

**CHESS AND BENJAMIN FRANKLIN-HIS PIONEERING CONTRIBUTIONS**  
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“The Games of Chess is not merely an idle amusement; several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired and strengthened by it, so as to become habits ready on all occasions;” - Benjamin Franklin, “The Morals of Chess,” published in 1786.

In 1999, Benjamin Franklin was inducted into the US Chess Hall of Fame. He joined 28 others among the greatest players, writers, and leaders in American chess as members of that Hall, which is now housed in a magnificent building in Miami, Florida.

What did Franklin do to justify that very rare honor, which was granted by the US Chess Federation and the US Chess Trust? In fact, Franklin, among his many other pioneering achievements in many fields, has long been recognized as one of the earliest writers, popularizers, and players of chess in America.

**FRANKLIN WAS AMONG THE FIRST AMERICAN CHESS PLAYERS:** Among his many other “firsts,” Benjamin Franklin is perhaps the earliest chess player in the future United States who can be identified by name! He was playing chess at least by around 1733, as the following passage in his autobiography demonstrates:

” I had begun in 1733 to study languages. I soon made myself so much a master of the French as to be able to read the Books with ease. I then undertook the Italian. An acquaintance who was also learning it, used often to tempt me to play Chess with him. Finding this took up too much of the Time I had to spare for study, I at length refused to play any more, unless on this condition, that the victor in every Game, should have the Right to impose a Task, either in parts of the Grammar to be got by heart, or in Translation, &c, which task the vanquish’d was to perform upon honor before our next Meeting. As we played pretty equally we thus beat one another into that Language.” (1, p.30)

Rev. Louis Rou, a Huguenot minister in New York City, was also documented as playing chess around 1734. Since Franklin’s “acquaintance” with whom he played around 1733 was not named, Franklin and Rou are apparently the first chess players in the future United States who can be definitely identified by name. (2)

The absence of earlier known chess players in the future United States before 1733 is surprising. The Spanish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were avid chess players. Franklin himself credited the Spanish with being the first chess players in the New World, when he noted in “The Morals of Chess” that “The Spaniards have spread it over their part of America, and it begins lately to make its appearance in these northern states.” The English also played: Queen Elizabeth I and King Charles I both enjoyed chess, and Shakespeare mentioned the game at least once in his plays (3). In 1533, Inca Chief Atahualpa was taught chess by his Spanish captors, becoming proficient at the game shortly before being executed by his Spanish opponents (4). But before Franklin’s reference to playing around 1733, exactly 200 years after Atahualpa, there is no known mention of any other American chess players who can be identified by name.

Incidentally, Franklin's interest in other games apparently preceded his interest in chess. On July 29, 1726, Franklin noted in his journal: "All this afternoon I spent agreeably enough at the draftboard. It is a game I much delight in; but it requires a clear head, and undisturbed; and the persons playing, if they would play well, ought not much to regard the *consequence* of the game, for that diverts and makes the player liable to make many false open moves; and I will venture to lay it down for an infallible rule, that, if two persons *equal* in judgment play for a considerable sum, he that loves money most shall lose; his anxiety for the success of the game confounds him. Courage is almost as requisite for the good conduct of this game as in a real battle; for, if he imagines himself opposed by one that is much his superior in skill, his mind is so intent on the defensive part, that an advantage passes unobserved." (1, pp. 29-30)

It is interesting to compare the above journal entry to his later essay "The Morals of Chess." There is some similarity of ideas, particularly in the tendency to minimize the importance of the outcome of a game as opposed to playing it in an ethical and enjoyable manner. In both writings, Franklin also clearly dislikes the idea of playing for money, and both writings employ an analogy with war.

### **WAS HE THE FIRST WRITER ON CHESS IN THE NEW WORLD?**

Until recently, Franklin was credited with being the first person in the New World to publish anything about chess, through his essay "The Morals of Chess," which appeared in *The Columbian Magazine* in 1786. "The Morals of Chess" was typical of Franklin, in that it tied the game of chess to the teaching of virtuous habits, "useful in course of human life", including foresight, circumspection, and caution.

