BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
From the original by Charles Willson Peale
in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania
THE PUBLIC CAREER OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
A LIFE OF SERVICE

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It may be considered not inappropriate that The Historical Society of Pennsylvania should devote one evening during the present year, which marks the two hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth, to consider anew some phases of the public career of that extraordinary man and great American. His life, to an unusual degree, was devoted to the service of his fellows, especially in his scientific, humanitarian, political and diplomatic activities. Perhaps no American of his day, not even excepting George Washington, can be mentioned, who devoted himself more fully to the service of others than did Franklin.

Our age is witnessing a new method in the study and writing of history and biography. It is the application of the scientific method to the writing of history. Its goal is the search for the truth. This has led to a new examination of the sources free from "the golden mist which surrounds the past," with the result that it has led to a revision of the estimate of some of our famous

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1 An address delivered before The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, March 9, 1931.
characters. These men are now presented as human beings not as demi-gods or lay figures. Indeed some modern biographers have gone to the opposite extreme from the older uncritical and heroic school of writers. In their desire for notoriety, or in the conscious effort to pander to the debased taste for the sensational, they have sought to present the seamy side of their subject, if there was such, by dragging him through the mud and mire, or by attributing to him motives of a selfish or otherwise ignoble nature. Such biographies frequently are equally uncritical and untrustworthy as the older laudatory ones.

The sensationalists and muckrakers for example have even attacked the character of George Washington and of Abraham Lincoln. But they have failed to injure the reputation of either. The fair minded and critical biographers of both the "Father of his Country" and the "Great Emancipator" show them to have been men with similar desires and passions to other human beings, without detracting from their great and unique services to their fellow countrymen.

What has been the result of a reexamination of the life of Benjamin Franklin? The penetrating light that has been thrown on his career has left him unscathed in his unselfish loyalty and his patriotic devotion to his country. He was a realist. If consulted he would have said with Cromwell, "Paint me as I am, mole and all." It has been said of Franklin that "he was not a paragon but was a polygon." This is a mathematical way of stating that he was not a perfect man but a many sided one. It is true that he had serious faults, particularly in his youth, but he was so frank in acknowledging them that they were well-known even in his own day. As a result there is little new of an uncomplimentary nature that modern investigators have revealed. He acknowledged the paternity of his son, William, born out of wedlock. He reared and educated him
and saw him advanced to the position of Governor of New Jersey. It is also true that recently a number of sentimental letters, written chiefly during his old age while in France, have been brought to light. While these do not add to his reputation for dignity and common sense, they have no bearing on his public career, with which we are concerned.

The great diversity of the channels into which his thoughts and actions were directed is almost incredible. His interests were so broad, his knowledge so comprehensive and his accomplishments so diverse that he has been characterized by one of his recent biographers as \textit{The First Civilized American}.\textsuperscript{2} Another, on account possibly of the catholicity of his mind and interests has called him \textit{The Apostle of Modern Times}.\textsuperscript{3}

Franklin's life falls naturally into three periods. The first (1706–1728), covers his youth in Boston up to seventeen years of age, when he arrived in Philadelphia. His arrival is picturesquely described in his \textit{Autobiography}, and graphically depicted by the statue by Dr. R. Tait McKenzie on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. The second period (1728–48), comprised the twenty-five years between the ages of seventeen and forty-two, when he was active as a printer, publisher, journalist and man of affairs in business. Through industry and the practical application of the rules of thrift and common sense, which were the notable features of the \textit{Poor Richard's Almanac}, Franklin accumulated a modest competency that enabled him to retire from business at the age of forty-two to devote the remaining half of his life,—another forty-two years (1748–90), to the services of the commonweal. What a contrast to the course followed by the typical business man of our day!

\textsuperscript{2} Phillips Russell, \textit{Benjamin Franklin, the First Civilized American}, N. Y., 1926.

