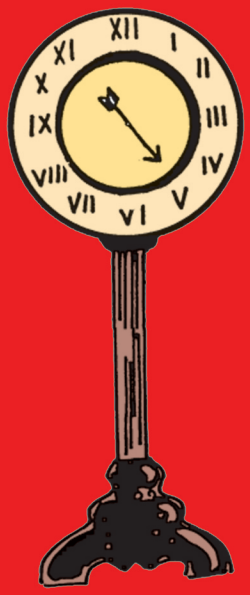
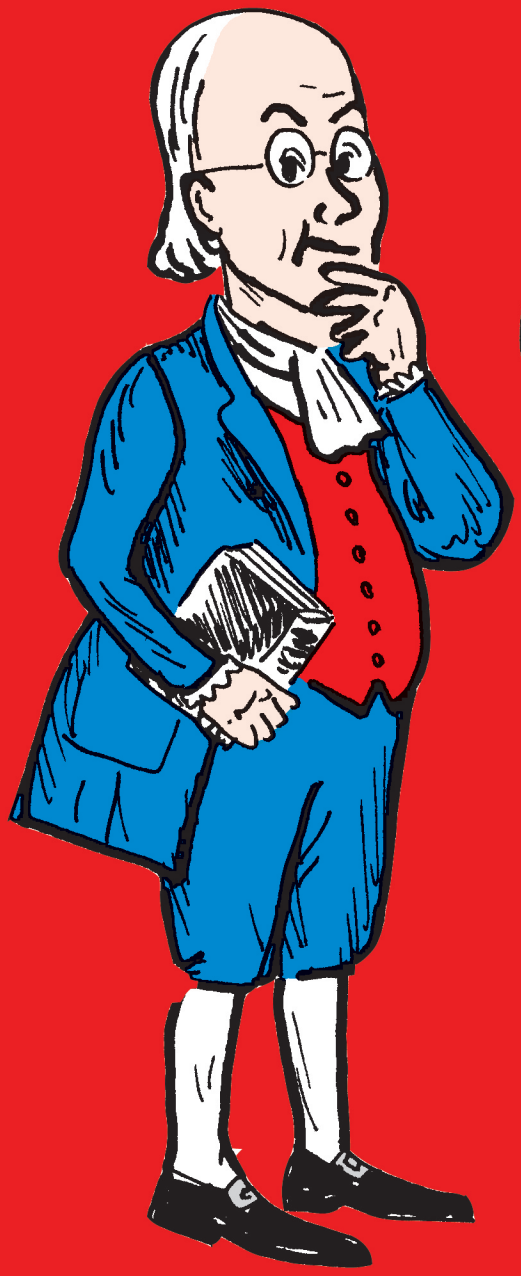
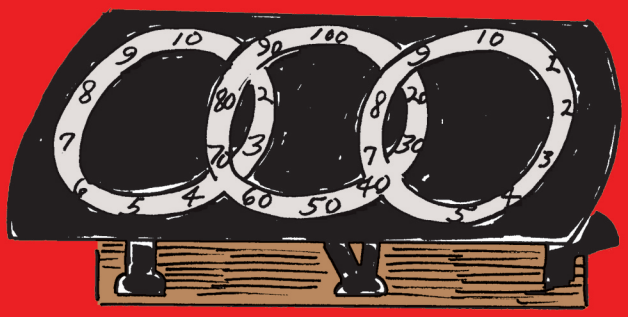
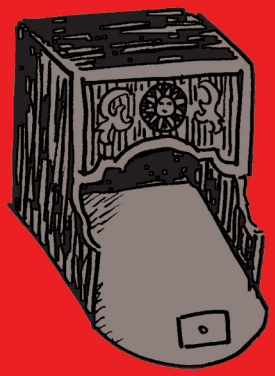
THE WORLD OF INVENTOR

# Benjamin Franklin









ADVENTURE TALES OF AMERICA

# Benjamin Franklin, 1706-1790

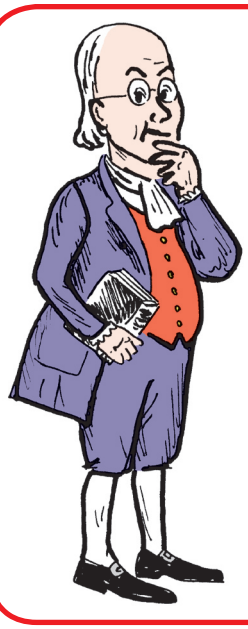
## A Mini-biography

**Biography is the heart of history.
To understand the American character
through biography, read this special section
on the life of Benjamin Franklin, often called
'the "first American."**

**To continue reading the historical narrtive,
turn to the next section.**

1492 — 1706 — 1790 — 2010

**"Benjamin Franklin was the greatest man and ornament of the age and country in which he lived."—Thomas Jefferson**



**Primary sources for the Benjamin Franklin mini-biography** are Franklin's letters and other writings, chiefly his famous *Autobiography,* ranked as one of the outstanding works in American literature.

**Franklin wrote Part I of the *Autobiography* in 1771 (at age 65) for his son** William (age 40), governor of New Jersey. In 1776 Franklin became bitter toward his son because William remained loyal to the British in the American Revolution.

**Between 1784 and 1789 he wrote the other three parts of the *Autobiography*** for the public. Enfeebled in 1789, he stopped writing a year before his death, having told his story only through 1760, the first 54 of his 84 years.

**His grandson William Temple Franklin published the manuscript in 1818.**

**Franklin's main goal in the *Autobiography*: to share his discoveries** of how to develop a good character, the pursuit of which he called "the science of happiness."

1492 1706 1790 2010

## In 1771, while serving as a colonial agent in England, Benjamin Franklin began his autobiography with these words:

Benjamin Franklin

"Dear Son:

"**I have ever had a pleasure in obtaining any little** anecdotes of my ancestors....Imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the circumstances of my life...I sit down to write them for you....

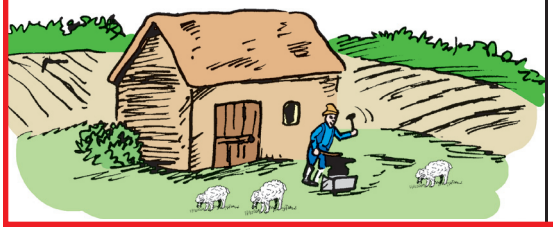
"**Besides, there are some other inducements that** excite me to this undertaking. From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born...I have raised myself to a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in the world. As constant good fortune has accompanied me...my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means which I employed....They may also deem them fit to be imitated, should any of them find themselves in similar circumstances....

William Franklin

"**And lastly (I may as well confess it, as the denial of it would be believed by nobody) I shall perhaps not a little** gratify my own vanity. Indeed I never heard or saw the introductory words, "Without vanity I may say," etc., but some vain thing immediately followed. Most people dislike vanity in others whatever share they have of it themselves, but I give it fair quarter wherever I meet with it, being persuaded that it is often productive of good to the possessor and to others that are within his sphere of action. And therefore, in many cases it would not be altogether absurd if a man were to thank God for his vanity among the other comforts of life.

"**And now I speak of thanking God, I desire with all humility to acknowledge that I owe the mentioned happiness** of my past life to his divine providence, which led me to the means I used and gave them success."

"**Relating to our ancestors....the family** had lived in the same village, Ecton [England] for 300 years...on a freehold [farm] of about 30 acres, aided by the smith's business... the eldest son being always bred to that business...."

