



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: COLONIAL PRINTER AND JOURNALIST



Grade 5
United States History and Geography

I. Introduction

Benjamin Franklin is legendary for his contributions as an inventor, a founding father, and a journalist. This lesson will focus on his early career as a printer and journalist, when he published over 400 books, pamphlets, and broadsides, including antislavery pamphlets, *The Psalms of David*, and a translation of Cicero's *Cato Major*. However, his most beloved work was *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which he himself wrote and published monthly between 1732 and 1757. Here Franklin sought to promote self-improvement and public virtue through the use of catchy sayings. In addition to his publishing efforts, Franklin contributed to the spread of information and literacy by establishing the first public library in Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Association, and the U.S. Post Office. He also helped set up Philadelphia's first fire department and hospital. His work as a public servant is unparalleled in early American history.

II. Objectives

- ◆ To understand the role and importance of print media such as daily newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, and almanacs as sources of public and information in colonial America.
- ◆ To understand Ben Franklin's role in promoting citizenship through print documents in colonial America.
- ◆ To understand the importance of literacy in a democracy.

III. History-Social Science Standards Addressed

- 5.4 Students understand the political, religious, social and economic institutions that evolved in the colonial era.
- (7) Explain the early democratic ideas and practices that emerged during the colonial period, including the significance of representative assemblies and town meetings.
- 5.5 Students explain the causes of the American Revolution.
- (4) Describe the views, lives, and impact of key individuals during this period.

IV. Materials Needed

Class set copies of the following documents:

Document A: Image of *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Document B: Wise Sayings Attributed to *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Document C: Image of an 18th-Century Broadside

Document Analysis Worksheet

V. Lesson Activities

1. Have students read background information on Benjamin Franklin, particularly with reference to his early career as a printer and journalist.
2. Show students **Document A**, a facsimile of *Poor Richard's Almanack*.

Introduce students to the concept, purpose, and importance of almanacs, especially in the days before radio, television, and the Internet. Describe their standard features such as weather predictions, sunrise/sunset charts, and advice on farming, business, and personal matters. Copies of *Poor Richard's Almanacks* from 1733–1758 can be found at the following Web site: < http://www.sage.advice.com/Benjamin_Franklin.htm > .

To conclude the group discussion about almanacs have students fill out their “Document Analysis Worksheet” in pairs. If needed, model the activity with the whole group. Ask students to report out their findings. The “Document Analysis Worksheet” can be used with any lesson that draws on primary documents or artifacts

3. Using the “California” section of the *Los Angeles Times* or another local newspaper, have students reproduce the forecasts for weather, moon cycles, sunrise/sunsets, smog, surf, etc. in the style of an 18th century almanac. Explain that almanacs provide farmers with long term predictions that can help them plan their planting cycles, whereas newspapers give us short term predictions that can help us plan our daily activities.

4. Divide students into 5 groups and distribute **Document B**, “Wise Sayings from *Poor Richard’s Almanack*.” Explain that Franklin used wit to convey important guidelines for daily living and the development of good character. Have students read five of the witticisms and brainstorm what Franklin might have really meant. Have groups report out to the whole class. Alternatively ask students to create comic strips depicting each wise saying as it applies to modern living. A Web site with a similar activity can be found at <<http://sln.fi.edu/franklin/printer/abc.html>> .
5. Distribute **Document C** “Image of an 18th-Century Broadside.” Explain the use of broadsides as a source of public information and entertainment for the masses from colonial times through the early 20th century. Broadside contained official political announcements, meeting announcements and playbills, social commentary, advertisements, essays, poems, and even lyrics to popular ballads. They were posted in town halls and coffee houses, read in churches and public meetings, and were often reprinted in local newspapers. In fact, they were an early form of mass media filling the role that television, radio, film, and the Internet play today. Have students create a colonial broadside of their own giving information on an important event from colonial history. Alternatively, they could create a broadside advertising a colonial product or business. The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. maintains a Web site containing information on over 350 historical broadsides entitled “An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadside and Other Printed Ephemera” at <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/rbpehtml/pehome.html>> .
6. Have students write an essay on the importance of print media in colonial times, especially before radio, television, and the Internet.

