

Franklin's Legacy and Popularity (1790-1860)

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While Franklin was widely viewed as an inspiration for individual advancement, his *Autobiography* and *The Way to Wealth* were simple and straightforward texts that illuminated the virtuous path to personal success. It is safe to say that the popularity of Franklin's legacy reached its height during the first half of the nineteenth-century.

By 1850 *The Way to Wealth* had been printed more than eighty times, a figure suggesting that during the first and second decades of the nineteenth century this tract was more readily available than any other work by Franklin, including his autobiography. Widely regarded to be the antidote to poverty and the most suitable textbook for enterprising youth, that little piece was published as a separate pamphlet, chapbook, or broadside, and appeared in many journals, newspapers, magazines, anthologies, and other almanacs as well. Apparently aimed at less educated readers, simplified and ever distorted versions also emerged, for example those heavily illustrated broadsides such as *Bowle's Moral Pictures* and *The Art of Making Money Plenty in Everyman's Pocket*.

In the meantime, the *Autobiography* was reprinted nearly one hundred and twenty times till the end of the 1850s. Publishers included not only those in big cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, but also those in Auburn and Buffalo, New York; Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Hudson, Ohio; Milwaukee, and San Francisco. Evidence further suggests that Franklin had his most serious impact on the minds of many young people not from formal textbooks, but from individual readings after school. Silas Felton of Marlborough, Massachusetts obtained a copy of Franklin's memoirs as early as 1796 when he was eighteen years old. "I perused them attentively," he said, "and found many very valuable precepts, which I endeavoured to treasure up and follow." Young Felton actively participated in community affairs, became interested in the diffusion of knowledge to the countryside through libraries and newspapers, and even began writing an autobiography at the age of twenty-five.

Some well-known personalities of the century, such as James Harper, Thomas Mellon, and Jared Sparks, readily admitted that the *Autobiography* and *The Way to Wealth* were crucial to their careers. It was after reading Franklin's life at sixteen that Harper decided not to stay on his father's farm near Newton, Long Island. On a cold December day in 1810 he entered New York City with one shilling in his pocket. Thirty-four years later he was elected mayor of the city and owned one of the most successful publishing companies in the nation. Born on a farm of twenty-three acres in Tyrone County, Ireland, Thomas Mellon immigrated with his family to America in 1818 when he was only five. His perspective of life changed after he came upon "a dilapidated copy of the autobiography of Dr. Franklin" at the age of fourteen. Born into a humble family in Connecticut, Jared Sparks professed the same pattern of life-changing experience after reading Franklin's autobiography, and later became a scholar and served as president of Harvard College from 1849 to 1853.

In 1831 a series of lectures was established to educate young men in Boston. Called the Franklin lectures, they were inaugurated by a prominent politician and orator, Edward Everett. He emphasized that, as far as happiness was concerned, no goal was greater than

the enrichment of the mind. For those who lacked formal education, Franklin's story could not be told too often, because his humble origins never discouraged him from educating himself. Other authors agreed, such as Robert C. Winthrop, Henry D. Gilpin, and Horace Greeley in their public speeches, Henry Howe in his *Memoirs of the Most Eminent American Mechanics*, and Freeman Hunt in his selection of business ethics. They confirmed that Franklin's model showed "the true philosophy of business life, in giving tone and direction to the mercantile mind of America." Or as John L. Blake concluded, in his biographical dictionary of 1859, that Franklin was "a philosopher and statesman, and emphatically a self-made man."

To be sure, emulation of Franklin's career was never a guarantee for success. Having learned the printing business and studied Franklin's life, Orion Clemens, a printer in Missouri, wrote to his mother that he was "closely imitating" the great Franklin. For a while he lived on bread and water, and was amazed to discover how clear his mind had become on such a low diet. He worked hard and often drove his helpers to do the same, sometimes until midnight. His teenage brother often complained, who was serving as his apprentice. Then the printer would quote Poor Richard's proverbs, which only led to more resentment. Facing a deteriorating environment, the younger brother, who was never paid a penny, left the printing shop to explore a different life. He was Samuel Clemens, a literary giant later known to the world as Mark Twain.

