BECOMING A GENTLEMAN

BOSTON BEGINNINGS

Franklin was born in Boston on January 17, 1706 (January 6, 1705, in the old-style calendar), of very humble origins, origins that always struck Franklin himself as unusually poor. Franklin's father, Josiah, was a nonconformist from Northamptonshire who as a young man had immigrated to the New World and had become a candle and soap maker, one of the lowliest of the artisan crafts. Josiah fathered a total of seventeen children, ten, including Benjamin, by his second wife, Abiah Folger, from Nantucket. Franklin was number fifteen of these seventeen and the youngest son.

In a hierarchical age that favored the firstborn son, Franklin was, as he ruefully recounted in his Autobiography, "the youngest Son of the youngest Son for 5 Generations back." In the last year of his life the bitterness was still there, undisguised by Franklin's usual irony. In a codicil to his will written in 1789 he observed that most people, having received an estate from their ancestors, felt obliged to pass on something to their posterity. "This obligation," he wrote with some emotion, "does not lie on me, who never inherited a shilling from any ancestor or relation."

Because the young Franklin was unusually precocious ("I do not remember when I could not read," he recalled), his father initially sent the eight-year-old boy to grammar school in preparation for the ministry. But his father soon had second thoughts about the expenses involved in a college education, and after a year he pulled the boy out of grammar school and sent him for another year to an ordinary school that simply taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. These two years of formal education were all that Franklin was ever to receive. Not that this was unusual: most boys had little more than this, and almost all girls had no formal schooling at all. Although most of the Revolutionary leaders were college graduates-usually being the first in their families to attend college-some, including Washington, Robert Morris, Patrick Henry, Nathanael Greene, and Thomas Paine, had not much more formal schooling than Franklin. Apprenticeship in a trade or skill was still the principal means by which most young men prepared for the world.

Franklin's father chose that route of apprenticeship for his son and began training Franklin to be a candle and soap maker. But since cutting wicks and smelling tallow made Franklin very unhappy, his father finally agreed that the printing trade might better suit the boy's "Bookish Inclination." Printing, after all, was the most cerebral of the crafts, requiring the ability to read, spell, and write. Nevertheless, it still involved heavy manual labor and was a grubby, messy, and physically demanding job, without much prestige.

In fact, printing had little more respectability than soap and candle making. It was in such "wretched Disrepute" that, as one eighteenth-century New
York printer remarked, no family "of Substance would ever put their Sons to such an Art," and, as a consequence, masters were "obliged to take of the lowest People" for apprentices. But Franklin fit the trade. Not only was young Franklin bookish, but he was also nearly six feet tall and strong with broad shoulders—ideally suited for the difficult tasks of printing. His father thus placed him under the care of an older son, James, who in 1717 had returned from England to set himself up as a printer in Boston. When James saw what his erudite youngest brother could do with words and type, he signed up the twelve-year-old boy to an unusually long apprenticeship of nine years.

That boy, as Franklin later recalled in his Autobiography, was "extremely ambitious" to become a "tolerable English Writer." Although literacy was relatively high in New England at this time—perhaps 75 percent of males in Boston could read and write and the percentage was rapidly growing—books were scarce and valuable, and few people read books the way Franklin did. He read everything he could get his hands on, including John Bunyan's
Pilgrim's Progress, Plutarch's Lives, Daniel Defoe's Essay on Projects, the
"do good" essays of the prominent Boston Puritan divine Cotton Mather,
and more books of "polemic Divinity" than Franklin wanted to remember.
He even befriended the apprentices of booksellers in order to gain access to
more books. One of these apprentices allowed him secretly to borrow his
master's books to read after work. "Often," Franklin recalled, "I sat up in my
Room reading the greatest Part of the Night, when the Book was borrow'd
in the Evening & to be return'd early in the Morning lest it should be miss'd
or wanted." He tried his hand at writing poetry and other things but was
discouraged with the poor quality of his attempts. He discovered a volume
of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's Spectator papers and saw in it a
tool for self-improvement. He read the papers over and over again and
copied and recopied them and tried to recapitulate them from memory. He
turned them into poetry and then back again into prose. He took notes on
the Spectator essays, jumbled the notes, and then attempted to reconstruct
the essays in order to understand the way Addison and Steele had organized
them. All this painstaking effort was designed to improve and polish his
writing, and it succeeded; "prose Writing" became, as Franklin recalled in
his Autobiography, "of great Use to me in the Course of my Life, and was a
principal Means of my Advancement." In fact, writing competently was
such a rare skill that anyone who could do it well immediately acquired
importance. All the Founders, including Washington, first gained their
reputations by something they wrote.