VI. Extension Activities

- Research colonial printing including mills, papermaking, printing presses, newspapers, and broadsides.
- Have students create an almanac for the next school month.
- Have students create 18th century-style broadsides advertising upcoming school events.
- Have students create their own *Poor Richard’s Almanack* with wise sayings or class rules.

Vocabulary

<i>apprentice</i>	one who works in return for instruction in a trade or occupation
<i>almanac</i>	a monthly or annual publication including weather forecasts, astronomical information, tide tables, and other useful information
<i>broadside</i>	a large sheet of paper printed on one side
<i>freedom of the press</i>	freedom to publish anything that is true
<i>prediction</i>	the act of stating, telling about or making known in advance
<i>public library</i>	a public place where books, newspapers, and tapes are kept for reading, reference, or lending
<i>wisdom</i>	understanding of what is true, right, or lasting
<i>wit</i>	the ability to express in a humorous manner the relationship between seemingly unlikely things

Resources

Books

- Brands, H.W. (2000) *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: New Doubleday.
- Fleming, Thomas, Editor. (1972). *The Founding Fathers Benjamin Franklin: A Biography in His Own Words*. New York. Newsweek, Inc.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. (Various publishers).
- Miller, William C. (1974). *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing 1728-1766: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Philadelphia, PA: The American Philosophical Society.
- Morgan, Edmund S. (2002). *Benjamin Franklin*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wright, Esmond, (1997). *Franklin of Philadelphia*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press.

Children's Books

- Giblin, James Cross; Dooling, Michael, illustrator. (2000). *The Amazing Life of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Scholastic Press.
- Gregson, Susan R. (2001). *Benjamin Franklin*. Mankato, MN: Bridgestone Books.
- Lawson, Robert, Editor (1988). *Ben and Me: A New and Astonishing Life of Benjamin Franklin as Written by His Good Mouse Amos*. EconoClad Books.
- Roop, Peter and Connie. (2000). *In Their Own Words: Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Scholastic Press.

Web Sites

Public Broadcasting Corporation, *Benjamin Franklin: An Extraordinary Life, An Eclectic Mind*. < <http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin> >

