



Benjamin Franklin's death on April 17, 1790, was the nation's first loss of a Founding Father. In failing health and unremitting pain for several years, Franklin had given his last service to his country as a delegate to the 1787 Constitutional Convention. The Philadelphia printer, author of *Poor Richard's Almanac* and countless satires and essays, signer of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, longtime representative to Britain and France, skillful negotiator of the peace treaty finalizing American independence, Franklin was buried in the Philadelphia Christ Church Burial Ground, next to his wife Deborah and near his son Folger who had died of smallpox as a child. Presented here are reports and tributes delivered in the two months after his death. What did they emphasize about Franklin as a man, a citizen, a pursuer of knowledge, and as a Founder of his country?

☞ Death of Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, 17 April 1790

The Federal Gazette, Philadelphia, 19 April 1790

Died on Saturday night, in the 85th year of his age, the illustrious BENJAMIN FRANKLIN. The world has been so long in possession of such extraordinary proofs of the singular abilities and virtues of this FRIEND OF MANKIND that it is impossible for a newspaper to increase his fame, or to convey his name to a part of the civilized globe where it is not already known and admired.

☞ Funeral of Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, 21 April 1790

The Federal Gazette, Philadelphia, 21 April 1790

This day were interred the remains of the illustrious and venerable BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, L.L.D., [Doctor of Laws, an honorific] with every mark of tender and respectful sorrow which an affectionate family devoted to him — friends truly sensible of his worth, or an intelligent and grateful city could show.

The ships in the harbor, even those of Great Britain, hung their flags half mast high.

To the city of Boston, the place of his nativity, he has left a liberal and well-judged token of his remembrance — to the city of Philadelphia, his second place of birth, he has left the same. — But time alone can unfold to his country and his fellow men the numerous treasures of wisdom which his patriotism and philanthropy have bequeathed them.

☞ Order of the Funeral Procession, Philadelphia, 21 April 1790

"The Immortal Franklin," *The Massachusetts Centinel*, Boston, 1 May 1790

This great and good man, whose death we announced in the last *Centinel*, was aged 85 years¹ — and was interred with every mark of the esteem and veneration of his fellow citizens. His last illness lasted 16 days.

At his funeral, the following was the order of Procession.

Copyright © National Humanities Center, 2010/2013. AMERICA IN CLASS®: americainclass.org/. Some spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Portraits on this page by: (1) Robert Feke, ca. 1746 (detail), earliest known portrait of Franklin, Harvard University Art Museums; (2) Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, 1778 (detail), Metropolitan Museum of Art; (3) Robert Edge Pine, ca. 1787, The Franklin Institute, Inc. Portraits reproduced by permission. Complete image credits at americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Franklin, born January 17, 1706, had turned 84 three months before his death; thus he died in his 85th year.

All the Clergy of the city, before the Corpse.

THE CORPSE,

Carried by Citizens,

The Pall supported by The President of the State,
the Chief Justice, the President of the [National] Bank,
Samuel Powel, William Bingham, and
David Rittenhouse, Esq'srs.

pall: cloth which covers
a coffin at a funeral.

Powel & Bingham: influential city statesmen.
Rittenhouse: scientist and Franklin friend.
Esq'srs: Esquires, i.e., gentlemen of society.

Mourners,

Consisting of the family of the deceased — with a number
of particular friends,

The Secretary and Members of the Supreme Executive Council.
The Speaker & Members of the General Assembly.
Judges of the [State] Supreme Court,
And other Officers of Government.

Supreme Executive Council: executive
branch, of which the president was
equivalent to a state governor.

The Gentlemen of the Bar.

Gentlemen of the Bar: lawyers in the
official state association of lawyers.

The Mayor and Corporation of the city of Philadelphia.

The *Printers* of the city, with their Journeymen and Apprentices.

Groups representing Franklin's
extensive civic involvement.

The Philosophical Society.

Franklin founded the American
Philosophical Society in 1743 and
the College of Philadelphia in 1749.

The College of Physicians.

The Cincinnati.

The Society of the Cincinnati was an
organization of Revolutionary War officers.

The College of Philadelphia.

Sundry other Societies — together with a numerous
and respectable body of Citizens.

Sundry: various.

The concourse of spectators was greater than ever was known on a like occasion. It is computed that not less than twenty thousand persons attended the funeral. The order and silence which prevailed during the Procession deeply evinced the heartfelt sense entertained by all classes of citizens of the *unparalleled virtues, talents, and services* of the deceased.

