

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**UPDATED INTO TODAY'S
ENGLISH, ILLUSTRATED, WITH
FOOTNOTES AND BACKGROUND
HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

**TODAY'S
ENGLISH**

PUBLISHERS

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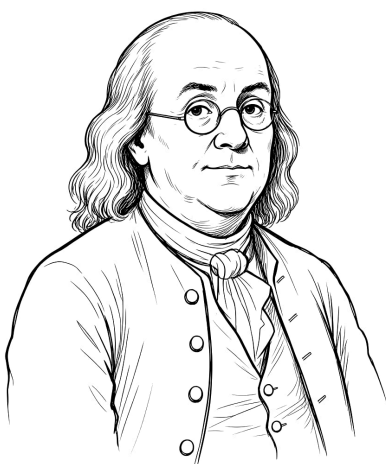
Benjamin Franklin began writing his life story in 1771, sitting in the English countryside at a friend's house. He was 65, postmaster general of the American colonies, and one of the most famous scientists in the world. He wrote for ten days, put the manuscript aside, and didn't return to it for more than a decade.

He picked it up twice more in his final years, making his last additions in 1789, a year before he died, and the book still breaks off in 1757. Franklin lived another 33 years past that point: he helped draft the Declaration of Independence, spent nearly a decade in Paris as America's ambassador, negotiated the peace treaty with Britain, and helped shape the Constitution. He simply ran out of time to write it all down.

Franklin wrote in the clear, vigorous prose of the eighteenth century, which has aged better than most. We've still updated the wording where it would slow a modern reader down, without touching his voice, his arguments, or his very deliberate self-presentation. We've added hundreds of footnotes to explain the people and events that we've forgotten today, but that he took for granted. You'll see some footnotes signed "—John Bigelow, 1868." He published the first edition based on Franklin's original manuscript.

At the back you'll find a narrative covering those missing 33 years, including the book's own story: Franklin never published the *Autobiography*, and it reached readers only in pieces after his death, first in French. We've also included reading group questions, a timeline, and a background essay on the colonial Philadelphia world that produced him. A selection from *Poor Richard's Almanack* gives you more Franklin before you're done, and the complete original text closes the book.

—The Publishers



Examples of what we've updated

Franklin's original text has many phrases that don't mean what they look like now, so we updated them. Here are some examples. How many do you think people would understand today?

