



LESSON 5:

What Good May I Do: Franklin and the American Civic Association

OVERVIEW

Franklin's drive to improve himself spilled over into a desire to further the common good. His public spirit mixed with practical organizational skills to produce a variety of civic improvement schemes. Franklin's collaborative spirit led to the founding of many civic institutions that helped to establish Philadelphia as the leading political, cultural, and social center of colonial America. The creative and collaborative nature of Franklin's civic projects became the civic model that helped shape American citizenship in the young Republic.

In this lesson students explore civic associations of the past and present. By comparing organizations founded by Franklin to those of today's towns and cities, students learn about the aims and character of American civic associations that have their origins in Ben Franklin's Philadelphia.

Students read about Franklin's organization of the Junto, a tradesmen's association, and the array of community service organizations that its members helped to establish. These include a university, hospital, lending library, firefighting brigade, militia, learned society, and insurance company. Today, civic associations such as Rotarians, Lions, the Heart Association, historical societies, and a host of local civic groups crowd the yellow pages of every community. They are an important part of our community lives.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Draw parallels between Franklin's Junto and contemporary civic associations.
- Examine several civic associations in their own community.
- Work collaboratively to devise their own plan for redressing a public issue confronting their community.

TIME

This lesson and activity require two to three class periods.

MATERIALS

- "What Good May I Do" Worksheet
- "Benjamin Franklin, Civic Improver," by Billy G. Smith (attached)

McREL STANDARDS

Civics

Standard 10. Understands the role of voluntarism and organized groups in American social and political life

Standard 28. Understands how participation in civic and political life helps citizens achieve goals

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Introduction and Discussion

Begin this lesson by inquiring if students know how the local hospital, college, museum, or library came into existence. Point out that there are major institutions in most communities that were organized or instigated by a group of private citizens. (The teacher may need to conduct some advance research in this area.) In the case of a private school, the school itself could be an example. The teacher may want to use the following graphic organizer:

Institution	Privately Founded	Publicly Founded (gov't)	Community Role
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The inquiry should conclude with a discussion of what these organizations do and the value they contribute to their community.

2. Reading

For homework, ask the students to read “Benjamin Franklin, Civic Improver” by Billy G. Smith (attached). As they read about Franklin’s civic activities, they should list the institutions that he helped to organize.

3. Discussion

Review the reading with the students. Then turn the conversation to contemporary society and ask whether or not there are modern day Franklins and modern day Leather Apron Clubs (Juntos). Students conjecture and discuss based on previous discussion and readings. Teachers can enhance this discussion by distributing various organizations’ literature (obtained from the Internet or directly from the institutions) or by assembling a panel of organization representatives for a question and answer session.

4. Group Work

The series of readings and discussions culminates in a problem-solving session in which students are asked to apply the Franklin civic model to their own community.

- First, ask students to identify problems and needs in their own communities. From class responses the teacher writes a list on the board or overhead.
- Next, divide the class into small groups of three to four students. Student groups identify and discuss a problem from the class-generated list.
- Then, each group is charged with “founding” their own organization, complete with a statement of purpose (mission statement) and an action plan that includes funding sources. They should fill out the “What Good May I Do” worksheet and present their organization to the class.

5. Assignment

Students will write a reflection on the activity that discusses the quality of their group’s work and the value of their own contributions.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on their level of class participation, the quality of their homework assignment, their group’s organizational statement of purpose and proposed project, and the quality of their self-reflection.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

This activity is an excellent entree to community service projects. The level of civic projects arising from this activity, however, could overwhelm the class (and the teacher). Those who are interested can pursue their project and may enlist other students beyond their work group for assistance. One or two projects may grow into viable community service projects that will require school and parental support.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- A&E DVD Archives. *Benjamin Franklin: Citizen of the World*. 1999.
- Fradin, Dennis B. *Who Was Benjamin Franklin?* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 2002).
- Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).
- Osborne, Mary Pope. *The Many Lives of Benjamin Franklin*. (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1990).
- Roop, Peter and Connie. *Benjamin Franklin*. (New York: Scholastic Reference, 2000).
- Time for Kids (ed.) *Benjamin Franklin: A Man of Many Talents*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

Benjamin Franklin, Civic Improver

BILLY G. SMITH

The initial energy that drove many early civic improvements emanated from the Leather Apron Club, subsequently called the Junto, founded by Franklin in 1727. The original name, taken from the customary attire of artisans, reflected the organization's membership and goals.