U.S. National Archives and Record Administration < <http://www.archives.gov> >

Image of Poor Richard's Almanack
March, 1733

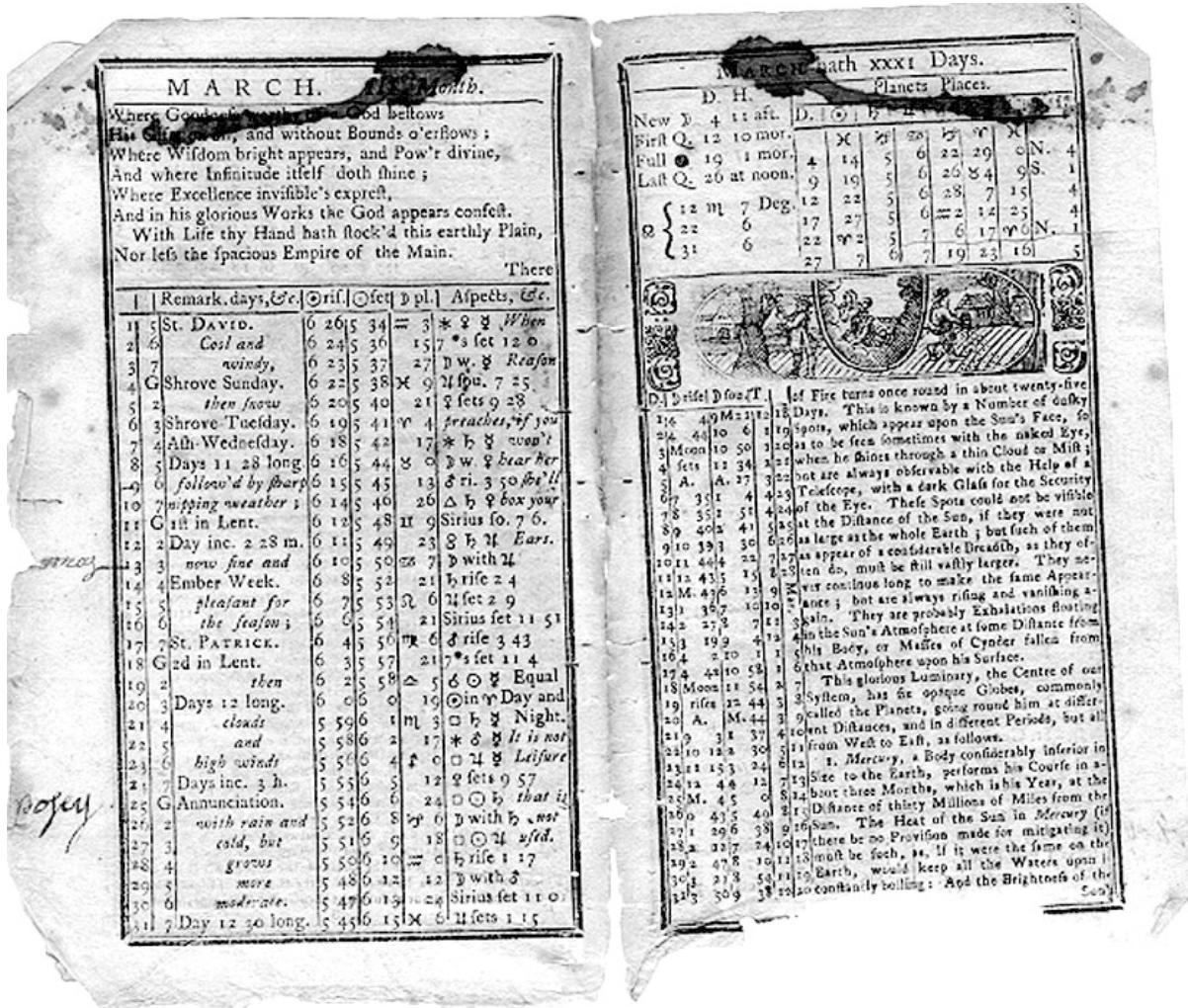


Table with columns: Remark, days, &c., Ori[entation], [Sun] set, [Sun] pl., Aspects, &c. Rows include weather observations like 'St. David', 'Shrove Sunday', and 'Annunciation' with corresponding astrological symbols and dates.

Table titled 'MARCH with xxxi Days' showing planetary positions. Columns include D. H., [Sun] [Moon] [Mercury] [Venus] [Earth] [Mars] [Jupiter] [Saturn]. Below the table is a large block of text discussing astronomical observations and the nature of the Sun's atmosphere.

Source: <http://www.Gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/his341/pras53mar.htm >

Wise Sayings attributed to *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Group One

- A An empty bag cannot stand upright.
- B Be always ashamed to catch thyself idle.
- C Cheese and salty meat should be sparingly eaten.
- D The Doors of wisdom are never shut.
- E Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.

Group Two

- F Full of courtesy, full of craft.
- G God helps them that help themselves.
- H Hunger never saw bad bread.
- I If you'd have a servant that you like, serve yourself.
- J If Jack's in love, he's no judge of Jill's beauty.

Group Three

- K Keep thy shop and thy shop will keep thee.
- L A Lie stands on one leg, the truth on two.
- M A Man without a wife is but half a man.
- N Nothing but money is sweeter than honey.
- O One today is worth two tomorrows.

