

Benjamin Franklin and the American Dream
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Americans refer to their Founding Fathers (Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams) with extraordinary frequency: a July 2006 Google search turned up 61.4 million references to Washington, 24.8 million to Franklin, 20.4 million to Jefferson, 19.2 million to Madison, 10.8 million to John Adams, and 4.6 million to Hamilton. They call upon them in to settle political debates: the Iraq war, free trade, taxes, religious liberty, immigration reform. They rip them, historian Gordon Wood comments, “out of their historical context, tear them out of their time and place, in order to make them part of our present-day circumstances.”¹

Americans believe the Founders are their neighbors, friends, and contemporaries, even if they lived more than two centuries ago. Almost seventy six years ago, a French journalist wrote that “America is the only country . . . which pretends to listen to the teaching of its founders as if they were still alive” and “could be called up on the phone for advice.”² They ignore their flaws: Jefferson’s racism and slaveholding, Franklin’s love of young women, John Adam’s defense of the rich, Hamilton’s support for an American monarchy, and Washington’s war (the Whiskey Rebellion) against his own tenants in Pennsylvania.

Popular biographers follow public taste. David McCullough paints Adams as the man next door. Yet Adams, a lawyer who represented rich men and defended British officers accused in the Boston Massacre, loathed the poor. Ron Chernow turns Hamilton into a poster boy for the “American Dream,” recounting his illegitimate birth, his thirst for knowledge, and his rise to prominence, but plays down the patronage he received from rich men that led to his entry into college, a privilege enjoyed by less than a half percent of colonial free, white men. Walter Isaacson emphasizes Franklin’s middle class identity, his appeal to workers, and his egalitarian democracy, at best a partial picture of Franklin.³

Both historians and the American public consider understanding the Revolutionary era essential. Historians view it as the harbinger of later social and political development; the public deems knowledge of the era necessary for good citizenship. Yet for almost a century, historians have decried Americans' adherence to myths about the nation's founding, while failing to delve into the role these myths play in American politics and culture. Such an examination is essential before historians can guide Americans toward a clearer understanding of the country's past.⁴

Americans have little interest in the politics or philosophy of the Founders, much less of the society in which they lived. Rather, as a 1998 poll revealed, they expect high school graduates "to understand the common history and ideas that tie all Americans together," including tales of the Founders, the Fourth of July, and the Bill of Rights.⁵ They draw moral principles from the lives of the Founders and view them as symbols of their most cherished values. Jefferson represents democracy and equality; Hamilton, capitalism and economic growth; Washington, courage under fire and integrity; Madison, the rule of law and constitutional liberty; and Franklin, inventiveness and upward mobility.

This essay will contrast the historical Franklin with popular images of his life by examining his class identity and its relationship to the "American Dream" of upward mobility. Franklin created a bourgeois persona in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Americans have taken the identity Franklin constructed, defined it as middle class, presumed it an accurate portrayal, and used his life story as emblematic of the "American Dream."

Recently, both Franklin and the American Dream have received renewed attention. Popular interest in Franklin surged in the lead-up to the 2006 tercentenary of his birth. New biographies have proliferated (two reached the best-seller lists) and a multi-part, three-and-a-half-hour documentary aired on America's Public Broadcasting System. Even as great fortunes have grown and economic

inequality increased, making a mockery of the American Dream, most Americans still adhere to it call on Franklin as a prime example of its success.⁶

Benjamin Franklin, the Atlantic bourgeois

Was Benjamin Franklin the exemplar of middle-class America, the self-made man who rose from poverty to riches by practicing virtue and seeking improvement? His *Autobiography* suggests as much. Was he a “leather-apron” man, a member of the middle class, as Walter Isaacson suggests? Or was he a gentleman, a would-be aristocrat who hobnobbed with English scientists and French aristocrats? Readers of Franklin’s *Autobiography* know how often he reinvented himself. One can make a case for Franklin the improving artisan, Franklin the politico and lobbyist, Franklin the gentleman, Franklin the intellectual, Franklin the inventor and scientist, Franklin the moralist, Franklin the apostle of middle-class morality, Franklin the astute diplomat, Franklin the bon vivant.

None of these identities, nor any combination of them, captures Franklin. He might be better seen as part of an Atlantic bourgeoisie. Historians are familiar with other eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic classes: the proletariat of sailors and workers (from the colonies, Britain, Europe, and Africa); the skilled workers (like Tom Paine) whose radicalism spanned the ocean; the intellectuals and religious leaders who created new corresponding societies; the immigrants with one foot in Scotland or Germany and the other in America; the Africans forced from their homes to suffer slavery. American historians are less familiar with the bourgeoisie, a term they identify with middle class.⁷

Who were the bourgeoisie as a class? The words “class” and “bourgeoisie” have long been essentially contested, in philosopher W. B. Gallie’s felicitous term. Such words, critically related to a person’s conception of a good society, can never be conclusively defined.⁸ Sociologists studying

stratification divide people by occupation, education, wealth, and income and call those divisions classes. Patterns of consumption permeate contemporary analyses. Conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently wrote about bourgeois bohemians, who he defines in terms of the college they attended, the coffee they drink, and the car they drive. Similarly, left-leaning French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu views class through the prism of taste and lifestyle. Their emphasis on consumption contrasts sharply with Max Weber's connection of class to markets, social status, and power or Karl Marx's insistence that class is a social relationship, structured by production.⁹

“Bourgeois” and “bourgeoisie” are similarly contested. Bourgeois originally meant city citizens, usually merchants, and by extension middle-class city inhabitants. Early twentieth-century writers used it contemptuously: it meant conventional, small minded money-grubbers. Among Marxist historians the term refers to the capitalist ruling class and its ideology, not a middle class standing between the rich and the poor. The English bourgeoisie, they argue, emerged out of agrarian ferment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when improving landlords confiscated peasant land and forced them into waged labor, turning themselves into a capitalist ruling class in the process. Forced into manufacturing, exploited families fueled rapid industrialization. The bourgeoisie thus opposed the feudal aristocracy (who they wished to replace) and the poor (who they wished to control).¹⁰

Bourgeois philosophers and political economists (John Locke and Adam Smith foremost among them) obscured the aspirations for class rule and economic dominance of their class by espousing an ethic of systematic individualism, pecuniary accumulation, education, sober living, and scientific inquiry. Property and the protection of property stood at the center of their ethic. Ever seeking to aggrandize their power, they presumed that their ethic was universal, appropriate for all time, places, and people rather than a tool of class rule.¹¹

In viewing Franklin, each of these definitions has merit. Franklin's tale of arriving in Philadelphia with only puffy rolls to his name but rising to hobnob with aristocrats evokes ideas of social mobility at the heart of social stratification theory. His concern with social status is legendary, but he had a conflicted view of consumption, sometimes reviling it as luxury, other times spending wildly on luxuries, thus emulating European nobility. Franklin was clearly urban: his printing business marked him as a burgher and a member of Philadelphia's middle class.