"The Morals of Chess" became one of the most famous pieces on chess ever published. It has been translated into a number of languages, and in 1791 it appeared in the first chess-related book ever to appear in Russia.

However, in 2003 it was determined that the "Morals of Chess" was not the first American publication on chess after all. David Shields, Professor of English at the Citadel, discovered that Rev. Lewis Rou, (referenced above as one of the first American players) published a poem about New York chess players in 1744. This long-lost publication was discovered in the Library of Edinburgh in Scotland. Shields informed Professor Gilbert Gigliotti, Professor and Chairman of the Department of English at Central Connecticut University, and he contacted this author. The discovery was then published in *Chess Life*, the magazine of the US Chess Federation. (5)

Thanks to this discovery, it seems that Rev. Rou now has replaced Franklin with the distinction of having authored the first American publication on chess. Rev. Rou's poem, which like Franklin's later writing also had a moralistic theme centered on chess, named eight other early players of the game in the New York coffeehouse where Rev. Rou played chess. The Rou poem was apparently written around 1735, so Franklin and Rou retain the distinction of being the two earliest-named players in the future United States.

Franklin and Rou are also rivals for the honor of writing the earliest-known unpublished piece about chess. In 1734, Rev. Rou wrote an essay on chess in response to a political article that had used chess in a metaphorical sense. That essay was apparently never published, but it was seen and described by Daniel Willard Fiske in 1859. (2)

However, Franklin seems to have outlined the ideas in his later “Morals of Chess” in 1732. The Commonplace book that Franklin kept from 1730-1738 has a sketchy outline of ideas that appear to be an anticipation of the ideas in the “Morals of Chess.” This outline is found between a fictitious letter for the Gazette and a set of private proposals and queries to be asked the Junto, dating from June 1732. The outline is therefore assumed to have been written around that date. It reads as follows:

“ The Antiquity and universality of it Has been practis’d by the most famous Men  
Usefulness. Wrestling of Bodies strengthen them, this a W of minds  
In the Conduct of Life  
Caution & Circumspection  
Foresight in looking for Advants and discovering Disadvts  
Consideration of Consequences  
It teaches the Consequences of Rashness, of Inattention to our Affairs, of Neglect of  
Circumspection-tis a constant Lesson of Morality-Nothing shows so much as the” [ The  
manuscript breaks off here.] (6)

Was the foregoing outline about chess? It does not say, though it is probably about a game because of the wrestling analogy. It contains references to foresight, circumspection, and caution, the same three traits that the “Morals of Chess” later credited chess with improving. The “Morals of Chess” also used the phrase “consequences of rashness” found in the outline. Since Franklin was known to be playing chess by 1733, this outline, apparently written in 1732, may be the first brief statement of ideas in the “The Morals of Chess” published decades later. If it is such, this might arguably give Franklin primacy over Rev. Rou as the first to write about chess in the future United States, and also as the first chess player who can be named in the future US.

## **THE MYSTERY OF THE REFERENCE IN 1756**

In 1756, a book on draughts was published in London that had a dedication with a remarkable resemblance to Franklin’s “Morals of Chess” that appeared thirty years later. The book was titled *An Introduction to the game of Draughts* and was written by William Payne. The book’s dedication to the Earl of Rochford includes the following:

“Had I considered this little volume as having no purpose beyond that of teaching a game, I should indeed have left it to take its fate without a patron. Triflers may find or make anything a trifle; but since it is the great characteristic of a wise man to see events in their causes, to obviate consequences, and ascertain contingencies, your Lordship will think nothing a trifle by which the mind is inured to caution, foresight, and circumspection. The same skill, and often the same degree of skill, is exerted in great and little things, and your Lordship may sometimes at a harmless game, exercise those abilities which have been so happily employed in the service of your country.” (7)

Note the reference to “caution, foresight, and circumspection” as qualities which draughts might improve in a person’s mind! This seemed to be a precise anticipation of “The Morals of Chess” which stated that chess improves those same qualities, using the same terms. When this author first read the above dedication, he assumed that Franklin, who arrived in England not long after the publication of Payne’s book, may have seen it and used those ideas 30 years later. However, the outline quoted above from Franklin’s Commonplace Book of 1732 also includes references to caution, foresight, and circumspection, apparently referring to chess.

