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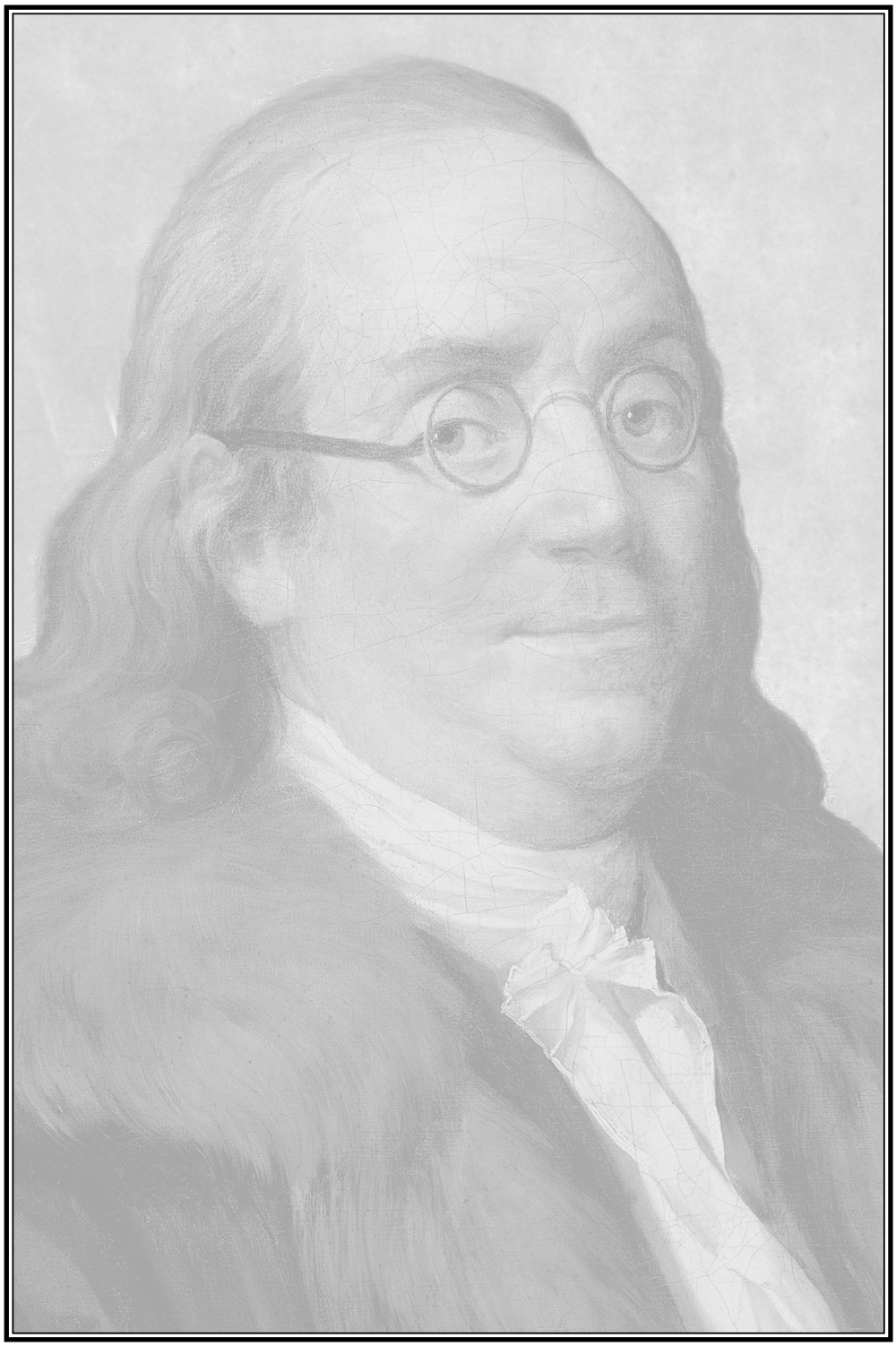

Benjamin Franklin

An American Life

WALTER ISAACSON

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To Cathy and Betsy, as always . . .

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Benjamin Franklin

An American Life

CHAPTER ONE

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE INVENTION OF AMERICA

His arrival in Philadelphia is one of the most famous scenes in autobiographical literature: the bedraggled 17-year-old runaway, cheeky yet with a pretense of humility, straggling off the boat and buying three puffy rolls as he wanders up Market Street. But wait a minute. There's something more. Peel back a layer and we can see him as a 65-year-old wry observer, sitting in an English country house, writing this scene, pretending it's part of a letter to his son, an illegitimate son who has become a royal governor with aristocratic pretensions and needs to be reminded of his humble roots.

A careful look at the manuscript peels back yet another layer. Inserted into the sentence about his pilgrim's progress up Market Street is a phrase, written in the margin, in which he notes that he passed by the house of his future wife, Deborah Read, and that "she, standing at the door, saw me and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward ridiculous appearance." So here we have, in a brief paragraph, the multilayered character known so fondly to his author as Benjamin Franklin: as a young man, then seen through the eyes of his older self, and then through the memories later recounted by his wife. It's all topped off with the old man's deft little affirmation—"as I certainly did"—in which his self-deprecation barely cloaks the pride he felt regarding his remarkable rise in the world.[1]

Benjamin Franklin is the founding father who winks at us. George Washington's colleagues found it hard to imagine touching the austere general on the shoulder, and we would find it even more so today. Jefferson and Adams are just as intimidating. But Ben Franklin, that ambitious urban entrepreneur, seems made of flesh rather than of marble, addressable by nickname, and he turns to us from history's stage with eyes that twinkle from behind those newfangled spectacles. He speaks to us, through his letters and hoaxes and autobiography, not with orotund rhetoric but with a chattiness and clever irony that is very contemporary, sometimes unnervingly so. We see his reflection in our own time.

He was, during his eighty-four-year-long life, America's best scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer, and business strategist, and he was also one of its most practical, though not most profound, political thinkers. He proved by flying a kite that lightning was electricity, and he invented a rod to tame it. He devised bifocal glasses and clean-burning stoves, charts of the Gulf Stream and theories about the contagious nature of the common cold. He launched various civic improvement schemes, such as a lending library, college, volunteer fire corps, insurance association, and matching grant fund-raiser. He helped invent America's unique style of homespun humor and philosophical pragmatism. In foreign policy, he created an approach that wove together idealism with balance-of-power realism. And in politics, he proposed seminal plans for uniting the colonies and creating a federal model for a national government.

But the most interesting thing that Franklin invented, and continually reinvented, was himself. America's first great publicist, he was, in his life and in his writings, consciously trying to create a new American archetype. In the process, he carefully crafted his own persona, portrayed it in public, and polished it for posterity.

Partly, it was a matter of image. As a young printer in Philadelphia, he carted rolls of paper through the streets to give the appearance of being industrious. As an old diplomat in France, he wore a fur cap to portray the role of backwoods sage. In between, he created an image for himself as a simple yet striving tradesman, assiduously honing the

virtues—diligence, frugality, honesty—of a good shopkeeper and beneficent member of his community.

But the image he created was rooted in reality. Born and bred a member of the leather-aproned class, Franklin was, at least for most of his life, more comfortable with artisans and thinkers than with the established elite, and he was allergic to the pomp and perks of a hereditary aristocracy. Throughout his life he would refer to himself as "B. Franklin, printer."

From these attitudes sprang what may be Franklin's most important vision: an American national identity based on the virtues and values of its middle class. Instinctively more comfortable with democracy than were his fellow founders, and devoid of the snobbery that later critics would feel toward his own shopkeeping values, he had faith in the wisdom of the common man and felt that a new nation would draw its strength from what he called "the middling people." Through his self-improvement tips for cultivating personal virtues and his civic-improvement schemes for furthering the common good, he helped to create, and to celebrate, a new ruling class of ordinary citizens.

The complex interplay among various facets of Franklin's character—his ingenuity and unreflective wisdom, his Protestant ethic divorced from dogma, the principles he held firm and those he was willing to compromise—means that each new look at him reflects and refracts the nation's changing values. He has been vilified in romantic periods and lionized in entrepreneurial ones. Each era appraises him anew, and in doing so reveals some assessments of itself.

Franklin has a particular resonance in twenty-first-century America. A successful publisher and consummate networker with an inventive curiosity, he would have felt right at home in the information revolution, and his unabashed striving to be part of an upwardly mobile meritocracy made him, in social critic David Brooks's phrase, "our founding Yuppie." We can easily imagine having a beer with him after work, showing him how to use the latest digital device, sharing the business plan for a new venture, and discussing the most recent political scandals or policy ideas. He would laugh at the latest joke about a

priest and a rabbi, or about a farmer's daughter. We would admire both his earnestness and his self-aware irony. And we would relate to the way he tried to balance, sometimes uneasily, the pursuit of reputation, wealth, earthly virtues, and spiritual values.[2]

Some who see the reflection of Franklin in the world today fret about a shallowness of soul and a spiritual complacency that seem to permeate a culture of materialism. They say that he teaches us how to live a practical and pecuniary life, but not an exalted existence. Others see the same reflection and admire the basic middle-class values and democratic sentiments that now seem under assault from elitists, radicals, reactionaries, and other bashers of the bourgeoisie. They regard Franklin as an exemplar of the personal character and civic virtue that are too often missing in modern America.

Much of the admiration is warranted, and so too are some of the qualms. But the lessons from Franklin's life are more complex than those usually drawn by either his fans or his foes. Both sides too often confuse him with the striving pilgrim he portrayed in his autobiography. They mistake his genial moral maxims for the fundamental faiths that motivated his actions.

His morality was built on a sincere belief in leading a virtuous life, serving the country he loved, and hoping to achieve salvation through good works. That led him to make the link between private virtue and civic virtue, and to suspect, based on the meager evidence he could muster about God's will, that these earthly virtues were linked to heavenly ones as well. As he put it in the motto for the library he founded, "To pour forth benefits for the common good is divine." In comparison to contemporaries such as Jonathan Edwards, who believed that men were sinners in the hands of an angry God and that salvation could come through grace alone, this outlook might seem somewhat complacent. In some ways it was, but it was also genuine.

Whatever view one takes, it is useful to engage anew with Franklin, for in doing so we are grappling with a fundamental issue: How does one live a life that is useful, virtuous, worthy, moral, and spiritually meaningful? For that matter, which of these attributes is most important? These are questions just as vital for a self-satisfied age as they were for a revolutionary one.

