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Domesticity: The Human Side of Benjamin Franklin

Michael Sletcher

Over the years Benjamin Franklin has been the subject of countless biographies. As one of America's leading founding fathers, his popularity as a historical subject should not surprise us; he was, after all, a significant figure who embodied the values of not only the eighteenth century but America's future. Franklin, in other words, personified the ideals of free enterprise found in nineteenth and twentieth-century America—the possibility of great achievement and worldly success through natural ability and hard work, or what we call “the American dream.” His contributions to science, politics, and civic life have been applauded by each succeeding generation, and with the arrival of the 2006 Franklin tercentenary, we are reminded of them once again. Yet there is another—more human—side of this great revolutionary hero, which is equally interesting but less well known to the public: Franklin the husband and father.

Marriage

When reading Franklin's *Autobiography*, one gets to know its author quite well, at least inasmuch as he wants us to know him, or as he would like to present himself to posterity. What is curious, however, is that his family is absent or simply alluded to as a device to keep the focus on himself. There is no mention at all of his only daughter, Sally;



In 1778, the ladies of France welcomed Benjamin Franklin, who arrived to negotiate for French aid. Here, Diana Polignac places a wreath on Franklin's head while Princesse Lamballe presents him with flowers. (“Franklin's Reception at the Court of France, 1778,” lithograph by Anton Hohenstein. Image courtesy of the Records of the Commission of Fine Arts, 1893 - 1981, National Archives and Records Administration, NWDNS-66-G-15B-5.)

his illegitimate son, William, to whom Benjamin initially framed the *Autobiography* in the form of a letter, is mentioned only casually; his wife, Deborah Read Franklin, appears only a few times, and it is hard to find any flattering remarks about her character, other than she was an industrious woman and good business partner.

Franklin's initial mention of Deborah in the *Autobiography* occurs when he first arrived in Philadelphia, where the young Miss Read spotted him from the doorstep of her father's house. As he learned later, she thought he made “a most awkward” and “ridiculous appearance.” She is next mentioned when Franklin was lodging at her parents' house. He began to court Deborah not long before embarking on a voyage to London, where he planned to advance his career, and they agreed to marry after he returned, or as he described it in the *Autobiography*, “Having taken leave of my friends, and interchang'd some promises

with Miss Read, I left Philadelphia . . .”

Franklin spent almost two years in London, where, unlike the proverbial characters of *Poor Richard's Almanack* or the Franklin known for his Thirteen Virtues, he enjoyed slumming it, spending a good part of “my earnings,” as he confessed, “in going to plays and other places of

amusement." While in London, he also forgot about his engagement to Deborah, "to whom I never wrote more than one letter, and that was to let her know I was not likely soon to return." He eventually did return and was not surprised to learn that Deborah, during his absence, had married another man. The match, though, proved disastrous. Her husband, a man named Rogers, left the country a year later and was never heard from again. Deborah's decision to marry, in a sense, provided Franklin with some relief, or as he conceded, "I should have been as much ashamed at seeing Miss Read, had not her friends, despairing with reason of my return after the receipt of my letter, persuaded her to marry another, Rogers, a potter, which was done in my absence . . . He was a worthless fellow, tho' an excellent workman, which was the temptation."

This last sentence perhaps gives us more insight into Deborah's character than any other in the *Autobiography*: she was looking for security and stability. Upon his return to Philadelphia, so, too, was Franklin. He quickly established a printing house and he began to pursue another woman. The courtship with this nameless woman was short and calculated—a business arrangement, so to speak—or as he later recalled:

Mrs. Godfrey projected a match for me with a relation's daughter, took opportunities of bringing us often together, until a serious courtship on my part ensued, the girl being in herself very deserving. The old folks encouraged me by continual invitations to supper, and by leaving us together, till at length it was time to explain. Mrs. Godfrey managed our little treaty. I let her know that I expected as much money with their daughter as would pay off my remaining debt for the printing-house, which I believe was not then above a hundred pounds. She brought me word they had no such sum to spare; I said they might mortgage their house in the loan-office. The answer to this, after some days, was, that they did not approve the match; that . . . they had been informed the printing business was not a profitable one . . . and, therefore, I was forbidden the house, and the daughter shut up.