Thus, the mystery remains: How did the 1756 book on draughts, published in England, come to contain such a duplication of Franklin’s main concepts? (Interestingly, some believe that the dedication may have been written by Dr. Samuel Johnson, but to this writer’s knowledge clear proof has not been found for such an assumption.)

## **DIPLOMACY THROUGH CHESS**

Franklin was brought into peace negotiations with Rear Admiral Viscount Howe thanks to chess. In late 1774, although he had not yet met Lord Howe, Franklin received an invitation to play chess with the gentleman’s sister. Franklin later wrote that after playing a few games with her, he decided to meet Lord Howe at her house to avoid “speculation,” as “it was known we played together at chess.” In fact it appears that the games of chess had been a lure intended to bring Franklin into discussions with Lord Howe, as she used the playing sessions as an excuse to effect an introduction between the two for that purpose. (8)

## **FRANKLIN’S INTEREST IN CHESS:**

Franklin’s strong interest in chess was noted by his contemporaries. Le Roy Chaumont’s grandson Vincent, referring to chess, maintained that Franklin’s “passion for late-night games was checked only by his supply of candles, and that...in the house of a French minister, Franklin refused to receive an important dispatch from Congress until after a match had finished.” (9)

In a letter from John Foxcroft, dated January 14, 1771, he noted that his brother would like to travel with Franklin, adding that “I believe he will be able to afford you some small amusement at that Noble Game of chess, which you so deservedly prefer before all others.” (10)

## **HOW GOOD A PLAYER WAS HE?**

Intelligent people do not always play chess well, since skill depends more on one’s playing experience against strong opponents than on one’s IQ. Unfortunately, none of Franklin’s many chess games seem to have been recorded for posterity, and we know almost nothing about even the results of those games.

We can make a rough, educated guess about Franklin's playing skill, however, based on the limited information we have. It seems likely that he was an above-average player, but not at the level of the top players of his day. Franklin was sufficiently acquainted with chess literature of that day to have known something of the theory of the game. In 1757, he wrote a letter in which he noted that he had "two or three" books on chess. At that time, there were only a few books on chess in print, (in contrast to the thousands of titles today), and they appeared in very small editions. **(11)**

Furthermore, Franklin was noted to have played at the Café de La Regence in Paris, where some of the strongest players in the world met to play. No results of any of his games there are known, but his willingness to play in that famous location suggests that he was of reasonable skill.

Franklin also played against the famous "Turk" chess automaton. **(12)** The "Turk" was one of the most famous illusions in history. It was presented as an "automaton," a chess-playing machine, in the form of a life-size figure of a man in front of a chessboard. Of course, no "thinking" machine was possible with the technology of the day, and learned persons like Franklin knew that. However, the illusion was so carefully designed that nobody could see the hidden player inside even when it was apparently opened for view. Also, nobody could guess how the opponent's moves were communicated to a hidden player inside, or to any player who might have operated the machine's arm by which it made its moves. (It was later revealed that the moves were communicated to the hidden player by magnets at the base of the visible board, and that clever optical illusions prevented the player from being seen when the insides of the "Turk" were apparently opened for viewing.)

On May 28, 1783, Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen, creator of the automaton, wrote as follows to Franklin: "If I have not, immediately upon my return from Versailles, renewed my request that you will be present at a performance of my automaton chess player, it was only to gain a few days in which I might make some progress in another very interesting machine, upon which I have been employed and which I wish you to see at the same time. Please sir, have the kindness to inform me of the day and hour when I shall have the honor of receiving you in my rooms." **(12, pp. 28-29, 238)** Franklin's grandson later stated that Franklin enjoyed his game with the automaton and was pleased with it. Franklin kept a copy of a book, published a year after Franklin's game with it, which theorized about the automaton's workings. **(12, p. 29)**

Unfortunately, nothing is known of the moves or the result of the game Franklin played against it, although if Franklin had won or drawn the result would have presumably been reported. The "Turk" defeated everyone except the handful of top players of that day, so it is reasonable to suppose that Franklin was not among that very top rank of players.