The Supreme Executive of Pennsylvania have agreed to wear mourning [black armband] for one month in memory of Dr. FRANKLIN.² And,

The Philosophical Society of that State have unanimously voted that an Oration shall be delivered by one of their Members in honor of their illustrious President.

“When an eminent man dies, it is worthwhile to inquire into the causes which conducted him to eminence:” — This inquiry will adorn our next [issue].³

☞ “VERSES Sacred to the Memory of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN,” 21 April 1790__

The Federal Gazette, Philadelphia, 21 April 1790; as printed in the *Independent Gazetteer*, Philadelphia, 24 April 1790, excerpts⁴

SINCE 'tis our lot upon this mortal stage
To combat pain and sickness, grief and age,
Why should we murmur at approaching death?
And why reluctantly resign our breath?
Our sighs, our anguish, Reason disavows,
Since *Franklin* to the King of Terrors bows.
Say, how shall I begin his various praise?
Truth led him thro' all Nature's wond'rous maze.

Earth! to the Sage thy greenest wreaths allow,
Whose wisdom taught the swain to guide the plough
By Reason's laws—to turn the fruitful soil
By useful rules, and scientific toil;
Thy cultivated bosom to adorn
With cooling fruits, and life-sustaining corn,
And prov'd, *Philosophy!* to thy true friends,
The man, who pants for Heav'n, to earth attends.

² The title “doctor” is used as an honorific. Franklin did not possess a medical or academic degree.

³ In its next issue (5 May 1790), the *Centinel* reprinted the article “Dr. Franklin” from the *Gazette of the United States*, 28 April 1790; see p. 5.

⁴ Author unidentified. Text as printed in the *Independent Gazetteer* which varied from and expanded the *Federal Gazette* text (not unusual for the time).

Ocean! his death thy waters should deplore,
 Rolling thy plaintive billows to the shore
 Where *Franklin rests*—Thy powers he understood,
 Fathom'd thy depths, and analyz'd thy flood.
 What tho' he prov'd, that earth thy power restrains,
 And rescues from thy reign her hills and plains,
 Still he deserves thy tribute of applause;
 Thy nature he explain'd, and gave thee laws.

Air! in the praises of the Sage⁵ unite,
 Who saw thy paths with more than human sight.
 Fair science taught her son the winds to know,
 Whence they all come, and whither they must go.

O Electricity! from thee he draws
 A large, a glorious portion of applause.
Lightning! confess the glory of the Sage,
 Who dar'd with all thy terrors to engage.
 Thy nature he explain'd and bade us gaze,
 Fearless, on thy wide-spreading, quiv'ring blaze.
Humanity! this proof of art applaud;
 Ye *Sceptres!* bow to *Franklin's* glorious rod,
 Which draws the furious fluid from its course,
 And bids it spend on earth its baffled⁶ force.

New England! glory in thy foremost son;
 What though on earth his glorious course is run?
 Thy fame and his shall evermore endure;
 He knew thy rights, and made those rights secure;
 Nor thine alone—to him a nation owes
 Conquest in war, and now a blest repose;
 To him, whose wisdom wond'ring *France* obey'd,
 Whilst *Lewis*⁷ glow'd, great *Washington* to aid.

France! when the awful news shall reach thine ear,
 Thy sons in sable garments should appear.
 On *Passy's* plains,⁸ from vulgar eyes retir'd,
 Lov'd by the good, and by the great admir'd,
 Like *Sicily's* enlighten'd son,⁹ serene
 He grasp'd, *O Policy!* thy nice machine,
 And mov'd court, city, camps, and plains, to dare
 In Freedom's cause the glorious toils of war.

France! if to him thou ow'st that glorious light,
 Which sav'd thee from oppression's dreary night,
 Record his name in thy historic page—
 There let the statesman triumph with the Sage;
 And since thy sons Philosophy adore,
 His death with many a tender sigh deplore,
 On whom with wonder all thy Sages gaz'd,
 And whom *Voltaire* with justice would have prais'd.

O Britain! to his memory be just,
 A valiant people wars not with the dust.
 In youth, to thee by sympathy allied,
 He knew thy worth—in age he scorn'd thy pride.
 His various virtues thou shouldst learn to prize;
 Checking thy haughtiness, he made thee wise.

But why should partial praise be his? The mind,
 Which labor'd for the good of all mankind,
 Due homage should receive from pole to pole,
 Theme of each tongue .and pride of ev'ry soul!