Marxist definitions nonetheless serves our purposes best, for they encompass elements of all the definitions while insisting that class is a social relationship. Viewing class through the prism of productive relations—the conflicts and agreements between classes—gives historical actors agency, the ability to make and remake their worlds within the constraints of capital. They reveal the class conflicts that permeated the eighteenth-century capitalist Atlantic world in which Franklin lived (and in which he occasionally participated).¹²

In what way or ways can we call Franklin bourgeois? We can consider him bourgeois in terms of his relation to the idle rich, farmers, and the poor. Franklin ridiculed colonial gentlemen, whether Harvard students or opponents of George Whitefield's revival. His friends, the London bourgeoisie, invested in commerce and industry and had wealth, education, and leisure, but the English nobility shunned them (and rich colonists) as newly-rich men with neither status nor authority to rule. In the 1770s, he negotiated with French aristocrats—but knew he was not one of them.¹³

Adverse to an idle, hereditary aristocracy, Franklin sought political support from the middling sort to help replace the gentlemen, great planters, and rentiers who ruled the colonies with men like himself. The militia he proposed in 1747 would have elected its officers. At the Constitutional Convention, he favored direct elections, opposed the presidential veto, urged creation

of a unicameral legislature, and supported judicial election—democratic positions that incorporated all free, male property holders into the body politic. Such patronage, he hoped, would lead to bourgeois rule.¹⁴

Franklin, however, could not be identified with the “middling sort,” even if (as Carl Van Doren wrote in his classic Franklin biography) he was “born of middling people.” Yet was he? His father Josiah struggled to pay his debts but worked as a Boston tallow-chandler and soap-maker for over a half-century, an extraordinary success in an era when most poor and middling families moved repeatedly. Even with seventeen children, he managed to buy a house, borrow money on good terms, provide doweries for his daughters, set up his son James as a printer, send Benjamin to the Latin School for a term, and buy books like Prince’s *History of New England*. Franklin’s family thus stood, precariously, between poverty and the upper reaches of the middling sort. Josiah’s willingness to finance James’ printing business provides a key to his aspirations. Printing was an elite trade, identified with politics, government contracts, and intellectual pursuits. No wonder the *Boston News-Letter* printed his obituary, rare for the middling sort, praising him for his temperance, piety, virtue, and honesty¹⁵

Isaacson claims that Franklin’s use of the term “we the middling people” twice in his 1747 pamphlet, *Plain Truth*, demonstrates his membership in the middle class.¹⁶ But Franklin’s “middling people,” what colonists called the “middling sort,” were not a twentieth-century “middle class,” the middle-income, mostly professional, employees of corporate or governmental America. Rather, they were small-scale property owners who worked independently, farmers, artisans, and laborers who owned a bit of land and the tools of their trade.

By 1747 Franklin had accumulated great wealth and would retire from printing the following year. He misleadingly signed *Plain Truth* “tradesman of Philadelphia” (much as rich lawyer John

Dickinson later called himself a Pennsylvania farmer) and used the phrase “we the middling people” to gain support from craftsmen and farmers for a private militia to defend the colony. He filled the pamphlet with intimations of war and impending doom. He predicted the impoverishment of artisans and farmers alike, the plunder and burning of Philadelphia, and the terror of “wanton and unbridled Rage, Rapine and Lust, of Negroes, Molattoes, and others” unless the colony united to defend itself.¹⁷

Franklin introduced the phrase “we the middling people” in the second half of the pamphlet. The rich, who refused to defend the colony, could readily flee the city, he argued. But “most unhappily circumstanced indeed are we, the middling People, the Tradesmen, Shopkeepers, and Farmers of this Province and City. We cannot all fly with our Families; and if we could, how shall we subsist?” We “must bear the Brunt” of the enemy’s extortion and risk losing “what little we have gained by hard Labour and Industry.” His second use of the phrase comes two long paragraphs later; after lambasting Quakers and their rich opponents for leaving the colony unprotected, he repeated the predicament of the middling sort: “thus unfortunately are we circumstanc’d . . . , my dear Countrymen and Fellow-Citizens; we, I mean, the middling People, the Farmers, Shopkeepers and Tradesmen of this City and Country.”

Richard Peters, secretary to the Pennsylvania Proprietors, dismissed the pamphlet as politics. Franklin, who feared war with the French, “thought he cou’d by some well wrote Papers. . . take an advantage of their [Philadelphians’] Fears and spirit them up to an Association for their Defence.” He assumed “the Character of a Tradesman, to fall foul of the Quakers and their opposers equally, as People from whom no good cou’d be expected, and by this Artifice to animate all the middling Persons to undertake their own Defence.” He fomented this plan with like-minded men and offered to print his pamphlet “gratis in his Gazette.” His conspiratorial language notwithstanding, Peters

understood Franklin's use of the term "middling people" perfectly.¹⁸

Franklin did not identify with yeoman farmers, a majority of the colonial middling sort. He lived in London or Paris for two-fifths of his adult life, associating with intellectuals, diplomats, and aristocrats. No middling farmer traveled to distant cities, and poor emigrants to America enjoyed none of his advantages. His vast appetite for luxuries demonstrates that he hardly shared farmers' desire to be satisfied with a sufficiency. He disliked Pennsylvania Germans and reviled the Paxton Boys, farmers who massacred peaceful Indians. Franklin, Isaacson tells us, "cringed at class warfare," but most colonial farmers shared their hatred of Indians and overbearing rulers, as rebellions in Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and the Carolinas demonstrate.¹⁹

At the same time, he denied that poverty existed in America, for those with any desire to accumulate property. Like later capitalists, he railed against plebeian drinking that reduced productivity and cost public money to support dependents of drunks. His occasional identification of himself as a printer and his support for decent wages for printers notwithstanding, he saw capital and labor as unified, not in conflict and opposed the urban Revolutionary-era mobs mechanics dominated.

Although the identity that Franklin constructed belies any simple story, he was foremost among those who devised a bourgeois ethic that championed education, industry, improvement, frugality, and temperance. Not only did he popularize pithy moral sayings (as Poor Richard and in *The Way to Wealth*), but in the 1730s, he devised a table of virtues to attain "moral perfection"(Figure 1). He wrote about these virtues in a 1784 letter, soon published in his *Autobiography*. The table listed fourteen virtues, each a component of bourgeois morality, good business practice, or Christian ethics. The most significant bourgeois morals and business practices

he sought to emulate included temperance (“Eat not to Dulness; Drink not to Elevation”), silence (“Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself”), order (“Let all Things have their Places”), frugality (“Make no Expense but to make good to others or yourself), and industry (“Lose no Time—Be always employ’d in something useful.”)²⁰

Franklin’s list of virtues, and the tale of self-improvement it suggests, is emblematic of the way he constructed his identity. His early life, as he told it in his *Autobiography*, is the quintessential tale of upward mobility and success. From his earliest writings, he emphasized virtuous living, honesty, and industry—a calculus of utility to guarantee success. He only intermittently practiced these virtues, but his behavior hardly undermines the bourgeois ethic they encapsulate. He consistently urged others to practice them, wrote about them in political pamphlets as well as *Poor Richard’s Almanac* and in *The Way to Wealth*, and exchanged letters with his friends on their importance. Even as he lived in splendor in France in the late 1770s, he urged his daughter to practice frugality. She had complained about rising prices but still strove to be fashionable, asking Franklin to send “black pins and feathers from France.”

TEMPERANCE.							
EAT NOT TO DULNESS; DRINK NOT TO ELEVATION.							
	S.	M.	T.	W.	T.	F.	S.
T.							
S.	*	*		*		*	
O.	**	*	*		*	*	*
R.			*			*	
F.		*			*		
L.			*				
S.							
J.							
M.							
C.							
T.							
C.							
H.							



