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Benjamin Franklin and the Leather-Apron Men: The Politics of Class in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia

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Benjamin Franklin's autobiography reveals his deep investment in shaping and controlling how both his contemporaries and posterity assessed his life and achievements. This essay explores Franklin's construction and presentation of his pride in his working-class origins and identity, analysing how and why Franklin sought not to hide his poor origins but rather to celebrate them as a virtue. As an extremely successful printer, Franklin had risen from working-class obscurity to the highest ranks of Philadelphia society, yet unlike other self-made men of the era Franklin embraced and celebrated his artisanal roots, and he made deliberate use of his working-class identity during the Seven Years War and the subsequent imperial crisis, thereby consolidating his own reputation and firming up the support of urban workers who considered him one of their own.

Benjamin Franklin is both the best-known and yet paradoxically the most enigmatic member of America's founding generation. A true master of spin, Franklin enjoyed an enviable ability to construct and popularize certain public faces and images for himself while yet contriving to obscure others. As his autobiography makes abundantly clear, Franklin was enormously sensitive to the ways in which his contemporaries and posterity might regard him. He constantly attempted to fashion and refashion his own image and admitted as much almost as a point of honour, recording that "In order to secure my Credit and Character ... I took care not only to be in Reality Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all Appearances of the Contrary."¹ The

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¹ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 125. Hereafter cited as *Autobiography*. The most comprehensive biographical study of Franklin is the as-yet unfinished multi-volume work by J. A. Leo Lemay. See Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, Volume I, *Journalist, 1706–1730* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); *idem*, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*,

result of such self-conscious and adept self-fashioning is that for two centuries historians have made what they will of the archetypal self-made American and author of what is quite possibly the world's most widely read autobiography, pursuing in his life, his writings and his actions whatever aspect of eighteenth-century British North American life and culture most interests them.

The excellent recent studies by Edmund S. Morgan, Gordon S. Wood and David Waldstreicher illustrate the point.² To Morgan, Franklin was a man who “could never stop thinking,” and who privileged public service.³ Wood recounts the inadvertent Americanization of a provincial Pennsylvanian who was drawn like a moth to the burning lights of the imperial metropolis of London. Wood's Franklin longed for acceptance into the imperial inner sancta of Whitehall, but was burned by the rejection he experienced in the later 1760s and early 1770s, and thus was driven into radical politics and the Patriot cause. A very different man emerges from Waldstreicher's study of the runaway servant who became wealthy and successful through his exploitation and usurpation of the labour of others, including African American slaves. All of these studies reveal elements of his life that Franklin sought to celebrate, and others that the authors contend he kept hidden.

Perhaps, however, these very processes of self-revelation and self-concealment are what draw us to Benjamin Franklin. For all that he was one of the oldest members of the founding generation, his life, his interests and his self-promotion make him the most identifiably modern, universally accessible and popular American of his age. Franklin was a self-made man in far more than a literal sense: how he constructed and presented himself, and the ways in which such performances succeeded and failed, reveal a great deal about life and society in eighteenth-century British North America.

And yet for all of the many studies of different aspects of Benjamin Franklin's life and character, his enduring working-class identity has been largely forgotten. This is somewhat surprising, given that it was a readily identifiable facet of Franklin's self-image and popular representation during his lifetime, and was very familiar to contemporaries in Philadelphia and beyond. Of all the Founding generation, none were so readily identified with

Volume 2, *Printer and Publisher, 1730–1747* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and *idem*, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, Volume 3, *Soldier, Scientist, and Politician, 1748–1757* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

² Edmund S. Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 2004); David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

³ Morgan, 304.

the leather apron and the life, the work and the identity of the craftsman as was Benjamin Franklin. From Boston apprentice to runaway, from journeyman to master craftsman, his was the story of success that America appeared to promise, in which hard work could secure independence. In eighteenth-century British America the few men who actually rose from the obscurity of manual labour to genteel status usually distanced themselves from their labouring pasts and refashioned their identities in terms of their hard-earned elite rank and privilege. In stark contrast, Franklin never tired of celebrating both his own and others' labour and craftsmanship. He revelled in the life that commercial success and financial independence afforded him, writing, conducting scientific experiments and exchanging ideas with some of the greatest minds of his generation, and he told all who would listen that he had succeeded. Yet throughout his life Franklin never looked down upon honest and capable workers, identifying with them and affording them a remarkable status and level of respect. If, as Wood suggests, Franklin would eventually become the heroic prototypical American "for hundreds of thousands of middling Americans," during his own lifetime Franklin appeared as a champion of the leather-apron men who included both working men and those whose success had made them into semi-independent or independent master craftsmen.⁴