Shortly after this episode, Franklin had a few sexual liaisons "with low women that fell in my way." He also turned his attention to finding another woman to be his wife and set his sights on Deborah again. He pitied "Miss Read's unfortunate situation," as he described it in the *Autobiography*, "who was generally dejected, seldom cheerful, and avoided company." He bore some of the blame for her situation and, after renewing their affections, they were married in a civil union on September 1, 1730. Deborah proved to be "a good and faithful helpmate," who "assisted me much by attending the shop; we thrived together, and have ever mutually endeavored to make each other happy."

Since they were both looking for stability in their relationship, it is not surprising that they thrived together. Benjamin was looking for a business partner and knew he was "lucky" to find a wife "as much disposed to Industry and Frugality as myself." She assisted him cheerfully in the printing shop and general store, and together they acquired a small fortune. On more than one occasion, Franklin complimented his wife on her frugality and industry, while she expressed gratitude at their domestic situation and promised never to complain when he was about to take yet another voyage to London, where he spent fifteen of the last twenty years of their marriage. During their separation, husband and wife corresponded on a regular basis, discussing the children and grandchildren, friends and relations, financial matters, or

Benjamin's latest social gathering, but overall there was little else to write about. They were content with their pragmatic arrangement and Franklin went about his business in London while Deborah looked after family and financial matters in Philadelphia.

If there was one particular event that exemplified this practical understanding, it was Deborah's defense of the Franklin home during the Stamp Act crisis of 1765. While mobs roamed the streets of Philadelphia, attacking the houses of suspected supporters of the unpopular tax, Deborah, knowing that her husband was suspected of supporting it, prepared to defend their household. She refused to leave the house—as advised by her son William—and sent her only daughter Sally with William to New Jersey. A brother and nephew arrived with guns, as she informed her husband shortly after the incident, and "we turned one room into a magazine. I ordered some sort of defence upstairs, such as I could manage myself . . ." A month and a half later, Benjamin laconically expressed little concern for Deborah's well being: "I honour much the Spirit and Courage you show'd," he remarked, "and the Prudent Preparations you made in that [Time] of Danger. The [Woman] deserves a good [House] that [is] determined to defend it."

Was Franklin simply a pragmatist, as some of his critics have claimed, devoid of sentimentality? On the contrary, in his correspondence with other women he occasionally demonstrated a more romantic side. In 1755, for example, he wrote to Catharine Ray, a young lady whom he recently met in Rhode Island, and whom he liked to call "Catty":

[S]ince you promis'd to send me Kisses in [the] Wind, and I find you as good as your Word, it is to me the gayest Wind that blows, and gives me the best Spirits. I write this during a N[orth] East Storm of Snow, the greatest we have had this Winter: Your Favours come mix[e]d with the Snowy Fleeces which are pure as your Virgin Innocence, white as your lovely Bosom, —and as cold:— But let it warm to some Worthy young Man, and may Heaven bless you both with every kind of Happiness.

Although he obviously enjoyed flirting with Catty, he saw himself not as her lover, but as a father figure. He took on the same role with Mary Hewson, the daughter of his landlady in London, and his letters to her reveal a more intimate side than those to his wife. In one letter, for example, he concluded with, "Adieu, my dearest Child: I will call you so; Why should I not call you so, since I love you with all the Tenderness, all the Fondness of a Father?" In another letter, he added a postscript to Dolly Blunt, a mutual friend of theirs, in which he wrote, "I love you more than you can imagine. Yours most sincerely, B[enjamin] Franklin."