"like so many emmets" — like a swarm of ants

"chapmen's books" — books sold by traveling peddlers

"I give it fair quarter" — I treat it kindly

"holding conventicles" — holding unauthorized religious meetings

"I was too saucy" — I was too cheeky

"a little obnoxious" — somewhat unpopular

"a transmigration" — reincarnation

"zeal against popery" — opposition to Catholicism

"outed for nonconformity" — removed from their positions

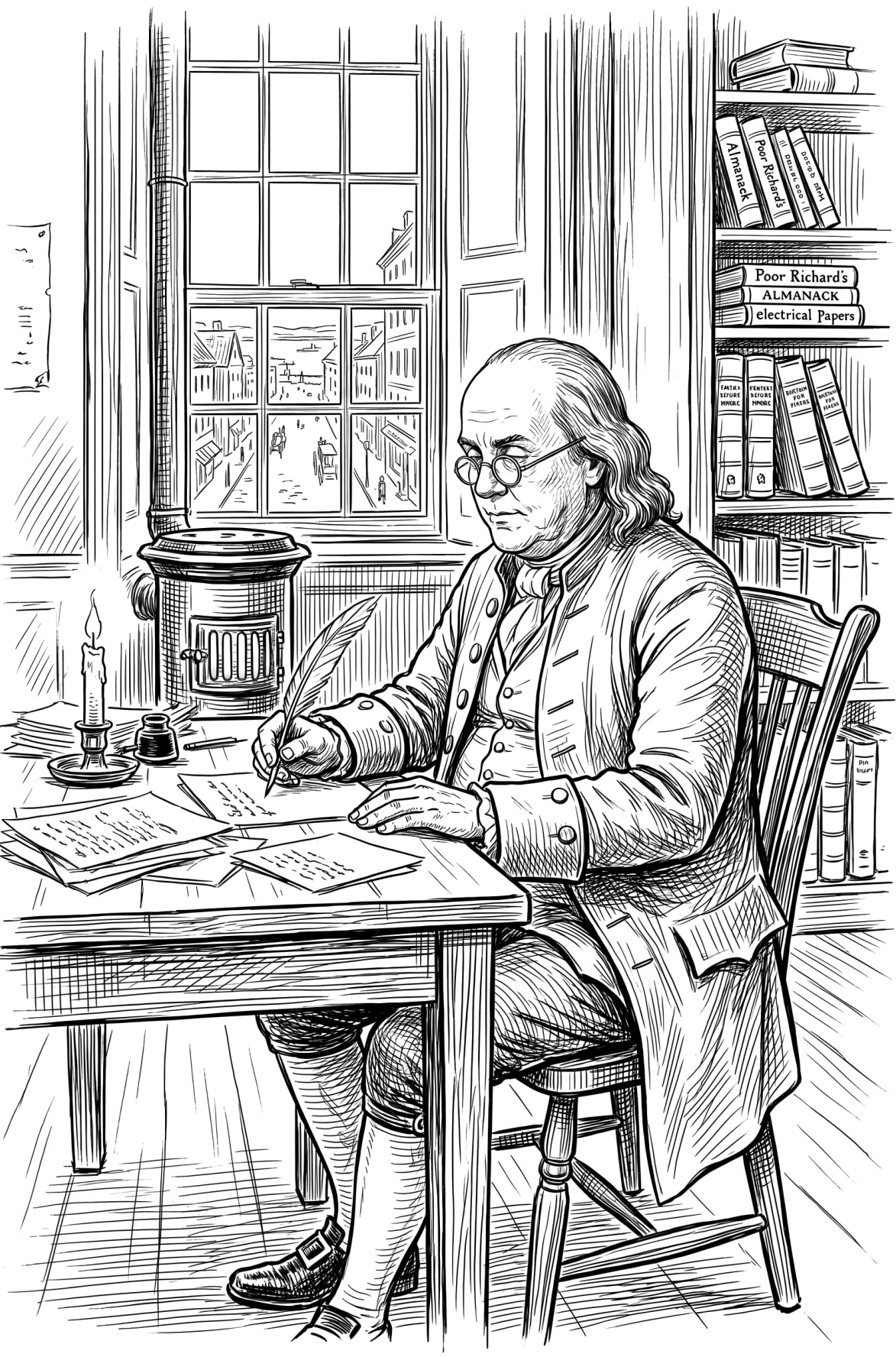
"chid for my singularity" — scolded for being so unusual

"lodged and dieted" — I stayed there and had my meals

"a good deal of the knave" — a great deal of deceit

"a naughty girl with child" — an unmarried pregnant girl

"the paquet" — the mail ship



Letter

1706–1757

Twyford, at the Bishop of St. Asaph's, 1771.

Dear Son: I've always enjoyed collecting brief accounts of my ancestors. You may remember the questions I asked among my surviving relatives when you were with me in England, and the trip I took for that purpose. Imagining it might be just as pleasing to^{*} you to learn the details of my life — many of which you're still unfamiliar with — and looking forward to a week of uninterrupted free time at my current country home[†], I'm sitting down to write them for you. I have a few other reasons as well. Having risen from the poverty and obscurity of my birth and upbringing to a state of wealth and some reputation, and having come so far in life with a considerable share of happiness, my descendants might want to know the methods I used. With God's blessing, those approaches worked well for me. They may find some of them suitable to their own circumstances and worth following.

That happiness, when I think about it, has led me to say that if I could choose to live this exact life again from the start, I would gladly accept. I would only ask for the same advantage authors get

^{*} After the words "pleasing to," the words "some of" were written in and later erased. —John Bigelow, 1868

[†] The country home of Bishop Shipley, "the good bishop," as Dr. Franklin used to call him. —John Bigelow, 1868

with a second edition: the chance to correct some mistakes from the first. I could also exchange some unlucky events and misfortunes for better ones. Even if I couldn't do that, I would still take the offer. Since I can't literally live my life over again, the closest thing to it is looking back on it. I want to preserve those memories as well as I can by writing them down.