CHAPTER TWO

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Boston, 1706–1723

THE FRANKLINS OF ECTON

During the late Middle Ages, a new class emerged in the villages of rural England: men who possessed property and wealth but were not members of the titled aristocracy. Proud but without great pretension, assertive of their rights as members of an independent middle class, these freeholders came to be known as franklins, from the Middle English word "frankeleyn," meaning freeman.[1]

When surnames gained currency, families from the upper classes tended to take on the titles of their domains, such as Lancaster or Salisbury. Their tenants sometimes resorted to invocations of their own little turf, such as Hill or Meadows. Artisans tended to take their name from their labor, be it Smith or Taylor or Weaver. And for some families, the descriptor that seemed most appropriate was Franklin.

The earliest documented use of that name by one of Benjamin Franklin's ancestors, at least that can be found today, was by his great-great-grandfather Thomas Francklyne or Franklin, born around 1540 in the Northamptonshire village of Ecton. His independent spirit became part of the family lore. "This obscure family of ours was early in the Reformation," Franklin later wrote, and "were sometimes in danger of trouble on account of their zeal against popery." When Queen Mary I was engaged in her bloody crusade to reestablish the Roman Catholic Church, Thomas Franklin kept the banned English Bible

tied to the underside of a stool. The stool could be turned over on a lap so the Bible could be read aloud, but then instantly hidden whenever the apparitor rode by.[2]

The strong yet pragmatic independence of Thomas Franklin, along with his clever ingenuity, seems to have been passed down through four generations. The family produced dissenters and nonconformists who were willing to defy authority, although not to the point of becoming zealots. They were clever craftsmen and inventive blacksmiths with a love of learning. Avid readers and writers, they had deep convictions—but knew how to wear them lightly. Sociable by nature, the Franklins tended to become trusted counselors to their neighbors, and they were proud to be part of the middling class of independent shopkeepers and tradesmen and freeholders.

It may be merely a biographer's conceit to think that a person's character can be illuminated by rummaging among his family roots and pointing out the recurring traits that culminate tidily in the personality at hand. Nevertheless, Franklin's family heritage seems a fruitful place to begin a study. For some people, the most important formative element is place. To appreciate Harry Truman, for example, you must understand the Missouri frontier of the nineteenth century; likewise, you must delve into the Hill Country of Texas to fathom Lyndon Johnson.[3] But Benjamin Franklin was not so rooted. His heritage was that of a people without place—the youngest sons of middle-class artisans—most of whom made their careers in towns different from those of their fathers. He is thus best understood as a product of lineage rather than of land.

Moreover, Franklin thought so as well. "I have ever had a pleasure in obtaining any little anecdotes of my ancestors," reads the opening sentence in his autobiography. It was a pleasure he would indulge when he journeyed to Ecton as a middle-aged man to interview distant relatives, research church records, and copy inscriptions from family tombstones.

The dissenting streak that ran in his family, he discovered, involved more than just matters of religion. Thomas Franklin's father had been active, according to lore, as a legal advocate on the side of the common man in the controversy over the practice known as enclosure, under

which the landed aristocracy closed off their estates and prevented poorer farmers from grazing their herds there. And Thomas's son Henry spent a year in prison for writing some poetry that, as one descendant noted, "touched the character of some great man." The inclination to defy the elite, and to write mediocre poetry, was to last a few more generations.

Henry's son Thomas II also displayed traits that would later be evident in his famous grandson. He was a gregarious soul who loved reading, writing, and tinkering. As a young man, he built from scratch a clock that worked throughout his life. Like his father and grandfather, he became a blacksmith, but in small English villages the smith took on a variety of tasks. According to a nephew, he "also practiced for diversion the trade of a turner [turning wood with a lathe], a gunsmith, a surgeon, a scrivener, and wrote as pretty a hand as ever I saw. He was a historian and had some skill in astronomy and chemistry."[4]

His eldest son took over the blacksmith business and also prospered as a school owner and a solicitor. But this is a story about youngest sons: Benjamin Franklin was the youngest son of the youngest sons for five generations. Being the last of the litter often meant having to strike out on your own. For people like the Franklins, that generally meant leaving villages such as Ecton that were too tiny to support more than one or two practitioners of each trade and moving to a larger town where they could secure an apprenticeship.

It was not unusual—especially in the Franklin family—for younger brothers to be apprenticed to older ones. So it was that Thomas II's youngest son, Josiah Franklin,* left Ecton in the 1670s for the nearby Oxfordshire market town of Banbury and bound himself to a pleasant older brother named John, who had set up shop there as a silk and cloth dyer. After the dour days of Cromwell's protectorate, the restoration under King Charles II led to a brief flowering of the garment industry.

While in Banbury, Josiah was swept up in the second great religious convulsion to hit England. The first had been settled by Queen Elizabeth: the English church would be Protestant rather than

* See page 495 for thumbnail descriptions of the main characters in this book.

Roman Catholic. Yet she and her successors subsequently faced pressure from those who wanted to go even further and to "purify" the church of all Roman Catholic traces. The Puritans, as these Calvinist dissenters who advocated this purge of papist vestiges came to be known, were particularly vocal in Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire. They stressed congregational self-governance, emphasized the sermon and Bible study over the liturgy and ritual, and disdained much of the Anglican Church's adornments as lingering pollutants from the Church of Rome. Despite their puritanical views on personal morality, their sect appealed to some of the more intellectual members of the middle class because it emphasized the value of meetings, discussions, sermons, and a personal understanding of the Bible.

By the time Josiah arrived in Banbury, the town was torn by the struggle over Puritanism. (During one of the more physical battles, a mob of Puritans toppled Banbury's famous cross.) The Franklin family was divided as well, though less bitterly. John and Thomas III remained loyal to the Anglican Church; their younger brothers, Josiah and Benjamin (sometimes called Benjamin the Elder to distinguish him from his famous nephew), became dissenters. But Josiah was never fanatic in pursuing theological disputes. There is no record of any family feud over the issue.[5]

ERRAND INTO THE WILDERNESS

Franklin would later claim that it was a desire "to enjoy the exercise of their religion with freedom" that led his father, Josiah, to emigrate to America. To some extent, this was true. The end of Cromwell's Puritan rule and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 had led to restrictions on the Puritan faithful, and dissenting ministers were forced from their pulpits.

But Josiah's brother, Benjamin the Elder, was probably right in attributing the move more to economic than religious factors. Josiah was not zealous about his faith. He was close to his father and older brother John, both of whom remained Anglican. "All evidence suggests that it was a spirit of independence, coupled with a kind of intellectual liveliness and earthy practicality, rather than controlling

doctrinal persuasions, that led the only two Franklins, Benjamin the Elder and Josiah, who became Puritans, to follow that course," wrote Arthur Tourtellot, author of a comprehensive book about the first seventeen years of Franklin's life.[6]

Josiah's greater concern was supporting his family. At age 19, he married a friend from Ecton, Anne Child, and brought her to Banbury. In quick succession, they had three children. With his apprenticeship over, he worked on salary in his brother's shop. But there was not enough business to support both fast-growing Franklin families, and the law made it impossible for Josiah to go into a new trade without serving another apprenticeship. As Benjamin the Elder put it, "Things not succeeding there according to his mind, with the leave of his friends and father he went to New England in the year 1683."

The story of the Franklin family migration, like the story of Benjamin Franklin, gives a glimpse into the formation of the American character. Among the great romantic myths about America is that, as schoolbooks emphasize, the primary motive of its settlers was freedom, particularly religious freedom.

Like most romantic American myths, it contains a lot of truth. For many in the seventeenth-century wave of Puritan migration to Massachusetts, as in the subsequent migratory waves that made America, the journey was primarily a religious pilgrimage, one that involved fleeing persecution and pursuing freedom. And like most romantic American myths, it also glosses over some significant realities. For many other Puritan migrants, as for many in subsequent waves, the journey was primarily an economic quest.

But to set up such a sharp dichotomy is to misunderstand the Puritans—and America. For most Puritans, ranging from rich John Winthrop to poor Josiah Franklin, their errand into the wilderness was propelled by considerations of both faith and finance. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was, after all, established by investors such as Winthrop to be a chartered commercial enterprise as well as to create a heavenly "city upon a hill." These Puritans would not have made an either/or distinction between spiritual and secular motives. For among the useful notions that they bequeathed to America was a Protestant ethic that taught that religious freedom and economic freedom were

linked, that enterprise was a virtue, and that financial success need not preclude spiritual salvation.[7]

Instead, the puritans were contemptuous of the old Roman Church's monastic belief that holiness required withdrawal from worldly economic concerns, and they preached that being industrious was a heavenly as well as earthly imperative. What the literary historian Perry Miller calls "the paradox of Puritan materialism and immateriality" was not paradoxical to the Puritans. Making money was a way to glorify God. As Cotton Mather put it in his famous sermon "A Christian at His Calling," delivered five years before Franklin was born, it was important to attend to "some settled business, wherein a Christian should spend most of his time so that he may glorify God by doing good for others, and getting of good for himself." The Lord, quite conveniently, smiled on those who were diligent in their earthly calling and, as Poor Richard's almanac would later note, "helped those who helped themselves."[8]

And thus the Puritan migration established the foundation for some characteristics of Benjamin Franklin, and of America itself: a belief that spiritual salvation and secular success need not be at odds, that industriousness is next to godliness, and that free thought and free enterprise are integrally related.

A MAN OF SOLID JUDGMENT

Josiah Franklin was 25 years old when, in August 1683, he set sail for America with his wife, two toddlers, and a baby girl only a few months old. The voyage, in a squat frigate crammed with a hundred passengers, took more than nine weeks, and it cost the family close to £15, which was about six months' earnings for a tradesman such as Josiah. It was, however, a sensible investment. Wages in the New World were two to three times higher, and the cost of living was lower.[9]

The demand for brightly dyed fabrics and silks was not great in a frontier town, especially a Puritan one such as Boston. Indeed, it was a legal offense to wear clothing that was considered too elaborate. But unlike in England, there was no law requiring a person to serve a long

apprenticeship before going into a trade. So Josiah chose a new one that had far less glamour but far more utility: that of a tallow chandler, rendering animal fat into candles and soap.