Franklin's articulation of his pride in his identity as a craftsman, long after he had become a gentleman who no longer needed to work for a living, endeared him to mechanics and craftsmen in Revolutionary and early national America. On Independence Day in 1795, for example, the members of New York City's General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen raised their glasses to this sentiment: "The memory of our late brother mechanic, Benjamin Franklin, may his bright example convince mankind, that in this land of freedom and equality talents joined to freedom and frugality, may justly aspire to the first offices of government."⁵ In their toast these working men remembered neither a gentleman nor a philosopher or scientist, but rather a working man, a skilled craftsman who embodied the democratic spirit of the new republic. It was an image that Franklin had helped fashion throughout his life, and which endured even after his death in the pages of his autobiography.

⁴ Wood, x. The best discussion of Franklin's pride in his working origins is Billy G. Smith, "Benjamin Franklin, Civic Improver," in Page Talbot, ed., *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 91–123.

⁵ "NEW-YORK, July 8," *American Minerva, and the New-York (Evening) Advertiser* (New York City), 8 July 1795.

Franklin grew up relatively poor in Boston, a provincial town in which widening class differences would play a significant role in the coming of the Revolution. A half-century later Franklin visited his ancestral home in Ecton, Northamptonshire, and in the register of St. Mary Magdalene parish church he learned “that I was the youngest Son of the youngest Son for 5 Generations back.”⁶ This reminiscence, early in his autobiography, recorded not only Franklin’s pride in his own ability to rise out of inherited poverty, but also the dignity and self-respect of a man who is not ashamed of his or his family’s working-class origins.

At the tender age of ten Franklin began assisting his father Josiah, who worked as a tallow chandler and soap-boiler, but the boy strongly “dislik’d the Trade and had a strong Inclination for the Sea.” Fearing that their youngest son would follow his brother Josiah Jr. and run away to sea, never to return, Franklin’s father

sometimes took me to walk with him, and see Joiners, Bricklayers, Turners, Braziers, &c. at their Work, that he might observe my Inclination, and endeavour to fix it on some Trade or other on Land. It has ever since been a Pleasure to me to see good Workmen handle their Tools; and it has been useful to me, having learnt so much by it, as to be able to do little Jobs my self in my House, where a Workman could not readily be got; and to construct little Machines for my Experiments.⁷

There is an almost lyrical quality to Franklin’s descriptions of the work of leather-apron men, and throughout his life his pleasure in “an excellent Craftsman” or an “ingenious” mechanic was almost tangible.⁸ Labour and craft were, for Franklin, far more than the means of survival and prosperity.⁹

While his autobiography records the limited options available to the sons of poorer craftsmen and labourers in early eighteenth-century Boston, Franklin nonetheless reminisces about and identifies with the joy and pride of skilled craftsmanship. He was the prototypical self-made man, who escaped the legal indenture and the social realities that trapped most of the younger sons of poorer artisans and workers in the same or even lesser

⁶ *Autobiography*, 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸ The reference to an “excellent Craftsman” is drawn from Richard Saunders, *Poor Richard Improved: Being an Almanack and Ephemers ... for the Year of Our Lord 1751* (Philadelphia: Franklin and Hall, 1751), in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. Leonard W. Labaree et al., Volume IV (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 86. Hereafter cited as *Papers*. Examples of workers described by Franklin as “ingenious” include his uncle Benjamin, Aquila Rose and Matthew Adams. See James N. Green and Peter Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin, Writer and Printer* (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2006), 9.