Figure

1 (left): Franklin's chart (temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, humility). Source: http://www.englit.ed.ac.uk/studying/undergrd/scottish_lit_2/Handouts/at_franklin.htm. Figure 2: (right) Mason Chamberlin, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1762. Source: <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/franklin/chamber.htm>;

But Franklin wrote that the war had made “our frugality necessary, and as I am always preaching that doctrine, I cannot . . . encourage the contrary” by “furnishing my children with foolish modes and luxuries.” He would send only “useful and necessary [articles], and omit the rest.” As for feathers, they “may be had in America from every cock's tail.”²¹

Many Americans first came upon Franklin the moralist in his *Autobiography* or in the *Way to Wealth*—and they knew little else about him. By 1860, the autobiography went through around 120 editions, published in cities all over the country; publishers reprinted *The Way to Wealth* at least twenty-one times between 1760 and 1790 and forty-one more times during the next three decades, more than eighty times in total by 1850. Reading these texts, acquiring simplified versions of them, or listening to speeches about them persuaded youths to leave the farm and aspire to greatness. Printers, who had special reasons to admire Franklin, paid heed to his writings and made him their patron saint.²²

Mason Locke Weems, the most popular nineteenth-century Franklin popularizer, reprinted the *Way to Wealth* (1796) and wrote a fictionalized biography (1815) that celebrated Franklin's virtues. He emphasized Franklin's temperance (the “golden opportunity lost” by drinking, the money saved by temperance), industry, and hard work; his “passion for learning;” his practical Christianity; his overcoming adversity; his inventiveness, *and* his rise to riches and prominence as exemplars for young men. The stories Weems made up about Franklin's life illustrated the virtues he stressed. He struck a chord: other writers repeated his stories and rendition of Franklin's virtues, and his fictionalized biography was reprinted at least sixteen times during the nineteenth century.²³

The virtues Weems celebrated remain crucial to the American Dream, repeated by pundits

and ordinary folk alike. Perhaps for that reason, intellectuals sometimes treated Franklin's virtues with disdain. Novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne, D. H. Lawrence, and Sinclair Lewis took Franklin literally, and made him a soulless money grubber. Sociologist Max Weber also took him at face value, making him into the exemplar of a secularized this-world asceticism, the symbol of the spirit of capitalism. In contrast, Franklin biographer Walter Isaacson celebrates Franklin, seeing him as exemplifying the virtues of "hard work, thrift, shopkeeping values, and the role of an industrious middle class that resisted rather than emulated the pretensions of the well-born elite" and the *Autobiography* as a "self-help manual for America's ambitious middle class."²⁴

Franklin had copied, borrowed, and shaped Poor Richard's proverbs, amusing readers with puns, metaphors, and personification of virtues. Reinterpreted to encourage wise investing, they have great staying power today, for they exemplify the American's vision of the American Dream. Philadelphia's Franklin Institute posts twenty-six proverbs on its web site and invites visitors to email "what you think Ben meant." Children—prominent among those who responded—interpret Franklin's metaphors and puns literally, to support bourgeois virtues of punctuality, honesty, and industry.²⁵

Franklin, the Bourgeois Gentilhomme?

Weems, Weber, and Lawrence are strange bedfellows, but each read Franklin literally. They missed the ambiguity and humor, the satires of a trickster, the playfulness and seriousness that permeates Franklin's writings on virtue.²⁶ In a strange way, Franklin resembled Moliere's bourgeois gentilhomme. He lived before at the birth of industrial capitalism, which reified the virtues he heralded. Pious capitalists had barely started to impose sobriety, punctuality, and industry on their workers. Lacking other models, new men of wealth like Franklin emulated the rich leisured

aristocracy, living well, building ostentatious houses, buying new baubles—just like the bourgeois gentilhomme.²⁷

The ambiguity of Franklin's social origins heightened this contradiction. Punctuality, industry, and frugality, along with luck and patronage, had made him rich. He satirized bourgeois virtues—but wanted to practice them. He attacked the nobility for their indolence— but luxury enticed him and he emulated their lifestyle. In London, he aped the richest aristocrats: he rented a four-story house; hired a carriage; bought wigs, expensive linen, swords, and silver buckles; and sent home silk cloth, English china, and a harpsichord. Like other would-be aristocrats, he had his portrait painted (Figures 2-4), sitting repeatedly for painters and sculptors, so much so that he became “perfectly sick of it,” tired of the tedium of “sitting hours in one fix'd Posture.”²⁸

In London, the paintings show, he puts on aristocratic airs, wearing the right wigs and expensive clothing. No tools of the printer's trade (a printer's measure or apron) appear in them. In 1762, Mason Chamberlin portrayed a be-wigged Franklin, sitting at his desk during a thunderstorm, quill pen in hand, a manuscript nearby, working on a scientific experiment (Figure 2). Outside his window, a storm destroys a house and a steeple. Franklin's chimney sports a lightning rod; he listens to hear the two bells (near his chair in the top left corner) attached to the rod ring when lightning strikes. A year later, he made a replica of the painting for William Franklin, Benjamin's son; the painting later served as the



Figure 3 (left) David Martin, 1767 (Franklin's copy), Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia . Source: <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/franklin/martin.htm>; Figure 4 (right): David Martin, portrait of Franklin, original version, National Portrait Gallery, London. Source: http://freespace.virgin.net/anstruther.collection/photos/pages/franklin_gif.htm

basis for a medal. This image of the scientist at work was so popular that Edward Fisher turned it into a black and white mezzotint engraving, brighter than the original. Hundreds circulated, in both England and America; new prints appeared from 1763 through 1781. In 1773, a reproduction appeared as the frontispiece to the third French edition of Franklin's works. Beneath the image, the editor explained that Franklin had "torn fire from the heavens" and "made the arts flourish in the wilderness," making Franklin the natural man of America, rather than a cosmopolitan intellectual.²⁹

David Martin's 1767 London oil painting shows Franklin in a more aristocratic pose. Wearing an elaborate blue suit, with gold braids and sports the "physical" wig of intellectuals, Franklin reads a manuscript (Figures 3-4). A bust of Isaac Newton, recently completed by Louis Francois Roubiliac, stands next to the desk. The painting thus represents him as a great scientist, perhaps the equal of Newton. The original painting (Figure 4) portrays Franklin sitting in a carved and gilded chair, a touch that symbolized holding high office and thereby accentuates his aristocratic identity. But Franklin, who held no major office at the time, disliked this ostentatious touch; when he ordered a

replica, he asked Martin to cover the chair with an elegant but simple red cloth (Figure 3). For a quarter century, Martin and other artists often copied this version. Publishers released black-and-white engraved prints in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which further softened the portrait's aristocratic demeanor and that engraved image appeared on tavern signs as well.³⁰

While in Paris, seeking French aid for the fledgling republic, however, Franklin pretended to be a rustic American. During his November 1776 Atlantic voyage, he had worn a formless fur cap to ward off the cold and kept it on in chilly France. When he saw that it captured the French public's imagination, he wore the cap, his "badge of homespun purity and virtue" in Paris, both outdoors and indoors, becoming in Walter Isaacson's phrase, a "noble frontier philosopher and simple backwoods sage." He did take it off when granted an audience with Louis XVI, but he kept in character, wearing his own hair, his bifocals, a simple brown suit and carrying a white hat. Without either wig or sword, he looked like a prosperous French farmer, not a diplomat. Franklin knew he was putting on a show. He didn't wear the fur hat at home; and he wrote Emma Thompson, imagine me, "very plainly dress'd, wearing my thin grey strait Hair that peeps out under my only Coiffure, a fine Fur Cap, which comes down to my Forehead almost to my Spectacles. Think how this must appear to the power'd heads of Paris."³¹

The image of Franklin and his fur cap became a sensation, in part because it fit an intellectual fashion toward simpler headgear. In Nantes, ladies wore wigs dubbed "*à la Franklin*" that resembled the cap. It appeared on prints, paintings, and engravings, medallions, (Figure 5) and snuffboxes. In England, Josiah Wedgwood manufactured a Jasperware plate cameo (Figure 6), based on the Chamberlin portrait, with the fur cap added. Both Jean Baptiste Nini's medal and Wedgwood's Jasperware replaced Franklin's formless Canadian cap with Rousseau's more shaped fur cap. (Neither had seen the cap and Wedgwood had made Franklin images as early as the late 1760s.) By

borrowing Rousseau's hat, Nini and Wedgewood identified Franklin with Rousseau's reputation as a natural man.

