

A portrait of Benjamin Franklin in 1778. From 1757, Franklin was the most celebrated American in London, renowned as a scientist and inventor. Yet, in 1775 he was forced to flee and would become one of Britain's most implacable foes

BRIDGEMAN

# The revolution of Benjamin Franklin

Listen to George Goodwin ON THE PODCAST

Today he is celebrated as one of the architects of the colonies' victory in the American War of Independence. Yet, for most of his life, Benjamin Franklin was a dyed-in-the-wool British patriot, as **George Goodwin** explains

When the 84-year-old Benjamin Franklin died in Philadelphia in 1790, he was revered as an American founding father and patriot. He had been the man responsible for bringing France into the War of Independence and for keeping it there. Franklin was, as the later US president John Adams reluctantly admitted, second only to George Washington in his importance in securing the victory of the United States. Yet for more than four-fifths of his long life, Benjamin Franklin had considered himself to be a British royalist. For the best part of two decades he had enjoyed the life of an English gentleman in London – right up to 1775, when he was forced to flee.

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston on 6 January 1706. He was the 16th child and youngest son of an English economic migrant from Ecton, Northamptonshire. At the age of 12, Ben was apprenticed as a printer to his brother James and when he was not printing his brother's *New England Courant*, he was busily reading his British books.

Boston was then the largest town in British America, but its population of 12,000 was not

a 50th of that of London, the greatest city in the western world. In staid, puritan Boston, most of the books Franklin read were those imported from London. He had read Bunyan as a child, but now he was consuming Locke, Defoe and Swift and the *Spectator* of Addison and Steele. He was later to describe Joseph Addison as a man "whose writings have contributed more to the improvement of the minds of the British nation, and polishing their manners, than those of any other English pen whatever".

But Franklin was not content merely to read

Addison. He started imitating him, and at the age of just 16 he anonymously submitted a satirical piece to the *Courant*, written in the persona of an impoverished widow named 'Silence Dogood'. It was brilliant and his brother James had no hesitation in placing it and its 13 successors on the front page, all without knowing the name of their author.

Young Ben's decision to keep his name secret had been a wise one, because when he divulged it, James was furious. The younger brother fled to Philadelphia before taking the glorious opportunity to travel to London.

## Rebuilt and reborn

Franklin's 18 months as a teenage printer in the imperial capital were to have a profound effect on him. London had been rebuilt and reborn, cleansed after the Great Fire and adorned with the architectural marvel of the new St Paul's.

From afar, Franklin had admired Addison's depiction of the coffee house society of writers and philosophers. Now, through his own writing and a growing self-confidence, he experienced it himself and enjoyed the company of freethinking men. The youngster Franklin was disappointed in his hopes of



A print of the Grand Union Flag, which is thought to have been approved by Franklin. This is considered to be the first national flag of the United States of America

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## Benjamin Franklin

meeting his hero, Isaac Newton. But he did meet Newton's Royal Society collaborator and close friend, Hans Sloane, and rather cheekily sold the great collector several artefacts that were impervious to fire, made from the then relatively unknown asbestos.

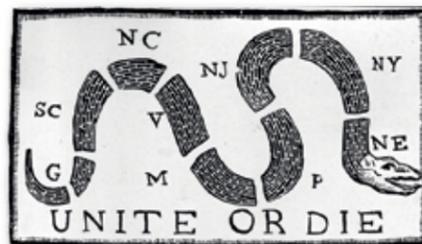
Franklin was tempted to stay in London permanently – perhaps, young and athletic as he was, as a swimming instructor. Instead he returned to Philadelphia as a printer and, through a careful cultivation of connections, he set up his own firm. It was extremely successful, so much so that he retired from the active running of the business at the early age of 42. Having established his fortune, he was now to find international fame through his electrical experiments and the invention of the lightning rod. He was, as acclaimed by Immanuel Kant in 1755, “The Prometheus of modern times”.