Further clues to Franklin's skill can be found in references made by his contemporaries. Lord Howe's sister, mentioned above in the section on "Diplomacy and chess" reportedly made her challenge to Franklin "fancying she could beat me" according to Franklin's account. **(13)** However, Franklin wrote in 1757 that "Honest David Martin, Rector of our Academy, my principal Antagonist at Chess, is dead, and the few remaining players here are very indifferent..." **(1, p.30)** These comments imply that only David Martin among local players could play him a challenging game. Franklin himself in his autobiography said that he

and his friend played about equally in 1733. However, in 1778 there was a note that two persons “were taking chess lessons to be worthier opponents” for him. (14) All this suggests that Franklin was above average, but not of Master strength by modern standards.

**SUMMARY:** Today there are an estimated 30,000,000 chess players in the United States, so it is difficult to imagine the time when only a handful of Americans played the game. Yet Benjamin Franklin, among his many other historic “firsts,” has a well-documented and secure place as one of the earliest known players and writers of chess in the future United States. It is fitting that that great intellect was so quick to grasp the value of the intellectual sport of chess, and all American chess players owe him a debt.

## REFERENCES

**All references to *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* given in this list refer to the multi-volume series produced at Yale in conjunction with the American Philosophical Society. Details can be found at [www.yale.edu/franklinpapers](http://www.yale.edu/franklinpapers)**

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12. Levitt, Gerald M. *The Turk, Chess Automaton* McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers Jefferson, North Carolina and London. 2000. pp. 27-29, 236, and 238

13. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* Vol. 21, p. 550

14. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* Vol. 27, p.lxv

### **APPENDIX: *The “Morals of Chess” by Benjamin Franklin***

Following is the text of Franklin’s famous essay, submitted by Franklin himself to the *Columbian Magazine*, which published it in the December 1786 issue. It is taken from the Hagedorn reference given as (1) in the reference list of this paper. There was a slightly different version of it, with various minor wording changes, published in book form the following year. There are references to a 1779 and 1780 printing of the essay, but to this writer’s knowledge no copy of either such supposed printing has been located.

To the Editor of The Columbian Magazine

Sir,

Playing at Chess, is the most ancient and the most universal game known among men; for its original is beyond the memory of history, and it has, for numberless ages, been the amusement of all the civilized nations of Asia, the Persians, the Indians, and the Chinese. Europe has had it above 1000 years; the Spaniards have spread it over their part of America, and it begins lately to make its appearance in these northern states. It is so interesting in itself, as not to need the view of gain to induce engaging in it; and thence it is never played for money. Those, therefore, who have leisure for such diversions, cannot find one that is more *innocent*; and the following piece, written with a view to correct ( among a few young friends) some little improprieties in the practice of it, shows at the same time that it may, in its effects on the mind, be not merely *innocent*, but *advantageous*, to the vanquished as well as to the victor.

#### The Morals of Chess

The game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement. Several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired or strengthened by it, so as to become habits, ready on all occasions. For life is a kind of chess, in which we have often points to gain, and competitors or adversaries to contend with, and in which there is a vast variety of good and ill events, that are, in some degree, the effects of prudence or the want of it. By playing at chess, then, we may learn:

1. *Foresight*, which looks a little into futurity, and considers the consequences that may attend to an action: for it is continually occurring to the player, “If I move this piece, what will be the advantages of my new situation? What use can my adversary make of it to annoy me? What other moves can I make to support it, and to defend myself from his attacks? “

2. *Circumspection*, which surveys the whole chess-board, or scene of action, the relations of the several pieces and situations, the dangers they are respectively exposed to, the several

possibilities of their aiding each other; the probabilities that the adversary may make this or that move, and attack this or the other piece; and what different means can be used to avoid his stroke, or turn its consequences against him.

3. *Caution*, not to make our moves too hastily. This habit is best acquired by observing strictly the laws of the game, such as, *If you touch a piece, you must move it somewhere; if you set it down, you must let it stand*. And it is therefore best that these rules should be observed, as the game thereby becomes more the image of human life, and particularly of war; in which, if you have incautiously put yourself into a bad and dangerous position, you cannot obtain your enemy's leave to withdraw your troops, and place them more securely; but you must abide by all the consequences of your rashness.