It was a shrewd choice. Candles and soap were just evolving from luxuries into staples. The odiferous task of making lye from ashes and simmering it for hours with fat was one that even the heartiest of frontier housewives were willing to pay someone else to do. Cattle, once a rarity, were being slaughtered more often, making mass manufacture of tallow possible. Yet the trade was uncrowded. One register of professions in Boston just before Josiah arrived lists twelve cobblers, eleven tailors, three brewers, but only one tallow chandler.

He set up shop and residence in a rented two-and-a-half-story clapboard house, only thirty feet by twenty, on the corner of Milk Street and High Street (now Washington Street). The ground floor was only one room, with a kitchen in a separate tiny structure added in the back. Like other Boston houses, it had small windows so that it would be easier to keep warm, but it was brightly painted to make it seem more cheerful.[10]

Across the street was the South Church, newest and most liberal (relatively speaking) of Boston's three Puritan congregations. Josiah was admitted to membership, or permitted to "own the covenant," two years after his arrival.

Church membership was, for the Puritans at least, a social leveler. Although he was merely a struggling tradesman, Josiah was able, because of his membership in the South Church, to become friends with such colony luminaries as Simon Bradstreet, the onetime governor, and Judge Samuel Sewall, a Harvard fellow and diligent diarist.

A trusted and paternalistic figure, Josiah rose within Boston's Puritan/civic hierarchy. In 1697, he was tapped to become a tithingman, the name for the moral marshals whose job it was to enforce attendance and attention at Sunday services and to keep an eye out for "nightwalkers, tipplers, Sabbath breakers . . . or whatever else tending toward debauchery, irreligion, profaneness and atheism." Six years later, he was made a constable, one of eleven people who helped oversee the tithingmen. Although the posts were unpaid, Josiah practiced the art, which his son would perfect, of marrying public virtue with

private profit: he made money by selling candles to the night watchmen he oversaw.[11]

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin gives a lapidary description of his father:

> He had an excellent constitution of body, was of middle stature, but well set and very strong. He was ingenious, could draw prettily, was skilled a little in music and had a clear pleasing voice, so that when he played Psalm tunes on his violin and sung withal as he sometimes did in an evening after the business of the day was over, it was extremely agreeable to hear. He had a mechanical genius too, and on occasion was very handy in the use of other tradesmen's tools. But his great excellence lay in a sound understanding, and solid judgment in prudential matters, both in private and public affairs . . . I remember well his being frequently visited by leading people, who consulted him for his opinion in affairs of the town or of the church . . . He was also much consulted by private persons about their affairs when any difficulty occurred, and frequently chosen an arbitrator between contending parties.[12]

This description was perhaps overly generous. It is contained, after all, in an autobiography designed in part to instill filial respect in Benjamin's own son. As we shall see, Josiah, wise though he undoubtedly was, had limited horizons. He tended to dampen his son's educational, professional, and even poetic aspirations.

Josiah's most prominent trait was captured in a phrase, deeply Puritan in its fealty to both industriousness and egalitarianism, that would be inscribed on his tombstone by his son: "Diligence in thy calling." It came from Josiah's favorite piece of Solomonic wisdom (Proverbs 22:29), a passage that he would quote often to his son: "Seest thou a man diligent in his calling, he shall stand before Kings." As Franklin would recall when he was 78, with the wry mixture of light vanity and amused self-awareness that pervades his autobiography, "I from thence considered industry as a means of obtaining wealth and distinction, which encouraged me, though I did not think that I should ever literally stand before kings, which, however, has since happened; for I have stood before five, and even had the honor of sitting down with one, the King of Denmark, to dinner."[13]

As Josiah prospered, his family grew; he would have seventeen children over a period of thirty-four years. Such fecundity was common among the robust and lusty Puritans: the Rev. Samuel Willard, pastor of the South Church, had twenty children; the famous theologian Cotton Mather had fifteen. Children tended to be a resource rather than a burden. They helped around the house and shop by handling most of the menial chores.[14]

To the three children who accompanied them from England, Josiah and Anne Franklin quickly added two more, both of whom lived to adulthood: Josiah Jr., born in 1685, and Anne Jr., born in 1687. Then, however, death struck brutally. Three times over the next eighteen months, Josiah made the procession across Milk Street to the South Church burial grounds: first in 1688 for a newborn son who died after five days; then in 1689 for his wife, Anne, who died a week after delivering another son; then for that son who died after another week. (One-quarter of all Boston newborns at the time died within a week.)

It was not unusual for men in colonial New England to outlive two or three wives. Of the first eighteen women who came to Massachusetts in 1628, for example, fourteen died within a year. Nor was it considered callous for a bereaved husband to remarry quickly. In fact, as in the case of Josiah, it was often considered an economic necessity. At the age of 31, he had five children to raise, a trade to tend, and a shop to keep. He needed a robust new wife, and he needed her quickly.

A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

Like the Franklins, the Folger (originally Foulgier) family was rebellious but also practical, and they shared the same mix of religious and economic restlessness. Descended from reformist Flemish Protestants who had fled to England in the sixteenth century, the Folgers were among the first wave of emigrants to depart for Massachusetts when Charles I and his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, began cracking down on the Puritans. The family of John Folger, including his 18-year-old son Peter, sailed for Boston in 1635, when the town was a mere five years old.

On the voyage over, Peter met a young servant girl named Mary Morrill, who was indentured to one of the Puritan ministers aboard. After their arrival, Peter was able to buy her freedom for £20 and take her as his wife.

Having found religious and personal freedom, the Folgers were restless for economic opportunities. From Boston they moved to a new settlement up the river called Dedham, then to Watertown, and finally to Nantucket Island, where Peter became the schoolmaster. Most of the inhabitants were Indians, and he learned their language, taught them English, and attempted (with great success) to convert them to Christianity. Rebellious in nature, he underwent his own conversion and became a Baptist, which meant that the faithful Indians whom he had led to Christianity now had to follow him through a ritual that required total immersion.

Displaying the robust resistance to authority that ran in both the Folger and Franklin families, Peter was the sort of rebel destined to transform colonial America. As clerk of the court on Nantucket, he was at one point jailed for disobeying the local magistrate during a struggle between the island's wealthy shareholders and its growing middle class of shopkeepers and artisans.[15]

He also wrote a near-seditious pamphlet, in verse, sympathizing with the Indians during what became known as King Philip's War in 1676. The war, he declared, was the result of God's anger at the intolerance of the Puritan ministers in Boston. His passion overpowered his poetic talents: "Let Magistrates and Ministers / consider what they do; / Let them repeal those evil laws, / and break those bonds in two." Later, his grandson Benjamin Franklin would pronounce that the poem was "written with manly freedom and a pleasing simplicity."[16]

Peter and Mary Folger had ten children, the youngest of whom, Abiah, was born in 1667. When she was 21 and still unmarried, she moved to Boston to live with an older sister and her husband, who were members of the South Church. Although raised as a Baptist, Abiah joined the congregation shortly after her arrival. By July 1689, when the well-respected tallow chandler Josiah Franklin went there to bury his wife, Abiah was a faithful parishioner.[17]

Less than five months later, on November 25, 1689, they were

married. Both were the youngest children in a large brood. Together they would live to unusually ripe ages—he to 87, she to 84. And their longevity was among the many traits they would bequeath to their famous youngest son, who himself would live to be 84. "He was a pious and prudent man, she a discreet and virtuous woman," Benjamin would later inscribe on their tombstone.

Over the next twelve years, Josiah and Abiah Franklin had six children: John (born 1690), Peter (1692), Mary (1694), James (1697), Sarah (1699), and Ebenezer (1701). Along with those from Josiah's first marriage, that made eleven children, all still unmarried, crammed into the tiny Milk Street house that also contained the tallow, soap, and candle equipment.

It might seem impossible to keep a watchful eye on so large a brood in such circumstances, and the Franklin tale provides tragic evidence that this was so. When he was a toddler of 16 months, Ebenezer drowned in a tub of his father's suds. Later that year, in 1703, the Franklins had another son, but he also died as a child.

So even though their next son, Benjamin, would spend his youth in a house with ten older siblings, the youngest of them would be seven years his senior. And he would have two younger sisters, Lydia (born 1708) and Jane (1712), looking up to him.

A SPUNKY LAD

Benjamin Franklin was born and baptized on the same day, a Sunday, January 17, 1706.* Boston was by then 76 years old, no longer a Puritan outpost but a thriving commercial center filled with preachers, merchants, seamen, and prostitutes. It had more than a thousand

* See page 503 for a concise chronology of events in this book. Franklin's birthdate of January 17, 1706, and all dates unless otherwise noted, are according to the Georgian calendar in use today. Until 1752, Britain and her colonies were still using the Julian calendar, which then differed by eleven days. In addition, they considered March 25, rather than January 1, to be the first day of a new year. Thus, under the Old Style calendar of the time, Franklin's birth was recorded as Sunday, January 6, 1705. Likewise, George Washington was born on February 11, 1731, on the Old Style calendar, but his birthday is now considered to be February 22, 1732.

homes, a thousand ships registered at its harbor, and seven thousand inhabitants, a figure that was doubling every twenty years.

As a kid growing up along the Charles River, Franklin was, he recalled, "generally the leader among the boys." One of their favorite gathering places was a salt marsh near the river's mouth, which had become a quagmire due to their constant trampling. Under Franklin's lead, the friends built themselves a wharf with stones intended for the construction of a house nearby. "In the evening when the workmen were gone home, I assembled a number of my playfellows, and we worked diligently like so many emmets, sometimes two or three to a stone, until we brought them all to make our little wharf." The next morning, he and the other culprits were caught and punished.

Franklin recounted the tale in his autobiography to illustrate, he said, his father's maxim "that nothing was useful which was not honest."[18] Yet, like many of Franklin's attempts at self-deprecation, the anecdote seems less designed to show how bad a boy he was than how good a leader he was. Throughout his life, he took palpable pride in his ability to organize cooperative endeavors and public-spirited projects.

Franklin's childhood days playing along the Charles River also instilled a lifelong love for swimming. Once he had learned and taught his playmates, he tinkered with ways to make himself go faster. The size of people's hands and feet, he realized, limited how much water they could push and thus their propelling power. So he made two oval palettes, with holes for his thumbs, and (as he explained in a letter to a friend) "I also fitted to the soles of my feet a kind of sandals." With these paddles and flippers, he could speed through the water.