Yet in the 1750s Franklin made time for another life, one of public service. Over the previous decades he had founded some of America's great cultural institutions: the American Philosophical Society, the Library Company and what was to become the University of Pennsylvania. Influenced by Locke and Defoe, Franklin gave them British foundation stones.

As a representative of Pennsylvania at the Congress of Albany in 1754, Franklin sought to unite the disparate and often mutually antagonistic American colonies more firmly under British rule. It seemed a necessity in order to secure a Great British empire of North America at the expense of the French.

Franklin had a firm belief in a common British purpose, writing: “I look on the colonies as so many counties gained to Great Britain.” The Albany Plan proposed a defence pact between the colonies under the overall command of one man to be called (somewhat ironically) the President General. It was, however, an initiative that was too advanced and too comprehensive for the colonial assemblies, who rejected it. Franklin now concentrated on the affairs of his own colony and these, in 1757, were to enable him to return to London. With just one brief return to America, there he was to stay until 1775.

Ostensibly Franklin was in Britain on behalf of the Assembly of Pennsylvania with the aim of persuading the Penn family, the absentee proprietors and effectively owners of the colony, to pay taxes. This they adamantly refused to do and the relationship between Franklin and his social superior Thomas Penn rapidly deteriorated into a vicious propaganda battle fought out in the newspapers and by letter, with Franklin's description of Penn as behaving like a “low jockey” particularly piquing the proprietor. To Franklin there was only one solution – a



A later variant of a famous Franklin cartoon. When first published in 1754, ‘Join, or Die’ urged the colonies to combine forces against French efforts to seize British America

“Franklin sought to unite the disparate and often mutually antagonistic American colonies more firmly under British rule”

British one. He advocated that the British turn out the Penns and make Pennsylvania a royal colony with governors appointed from London. It was a cause he fought for for more than a decade until it was rejected by the British government itself. It was a turning point for Franklin but by no means the only, or most important, one.

### Rightly royal

The Penns apart, Franklin's life in London was extremely enjoyable. Science had captured the imagination of the aristocracy and Franklin was one of the most famous scientists alive and a central figure at the Royal Society. This celebrity gave him access to key members of successive governments who competed in their scientific interest as they did in their politics.

In 1760 Franklin was delighted when a new, youthful and proudly British king George III succeeded his all too Germanic grandfather. In 1762 George's former tutor, the Earl of Bute, became prime minister and his relationship with Franklin was sufficiently close for the latter's scantily qualified son William to be appointed as the royal governor of New Jersey. Bute was in power during the final months of the highly successful Seven Years' War that crushed the French threat in North America. However, there was dissatisfaction at the peace terms given to France, and Bute was attacked verbally in parliament



Franklin's 1774 appearance before the Privy Council, as imagined by Christian Schussele in the 1850s. Some historians have claimed that this was the moment when Franklin and Britain's political society rejected each other. Yet, in fact, Franklin, working with the British parliamentary opposition, was still seeking Anglo-American reconciliation a year later

and under physical threat from mobs led by the radical politician John Wilkes. Much to the king's horror, Bute resigned. His successor, George Grenville was not close to the king, nor indeed to Franklin.

Grenville's aim in government was clear: to make the Americans themselves finance the British army on their soil, whose presence was believed necessary to ‘secure the peace’. Franklin suggested an ingenious paper money scheme that would have boosted existing tax revenues. Grenville rejected it and instead introduced a Stamp Tax that would be applied to a vast number of transactions, making it, in effect, a tax on everyday living. The colonies were united in violent protest.

This was a major problem for the Marquess of Rockingham, who replaced Grenville as prime minister in 1765. It was also a problem for Franklin, who had acquiesced in the Stamp Act and found himself vilified in

Philadelphia. But Franklin also provided part of the solution: he was the most important of the experts on America who appeared before a committee of the whole House of Commons on 13 February 1766. His testimony convinced the house. The Stamp Act was repealed and the political situation settled.