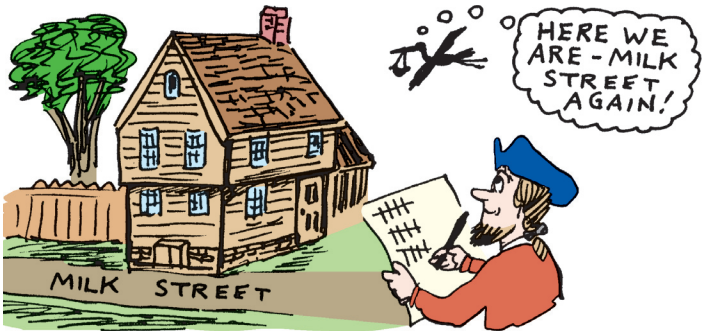


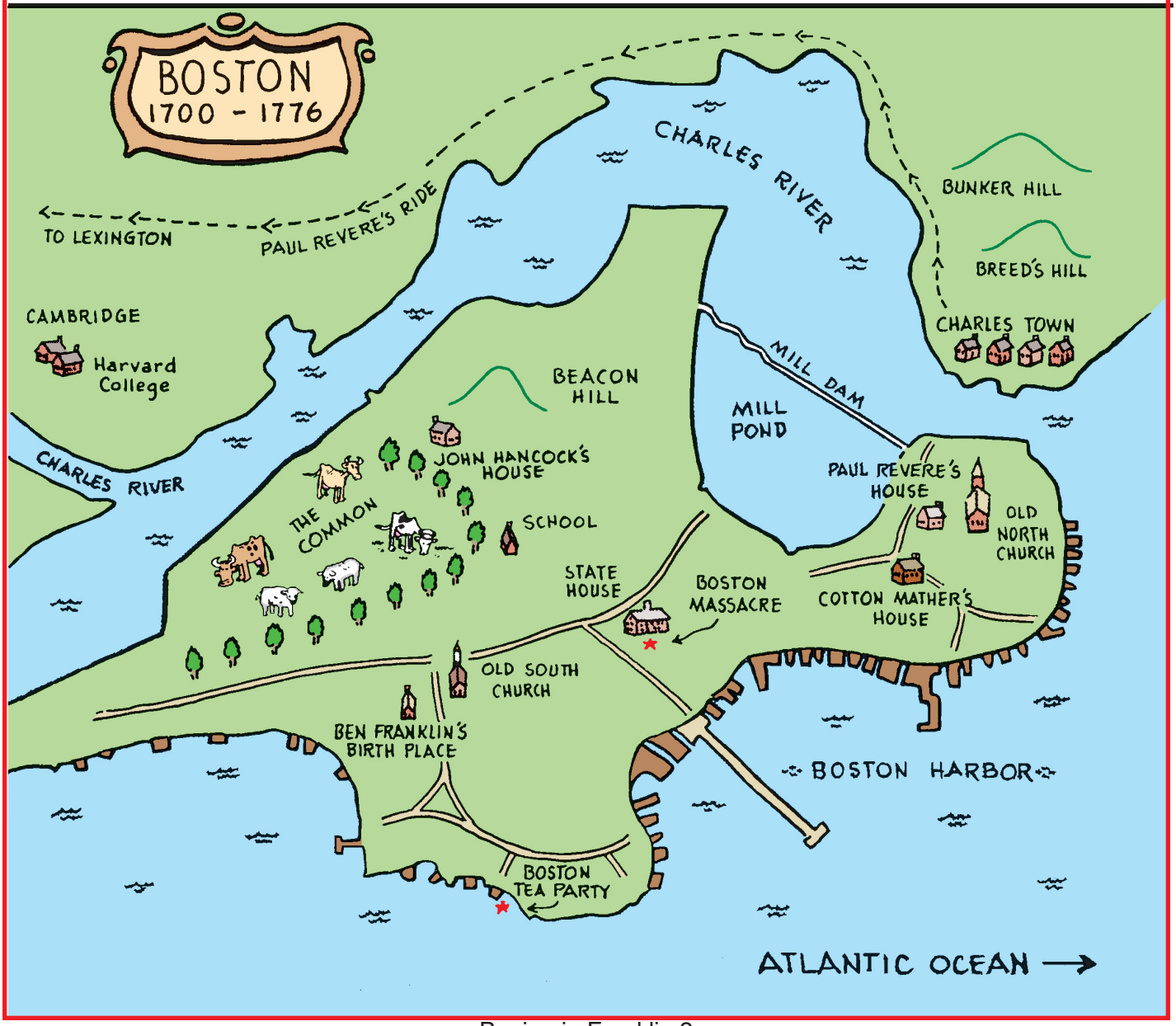
"**Our humble family early embraced the Reformation....** continued Protestants through the Reign of [Queen] Mary [Bloody Mary, 1553-58], when they were sometimes in danger of persecution on account of their zeal against Popery [Catholicism]. **They had an English Bible, and to conceal it...it was fastened open with tapes under...a stool**. When my great, great grandfather wished to read it to his family, he turned up the...stool upon his knees...."

**"Josiah, my father, married young and carried his wife** [Anne] with three children to [Boston, Massachusetts] New England about 1682....where they expected to enjoy the exercise of their [Puritan] religion with freedom.

**"By the same wife [he] had four children more born there** and by a second wife [Abiah, daughter of Peter Folger, a founder of Nantucket Island] 10 more, in all 17, of which I remember often to have seen 13 sitting together at his table...."

**Boston: January 17, 1706**—And so a crowd of brothers and sisters welcomed the birth of Benjamin Franklin, the 15th of 17 children born to Abiah and Josiah, by now an industrious, respected Boston candle and soap maker.



**Ben described his mother as "a discreet and virtuous woman."** He added, **"I think you might like to know something of [my father's]...character....**He was...well set and very strong, could draw...and was skilled a little in music and had a clear pleasing voice....But his great excellence lay in sound understanding and solid judgment....I remember his being...visited by leading people, who consulted him for his opinion in affairs of the town or of the church....He was...frequently chosen an arbiter between contending parties.

"At his table he liked to have some sensible friend...to converse with, and always took care to start some ingenious or useful topic which might tend to improve the minds of his children....[turning] our attention to what was good, just, and prudent in the conduct of life."

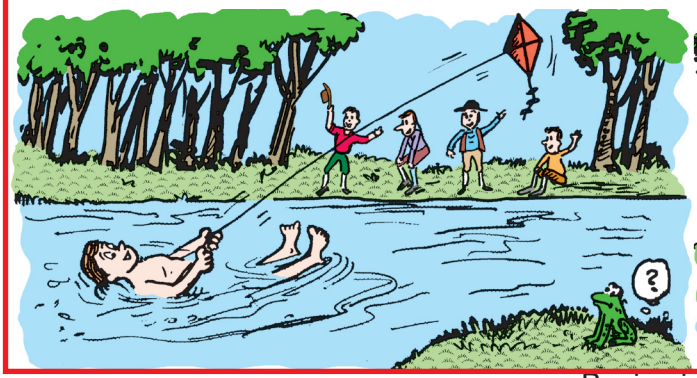
Josiah believed in the Puritan concept of learning as expressed by Samuel Sewell, his pastor at Old South Church, **"without knowledge the mind of man cannot be good...."**

**THE WHISTLE LESSON** was one of Ben's earliest memories.

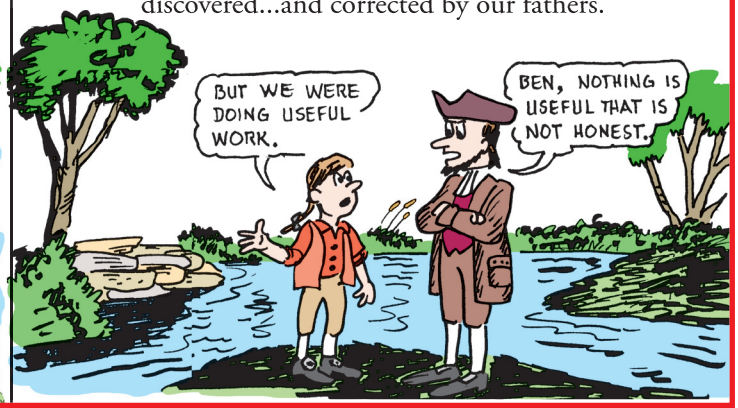
**"When I was a child of seven years...**being charmed with the sound of a whistle...in the hands of another boy, **I voluntarily offered and gave all my money for one.** I then came home and went whistling all over the house, much pleased.... My brothers and sisters, understanding the bargain I had made... laughed so much at me for my folly that I cried...."

**"As I grew up...and observed the actions of men,** I thought I met many who gave too much for the whistle....In short, I conceived that the great part of the miseries of mankind were brought upon them by the false estimates they had made of the value of things, and by their giving too much for the whistle."

**"I had a strong inclination for the sea [Boston was a** thriving seaport; its population, 10,000.]; but my father declared against it; however...I learned early to swim well, and to manage boats, and when in a boat...with other boys I was commonly allowed to govern....I amused myself one day...with my kite...enjoying at the same time the pleasure of swimming."




**"I was generally a leader among the boys, and sometimes led** them into scrapes, of which I will mention one...as it shows an early...public spirit, though not then justly conducted. There was a salt marsh...[where] we used to...fish....My proposal was to build a wharf there [from] a heap of stones... intended for a new house. The next morning...we were discovered...and corrected by our fathers."



## ❊ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: SCHOOL DAYS

"Genius without education is like silver in the mine."—P*oor Richard's Almanac*

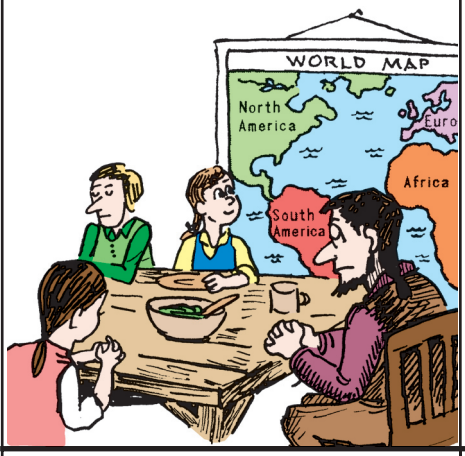
**"I was put to the grammar school at** eight years of age, my father intending to devote me as the tithe of his sons to the service of the [Congregational] church."

**"My early readiness in learning to** read (I do not remember when I could not read) encouraged him in this purpose....My Uncle Benjamin approved too of it...."

**"I continued however at the...school** not quite one year, though in that time I had risen...to be head of [the class]. My father...from a view of the expense of a college education... altered his intention."

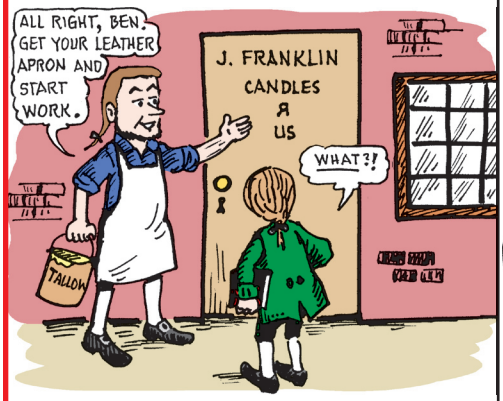
**Perhaps Josiah suspected that his son** was not cut out for the ministry. Ben questioned the logic behind everything, including matters of faith. Tired of long prayers before every meal, Ben reasoned:

**Unheeded, Ben entertained himself** during Josiah's long prayers by studying geography on the family's large world map.




**"My father...took me from the** grammar school and sent me to a school for writing and arithmetic....I acquired fair writing pretty soon, but I failed in arithmetic...."

**"At ten years old, I was taken home to assist my father in his business...."**




**Thus ended Ben's two years of formal schooling.**

As an old man, he expressed gratitude to the Boston public schools:

However...