By doing this, I will also give in to the habit so common among older men: talking about themselves and their past deeds. I can do so without boring people who might feel obligated to listen just out of respect for my age, since anyone can choose to read this or ignore it. Finally (I might as well admit it, since nobody would believe me if I denied it), I will probably indulge my own vanity quite a bit. In fact, I rarely hear or see the phrase "Without vanity I may say," or similar, without something boastful immediately following.¹ Most people resent vanity in others, no matter how much they have of it themselves. But I treat it kindly wherever I meet with it, convinced that it often benefits the person who has it and those around him. So in many cases, it wouldn't be entirely unreasonable to thank God for one's vanity alongside life's other comforts.

Speaking of thanking God, I humbly acknowledge that I owe the happiness I've described in my past life to His guiding care, which pointed me toward the methods I used and helped them succeed. This belief leads me to hope, though without presuming, that the same kindness will continue with me. It will either maintain that happiness or give me the strength to endure a tragic downturn, as others have faced. The course of my future fortunes is known only to Him, who has the power to turn even our suffering into a blessing.

1. A frequent stock preface in eighteenth-century correspondence and talk. Writers or speakers used it—often ironically or to affect modesty—before making a self-congratulatory remark.

[The Franklin family of Ecton]

One of my uncles, who shared my interest in gathering family stories, once gave me a set of notes. They provided several details about our ancestors. According to these notes, the family had lived in the same village, Ecton in Northamptonshire, for 300 years, and possibly longer. He wasn't sure how much longer, but it might date back to when the name Franklin — originally the name of a class of free landowners — was adopted as a surname, following the broader trend across the kingdom.² They owned about 30 acres outright and supported themselves with blacksmithing.³ That trade stayed in the family until his day, with the eldest son always trained for it. Both my uncle and my father followed this tradition with their own eldest sons.

When I checked the parish records at Ecton, I found a record of births, marriages, and burials starting only in 1555, as no records were kept there before that. Those records showed that, going back five generations, I was consistently the youngest son of the youngest son. My grandfather Thomas, born in 1598, lived in Ecton until he grew too old to work. He then moved in with his son John, a dyer in Banbury, Oxfordshire, where my father later served an apprenticeship. My grandfather died and was buried there. We visited his grave in 1758. His eldest son Thomas stayed in the house at Ecton. He left it and the land to his only child, a daughter. She and her husband, a man named Fisher from Wellingborough, sold it to Mr. Isted, who was the lord of the manor there.

My grandfather raised four sons: Thomas, John, Benjamin, and Josiah. I'll share what I remember about them, though I'm currently away from my documents. If those papers haven't been misplaced while I'm gone, you'll find plenty more details among them.

2. Franklins held their land outright, not as tenants, and ranked just below the gentry.

3. Approximately 12.1 hectares.

Thomas was trained as a blacksmith by his father. But he was clever, and encouraged to study (as all my brothers were) by Squire Palmer, then the leading gentleman in that parish. He trained as a scrivener, someone who drafted legal documents, became a prominent figure in the county, and led many civic projects for the county, the town of Northampton, and his own village — of which many examples were shared with me. He was widely recognized and supported by the then Lord Halifax.⁴ He died on January 6, 1702 (old style), exactly four years to the day before I was born.⁵ The account we received of his life and character from some elderly residents of Ecton, I remember, struck you as remarkable because of how closely it matched what you knew of my own life. “Had he died on the same day,” you said, “one might have supposed reincarnation.”

John, I believe, was trained as a wool dyer. Benjamin was trained as a silk dyer, completing an apprenticeship in London. He was a clever man. I remember him well: when I was a boy, he sailed to join my father in Boston and lived with us for several years. He lived to a ripe old age. His grandson, Samuel Franklin, now lives in Boston. He left behind two quarto volumes of handwritten poetry, filled with short occasional poems addressed to friends and relatives. The following, which he sent me, serves as a sample.* He had invented his own shorthand system and taught it to me, but because I never practiced it, I’ve long since forgotten it. I was named after this uncle, who shared a special bond with my father. He was deeply religious, regularly attending sermons by the finest preachers. He transcribed them in his shorthand and kept many

4. Charles Montagu (1661–1715), a Whig statesman and literary patron, was created Baron Halifax in 1700 and later Earl of Halifax (1714).

