

William Franklin Biography

William Franklin

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Biography

The American colonial administrator William Franklin (ca. 1731-1813) was the last of the royal governors of New Jersey. He chose to support Great Britain throughout the American Revolution.

William Franklin, the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin, was born in 1731 (possibly late 1730) and reared in his father's home. He obtained a militia commission with Pennsylvanians on the New York frontier and by 1750 had risen to captain.

When he returned to Philadelphia, Franklin became comptroller of the General Post Office, under his father, and clerk of the General Assembly. He accompanied the elder Franklin to England in 1757, studied law, and gained admittance to the bar. He traveled with his father in Europe and assisted in his scientific studies; Oxford awarded him a master of arts degree in 1762 at the same time his father was awarded an honorary degree. That year William married Elizabeth Downes. Personable and handsome, he fitted easily into English society. Through the influence of the Earl of Bute, he was appointed governor of New Jersey in 1763.

Despite the reservations of the proprietor of Pennsylvania, Franklin and his bride were at first popular in the colony. As governor, he tactfully avoided disputes with the Assembly and demonstrated genuine interest in improving roads, aiding agriculture, and reforming the legal code. But as differences grew between the colonists and the mother country, his position became difficult. He appreciated certain American grievances, but he had scant faith in popular government and supported the authoritarian stance his proprietor's instructions required.

After the extralegal Perth Amboy Convention (October 1765) chose delegates to the Stamp Act Congress, Franklin was in continual difficulties with New Jersey rebels. He became estranged from his father. Even after hostilities commenced, Franklin remained in office as a loyalist, forwarding information on the New Jersey situation to England. After January 1776 he was kept under guard by the Provincial Congress, which ordered his arrest on June 15 and had him imprisoned in Connecticut. Denied permission to visit his dying wife, he was exchanged in 1778.

For a time Franklin stayed in New York, where he served as president of the Board of Associated Loyalists. Soon he returned to England; the British commission on loyalist claims eventually awarded him £1,800 and a pension for the loss of his estates. He became reconciled with his father by letter in 1784 and died in England on Nov. 16, 1813.