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To raise the level of informed debate, Franklin suggested that the members of the club pool their books to form a library. The accumulated volumes filled only one end of the room on Market Street furnished by Robert Grace; after a year, "for want of due Care" of the books, and because members were loath to part with their best volumes, the collection was disassembled. However, Franklin's "first Project of a public Nature" grew out of this experiment. In 1731 he proposed plans for a subscription library; rather than pooling their books, members would pool their financial resources, thereby creating funds to establish a communal library greater than any of them could have built individually.

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[I]t took three more years before [Franklin] once again turned his attention "a little to public Affairs" when he focused on improving law enforcement...Franklin wrote a paper, initially discussed by the Leather Apron Club in 1735, proposing that taxes be instituted to pay for qualified, full-time watchmen...Reflecting his class and artisanal perspective, Franklin advocated a "more equitable" tax system to carry out the project, proportionate to the value of the citizen's property. It was unjust, he reasoned, that "a poor Widow Housekeeper, all [of] whose Property to be guarded by the Watch did not perhaps exceed the Value of Fifty Pounds," had to bear the same burden as "the wealthiest Merchant who had Thousands of Pounds worth of Goods in his Stores." It took seventeen years, "when the Members of our [Leather Apron] Clubs were grown into more Influence," before the Assembly ordered tax-supported, regular police patrols.¹

Franklin enjoyed more immediate success in organizing volunteer fire companies, in part because fire posed such a threat to towns with wooden structures.

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In February 1735 Franklin published an anonymous letter in the Gazette proposing a solution to the problem of fire. Declaring, like Poor Richard, that an "Ounce of Prevention is worth a Pound of Cure," he provided instructions on how to avoid home fires, then asserted, perhaps based on personal experience, that "when your Stairs [are] in Flames, you may be forced, (as I once was) to leap out of your Windows, and hazard your Necks to avoid being over-roasted." Because Philadelphians lacked "Order and Method" in fighting these catastrophes, Franklin suggested that they follow the example of Boston by establishing "a Club or Society of active Men belonging to each Fire Engine; whose Business is to attend all Fires with it whenever they happen." While Franklin typically emphasized volunteer associations as a means to civic improvement, he also recognized that compensation was essential; he thus advocated that firefighters be paid through an abatement of their taxes.²

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Like the Leather Apron Club and the Library Company, Franklin's fire company spawned numerous similar organizations. As a result, by the time of the American Revolution, when most of Philadelphia's male property owners belonged to a company, Franklin doubted "whether there is a City in the World better provided with the Means of putting a Stop to beginning Conflagrations."³

To further safeguard the citizens of Philadelphia, Franklin and his fire company colleagues conceived the idea of an insurance fund for company members. From this initial plan eventually resulted the nation's first successful property insurance company, the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire,

Benjamin Franklin, Civic Improver (continued)

today America's oldest fire insurance company, founded in 1752. Franklin held the first seat on the Contributionship Board and printed the company's first policies.

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Working with his friend John Bartram, a Quaker botanist who helped establish the foundation for American environmentalism, Franklin proposed a plan for a type of Junto on a larger, more sophisticated scale. In 1743 Franklin published *A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America*, which outlined an organization for the exchange of information and ideas. The group would "be formed of Virtuosi or ingenious men residing in the several colonies, to be called *The American Philosophical Society*." The society's goal was to encourage learned men to correspond and converse about matters that would benefit their own lives, their communities, and "Mankind in general."