Kites, as he would later famously show, could also be useful. Sending one aloft, he stripped, waded into a pond, floated on his back, and let it pull him. "Having then engaged another boy to carry my clothes round the pond," he recalled, "I began to cross the pond with my kite, which carried me quite over without the least fatigue and with the greatest pleasure imaginable."[19]

One childhood incident that he did not include in his autobiography, though he would recount it more than seventy years later for the amusement of his friends in Paris, occurred when he encountered a

boy blowing a whistle. Enchanted by the device, he gave up all the coins in his pocket for it. His siblings proceeded to ridicule him, saying he had paid four times what it was worth. "I cried with vexation," Franklin recalled, "and the reflection gave me more chagrin than the whistle gave me pleasure." Frugality became for him not only a virtue but also a pleasure. "Industry and frugality," he wrote in describing the theme of Poor Richard's almanacs, are "the means of procuring wealth and thereby securing virtue."[20]

When Benjamin was 6, his family moved from the tiny two-room house on Milk Street, where fourteen children had been raised, to a larger home and shop in the heart of town, on Hanover and Union Streets. His mother was 45, and that year (1712) she gave birth to the last of her children, Jane, who was to become Benjamin's favorite sibling and lifelong correspondent.

Josiah Franklin's new house, coupled with the dwindling number of children still living with him, allowed him to entertain interesting guests for dinner. "At his table," Benjamin recalled, "he liked to have, as often as he could, some sensible friend or neighbor to converse with, and always took care to start some ingenious or useful topic for discourse which might tend to improve the minds of his children."

The conversations were so engrossing, Franklin claims in his autobiography, that he took "little or no notice" of what was served for dinner. This training instilled in him a "perfect inattention" to food for the rest of his life, a trait he deemed "a great convenience," albeit one that seems belied by the number of recipes of American and French culinary delights among his papers.[21]

The new home also allowed the Franklins to accommodate Josiah's brother Benjamin, who emigrated from England in 1715 when he was 65 and his namesake was 9. Like Josiah, the elder Benjamin found the New World inhospitable to his craft of silk dyeing, but unlike Josiah, he did not have the drive to learn a new trade. So he sat around the Franklin house writing bad poetry (including a 124-quatrain autobiography) and a useful family history, attending and transcribing sermons, amusing his nephew, and gradually getting on his brother's nerves.[22]

Uncle Benjamin stayed with the Franklins for four years, easily

outlasting his welcome with his brother, if not with his nephew. Finally, he moved in with his own son Samuel, a cutler who had also immigrated to Boston. Years later, the younger Benjamin would write to his sister Jane and humorously recount the "disputes and misunderstandings" that grew between their father and uncle. The lesson his father drew was that visits from distant relatives "could not well be short enough for them to part good friends." In Poor Richard's almanac, Franklin would later put it more pithily: "Fish and guests stink after three days."[23]

EDUCATION

The plan for young Benjamin was to have him study for the ministry, Josiah's tenth son anointed as his tithe to the Lord. Uncle Benjamin was strongly supportive; among the many benefits of this plan was that it gave him something to do with his stash of secondhand sermons. For decades, he had scouted out the best preachers and transcribed their words in a neat shorthand of his own device. His nephew later noted with wry amusement that he "proposed to give me all his shorthand volumes, I suppose as a stock to set up with."

To prepare him for Harvard, Josiah sent his son, at age 8, to Boston Latin School, where Cotton Mather had studied and his son Samuel was then enrolled. Even though he was among the least privileged students, Franklin excelled in his first year, rising from the middle of the class to the very top, and then was jumped a grade ahead. Despite this success, Josiah abruptly changed his mind about sending him to Harvard. "My father," Franklin wrote, "burdened with a numerous family, was unable without inconvenience to support the expense of a college education."

This economic explanation is unsatisfying. The family was well-off enough, and there were fewer Franklin children being supported at home (only Benjamin and his two younger sisters) than had been the case for many years. There was no tuition at the Latin School, and as the top of his class he would easily have won a scholarship to Harvard. Of the forty-three students who entered the college when Franklin would have, only seven were from wealthy families; ten were sons of

tradesmen, and four were orphans. The university at that time spent approximately 11 percent of its budget for financial aid, more than it does today.[24]

Most likely there was another factor. Josiah came to believe, no doubt correctly, that his youngest son was not suited for the clergy. Benjamin was skeptical, puckish, curious, irreverent, the type of person who would get a lifelong chuckle out of his uncle's notion that it would be useful for a new preacher to start his career with a cache of used sermons. Anecdotes about his youthful intellect and impish nature abound, but there are none that show him as pious or faithful.

Just the opposite. A tale related by his grandson, but not included in the autobiography, shows Franklin to be cheeky not only about religion but also about the wordiness in worship that was a hallmark of Puritan faith. "Dr. Franklin, when a child, found the long graces used by his father before and after meals very tedious," his grandson reported. "One day after the winter's provisions had been salted—'I think, Father,' said Benjamin, 'if you were to say Grace over the whole cask—once for all—it would be a vast saving of time.' "[25]

So Benjamin was enrolled for a year at a writing and arithmetic academy two blocks away run by a mild but businesslike master named George Brownell. Franklin excelled in writing but failed math, a scholastic deficit he never fully remedied and that, combined with his lack of academic training in the field, would eventually condemn him to be merely the most ingenious scientist of his era rather than transcending into the pantheon of truly profound theorists such as Newton.

What would have happened if Franklin had, in fact, received a formal academic education and gone to Harvard? Some historians such as Arthur Tourtellot argue that he would have been stripped of his "spontaneity," "intuitive" literary style, "zest," "freshness," and the "unclutteredness" of his mind. And indeed, Harvard has been known to do that and worse to some of its charges.

But the evidence that Franklin would have so suffered is weak and does not do justice either to him or to Harvard. Given his skeptical turn of mind and allergy to authority, it is unlikely that Franklin would have become, as planned, a minister. Of the thirty-nine who were in

what would have been his class, fewer than half eventually joined the clergy. His rebellious nature may even have been enhanced rather than repressed; the college administrators were at the time wrestling mightily with the excessive partying, eating, and drinking that was infecting the campus.

One aspect of Franklin's genius was the variety of his interests, from science to government to diplomacy to journalism, all of them approached from a very practical rather than theoretical angle. Had he gone to Harvard, this diversity in outlook need not have been lost, for the college under the liberal John Leverett was no longer under the firm control of the Puritan clergy. By the 1720s it offered famous courses in physics, geography, logic, and ethics as well as the classics and theology, and a telescope atop Massachusetts Hall made it a center for astronomy. Fortunately, Franklin acquired something that was perhaps just as enlightening as a Harvard education: the training and experiences of a publisher, printer, and newspaperman.

APPRENTICE

At age 10, with but two years of schooling, Franklin went to work full time in his father's candle and soap shop, replacing his older brother John, who had served his term as an apprentice and left to set up his own business in Rhode Island. It was not pleasant work—skimming rendered tallow from boiling cauldrons of fat was particularly noxious, and cutting wicks and filling molds was quite mindless—and Franklin made clear his distaste for it. More ominously, he expressed his "strong inclination for the sea," even though his brother Josiah Jr. had recently been lost to its depths.

Fearing that his son would "break loose and go to sea," Josiah took him on long walks through Boston to see other craftsmen, so that he could "observe my inclination and endeavor to fix it on some trade that would keep me on land." This instilled in Franklin a lifelong appreciation for craftsmen and tradesmen. His passing familiarity with an array of crafts also helped make him an accomplished tinkerer, which served him in good stead as an inventor.

Josiah eventually concluded that Benjamin would be best as a cut-

ler, making knives and grinding blades. So he was, at least for a few days, apprenticed to Uncle Benjamin's son Samuel. But Samuel demanded an apprenticeship fee that struck Josiah as unreasonable, especially given the history of both hospitality and aggravation that existed between him and the elder Benjamin.[26]

Instead, almost by default rather than design, young Benjamin ended up apprenticed in 1718, at age 12, to his brother James, 21, who had recently returned from training in England to set up as a printer. At first, the willful young Benjamin balked at signing the indenture papers; he was a little older than usual for starting an apprenticeship, and his brother demanded a nine-year term instead of the typical seven years. Eventually, Benjamin signed on, though he was not destined to stay indentured until he was 21.

During his time in London, James saw how Grub Street balladeers would churn out odes and hawk them in the coffeehouses. So he promptly put Benjamin to work not only pushing type but also producing poetry. With encouragement from his uncle, young Franklin wrote two works based on news stories, both dealing with the sea: one about a family killed in a boating accident, and the other about the killing of the pirate known as Blackbeard. They were, as Franklin recalled, "wretched stuff," but they sold well, which "flattered my vanity."[27]

Herman Melville would one day write that Franklin was "everything but a poet." His father, no romantic, in fact preferred it that way, and he put an end to Benjamin's versifying. "My father discouraged me by ridiculing my performances and telling me verse-makers were generally beggars; so I escaped being a poet, most probably a very bad one."

When Franklin began his apprenticeship, Boston had only one newspaper: *The Boston News-Letter,* which had been launched in 1704 by a successful printer named John Campbell, who was also the town's postmaster. Then, as today, there was an advantage in the media business to controlling both content and distribution. Campbell was able to join forces with a network of fellow postmasters running from New Hampshire to Virginia. His books and papers were sent along the route for free—unlike those of other printers—and the postmasters in

his network would send him a steady stream of news items. In addition, because he held an official position he could proclaim that his paper was "published by authority," an important certification at a time when the press did not pride itself on independence.

The link between being the postmaster and a newspaper publisher was so natural that when Campbell lost the former job, his successor as postmaster, William Brooker, assumed that he would also take over the newspaper. Campbell, however, kept hold of it, which prompted Brooker to launch, in December 1719, a rival: *The Boston Gazette.* He hired James Franklin, the cheapest of the town's printers, to produce it for him.

But after two years, James lost the contract to print the *Gazette,* and he did something quite audacious. He launched what was then the only truly independent newspaper in the colonies and the first with literary aspirations. His weekly *New England Courant* would very explicitly *not* be "published by authority."[28]

The *Courant* would be remembered by history mainly because it contained the first published prose of Benjamin Franklin. And James would become known for being the harsh and jealous master described in his brother's autobiography. In fairness, however, the *Courant* ought to be remembered on its own as America's first fiercely independent newspaper, a bold, antiestablishment journal that helped to create the nation's tradition of an irreverent press. "It was the first open effort to defy the norm," literary historian Perry Miller has written.[29]

Defying authority in Boston at that time meant defying the Mathers and the role of the Puritan clergy in secular life, a cause James took up on the first page of his paper's first edition. Unfortunately, the battle he chose was over inoculation for smallpox, and he happened to pick the wrong side.

