

Benjamin Franklin, Printer

by Bruce L. Johnson

Anyone interested in the black art of printing could easily become a “fan” of Benjamin Franklin; I know I’ve been one for many years, and not only because of his proposed epitaph, which may be reason enough for any book-lover! While still a young man in 1728, Franklin wrote that he wanted the following to be on his gravestone:

The body of
 B. Franklin, Printer
 (Like the Cover of an Old Book
 Its Contents torn Out
 And Stript of its Lettering and Gilding)
 Lies Here, Food for Worms.
 But the Work shall not be Lost;
 For it will (as he Believ'd) Appear once More
 In a New and More Elegant Edition
 Revised and Corrected
 By the Author.

It’s that phrase, “B. Franklin, Printer,” that stuck in my mind; he used it again many years later in his Last Will & Testament.

Franklin always considered himself first, a printer, and his life’s motto was “Keep thy trade, and thy trade will keep thee.” Franklin’s passion for printing was honored in his funeral procession; the citizens of Philadelphia carried his coffin, and dignitaries surrounded the Pall, but they were followed, at Franklin’s request, by the printers of the city and their apprentices.

The year 2006 is the tricentennial of Benjamin Franklin’s birth (17 January 1706-17 April 1790), and it’s being commemorated world-wide by exhibitions, publications, and parades. And postage stamps! The United States Postal Service, for example, issued four stamps on 7 April to honor Franklin the scientist, statesman, postmaster, and printer. At the risk of minimizing the other contributions and accomplishments of this great American, I’d like to focus briefly on the last of these.

The story begins when Josiah Franklin sent his son, James, Benjamin’s brother, to London to fulfill a printing apprenticeship. When James returned to Boston in 1717, he established his own printing house on Queen Street, using a press and type he had acquired overseas. Twelve-year-old Benjamin soon began his own apprenticeship with his brother, which was supposed to last until he was 21.

In 1721, James began publishing The New-England Courant newspaper, but within a year, he had been taken into custody, publicly censured, and imprisoned for a month for publishing a “Scandalous Libel” against the civil authorities. So much for “freedom of the press”!

Benjamin assumed the management of the newspaper during his brother’s imprisonment; he was sixteen years old. A few months later, when James was forbidden by the authorities ever again to print or publish the newspaper, Benjamin became the



The United States Postal Service issued these four stamps on 7 April 2006 to honor Benjamin Franklin on the tercentenary of his birth. (Sc4021-4024)

nominal publisher. Franklin wrote humorous essays for the *Courant* under the byline, "Silence Dogood," which poked fun at the establishment.

The brothers had their differences, however, and when Benjamin left James' employ, presuming that the elder Franklin would not enforce his sibling's indenture, James prevented Benjamin from being hired by other printing houses in Boston by going round and speaking to every master, who accordingly refused to give him work. The younger Franklin went to New York to find a position, then Philadelphia, where he was hired by another printer, Samuel Keimer.

Franklin's printing talents were so obvious that the provincial governor himself, Sir William Keith, urged him to enter the printing business. Sir William offered to provide letters of credit and an introduction if Franklin would go to England to purchase the equipment he needed. Upon his arrival in London, Franklin discovered to his dismay that he had been inexplicably duped—Sir William had neither credit nor friends in London! He was able to find work in a large printing house until 1726, when he returned to Philadelphia and Keimer's printing shop. There he cast type, engraved, made ink, and helped train apprentices.

Franklin grew especially close to one apprentice, Hugh Meredith, and early in 1728, the two set up in business for themselves. Their first major success was securing the job of printing paper currency for Pennsylvania. Building on that success, for years thereafter Franklin was public printer for not only Pennsylvania, but also New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland.

In 1729 Franklin purchased the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from Keimer. Franklin's editing and publishing skills, not to mention his skill at securing advertisers, soon propelled the *Gazette* to the forefront of colonial newspapers. *Poor Richard's Almanac* began its twenty-five year run in 1732. The famous maxims, carefully lifted from published collections of proverbs and epigrams, but Americanized by Franklin, grew Franklin's reputation far beyond Philadelphia. The press run for the *Almanac* was occasionally

10,000 copies—a colonial "best seller"!

Franklin's presses also printed a wide range of other materials such as government pamphlets, religious tracts, and books. He prospered as a printer and publisher, and invested in partnerships with printers in the Carolinas, New York, and the British West Indies. He was able to retire from business in 1748, although he retained some hand in the almanacs, which alone gave him an annual income of almost £500.

Moving beyond the spheres of printing and publishing, the vagaries of middle-aged eyesight led Franklin to design a single, all-purpose set of glasses—bifocals. His observations and experiments in areas such as electricity and meteorology resulted in interesting inventions, including a heating stove, the lightning rod, and an early electrical battery. He served as postmaster of Philadelphia and a deputy postmaster for the American colonies before being appointed Postmaster General by the Continental Congress in 1775. He marked postage-free letters with his unique personal signature: "B. Free Franklin." To some contemporary observers, he seemed like a deity, who simply by declaring something could happen, made it so. His accomplishments seem almost endless:

- Founded the first circulating library (1731)
- Organized the Union Fire Company (1736)
- Advertised the "Franklin Stove" (1741)
- Began extensive electrical experiments (1746)
- Wrote *The Plain Truth* about military preparedness in Pennsylvania (1747)
- Published the first political cartoon in the United States (1747)
- Became a soldier in the Pennsylvania militia (1748)
- Conducted his famous kite experiment (1752)
- Mapped postal routes in the colonies (1762)
- Invented the glass harmonica (1762)
- Charted the Gulf Stream (1764-1765)
- Elected Pennsylvania delegate to the Second Continental Congress (1775)
- Became chairman of the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety (1775)
- Elected Postmaster General (1775)

- Presided over the Constitutional Convention of Pennsylvania (1776)
- Served on a committee to draft the Constitution of the United States (1776)
- Signed the French Alliance (1778)
- Negotiated the peace treaty with England (1778)
- Signed the peace treaty (1783)
- Wrote an anti-slavery treatise and became the president of the Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (1789)

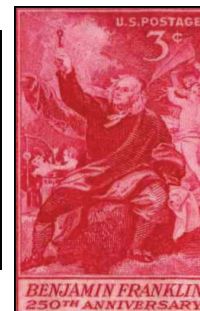
Benjamin Franklin died in Philadelphia on 17 April 1790. More than 20,000 mourners attended his funeral. Franklin seems “safe” to celebrate today, but near the end of his life he was mistrusted by many as a Francophile synonymous with the excesses of the French Revolution. The U.S. Senate even rejected a proposal to wear badges of mourning in his honor, and he was satirized as a middlebrow member of the “booboisie” for more than a century after that. That condescending elitism has mellowed today, and Franklin is now praised by both left and right in the political spectrum as a free thinker, a scientist, a man of letters, and of course, as a printer.

Three examples of earlier Franklin issues, which number more than 145 in the U.S.



A photograph of a statue by James Earle Fraser at Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute served as the basis for the illustration on the ½-cent value in the Presidential Issue of 1938 (Sc803).

In 1956, the United States Post Office issued this commemorative celebrating Franklin’s 250th birthday. It reproduces Benjamin West’s (1738-1820), painting “Franklin Taking Electricity from the Sky.” (Sc1073)



One issue in the American Bicentennial series commemorates the Bicentennial of the French Alliance, signed in Paris by Franklin and Louis XVI on 6 February 1778. The stamp reproduces a porcelain sculpture by C.G. Sauvagen of that event. (Sc1753)