5. Franklin uses ‘old style’ dates based on the Julian calendar and a year beginning on March 25. In modern dating, January 6, 1702 old style corresponds to January 16, 1703 new style (adding ten days and advancing the year).

* In the margin, Franklin wrote “here insert it,” but the poetry is not provided. Mr. Sparks reports (*Life of Franklin*, p. 6) that these volumes were preserved and later belonged to Mrs. Emmons of Boston, the great-granddaughter of their author.

volumes of these notes. He was also deeply involved in politics — perhaps too much for someone of his standing.

I recently came across, in London, a collection he had put together of the major pamphlets on public affairs from 1641–1717. Many volumes are missing, as the numbering shows, but eight folio volumes remain, along with 24 in quarto and octavo formats.⁶ A secondhand bookseller had found them, and knowing me from my occasional purchases, he brought them to me. My uncle must have left them here when he moved to America, roughly 50 years earlier. The margins contain many of his notes.

Our obscure family became Protestant early in the Reformation and stayed Protestant through Queen Mary's reign, when they occasionally faced persecution for their strong opposition to Catholicism. They had obtained an English Bible, and to hide and protect it, they fastened it open with cords beneath and inside the cover of a joint-stool.⁷ When my great-great-grandfather read from it to his family, he would flip the stool upside down onto his knees, revealing the pages hidden under the cords. A child would stand at the door to alert them if an officer of the church court was approaching. If that happened, they would flip the stool back onto its legs, leaving the Bible concealed underneath as before. I heard this story from my uncle Benjamin.

The entire family stayed within the Church of England until near the end of Charles II's reign. By then, several ministers who had been removed from their positions for nonconformity were holding unauthorized religious meetings in Northamptonshire.⁸

6. A folio is made from a sheet folded once, producing two leaves (four pages); a quarto is folded twice, yielding four leaves (eight pages); an octavo is folded three times, yielding eight leaves (sixteen pages).

7. A joint-stool was a stool made with mortise and tenon joinery, common in English households of the 16th and 17th centuries.

8. Nonconformity refers to the refusal of some English Protestants to conform to the doctrines, liturgy, and government of the Church of England after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. The Act of Uniformity (1662) required clergy to accept the Book of Common Prayer; about 2,000 ministers who refused were ejected from their livings.

Benjamin and Josiah joined these ministers and remained with them for the rest of their lives, while the rest of the family stayed with the Church of England.

[Growing up in Boston]

Josiah, my father, married at a young age and brought his wife and three children to New England around 1682. Because unauthorized religious meetings had been banned by law and were frequently disrupted, several prominent acquaintances of his decided to move to the colonies.⁹ He was persuaded to join them, hoping they could practice their faith freely. He had four more children with his first wife after arriving there, and ten more with a second wife, bringing the total to seventeen. I remember thirteen of us sitting at his table at one time. They all grew up and married. I was the youngest son and the third youngest child, born in Boston.

My mother, his second wife, was Abiah Folger, daughter of Peter Folger, one of New England's first settlers. Cotton Mather respectfully mentioned him in his church history of the region, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, describing him as "a godly, learned Englishman," if I recall the exact wording. I heard that Peter Folger wrote several short occasional poems, but only one was ever printed, and I read it many years ago. He wrote it in 1675, in the simple, unpolished verse typical of that era and region, and addressed it to the colonial officials.¹⁰ The poem advocated for freedom of conscience and defended the Baptists, Quakers, and other

8. Nonconformity refers to the refusal of some English Protestants to conform to the doctrines, liturgy, and government of the Church of England after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. The Act of Uniformity (1662) required clergy to accept the Book of Common Prayer; about 2,000 ministers who refused were ejected from their livings.

