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William Franklin Son Of Benjamin Franklin

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The Complicated Legacy of William Franklin, Son of Benjamin Franklin

The story of William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, is one of the most fascinating and tragic narratives in early American history. While his father is celebrated as one of the most brilliant Founding Fathers of the United States, William chose a different path—one that led him to become a steadfast Loyalist during the American Revolution. This father-son relationship, once incredibly close, became a heartbreaking divide that mirrored the fracturing of the American colonies from Great Britain. To understand the American Revolution fully, one must understand the deeply personal conflict between Benjamin Franklin and his son, William.

William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, was born around 1730 (the exact date is uncertain) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin and a woman whose identity remains a subject of historical speculation. Despite the circumstances of his birth, Benjamin Franklin raised William openly and with great affection. From a young age, William was educated by his father and accompanied him on many of his early scientific and diplomatic endeavors. They were not merely father and son; they were collaborators, confidants, and close friends.

Early Life and Education of William Franklin

William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, grew up in a household defined by intellectual curiosity and civic engagement. Benjamin Franklin personally oversaw William's education, teaching him languages, history, science, and the art of diplomacy. This hands-on fathering was unusual for the 18th century, especially given William's illegitimate status. Benjamin refused to let societal norms dictate his relationship with his son, and he included William in virtually every aspect of his life.

As a young man, William Franklin served alongside his father in several important projects. He assisted Benjamin in his famous experiments with electricity, including the legendary kite experiment in 1752. This hands-on scientific education gave William a unique perspective and skillset that would serve him well in his later career. He developed a sharp mind for politics and governance, a talent that his father recognized and nurtured carefully.

When Benjamin Franklin was appointed as the Deputy Postmaster General of the British colonies in 1753, he appointed William as the Comptroller of the Post Office. This gave William valuable administrative experience and introduced him to the world of colonial governance. The relationship between father and son during these years was remarkably productive, with Benjamin Franklin clearly grooming his son for a life of public service within the British imperial system.

William Franklin's Rise to Prominence

Military Service and Political Ambition

During the French and Indian War (1754-1763), William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, served as a captain in the Pennsylvania militia. He led a campaign against the French at Fort Duquesne (present-day Pittsburgh), demonstrating considerable bravery and leadership. This military service earned him respect among the colonial elite and helped establish his reputation as a capable leader. Benjamin Franklin, ever proud of his son, used his considerable influence to advance William's career.

Following the war, William traveled to England with his father in 1757. They spent several years in London, where Benjamin Franklin served as an agent for several American colonies. During this time, William continued his education, studied law at Middle Temple in London, and cultivated relationships with powerful British politicians. He immersed himself in the culture of the British Empire and developed a deep appreciation for the British constitution and monarchy.

Royal Governor of New Jersey

In 1763, through his father's connections and his own merits, William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, was appointed as the Royal Governor of New Jersey. He was only in his early thirties when he took office, making him one of the youngest colonial governors in British America. As governor, William proved to be an effective and popular administrator. He worked to improve the colony's infrastructure, promote education, and maintain peace with Native American tribes.

William Franklin governed New Jersey with a steady hand during a period of growing tension between the colonies and Great Britain. He believed firmly in the benefits of British rule and saw the empire as a force for civilization and progress. His father Benjamin, however, was beginning to shift toward a more critical view of British policies, particularly after the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 and subsequent taxation measures. This growing divergence in political perspectives would eventually drive a profound wedge between them.

The Growing Rift Between Father and Son

As the 1760s progressed, the political distance between Benjamin Franklin and his son William widened dramatically. Benjamin Franklin, who had once been a proud British subject, began to sympathize more deeply with American grievances against British rule. He came to see the colonial protests as justified and grew frustrated with British inflexibility. William, by contrast, remained steadfastly loyal to the Crown and viewed the growing resistance movement with alarm.

William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, wrote to his father repeatedly, urging him to reconsider his position and to use his influence to moderate colonial demands. Benjamin, equally passionate in his evolving views, tried to convince William that the British government was overreaching and that colonial rights needed protection. Their letters during this period reveal a painful struggle between filial affection and political conviction. Neither man could persuade the other, and their relationship began to fray under the strain.

By 1774, the situation had deteriorated significantly. Benjamin Franklin, after years of trying to broker a compromise between Britain and the colonies, was growing disillusioned. He returned to America in 1775, leaving behind his son William, who remained in New Jersey as a committed Loyalist. The outbreak of open warfare at Lexington and Concord in April 1775 forced both men to choose sides definitively. Benjamin aligned himself fully with the Patriot cause, while William Franklin remained loyal to the Crown.

The Revolutionary Crisis and William's Loyalty

Arrest and Imprisonment

As the American Revolution intensified, William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, found himself in an

increasingly untenable position. As Royal Governor of New Jersey, he was the most prominent symbol of British authority in the colony. The New Jersey Provincial Congress, which had taken control of the colony's government, declared him an enemy of the people and placed him under house arrest in 1776. He was later imprisoned in Connecticut, where he remained for nearly two years.