The Franklins, unlike John and Abigail Adams, seldom used the word "love" in their correspondence. And when they did, it was used as a noun, not a verb. "Send my love to the children," Benjamin wrote in one letter. In another, he wrote, "My love to our friends"; in another, "My love to all Pennsylvania," and he ended the letter with, "I am as ever, Dear Debby, your affectionate husband, B[enjamin] Franklin." This was the standard complimentary close to all of Franklin's letters to his wife, except for where he ended a few with "your loving [or 'ever loving'] husband." He sent his love to the children and grandchildren, to friends and relations, and even to Pennsylvania, but never to his wife. She was always "dear Debby" or "dear child," except in that one surviving letter of April 28, 1774, in which he addressed her, "My dear love." By then, however, he had not heard from Deborah in five months and was concerned about her long silence, which lasted another three months.

Did he choose to ignore the signs, or was he truly unaware that

Deborah was dying? In 1769, she had suffered a stroke and her health was declining rapidly. She complained little about her predicament but the signs were there. Her body and mind were failing. In 1771, Franklin, who had always praised his wife's frugality and management of their affairs, uncharacteristically censured Deborah for her handling of their accounts and suggested that she was squandering the inheritance of their progeny:

You were not very attentive to Money-Matters in your best Days, and I apprehend that your Memory is too much impaired for the Management of unlimited Sums without Danger of injuring the Future Fortune of your Daughter and Grandson.

Deborah must have taken his rebuke seriously, for she began to send receipts of her expenditures until he finally asked her to send only an occasional account of the larger expenses. Within a year, he gave power of attorney to Richard Bache, his daughter's husband, and Deborah approved by saying that she was no longer "able to walk about" and that her memory was now very poor. Benjamin made no comment about her declining health, responding instead two months later with a description of his four-week tour in the north of England, "which has given a new Spring to my Health and Spirits." In subsequent correspondence, he continued largely to ignore Deborah's remarks about her frail condition and her questions about his return. Impervious to his wife's declining health, Franklin reminisced on the eve of his sixty-seventh birthday about their happy lives together, reminding Deborah that they still had great reason to be thankful "that so great a Share of Health and Strength remains, as to render Life yet comfortable."

In February 1775, Franklin received a letter from his son William announcing Deborah's death.

A month later, sailing back to America, he remarked tersely in his *Journal of the Negotiations in London* that his wife's death had required him to speed up the talks so he could take over the management of his affairs in Philadelphia. His matter-of-fact statement was revealing in its absence of emotion. It encapsulated not only his but Deborah's sentiments about why they were compatible together. Their marriage, as explained in the *Autobiography* and surviving letters, was a calculated, business-like arrangement. Both benefitted from the union in a pragmatic way but they had grown worlds apart, spiritually as well as physically. Benjamin, the runaway tradesman, had become a world-famous scientist and statesman while Deborah, the provincial and barely literate woman, was still that. He enjoyed traveling while she had a fear of

the ocean. He possessed wit and charm, she, neither. And yet, her labor at home allowed him to pursue his diplomatic career in London.