\textsuperscript{3} Bernard Fayê, \textit{Franklin, The Apostle of Modern Times}, Boston, 1929.
Before Franklin was fifty years of age he had become the first citizen of Pennsylvania, having been elected to many important offices in both the government of the City of Philadelphia and the Province of Pennsylvania. He was responsible for the carrying out of a comprehensive program of municipal improvements in Philadelphia, which led to the establishment of a regular police system, a volunteer fire department and later for paving and cleaning the streets.

In the field of education and science he was instrumental in establishing the first library in the colonies, *The Library Company of Philadelphia*, he planned *The Academy*, which subsequently developed into *The University of Pennsylvania*. He founded *The Junto*, which after a few years became *The American Philosophical Society*, the oldest learned society in the United States. He promoted the establishment of *The Pennsylvania Hospital*, the first hospital in the Country. At a later period he established the first fire insurance company in the Country and devised the terms according to which the first life insurance company was formed. It has been truly said that "he furnished the impulse to nearly every measure or project which contemplated the welfare and prosperity of the city in which he lived."

In the scientific field he had invented the Penn fireplace or as it was soon better known, the Franklin stove, with a view not only of promoting the comfort of the users but also as a safer means of heating than previously known. Further he demonstrated by practical experiment the identity of lightning and electricity, and devised the lightning-rod.

From 1753 onward he had become a continental figure. In that year he was made Deputy Postmaster-General of the Colonies. He at once improved and extended the entire system and soon, for the first time, put it on a paying basis.
The following year he was one of the commissioners sent by Pennsylvania to the Congress at Albany, at which seven of the thirteen colonies were represented. This body was assembled on the initiative of the English Government in view of the expected outbreak of war with France, first to strengthen the alliance with the powerful six nations, in particular to "brighten the friendship chain" with the Indians, and, second, to consider the urgent need for concentrating the military strength of the colonies through some kind of plan of coöperation or union. This body, Lieutenant-Governor Hutchinson considered as "an assembly the most deserving of respect of any which had been convened in America."

Although none of the commissions given to the delegates, save that of Massachusetts, contain any reference to a plan of union, Franklin determined to seize this opportunity to try to secure the realization of an effective federal union which should make provision for the security and coöperation of all the continental colonies in time of peace as well as in war. To this end he made a study of the constitution of the only union that actually had existed in the colonies, namely the New England Confederation, which for over forty years had been in force during the seventeenth century, and also of the various plans of union that had been presented in later years by William Penn and others, but had never received serious consideration. Already in The Pennsylvania Gazette of May 9, 1754, Franklin had published an able article urging an intercolonial union to resist further French aggressions. At the end of the article was a woodcut representing a snake separated into twelve parts. To each part was

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4 Thomas Hutchinson, History of Massachusetts Bay from 1744 to 1774, 20.
5 Commissions are in Pennsylvania Archives, First Series, II. 137–145; Colonial Records of Pennsylvania, VI. 47, 48.
affixed the initial letter of one of the colonies and under the cut in large capital letters was the injunction "Join or Die."

He came to Albany with a draft of a federal constitution, containing some provisions evidently suggested by the New England Confederation but other features of a new and original nature. His plan after serious discussion and some slight but not fundamental amendment, was approved of by the Albany Congress, and sent to the several colonial legislatures and to the English Government. This constitution as agreed to by the delegates, provided for a federal union which should possess extensive powers over matters of common concern, but should not interfere with the integrity of the local government of the colonies, which is the fundamental principles later embodied in the Constitution of the United States. By this plan, the Federal Government should function through a Federal General Council, composed of delegates chosen by the Assemblies of the respective colonies for a three-year term, in which the colonies should be represented proportionately to their contribution to the Continental military service, with from two to seven delegates. This Council was to meet at least once annually at Philadelphia. In addition to the power to make treaties with the Indians and to regulate trade with them, it was to have the sole power to legislate on matters of general interest to all the colonies. For this purpose it could levy taxes, enlist soldiers, build forts and nominate civil officers. Laws were subject to the King's approval. The supreme executive power was to be vested in a President-General, appointed by the King. He could nominate all military officers and possessed the veto power. Franklin said of the plan, "it is not altogether to my mind, but it was the best he could get." This plan provided for a self sustaining Federal Government with power to pass laws that
would have acted directly on individuals with officers to execute them. If adopted the plan would have provided for a much stronger and more complete government than the later Articles of Confederation. I have gone thus far into the details of this plan because it anticipated several features that were incorporated into the Constitution of the United States, and it showed Franklin’s ability as a practical and constructive statesman.\(^6\)