The treatment of William Franklin by the Patriot authorities was harsh. He was denied basic comforts, separated from his wife Elizabeth, and subjected to difficult conditions. Benjamin Franklin, despite his personal affection for his son, refused to intervene on his behalf. The elder Franklin believed that William's Loyalist stance was a betrayal of the American cause, and he saw no reason to use his influence to help someone who was actively working against the revolution.

This refusal to help his son has been a source of controversy among historians. Some view it as a principled stand, while others see it as a cold and unforgiving act. Whatever the interpretation, it marked a definitive end to the close relationship between Benjamin Franklin and his son William. The father who had once doted on his son now seemed willing to let him suffer for his political choices.

William's Activities as a Loyalist Leader

After his release from prison in a prisoner exchange in 1778, William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, traveled to New York City, which remained under British control. There, he became a leading figure among Loyalist exiles. He organized Loyalist military units, provided intelligence to British commanders, and advocated for a more aggressive British strategy against the rebellion. He believed passionately that the American Revolution was a misguided and destructive movement led by ambitious agitators.

William's Loyalist activities put him in direct opposition to everything his father was working to achieve. While Benjamin Franklin was in France securing a critical military alliance with the French crown, William was working to subvert the American cause. The irony was not lost on contemporaries: one of America's greatest Founders had a son who was one of the most dedicated Loyalists in the colonies.

The personal costs of this political divide were enormous. William's wife Elizabeth died in 1778 while he was in prison. He was unable to attend her funeral or to comfort her in her final days. The revolution had taken everything from him: his position, his home, his family, and his relationship with his father. Yet, he never wavered in his commitment to the British cause.

Exile and Later Life

Life in Britain After the War

When the American Revolution ended in British defeat in 1783, William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, was among thousands of Loyalists forced into exile. He left America permanently and settled in London, where he lived for the remainder of his life. The British government, recognizing his sacrifices, granted him a pension and eventually appointed him as a colonial administrator in other parts of the empire.

In London, William struggled to rebuild his life. He was bitter about the loss of his American homeland and deeply wounded by the estrangement from his father. He made several attempts to reconcile with Benjamin Franklin, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Benjamin, despite his legendary warmth and sociability, could not forgive his son's political choices. The two men exchanged a few letters in the years after the war, but they never met again.

When Benjamin Franklin died in 1790, his will made a pointed statement about his relationship with William. While Benjamin left his other son (from a common-law marriage) substantial land and property, he left William only a small portion of land in Nova Scotia and the forgiveness of debts. He explicitly noted that William had been a Loyalist and that this was the reason for the limited bequest. It was a final, painful rejection from the father William had once revered.

William's Final Years and Legacy

William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, lived until 1813, dying in London at the age of 83. He never returned to America. In his later years, he became something of a recluse, though he maintained correspondence with other Loyalist exiles and occasionally wrote about his experiences. He raised his own son, William Temple Franklin, who later became a diplomat and edited his grandfather Benjamin's papers.

The legacy of William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, is complex and often overlooked. While his father's face adorns the hundred-dollar bill and his name is synonymous with American ingenuity and wisdom, William is largely forgotten or remembered only as a footnote to his father's story. Yet his life offers a compelling perspective on the American Revolution: the perspective of those who chose loyalty to the Crown and paid a terrible price for it.

William Franklin was not a villain or a fool. He was a capable administrator, a devoted husband, and a man of principle who made a choice that cost him everything. His story reminds us that the American Revolution was not simply a struggle between right and wrong, but a civil war that divided families, communities, and even the deepest bonds of love between fathers and sons.

The Historical Significance of William Franklin's Life

The story of William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, is essential for understanding the full complexity of the American Revolution. Too often, the revolutionary period is presented as a unified struggle for liberty against tyranny. The reality was far messier. Approximately one-third of the American population remained Loyalist, and these individuals had valid reasons for their choice. William Franklin embodied this perspective: educated, wealthy, and deeply connected to the British system that had served him well.

Historians continue to debate the motivations behind William Franklin's Loyalism. Some argue that he was simply protecting his position and privilege as a Royal Governor. Others suggest that he genuinely believed in the British constitutional system and saw the revolution as a dangerous experiment that would lead to chaos. Still others point to his personal psychology, suggesting that he may have been trying to establish his own identity separate from his extraordinarily famous father.

What is clear is that **William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin**, made a choice that had profound consequences. He lost his homeland, his family, and his place in history. Yet he stuck to that choice until the end, demonstrating a consistency and courage that deserves respect, even if one disagrees with his position. His life serves as a powerful reminder that history is rarely simple and that even the most brilliant and loving families can be torn apart by forces beyond their control.

Conclusion

The relationship between Benjamin Franklin and his son William is one of the most poignant stories of the American Revolutionary era. William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, began his life as the beloved child of America's greatest Enlightenment thinker, rose to become a respected colonial governor, and ended his life as an exiled Loyalist estranged from his father. The American Revolution was not just a war for independence; it was a deeply personal conflict that divided families and tested the limits of love and loyalty.

William Franklin's legacy reminds us that history is made up of individual choices, each with real human costs. While Benjamin Franklin stands as a towering figure of American history, his son William represents

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