...
 Nor be our praises to those arts confin'd
 Which seem above its sphere to raise the mind.
Franklin was born life's various scenes to grace,
 A bright example to man's erring race.
 His splendid worth a willing land confest,
 Whilst every gentler virtue warm'd his breast:
 Ye, whom vile sophistry¹⁰ oft leads astray,
 At Fancy's shrine unworthy vows to pay;
 Who, whilst bold knaves admire, & fools applaud,
 First rail at Nature, and then sneer at GOD
 By *Franklin* taught the husband's worth approve,
 And the soft duties of parental love.
 How great the merit, and the bliss how sweet,
 When in fond union love and science meet.

Thou, *Pennsylvania!* o'er his ashes bend;
 Revere the memory of thy steady friend.
 Thee he adopted with parental love;
 Daily thy blessings to enhance he strove,
 True to Religion, which detests control,
 And guides to Heav'n thro' Freedom's paths the soul,
 He found religious liberty with thee,
 And priz'd thy sons—for they are mild and free.

Then, *Pennsylvania!* every tribute pay;
 Erect the sculptur'd marble o'er his clay—
 Thus youth at equal praise shall boldly aim,
 And catch at *Franklin's* tomb worth's

hallow'd flame.



⁵ *Sage*: wise man, i.e., Franklin.

⁶ *Baffled*: obstructed, hindered, by Franklin's lightning rod.

⁷ *Lewis*: Louis—King Louis XVI of France.

⁸ *Passy*: Paris suburb where Franklin lived.

⁹ *Archimedes*: ancient Greek mathematician and scientist.

¹⁰ *Sophistry*: false, purposely misleading argument.

☞ “Anecdotes & Sketch of the Character of Doctor Franklin,” 24 April 1790__

The Daily Advertiser, New York, 24 April 1790, excerpts¹¹

Dr. Franklin was one of these extraordinary persons who, coming into the world without the advantages of great connections or great estate [wealth], are destined to arrive to the first ranks of eminence in life from their own efforts and the force of their own abilities. . . .

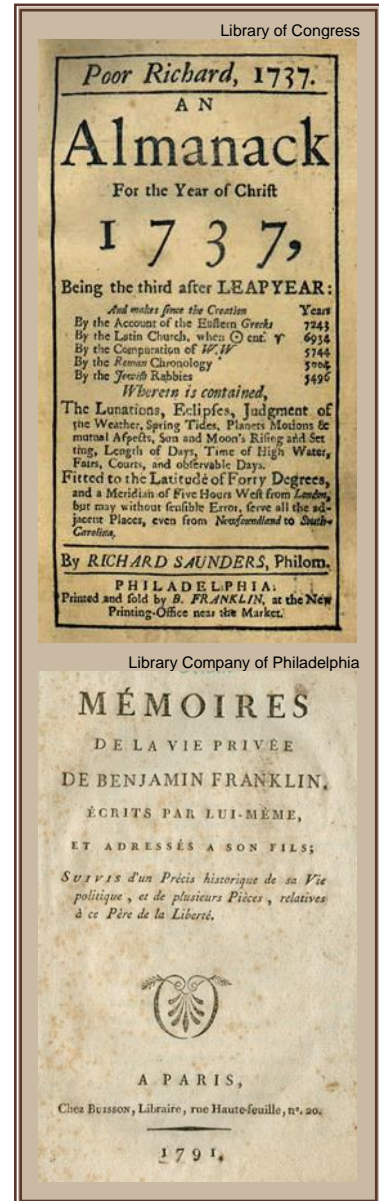
His understanding seems to have been uncommonly clear, solid and mature, as well as the pursuits of the most manly and substantial kind, at a period of life when extravagance, whim, and frivolity have too great an influence upon the minds of young men in general who prefer pleasure to business, and pastime to the improvement of the understanding. . . .

. . . His almanacs, besides the more essential matters,¹² were ever a fund of good natured entertainment to his readers, being interspersed with useful as well as amusing remarks on men, manners, and things — all of a cast truly original and possessing much of that *naivete*, or archness of satire which pleases without offending. . . .

It was his ambition to pursue Nature to its inmost recesses and lay open to the human view the secrets of that stupendous machinery which surrounds us on all sides and of which we ourselves make a part. If he did not wholly succeed in all his attempts, it may be justly said that he has thrown a light upon the natural or material world which may greatly assist future philosophers [scientists] in unfolding the mysterious scene.

His manners were plain and unaffected. He was a lover of good humor, conviviality, and pleasantry in conversation, and not at all of a reserved or an austere demeanor. . . . In religious matters, his opinions are said to have been very liberal and generous, equally an enemy to persecution, fanatical grimace, hypocritical austerity, and strictly one who *look'd thro' nature up to nature's God*.¹³ His numerous acquaintance[s] never suffered from the pride of superiority or the insolence of triumph, and in every respect the goodness of his heart was fully equal to the greatness of his understanding.

