

BEN FRANKLIN: THE ORIGINAL AMERICAN

KITE & KEY
MEDIA

[SCRIPT]

America's Founding Fathers. One of the most eclectic groups of individuals ever brought together in a common cause.

So, what happens when you combine a military commander, a literary genius, a path-breaking scientist, a visionary philosopher, a seasoned diplomat, and a universally admired statesman?

Well ... you get Benjamin Franklin. 'Cause this dude did all of those things.

Strap in. 'Cause this is a wild story – that's just as much about us as about him.

[OPENING SEQUENCE]

It's a real testimony to America's obsession with our Founding Fathers that nearly 250 years later ... we're still fixated on these guys. Alexander Hamilton gets the biggest Broadway show of all time. John Adams gets a best-selling book and an HBO series. George Washington gets ... ok, for real though, does anyone know what this is supposed to be?



OK, it's not that complicated: The Washington Monument is an obelisk of the kind found in ancient Egypt. In fact, at 555 feet, it's the tallest obelisk in the world. But that wasn't always the plan. The original design called for a rotunda and a statue of George Washington in a chariot. That wasn't the only front on which plans changed. While proposals for the monument began as early as 1833, the cornerstone wasn't laid until 1848 and construction of the monument (which at one point was suspended for 22 years) wasn't completed until 1885.

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Now, those guys definitely deserve the attention, but let us put in a word for the man who gave us our name here at Kite & Key...

[Yeah, think about it for a second. Ok, got it? Good. Now you can stop sending us emails about it.]

That's right, our guy: Benjamin Franklin. Now, we're not gonna tell you that he's the *greatest* American ever — **everyone knows that's Dolly Parton** — but he may just have been the most *American* American ever.

How do we know Dolly Parton is really that beloved? Part of the answer lies with the [Q Score](#), a famous tool of market analysis that rates celebrities both by how well-known they are and how popular they are with the public. Though Q Score results are not generally shared with the public, a 2022 [Washington Post](#) story revealed that Parton was amongst the most popular female celebrities, alongside the likes of Julia Roberts, Meryl Streep, Viola Davis, and Michelle Obama. The most beloved female celebrity? Sandra Bullock.



Here's what we mean: Chances are that almost every trait you think of as part of our national character ... is something you can find in the life of Benjamin Franklin.

America is a country where you can rise from nothing to achieve great things, right? Well, that describes Ben pretty well.



"FRANKLIN THE PRINTER"

CHARLES MILLS. C. 1900

One of 17 *children*,ⁱ his formal education only went up to the age of 10ⁱⁱ — although people ended up calling him *Dr. Franklin*, because he nevertheless got an honorary doctorate from Oxford, in addition to honorary degrees from Yale and Harvard.ⁱⁱⁱ And at 17, he got his start when he ran away from Boston — violating an employment contract with his own brother — to start a new life in Philadelphia.^{iv}

So yeah, he started his career as a fugitive ... also pretty American.

And in short order he turned into a big success. Between his newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and his best-selling book series, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Franklin did so well as a publisher that **he was able to retire by the age of 42.**^v

Now, you know what comes next...

...42 and retired in Philly? **Jersey Shore!**



The Jersey Shore was primarily known as a local vacation destination in the mid-Atlantic before the 2009 debut of the MTV reality show of the same name. Locals weren't exactly thrilled with the national spotlight. Many critics complained that the show cast Italian-Americans in a bad light ... and that most of the cast members weren't even from New Jersey. Among the show's detractors: then New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who vetoed a production tax credit for the show on the grounds that it did "nothing more than perpetuate misconceptions about the State and its citizens."

...Unless you're Ben, because another way he was quintessentially American is that he was restless ... and always looking for the next thing to build.

And man, did he ever build them.

The first lending library in America? He starts it.^{vi} The country's first volunteer firefighting company? He starts it.^{vii} The University of Pennsylvania? He starts it – and serves at its first president.^{viii} He helps charter the nation's first hospital.^{ix} **And he even runs the colonies' postal service – you're gonna want to sit down for this one – at a profit.**^{x xi} !

Today's postmasters could stand to learn a lesson or two from Dr. Franklin. In 2021, the U.S. Postal Service reported operating at a nearly \$5 billion loss – a sum that had actually declined from the year before, when it lost over \$9 billion. Those continued operating deficits – combined with unfunded pension and health care obligations – left the USPS deep in debt. In 2021, taxpayers assumed part of the burden when Congress passed a \$107 billion bailout to keep the agency afloat.



