

What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?

by JEAN FRITZ

illustrated by Margot Tomes





In 1706 Boston was so new that its streets were still being named. For 5 years the town officials had been thinking up names and they hadn't finished yet. So far they had Cow Lane, Flownder Lane, Turn Again Alley, Half-Square Court, Pond Street, Sliding Alley, Milk Street, and many others.

Luckily Milk Street had been named early, because that's where Benjamin Franklin was born. So right away he had an address. This was handy since he turned out to be famous and people like to know where and when famous men are born. (The day was January 17, 1706.) Of course no one knew then that Benjamin Franklin would be famous. No one dreamed that some day he'd have streets named after *him*. And towns, too. And counties, colleges, libraries, hotels, banks, ships, stoves, and stores. Even a football field would be named after him. And a flowering tree.





Certainly Benjamin's father never gave fame a thought. Mr. Franklin was a Leather Apron man; in other words, he worked with his hands and he had a trade. Carpenters, shoemakers, silversmiths, blacksmiths—all such men were called Leather Aprons because they wore leather aprons when they worked. Mr. Franklin was a soap- and candle-maker. His brothers were Leather Apron men and his sons would be Leather Apron men. That was generally the way it was in those days.

When Benjamin was born, his oldest brother, Samuel, was already a blacksmith. (The oldest son in the Franklin family was always a blacksmith.) Benjamin's brother James would be a printer. Three other brothers would be trained for the candle and soap business. The remaining four brothers died young. Two died as babies and Josiah and Ebenezer were drowned. Josiah ran away from home and was drowned at sea. Sixteen month-old Ebenezer ran away from his mother and was drowned in a tub of his father's soapsuds.



Benjamin was Mr. Franklin's 10th and last son. He was the youngest son of a youngest son of a youngest son of a youngest son of a youngest son—right back to his great-great grandfather. This made him special, Mr. Franklin thought. Besides, Benjamin was smart. Maybe he shouldn't be just another Leather Apron when he grew up.

No, Mr. Franklin decided, he shouldn't. Benjamin would be a preacher. He'd go to Latin School, then he'd go to college, then he'd climb up into a pulpit and make his father proud. So when he was 7 years old, off he went to Latin School. At the end of the year Benjamin was at the head of his class.

But he was only 8 years old. Mr. Franklin thought of all the years it would take to make Benjamin a preacher. And all the money! Besides, Mr. Franklin had been taking notice of preachers lately, especially young preachers in small churches. They had a hard time. Some went around with



No matter how busy he was, Ben Franklin always found time to try out new ideas. Such as a remote-control lock (so he could stay in bed and lock his door), a rocking chair (which powered a fan), and a windmill (to turn his meat roaster). Aside from being a man of ideas, he was an ambassador to England, a printer, an almanac maker, a politician, and even a vegetarian (for a time).

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