⁹ Here I take issue with the argument presented in Paul W. Connor, *Poor Richard’s Politics: Benjamin Franklin and His New American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 40–47.

professions than their fathers, reducing some of them to unskilled wage labour. Franklin combined celebration of his success with respect for the skill and the honest labour of ordinary working men. Almost three-quarters of Franklin's autobiography chronicled his working life as an apprentice, a runaway, a journeyman and a master craftsman, a remarkably unusual self-presentation by a wealthy and successful businessman and gentleman. He did not think less of an apprentice or journeyman who had not yet achieved independence, and even at the end of his life remembered with deep resentment the unfair beatings he had received from his brother and master James, recalling that "I fancy his harsh and tyrannical Treatment of me, might be a means of impressing me with that Aversion to arbitrary Power that has stuck to me thro' my whole Life."¹⁰

In one of his earliest publications Franklin noted that "the Generality of People" were unwilling to judge what they read until they knew "who or what the Author of it is, whether he be *poor* or *rich*, *old* or *young*, a *Schollar* or a *Leather-Apron Man*." When Franklin did identify himself it was most often in terms of his early-life status and craft, as a printer or a tradesman. This continued long after commercial success meant that he did not need to work for a living. In an age when class and status were profoundly significant in the ways in which people judged one another, Franklin continued to think of himself with pride as a skilled craftsman. Even after he had become a gentleman he repeatedly identified himself as "Benjamin Franklin, Printer," or more anonymously as "a Tradesman."¹¹ Franklin's almanacs had been filled with Poor Richard's celebrations of honest labour, and the collection of proverbs and aphorisms that Franklin pulled together and which eventually became known as *The Way to Wealth* can easily be read as a manual for controlling the terms of one's own labour, albeit a humorous one.¹² Self-presentation, popular image, hard work and frugality are presented by Franklin as the ways in which an honest worker may both succeed and command respect.

Franklin's social and political education came as a working child in Boston. The options facing Franklin's father were severely limited by economic circumstances, which in turn restricted the career options of his youngest son. Franklin experienced these domestic circumstances in the context of a decline in the enforced unity of the Puritan town, which had

¹⁰ *Autobiography*, 69.

¹¹ Silence Dogood, *New England Courant* (Boston), 2 April 1722, in *Papers*, Volume I, 9. For further discussion of Franklin's tendency to obscure his identity as an author and present himself as a printer, see Green and Stallybrass, 5–9.

¹² I am indebted to James Green for this observation.

been replaced by increasing social and political tensions. Mechanics who resented the control of the town's only liberal church by wealthy gentlemen had combined in 1714 to found their own New North Street Church.¹³ Many, including Franklin's older brother and master James, were supporters of the Old Charter and opponents of colonial governors' attempts to rule by prerogative. In James's printing office the young Franklin was surrounded by the political discussions of working men and their friends, and he was hardly in his teens when he first started contributing to them.¹⁴

But perhaps the most enduring lesson was less in the mechanics of printing and the principles of politics than in the potential of the man who worked. When Franklin formed the Junto in Philadelphia in 1727, originally named the Leather Apron Club, its members included other print workers like himself, a scrivener, a surveyor, a shoemaker, a clerk, and "a most exquisite Mechanic and a Solid and Sensible Man."¹⁵ The nascent American Philosophical Society may have been a self-help group for Franklin and his co-founders, but its very creation rested on the assumption that leather-apron men could and should be respected for their "exquisite" skills and their intellectual abilities. The Junto was in the tradition of artisanal mutual aid societies, designed not just to protect members and help advance their careers, but also to celebrate their lives as skilled craftsmen.¹⁶

Such beliefs informed much of what Franklin thought and did. In an impressive argument in favour of paper currency, the twenty-three-year-old journeyman printer expounded the labour theory of value in such clear terms as to later merit the approval of Karl Marx, who applauded Franklin's formulations.¹⁷ "Labouring and Handicrafts Men ... are the chief Strength and Support of a People," wrote Franklin, and he proposed that "Men have invented Money, properly called a Medium of *Exchange*, because through or by its Means *Labour* is exchanged for Labour, or one Commodity for another."¹⁸

He held these beliefs with conviction throughout his life. In some ways Franklin harked back to medieval and early modern artisanal concepts of work as far more than utilitarian physical labour but rather as highly skilled

¹³ Lemay, *Life of Franklin*, Volume I, 11.

¹⁴ Lemay, *Life of Franklin*, Volume I, 5–211.

¹⁵ Lemay, *Life of Franklin*, Volume I, 335, 334–36.

