

Benjamin Franklin



Born: January 17, 1706

Died: April 17, 1790

Benjamin Franklin; Patriarch of the American Fire Service

Before he became well known as a Patriot and a Founding Father of the Constitution of the United States, Benjamin Franklin was many other things. Moreover, his time spent on fire protection is a miniscule part of his overall contributions to society. His role in creating the fire service image can be traced back to his days as a young man and an organization called the Junto. The Junto was originally created in 1727 when he was only 21 years old. It remained a viable organization until 1757.

We know a great deal about Benjamin Franklin's life because he wrote about it. He developed his own autobiography written some eight to nine years after he had retired at the early age of 42. And it contains a description of the process of setting up the volunteer fire department in Philadelphia. In actuality there had been many volunteer departments already organized in the colonies, so Franklin was not the first. But, his flair for communications and marketing of ideas rapidly resulted in the idea that he was behind the whole idea.

Franklin was actually born in Boston on January 17, 1706. His father's name was Josiah Franklin; he was a soap and candle maker. He had fifteen siblings and as was the custom of that day as a younger member of the family his father sought to it that he was apprenticed out to become a member of some trade. At the tender age of twelve he was actually apprenticed to his older brother James. As a teenager he ran away to the City of Philadelphia in 1725. Becoming a printer was important to Franklin. He was a reader. He was a writer. Moreover, he wanted to be a printer. As soon as he arrived in Philadelphia he set up a printing house that soon met with very great success. As he established himself in business he also started establishing himself as a friend and partner with many people in Philadelphia.

Much of the reputation of the original volunteer activity was linked back to the idea of "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" quote from the pages of Poor Richards Almanac. Franklin also published several letters that talked about the possible loss of life and property from accidental fires. One article contains a story of himself almost "being roasted alive" as a result of a malfunctioning bedpan with hot coals.

Reportedly what really stimulated Franklin to start the development of the fire brigade was a fire aboard a ship at a wharf that was immediately adjacent to some warehouses in which Franklin has a financial interest. Even the entrepreneur he was not necessarily concerned about all of the problems within the community but he certainly was concerned about his. This should not be looked upon as a negative. In fact probably the best example we could give are true risk assessment. Franklin saw that he had a problem and instead of ignoring it or watering down the potential counter measures he took action. His action was to create a fire brigade.

What most people don't realize is that the Philadelphia Fire Brigade really wasn't what you could refer to as a sophisticated operation. To the contrary, it wasn't even a firehouse. If you go to Philadelphia today they will point to an alley in which the fire engine originally stood. There was no shelter for the firefighting appliances. They sat out in the rain, the wind, the snow and the blistering sun in the summer time. The individuals, who were selected to become party to the brigade however, were not without an approach prior to the enactment of the brigade entitled the Union Fire Company. As a matter of fact the concept of the bucket brigade was very well known throughout almost all of the colonies in the United States.

It is very likely that Benjamin Franklin beginning in his very early age in Boston and obviously going through his time in Philadelphia probably witnessed his fair share of homes and businesses being destroyed by fire. Bucket brigades were good on incipient fire, i.e. those that are still in the stage prior to what we moderns call flashover. But once a building had gone to total involvement most firefighting operations were literally nothing more than defensive operations to protect neighboring structures.

Franklin clearly understood this. And as a result of his awareness of the limitations of fire protection he also was one of those who became an advocate of another concept that is near and dear to the fire service – fire insurance. Again, Franklin did not invent it. In fact the concept of fire insurance that emerged as a result of the great fire of London in 1666. Merchants and businessmen soon realized that they wanted to be able to maintain their financial interest in spite of catastrophic losses needed to create some sort of financial resource. The concept of that resulted in the early American Institution called the “Fire Mark”.

What Franklin did was encourage the idea that the fire mark system be imported into this country and that there be rewards and recognition to volunteer firefighters who assisted those insurance companies in keeping losses to an absolute minimum.

While other communities had had fire protection on somewhat an improvised fashion the primary significance of the Union Fire Company was that it became a model of the organizational structure. If one follows through with the concept of the Junto and the fact that Benjamin Franklin was a strong proponent of locally governed institutions the American Fire House may well have been the initial incubator of the concept of individual and organizational freedom that spawned the American Revolution.

Franklin's consummate curiosity led him to many other discoveries that influenced his role in fire. For example he was the person that explained electricity and invented the lightning rod to ground its effects instead of destroying buildings. Throughout his life he exchanged letters with leading scientists of the times on fire protection issues.

Franklin died on April 17th, 1790 at the age of 84. He, with his wife Deborah, is buried in Philadelphia. His grave is located right behind the Holiday Inn Hotel. It is easily recognized because it is often covered over with hundreds of pennies that have been cast on his grave as a gesture of respect to him. His headstone simply reads "Benjamin and Deborah Franklin. There is no mention of his achievements.