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Episode 349: The Women Behind Benjamin Franklin

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to an AirWave Media podcast.

[00:00:04] **Liz Covart:** *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Hello and welcome to episode 349 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world with live in, and I'm your host, Liz Covart.

On January 17, 1706, Abiah Folger and Josiah Franklin welcome their ninth child into the world. It was a baby boy that they named Benjamin. That makes today, January 17, 2023, the 317th anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth. There are a lot of history books and biographies about Benjamin Franklin. They tell us about his youth and his accomplishments in business, politics, and diplomacy. They tell us about his interest in electricity and science, and about his philanthropic work, but only a handful of these books actually tell us about Benjamin Franklin as a man. What did Benjamin Franklin think about and experience when it came to his private, lived life? Nancy Rubin Stuart, an award-winning historian and journalist and the author of the book *Poor Richard's Women: Deborah Read Franklin and the Other Women Behind the Founding Father*, joins us to investigate the private life of Benjamin Franklin by using the women in his life as a window onto Franklin's experiences as a husband, father, and friend. Now, during our investigation, Nancy reveals why we should explore the life of Benjamin Franklin through the women who were in his life, Deborah Read Franklin and her marriage to Benjamin Franklin, and details about the marriage of Benjamin and Deborah Franklin, including the many years they spent apart from each other between 1757 and 1775.

But first, in two weeks we will drop episode 350. We have such a great episode planned for you, with a big guest and one of your longtime requested topics. So be sure to keep an eye out for this new episode as it drops in two weeks on January 31. Alright, are you ready to explore the personal life of Benjamin Franklin? Let's go meet our guest historian.

Joining us is the executive director of the Cape Cod Writers Center. She's an award-winning historian who has authored numerous books, and she's a journalist who specializes in the history of women, biography, and social history. Today she joins us to discuss details from her most recent book, *Poor Richard's Women: Deborah Read Franklin and the Other Women Behind the Founding Father*. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Nancy Rubin Stuart.

[00:03:02] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.



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[00:03:05] **Liz Covart:** We're glad to have you. Now it seems like you're one of those scholars, Nancy, who has spent a lot of time in Ben Franklin's world. Although your project, *Poor Richard's Women*, is a bit different in that you've spent most of your time in Ben Franklin's world getting to know Ben Franklin through the women in his life, rather than through all those scientific, political, philanthropic, and scientific accomplishments that many people write books about. So would you tell us why you chose to use the women in Franklin's life as a way to better know Ben Franklin?

[00:03:36] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** I began this book, as I do all books, with a question, and my initial question was, "why did Deborah and Ben, if they were so-called happily married, why were they separated for so many years?" I did not understand that marriage. So that led of course to research. And I have to say, I began this book a long time ago, maybe twenty-seven years ago, and wrote a little bit of a proposal about it, but at the time, not that much was actually known about his relationship with women and publishers weren't interested. So I put it away back in the back file, and then I took it out again about ten years later, and still nobody was really interested. The reputation that Deborah Read Franklin had was that of a stupid, ignorant woman way below Ben Franklin's level of intellectual achievements, and this was a youthful mistake. Anyway, around 2016, I thought, "well, you know, it's really time for me to try this again." And when I brought it to my publisher, they said, "well, we'd like to know about Deborah Read Franklin, but we'd also like to know about the other women in his life."

That's how it began. And what I didn't know at the time—because before that I'd been looking through many of the volumes of the papers of Ben Franklin—I then discovered that the Library of Congress had digitized most of his letters and they're still being completed. There're estimated 30,000 letters. So this was a great help when I began to write the book and discovered things that I had no idea about. I have to say that I was fortunate enough that a former historian, Claude-Anne Lopez, who was an editor of the *Franklin Papers*, had worked on several books. One of them was called *The Personal Ben Franklin* [correction: *The Private Franklin*], and there were two others that talked about his women and his personal life. And this was a big help to me. Of course, times have changed. I think my view is a little different than hers, but I found it very useful and I have indeed credited her in the book. But being able to get into all those letters and see them and hear these voices was an eye opener.

[00:05:49] **Liz Covart:** As I listened to you talk, I realized that it's a real challenge to find information about the women in Ben Franklin's life. Today we have social media, so most people will give the historians of the future a hand because they post pictures and videos and all sorts of information about the relationship status. I mean, it really doesn't feel like anyone's life is private anymore. But when we're talking about the eighteenth century, people could have private lives and women in particular didn't always write a lot and leave records behind about their lives. So Nancy, how did you find out about the women in Ben Franklin's life? What



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historical sources were you able to uncover that revealed and uncovered information about their voices, deeds, and lives?

[00:06:35] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes, of course, thanks to feminist scholarship over the last fifty years, and particularly in the last thirty, there's been a lot more attention to what colonial women endured. What their lives were. So there's a lot of information that one can get secondhand, if you will, by understanding that most women did not read beyond rudimentary Bible and write in a rudimentary manner. Some of them didn't learn to spell too well, and Deborah, by the way, was one of them. So when you look at her letters, they're difficult to read. They're phonetic on many of the spellings, and so they look incredibly ignorant. But because I was able to get into the digitized letters, if you were patient with it, he would uncover a whole world. Now, Deborah Read Franklin's letters to Ben Franklin during his first journey to England are not preserved. There are three or four that have been, but all of those for five years, we don't know what happened. Were they thrown out? Do they get miscarried? We don't know, but we know from his reaction and his letters to her, some of what had been going on.

And then, finally, in the last ten years of her life, we finally hear her voice fully. There are comments about her beforehand, for instance, and some of them are hints in Franklin's writing. When he first marries her, he's married just six weeks, and he's so funny. He writes about promoting matrimonial happiness. He writes a whole essay in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. But the bottom line was it was directed to women, and the message there was: women must obey their husbands. But then three years later, he's writing about the virtues of a scolding wife, how she's vibrant and she's vigorous and she's spirited and she's a great helpmate and all of this. And of course he's talking from personal experience about Deborah. And then you have other people who've made comments, that one neighbor, for instance, said that she was a hedgehog, or she had a violent temper, and she would shoot quills at this neighbor when they would argue. And another one, a clerk much later talks about her that he never heard so many foul words from a gentlewoman. So you have an idea that besides all of her virtues, and she had many—she was warm, she was extremely attentive to his records and his books. She transformed his shop into a profitable store. She helped him in the post office, all of his positions, both when he was postmaster of Philadelphia and later when he was postmaster general of all the colonies. She helped him. He, in fact, tells the man who was to take over him when he went to England had to listen to Mrs. Franklin because she had a great deal of experience in knowledge with the post office.