## ❊ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: BOOKS THAT SHAPED HIS LIFE

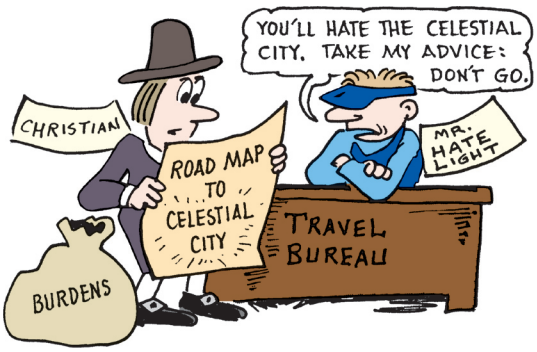
**"I have from my youth been indefatigably studious to gain and treasure up in my mind all useful and desirable knowledge...."**
**—Benjamin Franklin.**

**1716-1718—Between the ages of 10 and 12,** Ben read five books that influenced him forever.

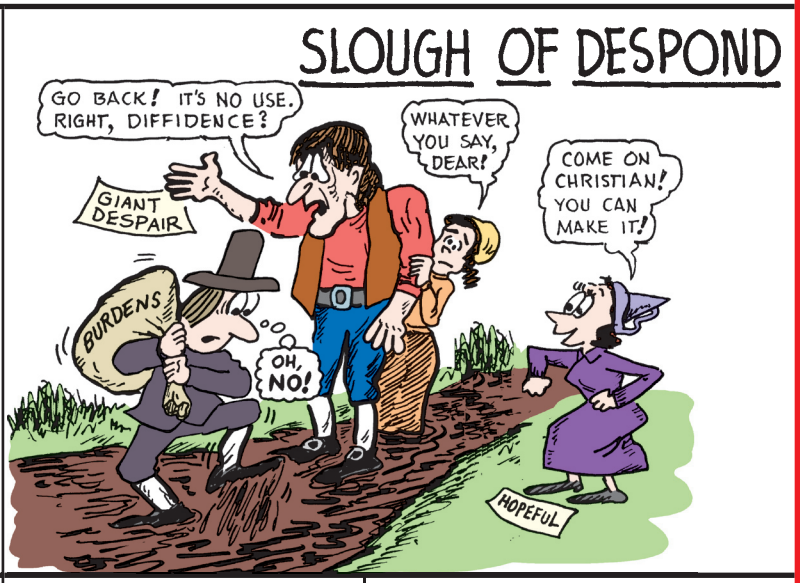
1) John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*
2) R. Burton, *Historical Collections*
3) Plutarch, *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*
4) Daniel Defoe, *Essay on Projects*
5) Cotton Mather, *Essays to Do Good*

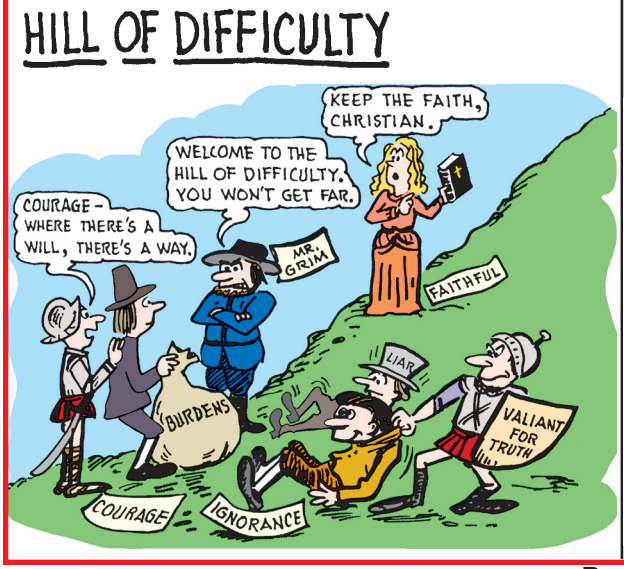
"**From a child I was fond of reading,** and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books. Pleased with *The Pilgrim's Progress,* my first collection was of John Bunyan's works."

**1) *The Pilgrim's Progress,*** written in 1678 by **John Bunyan**, an English Puritan preacher, is a famous allegory (published in 100 languages) in which the characters represent virtues and vices. **Christian, the hero laden with burdens,** progresses through life toward the Celestial City (heaven), crossing hazardous places along the way.

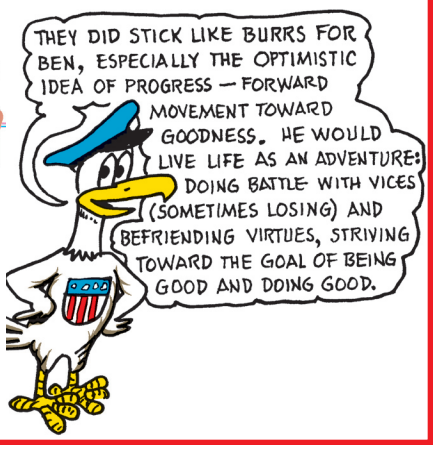



Christian meets people who try to hurt him: **VICES** such as Pride, Envy, Giant Despair and his wife Diffidence—and people who help him: **VIRTUES** such as Old Honest, Faithful, Hopeful, and Courage. Ben learned valuable tips from Christian's progress.



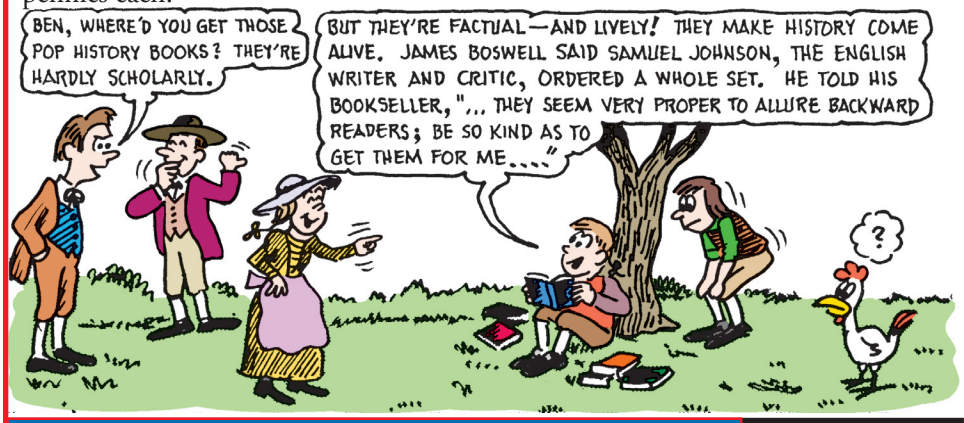
**Bunyan wrote in his preface,** "Wouldst thou see a truth within a fable? ....Then read my fancies: they will stick like burrs...."



virtue—goodness that is consciously maintained; moral excellence

## 2) R. Burton's Historical Collections

became Ben's next purchase. "Burton" was an alias for Nathan Crouch, an English printer who popularized history in brief volumes (40 or 50 in all), such as ***Admirable Curiosities, Rarities, and Wonders in England*** and ***Unfortunate Court Favorites of England***, for twelve pennies each.




**"My Father's little library consisted** chiefly of books in polemic divinity, most of which I read, and have since often regretted that at a time when I had such a thirst for knowledge, more proper books had not fallen in my way....

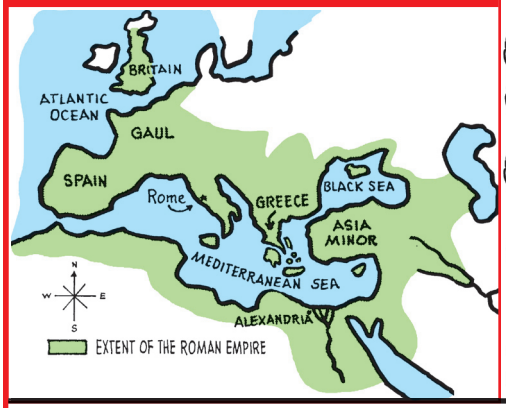
"**Plutarch's *Lives*** there was, in which I read abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great advantage."

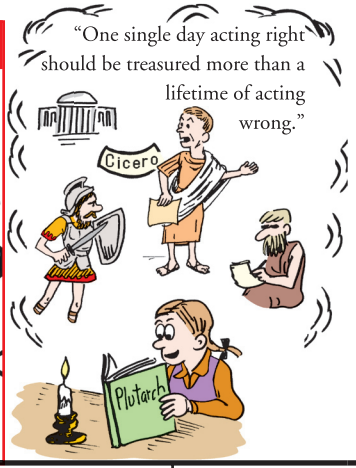
## 3) In *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*

(an important book read by all the Founding Fathers) **Plutarch**, a Greek writing in the first century A.D., made Greek and Roman history personal, vibrant, and exciting by telling it through the lives of great men.

**Plutarch's *Lives*—46 biographies of notable Greeks and Romans**—had a purpose: to provide role models of men who from small and obscure beginnings became great and powerful through a commitment to **virtue**—to the good.

### THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN 121 A.D.

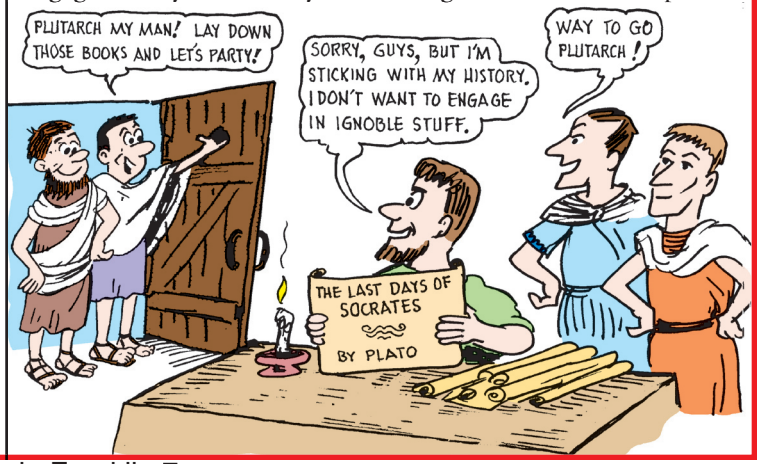



| GREEKS | ROMANS |
|---|---|
| Demosthenes | Cicero |
| Eloquent orators | |
| Aristides | Cato |
| Champions of justice | |
| Alexander the Great | Julius Caesar |
| Brilliant empire builders | |

**Plutarch said of biography: "Ah, and what greater** pleasure can one have? Or what more effective means to moral improvement?"