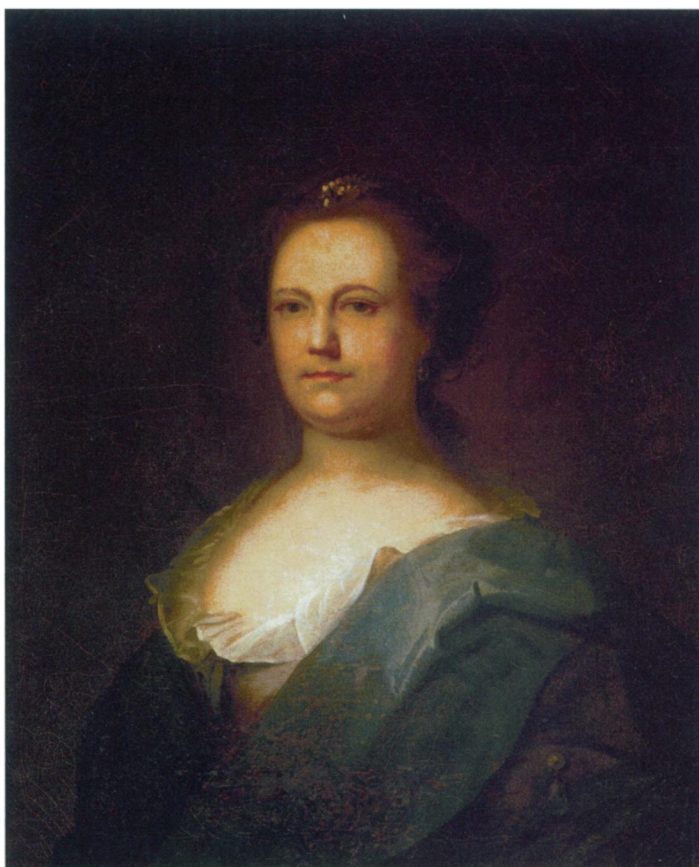
Although Franklin did not mention Deborah in any of his letters the year following her death, and seldom thereafter, there can be no doubt that he had a profound respect and admiration for his late wife. In a letter to Bethia Alexander, June 24, 1782, he gave some fatherly advice to the young lady about frugality, "an enriching . . . Virtue I never could acquire myself; but I was once lucky enough to find it in a Wife, who therefore became a Fortune to me." His use of the words "enriching" and "Fortune" underscored what he thought of his late wife: she was "a good and faithful helpmate."

Children

Franklin had two children with Deborah. Francis was the first but he died at the age of four. Sally, the second, was born in October 1743, thirteen years after the civil union. Franklin, however, had another child before he married Deborah—a son named William, the product of one of his youthful indiscretions with an unknown woman in Philadelphia. British Common Law did not recognize the legitimacy of a child born out of wedlock, but Deborah and he took in the boy and raised him as their own.

It is not known when William learned about his illegitimacy but he certainly knew about it at a young age; his father's political enemies never let him forget it. What is perhaps more revealing, however, is that Deborah apparently did not like the child. One of the Franklin's great-granddaughters recorded that Deborah did not approve of bringing William into the Franklin household, but "the tenderness of her husband towards herself at last overcame her objections and her only child, [Sally], was brought up to call him brother." Daniel Fisher, a clerk working in the Franklin household when William was in his twenties, affirmed this view. He

wrote in his diary that he had been forewarned about discord in the Franklin household, which proved to be well-founded. Deborah and William, according to Fisher, were not on speaking terms and she accused her husband of "having too great an esteem for his son in prejudice of herself and daughter . . . , for whom it was visible Mr. Franklin had no less esteem than for his own son." One day, as Fisher sat with Deborah in the house, William walked by, leading her to exclaim, "Mr. Fisher, there goes the greatest villain on earth." The clerk was greatly confounded, but this "did not hinder her from pursuing her invectives in the foulest terms" Fisher "ever heard from a gentlewoman."



Deborah Read Franklin, portrait by Benjamin Wilson, ca. 1758-1759 (Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Collection, American Philosophical Society.)

William's childhood evidently was not the happiest, but he received lots of attention from his father and was given advantages that Benjamin had not enjoyed as a child. Father and son were inseparable and traveled together to England. There William met Elizabeth Downes, the wealthy daughter of a Barbadian planter, and married her in 1762. That same year he received the royal governorship of New Jersey, largely through his father's influence.

As a married man and governor of New Jersey, William began to assert himself. This growing independence eventually climaxed as fighting broke out between the colonies and the mother country in 1775. Father and son met at Joseph Galloway's estate in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to discuss the impending crisis, and Franklin attempted to persuade his son to join the side of the revolutionaries. William did not budge and made the argument for loyalty, warning his father that if he "designed to set the Colonies in a flame," he had better take care and run away by the light of it. They met again later that year, but both were taciturn and the elder Franklin kept the visit short. As his daughter-in-law wrote, she and William hoped Benjamin would stay longer, "but Papa was anxious to get home."