In 1721 Franklin's brother, after being the printer for another person's
newspaper, decided to establish his own paper, the New England Courant.
It was only the fourth newspaper in Boston; the first, published in 1690,
had been closed down by the Massachusetts government after only one
issue. The second, the Boston News-Letter was founded in 1704; it became
the first continuously published newspaper not only in Boston but in all of
the North American colonies. The next Boston paper, begun in 1719 and
printed by James Franklin for the owner, was the Boston Gazette. These
early newspapers were small, simple, and bland affairs, two to four pages
published weekly and containing mostly reprints of old European news,
ship sailings, and various advertisements, together with notices of deaths,
political appointments, court actions, fires, piracies, and such matters.
Although the papers were expensive and numbered only in the hundreds of
copies, they often passed from hand to hand and could reach beneath the
topmost ranks of the city's population of twelve thousand, including even
into the ranks of artisans and other "middling sorts."

These early papers were labeled "published by authority." Remaining on the
good side of government was not only wise politically, it was wise
economically. Most colonial printers in the eighteenth century could not
have survived without government printing contracts of one sort or
another. Hence most sought to avoid controversy and to remain neutral in
politics. They tried to exclude from their papers anything that smacked of
libel or personal abuse. Such material was risky. Much safer were the
columns of dull but innocuous foreign news that they used to fill their
papers, much to Franklin's later annoyance. It is hard to know what colonial
readers made of the first news item printed in the newly created South
Carolina Gazette of 1732: "We learn from Caminica, that the Cossacks continue to make inroads onto polish Ukrania."

James Franklin did not behave as most colonial printers did. When he decided to start his own paper, he was definitely not publishing it by authority. In fact, the New England Courant began by attacking the Boston establishment, in particular the program of inoculating people for smallpox that was being promoted by the Puritan ministers Cotton Mather and his father. When this inoculation debate died down, the paper turned to satirizing other subjects of Boston interest, including pretended learning and religious hypocrisy, some of which provoked the Mathers into replies. Eager to try his own hand at satire, young Benjamin in 1722 submitted some essays to his brother's newspaper under the name of Silence Dogood, a play on Cotton Mather's Essays to Do Good, the name usually given to the minister's Bonifacius, published in 1710. For a sixteen-year-old boy to assume the persona of a middle-aged woman was a daunting challenge, and young Franklin took "exquisite Pleasure" in fooling his brother and others into thinking that only "Men of some Character among us for Learning and Ingenuity" could have written the newspaper pieces.

These Silence Dogood essays lampooned everything from funeral eulogies to "that famous Seminary of Learning," Harvard College. Although Franklin's satire was generally and shrewdly genial, there was often a bite to it and a good deal of social resentment behind it, especially when it came to his making fun of Harvard. Most of the students who attended "this famous Place," he wrote, "were little better than Dunces and Blockheads." This was not surprising, since the main qualification for entry, he said, was having money. Once admitted, the students "learn little more than how to carry themselves handsomely, and enter a Room genteely, (which might as well be acquire'd at a Dancing-School,) and from whence they return, after Abundance of Trouble and Charge, as great Blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited." One can already sense an underlying anger in this precocious and rebellious teenager, an anger with those who claimed an undeserved social superiority that would become an important spur to his ambition.