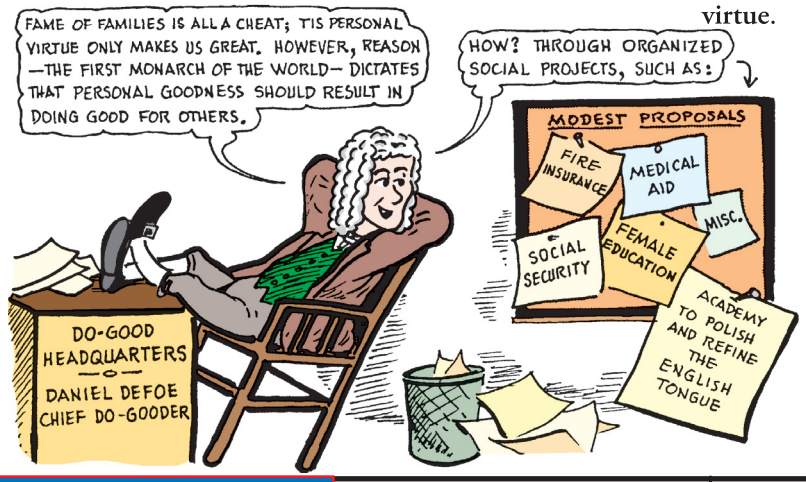
"**My method...is, by the study of history...to receive and retain** images of the best and worthiest characters. I thus am enabled to free myself from any ignoble, base, or vicious impressions, contracted from...ill company that I may be unavoidably engaged in, by the remedy of [viewing] these noble examples."



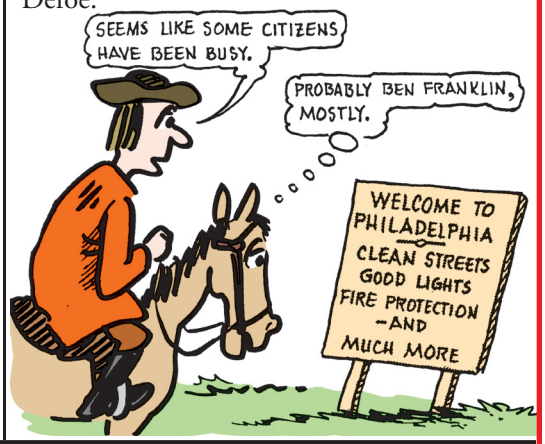
"Give thyself unto reading. Good books of all sorts may...enrich you with treasures more valuable than those which...work of your callings would have purchased."—Cotton Mather, *Essay to Do Good*

## 4) Essay on Projects (1610)

"There was also [in my father's library] a book of **Defoe's**, called **Essay on Projects.**" The English Puritan Daniel Defoe suggested practical ways of expanding **personal virtue** into **public virtue.**




Eleven-year-old Ben took Defoe's ideas to heart. And as an adult, Ben would transform Philadelphia into a model city through improvement projects inspired by Defoe.

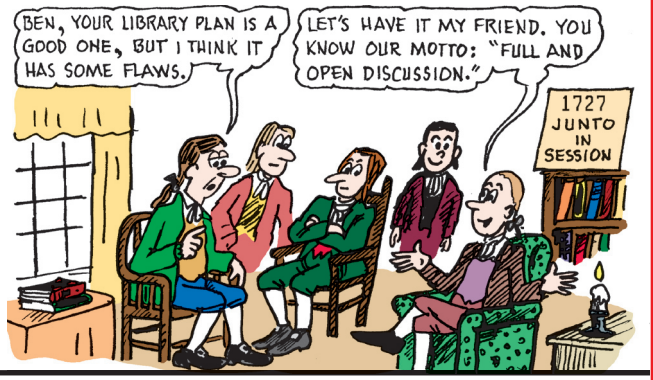



## 5) Essays to Do Good (1710)

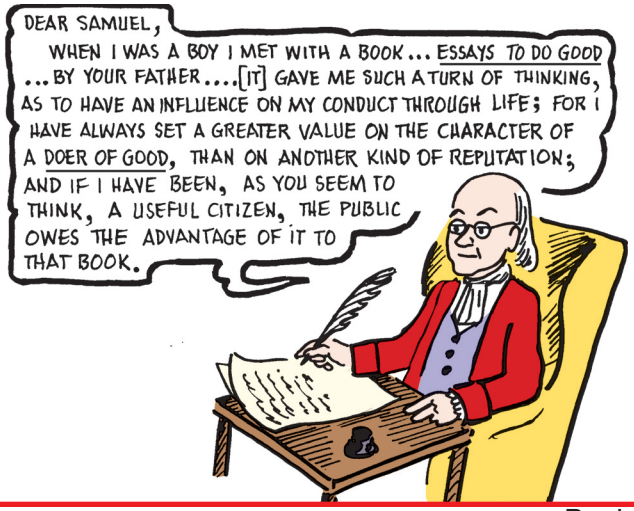
Ben also found in his father's library **Cotton Mather's** ***Essays to Do Good.*** Mather, a noted Puritan leader and associate pastor of Boston's North Church, showed how Christian ethics could bring about the Kingdom of God on earth—specifically Boston. Young Ben may have felt that Mather, who lived only a half-mile away, was talking directly to him:

**Cotton Mather, like Defoe, advocated doing good through voluntary associations.** He set forth 10 guidelines for conducting civic organizations. The most important: free and open discussion.

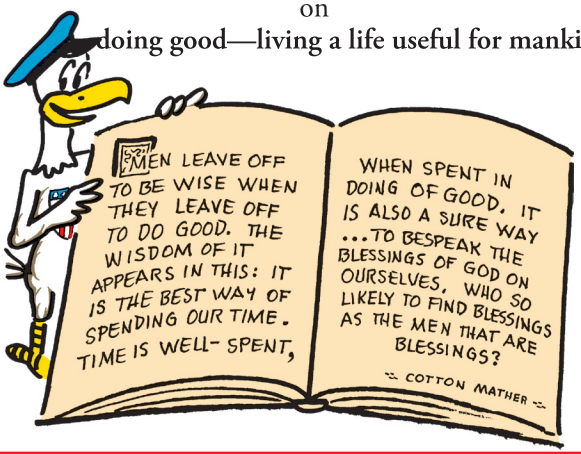
**1727—At age 21, Ben followed Mather's guidelines** in founding a club in Philadelphia, the **Junto**. He insisted on open discussion as the key to success of any group (including the 1787 Constitutional Convention).




As an old man, Ben wrote Cotton Mather's son:

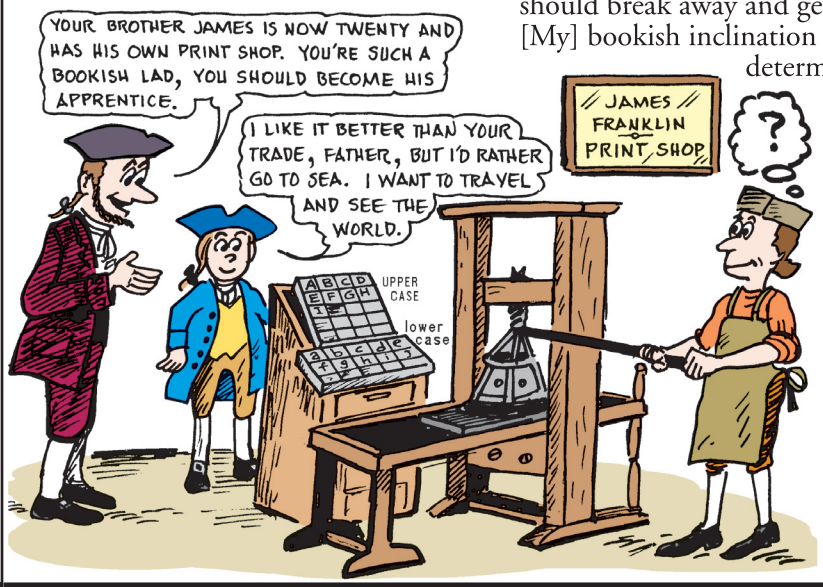



As you learn more about Ben, you can judge for yourself whether his life reflected Mather's Puritan advice on **doing good—living a life useful for mankind—**



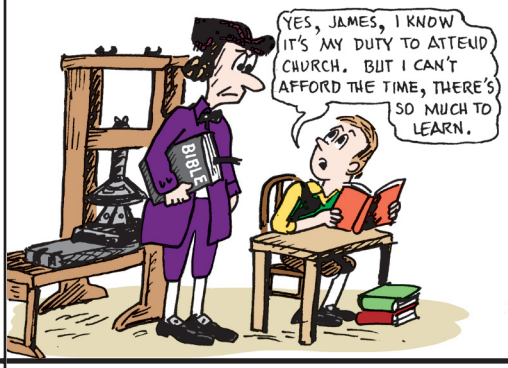
1718—"**To return. I continued ...employed in my Father's business** [making candles and soap] for two years...till I was 12 years old. I disliked the trade."