Smallpox epidemics had devastated Massachusetts at regular intervals in the ninety years since its founding. A 1677 outbreak wiped out seven hundred people, 12 percent of the population. During the epidemic of 1702, during which three of his children were stricken but survived, Cotton Mather began studying the disease. A few years later, he was introduced to the practice of inoculation by his black slave,

who had undergone the procedure in Africa and showed Mather his scar. Mather checked with other blacks in Boston and found that inoculation was a standard practice in parts of Africa.

Just before James Franklin's *Courant* made its debut in 1721, the HMS *Seahorse* arrived from the West Indies carrying what would become a new wave of smallpox. Within months, nine hundred of Boston's ten thousand inhabitants would be dead. Mather, trained as a physician before becoming a preacher, sent a letter to the ten practicing doctors in Boston (only one of whom had a medical degree) summarizing his knowledge of the African inoculation and urging that they adopt the practice. (Mather had evolved quite far from the superstitions that had led him to support Salem's witch hunts.)

Most of the doctors rejected the notion, and (with little justification other than a desire to prick at the pretensions of the preachers) so did James Franklin's new newspaper. The first issue of the *Courant* (August 7, 1721) contained an essay by a young friend of James's, John Checkley, a sassy Oxford-educated Anglican. He singled out for his sally the Puritan clergy, who "by teaching and practicing what's Orthodox, pray hard against sickness, yet preach up the Pox!" The issue also carried a diatribe by the town's only physician who actually had a medical degree, Dr. William Douglass, who dismissed inoculation as "the practice of Greek old women" and called Mather and his fellow ministerial proponents "six gentlemen of piety and learning profoundly ignorant of the matter." It was the first example, and a robust one at that, of a newspaper attacking the ruling establishment in America.[30]

Increase Mather, the family's aging patriarch, thundered, "I cannot but pity poor Franklin, who though but a young man, it may be speedily he must appear before the judgment seat of God." Cotton Mather, his son, wrote a letter to a rival paper denouncing the "notorious, scandalous paper called the *Courant,* full-freighted with nonsense, unmanliness, railery," and comparing its contributors to the Hell-Fire Club, a well-known clique of dapper young heretics in London. Cotton's cousin, a preacher named Thomas Walter, weighed in by writing a scathing piece entitled "The Anti-*Courant.*"

Knowing full well that this public spat would sell papers, and eager

to profit from both sides of an argument, James Franklin quite happily took on the job of publishing and selling Thomas Walter's rebuttal. However, the escalating personal nature of the controversy began to unsettle him. After a few weeks, he announced in an editor's note that he had banned Checkley from his paper for letting the feud get too vindictive. Henceforth, he promised, the *Courant* would aim to be "innocently diverting" and would publish opinions on either side of the inoculation controversy as long as they were "free from malicious reflections."[31]

Benjamin Franklin managed to stay out of his brother's smallpox battle with the Mather family, and he never mentioned it in his autobiography or letters, a striking omission that suggests that he was not proud of the side the paper chose. He later became a fervent advocate of inoculation, painfully and poignantly espousing the cause right after his 4-year-old son, Francis, died of the pox in 1736. And he would, both as an aspiring boy of letters and as a striver who sought the patronage of influential elders, end up becoming Cotton Mather's admirer and, a few years later, his acquaintance.

BOOKS

The print trade was a natural calling for Franklin. "From a child I was fond of reading," he recalled, "and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books." Indeed, books were the most important formative influence in his life, and he was lucky to grow up in Boston, where libraries had been carefully nurtured since the *Arabella* brought fifty volumes along with the town's first settlers in 1630. By the time Franklin was born, Cotton Mather had built a private library of almost three thousand volumes rich in classical and scientific as well as theological works. This appreciation of books was one of the traits shared by the Puritanism of Mather and the Enlightenment of Locke, worlds that would combine in the character of Benjamin Franklin.[32]

Less than a mile from Mather's library was the small bookshelf of Josiah Franklin. Though certainly modest, it was still notable that an

uneducated chandler would have one at all. Fifty years later, Franklin could still recall its titles: Plutarch's *Lives* ("which I read abundantly"), Daniel Defoe's *An Essay upon Projects,* Cotton Mather's *Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good,* and an assortment of "books in polemic divinity."

Once he began working in his brother's print shop, Franklin was able to sneak books from the apprentices who worked for booksellers, as long as he returned the volumes clean. "Often I sat up in my room reading the greatest part of the night, when the book was borrowed in the evening and to be returned early in the morning, lest it should be missed or wanted."

Franklin's favorite books were about voyages, spiritual as well as terrestrial, and the most notable of these was about both: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress,* the saga of the tenacious quest by a man named Christian to reach the Celestial City, which was published in 1678 and quickly became popular among Puritans and other dissenters. As important as its religious message, at least for Franklin, was the refreshingly clean and sparse prose style it offered in an age when writing had become clotted by the richness of the Restoration. "Honest John was the first that I know of," Franklin correctly noted, "who mixed narration and dialogue, a method of writing very engaging to the reader."

A central theme of Bunyan's book—and of the passage from Puritanism to Enlightenment, and of Franklin's life—was contained in its title: *progress,* the concept that individuals, and humanity in general, move forward and improve based on a steady increase of knowledge and the wisdom that comes from conquering adversity. Christian's famous opening phrase sets the tone: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world . . ." Even for the faithful, this progress was not solely the handiwork of the Lord but also the result of a human struggle, by individuals and communities, to triumph over obstacles.

Likewise, another Franklin favorite—and one must pause to marvel at a 12-year-old with such tastes in leisure pursuits—was Plutarch's *Lives,* which is also based on the premise that individual endeavor can change the course of history for the better. Plutarch's heroes, like Bunyan's Christian, are honorable men who believe that

their personal strivings are intertwined with the progress of humanity. History is a tale, Franklin came to believe, not of immutable forces but of human endeavors.

This outlook clashed with some of the tenets of Calvinism, such as the essential depravity of man and the predestination of his soul, which Franklin would eventually abandon as he edged his way closer to the less daunting deism that became the creed of choice during the Enlightenment. Yet, there were many aspects of Puritanism that made a lasting impression, most notably the practical, sociable, community-oriented aspects of that religion.

These were expressed eloquently in a work that Franklin often cited as a key influence: *Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good,* one of the few gentle tracts of the more than four hundred written by Cotton Mather. "If I have been," Franklin wrote to Cotton Mather's son almost seventy years later, "a useful citizen, the public owes the advantage of it to that book." Franklin's first pen name, Silence Dogood, paid homage both to the book and to a famous sermon by Mather, "Silentiarius: The Silent Sufferer."

Mather's tract called on members of the community to form voluntary associations to benefit society, and he personally founded a neighborhood improvement group, known as Associated Families, which Benjamin's father joined. He also urged the creation of Young Men Associated clubs and of Reforming Societies for the Suppression of Disorders, which would seek to improve local laws, provide charity for the poor, and encourage religious behavior.[33]

Mather's ideas were influenced by Daniel Defoe's *An Essay upon Projects,* which was another favorite book of Franklin's. Published in 1697, it proposed for London many of the sort of community projects that Franklin would later launch in Philadelphia: fire insurance associations, voluntary seamen's societies to create pensions, schemes to provide welfare for the elderly and widows, academies to educate the children of the middle class, and (with just a touch of Defoe humor) institutions to house the mentally retarded paid for by a tax on authors because they happened to get a greater share of intelligence at birth just as the retarded happened to get less.[34]

Among Defoe's most progressive notions was that it was "bar-

barous" and "inhumane" to deny women equal education and rights, and *An Essay upon Projects* contains a diatribe against such sexism. Around that time, Franklin and "another bookish lad" named John Collins began engaging each other in debates as an intellectual sport. Their first topic was the education of women, with Collins opposing it. "I took the contrary side," Franklin recalled, not totally out of conviction but "perhaps a little for dispute sake."

As a result of his mock debates with Collins, Franklin began to tailor for himself a persona that was less contentious and confrontational, which made him seem endearing and charming as he grew older—or, to a small but vocal cadre of enemies, manipulative and conniving. Being "disputatious," he concluded, was "a very bad habit" because contradicting people produced "disgusts and perhaps enmities." Later in his life he would wryly say of disputing: "Persons of good sense, I have since observed, seldom fall into it, except lawyers, university men, and men of all sorts that have been bred at Edinburgh."

Instead, after stumbling across some rhetoric books that extolled Socrates' method of building an argument through gentle queries, he "dropped my abrupt contradiction" style of argument and "put on the humbler enquirer" of the Socratic method. By asking what seemed to be innocent questions, Franklin would draw people into making concessions that would gradually prove whatever point he was trying to assert. "I found this method the safest for myself and very embarrassing to those against whom I used it; therefore, I took a delight in it." Although he later abandoned the more annoying aspects of a Socratic approach, he continued to favor gentle indirection rather than confrontation in making his arguments.[35]

SILENCE DOGOOD

Part of his debate with Collins over the education of women was waged by exchanging letters, and his father happened to read them. Though Josiah did not take sides in the dispute (he achieved his own semblance of fairness by providing little formal education to any of his children of either sex), he did criticize his son for his weak and un-

persuasive writing style. In reaction, the precocious young teen devised for himself a self-improvement course with the help of a volume of *The Spectator* that he found.

The Spectator, a London daily that flourished in 1711–12, featured deft essays by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele probing the vanities and values of contemporary life. The outlook was humanistic and enlightened, yet light. As Addison put it, "I shall endeavor to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality."

As part of his self-improvement course, Franklin read the essays, took brief notes, and laid them aside for a few days. Then he tried to recreate the essay in his own words, after which he compared his composition to the original. Sometimes he would jumble up the notes he took, so that he would have to figure out on his own the best order to build the essay's argument.

He turned some of the essays into poetry, which helped him (so he thought) expand his vocabulary by forcing him to search for words that had similar meanings but different rhythms and sounds. These, too, he turned back into essays after a few days, comparing them to see where he had diverged from the original. When he found his own version wanting, he would correct it. "But I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that in certain particulars of small import I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think that I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious."[36]

More than making himself merely "tolerable" as a writer, he became the most popular writer in colonial America. His self-taught style, as befitting a protégé of Addison and Steele, featured a fun and conversational prose that was lacking in poetic flourish but powerful in its directness.

