

University of Pennsylvania

Benjamin Franklin and His World

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"All that has happened to you is also connected with the detail of the manners and situation of a rising people..."

--Benjamin Vaughan to Benjamin Franklin
January 31, 1783

Benjamin Franklin was a preternaturally talented Renaissance man. He was a world-famous scientist whose insights into electricity are still relevant today; a first-class printer who helped define and expand the world of letters; North America's leading journalist and essayist; and a skilled politician and diplomat. His tremendous legacy of political, cultural, and civic organizations continues to influence his city and his country. His *Autobiography* is an essential feature of the American literary canon.

But Benjamin Franklin's life also raises questions for students who question how much his legacy is one they should follow: He owned slaves and profited from the sale of enslaved persons. He "borrowed" and reworked many of his most famous phrases. He published personal letters that helped instigate the Revolution. And there are many other controversial practices.

In Benjamin Franklin's life we can examine all of the great opportunities, advances and contradictions of eighteenth-century America.

Through examining Franklin's life, we will consider weighty questions in history, ethics, and science. To what extent do 18th century norms qualify or excuse what we consider moral failings? How are we to evaluate moral growth, that is repudiation of past moral errors? How are we to evaluate the morality of such a life and person?

This course will explore the life and ethos of Benjamin Franklin by studying the history of the 18th century, the details of his life, and several major ethical issues he confronted. Over the course, students will follow Franklin's own advice for establishing order in life. We will keep a detailed moral diary. We will, briefly, emulate the diet he adopted as a young adult.

The course will encourage students to examine the historical period in question from a variety of vantage points, and using that examination to critically analyze and evaluate our own practices.

Class Structure

This course will be divided in to four sections.

Unit 1: 18th Century Background

We will review the history of 18th Century colonial America, including:

- Life and politics of the American Colonies, and their relationship to England and Europe
- Civic life and business in Boston, Philadelphia, and London
- The road to revolution, from the French-Indian War through American Independence
- The Confederation and Constitutional Period

Unit 2: Franklin's Life, Work, and Ideas

We will explore Franklin's life, including his evolution as a writer, his experiences in London, and his becoming a successful printer. We will also explore his work upon retiring from printing—his work as a scientist, civic leader, politician and diplomat.

In this section we will read and critically examine his autobiography and other writings. We will discuss specific contributions he made, including:

- His work as a printer and journalist
- His role in starting civic institutions, and how he formed them
- His scientific discoveries and accolades
- His practical inventions and philosophy

Unit 3: Benjamin Franklin's Moral Challenges

Franklin's life is a window in to many moral questions of the 18th century—and today. Having learned about the life and times of Benjamin Franklin, we will examine several ethical challenges Franklin either confronted or evaded. In particular, we will discuss:

- His evolving view of slavery—from owning slaves to becoming President of the Society for the Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage.
- The ways he borrowed from other writers, and assess whether this constitutes plagiarism.
- His role in publicly revealing personal letters of Thomas Hutchinson, Governor of Massachusetts, a catalyzing event in the American Revolution.
- His own view of his sexual advances while a young man in London.
- His view of Native Americans.

Unit 4: How Should we Evaluate Figures from the Past including Benjamin Franklin

Franklin was great—at least a world leading printer, journalist, propagandist, writer, scientist, inventor, and diplomat. But he was also not perfect. But one of his characteristics is his ability to grow. How do we assess such as man? Do we dismiss him because he was a slave holder? Do we forgive him because he ended up appearing to reject slavery but signing onto the 3/5s compromise? Do we condemn him as a plagiarist? Do we condemn his sharing of personal correspondence? How do we evaluate how he treated his family—wife and son born of wedlock?

Field Trips

Depending on availability, this course will include in person or virtual tours of various Philadelphia Franklin establishments—such as his home.

Assignments and Grading

Reflection papers (20% of overall grade)

- 4 brief essays, in which students reflect on assigned readings and the issues they raise

Class activities (20% of overall grade)

- Keeping a moral diary (10%)
- Class participation (10%)

Papers (60% of overall grade)

- 2 papers (5-7 pages in length)

Course Materials

To the extent possible, all course readings will be posted on Canvas. However, this course relies heavily on several books, which students are recommended to purchase. You must obtain copies of the bolded books. (They make a nice Franklin library.)

- **The Library of America, *Franklin***
- **One of the major Franklin biographies**—eg H.A. Brands, Walter Isaacson, Lemay,
- Nick Bunker, *Young Benjamin Franklin*
- John M. Murrin, *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of The American People*

- **Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic***
- **Joyce Chapin (editor), *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography* (Norton edition)**
- **Sheila Skemp, *The Making of a Patriot: Benjamin Franklin at the Cockpit***
- **Page Talbott (ed.) *Benjamin Franklin, In search of a Better World***