Nicholas Cochin soon drew the more accurate, formless, messy, and "wilder" cap, and in 1777 Augustine de Saint Aubin made more than fifty engraved copies of the original (Figure 7). The engraving shows Franklin's head, shoulders, and part of his upper torso; it dressed him in a spectacles, cloth suit, white neck cloth. St. Aubin publicized the engraving in the *Journal de Paris*, informing his readers that the celebrated man of science and politics had arrived in France. *This* image became immensely popular, appearing on new portraits, medals, prints, watch faces, and other small-size media.³²

The images, as Franklin's son-in-law Richard Bache wrote Franklin "paid more attention to the



Figure 5: Portrait fur cap medallion of Benjamin Franklin, 1777 by Jean Baptiste Nini, <http://www.amphilsoc.org/library/guides/franklin/medallions.htm>; Figure 6 (right): William Hackwood, Josiah Wedgewood White on blue jasperware; Frankliniana Collection, The Franklin Institute, Philadelphia. Source: <http://www.benfranklin300.com/frankliniana/result.php?id=193&sec=0>.

fur-cap than to the Lines of your face." Two and a half years later, the fad continued strong. Franklin wrote his daughter Sally that the image could be seen everywhere, on a variety of objects "of

different sizes; some to be set in lids of snuffboxes and some so small as to be worn in rings; and the numbers sold are incredible. These, with the pictures, busts, and prints (of which copies upon copies are spread

everywhere), has made your father's face as well known as that of the moon."³³

In all, French artists completed at least thirteen oil, watercolor, pen portraits, or drawings of Franklin, some derived from earlier portraits. Innumerable miniatures, in every conceivable media, followed, usually based on one of the portraits. In most of them Franklin strikes a casual pose: one shows him disheveled, reading a book, another wearing a coat with a fur collar, a third with an unbuttoned shirt with ruffled sleeves. Franklin's popularity with the Paris bourgeoisie became even more evident in 1779, when three Franklin portraits—a painting, a sculpture, an engraving—were exhibited at the prestigious Salon (sponsored by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, held annually at the Louvre.)³⁴



Figure 7 (left). St. Aubin, engraving of Franklin, 1777, after Nicholas Cochin drawing <http://www.benfranklin300.com/frankliniana/result.php?id=594&sec=0> . Figure 8 (right): Joseph Siffred Duplessis, Metropolitan Museum of Art, oil painting, c 1778. Source:

http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_Art/viewOne.asp?dep=11&viewmode=1&item=32.100.132 .

The best-known Franklin portrait (Figure 8, 1778-79), by Joseph Siffred Duplessis more accurately portrays Franklin's class position than the fur hat images. It reflects Franklin's daily living at his elegant estate (complete with wine cellar) at Passy and his frequent visits with French scientists and aristocrats and to the salons of the rich and famous. Duplessis first completed a pastel; it shows Franklin wearing a plain, gray outfit, with a white scarf around his neck. The oil painting Duplessis completed from the pastel shows him standing, looking slightly right, and dressed in an refined if simple maroon outfit: a red coat with a fur collar, a red vest, and a white ruffled shirt. Although he wore no wig (his gray hair reaches his shoulders), this outfit marks him as a gentlemen, not as a farmer or artisan; that the oil painting garnered extravagant praise from elite viewers at the 1779 Salon suggests as much. The image was so popular that DuPlessis painted replicas and had engravings made from it; for decades, other artists imitated both versions, in paintings, miniatures and engravings, making it a familiar visage on bourgeois mantelpieces on both sides of the Atlantic.³⁵

Two busts by Jean-Antoine Houdon, sculpted at about the same time, present contrasting representations of Franklin. In both, his hair is brushed over his ears, giving him a sense of serious purpose. One sculpture pictures (Figure 9) Franklin as a Roman nobleman, with aristocratic demeanor and a long cloak or toga. Franklin looks straight ahead, with his long hair brushed completely to the back. Houdon sculpted most of Franklin's upper torso, down to his waist. The cloak hung almost to Franklin's waist, accentuating the classical imagery. The Founders, along with educated Europeans, had a strong interest in classical and republican Rome. Such images well represented Franklin's position as proconsul for the new American republic but had a distinctly undemocratic, hierarchical tinge.

Neither Americans nor the French saw Franklin as an austere Roman. Houdon's second

sculpture (Figure 10), dresses Franklin in eighteenth-century garb. Franklin's hair falls, somewhat carelessly, onto his shoulder, giving the statute a softer look. Houdon sculpted only down to Franklin's chest, allowing viewers to see a small part of his simple shirt, the top button fastened, the bottom two open, giving the appearance of casual dress. Houdon made a number of copies, in various media, of the sculpture, from molds. That many still survive suggests the popularity of this more plebeian representation of Franklin.³⁶

Franklin's class identity appears to be a contradiction wrapped in an enigma. Was he bourgeois? An intellectual? A scientist? A Roman senator? A would-be aristocrat? A wild American? The best example of the American Dream? The images belie a simple interpretation. Examination of *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, which Franklin wrote at Paris in 1784, helps untangle this riddle. Commentators often interpret it as a paean to upward mobility in a middle-class America. But a closer reading suggests, albeit ambiguously, that he sought to attract bourgeois families to America.³⁷

Information aimed at encouraging immigration to the new United States. Franklin wrote the pamphlet, he tells his readers, after many Europeans wrote him about emigrating to America. But they

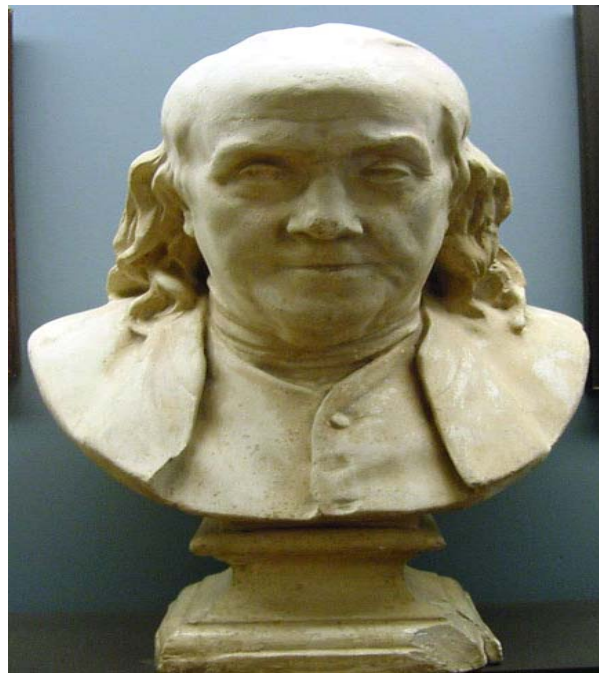
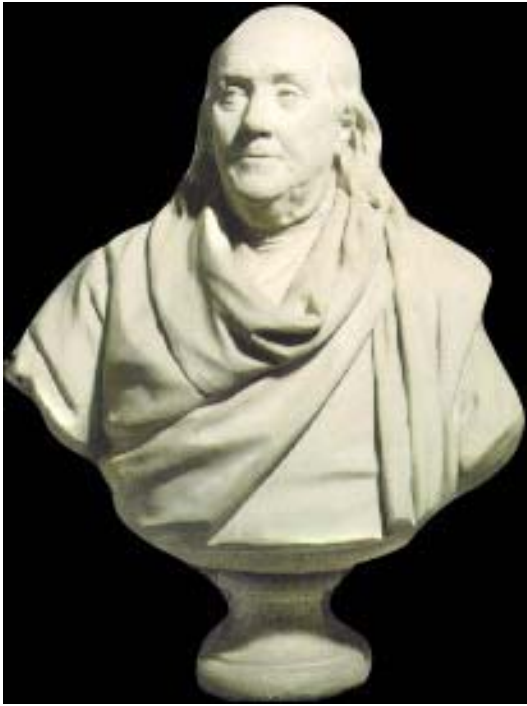


