



Wm. William Franklin

and the
Price of
Dissent

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Reproduction of a 1790 portrait of William
Franklin by Mather Brown, Danuta, 1989.
Picture of The Proprietary House, Gordon Bond

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Dissent: often scorned, sometimes praised, always misunderstood. The American Civil War is sometimes called the Second American Revolution or the Second War of Independence, yet the American Revolution is never referred to as our country’s first Civil War. And why not? One could argue that the situations were exactly the same. In both cases, a percentage of the population wanting to remove themselves from a ruler they perceived as tyrannical. Don’t think Abraham Lincoln was a tyrant? Well, there were plenty of people that didn’t think King George III was either.

One of those people was William Franklin, who served New Jersey as Royal Governor from 1763 until 1776. The last two years of his tenure carried out while he was living at the Proprietary House in Perth Amboy, where I now serve as Second Vice President of The Proprietary House Association. He was the son of Benjamin Franklin, one of America’s most well-known “Founding Fathers,” yet aside from the ardent and well-read of history buffs, not many people have heard of him. People are often equally surprised to find that Benjamin even *had* a son at all. Yet they have probably seen him.

Paintings depicting when the elder Franklin famously—and allegedly—flew a kite with a key tied to it during a thunderstorm, most often show a young boy with the old scientist. That boy was William, an illegitimate child who he and his wife Deborah raised as their own. Aside from this famous event, though, William seems to have been largely forgotten.

But the character of William is too fascinating to ignore, and not just because his relationship with his father can serve as an iconic microcosm of the American Revolution. Studying the character of William allows us to gain insight into the “unpopular” point of view. It is very easy for us today to judge history in hindsight, and those who lived it, choosing sides based on what we think is right or wrong by our current standards. It causes people to grow extremely uptight when historians speak anything less than critically of the losing side, be it the Loyalists of the Revolution or the Confederates of the Civil War. Yet such an “all or nothing” approach denies the complexity of motivations that animated our ancestors and misses the lessons history has to teach. We can learn so much more by digging deeper and examining *both* sides of the story, and remember that we are all human—that we have all made mistakes. William’s mistake, for example, cost him nearly everything except his life.

As we all know, Benjamin Franklin was one of the fiercest American “patriots”—though that term is relative, as the Loyalists would have considered themselves just as patriotic to their country and cause.

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Franklin started out a loyal subject, aspiring to being regarded as a gentleman in the English and European tradition. When that desire was rebuffed by “true” English gentry, his attitudes began to shift towards embracing an “American” identity. This left him in a rather precarious situation given how his own son was a Royal Governor and loyal to the same King George III that most colonists loathed. He tried to persuade his son, a very popular governor even amongst the growing turmoil and souring of relations, to join him in the American cause. But William would not have any of it. The man who had given his life of service to the crown, and a man who had accomplished much for the colony of New Jersey, by way of educational and agricultural improvements and some of the nation's first arguably humane Indian reservations, was going to stay loyal to his King, and there was nothing his father could say or do to change his mind.

It is said that in late 1775 or early 1776, Benjamin visited his son at the Proprietary House one last time. They debated over the course of several nights, likely by the fireplace in the drawing room. Both men were stubborn, opinionated, and passionate in their own right, and neither would allow his mind to be changed. Benjamin stormed out of the house following an argument, and father and son would never reconcile (though they did meet one more time).

As the summer of that same year came around, and one-by-one the other Royal Governors in the colonies became deposed. William remained one of only two loyalists left holding office, the other being William Tryon of New York. The Provincial Congress of New Jersey decided that Franklin too needed to go. He was first placed under house arrest in the spring of 1776, with orders to not conduct any governmental business. When he defiantly continued on with politics— included a secret negotiation with agents of the Crown to sign a truce to remove New Jersey from the war—they then wanted something more severe. They gave orders to militia colonel Nathaniel Heard from neighboring Woodbridge, to either coerce Franklin into unlikely changing sides, or to remove him from the office of governor and his mansion home. The orders were also explicit, however, in that he was to be treated with respect.

When Heard arrived at Franklin's mansion, the Royal Governor was insulted that someone with so low of a rank was chosen for the assignment. Franklin, therefore, refused to cooperate. When Heard reported to the Provincial Congress, he was then given orders to return, this time with a militia and to force Franklin out of the house and place him under arrest. The day of reckoning would come on June 19, 1776. He was allowed the courtesy of addressing a gathering crowd, which

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was proof that he was still a respected gentleman, even as a loyalist. Arrested, Franklin would be taken prisoner to Burlington, where he would fall ill and lose most of his hair and teeth. He would later be released in a prisoner exchange, following which he preceded to New York to rally the loyalist cause there. He eventually exiled himself to England, where he would remain until his death in 1814.

Father and son would meet only one more time in England, shortly before Benjamin’s death following the Revolution. The two talked but were unable to reconcile, the passions and disagreements between them still running too deep. In Benjamin’s last will and testament, he referenced his son only once, in the second paragraph, “To my son, William Franklin, late Governor of the Jerseys, I give and devise all the lands I hold or have a right to, in the province of Nova Scotia, to hold to him, his heirs, and assigns forever. I also give to him all my books and papers, which he has in his possession, and all debts standing against him on my account books, willing that no payment for, nor restitution of, the same be required of him, by my executors. The part he acted against me in the late war, which is of public notoriety, will account for my leaving him no more of an estate he endeavored to deprive me of.”

It is because of a single yet important decision—to remain loyal—that William, despite all of his accomplishments, has been largely forgotten by history, while his father is glorified in monuments and namesakes all over the country. You will not read of him in textbooks, and even information on the internet is scarce. When I talk about the Proprietary House with visitors, and introduce them to the many characters that walked the halls over the centuries, I do not even start out by saying it was, “William Franklin’s former mansion.” Instead, I have to call the house, “*Benjamin Franklin’s* son William’s former mansion,” just so people know who I am talking about. All of this is the price he paid for his dissent.

Imagine for a moment the possible outcome of William choosing instead to agree with his father and rebel against the crown, rather than follow his own instincts to stay loyal. Imagine how revered he would be, right alongside his father. Imagine the monuments constructed and endless number of books that could have been written about him. How too might a different choice have influenced the political landscape of the early Republic? Had he remained in government, perhaps that revered Franklin name might have even taken him as far as the presidency. There are so many stories, just like William’s, which result in a myriad of what-if scenarios balanced on a single decision.

On the other hand, had the British put down our rebellion, William would have most likely been re-installed as governor and over time—

even if we gained our independence through peaceful means as other former-British colonies have done—maybe his story would not be as shunned. After all, if the Revolution was not a success, the textbooks would likely note how insane the colonists were in thinking they could rebel against the mighty King. Our heroes would then be the ones regarded with the same disdain reserved for the “losers” with which often regard the British. One nation’s heroes are often another’s despised enemies. Had it all turned out differently, William’s future might have included martyrdom.

This is, of course, just a brief treatment of William’s story. While he may have been reviled by some during the Revolution, and even by his own father, however, today, at the Proprietary House, he is our folk hero. It may be one of the only places you will hear of a British figure during the War of Independence spoken about in a *positive* light.

We embrace his legacy in all its messy complexity because that is what history is: the facts, not mere convenience.



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