

Benjamin Franklin – Mason

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Many people refer to Brother George Washington as the "Father of our Country," and rightly so. He was truly a great man and our Masonic Brother, but there is another Brother Mason who contributed much to Brother George Washington's success, perhaps more than anyone else. There have been some who have said that George Washington was not very active as a Mason but that is very doubtful, at least to this poor unqualified Mason. This presentation is in no way intended to take anything away from George Washington, but to attempt to enlighten you a little about one that is sometimes not given the credit he rightly deserves. I suppose that many may have an image of Benjamin Franklin as an old man out flying a kite in a thunderstorm or, perhaps, the author of "Poor Richard's Almanac," which he was and he is also credited with discovering that lightning was indeed electricity. But there is so very much more to this most remarkable man, far more than I could hope to give in just a few minutes.

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts on January 17, 1706, the fifteenth child in a family of seventeen. He began his education at the age of 8 but, at just 10 years old, his father removed him from school to help in the family business of making soap and candles. The family was very poor so his help was needed to support this large family. Still, books and reading were his favorite pastime. Finally, his father placed him as an apprentice in a print shop belonging to his older brother, James. He liked printing and learned the trade very quickly. He taught himself arithmetic and spent hours learning to write. At the age of 17, he had a disagreement with his brother so he ran away from home. After some time of traveling on foot and by boat, he found himself in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He soon found a job as a printer. He became such a skilled printer that the Governor of Pennsylvania offered to help him set up his own print shop. The Governor suggested that Franklin go to England to buy presses and type and said he would send him a letter of credit in London.

When Franklin arrived in London, he was almost penniless and the letter from the Governor never came. He found work in a print shop and stayed in London for about 18 months. He lived very frugally and soon, after he returned home, he bought a print shop and later a newspaper called the Pennsylvania Gazette. In 1727 he started the "Juno," a club where men met to talk about philosophical problems. From this, Franklin founded the American Philosophical Society. In 1731 he started the first circulating library in the colonies. He set up the first street cleaning department and the first fire department. He founded the Academy of Philadelphia, which later became the University of Pennsylvania. He began "Poor Richard's Almanac" in 1732 when he was 26 years old and continued to publish it for some 25 years, using the name of Richard Saunders who said, "He was poor but his wife was proud." Franklin's sense of humor was always in evidence. He said, "Poor Richard liked pudding while he lived better than praise after he was dead." He is said to have invented the hoax. He wrote many wise and humorous sayings that are still around today; some were Proverbs just reworded:

"Fish and visitors stink after 3 days."

"He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas."

"Great talkers, little doers."

"Eat to live and not live to eat."

"What is serving God? `Tis doing good to Man." (Masonic?)

In 1737 Franklin was appointed clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly and in 1751 he became a member. Also in 1737 he was made Postmaster of Philadelphia and in 1753 he was appointed one of two deputy Postmaster Generals of all the colonies. Franklin reorganized the postal system so that it paid all its own expenses. (We could sure use him today). He taught himself to read several foreign languages and he learned to play a number of different musical instruments. He was most interested in science, especially the science of electricity. He invented the lightning rod and the Franklin Stove. He coined such words as battery, armature, condenser, and some others still in use today.

In 1757 he was sent to England to help settle a quarrel between the Pennsylvania Assembly and the English landowners that still owned much of the land in Pennsylvania. Franklin arranged a compromise. This proved to be only the beginning of his efforts to win fair treatment for the colonies. Later he became the agent for Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Georgia, as well as Pennsylvania. Although he defended the rights of the colonies, the English liked Franklin and he respected the English. His work in England became known throughout Europe. He was awarded a Doctorate Degree by Oxford University, one of many he would eventually receive. He stayed in England for most of 15 years but, after he had persuaded the English to repeal the Stamp Act, they invoked the Townsend Acts. With all this taxation without any say by the colonists, Franklin could see the Revolution on the horizon so in 1775 he sailed for home. By this time Franklin was almost 70 years old.

He began working with the Second Continental Congress that was meeting in Philadelphia to decide how the Colonies should deal with England. He drew up a plan to unite the Colonies and then went to Canada to ask the Canadians to join the rebellion, but this failed. When he returned to Philadelphia, he was put on the committee to write the Declaration of Independence. In 1776 he was sent to France to get French help of money, supplies and soldiers. While in France he made many friends for himself and for his country. The French loved his simplicity, his humor, and his wisdom. He remained in France throughout the Revolution and was able to gain the needed assistance from the French in the way of arms and financial aid, as well as military aid. All in all, the amount of help from France amounted to some \$30,000,000, a tremendous sum in those days. Without this help, General Washington would probably not have been successful in the fight against the British.