In a war that divided fathers and sons, brothers, and neighbors, William was to pay a much larger cost than his father for following his conscience: he was arrested shortly before the signing of the Declaration of Independence and placed in a Connecticut prison; he lost his wife whom he later said had died of "a broken heart"; and his property and most of his possessions were confiscated. Benjamin, who certainly knew about his son's arrest and confinement, made no mention of it in his correspondence; nor did he do anything to improve the conditions of William's confinement. Even after his daughter-in-law pleaded with him to intercede, he did nothing. Benjamin did act, however, when William Temple Franklin, William's illegitimate son, announced that he planned to visit his father in prison. Franklin admonished the teenager, who reluctantly obeyed his grandfather, as his father had instructed him to do on the day of his imprisonment.

When William was exchanged as a prisoner of war in 1778, he moved to New York City and sailed to England in 1782, an exile from his native land. "I must resign myself," he wrote, "for the remaining Days of my Existence to that Solitary State which is most repugnant to my Nature." William's health had also deteriorated, the American artist and patriot Patience Wright reported to Franklin in early 1783, adding that he "looks old."



The artist Jean Leon Gerome Ferris depicted Benjamin Franklin's return to Philadelphia from Europe. Franklin's daughter Sarah, her husband, and their son join others in welcoming Franklin. Two African American porters prepare a sedan chair to transport him. Ferris created a series of commemorative interpretations of early American development called "The Pageant of a Nation," published by the The Foundation Press, Inc., c. 1932. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-9906.)

For eight years father and son had not spoken or corresponded, and another year passed before William wrote to his father, declaring that he had been anxious to revive "that affectionate Intercourse and Connection which . . . had been the Pride and Happiness of my Life." William, though, did not apologize for his past actions but rather affirmed that he had acted with a clear conscience and would likely act the same way under similar circumstances. The following month, Benjamin responded to William's overture of reconciliation and declared that he was glad to find his son wanted "to revive the affectionate Intercourse" that formerly had existed between them. "It will be very agre[e]able to me," he wrote. "I ought not to blame you for differing in Sentiment with me in Public Affairs," he added, regarding his son's obligation to king and country.

We are Men, all subject to Errors. Our Opinions are not in our Power; they are form'd and govern'd much by Circumstances that are often as inexplicable as they are irresistible. Your Situation was such that few would have censured your remaining Neuter[al], tho' there are Natural Duties Which precede political Ones, and cannot be extinguish'd by them. This is a disagree[e]able Subject. I drop it. And we will endeavour as you propose mutually to forget what has happened relating to it, as well as we can.

Despite his father's favorable response, no reconciliation took place that year or thereafter. Father and son met in person the following year, when Benjamin spent four days in Southampton, England, on his way back to Philadelphia. No detailed account of what took place or what was said at that meeting exists; simply Benjamin's dry remark in his journal, "Met my son who had arrived from London the evening before." Even William Temple Franklin, describing the great event many years later, only noted that Doctor Franklin "had the satisfaction of seeing his son, the former Governor of New Jersey." Yet, as with the absence of expressed sentiment in Benjamin's relationship with his wife, the lacuna is revealing. That no correspondence took place between father and son after Benjamin's letter is also revealing. Father and son were beyond reconciliation—they were estranged. Thereafter Benjamin used William's name sparingly and more as a reminder of his betrayal. In a 1788 letter to Mather Byles, for example, Benjamin mentioned William, but only to underscore the point that he still had a dutiful daughter to care for him.

I too have a Daughter, who lives with me, and is the Comfort of my declining Years, while my Son, estrang'd from me in the Part he took in the late War, keeps aloof, residing in England, whose cause he espous'd; whereby the old Proverb is exempl[i]fied, My Son is my Son till he takes him a Wife, But my Daughter's my Daughter all Days of her Life.

Two years later Benjamin died in Philadelphia surrounded by Sally, her husband, and eight grandchildren. William was still in England, an exile who received virtually nothing from his father's estate. For the first

time in his life, William, dejected and alone, expressed anger at his father for the "shameful injustice" of his will and resigned himself never to set foot in America again.