In July 1766, Rockingham was himself replaced as prime minister by William Pitt, the man chiefly responsible for victory in the Seven Years' War. With Pitt's prestige high on both sides of the Atlantic, this should have been the moment when the relationship between Britain and its American colonies was regularised and the future of the British empire of North America secured. But Pitt, now the Earl of Chatham, was almost immediately debilitated by depression.

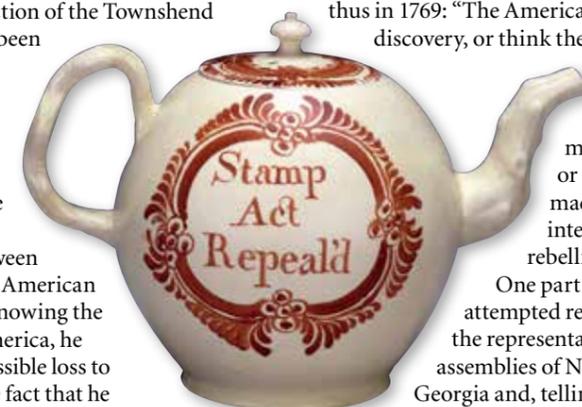
Into the resultant power vacuum stepped Charles Townshend, chancellor of the Exchequer, who, on his own authority,

imposed a tax on commodities imported into America, including tea. As with the Stamp Act, this was to satisfy a majority of British MPs and outrage the colonists.

The introduction of the Townshend duties has also been described as a point when Franklin lost faith in Britain. This was not so. Certainly he began to fear a separation between Britain and the American colonies and, knowing the potential of America, he bewailed its possible loss to Britain. But the fact that he could account for this did not mean that he sought it.

In fact, Franklin tried to bridge the growing chasm in Anglo-colonial relations.

There certainly had been a breakdown in trust, which Edmund Burke summarised thus in 1769: “The Americans have made a discovery, or think they have made one, that we mean to oppress them: we have made a discovery, or think we have made one, that they intend to rise in rebellion against us.” One part of Franklin's attempted remedy was to add the representation of the assemblies of New Jersey, Georgia and, tellingly, Massachusetts, to that for



This teapot was made to celebrate the repeal, in 1766, of the reviled Stamp Act

## The making of a revolutionary

**1706**

Benjamin Franklin is born the son of a tallow chandler (candlemaker). At age 12, he is **apprenticed to his printer brother**, before moving to Philadelphia in 1723.

**1724-26**

Franklin becomes a printer in London before returning to Philadelphia as a fierce Anglophile.

**1726-57**

He enjoys great success as a printer, newspaper owner and journalist and then **turns to science**, winning the 18th-century equivalent of the Nobel Prize.

**1757-62**

Franklin returns to London as the first great transatlantic celebrity **on a mission** to make the Penn proprietors of Pennsylvania pay taxes. After the accession of George III, he builds links with Prime Minister Bute (pictured).



**1762-64**

After a spell in Philadelphia, he **returns to London to make Pennsylvania a British Royal Colony**. This is rejected in 1768.

**1766**

Following Franklin's triumphant appearance before the House of Commons, the **hated Stamp Act is repealed**.