No doubt the death of a man of much eminence will draw forth abundance of particulars [remembrances/memorials] relative to him. It is said he has left a manuscript volume giving a full account of the particulars of his life,¹⁴ which, when published, must be equally interesting and in demand in Europe and America, as there will be no room to doubt of the authenticity of what is related.¹⁵ Altho' few can hope to arrive to an equal degree of extensive usefulness in the world, still the life of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ought to teach everyone that it is unworthy of a man to live for himself only, and that in proportion as we lay aside all narrow and selfish considerations, so much the more real service shall we be able to render to mankind, and by that means arrogate [make false claim] to ourselves a greater share of their affection and gratitude.



¹¹ Unidentified author.

¹² The core of all almanacs, including Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1732-1758) is data required for farming, navigation, etc., such as sunrise-sunset tables, tide tables, weather forecasts, farmers' planting times, astronomical events, and monthly calendars.

¹³ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, poem, 1734: "Slave to no sect, who takes no private road / But looks through nature up to nature's God."

¹⁴ Franklin's unfinished autobiography—written in 1771, 1784, and 1788-90—spans his life from childhood to the late 1750s and thus includes no memoirs from the Revolutionary period. It was first published in France (in French) in 1791, and in 1793 in Britain (in English from the French). The version known today as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, with all four parts of his narrative, was first published in 1868 by John Bigelow.

¹⁵ I.e., one can trust that Franklin will not have falsely embellished his experiences and accomplishments.

☞ “Dr. Franklin,” 28 April 1790

The Gazette of the United States, New York, 28 April 1790, excerpts

“When an eminent man dies, it is worthwhile to inquire into the causes which conducted him to eminence.”

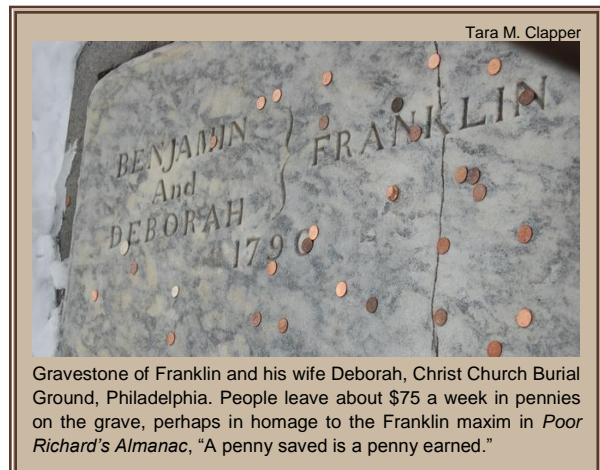
THERE is in the character of every distinguished person something to admire and something to imitate. The incidents that have marked the life of a great man always excite curiosity and often afford improvement. If there are talents we can never expect to equal, if there is a series of good fortune we can never expect to enjoy, we still need not lose the labor of our biographical inquiries. We may probably become acquainted with habits which it may be prudent to adopt, and discover virtues which we cannot fail to applaud. It will be easy for the reader to make a full application of these remarks in his contemplations upon the late celebrated Dr. FRANKLIN. . . .

Original genius was peculiarly his attribute. The native faculties of his mind qualified him to penetrate into every science, and his unremitting diligence left no field of knowledge unexplored. There were no limits to his curiosity. His inquiries were spread over the whole face of nature. But the study of man seemed to be his highest delight, and if his genius had any special bias, it lay in discovering those things that made men wiser and happier. As truth was the sole object of his researches, he was of course no sectary;¹⁶ and as reason was his guide, he embraced no system which that did not authorize. In short, he laid the whole volume of nature open before him, and diligently and faithfully perused it.

Nor were his political attainments less conspicuous than his philosophical. The ancients usually ranked good fortune among those circumstances of life which indicate merit. In this view Dr. Franklin is almost unrivalled, having seldom undertaken more than he accomplished. The world are too well acquainted with the events of his political career to require, at this time, a particular enumeration of them. It may be presumed the historians of the American revolution will exhibit them in proper colors.

If Dr. Franklin did not aspire after the splendor of eloquence, it was only because the demonstrative plainness of his manner was superior to it. Though he neither loved political debate nor excelled in it, he still preserved much influence in public assemblies, and discovered an aptitude in his remarks on all occasions. . . . The simplicity of his style was well adapted to the clearness of his understanding. His conceptions were so bright and perfect that he did not choose to involve them in a cloud of expressions. If he used metaphors, it was to illustrate and not to embellish the truth. A man possessing such a lively imagery of ideas should never affect the arts of a vain rhetorician, whose excellence consists only in a beautiful arrangement of words.

