

# Profiles in Caring: Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790)

"Doing nothing for others is the undoing of ourselves."

Benjamin Franklin was a renaissance man if ever there was one. He was a printer, author, philanthropist, inventor, statesman, diplomat, and scientist. He was also a member of Congress-the Continental Congress, which laid the groundwork for American independence.

Franklin was born in Boston in 1706 and grew up there, but left for Philadelphia at the age of 17. Already, he was an accomplished printer, and had started devoting himself to reading, writing, reflection and self-improvement, pursuits which would continue through his long life.

In 1730, Benjamin Franklin became sole owner of a printing business. From 1730 to 1748, he applied himself to business, and his industry and thrift soon brought prosperity. Many of the lessons learned were put to use in his wildly successful *Poor Richard's Almanac*, published from 1732-1757. The *Almanac* was a genuine expression of Franklin's passion for improving himself and the importance of caring for others.

Franklin did not actively seek public office but he was too public-spirited to decline such positions. He was clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly (1736-51), then a member representing Philadelphia (1751-64). He was Deputy Postmaster at Philadelphia (1737-53) and Deputy Postmaster General for the colonies (1753-74). In the latter post, he streamlined operations significantly and made the post office a financial success, too.

Now prosperous himself, Franklin was able to retire in 1748. He had hoped to pursue philosophical studies but public affairs again claimed him. In 1754, he was sent to represent Pennsylvania at the Albany Congress, called to unite the colonies in the war against the French and Indians. He was an agent of Pennsylvania in London for several years and then a member of the Continental Congress (1775-76). He sketched a Plan of Union for the colonies and organized the U.S. Post Office, of which he was the first Postmaster General. He was on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, which he also signed.

Franklin also was part of a trio sent to France in September of 1776, to negotiate a treaty. The French, eager to tip the European balance of power in their favor, eventually joined the cause of the American Revolution, partly because of Franklin's credibility and popularity. After independence was officially won, Franklin returned to France as U.S. Minister to that country (1776-1785). He was also one of the negotiators of the treaty of peace with Great Britain.



Although in his seventies, Franklin was summoned for other responsibilities. He was chosen president of the Executive Council of Pennsylvania (1785-88), and also was selected for membership in the Constitutional Convention, which met in May 1787. Franklin made a powerful contribution with his immense prestige, persuasiveness and genial personality. He was the advocate of a strong federal government balanced by a respect for individual rights.

Franklin will perhaps best be remembered for his writing. For example, in *Poor Richard's Almanac* he said, "A good example is the best sermon." When asked what was the best way to get ahead in the world, he said, "The nearest way to come to glory, is to do that for conscience which we would do for glory." The noblest question in the world, he said, is: "What good may I do in it?" The importance of caring and public service runs throughout his work. "Sell not virtue to purchase wealth nor liberty to purchase power," he wrote. "If thou injurest conscience, it will have its revenge on thee." He added, "Fear to do ill and you need fear nothing else."

At his funeral 20,000 people assembled to pay homage to him as one of the most revered and beloved figures in American history.

Benjamin Franklin Web site: <http://www.nahc.org/NAHC/Val/Columns/SC10-3.html>