So we know she was an industrious worker. And her letters reveal a caring person, very affectionate, taking care of neighbors who were ill. Also, she was a nurse, certainly raising the children, all the other things that she did for Ben. And when he left for England, first time, he's very angry that she won't go with him but he finally comes around and he says in one of his last letters to her before he left, that he's glad that she's going to be there to take care of his affairs. And he had a lot of respect for her. He even made her power of attorney twice when he was on



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two different trips, one in New England and one later when he went overseas. So this is a woman who I think had been greatly misjudged by earlier historians.

[00:09:57] **Liz Covart:** I do want us to talk about Deborah Read Franklin so that we can get to know her better. But as you've looked at all these varied and different historical sources where Benjamin Franklin is telling women to obey their husbands, then promoting the idea of a scolding wife because it seems he appreciated that in Deborah, what do you think Benjamin Franklin's relationship with women and his perceptions of women were like when you consider all of the research you did in these different historical sources?

[00:10:24] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, I always say that I think he was fascinated by women, as he was by electricity, and yet he found that attraction just as dangerous. And to me that seems to be symbolic of his relationships with women. He's the kind of a man who, as we all know, his most important goal and purpose in life is the betterment of mankind. To make social improvements, to improve the state of human being, whether it's through the Franklin stove or the bifocals, things to make life better personally and politically. And this is what he's pledged to do. This is his overarching purpose in life. And so women are important, but they're not primary in his life. And you know, one of the French women that he was involved with romantically once said, rather sarcastically, that Franklin is only interested in women when he's with them.

[00:11:17] **Liz Covart:** Now you mentioned that many historians have written off Deborah Read Franklin, Benjamin Franklin's wife, as being unintelligent and just a youthful mistake because Deborah, like many women who lived in the early to mid-eighteenth century, tended to write with phonetic spelling. And this just really surprised me because we know Benjamin Franklin is this brilliant mind and individual and you just don't tend to see very intelligent men hanging out with unintelligent women, at least not as partners and spouses. And my read of Benjamin Franklin is he really just didn't suffer ignorance for very long. So as we clear up the record about Deborah Read Franklin and what she was really like, could you tell us about Deborah's life and personality before she even came across Ben Franklin?

[00:12:03] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** She was the daughter of a carpenter, John Read and his wife Sarah White Read, and he was a prosperous middle-class carpenter and contractor in Philadelphia. He owned several buildings. He was reasonably well-to-do, therefore Deborah had a dowry. Now, her mother, Sarah, actually was already a businesswoman and had a sort of a flourishing salve and ointment business. And we think, least seems logical, that Deborah must have learned some of her business skills—and she was a great saleswoman—and probably her financial, her bookkeeping skills, recordkeeping from her mother. She probably assisted her mother. Father died just before Deborah thought she was going to marry Ben. But of course then he was to take off for England for his youthful trip in late 1724. So she didn't marry him at that



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time, but she by the way, probably came over, it's believed, 1711 with her parents as a very young child from Birmingham, England.

The family had emigrated to Philadelphia and she was not a Quaker, which some people had assumed she was, but indeed she was a member of the Christ Church. Quite a devoted member. She was a teenager, probably about seventeen or eighteen—we don't know the exact date of her birth—but when she met Ben and at the time she was standing outside her house and Ben had just arrived after two-week flight from Boston because he was disgusted with his brother's treatment of him as a young apprentice. So he was pretty dirty and unkempt and starving, and he was carrying these rolls, two under his arm, and he was ravenously devouring one of them. And he admits in his autobiography, he said that he made a ridiculous appearance when she saw him and allegedly, at least this is what he writes in his autobiography, that she giggled when she saw him. Of course, that changed later.

[00:14:00] **Liz Covart:** It's actually quite striking when you compare Deborah's upbringing with Ben's upbringing because they're actually very similar. Benjamin was born in Boston in 1706 to a devout family of puritans. His father, Josiah Franklin, had migrated from England to Boston for reasons of religion, and Josiah was also a tradesman. You know, he had been a silk dyer in London and became a soap and candle maker in Boston. And Franklin's parents who really wanted Franklin to join the church, they couldn't afford to keep Franklin in school, so Ben was apprenticed in the trade of printing to his brother James Franklin—after he picked printing, Josiah didn't force that on him—but Ben decided he didn't want to be a candle and soap maker like his father. So he followed his brother James into printing. So just like Deborah learned in her mother's shop about how to keep account books and sell goods, you have Ben learning how to print and sell newspapers in part because he was working in his, his family shop, his brother's printing shop.

[00:15:00] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes, but there is a real big difference. First of all, of course, Ben had grown up in puritan New England. He hated it and he would write things about that in his brother's paper making fun of puritans. He's really a freethinker. Deborah did not have much book learning. As I say, only the rudimentary reading the Bible and maybe some household accounts and things like that. Did not learn spelling and was not well read, and he was marvelously well read. He read everything. Besides all of the skills as a printer, this was his passion throughout his life. He read the classics, he read the contemporary. Dryden and Pope and so on and so forth. So there's an enormous intellectual gap between them. But in those days, women, they were never encouraged to be educated. Education for a woman beyond the homemaking skills was considered a waste and maybe even a distraction. There's some pretty restrictive comments about how women should just be in the house, in the home.



