Benjamin Franklin: Citizen-Sage of a New Age

Hosted by Hugh Downs

Synopsis

Benjamin Franklin was the quintessential Renaissance man, and 18th century genius known for his cheerful outlook on life. His contribution to the world in the areas of science, literature, politics, and foreign diplomacy were remarkable.

Hugh Downs takes the viewer on a tour of Philadelphia—the city Franklin called home for 67 years—while providing interesting information and anecdotes about the life of this fascinating man.

Franklin was born in 1706, the son of a candlemaker. He ran away from home when he was a teenager and became a printing apprentice. He was a ravenous reader and an excellent writer. He developed his writing skills by writing articles for the newspaper for which he apprenticed.

Later, in 1732, Franklin wrote the witty and insightful Poor Richard's Almanac. At about the same time, he established the Library Company which was America's first circulating library. It became apparent that he had talents in many other areas besides writing.

Benjamin Franklin was in inventor and a scientist. He invented the Franklin stove, bifocals and the lightning rod. His famous experiment with the kite precipitated his discovery of the electricity.

Franklin was also one of America's Founding Fathers, in attendance not only for the drafting of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, but also for the signing of the Constitution in 1787. He was an extraordinary and wise man loved by all.

In 1790, Benjamin Franklin died at the age of 84.

Questions to ask before viewing

• Who was Benjamin Franklin?
• What does the term founding Father mean to you?
• Name something for which Franklin is famous.

Questions to ask after viewing

1. Name some of Benjamin Franklin's inventions mentioned in this program. (Franklin stove, bifocals, a primitive copying machine and the lightning rod.)
2. What was the result of Franklin's experiment with a kite in a thunder storm? (He discovered how positive and negative charges work and developed the electron theory which led to the harnessing electricity.)
3. What two significant events in American history took place in Philadelphia's Independence Hall? (The signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the signing of the American Constitution in 1787.)
4. What is the American Philosophical Society? (It is the oldest learned society in America, founded by Ben Franklin in 1743.)
5. What is the name of Franklin's early book filled with witty sayings, advice and wisdom? (Poor Richard's Almanac.)

Additional activities

• Read some of Poor Richard's Almanac aloud in class. Discuss the familiarity and wisdom of its content (e.g. "Honesty is the best policy," "A stitch in time saves nine." Etc.)
• Read selected portions of the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. Discuss their importance.
• Ask the class to make diagrams showing how Franklin's experiment with the key, kite and lightning led to the electron theory.
• View the film 1776, starring William Daniels and Howard Da Silva. Discuss how the film captures the essence of time.
Annotation

Explored is the genius of Benjamin Franklin, one of the most important scientists, inventors, innovators and writers of his day. Also shown are the historic sites of the many institutions he founded and Independence Hall, where he helped write the Declaration of Independence.

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Discussion Guide

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Objectives

• To show the countless facts of Benjamin Franklin's genius.
• To illustrate political and social climate that Franklin dealt with his travels domestically and abroad.
• To show the influence Franklin has in founding and shaping the United States.