¹⁶ Smith, "Benjamin Franklin," 100.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 55; *idem*, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 1, 142, 286.

¹⁸ Franklin, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency* (Philadelphia, 1729), in *Papers*, Volume I, 144, 148.

productive activity with as much moral and social as economic value. This larger social role for skilled craftsmanship in the community encouraged artisans to regard themselves as equal to all other men, and Franklin inherited this proud belief.¹⁹ But with his clear articulation of the labour theory of value Franklin bridged the gulf between the medieval and modern worlds. In his autobiography he recalled that these ideas, contained in a defence of an expanded paper currency, were “well receiv’d by the common People in general; but the Rich Men dislik’d it.”²⁰

The proud memoirs of his own skilled labour by America’s most famous gentleman, his clearly stated belief in the labour theory of value, and Franklin’s lifelong respect for those who worked with their hands earned him a kind of respect from working men that was unparalleled amongst the Founding Fathers. During his lifetime wealth inequality rose in American towns and cities, and the economic security of craftsmen and unskilled labourers diminished. By the late eighteenth century the traditional route to competency and independence that many working men had dreamed of, and which Franklin and some others had travelled, had become increasingly difficult. It had been undermined by the import of mass-produced manufactured goods, by increasing immigration which flooded urban labour markets, and by the growing employment of semi-skilled or unskilled workers in the manufacture of goods. This trend helped fuel the artisanal radicalism that surfaced in Revolutionary-era Philadelphia and other American cities.²¹

Franklin’s experience and identity as a craftsman informed a political radicalism that pre-dated the Revolutionary era. The advent of King George’s War against Spain and France, bringing with it the possibility of naval and privateering attacks on Philadelphia, provided the seemingly unlikely occasion for Franklin to articulate these beliefs. He took action by writing and then printing and distributing a pamphlet entitled *Plain Truth*, in which he proposed to bypass the recalcitrant Quaker assembly, which had long resisted the creation of an official colonial militia, by forming “a voluntary Association of the People.”²² The author of *Plain Truth* identified

¹⁹ Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720–1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4–5.

²⁰ *Autobiography*, 124.

²¹ For a discussion of these trends in Philadelphia see Schultz; and Billy G. Smith, *The “Lower Sort”: Philadelphia’s Laboring People, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

²² *Autobiography*, 182; A Tradesman of Philadelphia, *Plain Truth: Or, Serious Considerations On the Present State of the City of Philadelphia, and the Province of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1747), in *Papers*, Volume III, 180–204.

himself as “A TRADESMAN of Philadelphia,” and class politics informed his argument as he railed against “the Rich [who] may shift for themselves,” as “The Means of speedy Flight are ready in their Hands.” In contrast, “Tradesmen, Shopkeepers, and Farmers” were “most unhappily circumstanced indeed”, for “We cannot all fly with our Families; and if we could, how shall we subsist? No; we and they, and what little we have gained by hard Labour and Industry, must bear the Brunt.”²³

In his autobiography Franklin recalled that *Plain Truth* had “a sudden and surprizing Effect,” and he immediately drafted “the Instrument of Association.” At a meeting of a large number of Philadelphians, Franklin presented the terms of this voluntary militia association, and some twelve hundred men signed the printed copies that he had prepared. Further copies were distributed throughout the colony, eventually attracting some ten thousand signatures. The class politics of Franklin’s argument for a militia influenced his organization of the association: volunteers “form’d themselves into Companies, and Regiments, [and] chose their own Officers.”²⁴ The association envisioned by “A Tradesman of Philadelphia” not only gave working men the power to elect their own officers, but in fact allowed them access to these ranks themselves. In positions of authority within companies of as many as one hundred men each were such Philadelphians as Richard Swan, a hatter; Plunket Fleeson and Abraham Jones, both of whom were upholsterers; and Francis Garrigues, a house carpenter.²⁵ The association was “a symbol in Philadelphia of artisan strength and unity.” Its members “never engaged the enemy, but conferred among themselves, nonetheless, an enormous collective strength.”²⁶

Franklin enjoyed an enduring popularity amongst his fellow crafts and working men not just because he acknowledged their rights to choose their own political – and in this case military – leaders, but also because he recognized their need for regular work. Following his organization of the

²³ *Plain Truth*, 198–99.

