Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 17, 1706. His family lived in a little wooden house on Milk Street.

Milk Street could be a busy place. That’s because Boston was a busy city. In 1706, the United States didn’t exist yet. Boston was an important seaport in the British colonies. Many ships sailed in and out of Boston Harbor each day. Benjamin’s house on Milk Street was close to the harbor. He grew up smelling salty ocean air and watching the large sailing ships being loaded or unloaded before sailing off to another part of the world.

The Franklin house could be a busy place, too. Benjamin was one of seventeen children. Children were everywhere! Benjamin’s mother, Abiah, stayed very busy looking after them.

Benjamin’s father, Josiah, stayed very busy as well. He was an immigrant from England who became a tallow chandler and soap boiler. That meant that he made candles and soap out of tallow, a substance made from
animal fat. To make the tallow, Josiah cooked the fat in large pots. It smelled terrible. But selling the soap and candles he made was a good way to support his family.

**Life in the Colonies**

*In the colonies, many women died after giving birth. Josiah’s first wife, Anne, died after giving birth to their seventh child. Josiah’s second wife, Abiah, had ten more children, including Benjamin.*

*Many children in the colonies also died young. Four of Benjamin’s siblings died before they grew up.*
One day, Benjamin and his friends went to play in their favorite salt marsh. They waded into the water, looking for little fish. But the marsh was too swampy to find fish that day.

Benjamin suggested they build a wharf to stand on. That way, they wouldn’t get their feet too muddy. He showed his friends a pile of stones they could use to construct the wharf. He knew the stones weren’t his. Someone else was using them to build a house. But he took them anyway.

The boys followed Benjamin’s lead. Together, they lugged the stones to the marsh. After they were done, they stood back to admire their work. They had built an impressive little wharf. Now they wouldn’t get muddy!

The next morning, the workers discovered the missing stones. They complained to the boys’ parents.

Benjamin’s father was not happy. He told Benjamin it was wrong to have taken the stones. What was he thinking?

Benjamin tried to explain that he had done so because the wharf that he and his friends built would be useful for everyone.

But in the end, his father made him understand that, as Benjamin later wrote, “nothing was useful which was not honest.”

**wharf**: structure built along the shore
Benjamin’s father wanted him to become a minister. But Benjamin could be a bit of a rascal. He was quite often up to some kind of mischief. Josiah began to wonder if being a minister was the best choice for Benjamin.

Benjamin went to school for two years. He was very smart, even if he didn’t do well in math. And he loved to read about many different subjects. He once read a book called The Art of Swimming. The pictures in the book showed Benjamin all the different ways of swimming. Benjamin was someone who liked to put learning into practice. So he put the book down, got into the water, and practiced all the swim strokes. Then he invented some strokes of his own! He taught his friends how to swim too.

Eventually, Josiah decided that Benjamin should learn a trade instead of continuing in school.

So at age ten, Benjamin became his father’s apprentice. For two years, he worked in his father’s shop, learning how to make candles and soap.

He cut wicks for the candles. He filled candle molds. He went on errands. And he tended the shop.

But Benjamin hated it all. He wanted to be a sailor. He wanted to sail away on one of those tall ships and go on adventures and make amazing discoveries.

minister: religious leader
apprentice: a person who learns a skill from an expert
wick: pieces of material that are lit to burn candles
“My dislike to the trade continuing,” Benjamin later wrote, “my father was under apprehensions that if he did not find one for me more agreeable, I should break away and get to sea.”

One of Benjamin’s older brothers had died at sea. His parents did not want to lose Benjamin too. Josiah wisely realized that his son needed work that could keep him interested.

So Josiah took Benjamin on long walks around Boston to learn about different trades. There were so many to choose from. Together, they watched bricklayers lay bricks. They watched joiners carefully fit pieces of wood together. And they watched cutlers make knives. But Benjamin was not interested in any of those.

What did Benjamin like to do? He liked to read—a lot.

“All the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books,” Benjamin wrote in his autobiography.

And so Josiah decided his son should become a printer. Benjamin became an apprentice to his older brother James. Benjamin would learn how to use a printing press.

He would also discover that he had a very special hidden talent.
At James’s print shop, Benjamin learned to compose pages. He set one letter of type at a time. He pounded ink onto the type with ink balls. And he pulled a long lever on the printing press, known as the “devil’s tale,” to print each page.

Soon, James started his own newspaper. Benjamin was excited because he wanted to write for it. But he was sure James wouldn’t let him. How could he win James over?

Benjamin set to work. He wrote an essay for the newspaper. But he disguised his handwriting and didn’t use his own name. Instead, he signed it “Silence Dogood”—a pseudonym. Benjamin wrote the essay pretending to be a middle-aged woman!

Then Benjamin secretly slipped the essay under James’s door.

James found it the next morning. As it turned out, James was impressed and published it in his newspaper. Benjamin was thrilled!
James printed thirteen more Silence Dogood essays before Benjamin let him in on the secret of who wrote them.

James was not at all happy that Benjamin had deceived him. And that caused problems. The brothers were at odds. They began arguing.

**Who Wrote That?**

A *pseudonym* is a pretend name signed to an author’s work. It is used when an author doesn’t want readers to know who wrote the work.

James thought Benjamin was too proud of himself after his Silence Dogood success. He also thought that Benjamin wasn’t working hard enough.

Benjamin, on the other hand, thought that James was too hard on him. After all, they were brothers. James should be a little nicer.

James wasn’t being very nice, though. “My brother was passionate,” Benjamin later wrote, “and had often beaten me.”

Even so, Benjamin had to keep working for James. He had no choice. He had signed papers saying he would be James’s apprentice until he turned twenty-one. It was a commitment. If Benjamin left, he would get into big trouble.
As it turned out, James was the one who got into big trouble. He printed an opinion in his newspaper that made the colonial government, the Massachusetts General Court, mad. In fact, the government was so mad that they threw James into jail for a whole month!
While James was in jail, Benjamin kept printing the newspaper. When James was released, the General Court ordered that “James Franklin should no longer print the paper called the New England Courant.”

What would James do? He didn’t want to stop printing his newspaper. So he came up with an idea. He would continue to print the newspaper. But he would list Benjamin as the printer instead of himself.

This seemed like a good plan. But there was one problem. Benjamin hadn’t completed his apprenticeship with James yet. Everyone in Boston knew that Benjamin was still just an apprentice, not a printer.

To get around this problem, James signed a paper saying that Benjamin had finished his apprenticeship. That made the transfer of the newspaper seem real. To the world, Benjamin was now a real printer.

But James was no fool. He also made his brother sign secret papers saying Benjamin would still be James’s apprentice for four more years.