"**My father [feared] that if he did not find one for me more agreeable, I** should break away and get to sea.... [My] bookish inclination at length determined my father to make me a printer."

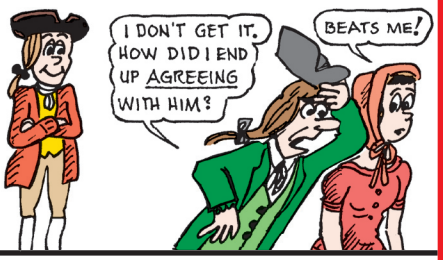



"**I stood out some time, but at last** was persuaded and signed the indentures [contract], when I was but 12 years old. I was to serve as an apprentice till I was 21 years of age...."

"**In a little time I made great proficiency** in the business, and became a useful hand to my brother. I now had access to better books....My time for reading was at night...or on Sundays...evading... attendance on public worship, which my Father used to exact of me."




1722—"[At age 16, I read] Xenophon's **Memorable Things of Socrates**....I was charmed with the Socratic method of dispute, adopted it, dropt my abrupt contradiction, and put on the humble enquirer. I found this method... embarrassing to those against whom I used it, therefore I took a delight in it...and grew... expert in drawing people... into concessions the consequences of which they did not foresee."

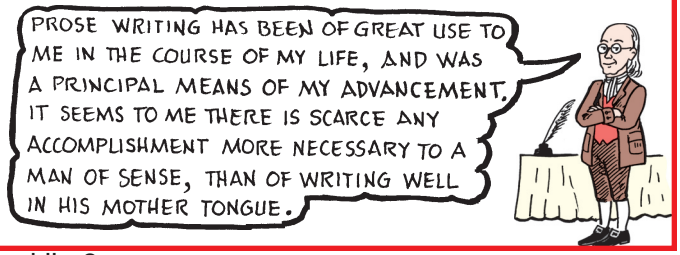



"And now it was that being...made ashamed of my ignorance in figures, which I had twice failed in learning when at school, I took Cocker's [**Arithmetic, Being a Plain and Easy Method**] and went through the whole by my self with great ease."

"**About this time I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*** [**a London daily** paper published by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele]. I thought the writing excellent and wished if possible to imitate it. I [made] short hints of...each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then...tried to complete the papers again.

"**By comparing my work with the original, I discovered many faults and amended** them; but I sometimes had the pleasure of [improving] the language, and this encouraged me to think I might...in time...come to be a tolerable English writer...."Intent on improving my language, I [also read] an English grammar...."

**Years later Ben said:**



**In 1722 Ben tried his new writing skills. "My brother had begun to print** a newspaper, The New England Courant. He had some...friends who [wrote] little pieces for this paper. I was excited to try my hand among them. But being still a boy [age 16] and suspecting that my brother would object to printing anything of mine...I contrived to disguise my hand, and, writing an anonymous paper [as Silence Dogood, a country widow], I put it in at night under the door of the printing-house."
James and his friends were surprised and impressed.

Silence Dogood sent a second letter describing her character. Or was it Ben's?

**Dear Author of the New England Courant:**

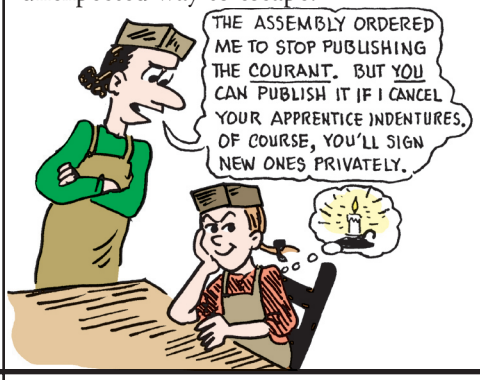
**...I shall conclude this with my own character....I am an enemy to vice and a friend to virtue.... a hearty lover of...all good men, and a mortal enemy to arbitrary government and unlimited power....I have likewise a natural inclination to observe and reprove the faults of others, at which I have an excellent faculty. I speak this by way of warning...for I never intend to wrap my talent in a napkin. I am courteous, affable, good humored (unless...provoked), handsome, and sometimes witty, but always, your friend and servant,**

SILENCE DOGOOD

**Silence Dogood was a hit, so Ben** wrote 12 more witty, anonymous letters. Some proposed reforms from Defoe' s *Essay on Projects*, such as women's right to education. Most satirized Boston customs and religion, offending political and religious leaders.

**Ben finally revealed his secret** authorship, and won praise from James' friends. Quite jealous, James complained (with reason) that their praise made Ben vain. This was but one of many master-apprentice conflicts between the brothers.

**"James...had often beat me, which** I took extremely amiss. I fancy his harsh and tyrannical treatment of me... [impressed] me with that aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me through my whole life." Ben found an unexpected way to escape.

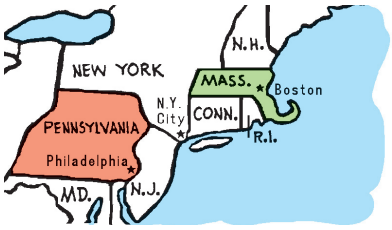



**"I took upon me to assert my** freedom, presuming he would not produce the new indentures. It was not fair in me to take this advantage, and this I reckon one of the first errata of my life: but the unfairness of it weighed little with...the...resentment [of] blows....He was otherwise not an ill-natured man; perhaps I was too saucy and provoking."

**1723—"So I sold some of my books** to raise a little money, [and secretly, with a friend's help] was taken on board [a ship], and...in three days I found my self in New York near 300 miles from home...." Ben asked a New York printer for a job.

**"Philadelphia was 100 miles** farther...[and] I set out in a boat. A drunken Dutchman...fell overboard; I reached through the water and drew him up. [He took] out of his pocket a book, which he desired I would dry for him."

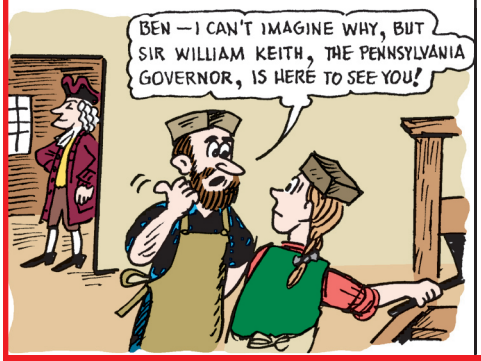
**1723: PHILADELPHIA**—On a September Sunday morning, Ben arrived in Philadelphia, a bustling port of 10,000 on the Delaware River. This city of ethnic diversity and religious tolerance would become his beloved hometown for life.



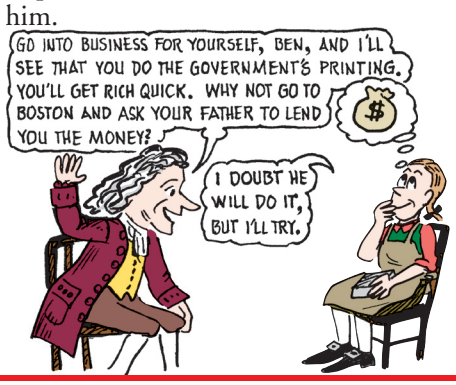

**Arriving in rags at age 17, Ben would** build a publishing empire and be rich enough at age 42 to retire to scientific pursuits, inventions, and public service. HOW DID HE DO IT?

**"I have been the more particular in [describing]...my first entry into that city** that you may in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there. I was in my working dress...dirty from my journey; my pockets were stuffed out with shirts and stockings; I knew no soul, nor where to look for lodging. I was fatigued...hungry...[and had only] a Dutch dollar." Ben bought three huge rolls and walked up Market Street eating his breakfast.

**Ben had no money, but he had a** trade. (And, as Poor Richard would say, "He who hath a trade hath an estate.") He immediately found a job at Samuel Keimer's print shop as a journeyman, a welcome step up from an apprentice. Then one day, he had a big surprise!

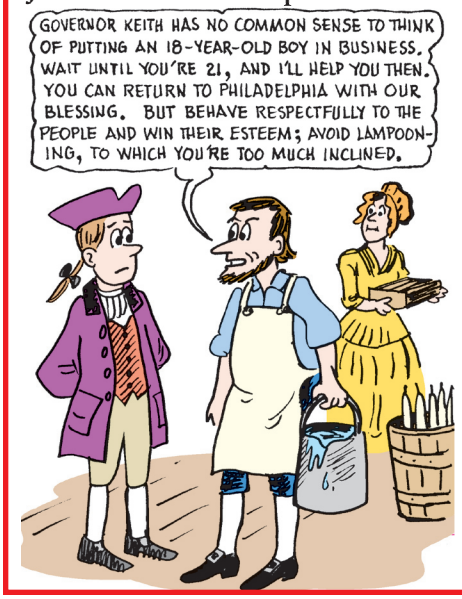



**An improbable development: Ben's** brother-in-law Robert Holmes, learning Ben was in Philadelphia, had written urging him to come home. Ben's return letter was read by Holmes in the presence of Gov. Keith, who was impressed with Ben and wanted to aid him.




**1724: BOSTON—And so after a** seven-month absence, Ben returned home to his surprised family. All were glad to see him, except James. Ben said, "I went to see him...better dressed than ever while in his service. He...looked me all over, and turned to his work again."

**Josiah denied Ben's request for a loan.**




**1724: LONDON—Governor Keith** turned out to be a con man. Offering to finance Ben, he sent him to England to buy print equipment—then reneged. Stranded, Ben once again relied on his trade. He worked for a year in London print shops where, refusing to drink beer for breakfast, he was called the "water-American."

**1726: PHILADELPHIA—At age 20,** Ben returned from London wiser about human nature. While at sea, he designed a plan for the future conduct of his life. The goal: happiness.