The Albany Plan, however, was not acceptable to the colonial assemblies or the British Government. None of the colonies ratified it and the Connecticut Assembly declared it “a very extraordinary thing and against the rights and privileges of Englishmen.”\(^7\) The New Jersey Assembly adopted a report stating that they “are sorry to say we find things in it which if carried into practice would affect our constitution in its very vitals.”\(^8\) Even in Pennsylvania the Assembly in Franklin’s absence rejected a motion to refer the plan to the next Assembly.\(^9\) This act of discourtesy hurt Franklin as he felt it was done behind his back. The English Government took no action. The Plan was disliked by the colonies, said Franklin, because they felt it emphasized too much the perogative of the King and by the English ministry because it was too democratic.

Franklin evidently disappointed by its failure, cleverly described the American attitude as follows, “Everybody cries, a union is absolutely necessary, but when they come to the manner and the form of the union their weak noddles are perfectly distracted.”\(^10\) The fact was, the colonies were not only jealous of the British Government but of each other. Franklin said

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\(^6\) The plan as agreed to is given in *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (Smyth Edition), III. 197–226.


\(^8\) *New Jersey Archives, First Series*, XVI. 492.

\(^9\) *Votes of the House of Representatives*, IV. 324.

\(^10\) Franklin’s *Writings*, III. 242.
about this time that "no one need fear that the colonies will unite against their own nation, which it is well known they all love much more than they love one another."11

With the outbreak of the French and Indian War, he was employed during the next three or four years in aiding the defense of Pennsylvania, especially in providing transportation for the supplies of the Braddock expedition.

He next enters upon his international mission. With but brief interruptions he was destined to pass the greater part of the remaining years of his life in Europe. In 1757, the Assembly of Pennsylvania sent him as its Agent to England, where he passed the next five years in the effort to adjust the difficulty with the Penns over the taxation of the Proprietary Estates. His fame as a scientist and philosopher had preceded him. He was honored by being elected to the Royal Society and the highest honorary degree was conferred upon him by both Oxford and Saint Andrews Universities. Chatham spoke of him later "as an honor not to the English nation only, but to human nature." After effecting a compromise with the Proprietary he returned to America for two years, but was again sent to England in 1764 by the Colony. He became the agent also for three other colonies, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Georgia. In England for the next ten years he was the defender not only of the rights of Pennsylvania but of America in general in the controversy over the taxation of the colonies by Parliament.

In his examination before the House of Commons in February of 1766 in regard to the Stamp tax he displayed his ability to handle a difficult situation possibly to better advantage than in any other event of his life.12 The Gentleman's Magazine said of his examina-

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12 His Examination published in Writings, IV. 412-448.
tion that their readers could "form a clearer and more comprehensive idea of the state and disposition of America, of the expediency or inexpediency of the measures in question, and of the character and conduct of the ministers who proposed it, than from all that has been written upon the subject—from the first movement of its becoming the subject of public attention until now. The questions in general are put with great subtlety and judgment, and they are answered with such deep and familiar knowledge of the subject, such precision and perspicuity, such temper and yet such spirit, as to do the greatest honor to Dr. Franklin, and justify the general opinion of his character and abilities."\

The spirit he exhibited may be illustrated by one quotation from his statements on taxation, "I can only judge of others by myself," said he. "I have some little property in America. I will freely spend nineteen shillings in the pound to defend the right of giving or refusing the other shilling."