9. England's Conventicle Act of 1664 prohibited religious assemblies of more than five people outside the Church of England, with penalties for both ministers and attendees. Subsequent acts reinforced these measures, prompting many Nonconformists to emigrate to the colonies.

10. The poem, published in 1676, is "A Looking Glass for the Times; or the Former Spirit of New England Revived in this Generation." Peter Folger (c. 1617–1690) wrote it during King Philip's War (1675–1676).

dissenting groups who had faced persecution. It blamed the conflicts with Native Americans and other hardships in the colony on this religious intolerance, calling these events divine punishments for such a grave offense, and urged the repeal of those intolerant laws. To me, the whole piece was written with dignified clarity and bold honesty. I remember the six concluding lines, though I have forgotten the first two of the stanza.¹¹ The overall meaning was clear: his criticisms came from good intentions, and therefore he wished to be known as the author.

“Because to be a libeller (says he)
I hate it with my heart;
From Sherburne town, where now I dwell
My name I do put here;
Without offense your real friend,
It is Peter Folgier.”

My elder brothers were all apprenticed to different trades. I was sent to grammar school at eight, my father intending to devote me, as his tithe, to the service of the Church.¹² I showed an early readiness in learning to read—I must have started very early, because I don’t remember not knowing how. This, along with the belief of all his friends that I would certainly make a good scholar, encouraged him in this plan. My uncle Benjamin also approved, and offered to give me all his shorthand volumes of sermons — I suppose as a foundation to start with, if I would learn his shorthand system.

I continued at grammar school for not quite a year, though during that time I gradually rose from the middle of my class to become its top student, and was also moved up into the class above, so I could go on with that class into the third form at the end of the year. Meanwhile, my father reconsidered. Considering the ex-

11. The two lines are: “But I shall cease and set my name / to what I here insert.” *Insert* rhymes with *heart*, and *Folgier* (fol-JEER) rhymes with *here*.

12. A tithe is a portion set aside as an offering.

pense of a college education — which, with such a large family, he couldn't easily afford — and the meager earnings that many college-educated men later achieved, he changed his mind. He explained these reasons to his friends in my hearing, took me out of grammar school, and sent me to a writing and arithmetic school run by a then well-known teacher, Mr. George Brownell. Brownell was generally very successful in his profession, using mild, encouraging methods. Under him I learned to write neatly rather quickly, but I failed in arithmetic and made no progress. At ten, I was brought home to help my father in his business as a candle and soap maker. He hadn't been trained for this work, but he'd taken it up after arriving in New England when he found that his trade as a dyer would not support the family, since there was little demand for it. Accordingly, I was put to work cutting candle wicks, filling the dipping molds and the molds for cast candles, tending the shop, running errands, and so on.

I disliked the trade and had a strong pull toward the sea, but my father forbade it. Still, living near the water, I spent a lot of time in and around it. I learned to swim well early on and became adept at handling boats. When I was in a boat or canoe with other boys, I was usually allowed to steer, especially in difficult situations. On other occasions, I was generally a leader among the boys, and sometimes I led them into trouble. I'll mention one instance, since it shows an early sense of public-spirited initiative, even if it was not handled properly at the time.

A salt marsh bordered part of the mill pond. At high tide, we used to stand at its edge to fish for minnows. All our trampling had turned it into a complete quagmire. I proposed building a wharf there so we could stand on it, and I showed my friends a large pile of stones that were meant for a new house near the marsh and would suit our purpose perfectly. That evening, after the workmen had left, I gathered several of my playmates. Working diligently like a swarm of ants, sometimes two or three boys to a stone, we carried them all away and built our little wharf. The next morning, the workmen were surprised to find the

stones missing, only to discover they'd ended up in our wharf. They asked around about who had moved them. We were caught and reported to our parents. Several of us were punished by our fathers. Although I argued that the project was useful, my father convinced me that nothing is truly useful if it isn't honest.



[My parents]

I think you'll want to know something about his appearance and character.¹³ He was in excellent

health, of medium height, well built, and very strong. He was inventive, drew quite well, had some skill in music, and had a clear, pleasant voice. When he played psalm tunes on his violin and sang along — as he sometimes did in the evening after the day's work was done — it was truly enjoyable to listen to.¹⁴ He also had a knack for mechanics and, when necessary, was very skilled with other tradesmen's tools. But his greatest strength lay in his sound reasoning and solid judgment regarding practical matters, both in private and public affairs.

