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Citation

Horrocks, Thomas A. 2007. Poor Richard's offspring: Benjamin Franklin's influence on the American Almanac Trade. Harvard Library Bulletin 17 (1-2), Spring-Summer 2006: 41-46.

Permanent link

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Poor Richard's Offspring: Benjamin Franklin's Influence on the Almanac Trade in America

Thomas A. Horrocks

Houghton Library's exhibition, *Benjamin Franklin: A How-to Guide*, surveys Franklin's influential role in the circulation of knowledge during the eighteenth century. To say that Franklin's role was influential is an understatement; when one considers the communications circuit in Franklin's time, which comprised authors, printers and publishers, suppliers and shippers, booksellers, and readers, one clearly sees Franklin's significance.¹³⁴ He was involved, in one way or another, in most of the circuit's activities. This brief essay examines Franklin's profound influence on the American almanac trade, and commences with a glance at one of the publications included in the Houghton exhibition—a copy of Franklin's 1748 edition of *Poor Richard Improved* (figure 11).¹³⁵

Franklin's 1748 version of *Poor Richard* was the first of the "improved" series. From 1733 through 1747, he had issued his almanacs under the title of *Poor Richard*. The 1748 revisions included, besides the new title, more pages; additional essays of varying length on diverse topics, particularly history, literature, and science; and a higher price. What remained, however, were the key elements that made *Poor Richard* such a resounding success (and, by extension, helped make Franklin a wealthy man): Franklin's creation "Poor Richard" Saunders and his wise and witty maxims that charmed readers while promoting frugality, industry, and morality. It probably mattered little whether or not readers knew that Poor Richard's maxims, such as "Lost time is never found again," "Liberality is not giving much but giving wisely," and "Half Wits talk much but say little" from the 1748 almanac, were borrowed from other sources.¹³⁶ In fact, the *Poor Richard* series, in physical appearance and in content, differed little from other almanacs of the time. What, then, separated *Poor Richard* from its competitors? It was the genius of its

134 I refer to the communications circuit model Robert Darnton defined in "What is the History of Books," in *Reading in America: Literature & Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 27-52.

135 *Poor Richard Improved: Being an Almanack and Ephemeris . . . 1748* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, [1747]).

136 Many of Franklin's maxims were borrowed from various French and English anthologies "available to him in the Library Company of Philadelphia or on the shelves of friends." He would then revise them for American readers, giving them, in the words of one Franklin scholar, "an American tang." Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., "Introduction" to *The Complete Poor Richard Almanacks*, 2 vols. (Barre, Mass.: Imprint Society, 1970), xi-xii. See also James N. Green and Peter Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer* (New Castle, Del., Philadelphia, and London: Oak Knoll Press, Library Company of Philadelphia, and The British Library, 2006), 101-116.

creator. Like many others in the almanac trade, Franklin knew what the reading public wanted. Unlike many almanac makers, however, Franklin possessed the ingenuity and the shrewd business sense to deliver a unique product in a familiar package.

When *Poor Richard* first appeared in 1733, the American almanac trade was entering a golden era that would extend into the early nineteenth century. This country's first almanac was printed in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1639. By the end of the seventeenth century, the almanac had assumed the basic form with which Americans of Franklin's time were familiar: a publication consisting of a calendar, astronomical and astrological compilations of time, and weather predictions. During the eighteenth century other elements were added, such as local and federal court dates, lists of roads, postage and currency information, farming advice, poetry, essays, humor, health information, maxims, and extracts from literary and scientific publications. The almanac became extremely popular with American readers, ranging from the affluent and learned to the poor and barely literate. It had become this country's most popular secular publication by the end of the eighteenth century. For many Americans the almanac was both a guidebook containing essential information for the farmer, merchant, and seaman, and a haven for those seeking edification, entertainment, and escape from the unchanging routines of everyday life.¹³⁷