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So her role was ordinary. It was the norm, which was to be a homemaker. Of course, she did much more. She ended up being quite a businesswoman and help her in the post office. She could actually do enough math to be able to transfer or account for the different currencies, including the ones in the West Indies quicker than anybody else, it looked like, I mean, he talks about that. But what's funny about Ben is he has a way in his autobiography of mentioning things briefly, and then glossing over the most important emotional highlights in his life. So at the time that he marries Deborah, all we know is that he admits, finally he felt a little guilty about what had happened, but he glosses over that. All he says is, "I took her to wife on September 1, 1730," and this goes on throughout his life. There's a way that he just doesn't deal with them. And if he does, of course he's a wordsmith. He's very good at, very slick with the words. He's able to do that. So it requires some digging to get underneath and find out what really was going on.

[00:17:02] **Liz Covart:** Did your research reveal any information about Deborah and Ben's courtship? As you told us, Franklin writes in his autobiography how he had these giant rolls stuffed under his arms and in his mouth, and that's when Deborah saw him for the first time. But what about after this initial encounter? Do any of the historical records tell us about their actual courtship and how that courtship led to their marriage?

[00:17:27] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, we do because after he'd been working for a new printer in Philadelphia, somebody he didn't like at all, Keimer, he was renting rooms in the home of a rival printer. And his boss, Keimer, didn't want that at all and recommended he go and room with John Read in John Read's home. So he did in early in 1724. And then he writes in his autobiography "I had made some courtship during that time to Ms. Read. I had great respect and affection for her and had some reason to believe she had the same for me." That's a quote from his autobiography. So that's what we know. And then as I mentioned before, in September of 1724, suddenly John Read died, which obviously very upset to her and her mother. And at that point, Mrs. Read said, because they were betrothed, basically, Mrs. Read said she felt they were too young. Besides, Ben was going off to England on this adventure to buy printing equipment, supposedly at the generosity of a deputy governor, Sir William Keith. So the marriage was put off and all he writes again is that they exchanged promises before he left on the ship.

So that's all we really know about the courtship. But obviously they were living in the same house before that, you know, they must have spent a fair amount of time together. I think his attraction to her was that he admired her, which he talks about a little later when she unfortunately marries somebody else. How after that marriage, how she was no longer sociable. She was no longer upbeat or cheerful. She was a totally different person. So we know she had a lot of energy and a lot of zest for life and always interested in other people and doing well by other people as well. These were qualities that attracted him much more than the intellectual. But again, the intellectual gap—and I won't say the intellectual, the *knowledge* between men and



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women. The men were involved in the world, the women in the home. That's what was the norm, and that was expected and was appreciated.

[00:19:34] **Liz Covart:** But it does sound like Deborah was an intelligent woman. She may not have had all of Ben's book smarts and been able to teach herself all the things that Ben had, but she was smart. She had a lot of what we would call today street smarts, right? She was able to turn Ben's store, where he sold newspapers, pamphlets, books, stationary, those sorts of things, profitable and she was able to run his business and their store while he was away and take care of their affairs. So she definitely had a lot of street smarts. Now it does sound like Deborah broke her promise to wait for Ben and she married while he was away in London. What do we know about Deborah's first marriage?

[00:20:15] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, I won't say she broke her promise because when he was in England, he was a pretty randy young man, I have to say. I mean, he made a few passes at his friend's girlfriend over there. He also admits, we don't know exactly when, but most historians think that this is where he began to keep company with low women to satisfy his natural urges. But he wrote to Deborah, I mean, he was taken by London. He loved the theater and the culture, and he was pretty dazzled by it. And he wrote to Deborah, he said he wrote her one letter, only one letter in the eighteen months he was there saying, "I'm not likely to return soon." Naturally, Deborah was extremely upset and Mrs. Read and her friends prevailed upon her to not wait around. Who knows when, if he was going to come back. So she accepted courtship from other people and she finally, in August of that year, she married a man who was an English emigre and found out within two months that he was already married.

So that was it for her. Deborah would not take his name, would not have anything to do with him. Meanwhile, he had her dowry, of course, which he squandered, ended up in debt, and he finally fled, after a while—a few other things he did that were pretty bad—he fled to the West Indies and then rumors came back that he had been killed in a barroom. But this left Deborah legally in a very strange situation. She was neither married nor single. All of her friends were getting married and having children by then, and she was sort of nowhere, and there was no way for her to get a divorce, even if she could get a divorce, which was very unusual and difficult in those days in colonial Pennsylvania. There's no way to prove he was dead or alive. So it was a quandary. She was a woman alone.

[00:22:06] **Liz Covart:** So what happened when Franklin returns from London and finds out that Deborah had been married but might not really be married?

[00:22:13] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes, that's the problem. And when he comes back, of course, he somehow he continues to socialize or see the Reads, visit them. He said that they actually depended, he wasn't specific about it again, that he often gave them advice, I presume, financial



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advice, because pretty soon he left back to his printer job after another earlier work with a clerk, and then he and a partner started another printing company, their own printing company. Eventually they bought the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from his former boss, but in the meanwhile, now four years pass. And he's trying to court other women, and he does. And the fathers of these women don't want him because they say printers are poor providers.

So now we're into 1730. In July 1730, August, he has basically bought out his partner. So he now owns the B. Franklin Printer Company. And he admits he was guilty about Deborah, that he felt badly about it, and he finally talks to Mrs. Read about Deborah and he admits that he feels that her situation, and she's very depressed, is all because of his behavior in England. To his surprise, Mrs. Read said, "well, not really," because she was the one who pushed Deborah to get married, and this is a great relief to him that he's not totally responsible for what happened. The next thing we know in his autobiography is he says, "I took her to wife on September 1, 1730." So obviously they had renewed their affection and Deborah forgave him and common-law marriage, of course, they moved in together.

[00:23:52] **Liz Covart:** Speaking of that common-law marriage, Stessa has some questions. She knows that Deborah Read and Benjamin Franklin married in a common-law marriage and she wonders why they chose a common-law marriage. She also wonders how common common-law marriages were in the eighteenth century and what the difference was between a common-law marriage and a marriage officiated and recognized by a church or at a local courthouse?