Figure 9 (left): Jean-Antoine Houdon, [ca. 1778] Plaster bust, Boston Athenaeum. Source: <http://www.benfranklin300.com/frankliniana/result.php?id=613&sec=0>. Figure 10 (right): Jean-Antoine Houdon. Peabody Art Collection, eighteenth century, Houdon 1778-79, marble. Source: <http://www.mdarchives.md.us.msa/speccol/sc4600/sc4680/houdon.html/franklin.html>.

had “mistaken Ideas and Expectations of what is to be obtained there.” Franklin posed as an expert on America and strived to give “some clearer and truer Notions of that part of the World” to his readers. He sought to encourage some immigrants, while discouraging less desirable ones.

The pamphlet’s arguments reflect promotional literature, dating back to the sixteenth century. Franklin extolls America as the best poor man’s country, seeks men who will work hard, and tells tales of poor men becoming rich. He contrasts over-populated Europe, where few opportunities existed, with America, with its abundance of free land. America has neither classes of miserable poor people nor those Europeans “called rich; it is rather a general happy Mediocrity that prevails. There are few great Proprietors of the Soil, and few Tenants; most People cultivate their own Lands, or follow some Handicraft or Merchandise; very few rich enough to live idly upon their Rents or Incomes.”

Franklin frames his pamphlet around an anti-aristocratic discourse. Potential immigrants who imagine “that Strangers, possessing Talents in the Belles-Lettres, fine Arts, &c., must be highly esteemed, and so well paid, as to become easily rich themselves” were misinformed. No lucrative offices awaited them nor would fledgling states would not give them “Lands gratis . . . , with Negroes to work for them, Utensils of Husbandry, and Stocks of Cattle. These are all wild Imaginations; and those who go to America with Expectations founded upon them will surely find themselves disappointed.” Nor will America welcome titled men, who have neither talent nor energy for hard labor. “Much less is it adviseable for a Person to go thither,” Franklin argues, “who has no other Quality to recommend him but his Birth. In Europe it has indeed its Value; but it is a Commodity that cannot be carried to a worse Market than that of America, where people do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do? If he has any useful Art, he is welcome; and if he exercises it, and behaves well, he will be respected by all that know him; but a mere Man of Quality, who . . . wants to live upon the Public, by some Office or Salary, will be despis’d and disregarded.”

America admires hard-working men. “The Husbandman is in honor there,” Franklin writes, “and even the Mechanic, because their Employments are useful. The People have a saying, that God Almighty is himself a Mechanic, the greatest in the Universe; and he is respected and admired more for the Variety, Ingenuity, and Utility of his Handyworks, than for the Antiquity of his Family.” He “who could prove . . . that his Ancestors and Relations for ten Generations had been Ploughmen, Smiths, Carpenters, Turners, Weavers, Tanners, or even Shoemakers, and consequently that they were useful Members of Society” is more valued by Americans than a man who “could only prove that they were Gentlemen, doing nothing of Value, but living idly on the Labour of others.”

Does Franklin seek to entice only farmers and artisans? His appears to encourage them above all to immigrate. With vast lands “still void of Inhabitants,” land remains cheap, and a migrant can

buy “an hundred Acres of fertile Soil full of Wood” on the frontier “for Eight or Ten Guineas.” At these places, “hearty young Labouring Men, who understand the Husbandry of Corn and Cattle. . . may easily establish themselves” there. With the “good Wages they receive . . . while they work for others,” they can “buy the Land and begin their Plantation.” With the help of credit and neighbors, “multitudes of poor People from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Germany, have . . . in a few years become wealthy Farmers, who, in their own Countries, where all the Lands are fully occupied, and the Wages of Labour low, could never have emerged from the poor Condition wherein they were born.”

Does Franklin identify the “general happy Mediocrity” of Americans with a middle class or middling sort? A careful reading of his pamphlet belies such an interpretation. Franklin must have known how few migrants could accumulate eight or ten guineas (about \$800 to \$1,000 in 2004 dollars, but \$16,100 to \$20,400, when compared to an unskilled laborer’s wage), much less jump from poverty to riches. Per capital annual income in the colonies was only ten guineas, and it was lower in Britain and Europe.³⁸ The sub-text of the pamphlet encourages those with capital or knowledge to emigrate, people who could engage in manufacturing or commercial farming. Why else would he praise the nine colleges found in America, “all furnish’d with learned Professors; besides a number of smaller Academies; these educate many of their Youth in the Languages, and those Sciences that qualify men for the Professions of Divinity, Law, or Physick.” Middling immigrants, could hardly expect to attend a college or academy, much less become ministers, lawyers, or doctors—but those with connections or family wealth could.

Businessmen and farmers could succeed, if they had money. “Tolerably good Workmen in any . . . mechanic Arts are sure to find Employ, and to be well paid for their Work. . . . If they are poor, they begin first as Servants or Journeymen; and if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon

become Masters, establish themselves Business, marry, raise Families, and become respectable Citizens.” Franklin had gone from an apprenticeship to riches, yet few apprentices or journeymen could follow in Franklin’s footsteps—unless they had money or education. And what about farming? “Persons of moderate Fortunes and Capitals, who, having a Number of Children to provide for,” could “secure Estates for their Posterity.” Here, “small Capitals laid out in Lands, which daily become more valuable by the Increase of People, afford a solid Prospect of ample Fortunes thereafter for those Children.” But who were these “persons of modest fortunes?” If immigrants already had some wealth, their fortunes—small by the standards of aristocratic Europe—would go far in the new United States.

Franklin’s reading of American society fits the middle-class ideal imputed to him. But he misrepresented the new nation’s social structure, class relations, and economic opportunities. Increasing numbers of poor and slaves lived in America, along with the rich, a divided society Franklin had seen on Philadelphia’s streets.³⁹ He equally misleads readers on land acquisition. Productive land, located near markets, was expensive; frontier land titles were in disarray and often a few men or big companies monopolized the best acreage. Rural land wars, moreover, continued to pit small landholders against landlords, lawyers, and merchants.

Why did Franklin mislead readers? Perhaps he believed what he wrote: it is consonant with his 1755 pamphlet on American population, which linked abundant land to unlimited opportunities.⁴⁰ But Franklin, who understood American conditions very well, may have deliberately misinformed readers. A portrayal that emphasized hierarchy, land companies, and frontier difficulties, might not attract ambitious men to the new United States, even those with capital, Franklin’s goal in writing the pamphlet.