Franklin's *Poor Richard* played no small role in the phenomenal success of the almanac. Poking fun at astrology while at the same time cleverly using it to his advantage, Franklin introduced his *Poor Richard* almanac with a prediction, based on the stars, of the death of rival Philadelphia almanac maker Titan Leeds.¹³⁸ Humorous as well as a shrewd ploy to attract publicity, Franklin's "prediction" was in reality a preview of the tongue-in-cheek introductions that readers would come to expect in future issues. But Franklin served more than entertainment and humor to his *Poor Richard* readers; he believed that he had a moral obligation to society to use *Poor Richard*, as well as his other publications, to educate and instruct. Franklin's almanac, in addition to *Poor Richard*'s maxims, included numerous essays on scientific discoveries and descriptions of instruments and inventions.¹³⁹

Franklin's *Poor Richard* was one of the most successful almanacs in early America, reaching a print run of 10,000 copies annually. While it did not have circulation figures as high as the almanacs of Nathaniel Ames (50,000) and Robert B. Thomas (20,000), *Poor*

137 Thomas A. Horrocks, "Rules, Remedies, and Regimens: Health Advice in Early American Almanacs," in *Right Living: An Anglo-American Tradition of Self-Help Medicine and Hygiene*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 5-6. See also Marion Barber Stowell, *Early American Almanacs: The Colonial Weekday Bible* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1977). Despite its age, Stowell's work remains the best treatment of eighteenth-century almanacs.

138 *Poor Richard, 1733. An Almanack for the Year ... 1733* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, [1732]), [2].

139 Joyce E. Chaplin, *The First Scientific American: Benjamin Franklin and the Pursuit of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 56-63.