²⁴ *Autobiography*, 183.

²⁵ “Philadelphia, January 5,” *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), 5 Jan. 1748. It is possible that Franklin’s democratic ideas about militia organization were drawn from his youth in Massachusetts, where “over half the [milita] company officers identified themselves with manual occupations, and in fact followed the same livelihoods as private soldiers.” See Fred Anderson, *A People’s Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years’ War* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984), 55. I am grateful to Alan Houston, who has traced the occupations of many of the officers recorded as serving in the eleven Philadelphia companies listed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* article. See Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 85–92.

²⁶ Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 232.

militia Franklin “propos’d a Lottery to defray the Expence of Building a Battery below the Town.”²⁷ While war with Spain and France threatened Pennsylvanian commerce, the immediate dangers to the city of Philadelphia were relatively minor, and what followed was in many ways a major public works project, giving occasional employment to workers who were suffering during the interruption of Atlantic trade, and thus bringing relief to their families. With characteristic precision Franklin recorded and then published the Philadelphia lottery accounts for the period between April 1748 and May 1751.²⁸ While some money was spent on the cannon for the battery, most of the thousands of pounds raised and disbursed found its way into the pockets of ordinary working men.

On many occasions the accounts are vague, recording the payment of one pound and seven shillings “to 3 Men, 3 Days Work each,” or miscellaneous payments “to a Labourer” or “to the Workmen,” but more often the information is far more specific. A “Labourer” was paid one pound and thirteen shillings “for 11 Days Work, levelling the ground”; Tobias Griscome earned eleven shillings “for Work at the upper Battery”; and Edward Turner received five pounds and seven shillings “for Ditching.”²⁹ Craftsmen, too, benefited from the lottery’s largesse. John Beezly received three pounds and twelve shillings “for nine Days Work on the Carriages”; George Kelly was paid twelve shillings “for Smith’s Work”; James Catteer made one pound and one shilling “for jointing Shingles”; the bricks made by John Coates earned him two pounds and fourteen shillings; and other craftsmen and workers employed on the public project included gunsmiths, stonemasons, painters, glaziers, carpenters, woodsmen, hauliers, blacksmiths, carters, joiners, turners, and nail-makers.³⁰ At least one hundred and eleven unskilled workers were paid on an individual basis, some twenty-six of whom were identified by name. Numerous references to payments to “the Workmen,” “sundry Workmen” and “the Men at the Battery” suggest that the total unskilled workforce was considerably larger. Seventy-nine craftsmen were identified in Franklin’s accounts, and almost one-third of these were paid on more than one occasion. Given that skilled craftsmen employed journeymen and apprentices, it is clear that this constituted one of the largest public works projects in the city’s history.

²⁷ *Autobiography*, 183.

²⁸ *Philadelphia Lottery Accounts* (Philadelphia: Franklin and Hall, 1752). For discussion of the ways in which the lottery scheme worked, and how it benefited Philadelphia’s working men and their families, see Houston, 92–100.

²⁹ *Philadelphia Lottery Accounts*, 6, 11, 7, 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7, 11, 12.

When military threats receded, the new Pennsylvania militias faded with them, but Franklin was instrumental in the revival of a militia force in the wake of General Edward Braddock's defeat at the beginning of the Seven Years War. He drafted a bill to establish a militia, and prepared the ground by composing a dialogue "stating and answering all the Objections I could think of to such a Militia," which appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.³¹ True to form, Franklin's Militia Act placed power in the hands of "the Freemen of this Province," who would

form themselves into Companies, as heretofore they have used in Time of War without Law, and for each Company, by Majority of Votes, in the Way of Ballot, to chuse its own Officers, to wit, a Captain, Lieutenant and Ensign ...³²

The popularly elected officers would then in turn elect a colonel, lieutenant-colonel and major to command the regiment. While these officers and the colonial authorities enjoyed authority over the soldiers of Pennsylvania's new militia, the ordinary working men they commanded enjoyed significant control over the terms of their service. The militia could not be

led more than three Days March beyond the inhabited Parts of the Province; nor detained longer than three weeks in any Garrison, without an express Engagement for that Purpose first voluntarily entered into and subscribed by every Man so to march or remain in Garrison.³³