**1764-75**

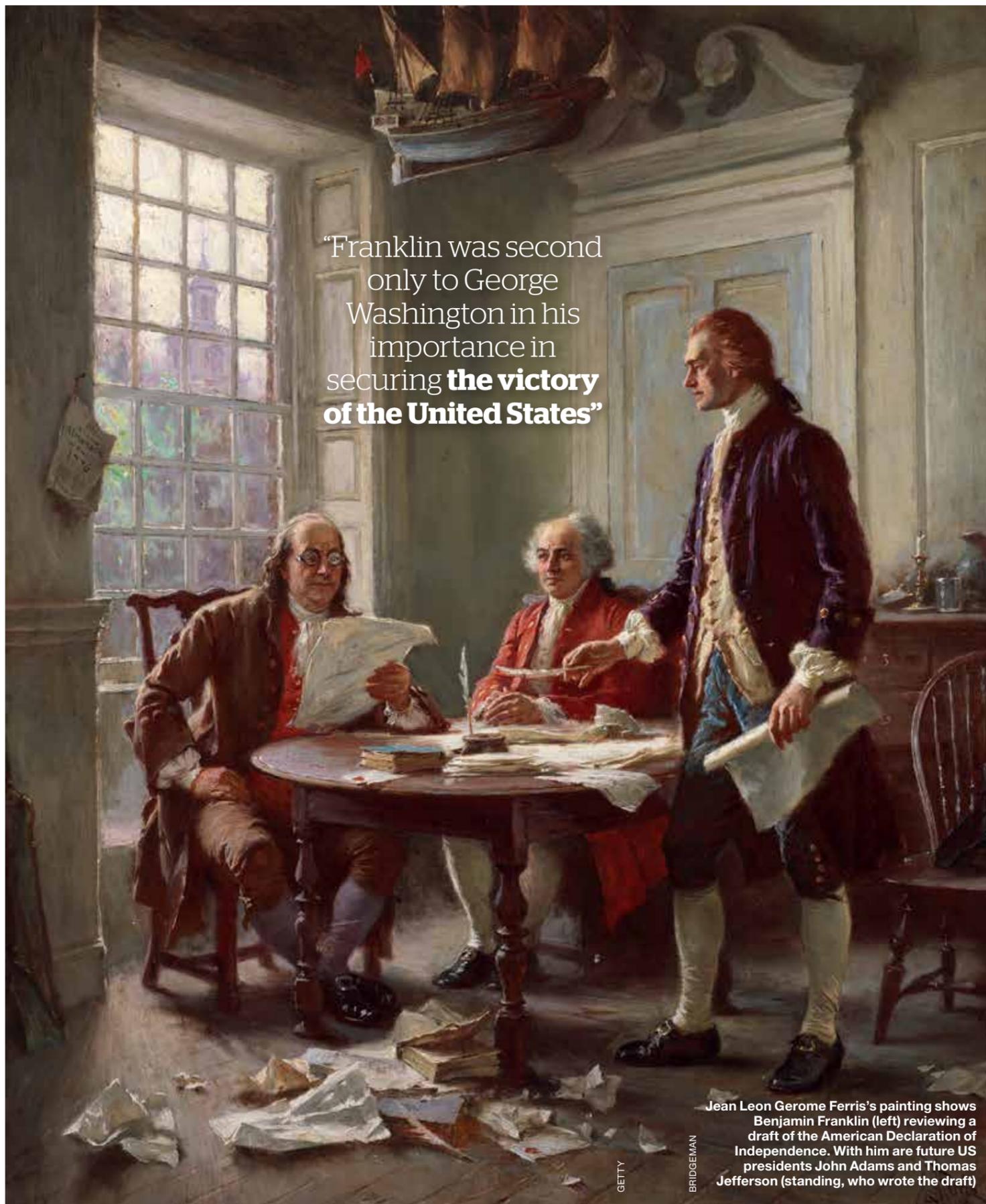
The slow transformation of Franklin from government supporter to **British opponent**. In 1775, he is forced to flee.

**1776-85**

In Paris in an ambassadorial role. By bringing France into the war against Britain, Franklin is **crucial in securing American independence**.