And lastly, we learn by chess the habit of *not being discouraged* by *present* bad appearances in the state of our affairs, the habit of *hoping for a favorable change*, and that of *persevering in the search of resources*. The game is so full of events, there is such a variety of turns in it, the fortune of it is so subject to sudden vicissitudes, and one so frequently, after long contemplation, discovers the means of extricating one's self from a supposed insurmountable difficulty, that one is encouraged to continue the contest to the last, in hopes of victory by our own skill, or, at least, of giving a *stale mate*, by the negligence of our adversary. And whoever considers, what in chess he often sees instances of, that particular pieces of success are apt to produce *presumption*, and its consequent, inattention, by which more is afterwards lost than was gained by the preceding advantage; while misfortunes produce more care and attention, by which the loss may be recovered, will learn not to be too much discouraged by the present success of his adversary, nor to despair of final good fortune, upon every little check he receives in the pursuit of it.

That we may, therefore, be induced more frequently to chuse this beneficial amusement, in preference to others which are not attended with the same advantages, every circumstance, that may encrease the pleasure of it, should be regarded; and every action or word that is unfair, disrespectful, or that in any way may give uneasiness, should be avoided, as contrary to the immediate intention of both the players, which is, to pass the time agreeably.

Therefore 1<sup>st</sup>. If it is agreed to play according the strict rules, then those rules are to be exactly observed by both parties; and should not be insisted on for one side, while deviated from by the other; for this is not equitable.

2. If it is agreed not to observe the rules exactly, but one party demands indulgences, he should be as willing to allow them to the other.

3. No false move should ever be made to extricate yourself out of a difficulty, or to gain advantage. There can be no pleasure in playing with a person once detected in such unfair practice.

4. If your adversary is long in playing, you ought not to hurry him, or express any uneasiness at his delay. You should not sing, or whistle, nor look at your watch, nor take up a book to read, nor make a tapping with your feet on the floor, or with your fingers on the table, nor do any thing that may disturb his attention. For all these things displease. And they do not show in playing, but your craftiness or your rudeness.



5. You ought not to endeavour to amuse and deceive your adversary, by pretending to have made bad moves, and saying you have now lost the game, in order to make him secure and careless, and inattentive to your schemes; for this is fraud, and deceit, not skill at the game.

6. You must not, when you have gained a victory, use any triumphing or insulting expression, nor show too much pleasure; but endeavour to console your adversary, and make him less dissatisfied with himself by every kind and civil expression, that may be used with truth; such as, You understand the game better than I, but you are a little inattentive; or, You play too fast; or, You had the best of the game, but something happened to divert your thoughts, and that turned it in my favour.

7. If you are a spectator, while others play, observe the most perfect silence. For if you give advice, you offend both parties; him, against whom you may give it, because it may cause the loss of his game; him, in whose favour you give it, because, tho' it may be good, and he follows it, he loses the pleasure he might have had, if you had permitted him to think till it occurred to himself. Even after a move or moves, you must not, by replacing the pieces, show how it might have been played better: for that displeases, and may occasion disputes or doubts about their true situation. All talking to the players, lessens or diverts their attention, and is therefore displeasing; nor should you give the least hint to either party, by any kind of noise or motion. – If you do, you are unworthy to be a spectator. – If you have a mind to exercise or show your judgment, do it in playing your own game when you have an opportunity, not in criticizing or meddling with, or counseling, the play of others.

Lastly. If the game is not to be played rigorously, according to the rules above mentioned, then moderate your desire of victory over your adversary, and be pleased with one over yourself. Snatch not eagerly at every advantage offered by his unskillfulness or inattention; but point out to him kindly that by such a move he places or leaves a piece in danger and unsupported; that by another he will put his king in a dangerous situation, &c. By this generous civility (so opposite to the unfairness above forbidden) you may indeed happen to lose the game to your opponent, but you will win what is better, his esteem, his respect, and his affection; together with the silent approbation and good will of impartial spectators.