



## The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

*Benjamin Franklin (1705 - 1790)*

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No American has led a more full or influential life than Benjamin Franklin. In the words of biographer Walter Isaacson, Franklin was “the most accomplished American of his age and the most influential in inventing the type of society America would become.” *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is Franklin’s own record of his life, written between 1771 and 1790 and incomplete and unpublished at the time of his death. He referred to it as a memoir and divided it into four parts. Fittingly, it was first published in France in a translation of the first part only from an early manuscript. It languished until his grandson William Temple Franklin published the first three parts in London in 1818, omitting part four and taking stylistic liberties with the text. The first reliable edition with the text from the complete original manuscript was published by John Bigelow in 1868 and has been further improved by scholars in the 20th century. Franklin’s legacy of “firsts” continues to our time: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* was the first full-length recorded book in history, recorded by actor Rye and released in 1969.

Born one of ten children in Boston, **Benjamin Franklin** attended Boston Latin School but did not graduate. He continued his self-education through voracious reading. At age 12 he was apprenticed to his brother James, a printer. When his brother declined to print a letter from young Franklin, he responded by submitting anonymous pieces under the pseudonym of Mrs. Silence Dogood, a middle-aged widow, which were published and became popular. The discovery of his authorship led to the first of several differences with his brother, which led to his leaving his apprenticeship and being forced to seek employment outside of Boston.

He landed in Philadelphia and was employed by a local merchant before returning to the printing trade. He became the successful publisher of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, which gave him a forum to express his opinions and the capital to underwrite newspaper operations for other colonial printers. In doing so he established the first newspaper chain. He established *Poor Richard’s Almanack* in 1733. Writing under the pseudonym Richard Saunders, the pieces written for the almanac established his mature voice and style. He was both a moral philosopher and a student of topical satire of the sort found in *The Spectator*. He believed that the press had a moral duty to instruct colonial America in moral virtue, and his writings manage to convey moral truths with a humor, wit and humility uniquely American.

Franklin’s activity as a printer, publisher, and writer brought him wealth, social standing and the freedom to use his extraordinary talents in new areas. His many activities influencing the independence of the colonies and the birth of the republic are well known, yet these are only the last in an extraordinary life of accomplishments far too numerous to mention here. He established the first lending library. He established one of the first volunteer fire fighting companies. He freed his slaves. He became the deputy postmaster of North America and reformed the postal system. With Dr. Thomas Bond he established the first hospital. With two others he established a new model for university education, focusing on the professions, which became the University of Pennsylvania. He invented the Franklin stove, still in use today. His study of electricity led to the concepts of positive and negative charges and electrical ground, which led to the invention of the lightning rod and made Franklin a celebrity throughout Europe. Several other discoveries are less well known but no less influential. Franklin’s studies of population underscored the importance of abundant farmland and food, predicted America’s growth and directly influenced both Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus. He published the first chart of the Gulf Stream in which would later shave two weeks from the trip from England to America. He was the first to make decisions using the “Pro and Con” method. Not surprisingly, his *Autobiography* was something of a step forward at the time.