He was never officially involved in public affairs, however, because raising a large family and his limited financial resources kept him focused on his trade. Still, I clearly remember leading figures frequently visiting him to ask for his opinion on town or church matters. They showed considerable respect for his judgment and advice. He was also often consulted by private citizens

13. This is Josiah Franklin (1657–1745), Benjamin Franklin's father.

14. Psalm tunes: melodies from the metrical psalter, typically the Bay Psalm Book (1640) or later editions, used in Congregational worship. Singing psalms at home was a common practice in devout Puritan households.

when difficulties arose, and he was frequently chosen as an arbitrator between opposing parties.¹⁵

At the dinner table, he liked to have a thoughtful friend or neighbor to talk with whenever possible. He always made sure to introduce a clever or useful topic of conversation, aiming to sharpen his children's minds. Through this practice, he directed our attention toward what was good, fair, and reasonable in living. He paid little or no attention to the food itself, whether it was well cooked or poorly prepared, in season or out of season, flavorful or bland, better or worse than other dishes. As a result, I was raised with such complete indifference to these matters that I did not care what was put in front of me. I paid so little attention to meals that even today, if asked, I can hardly say what I ate for dinner a few hours later. This has been a great advantage while traveling. My companions have sometimes been deeply frustrated because they lacked suitable food to satisfy their more refined — due to better upbringing — tastes and appetites.

My mother also had excellent health; she nursed all ten of her children. I never saw either parent fall ill except from the diseases that killed them, my father at 89 and my mother at 85. They are buried together in Boston, where I placed a marble marker over their grave several years ago, bearing this inscription:

Josiah Franklin,
and
Abiah his wife,
lie here interred.
They lived lovingly together in wedlock
fifty-five years.
Without an estate, or any gainful employment,
By constant labor and industry,
with God's blessing,

15. Respected community members often served as informal arbitrators because courts were scarce and communities preferred mediated settlements.

They maintained a large family
comfortably,
and brought up thirteen children
and seven grandchildren
reputably.
From this instance, reader,
Be encouraged to diligence in thy calling,
And distrust not Providence.
He was a pious and prudent man;
She, a discreet and virtuous woman.
Their youngest son,
In filial regard to their memory,
Places this stone.
J.F. born 1655, died 1744, *Ætat* 89.¹⁶
A.F. born 1667, died 1752, -----85.

My rambling digressions show that I have grown old. I used to write more systematically, but one doesn't dress for private company the way one does for a public ball. It's perhaps just a matter of neglect.

[Books and the printing trade]

To return to the matter at hand: I worked in my father's business for another two years, until I was twelve. My brother John, who had been trained in the trade, had left home, married, and set up shop in Rhode Island. It looked as though I was meant to take his place and become a candlemaker. But because I continued to dislike the work, my father worried that if he didn't find me a more suitable occupation, I'd run off to sea, just as his son Josiah had done to his great frustration.¹⁷ So he sometimes took me out to

16. *Ætat* (Latin *aetatis*, "aged") is commonly used on gravestones and in obituaries. Here "*Ætat* 89" means "aged 89 years."

17. His older brother Josiah Franklin Jr. (born 1685).

watch cabinetmakers, bricklayers, wood turners, brass metalworkers, and others at work, hoping to spot my natural inclinations and steer me toward a land-based trade.

Ever since, I've enjoyed watching skilled craftsmen handle their tools. That exposure proved useful, too: I learned enough to tackle small repairs around the house when I couldn't easily hire a worker, and to build simple machines for my experiments while the ideas were still fresh in my mind. Eventually, my father settled on the cutlery trade. My uncle Benjamin's son Samuel, who had been trained in that business in London, had just established himself in Boston, so I was sent to apprentice with him for a trial period. But when Samuel expected to charge a fee for taking me on, my father was displeased and brought me back home.