- APPLY MYSELF WITH INDUSTRY TO MY BUSINESS AND NOT BE LED ASTRAY BY GET-RICH-QUICK SCHEMES.
- SPEAK TRUTH IN EVERY INSTANCE.
- SPEAK ILL OF NO MAN (EVEN IN TRUTH) BUT RATHER SPEAK ALL THE GOOD I KNOW OF EVERYBODY.
- BE FRUGAL.

This became Ben's versio n of the **Protestant work ethic:**

**Industry +Virtue +Frugality = Success.**

# ❊ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC

**Benjamin Franklin's version of the Protestant work ethic became one of the strongest influences in American life.**

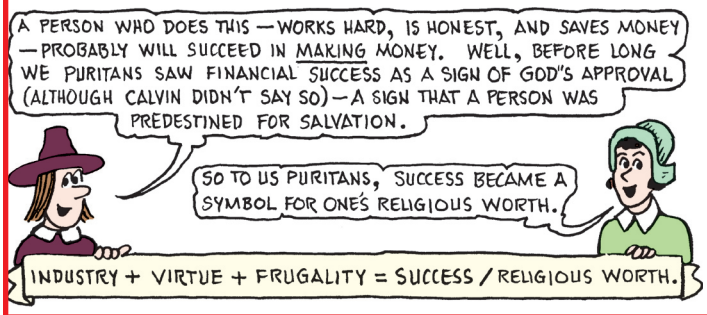
## THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC: INDUSTRY+VIRTUE+FRUGALITY= SUCCESS

### Puritan Version
Industry + Virtue + Frugality = Success /Religious Worth

**New England Puritans, unsure whether God had** predestined them for salvation (that is, whether God had determined that they would go to heaven), followed John Calvin's advice to glorify God **as if** they were saved.

**HOW MIGHT A PERSON GLORIFY GOD?**

1) **INDUSTRY**—Work hard at your calling.
2) **VIRTUE**—Be good; obey the 10 Commandments.
3) **FRUGALITY**—Spend money not on yourself (indulgence diverts you from glorifying God) but on charity and reinvestment in your work.

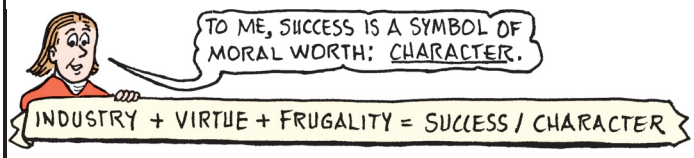



### Benjamin Franklin's Version
Industry + Virtue + Frugality = Success / Character

**Ben secularized the Protestant work ethic by giving it practical** rather than **religious** meaning. He asked not how a person might glorify God—but rather:

**HOW MIGHT A PERSON LIVE A USEFUL LIFE?**

1) **INDUSTRY**: **"Be industrious and free. I**f we are industrious we will never starve." "Industry brings comfort, plenty, and respect."
2) **VIRTUE**—**"Sin is not hurtful because it is forbidden, but it is forbidden because it is hurtful."** "It [is] in everyone's interest to be virtuous who [wishes] to be happy."
3) **FRUGALITY**—**"Be frugal and free."** "Ah, think what you do when you run in debt: you give to another power over your liberty."




**In 1728 Ben, by now a master printer, opened his own print shop and put the Protestant work ethic into practice.**

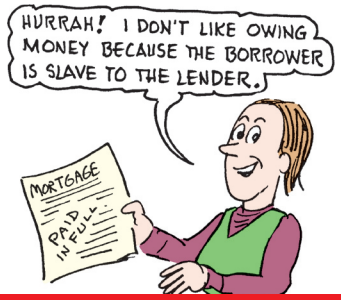
### 1) INDUSTRY

"In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid all appearances of the contrary. I dressed plainly; I was seen at no places of idle diversion....And this industry visible to our neighbors began to give us character and credit.

"I mention this industry, though it seems to be talking in my own praise, that those...who read it may know the use of that virtue...."

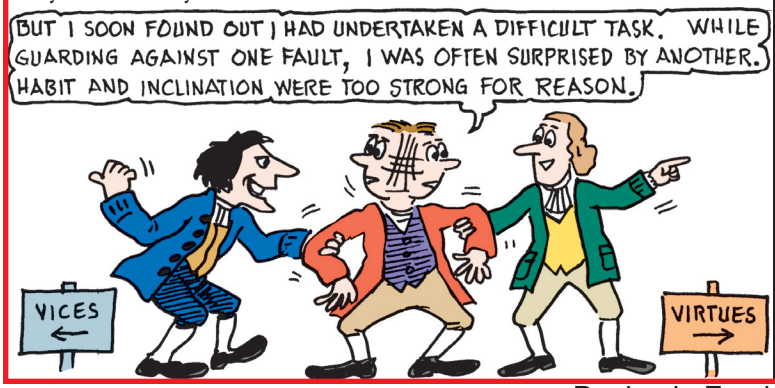
### 2) FRUGALITY

By spending little and saving much, Ben soon paid the debts on his shop. He reinvested by starting a newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette.

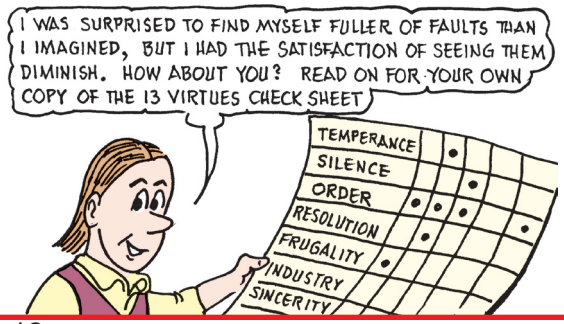



### 3) VIRTUE

"About this time I conceived the bold plan of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time...."




**So Ben designed a way to break bad habits and** acquire good ones. He made a list of 13 virtues and practiced each for a week, giving himself a mark for every offense. He repeated the course every 13 weeks, 4 times per year, aiming for a clean slate.



## ❊ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: THE THIRTEEN VIRTUES

**"Let no pleasure tempt thee, no profit allure thee, no ambition corrupt thee, no example sway thee, no persuasion move thee, to do any thing which thou knowest to be evil; so shalt thou always live jollily; for a good conscience is a continual Christmas."**

***—Poor Richard's Almanac***

| | | Sun. | Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. | Sat. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1. TEMPERANCE:** Eat not to dullness. Drink not to elevation. | | | | | | | | |
| **2. SILENCE:** Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversation. | | | | | | | | |
| **3. ORDER:** Let all your things have their places. Let each part of your business have its time. | | | | | | | | |
| **4. RESOLUTION:** Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve. | | | | | | | | |
| **5. FRUGALITY:** Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing. | | | | | | | | |
| **6. INDUSTRY:** Lose no time. Be always employed in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary actions. | | | | | | | | |
| **7. SINCERITY:** Use no hurtful deceit. Think innocently and justly; if you speak, speak accordingly. | | | | | | | | |
| **8. JUSTICE:** Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty. | | | | | | | | |
| **9. MODERATION:** Avoid extremes. Forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve. | | | | | | | | |
| **10. CLEANLINESS:** Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, clothes, or habitation. | | | | | | | | |
| **11. TRANQUILITY:** Be not disturbed at trifles or at accidents common or unavoidable. | | | | | | | | |
| **12. CHASTITY:** Rarely use venery but for health or offspring never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation. | | | | | | | | |
| **13. HUMILITY:** Imitate Jesus and Socrates. | | | | | | | | |

## ❊ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: FINE-TUNING THE 13 VIRTUES

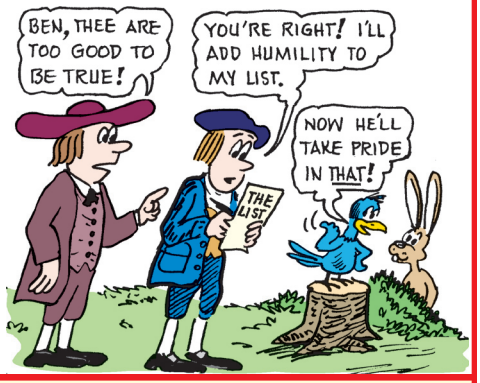
**Pride is "the last vice the good man gets rid of."—Benjamin Franklin**

"**ORDER gave me the most trouble.** The precept of order requiring that every part of my business...have its alloted time, [I designed] the following scheme for the day."

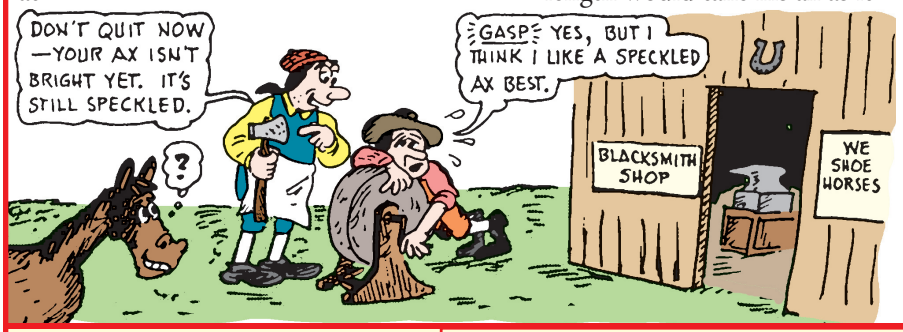
| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Morning question:** What good shall I do this day? | 5 | Rise, wash, address Powerful Goodness; contrive day's business and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study; and breakfast. |
| | 6 | |
| | 7 | |
| | 8 | |
| | 9 | Work |
| | 10 | |
| | 11 | |
| | 12 | Read or overlook my accounts, and dine. |
| | 1 | |
| | 2 | |
| | 3 | Work |
| | 4 | |
| | 5 | |
| | 6 | Put things in their places, supper, music, or diversion, or conversation; examination of the day. |
| **Evening question:** What good have I done today? | 7 | |
| | 8 | |
| | 9 | |
| | 10 | Sleep |

"**In truth I was incorrigible about order.** I was almost ready to content myself with a faulty character in that respect....For something that pretended to be reason was suggesting that... a perfect character might be..envied and hated and that a...man should allow a few faults in himself to keep his friends."