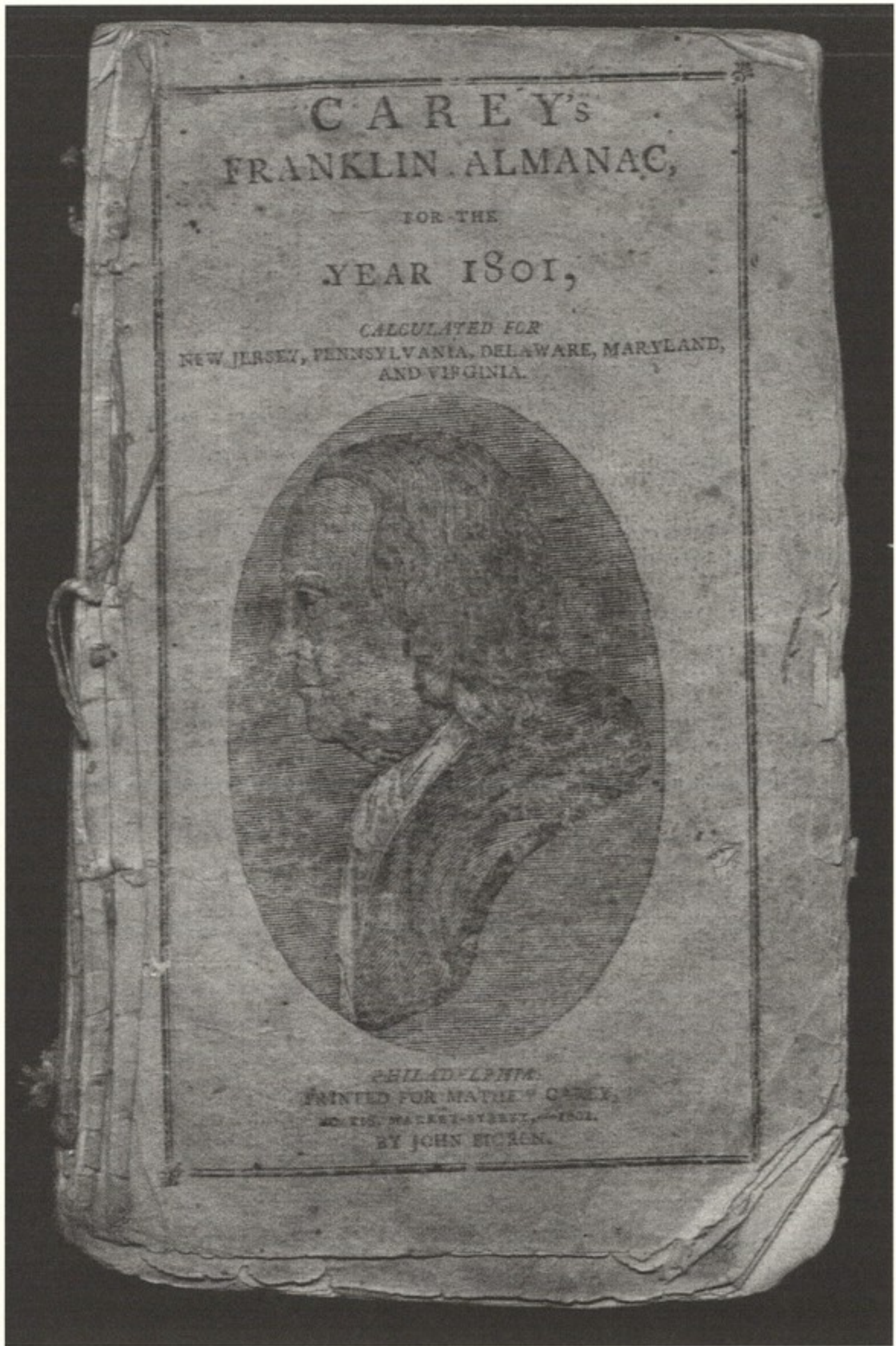


Figure 7. *Carey's Franklin Almanac, for the Year 1801* (Philadelphia, 1801), title page. Private Collection.

Richard exerted a greater influence on the American almanac trade.¹⁴⁰ As successful as Ames's and Thomas's almanacs were, their impact on their competitors and successors is hard to discern. Admittedly, it is hard to tell one early American almanac from another because all almanac makers followed a conventional arrangement in terms of content and organization that was popular with readers. *Poor Richard* may have looked like its competitors, but its influence on the trade is clearly apparent in the use of Franklin's name or variations of its title by a number of its successors in the American almanac trade from the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth.

Poor Richard Improved for 1758 was the last issue in which Franklin was personally involved. The farewell issue is notable for its inclusion of a speech by a man known as Father Abraham that Poor Richard heard and recorded. The speech, which included many of Poor Richard's maxims, achieved instant notoriety and subsequently appeared in many separate editions under the title *The Way to Wealth* (a copy of the 1799 Philadelphia edition is included in Houghton's exhibition). *Poor Richard Improved* continued to be issued under the same title by Franklin's former partner David Hall until 1802. As the Franklin/Hall *Poor Richard* almanac left the scene, other almanac makers eagerly sought to take its place, offering publications with similar titles in the hope that they, too, would achieve Franklin-like fame and fortune. For example, the year 1801 witnessed the arrival of *Carey's Franklin Almanac* (figure 7) in Philadelphia and *Poor Richard Reviv'd* in Newfield, Connecticut. The next year saw the inaugural issues of *The Almanack of Poor Richard the Second* in Boston, *Franklin's Legacy; or the New-York & Vermont Almanack* in Troy, New York, and *Poor Richard Revived: or the Albany Almanack* in Albany, New York.¹⁴¹ As the nineteenth century progressed, numerous almanacs appeared under similar titles. One such long-running title was *The Franklin Almanac* (figure 8), published in Philadelphia by McCarty and Davis from 1829 through the 1840s.¹⁴²

140 Green and Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin*, 104; C. William Miller, "Franklin's *Poor Richard* Almanacs: Their Printing and Publication," *Studies in Bibliography* 14 (1961): 98; Stowell, *Early American Almanacs*, x; David H. McCarter, "'Of Physick and Astronomy': Almanacs and Popular Medicine in Massachusetts, 1700-1764" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Iowa, 2000), 59. Nathaniel Ames, father and son, issued almanacs in Boston from 1726 to 1774. Robert B. Thomas issued his first almanac in Boston in 1793; it is still published today as *The Old Farmer's Almanac*.