I loved reading from a young age, and I spent every little bit of money I earned on books. After enjoying *The Pilgrim's Progress*, I started collecting John Bunyan's works in separate small volumes. I later sold them so I could afford R. Burton's *Historical Collections*; they were inexpensive books from traveling peddlers, totaling 40 or 50 volumes.

My father's small library consisted mainly of works on religious controversies. I read most of them, and I've often regretted that, at a time when my thirst for knowledge was so strong, more suitable reading hadn't been available to me, especially since it had already been decided I wouldn't become a clergyman. The collection included Plutarch's *Lives*, which I read extensively, and I still consider that time well spent.¹⁸ There was also Daniel Defoe's *An Essay on Projects* and Dr. Mather's *Essays to Do Good*.^{19,20} These

18. Plutarch (c. 46–c. 120), a Greek writer, paired the lives of famous Greeks and Romans and compared their characters.

19. Daniel Defoe's *An Essay upon Projects* (1697) was an early work proposing social and economic reforms, including joint-stock companies, pensions, and educational schemes.

20. Dr. Cotton Mather (1663–1728), a leading Puritan minister in Boston, published *Essays to Do Good* in 1710, urging Christians to engage in active benevolence.

books likely shaped my thinking and influenced several major events later in my life.

Eventually, my love of books convinced my father to train me as a printer, even though he already had one son, James, in that profession. In 1717, James returned from England with a printing press and type to start his own business in Boston. I liked this trade far better than my father's, though I still harbored a longing for the sea. Fearing I would run off to sea, my father



was eager to have me formally apprenticed to my brother. I resisted for a while, but eventually gave in and signed the contract at just twelve years old. I was to serve until I turned twenty-one, with the provision that I could earn a skilled worker's pay during my final year.

I picked up the craft quickly and soon became a reliable assistant to my brother. I also gained access to better books. Through connections with booksellers' apprentices, I could sometimes borrow a volume, which I made sure to return promptly and in good condition. I often stayed up in my room reading through most of the night, especially when I borrowed a book in the evening and had to return it early the next morning so it wouldn't be missed.

After a while, a clever tradesman named Mr. Matthew Adams, who owned a decent book collection and often visited our print shop, took an interest in me. He invited me to his library and kindly lent me whatever books I wanted to read. I soon became interested in poetry and wrote a few short poems.²¹ My brother,

21. Poetry then meant any verse: satire, comedy, news ballads, and political argument, as well as personal lyric.

thinking it might be profitable, encouraged me and put me to work writing topical ballads. One was called *The Lighthouse Tragedy* and told the story of Captain Worthilake drowning along with his two daughters; the other was a sailor's song about the capture of the pirate Teach (Blackbeard).²²²³ They were pretty terrible work, written in the cheap Grub Street ballad style.²⁴ Once they were printed, he sent me around town to sell them. The first one sold very well because the event was recent and had made a splash. This flattered my vanity, but my father discouraged me by mocking my efforts and telling me that poets usually ended up penniless. So I escaped becoming a poet — probably a pretty bad one, at that. But since prose writing proved so useful throughout my life and was a major factor in my success, I'll explain how I managed to develop whatever skill I ended up with.

[Collins and self-education]

There was another studious young man in town named John Collins, who knew me quite well. We liked to argue, and we were especially eager to prove each other wrong. This argumentative streak, by the way, easily becomes a bad habit. It makes people deeply unpleasant in social settings because keeping up the debate requires constantly contradicting others. As a result, it not only ruins the conversation but also breeds resentment and, perhaps, lasting hostility — right when you might actually need friends. I picked up the habit from reading my father's books on

22. Captain George Worthylake (also spelled Worthilake, c. 1673–1718) was the first keeper of Boston Light, on Little Brewster Island. On 3 November 1718 a canoe capsize as he returned from a sermon in Boston. With him were his wife Ann, their daughter Ruth, a servant, George Cutler, an enslaved man named Shadwell, and a friend, John Edge. Franklin remembered two daughters.

23. Edward Teach (c. 1680–1718) preyed on shipping along the eastern coast of North America. He was killed on 22 November 1718 in a battle with British naval forces led by Lieutenant Robert Maynard near Ocracoke Inlet, North Carolina.

