recommended that the King of England send additional British troops to Boston to fight the American rebels. When Franklin learned this information he made it available to the

public. These actions caused him to be publicly condemned in Whitehall, the English Foreign Ministry (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). Franklin returned home shortly after his experience in Whitehall and was elected to the Second Continental Congress where he contributed greatly to the Declaration of Independence (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). Franklin's outspokenness in this matter brought him a great deal of personal and political pressure. Because of this he returned to the Colonies. Eight days after Franklin arrived in Philadelphia, an order to arrest him was made in England (Clark 268). Shortly after his stop in Philadelphia, Ben set sail for France where through his popularity; he influenced the French government to sign an Alliance with the United States (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin). While Ben was in France he rarely traveled, except to visit the court (Clark 359). While he was living in France during 1784, he wrote a comical letter to the Journal of Paris in which he suggested that his concept of daylight savings should be enforced and even today we are not sure if he intended people to take his idea seriously but we observe his idea all the same (It's the Little Things). Finally on May 2, 1785, Franklin received permission to return home from France from the new United States government (Clark 394). Even though Benjamin was on his deathbed, he still continued to write (Miller). When Franklin died on April 17, 1790 at the age of 84, twenty thousand mourners attended his funeral (A Quick Biography of Benjamin Franklin).

In conclusion, Franklin's inventions may seem somewhat simplistic to a modern society, in contrast many of his unique lifetime achievements still stand out today. One can also see that his life consisted of an almost normal childhood, young adulthood and

old age. Lastly, one can see how many different activities in which he actually participated.

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