Indeed, Franklin's legacy was particularly dear to printers, who were proud that their patron saint enjoyed international renown. Using his name as an ornament, many printers believed that Franklin's fame might help to glorify their own trade. When he was alive, some printers in Philadelphia formed an institution called the Franklin Society, which was dissolved shortly after his death. Several years later, in 1799, a group of printers in New York founded the Franklin Typographical Society of Journeymen Printers. In 1822 another Franklin Typographical Society was established in Boston, and in 1844 the Franklin Typographical Association in New York. These organizations were the earliest benevolent societies within the craft.

If Franklin's name appealed to the imagination of printers, so did his works. In Auburn, a small town in central New York, a printer named Henry Oliphant purchased a newly-invented power press from Seth Adams & Co. of Boston in 1845. Pleased with the new equipment, the owner promised that his press could be "making books at a rate which only a few years since, would have been looked upon as altogether beyond belief." In the same town an energetic publisher, James Cepha Derby, seized the opportunity and asked Oliphant to printer books for him. One of the earliest that they launched was Franklin's autobiography, which they reprinted almost yearly from 1846 to 1853.

Technical advancement and entrepreneurial undertakings gave reasons to printers in western New York for celebrations, who decided to hold a festival to commemorate his birthday on January 17, 1846, which was the first of its kind among the printers in New York state. The festival was held in Rochester. Approximately eighty craftsmen and more than a hundred guests were present, many of whom came from neighboring towns and villages. Throughout the evening Franklin's remarkable career and admirable achievements were repeatedly lauded, and toasts were proposed one after another for "Our Craft," "Printers," "The

Press “The engine of Liberty,” “Franklin “The self-made man,” and “Once a printer, always a printer, and never ashamed of the craft.”

Apparently, that celebration was a delightful success, for participating printers decided to hold the same festival in Rochester for the next three years in 1847, 48, and 49. What happened in western New York did not pass unobserved elsewhere. Only a few days later the *New-York Daily Tribune* reported on its front page that “the anniversary of Franklin’s birthday was celebrated by the printers of Rochester in glorious style.” The Franklin Typographical Society in Boston began to hold its first printer’s festival on January 15, 1848, and again in 1857 and 1858. In New York City the Typographical Society made a quiet but significant change. Hitherto it had maintained a tradition of celebrating Independence Day, on which it was founded in 1809. Beginning from 1849, however, it shifted to observe Franklin’s birthday, and repeated the ceremony in 1850, 1851, 1853, and 1865. Evidence also suggests that in a place as remote as Keokuk, Iowa, local printers held a party on January 17, 1856, when Mark Twain gave one of his earliest after-dinner speeches.

Franklin’s increasing popularity coincided with a growing availability of artifacts about him. Toward the end of the 1780s directors of the Library Company of Philadelphia began to plan a new building. They decided that a statue should be erected as a tribute to their most prominent founder, Benjamin Franklin. On April 4, 1792, they received a letter from the Philadelphia banker, and later senator, William Bingham, who informed them that their long awaited statue had finally arrived. His gift was happily accepted. Within a week it was placed in a huge niche over the front door of the new library on Fifth Street. It was a full-figure statue more than five feet high. A report in the *Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine* told the public that the elegant sculpture, worth 500 guineas, has been executed by an Italian artist, François Lazzarini. The report went on to describe the latest embellishment of the city as follows: “The statue of Dr. Franklin is a full length figure, erect, clad with a Roman toga— the position easy and graceful— in the right hand is a sceptre reversed, the elbow rested on books placed on a pedestal— the left hand, a little extended, holds a scroll.” Pleased, the directors of the library company believed that as “the most finished Specimen of Sculpture America can exhibit,” the statue was “much admired.”