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Immediately after his retirement, Franklin pursued the twin goals of establishing a college and a hospital. Building on an idea that he had discussed with the Leather Apron Club six years earlier, in 1749 Franklin published a pamphlet called *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* that defined a public academy unique in early America. An educational radical, Franklin challenged the dominant classical elite approach that emphasized instruction for the glory of God and learning for its own sake. Rather than serving the privileged (as did the four existing colonial colleges: William and Mary, Princeton, Yale, and Harvard), Franklin's academy would provide training in practical matters and prepare young men for future careers. "As to their Studies," he wrote, "it would be well if they could be taught every Thing which is useful, and every Thing which is ornamental: But Art is long, and their Time is short." Enlightenment ideas, his own self-education and experiences, and his egalitarian commitment to the needs of Philadelphia's diverse class and religious groups all shaped Franklin's perspective. In addition, in typical Franklin fashion, he felt that higher education should enrich the community by cultivating in its students "an *Inclination* join'd with an *Ability* to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family."⁴

Franklin solicited several thousand pounds in donations, and the Philadelphia Academy opened in 1751 as the equivalent of a high school, divided into a Latin and an English component. Franklin was elected president of the academy board, but he soon lost control of its direction. The Anglican priest William Smith, who became professor and provost of the academy, persuaded the wealthy, religiously committed trustees to redefine Franklin's priorities, moving the institution closer to a classical view in training the sons of affluent Anglican merchants rather than the children of artisans or people of other religious denominations. In 1755 Smith established the College of Philadelphia, geared for more advanced students. Franklin and Smith grew to be bitter enemies, and the academy became a political football during the revolutionary era when the trustees proved to be Tory sympathizers. The Pennsylvania Assembly consequently took control of the institution, changed its administrators, and renamed it the University of Pennsylvania in 1791. Even though his democratic designs were thwarted, Franklin continued as a trustee throughout his life and hailed the college as one of his greatest accomplishments.⁵ Near the end of his life, Franklin was a patron of yet another college, which was named after him when in 1787 he gave the first large donation of two hundred pounds. Franklin College later merged with another school and became Franklin and Marshall College in 1853.

Within a few weeks of the academy's opening, Franklin began to set the groundwork for a hospital. Doctor Thomas Bond, a fellow member of the American Philosophical Society and trustee of the academy, campaigned for a hospital "for the reception and cure of poor persons," especially those "whose poverty is made more miserable

Benjamin Franklin, Civic Improver (continued)

by the additional weight of a grievous disease.” Bond appealed to his friend Franklin, the great organizer of such endeavors. Franklin realized that like so many of his schemes, this large project required government aid in addition to private donations. When he petitioned the Assembly, however, backcountry delegates resisted because they perceived little benefit to funding an exclusively urban institution. Franklin’s ingenious response was to propose a matching grant: the Assembly would provide two thousand pounds if citizens contributed an equal sum. Franklin used the Assembly’s commitment to leverage private donations: “We urg’d the conditional Promise of the Law as an additional Motive to give, since every Man’s Donation would be doubled.” As a result, the “Subscriptions accordingly soon exceeded the requisite sum.”⁶

Reflecting its clientele by its name, the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Sick Poor—the first public hospital in the colonies—began treating patients in 1752. “A convenient and handsome Building was soon erected,” Franklin wrote years later, and “the Institution has by constant Experience been found useful.”...The original building was constructed well out of town, near the corner of Pine and Eighth Streets, to shield more respectable residents from the perceived threat posed by impoverished patients. Once again, though, Franklin had been the principal moving force in creating an institution that catered primarily to people of the poorer classes.⁷

This essay was excerpted from Billy G. Smith, “Benjamin Franklin, Civic Improver,” in *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World*, edited by Page Talbott (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

1. *Autobiography*, 81; Hawke, *Franklin*, 52.
2. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 30, 1730, December 20, 1733, and February 4, 1735.
3. Franklin, “On Protection of Towns from Fire,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 4, 1735, *PBF* 2: 14; *Autobiography*, 87; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 4, 1735; and Hawke, *Franklin*, 52–53.
4. *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*, *PBF* 3: 397a.
5. Isaacson, *Franklin*, 146–47; Brands, *First American*, 662.
6. *PBF* 5: 285; *Autobiography*, 104. See also Wright, *Franklin*, 91.
7. *Autobiography*, 103–4.

What Good May I Do

NAMES:

1. Our issue or problem:

2. Name of civic organization [to address the above issue or solve the above problem]:

3. Provide your statement of purpose. (Attach additional pages as necessary.)

4. Describe your project. (Attach additional pages as necessary.)