24. Grub Street, a lane in the Cripplegate area of London, was notorious for impoverished hack writers who produced cheap ballads, pamphlets, and sensational journalism. By the early eighteenth century, 'Grub Street' had become a term for low-quality literary work produced hastily for money.

religious debates. I've since noticed that level-headed people rarely fall into this trap, except for lawyers, academics, and practically anyone educated at Edinburgh.²⁵

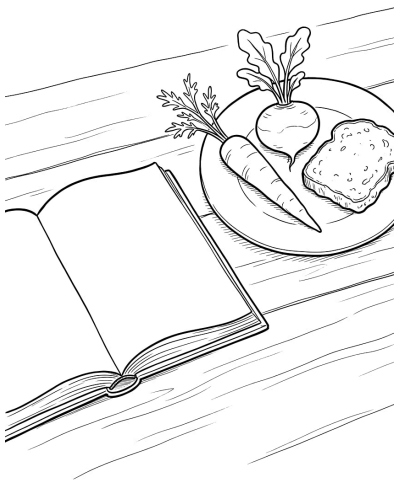
A question once came up between Collins and me about whether it was proper to give women a formal education and whether they were naturally capable of serious study.²⁶ He believed it was inappropriate and that women were simply not suited for it. I took the opposite side, partly just to keep the argument going. He was naturally more eloquent and quick with his words. Sometimes, I thought, he overwhelmed me more with his smooth delivery than with the actual strength of his arguments. Since we parted without resolving the issue and wouldn't see each other for a while, I sat down to write out my arguments, made a clean copy, and sent it to him. We went back and forth. After we had exchanged three or four letters each, my father happened to find my drafts and read them. Without getting into the actual debate, he used the chance to discuss my writing style. He pointed out that while I had the edge over my opponent in spelling and punctuation (thanks to my time at the print shop), I lagged far behind in style, structure, and clarity, proving his point with several examples. I recognized he was right. From that point on, I paid much closer attention to how I wrote and resolved to improve.

Around this time, I came across a stray volume of the *Spectator*.²⁷ It was the third. I'd never read any of them before. I bought it, read it repeatedly, and was thoroughly impressed. I thought the writing was excellent and wanted to imitate it if I could. To practice, I took a few of the essays and jotted down brief notes capturing the main idea of each sentence. I set the notes

25. 'anyone educated at Edinburgh' — The University of Edinburgh was a leading centre of the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, with a curriculum that placed heavy emphasis on rhetoric, logic, and formal disputation.

26. Little else is known about John Collins beyond what Franklin tells here.

27. **The Spectator** — The *Spectator* was a daily periodical published in London from 1711 to 1712 by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. It aimed to 'enliven morality with wit,' and its lucid, polished prose became a model for eighteenth-century British essayists. The essays were later collected in bound volumes.



aside for a few days, then — without looking at the book — tried to reconstruct the essays by writing out each noted idea in full detail, using whatever appropriate words I could think of. Then I compared my version with the original, spotted my mistakes, and fixed them.

But I realized I lacked a large vocabulary and the quickness to recall and use the right words. I felt I should have developed those skills earlier if I had kept writing poetry. Writing verse constantly forces you to find synonyms that match the meter or rhyme scheme. That practice would have trained me to hunt for variety and lock those alternatives into my memory. So I took some of the essays and turned them into poetry. After a while, once I'd mostly forgotten the original prose, I translated them back.

I also sometimes shuffled my notes on purpose. After a few weeks, I'd try to reorganize them into the best possible order before drafting full sentences and finishing the essay. This was my way of learning how to structure ideas logically. When I compared my drafts to the original later, I found plenty of mistakes and fixed them. But I occasionally took pleasure in thinking that, on minor details, I'd actually managed to improve the structure or wording. That gave me enough confidence to believe I could eventually become a decent English writer, a goal I was extremely ambitious about.

I did my exercises and reading at night, after work or before work in the morning, or on Sundays when I could manage to be alone at the print shop. I skipped public church services as often as I could. My father had strictly required me to attend when I