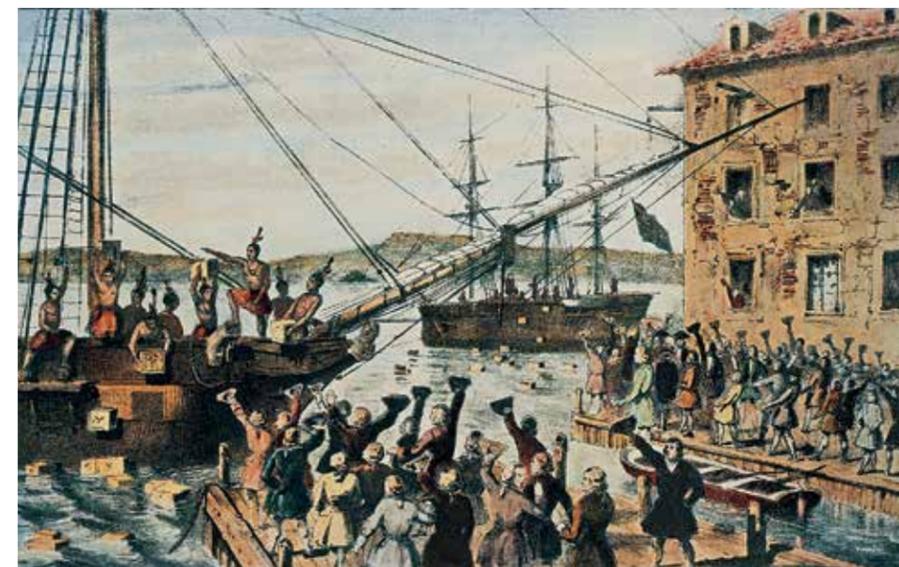
**1776-87**

Franklin (pictured) is the **only person to sign all three key documents** in the creation of the United States: the Declaration of Independence (1776); the Treaty of Paris (1783); and the Constitution (1787). He dies in 1790.



“Franklin was second only to George Washington in his importance in securing **the victory of the United States**”

Jean Leon Gerome Ferris's painting shows Benjamin Franklin (left) reviewing a draft of the American Declaration of Independence. With him are future US presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (standing, who wrote the draft)



Colonists throw tea chests overboard in this depiction of the Boston Tea Party of 16 December 1773. Franklin was appalled by the action, but even more by the British government's retribution and increasing coercion against the colonies

Pennsylvania. It made him the pre-eminent representative of American colonial interests in Britain.

The other, acting against the predominance of an anti-American group in the government of first the Duke of Grafton and then (from 1770) Lord North, was to associate with British opposition factions. One of these was led by a revived Chatham acting with the Earl of Shelburne, and the other by Rockingham.

### Stoic silence

Franklin's American and British interests were to fuse together when, in January 1774, he was called to appear at the Cockpit offices of the Privy Council, in order to answer for, among other things, the outbreak of lawlessness known as the Boston Tea Party. He was, much to the amusement of the council, subjected to a venomous and humiliating denunciation by the government's solicitor general, Alexander Wedderburn. This Franklin bore stoically in silence. However, those historians who deem that this was the time that Franklin swore revenge on Britain ignore the lawyers who represented him at the Cockpit: they were the chief legal advisers of Shelburne and Rockingham. The opprobrium heaped upon Franklin was not merely through his being a representative of rebellious Americans but because he was clearly seen as a member of the British opposition.

Franklin did not leave Britain after the Cockpit, but remained in London for more than a year. In the summer he began a series of meetings with Chatham, now with health almost restored, in order to prepare a plan for parliament. This, it was intended, would finally resolve the American issue. In February 1775 Chatham presented it.

Franklin had hoped that Chatham would sway the House of Lords and bring about a change of government. Instead, the Earl of Sandwich, on behalf of the administration and rightly confident of bedrock support, treated Chatham's plan with contempt.

As for Franklin, who was observing as Chatham's guest, Sandwich looked him straight in the eye and condemned him as “one of the bitterest and most mischievous enemies this country had ever known”. However, Franklin was not deterred and, although he knew that his arrest was becoming ever more likely, he still attempted some last-ditch negotiations before leaving.

The first shots in the American War of Independence were exchanged while Franklin crossed the Atlantic. It was during the voyage that he made a final decision. And it was only after Benjamin Franklin had set foot on American soil that Sandwich's intended slur became an observable truth. **II**

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**George Goodwin** is the author of *Benjamin Franklin in London: The British Life of America's Founding Father*, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (US: Yale University Press) this month

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