Thus was born Silence Dogood. James Franklin's *Courant,* which was modeled on *The Spectator,* featured sassy pseudonymous essays, and his print shop attracted a congregation of clever young contributors who liked to hang around and praise each other's prose. Benjamin was eager to become part of the crowd, but he knew that James, already jealous of his upstart young brother, was unlikely to encourage him. "Hearing their conversations, and their accounts of the approba-

tion their papers were received with, I was excited to try my hand among them."

So one night, Franklin, disguising his handwriting, wrote an essay and slipped it under the printing house door. The cadre of Couranteers who gathered the next day lauded the anonymous submission, and Franklin had the "exquisite pleasure" of listening as they decided to feature it on the front page of the issue out the next Monday, April 2, 1722.

The literary character Franklin invented was a triumph of imagination. Silence Dogood was a slightly prudish widowed woman from a rural area, created by a spunky unmarried Boston teenager who had never spent a night outside of the city. Despite the uneven quality of the essays, Franklin's ability to speak convincingly as a woman was remarkable, and it showed both his creativity and his appreciation for the female mind.

The echoes of Addison are apparent from the outset. In Addison's first *Spectator* essay, he wrote, "I have observed that a reader seldom peruses a book with pleasure 'til he knows whether the writer of it be a black or a fair man, of a mild or choleric disposition, married or a bachelor." Franklin likewise began by justifying an autobiographical introduction from his fictitious narrator: "It is observed, that the generality of people, nowadays, are unwilling either to commend or dispraise what they read, until they are in some measure informed who or what the author of it is, whether he be poor or rich, old or young, a scholar or a leather apron man."

One reason the Silence Dogood essays are so historically notable is that they were among the first examples of what would become a quintessential American genre of humor: the wry, homespun mix of folksy tales and pointed observations that was perfected by such Franklin descendants as Mark Twain and Will Rogers. For example, in the second of the essays, Silence Dogood tells how the minister to whom she was apprenticed decided to make her his wife: "Having made several unsuccessful fruitless attempts on the more topping sort of our sex, and being tired with making troublesome journeys and visits to no purpose, he began unexpectedly to cast a loving eye upon me . . . There is certainly scarce any part of a man's life in which he

appears more silly and ridiculous than when he makes his first onset in courtship."

Franklin's portrayal of Mrs. Dogood exhibits a literary dexterity that was quite subtle for a 16-year-old boy. "I could easily be persuaded to marry again," he had her declare. "I am courteous and affable, good humored (unless I am first provoked) and handsome, and sometimes witty." The flick of the word "sometimes" is particularly deft. In describing her beliefs and biases, Franklin had Mrs. Dogood assert an attitude that would, with his encouragement, become part of the emerging American character: "I am . . . a mortal enemy to arbitrary government and unlimited power. I am naturally very jealous for the rights and liberties of my country; and the least appearance of an encroachment on those invaluable privileges is apt to make my blood boil exceedingly. I have likewise a natural inclination to observe and reprove the faults of others, at which I have an excellent faculty." It was as good a description of the real Benjamin Franklin—and, indeed, of a typical American—as is likely to be found anywhere.[37]

Of the fourteen Dogood essays that Franklin wrote between April and October 1722, the one that stands out both as journalism and self-revelation is his attack on the college he never got to attend. Most of the classmates he had bested at Boston Latin had just entered Harvard, and Franklin could not refrain from lampooning them and their institution. The form he used was an allegorical narrative cast as a dream. In doing so, he drew on, and perhaps was mildly parodying, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress,* also an allegorical journey set as a dream. Addison had used the form somewhat clumsily in an issue of *The Spectator* that Franklin read, which recounted the dream of a banker about an allegorical virgin named Public Credit.[38]

In the essay, Mrs. Dogood recounts falling asleep under an apple tree while she mulls over whether to send her son to Harvard. As she journeys in her dream toward this temple of learning, she makes a discovery about those who send sons there: "Most of them consulted their own purses instead of their children's capacities: so that I observed a great many, yea, the most part of those who were traveling thither were little better than Dunces and Blockheads." The gate of the temple, she finds, is guarded by "two sturdy porters named Riches

and Poverty," and only those who meet the approval of the former could get in. Most of the students are content to dally with the figures called Idleness and Ignorance. "They learn little more than how to carry themselves handsomely, and enter a room genteelly (which might as well be acquired at a dancing school), and from thence they return, after abundance of trouble and charge, as great blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited."

Picking up on the proposals of Mather and Defoe for voluntary civic associations, Franklin devoted two of his Silence Dogood essays to the topic of relief for single women. For widows like herself, Mrs. Dogood proposes an insurance scheme funded by subscriptions from married couples. The next essay extended the idea to spinsters. A "friendly society" would be formed that would guarantee £500 "in ready cash" to any member who reaches age 30 and is still not married. The money, Mrs. Dogood notes, would come with a condition: "No woman, who after claiming and receiving, has had the good fortune to marry, shall entertain any company [by praising] her husband above the space of one hour at a time upon pain of returning one half the money into the office for the first offense, and upon the second offense to return the remainder." In these essays, Franklin was being gently satirical rather than fully serious. But his interest in civic associations would later find more earnest expression, as we shall see, when he became established as a young tradesman in Philadelphia.

Franklin's vanity was further fed during that summer of 1722, when his brother was jailed for three weeks—without trial—by Massachusetts authorities for the "high affront" of questioning their competence in pursuing pirates. For three issues, Benjamin got to put out the paper.

He boasts in his autobiography that "I had the management of the paper, and I made bold to give our rulers some rubs in it, which my brother took very kindly, while others began to consider me in an unfavorable light as a young genius that had a turn for libeling and satire." In fact, other than a letter to the readers written from prison by James, nothing in Benjamin's three issues directly challenged the civil authorities. The closest he came was having Mrs. Dogood quote in full an essay from an English newspaper that defended free speech.

"Without freedom of thought there can be no such thing as wisdom," it declared, "and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech."[39]

The "rubs" that Franklin remembered came a week after his brother's return from prison. Writing as Silence Dogood, he unleashed a piercing attack on the civil authorities, perhaps the most biting of his entire career. The question that Mrs. Dogood posed was "Whether a Commonwealth suffers more by hypocritical pretenders to religion or by the openly profane?"

Unsurprisingly, Franklin's Mrs. Dogood argued that "some late thoughts of this nature have inclined me to think that the hypocrite is the most dangerous person of the two, especially if he sustains a post in the government." The piece attacked the link between the church and the state, which was the very foundation of the Puritan commonwealth. Governor Thomas Dudley, who moved from the ministry to the law, is cited (though not by name) as an example: "The most dangerous hypocrite in a Commonwealth is one who leaves the gospel for the sake of the law. A man compounded of law and gospel is able to cheat a whole country with his religion and then destroy them under color of law."[40]

By the fall of 1722, Franklin was running short of ideas for Silence Dogood. Worse yet, his brother was beginning to suspect the provenance of the pieces. In her thirteenth submission, Silence Dogood noted that she had overheard a conversation one night in which a gentleman had said, "Though I wrote in the character of a woman, he knew me to be a man; but, continued he, he has more need of endeavoring a reformation in himself than spending his wit in satirizing others." The next Dogood would be Franklin's last. When he revealed Mrs. Dogood's true identity, it raised his stature among the Couranteers but "did not quite please" James. "He thought, probably with reason, that it tended to make me too vain."

Silence Dogood had been able to get away with an attack on hypocrisy and religion, but when James penned a similar piece in January 1723, he landed in trouble yet again. "Of all knaves," he wrote, "the religious knave is the worst." Religion was important, he wrote, but, using words that would describe the lifelong attitude of his

younger brother, he added, "too much of it is worse than none at all." The local authorities, noting "that the tendency of the said paper is to mock religion," promptly passed a resolution that required James to submit each issue to the authorities for approval before publication. James defied the order with relish.

The General Court responded by forbidding James Franklin from publishing the *Courant.* At a secret meeting in his shop, it was decided that the best way around the order was to continue to print the paper, but without James as its publisher. On Monday, February 11, 1723, there appeared atop the *Courant* the masthead: "Printed and sold by Benjamin Franklin."

Benjamin's *Courant* was more cautious than that of his brother. An editorial in his first issue denounced publications that were "hateful" and "malicious," and it declared that henceforth the *Courant* would be "designed purely for the diversion and merriment of the reader" and to "entertain the town with the most comical and diverting incidents of human life." The master of the paper, the editorial declared, would be the Roman god Janus, who could look two ways at once.[41]

The next few issues, however, hardly lived up to that billing. Most articles were slightly stale dispatches containing foreign news or old speeches. There was only one essay that was clearly written by Franklin, a wry musing on the folly of titles such as Viscount and Master. (His aversion to hereditary and aristocratic titles would be a theme throughout his life.) After a few weeks, James returned to the helm of the *Courant,* in fact if not officially, and he resumed treating Benjamin as an apprentice, subject to occasional beatings, rather than as a brother and fellow writer. Such treatment "demeaned me too much," Franklin recalled, and he became eager to move on. He had an urge for independence that he would help to make a hallmark of the American character.

THE RUNAWAY

Franklin managed his escape by taking advantage of a ruse his brother had contrived. When James had pretended to turn over the *Courant* to Benjamin, he signed an official discharge of his appren-

ticeship to make the transfer seem legitimate. But he then made Benjamin sign a new apprentice agreement that would be kept secret. A few months later, Benjamin decided to run away. He assumed, correctly, that his brother would realize that it was unwise to try to enforce the secret indenture.

Benjamin Franklin left behind a brother whose paper would slowly fail and whose reputation would eventually be reduced to a tarnished historical footnote. James was doomed by his brother's sharp pen to be remembered "for the blows his passion too often urged him to bestow upon me." Indeed, his significance in Franklin's life is described in a brusque footnote in the *Autobiography,* written during Franklin's time as a colonial agent fighting British rule: "I fancy his harsh and tyrannical treatment of me might be a means of impressing me with that aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me through my whole life."