Using a picture of Franklin as a frontispiece took place in the first American editions of his autobiography printed in New York and Philadelphia in 1794, a practice rarely stopped ever since. Through numerous engravings, the public had the opportunity to encounter some of the most famous painting of Franklin. In addition to Duplessis’s “fur collar” portrait, two of the most frequently reproduced pictures were those by Charles Nicolas Cochin (“fur cap and spectacle” portrait, 1777) and by David Martin (depicting Franklin’s chin resting upon his thumb, or “thumb” portrait, 1766). J. A. Houdon’s bust of Franklin was very well known for it was copied in several replicas and in a great number of engravings. To a lesser extent, the public was also familiar with Franklin’s portraits painted by Benjamin Wilson (1759), Mason Chamberlin (1762), Charles Willson Peale (1785), and Benjamin West (1784-85).

All of those artists portrayed him with dignity while each had his own perspective. The pictures painted by Cochin, Peale, and West stressed Franklin’s simple dress and plainness, whereas Wilson and Martin presented him as a classical scholar in elegant clothes. Furthermore, those artists seemed to hold different views about improving Franklin’s

appearance. Thus, while Martin's and Wilson's portraits clearly showed the warts on Franklin's left cheek, others' did not.

Even though a portrait of Franklin should certainly present his likeness, American publishers and editors seldom used those portraits for this purpose alone. In fact, for a long time the size of many engravings was so small and their quality so poor that his profile in those pictures was highly unreliable. Mason Weems was among those booksellers who realized that illustrations could attract potential readers. He believed that if he had stories of patriotic heroes printed in small volumes, each of them with an interesting frontispiece, he would be able to sell "an immense number of them." Thus, when he published a life of Franklin, he repeatedly wrote to his publisher, Mathew Carey, requesting a frontispiece of Franklin and sometimes asking for as many as thousand copies of the picture.

Some authors adopted an illustration of Franklin as a symbol of success. In his *Franklin Primer*, which included numerous woodcuts, Samuel Willard pointed out that he had "introduced the Bust of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, as a frontispiece; a man whose manner of life, from youth's first dawning morn to man's meridian day, is worthy the imitation of all who would wish to thrive upon this World's vast theatre." Samuel G. Goodrich (better known as Peter Parley) ascribed his success in selling children's books to the use of illustrations. He believed that the eye, as the master organ of the human senses, was the means to secure a child's interest. His tactic was particularly useful when discussing such qualities as hard work, frugality, and economy. Depicting Franklin as a diligent young printer, Goodrich helped young readers to visualize those abstract economic virtues.

Still, the many European portraits of Franklin copied by American engravers and illustrators did not satisfy all of the public's demand. For one thing, most depicted Franklin as an accomplished older man, while more Americans were interested in his youth. Some lesser-known and native artists filled the void. For example, artists like David Rent Etter and John Gadsby Chapman, and engravers like Reuben S. Gilbert and William B. Gihon, had often portrayed Franklin as a tallow-chandler and printer. Neither their skills nor the authenticity of Franklin's likeness could match those of their European counterparts. But their pictures were adopted by several authors.

Little evidence would indicate that Franklin's image was caricatured during the first half of the nineteenth century. Even in a pictorial broadside such as *Bowle's Moral Pictures*, his formal portrait occupied the center of the page. A typical self-made man and a symbol of frugality, his portrait frequently appeared in commercial offices and on business certificates. The federal postal service, in memory of their first postmaster general, adopted his portrait on one of the first stamps issued in the United States in 1847. About the same time, as many as twenty-six states, including not only those in the Northeast but also Illinois, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Florida, printed banks notes bearing his likeness.

European visitors, however, complained that they could not find a major Franklin statue in America, although they noticed many streets, banks, and companies adopted his name. From their point of view, only a work of art could be regarded as the ultimate tribute to a hero. Especially for those Europeans who "identified national greatness with artistic maturity" and who insisted that sculpture was the most elevated of all the arts, the lack of such a monument indicated the barren condition of the arts in the nation. Well-informed people,

including Jared Sparks and Robert C. Winthrop, knew the criticism to be correct. Until the early 1850s neither a Franklin statue by an American artist nor a bronze of him existed in the nation, which, they felt, was an embarrassing omission. Toward the end of 1853 Winthrop spoke before the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association and urged its members to consider erecting a Franklin statue. It would be less a tribute to the hero, he insisted, than one to the city's artistic taste and repute. The organization concurred and passed a resolution stating that "the statue should be an American work, and, as far as possible, a Massachusetts work, designed and executed upon the soil of Massachusetts, and they were desirous, too, that Boston, the native place of Franklin, should furnish the artist."