Ben Franklin, and the American Dream

The Franklin American school children learn about and popular biographers write about—exemplar of the American Dream of upward mobility; a practical man who presaged our inventiveness, from the electric light bulb to the internet—is hardly the Franklin I have sketched. Americans want Ben to be one of them, not an eighteenth-century Warren Buffet or Bill Gates. To sustain this vision, Americans rework Franklin’s misleading texts, draining irony and ambiguity from them, while reshaping his portraits into a more democratic, middle-class picture.

What Americans know about Franklin is a melange of myths, facts, and images, all mixed up, all pointing to the American Dream. They know that he discovered the electrical nature of lightning and invented the lightning rod; that he wandered into Philadelphia as a teenager with nary a penny to his name but with puffy rolls under his arm; that he worked as a printer; that he made up pithy sayings and published them in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*; that he worked hard and made his fortune by behaving virtuously; and that he was involved in the Revolution.

Americans have long seen images of Franklin as printer, inventor, poor boy made good, and Revolutionary hero. From the early nineteenth century through the present, Franklin has appeared on magazine covers, medals, tokens (private coins), coins, paper money, and stamps, making his face one of the most widely known in the country. Designers of these Franklin images redrew eighteenth-century portraits (especially the Martin, Duplessis, Cochin, and Houdon images in particular) to show these different Franklin roles in a more democratic guise. Roman togas and elegant clothing have almost disappeared, usually replaced by working or middle-class clothing. When artists retain eighteenth-century garb, they use softer colors, which reduces the elegance the original painter or sculptor intended.⁴¹

The *Saturday Evening Post*, once one of the most popular magazines in America, published

twenty-four Franklin covers between 1903 and 1973, because it claimed lineage from Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Two covers deal with printing, four concern Franklin's science; eight reprint proverbs on industry, virtue, and service; nine present writings on politics and war. Covers commemorate the bicentennial of Franklin's birth, the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the bicentennial of the founding of the *Saturday Evening Post*.⁴²

The *Post's* artists strove to portray Franklin as a middle-class American. During the 1940s and 1950s, sixteen of the covers used Houdon's Franklin sculpture in modern dress (Figure 11). The artists reprinted the softer of the two Houdon sculptures, but let his hair fall on his jacket less symmetrically than the sculpture. Franklin quotes appeared in a frame to the right of the Franklin bust. Franklin's gray, somewhat stern and unadorned visage, fit the late 1940s and 1950s; this Franklin could stand for republican truth against Nazi and communist tyranny.

The political covers reprint Franklin quotes, severed from their contexts, to sustain America's fight for democracy in World War II (Figure 11) and unity in the Cold War. In January 1944, with the Allies far from victory, John Atherton's *Post* cover reminded readers that they must defend America's rights, pursue the war vigorously, and—by implication fight for the American Dream, impossible while Nazis and Fascists dominated the world. The quote, taken from a 1775 letter came at another difficult time. The Tory ministry was about to restrict New England's trade, but if colonists boycotted British goods, British merchants and manufacturers would clamor to restore colonial rights. "The Eyes of all Christendon are now upon us," he began, "and our Honor as a People is become a Matter of the utmost Consequence to be taken Care of. If we give up our Rights in this Contest, a Century to come will not restore us in the Opinion of the World. We shall be stamp'd with the Character of Poltroons and Fools. Present Inconveniences are therefore to be borne with Fortitude, and better Times expected."⁴³

Popular images—the printing press, the kite experiment— appear on the other eight covers.

The most fanciful cover, from 1973 (Figure 12) captured Franklin’s ingenuity—and a new American Dream

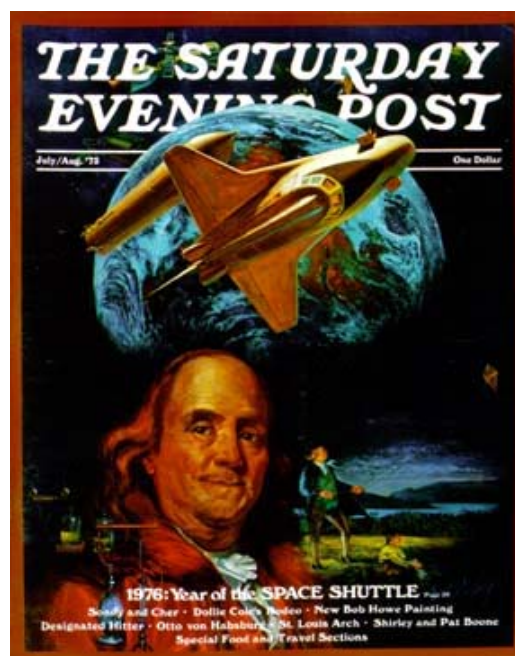
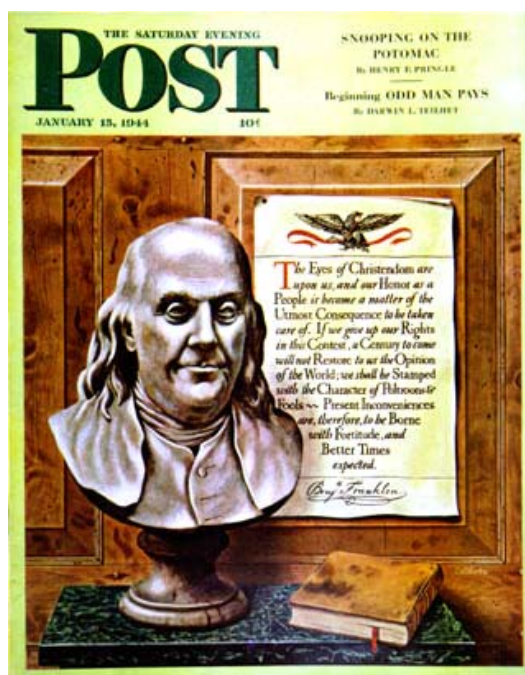


Figure 11 (left): *Saturday Evening Post* Cover, Jan. 15, 1944 by John Atherton. Figure 12 (right): *Saturday Evening Post* by B. Winthrop, July-August 1973. Both at <http://www.curtispublishing.com/gallery/categories/html/Franklin.html>.

of technological success. It shows the space shuttle flying high above the earth. A middle-aged Franklin, perhaps drawn from the Duplessis painting, red hair flowing, appears just below the shuttle. Duplessis drew Franklin’s hair gray and painted his outfit in a duller red-orange color than the magazine cover. On the right side, in a round cartouche, the artist painted Franklin’s kite experiment.

From 1847 through 1953, Franklin busts appeared continuously on regular U.S. postage stamps. Already familiar with Franklin from his writings and popular biographies, Americans—native-born and immigrants alike—bought 80.6 billion Franklin stamps, half of them for one-cent, between 1902 and 1929 alone. Every time a person sent or received a one-cent postcard, they saw Franklin. The post office based most Franklin stamps on Jean Jacques Caffieri’s 1771 bust. Like

Houdon, Caffieri sculpted Franklin down to the chest; he gave Franklin a pensive smile and dressed him in a cloak and a loosely-knotted scarf around his neck. The post office usually printed the stamps in a pastel green, red, yellow, orange, maroon, or brown. The designer changed the bust to show little more than Franklin's head, hiding the elegant clothing he wore. The design and colors softened the statute and turned Franklin into a prosperous-looking, successful, grand fatherly figure. (Figures 13-14).⁴⁴

The post office designed several stamps based on the Houdon statute and the Duplessis painting. The Houdon bust appeared on an 1871 stamp and a 2006 postal card. The 1871 white and pastel blue stamp (Figure 16) showed Franklin's head and a part of his neck. It appears lighter and less severe than the statute, and resembled a grandfather as much as the stamps based on Caffieri's bust. The postal card, which appeared at almost the same time as a commemorative sheet, shows a side view of Franklin's head



Figure 13(left): <http://www.1847usa.com/washfrank/1cFranklinQuickChart.htm> (1908); Figure 14 (right): <http://www.1847usa.com/washfrank/design5/design5main.htm> (1918-20).

and part of his neck. Lacking ornamentation, the bust resembles a coin more than a stamp. Classical male figures, evoking Roman statuary, adorn the frame of the 1902 stamp (figure 15) that reworks the Duplessis painting; the designer printed Franklin's clothing) in a pastel green, rather than the maroon of the original. Duplessis painted most of Franklin's profile, but the stamp includes only the

bust and part of the shoulders, accentuating the fur collar rather than the refined dress below the neck.