Franklin's contrived dialogue in defence of the new militia dealt with objections to the popular election of officers, and he began by noting that "if all Officers appointed by Governors were always Men of Merit and fully qualified for their Posts" then this would not be a problem. More significantly, "it seems likely that the People will engage more readily in the Service, and face Danger with more Intrepidity, when they are commanded by a Man they know and esteem."³⁴ Franklin was a man who was thus esteemed by his fellow Philadelphians, and he was elected colonel of the regiment. "The first Time I review'd my Regiment," he recalled with obvious relish, the twelve hundred or so men "accompanied me to my House, and would salute me with some Rounds fired before my Door, which shook down and broke several Glasses of my Electrical Apparatus."³⁵

Increasing wealth and genteel status did not prevent Franklin from persisting in identifying with working craftsmen, and Philadelphia's artisans and

³¹ *Autobiography*, 230; "A Dialogue between X, Y, and Z, concerning the present State of Affairs in Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 18 Dec. 1755, in *Papers*, Volume VI, 295–306.

³² "Militia Act," 25 Nov. 1755, *Papers*, Volume VI, 270.

³³ *Ibid.*, 272–73.

³⁴ "A Dialogue between X, Y, and Z," *Papers*, Volume VI, 298.

³⁵ *Autobiography*, 238.

working men continued to celebrate the man who was proud of his own artisanal roots, and who respected the civic and political rights of working men and craftsmen. The actions of the professional organization of ship carpenters who protected Franklin's Philadelphia home and possessions during the Stamp Act Crisis provide a revealing insight into Franklin's status amongst the craftsmen whose lives and work he celebrated.³⁶ Shipwrights and ship carpenters were often highly skilled and relatively affluent artisans, and the leading members of an array of craftsmen involved in shipbuilding including blockmakers, caulkers, joiners, sailmakers, blacksmiths and rope-makers.³⁷ Few records remain of their organization, the White Oaks, named for the strongest and best of the woods from which they constructed ships, and it may have been a typical craftsmen's social and mutual aid association.³⁸ While ship carpenters were, like Franklin, relatively elite and successful craftsmen, their trade depended upon a wide range of Philadelphia's skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labor force, and contemporary reports suggest that a good many Philadelphia workers joined the White Oaks in celebration or defence of Franklin. Echoing the salutes to Franklin by the popularly elected militia officers, the White Oaks serenaded Franklin as they rowed him to his ship when he left for London in 1764, they mobilized craftsmen and workers to defend his home against Stamp Act rioters in 1765, and they celebrated the repeal of that law by launching their new smack, which they named the Franklin. Samuel Wharton wrote to Franklin describing how Stamp Act rioters' plans to destroy Franklin's home had "roused Our Friends," including "every Mechanick, Who rowed you from Chester to the Ship."³⁹ Some eight hundred mechanics mobilized to protect Franklin's family and home, including many "hones[t] good tradesmen" (*sic*) who supplemented the core of ship carpenters to form "a private army of Franklin's artisan supporters."⁴⁰

³⁶ James H. Hutson, "An Investigation of the Inarticulate: Philadelphia's White Oaks," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 28 (1971), 3–25; Jesse Lemisch and John K. Alexander, "The White Oaks, Jack Tar, and the Concept of the Inarticulate," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 29 (1972), 109–34; Simeon J. Crowther, "A Note on the Economic Position of Philadelphia's White Oaks," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 29 (1972), 134–36.

³⁷ Crowther, 134–35.

³⁸ Hutson argued that the White Oaks were "typical of the ordinary Philadelphia working-man"; see Hutson, 25. Lemisch and Alexander, and then Crowther, disagreed, providing compelling evidence that many ship carpenters, and presumably many members of the White Oaks, were relatively successful craftsmen, of middling rank.

³⁹ Samuel Wharton to Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, 13 Oct. 1765, *Papers*, Volume XII, 316.

⁴⁰ Deborah Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, 22 Sept. 1765, and 3 Nov. 1765, *Papers*, Volume XII, 271, 353; Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 305–6.