Subsequently Richard S. Greenough, a native of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, was chosen as the sculptor. Realizing that Bostonians wanted a Franklin of their own, not some classical, toga-draped saint, he molded his statue in fidelity and simplicity. Cast in rich golden bronze eight feet high, the finished sculpture depicted neither a philosopher nor a statesman, but a respectable citizen in his later age: bare-headed and dressed in a long coat trimmed with fur, Franklin stood holding an old crab-tree walking stick in the right hand and a continental hat in the left. The face duplicated Houdon's original bust, which showed Franklin's placid and benign countenance. Different from Houdon's, however, Greenough's Franklin looked downward to the left, seemingly lost in contemplation and unaware of the public gaze. Therefore, anyone standing in front of the statue could meet Franklin's eye from the ground, and was able to have a close view of the aged and thoughtful Franklin who, with virtuous tranquility and plain costume, appeared to be a hero without exerting any pretentious power and grandeur.

William James Stillman, an art critic from New York, happened to see the statue in Greenough's studio. He thought that it was a "noble work, unaffected and thoroughly full of common-sense." This Franklin statue was one of the most successful sculptures that Greenough had ever modeled. Thousands of lead and chalk copies were made; a century later some of them could still be found in New England antique shops. His statue was further distinguished by its grand unveiling ceremonies, which far exceeded the attention the public gave to earlier events, such as Charles Bulfinch's memorial urn and building in Franklin Place (1794), the renovation of the grave of Franklin's parents in the Granary Burial Ground (1827) and Thomas Bowse's memorial monument in honor of Franklin at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge (1854). In fact, not since the railroad jubilee in 1851 had Bostonians witnessed such an elaborate celebration overwhelming the entire city.

Sunny and pleasant, September 17, 1856 began with church bells ringing and cannon being fired. Thongs of people from all parts of the city intermingled with hundreds of school boys and girls on the street. It was the two hundred and twenty-sixth anniversary of the founding of Boston, when Greenough's statue was to be unveiled in front of City Hall in School Street. The day was designated as a general holiday, and organizers mobilized thousands of people from nearby towns and cities by special arrangements with railroad companies. Participants in the celebration procession included craftsmen from almost every major trade in the city as well as members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and students from Harvard College.

Along the route of the procession, Tremont, Washington, Union, Milk, Federal, and many other streets were richly decorated. Among hundreds of signs, flags, and posters one slogan

that captured the general mood of the day read: “Franklin□ We All Unite to Honor Him.” After four hours the five-mile-long procession finally came to City Hall, where Winthrop was to deliver an oration. Stressing the hero’s birth in Boston, the orator praised Franklin’s greatness and carefully related his achievements to his New England heritage, by using such phrases as “native son,” “native Bostonian,” “native energy,” and “native genius.” He also understood how much the statue meant to the pride of Bostonians. The new work of art, he emphasized, was the “product of New England industry and invention” and represented “the latest and best efforts of American genius and American skill.” If Franklin was “the man of the people,” he declared, let his statue be unveiled and receive the daily salute of all who would pass it by.

Ironically, only two years later in 1858, the Franklin family house in Boston, which was a few blocks away from the new statue, was demolished in order to make room for an increasing volume of traffic. No one, including Edward Everett, could do anything to stop the demolition. The memorable success of the inauguration of the Franklin statue and the permanent loss of his homestead suggest that depending on the city’s need, Franklin’s legacy could become either an asset on which to capitalize or a liability to be sacrificed.

References and Further Reading:

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