James deserved better. If Franklin learned an "aversion to arbitrary power" from him, it was not merely because of his alleged tyrannical style but because he had set an example by challenging, with bravery and spunk, Boston's ruling elite. James was the first great fighter for an independent press in America, and he was the most important journalistic influence on his younger brother.

He was also an important literary influence. Silence Dogood may have been, in Benjamin's mind, modeled on Addison and Steele, but in fact she more closely resembled, in her down-home vernacular and common-touch perceptions, Abigail Afterwit, Jack Dulman, and the other pseudonymous characters that had been created for the *Courant* by James.

Benjamin's break with his brother was fortunate for his career. As great as it was to be raised in Boston, it would likely have become a constricting town for a free-spirited deist who had not attended Harvard. "I had already made myself a little obnoxious to the governing party," he later wrote, "and it was likely I might if I stayed soon bring myself into scrapes." His mockery of religion meant that he was pointed to on the streets "with horror by good people as an infidel or atheist." All in all, it was a good time for him to leave both his brother and Boston behind.[42]

It was a tradition among American pioneers, when their communities became too confining, to strike out for the frontier. But Franklin was a different type of American rebel. The wilderness did not beckon. Instead, he was enticed by the new commercial centers, New York and Philadelphia, that offered the chance to become a self-made success. John Winthrop may have led his Puritan band on an errand into the wilderness; Franklin, on the other hand, was part of a new breed leading an errand into the Market streets.

Afraid that his brother would try to detain him, Franklin had a friend secretly book him passage on a sloop for New York using the cover story that it was for a boy who needed to sneak away because he "had an intrigue with a girl of bad character" (or, as Franklin put it in an earlier draft, "had got a naughty girl with child"). Selling some of his books to pay for the fare, the 17-year-old Franklin set sail in a fair wind on the evening of Wednesday, September 25, 1723. The following Monday, the *New England Courant* carried a succinct, slightly sad little ad: "James Franklin, printer in Queen Street, wants a likely lad for an Apprentice."[43]

CHAPTER THREE

JOURNEYMAN

Philadelphia and London, 1723–1726

KEIMER'S SHOP

As a young apprentice, Franklin had read a book extolling vegetarianism. He embraced the diet, but not just for moral and health reasons. His main motive was financial: it enabled him to take the money his brother allotted him for food and save half for books. While his coworkers went off for hearty meals, Franklin ate biscuits and raisins and used the time for study, "in which I made the greater progress from that greater clearness of head and quicker apprehension which usually attend temperance in eating and drinking."[1]

But Franklin was a reasonable soul, so wedded to being rational that he became adroit at rationalizing. During his voyage from Boston to New York, when his boat lay becalmed off Block Island, the crew caught and cooked some cod. Franklin at first refused any, until the aroma from the frying pan became too enticing. With droll self-awareness, he later recalled what happened:

> I balanced some time between principle and inclination until I recollected that when the fish were opened, I saw smaller fish taken out of their stomachs. "Then," thought I, "if you eat one another, I don't see why we may not eat you." So I dined upon cod very heartily and have since continued to eat as other people, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable diet.

From this he drew a wry, perhaps even a bit cynical, lesson that he expressed as a maxim: "So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do."[2]

Franklin's rationalism would make him an exemplar of the Enlightenment, the age of reason that flourished in eighteenth-century Europe and America. He had little use for the fervor of the religious age into which he was born, nor for the sublime sentiments of the Romantic period that began budding near the end of his life. But like Voltaire, he was able to poke fun at his own efforts, and that of humanity in general, to be guided by reason. A recurring theme in his autobiography, as well as in his tales and almanacs, was his amusement at man's ability to rationalize what was convenient.

At 17, Franklin was physically striking: muscular, barrel-chested, open-faced, and almost six feet tall. He had the happy talent of being at ease in almost any company, from scrappy tradesmen to wealthy merchants, scholars to rogues. His most notable trait was a personal magnetism; he attracted people who wanted to help him. Never shy, and always eager to win friends and patrons, he gregariously exploited this charm.

On his runaway journey, for example, he met the sole printer in New York, William Bradford, who had published editorials supporting James Franklin's fight against the "oppressors and bigots" in Boston. Bradford had no job to offer, but he suggested that the young runaway continue on to Philadelphia and seek work with his son Andrew Bradford, who ran the family print shop and weekly newspaper there.

Franklin arrived at Philadelphia's Market Street wharf on a Sunday morning ten days after his departure from Boston. In his pocket he had nothing more than a Dutch dollar and about a shilling in copper, the latter of which he gave to the boatmen to pay for his passage. They tried to decline it, because Franklin had helped with the rowing, but he insisted. He also gave away two of the three puffy rolls he bought to a mother and child he had met on the journey. "A man [is] sometimes more generous when he has little money than when he has plenty," he later wrote, "perhaps through fear of being thought to have but little."[3]

From his first moments in Philadelphia, Franklin cared about such appearances. American individualists sometimes boast of not worrying about what others think of them. Franklin, more typically, nurtured his reputation, as a matter of both pride and utility, and he became the country's first unabashed public relations expert. "I took care not only to be in *reality* industrious and frugal," he later wrote, "but to avoid all *appearances* of the contrary" (his emphasis). Especially in his early years as a young tradesman, he was, in the words of the critic Jonathan Yardley, "a self-created and self-willed man who moved through life at a calculated pace toward calculated ends."[4]

With a population of two thousand, Philadelphia was then America's second-largest village after Boston. Envisioned by William Penn as a "green country town," it featured a well-planned grid of wide streets lined with brick houses. In addition to the original Quakers who had settled there fifty years earlier, the city named for brotherly love had attracted raucous and entrepreneurial German, Scotch, and Irish immigrants who turned it into a lively marketplace filled with shops and taverns. Though its economy was sputtering and most of its streets were dirty and unpaved, the tone set by both the Quakers and subsequent immigrants was appealing to Franklin. They tended to be diligent, unpretentious, friendly, and tolerant, especially compared to the Puritans of Boston.

The morning after his arrival, rested and better dressed, Franklin called on Andrew Bradford's shop. There he found not only the young printer but also his father, William, who had come from New York on horseback and made it there faster. Andrew had no immediate work for the runaway, so William brought him around to see the town's other printer, Samuel Keimer—a testament both to Franklin's charming ability to enlist patrons and to the peculiar admixture of cooperation and competition so often found among American tradesmen.

Keimer was a disheveled and quirky man with a motley printing operation. He asked Franklin a few questions, gave him a composing stick to assess his skills, and then promised to employ him as soon as he had more work. Not knowing that William was the father of his competitor, Keimer volubly described his plans for luring away most of Andrew Bradford's business. Franklin stood by silently, marveling

at the elder Bradford's craftiness. After Bradford left, Franklin recalled, Keimer "was greatly surprised when I told him who the old man was."

Even after this inauspicious introduction, Franklin was able to get work from Keimer while he lodged with the younger Bradford. When Keimer finally insisted that he find living quarters that were less of a professional conflict, he fortuitously was able to rent a room from John Read, the father of the young girl who had been so amused by his appearance the day he straggled off the boat. "My chest and clothes being come by this time, I made rather a more respectable appearance in the eyes of Miss Read than I had done when she first happened to see me eating my roll in the street," he noted.[5]

Franklin thought Keimer an "odd fish," but he enjoyed having sport with him as they shared their love for philosophical debate. Franklin honed the Socratic method he found so useful for winning arguments without antagonizing opponents. He would ask Keimer questions that seemed innocent and tangential but eventually exposed his logical fallacies. Keimer, who was prone to embracing eclectic religious beliefs, was so impressed that he proposed they establish a sect together. Keimer would be in charge of the doctrines, such as not trimming one's beard, and Franklin would be in charge of defending them. Franklin agreed with one condition: that vegetarianism be part of the creed. The experiment ended after three months when Keimer, ravenous, gave in to temptation and ate an entire roast pig by himself one evening.

Franklin's magnetism attracted not only patrons but also friends. With his clever mind, disarming wit, and winning smile, he became a popular member of the town's coterie of young tradesmen. His clique included three young clerks: Charles Osborne, Joseph Watson, and James Ralph. Ralph was the most literary of the group, a poet convinced both of his own talent and of the need to be self-indulgent in order to be a great artist. Osborne, a critical lad, was jealous and invariably belittled Ralph's efforts. On one of their long walks by the river, during which the four friends read their work to one another, Ralph had a poem he knew Osborne would criticize. So he got Franklin to read the poem as if it were his own. Osborne, falling for the ruse,

heaped praise on it, teaching Franklin a rule of human nature that served him well (with a few exceptions) throughout his career: people are more likely to admire your work if you're able to keep them from feeling jealous of you.[6]

AN UNRELIABLE PATRON

The most fateful patron Franklin befriended was Pennsylvania's effusive governor Sir William Keith, a well-meaning but feckless busybody. They met as a result of a passionate letter Franklin had written to a brother-in-law explaining why he was happy in Philadelphia and had no desire to return to Boston or let his parents know where he was. The relative showed the letter to Governor Keith, who expressed surprise that a missive so eloquent had been written by a lad so young. The governor, who realized that both of the established printers in his province were wretched, decided to seek out Franklin and encourage him.

When Governor Keith, dressed in all his finery, marched up the street to Keimer's print shop, the disheveled owner bustled out to greet him. To his surprise, Keith asked to see Franklin, whom he proceeded to lavish with compliments and an invitation to join him for a drink. Keimer, Franklin later noted, "stared like a pig poisoned."[7]

Over fine Madeira at a nearby tavern, Governor Keith offered to help Franklin set up on his own. He would use his influence, Keith promised, to get him the province's official business and would write Franklin's father a letter exhorting him to help finance his son. Keith followed up with invitations to dinner, further flattery, and continued encouragement. So, with a fulsome letter from Keith in hand and dreams of a familial reconciliation followed by fame and fortune, Franklin was ready to face his family again. He boarded a ship heading for Boston in April 1724.

It had been seven months since he had run away, and his parents were not even sure that he was still alive, so they were thrilled by his return and welcomed him warmly. Franklin had not, however, yet learned his lesson about the pitfalls of pride and of provoking jealousy.

He sauntered down to the print shop of his jilted brother James, proudly sporting a "genteel new suit," a fancy watch, and £5 of silver coins bulging his pocket. James looked him up and down, turned on his heels, and silently went back to work.