Group Four

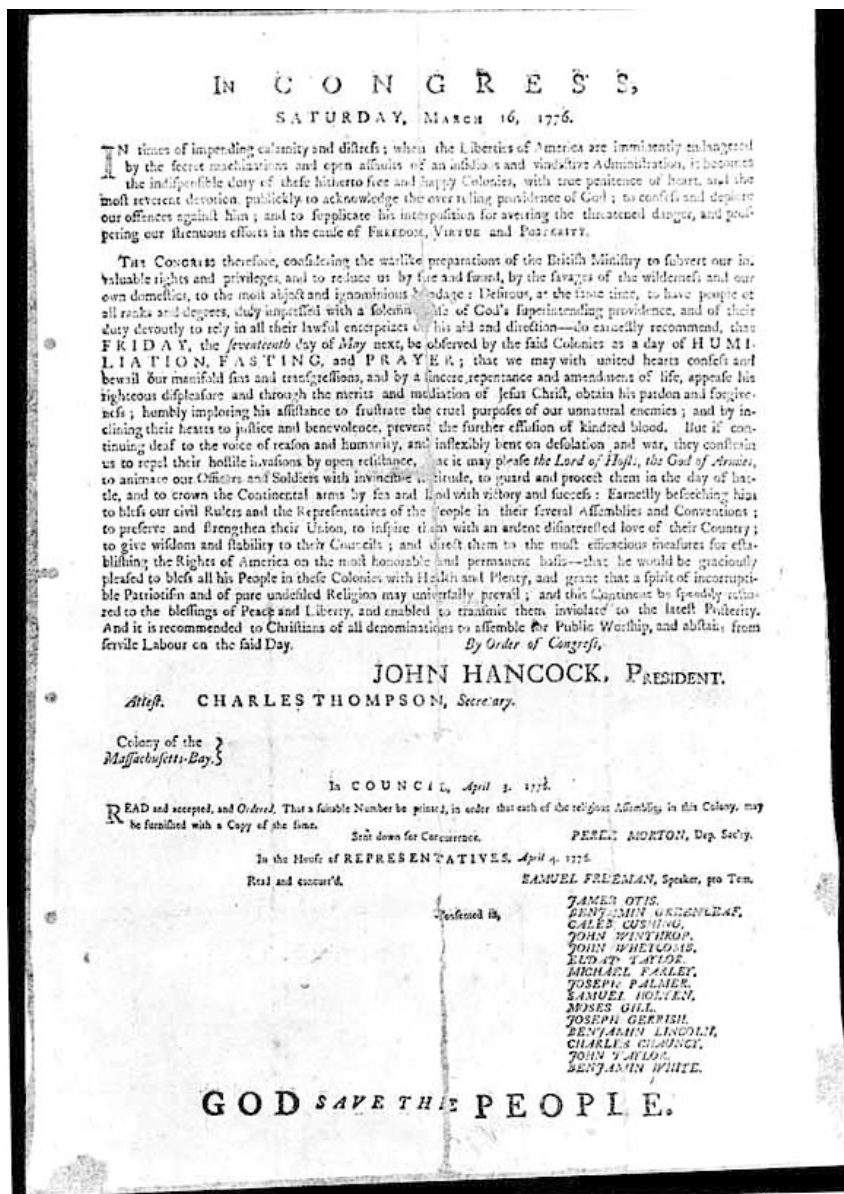
- P Pay what you owe and you'll know what's your own.
- Q A quarrelsome man has no good neighbors.
- R The Rotten apple spoils his companion.
- S Speak little, do much.
- T Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.

Group Five

- U Up, sluggard, and waste not life; in the grave will be sleeping enough.
- V Visits should be short, like a winter's day.
- W Well done is better than well said.
- X A good example is the best sermon.
- Y You may delay, but time will not.
- Z There are lazy minds as well as lazy bodies.

Source: < http://www.sage.advice.com/Benjamin_Franklin.htm >

Image of an 18th-Century Broadside



Congressional Fast Day Proclamation, March 16, 1776

Source: Library of Congress < <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/obj-list.html> >

Document Analysis Worksheet

1. Type of Document: (check one)

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper | <input type="checkbox"/> Map | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letter | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram | <input type="checkbox"/> Congressional Record |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patent | <input type="checkbox"/> Press Release | <input type="checkbox"/> Census Report |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum | <input type="checkbox"/> Report | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify type) _____ | | |

2. Unique Physical Qualities of the Document (check one or more)

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten | <input type="checkbox"/> Interesting Letterhead |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Typed | <input type="checkbox"/> "Received" Stamp |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seals | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Notations | |

3. Date(s) of the Document: _____

4. Author (or creator) of the document:

Position (Title)

5. For what audience was the document written?

6. Document information:

A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

B. Why do you think this document was written?

C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

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