Franklin returned to Philadelphia in 1785 and was made the head (Governor) of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. When the Constitutional Convention met in 1787 to draw up plans for a new form of government, Franklin was one of its members. He was instrumental in holding the Convention together when some of its members became

discouraged and wanted to return home. Even more importantly, he helped in getting the members to agree and accept the final plan. Franklin was the only man to sign the four documents most important in the founding of the United States which were: "The Declaration of Independence" (1776), "The Treaty of Alliance with France" (1778), "The Treaty of Paris" (1783), and the United States Constitution (1787). He died on April 17, 1790, almost 1 year after George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the new country, The United States.

Franklin's history as a Mason includes the following. He was made a Mason in St. John's Lodge, Philadelphia, PA in 1732, the year George Washington was born. Two years later he wrote to M. W. Henry Price, newly appointed Grand Master of Masons in Boston, asking for a charter for a Grand Lodge in Pennsylvania. This was granted with Benjamin Franklin being the first Grand Master of Pennsylvania at age 28.

When he was first sent to France to obtain financial aid for his fledging new Nation, he met with little assistance. Finally he joined the French Lodge of the Nine Sisters, among whose members were some of the most influential men of France. Because of Franklin's writings, the people began to recognize the struggle in America and the kind of men who were fighting for their liberty. Franklin was elected Master of that Lodge at a time when it had begun to divide and disintegrate, but through his guidance, peace was restored and the lodge reunited stronger than ever. Even the King of France, who was a member of another lodge, expressed admiration for him.

It was through the great respect for him around the French Court that the Marquis de Lafayette became interested in him and became more interested in the American struggle. Lafayette secured Franklin's permission to come to America on a ship provided and equipped at his own expense. He brought a letter of introduction from Franklin to George Washington and, after some difficulty, was made a Brigadier General in the American Army at the age of only 19! He served in our army without any pay and often used his own fortune to pay for needed supplies. He won a place in the history of America

and, when he reached the proper age, became a Brother Mason being forever revered by his brethren. Among other famous men who became members of the Lodge of Nine Sisters were John Paul Jones, our first Naval Commander and it has been said that when Thomas Jefferson went to France to assist Franklin, he too became a member. This apparently was never documented. Also, while Franklin was Master, Voltaire was initiated.

When Franklin left France to return home in 1785, it was like a triumphant tour. The King of France sent him a special letter. The road was lined with cheering admirers who formed a long procession to escort him along the way. Wherever he stopped, every possible honor was accorded by local dignitaries, especially wherever there was a local Masonic Lodge, for he had received many Masonic honors in France. Thomas Jefferson was sent to France to assist Franklin and, when Franklin left to return home, Jefferson was appointed the plenipotentiary.

The French Count de Vergennes said to Jefferson, "So you come to replace Dr. Franklin?"

Jefferson replied, "I succeed him, sir, no one can replace him."

Franklin died on April 17, 1790 and was buried in the corner wail of the Quaker Church in Philadelphia. A Philadelphia newspaper reporter wrote, "Philadelphia never displayed a scene of greater grandeur than was exhibited at his funeral." His body was attended to the grave by 30 clergymen and men of all ranks and professions, arranged in greatest order. The National Assembly of France decreed a general mourning of 3 days. Even the English Government recognized his death with a period of respect. The Lodge of Nine Sisters in Paris held Franklin in such high esteem they had a medal made in honor of their distinguished member and Past Grand Master. This Medal is now held by the Provincial Lodge of Mecklenburg, France.

Following is the text of a letter written to Franklin by the King of France:

"If to be venerated for benevolence, if to be admired for talents, if to be esteemed for patriotism, if to be loved for philanthropy can gratify the human mind, you must have the pleasing consolation to know that you have not lived in vain.

And I flatter myself that it will not be ranked among the least grateful (sic) occurrences of your life to be assured, that as long as I retain my memory, you will be recollected with respect, veneration and affection by your sincere friend."

My Brethren, this has been an attempt to give you a little insight into the life and work of a truly great American and a truly great Freemason, Most Worshipful Benjamin Franklin.

References used:

- Encyclopedia Britannica
- The Maryland Master Mason Handbook (1976 Edition)
- Poor Richard's Almanac.