Franklin could not refrain from flaunting his new status. As James stewed, he regaled the shop's young journeymen with tales of his happy life in Philadelphia, spread his silver coins on the table for them to admire, and gave them money to buy drinks. James later told their mother he could never forget nor forgive the offense. "In this, however, he was mistaken," Franklin recalled.

His family's old antagonist Cotton Mather was more receptive, and instructive. He invited young Franklin over, chatted with him in his magnificent library, and let it be known that he forgave him for the barbs that had appeared in the *Courant.* As they were making their way out, they went through a narrow passage and Mather suddenly warned, "Stoop! Stoop!" Franklin, not understanding the exhortation, bumped his head on a low beam. As was his wont, Mather turned it into a homily: "Let this be a caution to you not always to hold your head so high. Stoop, young man, stoop—as you go through this world—and you'll miss many hard thumps." As Franklin later recalled to Mather's son, "This advice, thus beat into my head, has frequently been of use to me, and I often think of it when I see pride mortified and misfortunes brought upon people by carrying their heads too high." Although the lesson was a useful counterpoint to his showy visit to his brother's print shop, he failed to include it in his autobiography.[8]

Governor Keith's letter and proposal surprised Josiah Franklin. But after considering it for a few days, he decided it was imprudent to fund a rather rebellious runaway who was only 18. Though he was proud of the patronage his son had attracted and the industriousness he had shown, Josiah knew that Benjamin was still impudent.

Seeing no chance of a reconciliation between his two sons, Josiah did give his blessing for Benjamin to return to Philadelphia, with the exhortation "to behave respectfully to the people there . . . and avoid lampooning and libeling, to which he thought I had too much inclina-

tion." If he was able by "steady industry and prudent parsimony" to save almost enough to open his own shop by the time he was 21, Josiah promised he would help fund the rest.

Franklin's old friend John Collins, entranced by his tales, decided to leave Boston as well. But once in Philadelphia, the two teenagers had a falling-out. Collins, academically brighter than Franklin but less disciplined, soon took to drink. He borrowed money from Franklin and began to resent him. One day, when they were boating with friends on the Delaware, Collins refused to row his turn. Others in the boat were willing to let it pass, but not Franklin, who scuffled with him, grabbed him by the crotch, and threw him overboard. Each time Collins swam up to the boat, Franklin and the others would row it away a few feet more while insisting that he promise to take his turn at the oars. Proud and resentful, Collins never agreed, but they finally allowed him back in. He and Franklin barely spoke after that, and Collins ended up going to Barbados, never repaying the money he had borrowed.

In the course of a few months, Franklin had learned from four people—James Ralph, James Franklin, Cotton Mather, and John Collins—lessons about rivalry and resentments, pride and modesty. Throughout his life, he would occasionally make enemies, such as the Penn family, and jealous rivals, such as John Adams. But he did so less than most men, especially men so accomplished. A secret to being more revered than resented, he learned, was to display (at least when he could muster the discipline) a self-deprecating humor, unpretentious demeanor, and unaggressive style in conversation.[9]

Josiah Franklin's refusal to fund his son's printing venture did not dampen Governor Keith's enthusiasm. "Since he will not set you up, I will do it myself," he grandly promised. "I am resolved to have a good printer here." He asked Franklin for a list of what equipment was necessary—Franklin estimated it would cost about £100—and then suggested that Franklin should sail to London so that he could personally pick out the fonts and make contacts. Keith pledged letters of credit to pay for both the equipment and the voyage.[10]

The adventurous Franklin was thrilled. In the months leading up to his planned departure, he dined frequently with the governor.

Whenever he asked for the promised letters of credit, they were not ready, but Franklin felt no reason to worry.

At the time, Franklin was courting his landlady's daughter, Deborah Read. Despite his sexual appetites, he was practical about what he wanted in a wife. Deborah was rather plain, but she offered the prospect of comfort and domesticity. Franklin offered a lot as well, in addition to his husky good looks and genial charm. He had transformed himself from the bedraggled runaway she first spotted wandering up Market Street into one of the town's most promising and eligible young tradesmen, one who had found favor with the governor and popularity with his peers. Deborah's father had recently died, which put her mother into financial difficulty and made her open to the prospect of a good marriage for her daughter. Nevertheless, she was wary of allowing her to marry a suitor who was preparing to leave for London. She insisted that marriage wait until he returned.

LONDON

In November 1724, just over a year after arriving in Philadelphia, Franklin set sail for London. Traveling with him was the boy who had replaced Collins as his unreliable best friend, the aspiring poet James Ralph, who was leaving behind a wife and child. Franklin still had not received the letters of credit from Governor Keith, but he was assured that they would be sent on board in the final bag of dispatches.

Only after he arrived in London, on Christmas Eve, did Franklin discover the truth. The flighty governor had supplied no letters of credit nor recommendation. Franklin, puzzled, consulted a fellow passenger named Thomas Denham, a prominent Quaker merchant who had befriended him on the voyage. Denham explained to Franklin that Keith was incorrigibly capricious, and he "laughed at the idea of the Governor's giving me a letter of credit, having, as he said, no credit to give." For Franklin, it was an insight into human foibles rather than evil. "He wished to please everybody," Franklin later said of Keith, "and having little to give, he gave expectations."[11]

Taking Denham's advice, Franklin decided to make the best of his situation. London was enjoying a golden age of peace and prosperity,

one particularly appealing to an intellectually ambitious young printer. Among those then brightening the world of London letters were Swift, Defoe, Pope, Richardson, Fielding, and Chesterfield.

With the dreamy wastrel Ralph under his wing, Franklin found cheap lodgings and a job at a famous printing house, Samuel Palmer's. Ralph tried to get work as an actor, then as a journalist or clerk. He failed on all fronts, borrowing money from Franklin all the while.

It was an odd-couple symbiosis of the type often found between ambitious, practical guys and their carefree, romantic pals: Franklin diligently made the money, Ralph made sure they spent it all on the theater and other amusements, including occasional "intrigues with low women." Ralph quickly forgot his own wife and child in Philadelphia, and Franklin followed suit by ignoring his engagement to Deborah and writing her only once.

The friendship exploded, not surprisingly, over a woman. Ralph fell in love with a pleasant but poor young milliner, moved in with her, then was finally motivated to find work as a teacher in a village school in Berkshire. He wrote Franklin often, sending installments of a bad epic poem along with requests that Franklin look after his girlfriend. That he did all too well. He lent her money, comforted her loneliness, and then ("being at the time under no religious restraint") tried to seduce her. Ralph returned in a fury, broke off their friendship, and declared that the transgression released him from the duty of paying back any debts, which amounted to £27.[12]

Franklin later concluded that the loss of money he was owed was balanced by the loss of the burden of having Ralph as a friend. A pattern was emerging. Beginning with Collins and Ralph, Franklin easily made casual friends, intellectual companions, useful patrons, flirty admirers, and circles of genial acquaintances, but he was less good at nurturing lasting bonds that involved deep personal commitments or emotional relationships, even within his own family.

CALVINISM AND DEISM

While at Palmer's, Franklin helped print an edition of William Wollaston's *The Religion of Nature Delineated,* an Enlightenment tract

that argued that religious truths were to be gleaned through the study of science and nature rather than through divine revelation. With the intellectual spunk that comes from being youthful and untutored, Franklin decided that Wollaston was right in general but wrong in parts, and he set out his own thinking in a piece he wrote early in 1725 called "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain."

In it, Franklin strung together theological premises with logical syllogisms to get himself quite tangled up. For example: God is "all wise, all good, all powerful," he posited. Therefore, everything that exists or happens is with his consent. "What He consents to must be good, because He is good; therefore evil doth not exist."

Furthermore, happiness existed only as a contrast to unhappiness, and one could not exist without the other. Therefore, they balanced out: "Since pain naturally and infallibly produces a pleasure in proportion to it, every individual creature must, in any state of life, have an equal quantity of each." Along the way, Franklin disproved (to his own satisfaction at least) the concept of an immortal soul, the possibility of free will, and the fundamental Calvinist tenet that people are destined to be either saved or damned. "A creature can do nothing but what is good," he declared, and all "must be equally esteemed by the Creator."[13]

Franklin's "Dissertation" does not belong in the annals of sophisticated philosophy. Indeed, it was, as he later conceded, so shallow and unconvincing as to be embarrassing. He printed a hundred copies, called it an "erratum," and burned as many as he could retrieve.

In his defense, philosophers greater and more mature than Franklin have, over the centuries, gotten lost when trying to sort out the question of free will and reconcile it with that of an all-knowing God. And many of us can perhaps remember—or would cringe at being reminded of—our papers or freshmen dorm disquisitions from when we were 19. Yet even as he matured, Franklin would never develop into a rigorous, first-rank philosopher on the order of such contemporaries as Berkeley and Hume. Like Dr. Johnson, he was more comfortable exploring practical thoughts and real-life situations than metaphysical abstractions or deductive proofs.

The primary value of his "Dissertation" lies in what it reveals about Franklin's fitful willingness to abandon Puritan theology. As a young man, he had read John Locke, Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and others who embraced the freethinking religion and Enlightenment philosophy of deism, which held that each individual could best discover the truth about God through reason and studying nature, rather than through blind faith in received doctrines and divine revelation. He also read more orthodox tracts that defended the dogmas of Calvinism against such heresies, but he found them less convincing. As he wrote in his autobiography, "The arguments of the deists which were quoted to be refuted appeared to me much stronger than the refutations."[14]

Nevertheless, he soon came to the conclusion that a simple and complacent deism had its own set of drawbacks. He had converted Collins and Ralph to deism, and they soon wronged him without moral compunction. Likewise, he came to worry that his own freethinking had caused him to be cavalier toward Deborah Read and others. In a classic maxim that typifies his pragmatic approach to religion, Franklin declared of deism, "I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful."

Although divine revelation "had no weight with me," he decided that religious practices were beneficial because they encouraged good behavior and a moral society. So he began to embrace a morally fortified brand of deism that held God was best served by doing good works and helping other people.

It was a philosophy that led him to renounce much of the doctrine of the Puritans and other Calvinists, who preached that salvation came through God's grace alone and could not be earned by doing good deeds. That possibility, they believed, was lost when Adam rejected God's covenant of good works and it was replaced by a covenant of grace in which the saved were part of an elect predetermined by God. To a budding rationalist and pragmatist like Franklin, the covenant of grace seemed "unintelligible" and, even worse, "not beneficial."[15]