This was one of the few instances when a crowd of American working men banished the Sons of Liberty, whose members generally controlled American urban space from the mid-1760s on. In virtually every other major urban area, craftsmen and workers united with the Sons of Liberty to oppose the Stamp Act; that this group of Philadelphia's craftsmen and workers overcame their own opposition to the law in order to defend Franklin's home and reputation is particularly telling.⁴¹ Few American gentlemen were able to count on mechanics as such steadfast friends. Perhaps Franklin's creation of a militia in the preceding decade, a militia in which working men and craftsmen elected their own officers, had helped to consolidate his popularity. But it seems equally likely that the former apprentice, runaway, journeyman and craftsman, who throughout his life celebrated work and craftsmanship, was readily identified by working men as one of their own.⁴²

It is perhaps in the lessons learned from the upbringing and education of his son William Temple Franklin, and the way in which Franklin tried again with his grandson Benjamin Franklin Bache, that we can see how Franklin regarded respectable labour. Franklin recalled, somewhat wistfully, that he had wanted William to become an artisan, but that his son had become infatuated with English titles and was too ashamed to emulate his father, preferring the life and title of a gentleman. After Franklin's death those who had known both father and son even wondered whether William might suppress "the humble details" of his father's early life as chronicled in the autobiography, complete with remarkably detailed memoirs of wages and the cost of living, the kind of fiscal details that were very familiar to working people.⁴³

Regretful of the way that he had raised William, Franklin advised his son-in-law Richard Bache to raise his own son as a working man.⁴⁴ Franklin then helped make this possible by taking Benjamin Franklin Bache with him to Europe and training him as a printer. Only seven years old when he accompanied his grandfather to France in 1776, Bache was educated in France and Switzerland, until he began his apprenticeship in Franklin's Passy

⁴¹ For examples of popular reactions to the Stamp Act see Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Nash, 292–338; Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 11–44.

⁴² Hutson, 11–12.

⁴³ Jacques Gibelin, *Mémoires de la privée de Benjamin Franklin, écrits par lui-même* (Paris: Chez Buisson, 1791), 110, as quoted in Green and Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin*, 154. See also Smith, "Benjamin Franklin," 113.

⁴⁴ Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis, *Oeuvres complètes de Cabanis*, 6 vols. (Paris: Bossange Freres, 1825), 5, 222–23.

printing works. With evident delight Franklin wrote to his son-in-law that Bache

is a very sensible and a very good Lad, and I love him much. I had Thoughts of ... fitting him for Public Business, thinking he might be of Service hereafter to his Country; but being now convinc'd that *Service is no Inheritance*, as the Proverb says, I have determin'd to give him a Trade that he may have something to depend on, and not be oblig'd to ask Favours or Offices of any body. And I flatter my self he will make his way good in the World with God's Blessing. He has already begun to learn his Business from Masters who come to my House, and is very diligent in working and quick in learning.⁴⁵

Franklin employed the best master craftsmen to supervise Bache's apprenticeship, and the young man even learned type-casting and type-founding with the renowned Didot family.⁴⁶

In his will Franklin bequeathed "to my grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache, all the types and printing materials, which I now have in Philadelphia, with the complete letter foundry." Bache subsequently became one of the new republic's most successful newspaper printers, and one of the most politically radical Jeffersonian Republican printers of the 1790s. In the codicil to his will Franklin noted that he had been "bred to a manual art, printing," and asserted that "among artisans, good apprentices are most likely to make good citizens." Acknowledging that "all the utility in life that may be ascribed to me" had come from his success as a craftsmen and the people who had aided him in that work, Franklin hoped to help other working men to follow the path he had travelled. He left one thousand pounds each to the cities of Boston and Philadelphia, to be loaned at low interest "to such young married artificers, under the age of twenty-five years, as have served an apprenticeship in the said town, and faithfully fulfilled the duties required in their indentures." Franklin's will also acknowledged the early education he had received in Boston, and left money for the free schools of that city.⁴⁷

It is sometimes quite hard to recognize Gordon Wood's Franklin in the man who celebrated his own working past and the nobility of all who worked with their hands. Wood looks back from the nineteenth century's refashioning of Franklin as a liberal capitalist hero and presents the printer as

⁴⁵ Franklin to Richard Bache, Passy, 11 Nov. 1784, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin: American Philosophical Society and Yale University. Digital Edition by the Packard Humanities Institute*, available at <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp>. Hereafter cited as *Papers: Digital Edition*.

