

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
Postmaster General
July 26, 1775, to November 1776



Benjamin Franklin, by Benedict Anton Osnis, 1919
The Pennsylvania Postmasters' Association gave this 7-foot oil portrait of Benjamin Franklin to the Postal Service in 1919. It is currently on display in the Office of the Postmaster General at USPS Headquarters in Washington, DC.

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 17, 1706, and left school at age 10 to work in his father's candle shop.¹ In 1718 the 12-year-old Franklin apprenticed to his brother James, a printer, who started the Boston newspaper the *New England Courant* in 1721. Young Benjamin read voraciously, contributed anonymous articles to his brother's newspaper, and even published the paper for a time when his brother was imprisoned for a political offense. However, fraternal relations deteriorated and, at age 17, Ben ran away. He ended up in Philadelphia with little money and slim prospects but quickly found work as a printer. By 1728, he had his own print shop and, shortly thereafter, purchased *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. In 1732, he first published *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which was wildly successful and secured his fortune.

Postal Career under Great Britain

Franklin's postal career began in 1737, when Alexander Spotswood, Deputy Postmaster General of America under the British, appointed Franklin as postmaster of Philadelphia. In Franklin's day, newspaper printers often served as postmasters, which helped them to gather and distribute news. More importantly, postmasters decided which newspapers could travel free in the mail — or if they could travel by mail at all. Philadelphia's previous postmaster, who printed a rival newspaper, had barred Franklin's *Gazette* from the mails. In his autobiography, Franklin observed that he accepted the job of postmaster "readily, and found it of great advantage; for, tho' the salary was small, it facilitated the correspondence that improv'd my newspaper, increas'd the number demanded, as well as the advertisements to be inserted, so that it came to afford me a considerable income."²

Postmaster General Elliott Benger (1743–1753) added to Franklin's duties by making him comptroller with financial

oversight over neighboring Post Offices. When Benger's health failed, Franklin lobbied the British for the job of Postmaster General of America. On August 10, 1753, he and William Hunter of Virginia became joint Postmasters General for the Crown.

As joint Postmaster General, Franklin surveyed post roads and Post Offices, introduced a simple accounting method for postmasters, and had riders carry mail by night as well as day, speeding service. He encouraged postmasters to establish the penny post, a British idea he had implemented while postmaster of Philadelphia, whereby letters not called for at the Post Office were delivered for a penny. He also ordered postmasters to print in newspapers the names of people who had letters waiting for them. Remembering his own experiences as a printer and postmaster, Franklin instructed postmasters to admit all newspapers to the mail for a small fee. Thanks in part to Franklin's efforts, the British Crown Post in North America registered its first profit in 1760.

In 1757, while still serving as joint Postmaster General, Franklin went to London, where he represented the government of Pennsylvania. In 1763, back in the colonies, Franklin began an extensive survey of post roads and Post Offices from Virginia to New England. Putting an odometer on the axle of his carriage, he personally measured distances between Post Offices, travelling approximately 1,600 miles.

In 1764, Franklin returned to London, where he represented the interests of several colonial governments. A decade later, in 1774, Benjamin Franklin was dismissed as joint Postmaster General for the Crown because he was judged too sympathetic to the colonies.

First Postmaster General under the Continental Congress

Back on American soil in 1775, Franklin was part of the Second Continental Congress and served on many committees, including one to establish an independent postal system. On July 26, 1775, the Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin the first Postmaster General of the organization now known as the United States Postal Service. Franklin received an annual salary of \$1,000 plus \$340 for a secretary and comptroller. He was responsible for all Post Offices — “from Falmouth in New England to Savannah in Georgia” — and had authority to hire as many postmasters as he saw fit.³

Founding Father of a New Nation

In the summer of 1776, Franklin worked with the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. In the fall, he left for Paris to secure French support for the war with England. Franklin entrusted the General Post Office to his son-in-law, Richard Bache, who was comptroller and his second in command. Benjamin Franklin's tenure as Postmaster General officially ended when Bache was appointed Postmaster General on November 7, 1776.

Renowned for his scientific discoveries, Benjamin Franklin was by all accounts the most highly respected American in Europe and served the colonies well with his skilled diplomacy. The treaty of alliance he negotiated with France in 1778 proved vital to the success of the American Revolution. After the war, Franklin helped negotiate the peace treaty with Great Britain, which was signed on September 3, 1783.

In 1785, Franklin returned to Philadelphia. He attended the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and lived to see the adoption of the Constitution of the United States of America in May 1789. Less than a year later, on April 17, 1790, Benjamin Franklin died.

A postal pioneer, printer, writer, statesman, and diplomat, Franklin also was renowned as a civic leader, scientist, and inventor. He helped establish a library, fire company, college, philosophical society, militia for civil defense, and hospital, and he helped improve streets and street lighting in the city of Philadelphia. His scientific contributions included a study of electricity and lightning, theories of heat absorption, and the measurement of the Gulf Stream, and he invented the lightning rod, bifocals, and the Franklin stove. Near the end of his life, Franklin served as president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and worked to end slavery.⁴

Centuries later, Franklin remains an internationally recognized figure, undiminished by time. In 1938, biographer Carl Van Doren wrote:

In any age, in any place, Franklin would have been great. ... He moved through the world in a humorous mastery of it. ... [N]umerous as his achievements were, they were less than he was. ... And sometimes, with his marvelous range, in spite of his personal tang, he seems to have been more than any single man: a harmonious human multitude.⁵



To learn more about Benjamin Franklin:

Butler, Ruth Lapham. *Doctor Franklin, Postmaster General*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1928. 200 pp.

Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, John Bigelow, editor. Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1868 (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006522947>). 409 pp.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959–. <https://franklinpapers.org/>.

Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003. 590 pp.

Morgan, Edmund S. *Benjamin Franklin*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002. 339 pp.

Van Doren, Carl. *Benjamin Franklin*. New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1957. 845 pp.

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¹ Benjamin Franklin was born on January 17, 1706, according to the current, Gregorian calendar. He was born on January 6, 1705, under the old, Julian calendar.

² Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, John Bigelow, editor (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1868), 247, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006522947> (accessed July 27, 2021).

³ *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1905), 2:208.

⁴ “Benjamin Franklin’s Anti-Slavery Petitions to Congress,” The Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/franklin> (accessed July 27, 2021).

⁵ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1957), 782.