[00:24:15] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes. It's an interesting question. Common-law marriages, there were many, it was not regular, but let me put it this way, it wasn't so unusual. There were situations where people, for whatever reason, couldn't be recognized by the church. Of course, the church, all the churches wanted people to be married in a church. In her case, it was absolutely impossible. As Ben points out, if he married her and then her former husband appears he's a bigamist, and he and Deborah would've been severely punished and beaten. Moreover, if he marries her legally somehow, I don't know how, but if he did, the debts that her husband had accrued would become Ben's debts.

So there were a number of reasons for that. By the way, common-law marriage was only slowly, has been recognized for hundreds of years. And the changed in the British law much earlier than it did in America. America, United States, common-law marriages were allowed, in fact, in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, common-law marriage recognized as a legal union, civil legal union, up until 2005.

[00:25:25] **Liz Covart:** So is a common-law marriage, basically just two people making a promise to each other and then society recognizing this promise as marriage vows?



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[00:25:33] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Basically, yes. It can be before witnesses or just a verbal promise to each other privately. They lived together for so many years, and it used to be if you lived together with somebody for seven years, it would be recognized legally as a common-law marriage. Of course, that became sticky much later in terms of divorce rights and so on. But sure, a common-law marriage, these two people with good intention and pledge love to each other, live together for the rest of their lives.

[00:26:01] **Liz Covart:** You mentioned that one of the reasons that Ben married Deborah in a common-law marriage was because Deborah was in a really stuck position where she was married but not really married, and she was depressed because she felt like she was stuck and that she'd always be alone. Did marrying Ben make Deborah happy?

[00:26:19] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Oh, it made her very happy. She was always wild about Ben. You know her letters later, it's clear that she was very happy. There was one cloud in the marriage early on, which is six months into the marriage he appears one day with a bundle of blanket. Inside that blanket is a little baby boy. She's horrified. And where's the mother? Who's the mother? We still don't know. Historians have theorized about this for generations, there are whole books on it. The child was named William. He called him Billy. And she did not want to take care of him. According to the family memoir, again, a couple generations down, said that she didn't want to, but it was her great love and tenderness for Ben that she finally agreed to raise him and she never really took to him.

There's a fair amount of dissension between them, and she even much later says terrible things about him. She says he's the greatest villain in the world to a clerk who had come to work for Franklin, didn't work for him, but anyway, tried to. Yet Billy called her "mother" and she considered him a son. And of course, the fact that he had this illegitimate son did not do Ben well in terms of his enemies, who used this to torment him really for the rest of his life, about how he was lascivious, he was, you know, a cad, and so on. What about the mother? All kinds of theories. If it had been the child of a prostitute, it has been argued that there would be no way that Ben would've had to claim this child as his own. Therefore, the scholar, for instance, Leola May, talks about how probably was somebody that Ben knew, probably maybe another middle-class person whose husband was away at sea and they'd had a little dalliance and this child, she couldn't raise it when the husband was about to come home.

We don't know exactly when he was born. There're again, theories upon theories, was he born in 1728? Was he born in 1730? Was he really a three-or-four-month-old or infant when he brought him to Deborah? We don't know. Although Billy claims later he was born in 1730, much later in life. So who knows? Of course, Billy, William becomes the governor of New Jersey and tragically remains on the British side. Tremendous heartbreak to Ben.



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[00:28:43] **Liz Covart:** That's really surprising to me that Deborah and William Franklin didn't really get along because other scholars we've spoken to about Ben and William's relationship have mentioned that William was really there for Deborah when Ben was away in London and he took care of Deborah at the end of her life. Rather than Ben, it was William who really sought to her needs.

[00:29:04] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes, that is sort of the mystery about it because at the end when Ben is still in England and probably didn't need to be there those last few months, and Deborah is obviously failing. When she dies, Billy writes to his father and lambasts him and says that the one thing she wanted and longed for before she died was to see him and you know, is quite angry with his father. So there's a mystery there.

I do have to say that when Billy comes back from England with his bride, he had been betrothed to somebody in Philadelphia who didn't even know that he was about to marry someone else. But when he comes back with a bride, Deborah and Sally, their daughter, entertain the bride and him for quite a while, and then there's quite a bit, Sally is still single when William and his wife settle in New Jersey. There's a lot of back and forth with Sally going there and being introduced to Downes and learning how to dress stylishly from this stylish English woman, and Deborah writes about that. So I think that it softens over time, undoubtedly does enough at least that there's certainly cordiality and respect for each other. And there must be some affection because after all, she brought him up and watched him as a young man.

[00:30:21] **Liz Covart:** It really just must have been a shock when Ben comes home to his new wife and presents her with a new baby in his arms. Did Benjamin and Deborah ever have their own children?

[00:30:32] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes. In 1732, Deborah bore their son, Francis Folger. They called him Frankie and he was the apple of their eye. When he's about two and a half, or maybe nearly three, they have a little portrait painted of him, and Franklin is thinking he's very bright and very energetic and very winning. And Deborah, too, apparently, although we don't hear much about Deborah's reaction because it hasn't been recorded, and he even starts to have little Frankie tutored, so he's wild about him, as was Deborah. Unfortunately, because smallpox was raging, Ben had been writing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for several years warning people about the smallpox and encouraging them to get what was the inoculation or what was called then the variolation. Of course, it wasn't with a hypodermic, but it was really scratching the pus from somebody with pox into the arm of somebody else.

He's lecturing about this continually in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. So in 1736 there had been several smallpox epidemics in Philadelphia and people have died from it. And he's encouraging people continually, and yet he does not inoculate little Frankie. Frankie is not quite four at the



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time. And there's a reason why, which is that little Frankie was suffering from dysentery. It's a terrible disease, and he was quite ill from it, and he was afraid to inoculate him when he was so sick. So he did not. And then what happens is little Frankie dies. He's just a few weeks over his fourth birthday, and this is heartbreak for Ben and for Deborah. Deborah, again, we don't have much of a reaction. What we do have is she kept that portrait prominently displayed in her home for the rest of her life. Ben is accused by his enemies because of the controversy over inoculation of probably having inoculated his child and therefore caused his death. This is the people who are anti inoculation. And Ben is furious.