With the coming of the Revolution he rendered important services in the establishment of the new state government of Pennsylvania, sitting in the Convention that adopted its Constitution and in the Continental Congress. In the early spring of 1776 Franklin with two other members of Congress undertook a fruitless journey to Canada, in an effort to enlist the interests of its inhabitants in uniting with the thirteen colonies in the struggle with England. Although Franklin survived the hardships of this journey, he suffered a serious illness for some weeks but recovered in time to participate in the important work of the Continental Congress in the early summer of 1776.

His ardor in the cause is shown by the following ex-

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13 July, 1767, XXXVII. 318.
14 Works of Franklin (Bigelow Edition), IV. 252.
15 Writings, VI. 445.
excerpt from a letter to his English friend, Dr. Priestley, written in the summer of 1776:—"Britain, at the expense of three millions has killed one hundred and fifty Yankees in this campaign, which is twenty thousand pounds a head; and at Bunker Hill she gained a mile of ground, half of which she lost again. During the same time sixty thousand children have been born in America. From this data his [Dr. Price's] mathematical head will exactly calculate the time and expense necessary to kill us all and conquer our whole territory."

In the Continental Congress Franklin was elected to membership on its three most important committees, namely the one to draft the Declaration of Independence, the second, to draw up a Frame of Government and third, the committee to secure Foreign Alliances. On the first Franklin did not have much share in the actual drafting of the Declaration of Independence beyond verbal changes in its text, but he exerted himself to try to salve Jefferson's wounded feelings when his draft of the Declaration was under criticism by telling him the story of John Thompson, Hatter, and his sign.17

Franklin's contribution to the work of the Frame of Government was more notable. Already, in the previous year, July 21, 1775, he had submitted a draft of articles of Confederation and Union18 resembling in many respects his Albany Plan, but action was postponed for nearly a year until further progress had been made on the road toward the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. In 1776, his plan was before the Committee but that body reported Dickinson's draft which accepted some of the provisions of Franklin's plan, but not those important features that would

16 *Writings*, VI. 430.
have made it Federal in character. Dickinson's plan proposed for the Constitution a much weaker union, a Confederation instead of a Federal Union. This doubtless was a necessary concession to the spirit of particularism or State rights, that was to characterize the Articles of Confederation which ultimately were adopted, and which after a few years demonstrated its weakness and failure in practice.

It was in connection with Foreign Relations that Franklin rendered his most important services of the war. The need of a wise and tactful representative abroad led Congress to select Franklin for this important mission, when he was over seventy years of age.\(^{19}\) As he was elected he whispered to Dr. Rush these significant words:—"I am old and good for nothing, but as the storekeepers say of their remnants of cloth, I am a fag end, you may have me for what you please."\(^{20}\)

To the student of the period the three men indispensable to the success of the Revolution appear to have been Washington, the military leader, Morris, the financier, and Franklin, the diplomatist.

The latter, for eight years did a work in Europe that no other man could have done. Already celebrated as a scientist, investigator, author and philosopher, he was immensely and extravagantly popular with the French court and people. John Adams wrote of him while in France that "Franklin's reputation was more universal than that of Leibnitz or Newton, Frederick or Voltaire, and his character more beloved and esteemed than any or all of them. . . . His name was familiar to government and people, to kings, courtiers, nobility, clergy and philosophers as well as plebeians, to such a degree that there was scarcely a peasant or a citizen, a valet de chambre, coachman or footman, a

\(^{19}\) Appointed September 26, 1776. Journal of Congress, V. 827.
\(^{20}\) Sydney George Fisher, The True Benjamin Franklin, 441.
lady's chambermaid or a scullion in the kitchen who was not familiar with it and who did not consider him a friend to humankind. When they spoke of him they seemed to think he was to restore the golden age."

He was stronger than his cause. He was not simply the agent of America, but as Jefferson said, "Franklin was America itself when in France." It was he who saved the situation abroad repeatedly, by counteracting the mismanagement of other agents and the mistakes of Congress, through his ability, tact and force of character. It was he who secured from France the most of the funds and the supplies required for the armies of the young republic. It was he who was instrumental in bringing about the alliance with France, without which it is very questionable whether American independence could have been won. It was he whose confidence in the French ministry was unshaken when his colleagues became distrustful. The late Ambassador Choate regarded Franklin as the greatest of American diplomats.