The U.S. Postal Service issued commemorative stamps nine times between 1947 and 2006. The designers borrowed eighteenth century portraits to evoke images of Franklin that symbolize the American Dream. In as far as they place him in the social order, they make him a printer or tinkerer. They honor Franklin for his electrical experiments, work as a printer, post office founding, political philosophy, and politic (his signing of the Declaration of Independence and negotiating the Treaty of Paris).⁴⁵



Figure 15 (left) http://www.physik.uni-frankfurt.de/~jr/gif/stamps/sm_franklin2.jpg (1902); Figure 16 (right) <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA04/hopper/Postal/modern.html> (1871).

In 2006 the Postal service released four Franklin stamps, in honor of the tri-centennial of his birth (Figure 17). One celebrates Franklin as statesman; it includes images of the Declaration of Independence (which Franklin helped edit), the 1778 Franco-American treaty (which Franklin negotiated), and Franklin's 1754 "Join or Die" cartoon (which urged—with no success—colonial unity during the French and Indian War). A second stamp honors Franklin as scientist but evokes more his reputation as an inventor than as the best natural scientist of his age. It reprints a romantic nineteenth-century Currier and Ives print of the electrical kite experiment and the "magic squares" from his pamphlet on electricity and shows a young Franklin working at his desk. The third stamp,

which commemorates Franklin's life as a printer, shows him in a printer's smock—a pose that never appears in a contemporary portrait. It pictures the 1733 *Poor Richard's Almanac* and a 1729 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The final stamp memorializes Franklin's founding of the U. S Post Office, including Franklin's franking signature, a 1775 postal cover from Marlboro, Maryland, and a Charles Wilson Peale portrait, copied from the 1767 Martin 1767 (Figure 3).⁴⁶

Americans could read the 2006 stamps as the story of Franklin's pursuit of the American dream. It began in the print shop, where Franklin, in plebeian dress, worked hard publishing newspapers and books the public wanted to read. Having made money, he buy elegant clothes, but he did not waste time in leisure. Rather, he invented things that made life safer and easier and organized the post office, which



Figure 17: 2006 U.S. Postal Service commemorative stamps honoring the tricentennial of Franklin's birth. Source: http://www.usps.com/communications/news/stamps/2006/sr06_004.htm.

sped business communication. This practicality, an American trait that—along with hard work—

guaranteed success, served him well in his political career. His greatest political successes came because of his practical desire to unify the colonies and achieve independence.

Franklin's kite experiment has long been a powerful icon of American inventiveness. It is the subject of two famous paintings; it has been the centerpiece of nineteenth-century bank notes, science web sites, children's biographies, a Bugs Bunny cartoon, and children's school projects. Benjamin West's fanciful 1817 painting, "Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky," shows a white-haired Franklin dressed in a blowing red cape surrounded by cherubs; a 1956 stamp celebrating Franklin's 250th birthday reproduces that painting (Figure 18). A later Currier and Ives print, reproduced a 2006 commemorative (Figure 17), depicts Franklin and his son making the experiment.⁴⁷

Successful business people, exemplars of the American Dream, often appropriate Franklin's name, image, and words. His life symbolizes the virtuous businessman: upwardly mobile, inventive, forward-looking, ethical. "Benjamin Franklin, the Punctual Plumber," a company begun in 2000, has franchisees found in twenty states. It chose the name after a market survey determined that "customers see plumbers as honest, frugal, and hardworking," images that Franklin embodies. The company's logo—a smiling, bespeckled Franklin, wearing work clothes and holding a pipe wrench—appears on its ads and trucks (Figure 17). The organization emulates Franklin. They dub their operations manual "Ben's Big Book" and call their franchiser organization the Junto, named after the artisan club that Franklin founded in 1727. President Ellen Rorh particularly models herself on Franklin. She willingly served on a jury when called, thinking all the while "what would Ben think if I had shirked my jury duty." Franklin's portrait graces her office wall. "He is," she reports, "part of the team. He was a scholar, an inventor, a politician, a businessman. He retired from the printing business a millionaire at age 42. That was in 1748, when a million dollars really meant something!"⁴⁸



Figure 18 (left), U. S. Postage Stamp, 250th anniversary of his birth. Source: <http://www.kitelifelife.com/archives/issue38/benfranklin38/index.htm> ; Figure 19 (right): Punctual Plumber truck. Source: <http://www.benjaminfranklinplumbing.net>.

Why do Americans Adhere to Franklin's American Dream?

Historians will not persuade educated Americans that Franklin exemplified a newly-born bourgeoisie, much less that his American Dream is dead. Franklin, they know, was a man of the people who achieved the American Dream they crave. He rose from humble beginnings—but he never lost his pride in craftsmanship and his identity with lowly workers. His democratic instincts, his unfaltering work for independence makes this poor boy made good an emblem of national unity and representative government. Franklin thereby symbolizes what middle class Americans think is best about themselves, their neighbors, their country, and the world.

Americans savor Franklin's story because they need to believe its truth—in the face diminished opportunity. It has so long been a part of the American ethos, held by everyone from Abraham Lincoln (in a speech before the Wisconsin Agricultural Society) to Jewish immigrants that disbelief is inconceivable. (Of course, immigrants found rags-to-riches stories untrue). Pollsters have long asked Americans if they “think it's still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and

become rich” —a definition of the American Dream that Franklin would recognize. In 1983, nearly three-fifths thought it possible; during the 1990s and 2005, between 70 and 84 percent agreed.⁴⁹

In April 2006, *Parade Magazine*—a supplement found in Sunday newspapers, with a circulation of 32.7 million and a readership of 76.8 million (three-tenths of the U.S. population, age ten and older)—published an article entitled “Is the American Dream Still Possible?” The article connected the middle class (families with incomes between \$25,000 or \$30,000 and \$100,000) to the American Dream, to “living well and having financial security,” the “belief that hardworking citizens can better their lives, pay their monthly bills without worry, give their children a start to an even better life and still save enough to live comfortably after they retire.” Four fifths of the 2,203 respondents in a random-sample poll *Parade* commissioned thought that “it is still possible to achieve the American Dream” and more (84 percent) described themselves as “middle class.”⁵⁰

Even as they adhere to the American Dream, many Americans face economic stress—the *Parade* article reported stagnant salaries, the lowest savings rate for three-quarters of a century, expensive (or non-existent) health insurance, rising housing and college costs, unbearable levels of personal debt. They had not achieved the American Dream: two-thirds lived “from paycheck to paycheck”; nearly half reported that “no matter how hard they work, they cannot get ahead”; and more than four-fifths had little “money left to save after they have paid bills.” Over half report that their economic condition exceeds their parents’, but an equal number fear their children will not do as well.⁵¹