Conclusion

William's loyalty to the British Crown had had a profound and lasting effect on his father. In his last letter to William, Benjamin Franklin revealed that "Nothing has hurt me so much and affected me with such keen Sensations, as to find myself deserted in my old Age by my only Son." William's decision to become a loyalist had tragic consequences, but should not Benjamin have expected as much? Had not his son, on more than one occasion, declared that he owed so much to England? Had not Benjamin raised his only son to be a loyal subject of the British Empire? Yet conversely, had not William pledged years earlier that he owed so much to his father and was ready to follow him to any part of the world? William followed his conscience but he overlooked two

important things: When he asked his father for reconciliation, he did not acknowledge that he had made an error, nor did he ask for forgiveness.

Benjamin, who was willing to accept that political differences existed between fathers and sons, held that there were private duties that superseded political ones. William, in other words, need not have sided with his father in the revolutionary cause, but when his father was sacrificing so much—his reputation, fortune, and life—and when he had asked no favor of his son until this point, William should have recognized his filial duty and at least remained neutral. In his letter of reconciliation, Benjamin underscored William's betrayal by under-

lining the words, "*there are Natural Duties Which precede political Ones*," the natural duties of a son to his father.

With Deborah, however, Benjamin did not recognize that there were familial duties that preceded political ones. He had known for years that her health was declining, yet he kept saying he was on the verge of returning home. Years passed and Deborah complained little, but following the stroke, she intimated that her health was declining rapidly and that she wanted to see her husband one more time. When William informed his father of Deborah's death, he acknowledged that her "Death was no more than might be reasonably expected after the paralytic Stroke" she suffered some years earlier. She did not expect to live until the following summer, nor to see her husband again, and, as William reminded his father, "I heartily wish you had happened to have come over in the Fall, as I think her Disappointment" of not seeing you "preyed a good deal on her Spirits."

Benjamin, of course, had invited his wife on more than one occasion to come to England, but her fear of traveling by sea, together with her cultural and intellectual insecurities, kept her in Philadelphia. Benjamin also knew that Deborah would not come over. She was an eighteenth-century woman, possessing the virtues which Benjamin admired most in women and a wife: frugality, industry, and good economy. Like many eighteenth-century women, she was productive in the domestic sphere, helping her husband with his business and financial affairs, but not involving herself in political matters. That was

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Deborah's role and she fulfilled it graciously, but she did not think for one moment that there were natural duties of a husband to his wife that preceded political ones, that would bring Benjamin home as she lay there dying in the winter of 1774.

And yet Franklin was not a bad husband, nor father, by eighteenth-century standards; he had devoted himself faithfully to public service and fulfilled that role as a servant of the British Empire, and later as a servant of the revolutionary cause and the creation of the American republic. His attempts to balance family and public life, however, came at a price—the physical and intellectual estrangement of husband and wife, father and son. If political and intellectual history has taught us anything about Franklin, it is that he was a genius, a remarkable scientist, politician, and diplomat. Social history has taught us the same, but also that the genius was human, just like the rest of us.

Note on Sources

The quotations in this article are found in manuscripts located in the Benjamin Franklin Collection at Yale University. They have been published in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 37 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959-) covering the years up to 1782. The editors have not yet published the two letters of William and Benjamin's attempt at reconciliation, nor Franklin's letter to Mather Byles, June 1, 1788; extracts of the first can be found in Willard Randall, *A Little Revenge: Benjamin Franklin and His Son* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1984), 485-86; the others are reproduced in Benjamin Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. and intro. by Albert H. Smythe, vol. 9 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1905-1907), 252-54, 655-56. Deborah's disapproval of William can be found in E. D. Gillespie, *A Book of Remembrance* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1901), 17, and Daniel Fisher, "Diary," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 27 (1893): 276-77. Citations from William and Elizabeth Franklin, William Temple Franklin, and Patience Wright can be found in what is still the best account of the Franklin family: Claude-Anne Lopez and Eugenia W. Herbert, *The Private Franklin: The Man and His Family* (New York: Norton, 1975), 200, 205, 250, 279, 305.

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