Shortly after his return to America he was elected President of the State of Pennsylvania, and a delegate to the Federal Convention of 1787. In regard to his call to the former office he wrote to a friend: "I have not the firmness to resist the unanimous desire of my country folks; and I find myself harnessed again into their service for another year. They engrossed the prime of my life; they have eaten my flesh, and seem resolved now to pick my bones." He served in this office three successive years.

In the Federal Convention his influence was exerted in favor of one of its important compromises, when that body seemed on the point of breaking up, namely the compromise in regard to representation. On the final day of the session of the Convention, September

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22 Writings, IX. 476.
17th, after a few minutes of silence at its opening Franklin arose with a paper in his hand, as if about to speak, but he was too infirm to deliver the address he had prepared, so he handed it to his colleague, James Wilson of Pennsylvania, who read it for him. The address was quite in harmony with Franklin's course during the Convention, where he had championed compromise in the interest of harmony and the success of its work. He now pleaded with the minority to surrender their opposition to the completed draft of the Constitution. He began as follows:—"I confess I do not entirely approve of this constitution at present; but sir, I am not sure that I shall never approve it; for having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by later information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is, therefore, the older I grow the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment of others." He then illustrated his point by recounting, as was his habit, an apt story. A certain French lady in a dispute with her sister, exclaimed, "I do not know how it is, sister, but I meet with nobody but my self, that is always in the right." In deference to the opinion of others and his experience, he continued, "I agree to this Constitution with all its faults—if they are such:—because I think a general government necessary for us and there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people, if well administered. . . . I doubt, too, whether any other Convention we can obtain, may be able to make a better Constitution. . . . It therefore astonishes me, sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does. . . . Thus I consent, sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better and because I am not sure that it is not the best. . . . On the whole, sir, I can not help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention, who may still have objections to it, would with
me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."  

Franklin alone of our Revolutionary statesmen had the distinction of signing all four of the great documents of the time, namely, the Declaration of Independence, the Treaty of Alliance with France, the Treaty of Peace with Great Britain and the Federal Constitution.

His last public service was performed as President of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, when he signed one of the earliest memorials to Congress praying that body "to step to the very verge of your power in discouraging every species of traffic in the person of our fellowmen."  

As we review the life of this remarkable man we are struck by the fact that the outstanding purpose of his versatile career was that of service to his fellowmen. He taught the people through the pages of his Almanac the virtues of industry, thrift and economy. In his scientific experiments and investigations his constant endeavor was to make natural philosophy the handmaid of material progress. He never sought a patent for any of his inventions or made any effort to capitalize them. They were open to all to use, until unfortunately they were patented by others.

As we have seen he worked and contributed to every philanthropic cause in the city of his adoption. While still in middle life, he gave up his business pursuits, in order that he might spend the remainder of his life in the public service. Indeed, more than one-half of his life was spent in offices that he did not seek. It was truly a case of "the office seeking the man."

Finally, when he came near to the close of his life, his thoughts were of posterity. "Wishing," as he

23 Writings, IX. 607–609.
wrote, "to be useful even after my death" he left in his will the sum of a thousand pounds each to Boston and Philadelphia, to be used to aid young married artificers by loans of money to establish themselves in business. These two funds, greatly augmented, are still held in trust by the two cities for the benefit of worthy objects. Truly it may be said of Franklin, "He rests from his labors and his works do follow him."

Preëminent as printer, journalist, philosopher, scientist, statesman and diplomatist, Franklin was above all a great American citizen and patriot, and in all of his activities a servant of humanity.

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25 This portion of his will is given in Writings, X. 503–507.
26 The amounts invested and accumulated up to the 31st of December, 1929, as presented in the Report of the Director of City Trusts for Philadelphia, and the Report of the City Auditor of Boston were as follows:

Philadelphia

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<tr>
<td>Cash Balance</td>
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Boston

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