And so the next month in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, he writes a long letter describing why he did not, and he could not inoculate little Frankie saying, "look, you really need to inoculate your children. If they die, they might die anyway if they get smallpox. So either way, at least you've done everything you can to protect them." It's pretty sad. And then later, much later, many decades later, when Jane, his sister, writes about his grandchildren—Ben is in England, at that point—Ben writes back that talking about the grandchildren and remembering them, not knowing all of them, but this brings him back to his lost son, quite poignant.

[00:33:15] **Liz Covart:** And then of course they had Sarah, or Sally, Franklin.

[00:33:17] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** And then, yes, it is not until 1743 that Deborah bears another child and that daughter is Sarah, or Sally. Now again, the historians have jumped in and have said, "well, why are there so many years between?" Was it because Ben didn't care anymore about Deborah? Was he involved with other women? Why so many years? My theory, of course, is that she probably had a number of stillborns and miscarriages before she had Sally. So they have really one child of their own, which is Sally, and it's through her that of course there are the Franklin descendants.

[00:33:55] **Liz Covart:** Now, you've mentioned a few times that Ben travels to England and stays for a number of years as a colonial agent for Pennsylvania and later as a colonial agent for Georgia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, as well. In fact, it's with the exception of just a year or two when he sails back to Philadelphia and then back to London that Franklin is pretty much in England from 1757 to 1775. But during all of this time abroad, Franklin never brought Deborah with him to London. Nancy, We want to hear all about why Ben Franklin never brought his wife, Deborah, to London, to be with him. But first we need to thank our episode sponsor.

[00:34:37] **Carolyn Eastman:** Hi, I'm Carolyn Eastman of Virginia Commonwealth University and my newest book, *The Strange Genius of Mr. O: The World of the United States' First Forgotten Celebrity*, is out now. During the early nineteenth century, James Ogilvie was the very face of eloquence. He had been a burned-out immigrant schoolteacher who discovered that he had a real knack for the spoken word, delivering thoughtful and passionate speeches. And in



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1808, he decided to abandon the school room and undertake a career as a traveling public speaker. The reason why Ogilvie matters so much to the history of early America is that he was, in essence, the first great public speaker who vast numbers of early Americans were able to see. He was somebody who was terribly eager, not just to make a name for himself, but also to help Americans imagine a kind of, maybe not unity, but at least he could get them unified in thinking together about the same subjects. And he succeeded. One of the most remarkable things about his story is how long he succeeded in doing exactly that. Be sure to pick up your copy of *The Strange Genius of Mr. O* wherever you buy your books.

[00:36:08] **Liz Covart:** Nancy, why didn't Ben Franklin ever bring Deborah Franklin to be with him in London? Do we know anything about how Deborah even felt about being left at home in Philadelphia for so long?

[00:36:20] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes. Well, Ben had been sent by the assembly to go to England to plead with the Penns, who were the proprietors of Pennsylvania, and were not paying their taxes for the defense of the colony, especially on the western border near the Ohio River valley. There were a lot of dissension, which of course gets mixed up with the French and Indian War. But anyway, the settlers were being massacred and so on. And the Penns aren't paying their taxes when they feel they don't need to, and there's enormous controversy. So with a lot of difficulties, finally, the assembly—and Ben had been in the assembly, at that point—that he was the best person because of all of his activity before that in negotiating other political problems and his political improvements and social improvements, he's highly respected.

So he's sent to England to plead with the Penns to pay their taxes. And if that doesn't work to go plead to the crown. Ben has an idea that he wants to get rid of the Penns, basically, and make it a crown colony, not a colony owned by propriety, by the Penns. So he of course expects—this is 1757. He, of course, expects Deborah to go with him, and he's flabbergasted because she refuses. Again, theories abound about why. One of the prominent theories is that because she came over as a very young child on probably a perilous sea journey, 1711. This is the reason. That she remembers this terrible journey, frightening journey. She's a child. That she's traumatized and she will not set on a ship. She will not go.

So he goes off to England himself. You know, I've puzzled over this myself a great deal. And is this an agreement between them? Is it like sort of an amiable twenty-first-century legal separation or divorce? That therefore if he's going to go, he's going to live as a man with freedom, which it seems he does? That's the first journey. The second journey, and that one, the next one, again, she refuses to go. But during the first journey, no sooner is he settled in London and living with a middle-class widow, Margaret Stevenson, in her townhouse on Craven Street in central London, that his friend William Strahan writes to Deborah and he says, "you know, Ben is very popular here with the ladies, and he's living with a lovely woman. And my suggestion to



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you is that you'd better sail over here and protect your interests." And Deborah writes back to him that she's not going to get on the ship. And she feels, I guess, secure. I mean, Ben is sending her all kinds of presents at this time. He's sending her English furniture and candle snuffers and China and fabrics and so on. And she in turn is sending some home goods and commodities like buckwheat and apples and so on, things that would remind him of home. But that's how it goes.

And again, there's not a lot of great information about what exactly went on with Margaret Stevenson. We do know that she was much more than his landlady. You know, it's interesting. At first he only talks about her as "landlady." It's only later he begins to mention her name. And we know that she nursed him when he was sick, that she helped him get English clothes, that she introduced him to his friends, and that they socialized together and that their friends consider them an item. And much, much later, he writes many, many years later, that his years living with Mrs. Stevenson—he calls her Mrs. Stevenson, sometimes Margaret—these years together with her, were among the sweetest of his life.

[00:39:52] **Liz Covart:** Historians also wonder about the fact that in Ben's letters, even though he's sending all these gifts to Deborah and Sally from London, that Ben really seems cold to his actual family in these letters, and yet he seems very warm when he talks about Margaret Stevenson and her daughter Polly.

[00:40:09] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes. And if you read the letters, this is pretty true. His letters become less frequent as time goes on with Deborah. And you know, he indicates, I mean, even in that first journey, he starts listing off dates. I mean, maybe ten dates in which Deborah wrote to him, and it looked like every week when she was trying to make the packet, of the boats that would bring the mail to London. He lists off all these dates and he says, "well, I'm sorry I haven't responded. You know, I've been ill and I've been busy and so on." So his letters to Deborah are somewhat newsy, but he says he's not going to write a lot about politics because he doesn't want her to get involved, and a lot of them are requests for things or business or telling her where he traveled, as he did travel, both in England and on the continent. Talks a little bit about Mrs. Stevenson's selection of fabrics that are sent to her. Also, he writes to Polly, who lives at a distance from her mother at this point. And Polly's a young woman, eight, nineteen or twenty. And Polly is forever asking him information. How do chimneys work? How do the tides work? And he loves to be a teacher. So he's writing these long letters to her explaining things, and he does really act as her surrogate father.