But whatever claims to eminence Dr. Franklin may have as a politician or a scholar, there is no point of light in which his character shines with more lustre than when we view him as a man or a citizen. He was eminently great in common things. Perhaps no man ever existed whose life can with more justice be denominated [called] useful. — Nothing ever passed through his hands without receiving improvement, and no person ever went into his company without gaining wisdom. His sagacity [wisdom] was so sharp, and his science so various [varied] that whatever might be the profession or occupation of those with whom he conversed, he could meet every one upon their own ground. He could enliven every conversation with an anecdote and conclude it with a moral.



¹⁶ Sectary: member of a religious sect, with the connotation of bigotry and intolerance toward others' beliefs.

☞ “Stanzas Occasioned by the Death of Dr. Benjamin Franklin,” 3 May 1790__

[Philip Freneau, “Poet of the Revolution”], *The Pennsylvania Packet*, 3 May 1790

Thus, some tall tree that long has stood
The glory of its native wood,
By storms destroy’d, or length of years,
Demands the tribute of our tears.

The pile, that took long time to raise,
Will sink, ’tis true, by slow decays;
But when its destin’d years are o’er,
We must regret the loss the more.

So long befriended by your art,
Philosopher, we must not part!—
When Monarchs tumble to the ground
Successors easily are found.

But, matchless FRANKLIN, what a few
Can hope to rival such as YOU,
Who seiz’d from Kings their scepter’d pride,
And turn’d the lightning’s darts aside!

☞ Statement to the French National Assembly, 11 June 1790_____

Comte de Mirabeau, French centrist statesman, statement on the announcement of Franklin’s death

Franklin is dead! The genius that freed America and poured a flood of light over Europe has returned to the bosom of the Divinity.

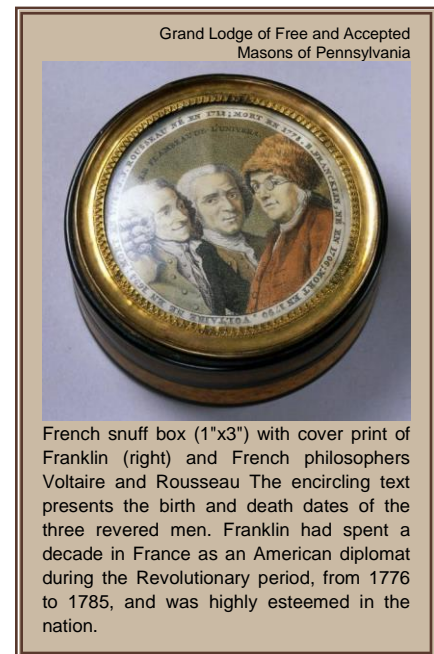
The sage whom two worlds claim as their own, the man for whom the history of science and the history of empires contend with each other, held, without doubt, a high rank in the human race.

Too long have political cabinets taken formal note of the death of those who were great only in their funeral panegyrics [praising speeches]. Too long has the etiquette of [royal] courts prescribed hypocritical mourning. Nations should wear mourning only for their benefactors. The representatives of nations should recommend to their homage none but the heroes of humanity.

The Congress has ordained throughout the United States a mourning of one month for the death of Franklin, and at this moment America is paying this tribute of veneration and gratitude to one of the fathers of her Constitution.

Would it not become us, Gentlemen, to join in this religious act, to bear a part in this homage, rendered in the face of the world both to the rights of man and to the philosopher who has most contributed to extend their sway over the whole earth? Antiquity would have raised altars to this mighty genius who, to the advantage of mankind, compassing in his mind the heavens and the earth, was able to restrain alike thunderbolts and tyrants. Europe, enlightened and free, owes at least a token of remembrance and regret to one of the greatest men who have ever been engaged in the service of philosophy and of liberty.

I propose that it be decreed that the National Assembly, during three days, shall wear mourning for Benjamin Franklin.¹⁷



¹⁷ The U.S. House of Representatives voted unanimously on April 22, 1790, to wear “the customary badge of mourning”—a black crepe armband—for one month. The Senate voted down a similar resolution, and Washington also decided against it for the executive branch, expressing to Jefferson a reluctance to set a precedent for official governmental mourning, and perhaps wishing to avoid the ostentation of royal mourning practices in Europe. “I proposed to General Washington,” Jefferson later wrote to Benjamin Rush, “that the Executive department should wear mourning. He declined it, because he said he should [would] not know where to draw the line, if he once began that ceremony.”