141 *Carey's Franklin Almanac, for the Year 1801* (Philadelphia: Printed for Mathew Carey by John Bioren, 1801); *Poor Richard Reviv'd. Being an Astronomical Diary, or Almanack, for the Year ... 1801* (Newfield, Conn.: L. Beach, [1800]); *The Almanack of Poor Richard the Second; or, an Astronomical Museum, for the Year ... 1802* (Boston: Andrew Newell, [1801]); *Franklin's Legacy; or, the New-York & Vermont Almanack, for the Year ... 1802* (Troy: Moffitt and Lyon, [1801]); *Poor Richard Revived: or, the Albany Almanack: for the Year ... 1802* (Albany: John Barber, [1801]).

142 *Franklin Almanac for the Year ... 1829* (Philadelphia: McCarty and Davis, [1828]). For subsequent years, see Milton Drake, comp., *Almanacs of the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1962), vol. 2.

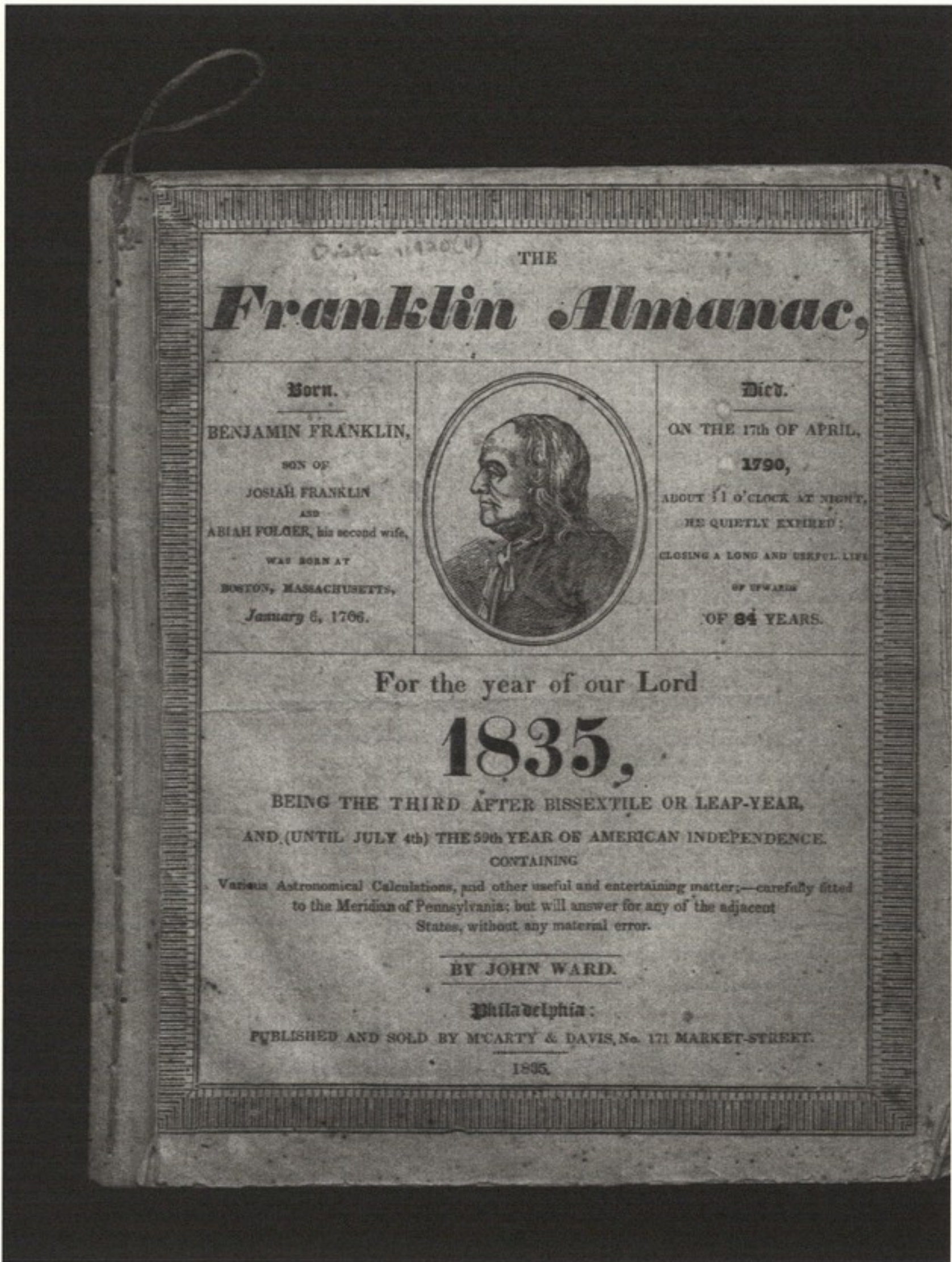


Figure 8. *The Franklin Almanac, for the Year ... 1835* (Philadelphia, 1835), title page. Private Collection.

What is interesting about the almanacs mentioned above is that, for the most part, their creators made no attempt to imitate or resurrect Franklin's Poor Richard character. For example, the 1801 *Poor Richard Reviv'd* listed "Poor Richard Saunders, Star-Gazer," as its compiler, but the publication contained no humorous prologue by him nor did it contain any maxims. Two of the almanacs mentioned, *Carey's Franklin Almanac* (which was issued from 1801 through 1811) and McCarty and Davis's *The Franklin Almanac*, included an image of Franklin on their covers. Neither of these two titles included any mention of Franklin or Poor Richard inside their covers. Only the compiler of the 1802 *Almanack of Poor Richard the Second* made an attempt to create a Franklin-type character. Poor Richard the Second is introduced to readers as a native of Ireland, the son of "Richard F . . .," who was a famous bespectacled philosopher, a man of science, and a performer of electrical experiments (much like the real Franklin). Poor Richard the Second emigrated to America, "where he now lives in his homely cottage, in the forest of uncertainty; and as a mean [*sic?*] of finding little money in his purse, publishes this first number of his almanack and sayings, the principal part of which he composed under an apple-tree, having *then* no other place upon which *to lay his head*." Surprisingly, the character of Poor Richard the Second disappears after the first issue (and the title of the publication was changed to *Poor Richard's Almanack* with the 1803 issue).¹⁴³