Some people say, "oh, he was so affectionate. It was really romancing Polly." I mean, there is that theory, but that's not what I believe. I doubt very much he would be involved romantically with her and her mother. But he's very warm to Polly. He steps in as the person who gives her away when she gets married later. That affection continues throughout their entire lives. She finally even comes over at the end of his life to be with him in Philadelphia. But to Sally, there



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are lectures about being thrifty, about going to church more often, about being a good person and about taking care of her mother. And they're pretty cold. At one point, Sally is maybe fourteen, fifteen, and she wants to study French, and so he's provided her with a tutor of French. It's the beginning of his journeys. And she writes back a perfect letter in French and he says, "surely your tutor and wrote that, you didn't." And Sally just crumples. She stops learning French.

So it's just one more example. There are many others. There's another time when it's during a ball that Washington's going to have, I guess probably to celebrate the return to Philadelphia by the patriots. And she just wants a few feathers and a few little things, and he just thinks it's terrible that she's going to engage in this kind of frivolity and is very resentful of it. And of course, he does not approve of her marriage when she wants to marry Richard Bache. So in fact, he's so angry about it when he discovers it that he doesn't even mention his son-in-law's name for almost a year. So it's pretty cold. And yet Sally continues to try to be a dutiful and devoted daughter.

[00:43:02] **Liz Covart:** Is there enough historical evidence where you could make any sort of informed speculation as to why Franklin seemed so cold to his real family and yet so warm to his adopted family, the Stevensons?

[00:43:14] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, we have to understand that most of his last years are spent in England—well, aside from before he goes to France. They are at a distance. Deborah's taking care of a lot of his affairs. She's raising his daughter, which by the way, he's always admonishing her to make her into a perfect colonial wife. So he had this idea that this model of a colonial woman and a colonial wife, which was quite different than his idea or his experiences with English women. So different values for them. And I think he also felt probably somewhat insecure that this was all left to Deborah, that he's much too far away to have much more of an influence. Yes, he does buy her a harpsichord. And when he does come home, they play duets, him on his harmonica that he had invented and she on her harpsichord. And this seems to be one moment, at least, when they really have a great father-daughter kind of a unity, and Deborah's ecstatic with the music and calls it "heavenly angels" and so on. But this is short-lived. He's only home for two years and then he's back again to England. So most of his years, when you compare the two families, are spent with his English family. And, you know, I guess familiarity and being there every day. Of course, he would in some ways bond with the women, the family, that he's living with.

That's not to necessarily excuse him, but you know, he is away for five years the first time and he is away ten years the second time. That's a long time. In fact, later when people are saying, well, maybe he's thinking about going back to America, he's saying it doesn't feel like his country anymore and he doesn't know how well he's going to be received or how comfortable



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he's going to be there. So he really, in many ways, becomes an advocate for a while anyway, for a while only, of England.

[00:45:06] **Liz Covart:** I just can't help but think how Deborah viewed Franklin's behavior and communication because in so many ways it was her street smarts, her ability to keep the books of their print and paper shops and to keep that family afloat and his affairs in order while he was in London that allowed Franklin to go to London and spend so much time there. So I just can't help but think what she must have thought that he's spending so much time with the Stevensons and never coming home.

[00:45:36] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes. I wish we knew more. There is only one comment that we know about that she accepted it with, quotes, "Christian resignation." So, philosophically. I guess it's like that's all she could do. We do know she continually, and it's heartbreaking when you read the letters, longing for him to come back and he keeps writing to her. He's coming back on the fall ships, he's going to come back on the spring ships, he's going to come back in the summer, and she gets all excited. At one point she calls Sally and her husband, Richard, back from Boston because he's going to come to Philadelphia. He's going to return, and yet he doesn't because of the political issues that he's involved with, with the parliament. So she continually longs for it and all she wants, to her very last letters, that she just longs to see him again. It's heartbreaking. So that's what we know.

She's also a little disgusted with the fact that everyone's always asking her about her husband, when he's coming back, and, by the way, about his political issues, and what was developing. And she just says she wants them to stop bothering her. And yet she'll do everything he said. He leaves it with that half-finished house, which becomes Franklin Court, and she's got to finish supervising the people to finish working it. She has to furnish it the way he wants. He sends her orders from overseas about them, and she obeys everything that he wants and does. And she even sends him, when he has some funny requests, he wants two squirrels sent to England to one of the daughters of a friend, and she even gets squirrels captured and sent over. I mean, there's nothing she doesn't do for him. So she's crazy about him and she just longs to be with him.

In my book, I do say that when she refused to leave with him, it was the worst mistake of her life. And I believe it was. But they must have come to some kind of an agreement because on his last journey, he evidently told her, "well, if you're not going to come with me on the second journey, then I only want you to write cheerful letters." And she actually echoes that in a letter to him that, you know, he doesn't want to hear her complaining, "if you're not going to go with me, I don't want to hear complaining." So she tries not to, except finally, she just has to write to him, "I just long to see you. When am I going to see you? Will I see you again, ever?"



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[00:47:57] **Liz Covart:** And she never does see him again, because she dies in December 1774 of a stroke, and Ben was still in London until April of 1775. Do we know how Franklin reacted to the news of Deborah's death when it finally reached him? Should we read anything into the fact that he never remarried after her death?