When Franklin's brother found out who the author of the Silence Dogood pieces was, he was not happy, "as he thought, probably with reason," that all the praise the essays were receiving tended to make the young teenager "too vain." Franklin, as he admitted, was probably "too saucy and provoking" to his brother, and the two brothers began squabbling. James was only nine years older than his youngest brother, but he nonetheless "considered himself as my Master & me as his Apprentice." Consequently, as master he "expected the same Services from me as he would from another; while I thought he demean’d me too much in some he requir’d of me, who from a Brother expected more Indulgence."

Since the fraternal relationship did not fit the extreme hierarchical relationship of master and apprentice, the situation became impossible, especially when James began exercising his master’s prerogative of beating his apprentice.
Indentured apprentices were under severe contractual obligations in the eighteenth century and were part of the large unfree population that existed in all the colonies. In essence they belonged to their masters: their contracts were inheritable, and they could not marry, play cards or gamble, attend taverns, or leave their masters’ premises day or night without permission. With such restraints it is understandable that Franklin was "continually wishing for some Opportunity" to shorten or break his apprenticeship.

In 1723 that opportunity came when the Massachusetts government-like all governments in that pre-modern age, acutely sensitive to libels and any suggestion of disrespect—finally found sufficient grounds to forbid James to publish his paper. James sought to evade the restriction by publishing the paper under Benjamin’s name. But it would not do to have a mere apprentice as editor of the paper, and James had to return the old indenture of apprenticeship to his brother. Although James drew up a new and secret contract for the remainder of the term of apprenticeship, Franklin realized his brother would not dare to reveal what he had done, and he thus took "Advantage" of the situation "to assert my Freedom."

His situation with his brother had become intolerable, and his own standing in the Puritan-dominated community of Boston was little better. Since Franklin had become "a little obnoxious to the governing Party" and "my indiscreet Disputations about Religion began to make me pointed at with Horror by good People, as an Infidel or Atheist," he determined to leave Boston. But because he still had some years left of his apprenticeship and his father opposed his leaving, he had to leave secretly. With a bit of money and a few belongings, the headstrong and defiant seventeen-year-old boarded a ship and fled the city, a move that was much more common in the mobile eighteenth-century Atlantic world than we might imagine. Thus Franklin began the career that would lead him "from the Poverty & Obscurity in which I was born & bred, to a State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World."

PHILADELPHIA

Franklin arrived in the Quaker city renowned for its religious freedom in 1723, hungry, tired, dirty, and bedraggled in his "Working Dress," his "Pockets stuffed out with Shirts and Stockings," with only a Dutch dollar and copper shilling to his name. He bought three rolls, and "with a Roll under each Arm, and eating the other," he wandered around Market, Chestnut, and Walnut Streets, and in his own eyes, and the eyes of his future wife, Deborah Read, who watched him from her doorway, made "a most awkward ridiculous Appearance." He finally stumbled into a Quaker meetinghouse on Second Street, and "hearing nothing said," promptly "fell fast asleep, and continu’d so till the Meeting broke up, when one was kind enough to wake me."

Franklin tells us in his Autobiography that he offers us such a "particular" and unforgettable description of his "first Entry" into the city of Philadelphia so "that you may in your Mind compare such unlikely Beginnings with the Figure I have since made there." Although he tried in his Autobiography to play down and mock his achievements, Franklin was nothing if not proud of his extraordinary rise. He always knew that it was
the enormous gap between his very obscure beginnings and his later worldwide eminence that gave his story its heroic appeal.

Philadelphia in the 1720s numbered about six thousand people, but it was growing rapidly and would soon surpass the much older city of Boston. The city, and the colony of Pennsylvania, had begun in the late seventeenth century as William Penn’s “Holy Experiment” for poor persecuted members of the Society of Friends. But by the time Franklin arrived, many of the Quaker families, such as the Norrises, Shippens, Dicksons, and Pembertons, had prospered, and this emerging Quaker aristocracy had come to dominate the mercantile affairs and politics of the colony.

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