There were many other nineteenth-century American almanacs that used Franklin's name, a variation of Poor Richard, or even Father Abraham in their titles. And a few almanac makers even attempted to invent their own Poor Richard-like characters. This widespread practice of borrowing or imitation should not be viewed merely as the pirating of an idea for profit, though undoubtedly this was the case with some almanac makers. I would argue that it signified tribute as much, if not more, than theft. After all, by the nineteenth century, borrowing titles and content had become a tradition within the almanac trade. (Franklin himself was very good at it.) Nineteenth-century American almanac makers, many of whom were printers or former denizens of the printing business, revered Franklin and truly admired his successful rise from a humble journeyman to a famous statesman. He was one of their own and he was a model worth emulating. To Franklin's successors in the American almanac trade, the model of a successful almanac was *Poor Richard*. By imitating it they were not only taking advantage of Franklin's growing reputation in nineteenth-century America, but also paying their respects to the ingenuity and success of America's most famous almanac maker.

143 *The Almanack of Poor Richard the Second*, [2]. From 1803 through 1808, this series was issued under the title *Poor Richard's Almanack*.

Contributors

Ann Blair is Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Harvard University. She teaches early modern European history and book history. She is finishing a book on the management of information in early modern reference works.

Joyce E. Chaplin is James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History at Harvard University. She is currently working on a history of circumnavigation.

Thomas A. Horrocks is Associate Librarian of Houghton Library for Collections. He is completing a book that examines early American printed and popular attitudes on health and disease.

Jessica Riskin teaches in the History Department at Stanford University. She is writing about the idea of the body as a machine from Descartes to Darwin.

Sara J. Schechner is David P. Wheatland Curator of the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments in the Department of the History of Science, Harvard University.