⁴⁶ See James Tagg, *Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia Aurora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), esp. 23–55, and Jeffrey A. Smith, *Franklin and Bache: Envisioning the Enlightened Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 67–82.

⁴⁷ Franklin, Will and Codicil, 17 July 1788, *Papers: Digital Edition*.

a somewhat typical self-made man who, while revelling in his newfound wealth and power, was eager to enhance his status and was somewhat uncomfortable with his lower-sort origins. According to Wood, Franklin “believed in the power of a few reasonable men,” and he “regarded the common people with a certain patronizing amusement, unless, of course, they rioted,” in which case he reacted “with disgust.”⁴⁸

Whether a proud subject of the British Empire or a radical American revolutionary, Franklin in fact retained a comfortable pride in his working-class origins and a healthy respect for those who lived by their own labour. It was only after his death in the nineteenth century, according to Wood, that “many middling Americans – tradesmen, artisans, farmers, proto-businessmen of all sorts – found in ... [Franklin’s] popular writings a middling hero they could relate to.”⁴⁹ This sells both Franklin and his contemporaries short, for he was known and respected as a friend of working men throughout his public career. The advent of revolutionary politics encouraged the politicization of Franklin’s long-standing artisanal beliefs. Thus he built upon his earlier organization of the militia when he championed the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, premised upon the principle that freedom rather than property was the criterion for male suffrage. Only months before his death Franklin contributed to the debate over revision of this constitution, defiantly affirming the democratic politics that were, at least in part, the political articulation of his enduring respect for working men. A proposal to allow only men of property to elect members of a new upper chamber enraged the old printer, who asked what “the great Majority of the Freemen” had done “to forfeit so great a Portion of their Rights in Elections?” He continued,

Why is this Power of Controul, contrary to the Spirit of all Democracies, to be vested in a Minority, instead of a Majority? ... Is it supposed that Wisdom is the necessary Concomitant of Riches ...? And why is Property to be represented at all? ... the important Ends of Civil Society are the personal Securities of Life and Liberty; these remain the same in every Member of the Society, and the poorest continues to have an equal Claim to them with the most opulent, whatever Difference Time, Chance or Industry may occasion in their Circumstances.⁵⁰

Much of Franklin’s lifelong commitment to public service had been informed by pride in his own working roots, a strong desire to help working men improve themselves and their situation, and a fierce belief in their

⁴⁸ Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 10.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁰ Franklin, “Queries and Remarks on *Hints for the Members of Pennsylvania Convention*”, Nov. 1789, *Papers: Digital Edition*.

political rights. Franklin had recorded with evident pride his role in creating a “HOSPITAL for the Relief of the Sick Poor,” which rested on his belief that “saving and restoring useful and laborious Members to a Community, is a Work of Public Service.” He had fashioned the rules for the creation of Pennsylvania’s first militia, including the election of their officers by the ordinary men who comprised each company, with commissions from the governor dependent on the votes of working men, thus creating an “an Army of FREEMEN.” And between July and September of 1776 Franklin had presided over the interim government of Pennsylvania, which drafted the most radical state constitution of the entire Revolutionary era. Franklin’s carefully amended copy of the Declaration of Rights that preceded the Frame of Government illustrated his role in the creation of this document, which decreed that “all elections ought to be free; and that all free men having a sufficient evident common interest with, and attachment to the community, have a right to elect officers, or to be elected into office.”⁵¹ Franklin championed a polity in which a leather-apron man like his own youthful self and his printer grandson were the equal of any other man. Lauding this singular achievement were the great many of Philadelphia’s workers and craftsmen, together with their wives and children, who swelled the ranks of the twenty thousand people who attended Franklin’s funeral, as they bid farewell to one of their own.⁵²

⁵¹ “Some Account of the Pennsylvania Hospital,” 28 May 1754, *Papers*, Volume V, 287; “FORM of the ASSOCIATION into which Numbers are daily entering, for the Defence of this City and Province,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 3 Dec. 1747; Franklin’s amended copy of the first draft of the Pennsylvania Declaration of Rights is reprinted in *Papers*, Volume XXII, 531.

⁵² For Franklin’s funeral see “Philadelphia, April 28,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 28 April 1791.