Now, as this list might suggest, a lot of this came from the fact that Ben Franklin had a very American obsession with self-improvement. In fact, his autobiography is practically the nation's first self-help book, providing detailed formulas for

how to be a better, more disciplined person. And this is how insane this gets: We're not joking, Benjamin Franklin invented the pro-and-con list.^{xii}

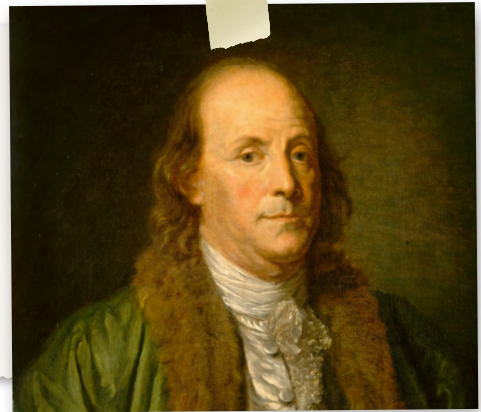
Like to see Alexander Hamilton do that.

And it was this fascination with testing out all his options that also made Franklin one of the great scientific thinkers of his day. You already know about the kite and the key – more on that in a minute – and you might know that he invented bifocals, the Franklin stove, and the lightning rod.^{xiii} But did you know that that he also was one of the first proponents of inoculations against disease,^{xiv} the first person to chart the Gulf Stream,^{xv} and even one of the first to identify what we now know as the Placebo Effect?^{xvi} I mean, it's impressive ... and borderline annoying?

And this is before we get to all the quintessentially American stuff that you probably already know him for: speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, Governor of Pennsylvania, member of the committee that drafts the Declaration of Independence, Ambassador to France who secures their support for the American Revolution, and the oldest member of the Constitutional Convention.^{xvii}

Which is not to mention leading troops during the French and Indian War,^{xviii} calling for the abolition of slavery,^{xix} and coming up with the most iconic symbol of the American Revolution.^{xx}

Now a largely forgotten chapter of his life, in 1756 Franklin was placed in charge of a military unit that erected a defensive fort at the site of present day Weissport, Pennsylvania to protect the community and halt the advance of French and Indian forces towards the Atlantic. Even more improbable: Pennsylvania's governor feared that Franklin might use the role to commandeer the militia, march into Philadelphia, and seize control of the colonial government. In reality, Franklin's tenure lasted only about a month, and he shortly thereafter departed for England to represent the colonial government in London.



Because, of course. Why wouldn't he have?

Now, when someone's life is that full it probably makes sense that not every story about them is going to be totally airtight. It's not actually true, for instance, that Franklin discovered electricity with a kite and a key. He just proved that lightning was a *form of* electricity.^{xxi}

Not that that's super-easy, by the way. A Russian physicist trying to replicate the results a year later – without the proper grounding – managed to kill himself.^{xxii}

It's also not true that Franklin came up with the idea of Daylight Saving Time,^{xxiii} not true that he wanted the turkey to be the national bird,^{xxiv} and he said that wine is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy, not beer.^{xxv} Which is one area where he could've been a slightly better American.

Franklin's role in Daylight Saving Time is a widely held misconception (unhelpfully propagated in pop culture by films like National Treasure). The confusion stems from a satirical letter Franklin wrote in the French press in 1784 ... the point of which was mainly to make fun of the French people for sleeping so late.



But here's the thing: Benjamin Franklin's life was so crazy that any story about him sounds plausible. Because the following are things he really did do: He did electrocute turkeys, because he thought it made the meat more tender.^{xxvi} He did introduce tofu to Americans.^{xxvii} And he did leave money in his will for the cities of Boston and Philadelphia – on the condition they couldn't use it for 200 years.^{xxviii} That's right – he was giving millions of dollars to charity in the 1990s.

Oh, there's also one other one we should mention: He ... may have killed Beethoven.^{xxix} Franklin invented the **armonica**, a musical instrument played by applying wet fingers to glass. And Beethoven had one. And it turns out that a lot of them were made with significant amounts of lead. And it turns out Beethoven probably had lead poisoning.

But, look it's not very likely! And honestly ... if anyone had ever done enough to work off that debt...

All of which is to say that Ben Franklin was quintessentially American. Always striving, always on to the next thing, always believing that tomorrow could be better than today. And there's a lot of inspiration to be found there.



ARMONICA

So, yes, the father of our country was a strapping military man who carried himself with grace and dignity. The mind behind the Declaration of Independence belonged to a country gentleman with the heart of a poet. But the real seeds of our national character ... go back to a fat dude with a mullet who just kinda did a little bit of everything. Which is about as American as it gets.

God, is this a great country or what?

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