Americans think economic conditions have worsened. In August 2006, the Pew Research Center asked 2,003 Americans to compare work conditions and opportunity with that of twenty or thirty years ago, for themselves and for typical Americans. Three-fifths worked harder; a sixth thought they earned too little, and a quarter thought job opportunities had gotten worse for most

Americans. Two-thirds thought work life had deteriorated over that time: half reported their “retirement benefits . . . are not as good” and the same number thought employer-sponsored health care worse for most Americans. The respondents most often blamed outsourcing of American jobs (77 percent thought it had hurt workers and three-tenths thought their jobs at risk for outsourcing), the growing number of immigrants (55 percent), and the decline in union membership (47 percent) for their plight.⁵²

Respondents to the two polls so wanted to believe the American Dream that Franklin exemplified that they ignored their own plight. Their wages might be too low, their neighbors might be poorer than decades ago, but anyone can still succeed. How do Americans reconcile diminished opportunities with adherence to the American Dream? They could explain the contradiction by looking at the failure to raise minimum wages or the reduction of union rights, as do liberal economists like Princeton professor and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman. Although Americans do agree, the *Parade* poll discovered, that businesses have not honored their responsibility to employees, few agree with Krugman.⁵³

Instead, Americans take responsibility for their own failures. Three-quarters of the respondents in the Pew Poll thought that (compared to two or three decades ago) the “average working person” had to “improve work skills to keep up with” foreign competition. Two-fifths thought they needed more education or training, even though nearly three in four had already completed courses. And three-quarters of the middle-class respondents to the *Parade* poll said that “they take responsibility for their own financial destiny and believe that they will succeed or fail based on their own efforts.”⁵⁴

Parade set up a blog about the article and 242 people emailed comments about the “American Dream.” Nearly all agreed about the poor financial condition of many Americans—but they disagreed

about its causes. Close to half, more than double the percentage of those polled, thought the American Dream dead. A quarter of these respondents told personal tales of stress and financial woes. No matter how hard they tried, they could not save money, buy a house, or send their children to college; those who had succeeded feared their children would not be as lucky. They explained their predicament in a number of ways. A third contrasted high prices for necessities, health care, and housing with poor benefits and stagnant or falling wages. But what was responsible for these prices? More than two-fifths pointed to a culprit: corporate venality (a sixth), outsourcing and free trade (a twelfth), illegal immigrants (four percent), conservatives (seven percent), or liberals (six percent).⁵⁵

Those who thought the dream alive reveled in their success. A seventh told stories of how they achieved the American Dream. Several explained that they had little income, yet managed to save for retirement, support poorer family members, and even tithe their church. Others, numbering a fifth, shared ways to make money, through wise investment, self employment (such as setting up home businesses), or finding internet business opportunities. Some urged readers get a financial education. Many preached the virtues of hard work, savings, frugality, and not buying luxuries—much as Franklin had done 250 years earlier. Six bloggers concluded that the state should keep out of economic activity, thereby allowing Americans to make money and achieve their dreams.

At the same time, these bloggers criticized those who failed. Anyone can make it in America if they pursue education, work hard, stay within their means, forego luxuries, and stop whining! Close to half of them argued that those who failed had either bought unnecessary babbles—two or three cars, multiple cell phones, expensive cable TV packages, high definition television sets, mp3 players—or lacked the initiative necessary to succeed. They deemed personal responsibility, not reliance on employers or government, essential for success. Smaller numbers pointed to liberal economic policies, high taxes, or immigrants as impediments to success, but still thought that they

could be overcome.

Those who adhere to the American Dream sometimes appear profoundly contradictory: they admit that many Americans (and sometimes themselves or their children) have not lived the American Dream. They themselves have rarely attained riches. Only by redefining the American dream, by reducing the criteria for economic success could they adhere to the dream and acknowledge economic realities as well. About one in thirteen redefined the American Dream, to encompass liberty, good health, the freedom to choose, or a stable and loving family life. Such redefinitions obscure the economic opportunity to succeed (and the reality of success) central to the American Dream.

Other respondents expressed ambiguity about the American Dream. Listen to Cynthia Singh of Lake Wales, Florida. In the past, she writes “with determination and hard work one could realize the American dream. She and her husband “are living the American dream” but she is “not sure it will remain possible for my children and most likely will be impossible for my grandchildren.” She blames the government for “the influx of cheap illegal labor, cheap foreign goods, and the outsourcing of American jobs” that is ending the American dream. Her solution: secure borders, ending illegal immigration, and electing a government that represents the people not “big business and illegal aliens.”

How can we reconcile academic knowledge with popular understanding of Benjamin Franklin and his (and our) American dream? Franklin’s story is central to perceptions widely-shared by Americans. After granting Franklin’s great success (he *did* rise from humble origins to riches), we might explain structural features that aided his success: that his brother was a printer, that patrons in Philadelphia aided his rise, that he behaved ruthlessly on his rise as the most prominent printer in Philadelphia. Few Americans have had his advantages. Once admitting that Franklin espoused

democratic ideals, we might contrast his extravagant live style and his attendance at elegant Salons in Paris with his deliberately-constructed persona as a wild American. When we point to these ambiguities in Franklin's life, we suggest how special, how unique Franklin's experience was, a point that might lead to gradual revisions in the myth of the "American Dream" itself.

1. For the issues raised in this essay, see Allan Kulikoff "The Founding Fathers: Best Sellers! TV Stars! Punctual Plumbers!" *Journal of the Historical Society* 5 (2005) 155-87; and Kulikoff, "Electric Ben: Franklin and Popular History," *Journal of the Historical Society* 4 (2004): 211-44 . I have revised some material from these essays for this one; I have footnoted direct quotes and essential secondary works. Quote: Gordon S. Wood, "Slaves in the Family," *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 14, 2003, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/14/books/review/14WOODLT.html>.
2. Raoul de Roussy de Sales, "What Makes an American," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1939, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/39mar/desales.htm>;
3. David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001, on the *New York Times* non-fiction bestseller list for more than a year); Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, half a year).
4. Sam Weinberg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), vii-ix. Dianne Ravitch and Cheste F. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).
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10. Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past & Present*, no. 71 (1976): 30-75.
11. C. B. McPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
12. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1963) is the best exemplar of this approach.
13. Bernard Bailyn, *To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders* (New York: Knopf, 2003), chap. 3; Isaacson, *Franklin*, 30-31, 112, 124.
14. Isaacson, *Franklin*, 447-55.

15. Nian Sheng Huang., *Franklin's Father Josiah: Life of a Boston Tallow Chandler, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, ns 90: 3 (Philadelphia: APS, 2000): 13-25, 47, 52, 55-62, 71-83, 95, 99-101, 105, 127-31, 149. Huang would not accept my interpretation of his evidence.

16. Isaacson, *Franklin*, 124 but see also 112, 149, 234-35, 259, 266, 295, 422-25, 476, 480, 485-86, 493, 532; Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 260.

17. *Plain Truth: or, Serious Considerations On the Present State of the City of Philadelphia, and Province of Pennsylvania. By a Tradesman of Philadelphia.* (Philadelphia, 1747), *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* digitized by the Packard Humanities Institute at <http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp> (Hereafter cited as *Franklin Papers*. Quotes from this text in succeeding paragraphs come from this source.

18. Richard Peters to the Proprietaries, Letterbook copy, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Nov 29 1747, *Franklin Papers* at <http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp>.

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