"**My list of virtues contained at first but twelve.** But a Quaker friend kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud, that my pride showed itself frequently in conversation."



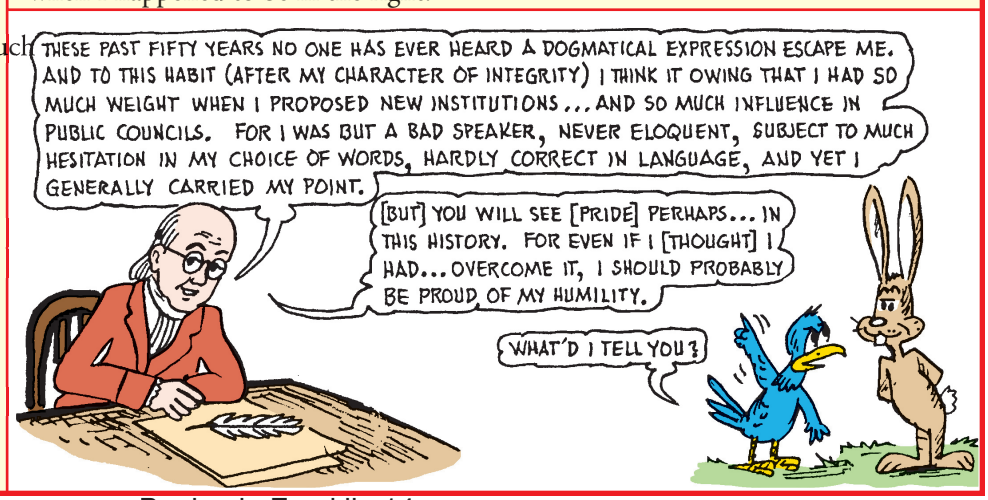

**THE SPECKLED AX**—"[I was] **like the man who in buying an ax of** smith... desired to have...the surface as bright as the edge; the smith consented to grind it bright...if he would turn the wheel. He turned while the smith pressed the ax hard...on the stone, which made the turning of it very fatiguing. The man at length would take his ax as it




**HUMILITY: "I made it a rule to:**

- "Forbear all direct contradiction of others' opinions and all positive assertion of my own.
- "Forbid myself every word that imported a fixed opinion, such as 'certainly,' 'undoubtedly.'
- "Adopt instead of them, 'I conceive' or 'I imagine' a thing to be so, or 'It so appears to me at present.'
- "Deny myself the pleasure of showing...some absurdity in [another's] proposition."
- "Observe that in some cases...his opinion might be right, but in the present case there 'appeared' or 'seemed to me' some difference."

"This mode [humility] I put on with some violence to my natural inclination, became at length...easy and habitual. I soon found the advantage in this change in my manners....My opinions [had] a readier reception...had less mortification when I was found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevailed with others to...join me when I happened to be in the right."



## ❊ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: THE JUNTO, A DO-GOOD CLUB

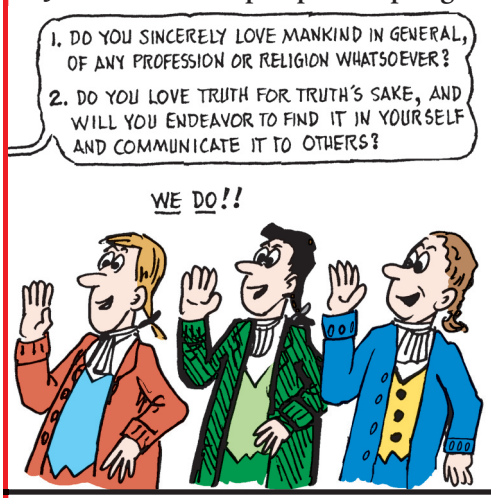
"For my own part, when I am...serving others, I do not look upon my self as conferring favors, but as paying debts."—Benjamin Franklin

**1727: THE JUNTO—Meanwhile, inspired by Daniel Defoe and Cotton Mather, Ben turned private virtue into public** virtue by organizing a self-improvement and public service club called the **Junto** (Latin for "together"). Also called the **Leather Apron Club**, it was composed of a dozen fellow tradesmen who were "ingenious friends" and "lovers of reading."

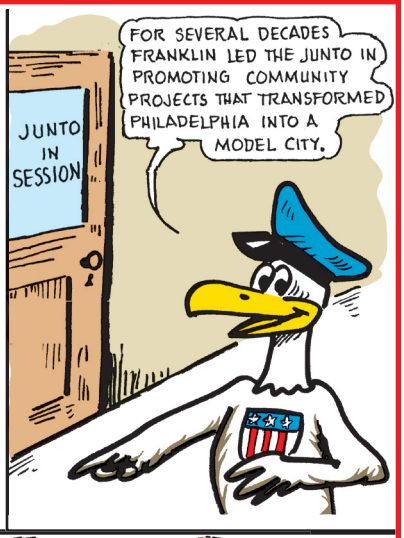
**Friday night meetings were sociable—Ben said, "I love company, chat, a laugh, a glass, and even a song."—and purposeful:**

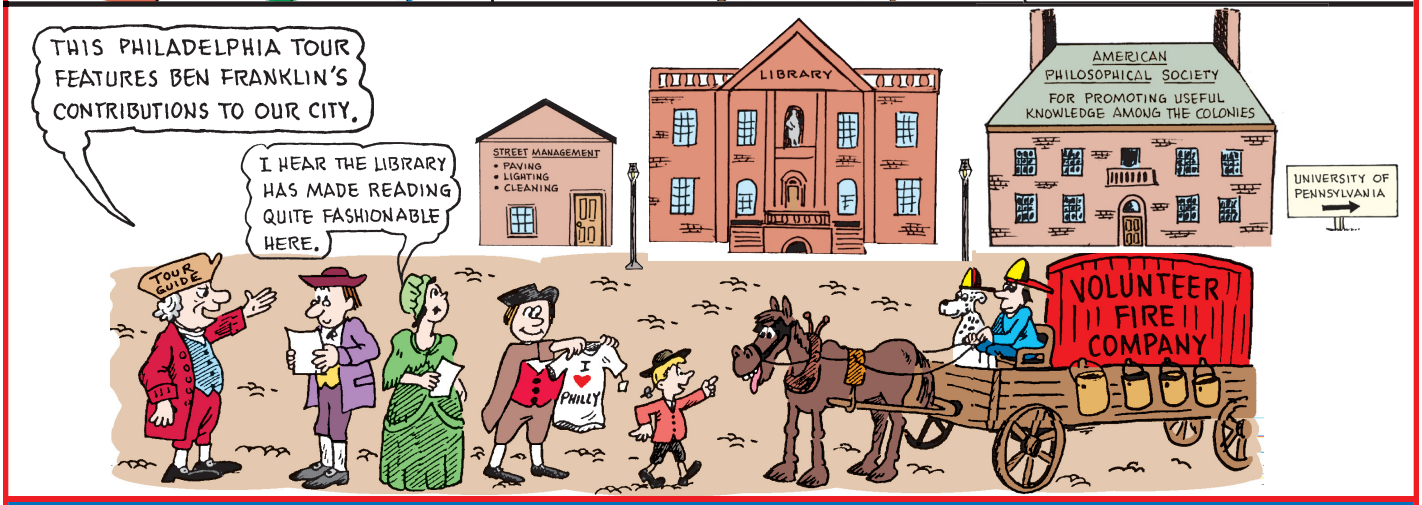
1. Members would each raise one question about morals, politics, or science—to be discussed at the next meeting after everyone had read up on it. Once a quarter each person would write and read an essay on any subject.
2. Discussions would be in the spirit of finding truth, without disputes or desire of victory. Dogmatic statements were penalized by a fee.

**Junto membership required a pledge.**



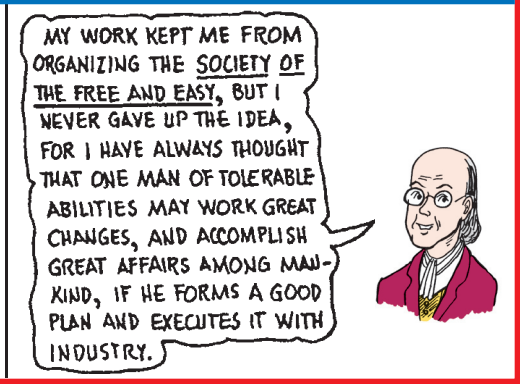

**Friday night discussions began with this question:**




**Ben envisioned an international Junto, THE SOCIETY OF THE FREE AND EASY, uniting virtuous men of all nations for the good of mankind. By practicing the 13 virtues, members would become free from the dominion of vice, and by practicing industry and frugality, free from the slavery of debt. Life then would be easy.**

**Ben said if villains knew the advantages of being virtuous, they'd switch over immediately!**



**At age 25 Ben wrote down his own religious creed—** a rational religion arrived at through observing what seemed reasonable.