[00:48:15] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** No, and I sure wish we did. In fact, when he does come back in 1775, soon after Lexington and Concord, he sees the house and how she put everything. She finished it the way he wanted. She furnished it the way he wanted. She did everything. And yet we don't know anything more other than the next morning he is besieged by these crowds of people who want him to get to work for helping with the revolution. So at least nothing that I can find or I think anyone else can find. He does talk about, later to a French friend, how he was so fortunate to have a wife like her, that she was frugal and she was a fortune to him. And he does talk about that, that she was wonderful. In his autobiography he does also write that "she proved a good and faithful helpmate, assisted me by attending the shop, we throve together, and have mutually endeavored to make each other happy." And again, this autobiography is written in stages, but he says, thus he "corrected the great erratum as well I could," meaning the erratum—the printer term for a mistake. Meaning when he didn't marry her before he left the first, when he was young, first time to England.

So that's kind of all we know. We don't know what he felt. Now, he's home for two years before he goes to France as one of the commissioners to plead for funds for the American Revolution to support the soldiers. But soon afterwards, within several months, he meets and engages in quite a romance with Madame Brillon, the musician.

[00:49:51] **Liz Covart:** Yes. And we have focused a lot of our conversation on Franklin's relationship with his wife Deborah, and we've heard some about his relationship with his London landlady, Margaret Stevenson, and her daughter Polly. But Nancy, you've written about a fair number of women in your book *Poor Richard's Women* and I wonder if you could give us a preview of the other women in Ben Franklin's life, which you cover in *Poor Richard's Women*?

[00:50:14] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, while he is still in Philadelphia, and we're looking at 1754, he's now the postmaster general of the colonies, and he's on a postal tour in Boston, in his late forties. And he meets Catherine Ray. Catherine Ray is a twenty-three-year-old, very intelligent, sparkling young woman, and she's enthralled on, he's of course an international celebrity by then. He's already had his famous electrical experiments and all of that, and she's awed by him and they have quite passionate encounters. He volunteers to escort her. She has to go back to Rhode Island, to board a boat, to go to Block Island where she lives. Her father's ill. He volunteers to escort her on a, at least a two-day carriage ride. And he does, and there's wonderful letters between them, a flirtation, and he teases her also. There's a lot of teasing that



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goes on between them. They played word games and mind reading games, and she calls him a conjurer and so on. Anyway, I guess he teasingly, or maybe not teasingly, he invites her on this two-day carriage ride. We don't know where they stayed. He's going to teach her multiplication and she refuses, and I think he's pretty upset about that because later he writes to her when they have parted in this letters between them that he's looking for the sweet kisses she promised him in the wind. Then he writes that, you know, he sees these snowy fleeces, these snowflakes that are coming down and it reminds him of her lovely bosom, but as cold. So he's pretty upset that he doesn't get the last favor from her. She later goes on to marry, who will become the future governor of Rhode Island, and they remain friends. They do become friends and they remain friends throughout their lives and as correspondents.

So that's one of the women that I've talked about in the book. And then of course I've talked, obviously, about Margaret Stevenson and Polly, and then the French women. Madame Brillion, a thirty-three-year-old, very beautiful, said to be the most beautiful in France, a musician who favored the piano forte over the harpsichord. In fact, she was such an outstanding performer, I think, and composer, that Boccherini devoted his six piano sonatas to her. That again becomes a passionate romance that goes on for over a year. She's married, of course, arranged marriage, has two children. It didn't matter. She's inviting him all the time and they begin to have regular dates on Wednesdays and Saturdays together and meals and walks and so on, and music and concerts. And she promises to love him forever. She loves him more than anyone else, and she wants him to love her only. And yet ultimately, she does not allow him to be intimate with her. And he's stung and he takes off, and he says, there's nothing wrong with somebody my age, admiring pretty young women. I mean, there's a delightful courtship between them. She's teasing him about his gout and his excesses. Walking and exercising instead of sitting and playing chess and drinking too much wine and too many rich foods.

And then the next woman that is talked about in the book is, uh, Madame Helvétius, the widow of a philosopher, wealthy, very unconventional, and she has a very strange household. She has an estate and three single men live with her. Try to keep tabs on her social engagements, which they can't because she's very flighty. And he will arrive with his grandson and all, ready for dinner, and she won't be there. And she's off to Paris for some sort of an engagement. And yet she loves him, but she's on to him and they have all these discussions about getting married, and he becomes so entranced with her, now he's in his late seventies, and he becomes so entranced with her. He wants to marry her and he continually proposes. Now her good friend Turgot, the economist, scoffs at it and says, "you're too old for romance. Forget this stuff." But he persists. He becomes almost violent at one point with proposals and at that point, she, who is quite bold herself, she flees Tours to be away from him for several months to let him cool down, as Turgot would say. So then he tries to marry his grandson to one of her daughters because this will bind the families together. Then that doesn't work out. His grandson is, well, let's just say a bit of a playboy. So ultimately none of those romances come to fruition. Did he want to marry Madame Helvétius because his be security and they love France, be there for the rest of his life? He is



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looking towards his old age. He is old. He's looking towards what's going to happen next, and he's alone and he doesn't want to be alone.

But anyway, as I say, it didn't happen. So ultimately, after the truce, you know, many years later, it's not until then that he goes back to Philadelphia. And who takes care of him the end of his life? It is his daughter, Sally, who's now just had her ninth, or will soon have her ninth child, and Polly. Polly is widowed by then. Polly comes over with her three children and they meet. And you have to wonder about that meeting. I talk about that in the book. You don't get a lot of information about it. You have to wonder, I mean, these two women knew of each other well, but after all, they're really competitors for his love, and they take care of him until he dies.

[00:55:30] **Liz Covart:** Well, we'll have to get copies of *Poor Richard's Women* so we can read all about these other interesting women in Ben Franklin's life. Nancy, I'm curious what you think about the inclusion of these different women in Ben Franklin's story. My sense is that you wrote *Poor Richard's Women* to help us find a better window into Ben Franklin's private life and to help us understand him better. But I'm curious what you think the inclusion of these other women in Franklin's story does for understanding of Franklin's life, work, and finally his legacy?