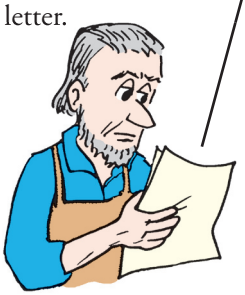
- **There is one God who made all things.**
- **He governs the world by his providence.**
- **The most acceptable service to God is doing good to man.**
- **The soul is immortal.**
- **God will reward virtue and punish vice either here or hereafter.**

"**Though I seldom attended any public worship, I had still** an opinion of its propriety...when rightly conducted, and I paid my annual subscription for the support of the Presbyterian minister.... Had he been...a good preacher...I might have [attended church]...

"**I had some years before composed a form of prayer...** [And] I returned to this and went no more to [church]. My conduct might be blameable, but I leave it without attempting...to excuse it , my purpose being to relate facts, and not to make apologies for them."

**Josiah worried about Ben's independent religious ideas.**

In 1738 he expressed this concern to his 32-year-old son and received this letter.



Ben's reply explains his approach to religion:

Honored Father,

**You seem concerned lest I have imbibed some erroneous opinions. Doubtless I have my share;** and...I imagine a man must have a good deal of vanity who believes...that all the doctrines he holds are true....I am sorry you have uneasiness on my account; and if it were a thing possible for one to alter his opinions in order to please another, I know of non whom I ought more willingly oblige than...yourself. But, since it is no more in man's power to think than to look like another, methinks all that should be expected from me is to keep my mind open to conviction, to hear patiently, and examine attentively whatever is offered me for that end; and if I continue in those same errors, I believe your usual charity will induce you to rather pity and excuse than to blame me.

**I think vital religion has always suffered when orthodoxy is more regarded than virtue;** and the scriptures assure me that at the last day we shall not be examined what we thought, but what we did; and our recommendation will not be that we said, "Lord, Lord!" but that we did good to our fellow creatures. See Matthew XXV.

**I am your dutiful son, Ben**

**Ben's practical approach to religion can be seen in an** incident with his friend George Whitefield, the famous preacher of the Great Awakening revivals.

**Ben believed that you served God by doing good to his children.**

He was a friend to all religious sects, feeling there was some truth in all of them.

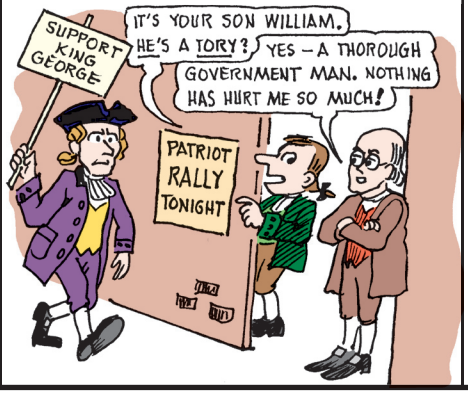
According to John Adams:

**1730—At age 24, Ben married Deborah Read—the girl** who had laughed at him when he first arrived in Philadelphia. It was a common-law marriage, for Deborah's first husband had disappeared. Deborah's mind was no match for Ben's, and she had a bad temper. But Ben said, "She was a good and faithful helpmeet, assisted me much in the shop, [and] we throve together."

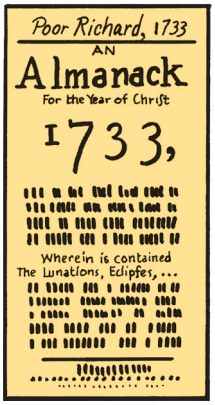
They reared two children to adulthood: William, Ben's son born by an unknown woman about the time of the marriage, and Sarah, born in 1742. Francis, a son born in 1732, died in 1736.

**Because of Ben's prosperity, the** children enjoyed advantages Ben had not known as a boy—in the case of William, a fine law education and an aristocratic social life.

**In 1762 William won a royal** appointment as governor of New Jersey. He remained loyal to the king during the Revolutionary War, an act Ben considered treasonous and hard to forgive.




**Between 1732 and 1757 Ben** annually published Poor Richard's Almanac, a book combining a calendar with weather and astrological data and sprinkled with proverbs.

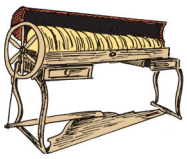
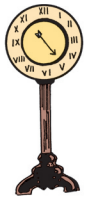



"**Poor Richard**" was a fictitious character who personified Ben's wit and wisdom in a down-home way. For 25 years the almanac was a best-seller. Read in Europe as well as all the colonies, it gained Ben international fame.

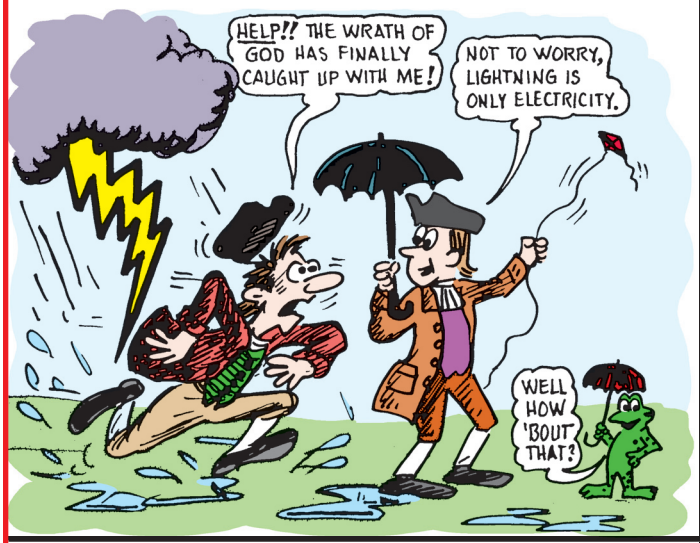
**Ben published *Poor Richard's Almanac* as a way to inform the common people**, most of whom owned two books, a Bible and an almanac, and few others. He filled it with proverbs showing hard work and frugality "as the means of procuring wealth and thereby securing virtue—it being more difficult for a man in want to act always honestly, as 'It is hard for an empty sack to stand upright.'"

**These proverbs contained the wisdom of many ages and nations.** To assemble them. Ben taught himself French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Latin. Wisdom through humor became Ben's tool for improving the world. He thought a good laugh more effective than a sermon for doing so.

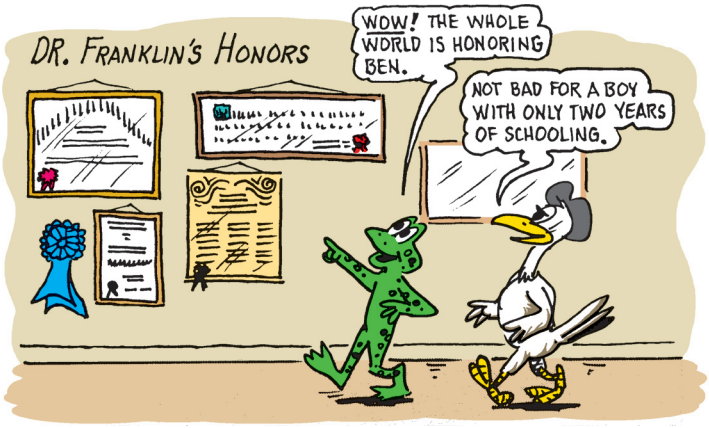
**17457—At age 42 Ben retired to pursue his major interests: invention and science.**
He wanted to improve the physical as well as the moral world.
The items below are a few of his inventions.
He refused to patent any of his inventions, explaining:
**"As we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by an invention of ours; and this we should do freely and generously."**

| FRANKLIN STOVE | BIFOCAL GLASSES | WRITING CHAIR | ARMONICA | ODOMETER | LIGHTNING ROD | CLOCK |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | |  | | |  |

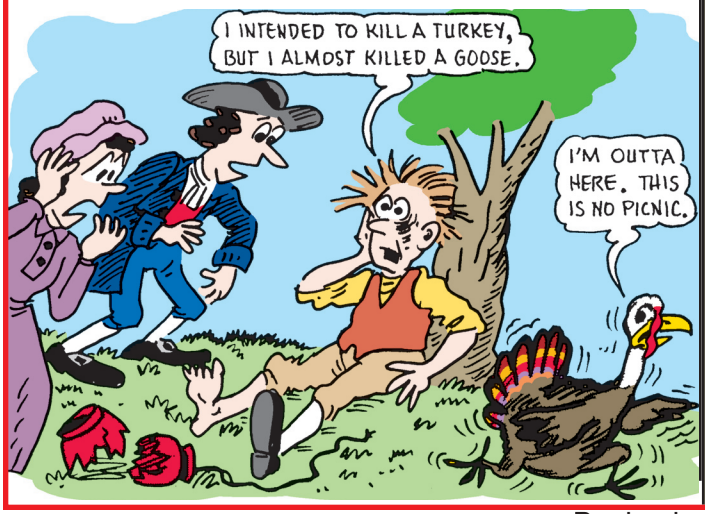
**1752—Ben's major contribution to science was his proof** that lightning and electricity were identical.




**For this historic discovery Ben won honorary doctoral** degrees from Harvard, Yale, and Oxford Universities, as well as membership in the Royal Society of London. He became famous throughout Europe, a great advantage to the American cause when he served as minister to France from 1776 to 1785.




**But Ben didn't take himself too seriously. After nearly** electrocuting himself at a picnic by trying to cook a turkey with an electric shock from a Leyden jar, he said:




**Between 1757 and his death in 1790, age 51 to 84,** Ben gave himself to public service, some of which you will read about in later pages. Here is an overview of his activities:

1. **Colonial postmaster**
2. **Colonial agent in England; helped secure repeal of Stamp Act**
3. **Delegate to Albany Congress**
4. **Delegate to First and Second Continental Congresses**
5. **Member of Declaration of Independence Committee**
6. **Minister to France**
7. **President of Pennsylvania**
8. **Delegate to Constitutional Convention**

The life of Benjamin Franklin now merges with that of the colonies, as events lead toward the American Revolution.