[00:56:00] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, you know, there's been a great deal written, obviously, about his incredible achievements. Not only scientific, which are remarkable, but political and diplomatic and his inventions. He's also witty and charming and whimsical and extremely clever. And because of all the books and media that have been done on that, this is what we know about Ben. And he's an icon. Not only as a founding father, but he's an icon of Americana, if you will. And yet there is a real person behind there. And that real person has some of the same struggles and indecisions and difficulties of all the rest of us. And this humanizes him. My theory is this is a man who privately struggled between passion and prudence. You see it sometimes in his political writings, his personal writings, letters, and so on, but you certainly see it with these women. So you know, this iconic vision we have of him is a man of ultimate reason. He's completely guarded by reason. I mean, *Poor Richard's Almanack* sayings are always about discretion and reason over emotion.

But my theory is this is a man who struggled privately with prudence and passion, and maybe this iconic vision which he promotes, and which is our view of him, is almost a defense against the vulnerability and the internal struggles that go on with his closest personal relationships. So to answer your question, I think that it humanizes him in a way that we are not that familiar with. We're familiar with the iconic, fantastic brilliance of the man. But we don't really know that much about the human being behind it, and hopefully *Poor Richard's Women* will help people understand that.



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[00:57:50] **Liz Covart:** Now we should jump into the “Time Warp.” This is a fun segment of this show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something occurred differently or someone had acted differently. In your opinion, what might have happened if Deborah Read Franklin had accompanied Benjamin to England? If Benjamin had never met and formed a relationship with Margaret Stevenson, how might Franklin’s life in his marriage to Deborah have been different?

[00:58:36] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, undoubtedly it would’ve been, you know, maybe she would’ve become far more cultured. Certainly she would’ve become far more urbane, more stylish, and their marriage might’ve, well, continued along the way. I should also mention that undoubtedly she would’ve brought Sally with her. I mean, Ben was forever trying to get Sally married to somebody in England. This went on from the time she was a child, right up until she got married. So they could have very well become sort of the expatriates and stayed in England, obviously until the revolution. So that might have greatly changed the marriage and made it a very happy union.

But it didn’t happen. So we don’t know. And would she have, you know, never wanted to go back to Philadelphia? Which she loved, by the way, more than anything, and loved to be there. So we don’t know, and maybe there wouldn’t have been this legal separation in terms of their feelings for each other. I mean, they still had feelings. She clearly had great feeling for him and he had affection for her, but not in the way that we would think about a long-term married couple. I think more affection and affection for what had happened before. Youthful. Yeah, youthful years together. More memory than reality at this point.

[00:59:52] **Liz Covart:** Nancy, you’ve written a lot of biographies of women who lived during the American Revolution, and I wonder, are you working on another such biography now?

[01:00:00] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, I’ll tell you the truth. I’m looking at a lot of different ideas and I can’t tell you that answer right now. I guess when I do, I’ll let you know.

[01:00:11] **Liz Covart:** Please do. And where’s the best place to find more information about you, your different books, and how we can reach out to you with questions?

[01:00:18] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, my website, nancyrubinstuart.com, will provide it. Of course you can always get in touch with me through my website very easily. It’s been fun to write about these women because they’re women that history seems to have sidelined or marginalized, and it’s great to be able to take a look at some of these women and see that they were really the other half of history, just mostly not recorded. Well, Nancy Rubin



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[01:00:43] **Liz Covart:** Well, Nancy Rubin Stuart, thank you for introducing us to the women in Ben Franklin's life and for showing us a more personal Ben Franklin.

[01:00:51] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** It's my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

[01:00:54] **Liz Covart:** It can be really hard to humanize and see the man that we hold up as an icon of Americana as a real human being, but Benjamin Franklin was a real man who had flaws just like the rest of us, and we can see many of these flaws when we look at Benjamin Franklin through the eyes and experiences of the women in his life. As Nancy related, Ben may have thought about women and really enjoyed their company, but he didn't treat women as his equals. And he was a bit wishy-washy when it came to his affection. While he seems to have appreciated and had affection for his wife, Deborah Read, it doesn't appear that Franklin always gave her due credit for all the work she did in their household or the affection she deserved for all her devotion to Ben.

Deborah Franklin brought a lot to her marriage with Benjamin. She knew how to sell goods, run a shop, how to do bookkeeping, and how to run a home. While she may have lacked the book smarts that Benjamin had, make no mistake that it was Deborah's ability to keep Franklin's household and business going that enabled Ben to stay in England for most of the last seventeen to eighteen years of their marriage. Now in episode 175 we learned all about Benjamin's deep and affectionate relationship with his son William. At least, that is, until the American Revolution, when William chose to remain loyal to the British Crown. Now, where Ben doted on Billy and always seemed to make himself available to his son, he didn't show the same attention or affection for his daughter, Sally. And yet, while we may point to the fact that William was a boy and Sally was a girl, that just doesn't jive with how Ben interacted with young Polly Stevenson. Ben seems to have doted on Polly in many of the similar ways that he had once doted on William.

So it's through the eyes of the women in his life where we can see Benjamin Franklin as a husband and a father and how his personal relationships really impacted and influenced his work as a printer, statesman, diplomat, inventor, philanthropist, and scientist. The capable and smart women in Benjamin Franklin's life clearly freed up Ben's time so that he could pursue these professional pursuits. Additionally, by investigating the women in Ben Franklin's life, we can better understand and see the passion and joy Franklin had for life. Benjamin Franklin was certainly a man of reason, but his sense of humor and his interactions with women showed us that he was a man who loved living and had a real passion for life. And this is the view of Benjamin Franklin that we may not always be able to see through his many accomplishments. This is why Nancy reminds us that only by looking beyond the deeds of the people history remembers, can we see real glimpses of who they were as living, breathing people. It's our



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personal relationships and how we interact with others that can really reveal a lot about who we are.

Look for more information about Nancy, her book *Poor Richards Women*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinworld.com/349. Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts, so if you enjoy *Ben Franklin's World*, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from the Omohundro Institute's digital audio team, Joseph Adelman, Holly White, and Ian Tonat. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com.

Finally, what other aspects of Benjamin Franklin's life would you like to know about? This may be a show dedicated to the world that Franklin lived in and help create, but every once in a while, it's really fun to peek inside this dynamic man's life. So let me know what you'd like to explore, liz@benfranklinworld.com.

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