

Benjamin Franklin: America's First Emergency Manager

By Michael Prasad, MA, CEM, Senior Research Analyst, Barton Dunant

I had a chance to catch the PBS/Ken Burns documentary on United States founding father, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, the oldest signer of both the *Declaration of Independence* and the *U.S. Constitution*. The four-hour film helped validate a hypothesis of mine that Franklin was our nation's first emergency manager. He spent his whole life taking on all hazards and all disaster types, including a revolution.

Most folks know Franklin was a prolific inventor and a businessman, besides being a statesman. Franklin is credited with starting the Union Fire Company in 1736 in Philadelphia, the first volunteer fire company in the United States. Franklin knew his threats and hazards. He also understood that all disasters start, and end, locally. Home fires in the tightly knit urban areas of major cities back then became conflagrations quickly if people did not help their neighbors extinguish them.

Franklin's work as the first postmaster general of the United States, starting in 1775 certainly showed the importance of [interoperable communications](#) in the Revolutionary War effort. He was the co-lead for postal services under the British rule for the colonies for several years prior, before being fired in 1774. Remember, there were no radios and no cars back then, let alone telephones or the internet. Getting a letter on time – and Franklin shaved the round-trip between Philadelphia and New York to under 24 hours – could mean the difference between winning or losing battles.

As part of his postal work, Franklin traveled across the colonies. As a diplomat to London and Paris, he took perilous trans-At-

lantic journeys. He understood the concept of deployments and being away from his family. Franklin and his common-law wife Deborah were married for 43 years, of which 18 were spent with him overseas. The documentary recounts a historical moment when tax protestors were outside of the Franklin home in Philadelphia while he was still in Europe and Deborah was ready at home with a shotgun in case they tried to gain entry to their house.

In addition to the postal work, Franklin was a prolific writer and publisher. Writing the material, publishing it, and then coordinating its delivery to the public would also make Franklin the United State's first public information officer. As a consummate anonymous writer and political satirist, Franklin also used the power of the press (literally) to divert the attention of the British and embellish Patriot victories in battles. He understood the value of propaganda and publicity for disaster response.

As far as the Revolutionary War itself (considering war as being the worst human-made disaster), it's easy to put George Washington as the head of operations, but Franklin's role on the policy council—or MAC Group—the Continental Congress) certainly provided logistics and finance and administration leadership. Franklin worked his connections in France to raise money, equipment, and supplies for the Patriots. Franklin also had a role in [emergency management intelligence](#), as the documentary noted, in that at one point Franklin knew his every move was being watched by the British, as were his letters and communique. Franklin used this to the Patriot's advantage by providing

misinformation and disinformation through those dispatches.

Franklin understood the future importance of electricity in day-to-day life. While his famous kite and key experiment [may have been an exaggeration](#), he made the connection between lightning and electricity. This research led to Franklin's invention of the lightning rod, and many buildings have been saved from lightning fires because of it.

Like many emergency managers today, Franklin came to an understanding and accepting of the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion late in life. While his wife Deborah was surely a formidable business partner for Franklin, he wrestled with the not-of-that-time concept of [feminism](#) and many viewed him as a womanizer. Burn's documentary seems to show these purported extramarital affairs, were more intellectual than physical. He definitely thought of women as collaborators and capable business partners. It was during Franklin's lifetime that women gained the right to own property, colony by colony and state by state, in the United States. Women did not get the right to vote in the United States until the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, nearly 130 years after Franklin's death.

With regards to indigenous peoples, near the end of Franklin's life, he published *Remarks concerning the Savages of North America*. In this click-bait titled essay, Franklin argues that native men and women are more civilized than the white people who would be reading his essay. The [first line reads](#), "Savages we call them, because their man-

[continued on page 34](#)

Disaster Housing

[continued from page 32](#)

sponsiveness and equity to survivors and stop the two-plus-year wait.

- FEMA Rapid Repair Program, (aka STEP, Shelter at Home, PREPS) offers a solution that is much cheaper and places homeowners back in their homes in a timely fashion when executed correctly.

- Data sharing among agencies (federal, state, and local levels) is a significant challenge and one that must be addressed to successfully administer programs in an equitable and expeditious manner. Every federal partner I have ever spoken to acknowledges this issue, yet we still have not resolved it.

- We should take into consideration diaspora and host communities – jurisdictions outside the affected area will receive survivors; they also need support.

- We need defined criteria for triggering funding. Considering how much easier it is for a wealthy community to reach a high dollar amount in damages than it is for a lower-economic community, where does equity meet disaster declaration, we must consider a qualitative narrative of the disaster.

- Unfortunately, recent pushes to consider topics such as “equity” and “social vulnerability” don’t align with established formulas and quotas.

- When states are appealing a rejected disaster declaration request, delaying SBA disaster funds during that process can slow recovery efforts.

- Public health events coupled with natural disasters like a hurricane during COVID-19 further justify the use of Rapid Repair housing to preserve the health and safety of disaster survivors where short-term sheltering is concerned by not congregating evacuees following events.

- There is a nationwide lack of supply for affordable housing. This supports the need for repair programs versus temporary housing programs that do not provide a solid housing solution.

- Programs should be developed to repair housing post-disaster that speeds recovery and is not dependent on Congressional allocation post-storm. Disaster relief fund for permanent housing.

- Permanent Housing Construction programs are less expensive and more efficient.

- Permanent Housing Construction alleviates costly and time-consuming disaster case management programs.

- Criteria to trigger Permanent Housing Construction can be easily identified and emplaced for a rapid decision.

- Consider “pre-positioned” contracts for STEP or PHC. The disaster debris industry utilizes this concept, and it would be an effective instrument for delivering timely housing solutions at a pre-established standard.

- Impact area versus state. How can disaster recovery be equitable if there is a high impact but doesn’t meet the ‘state’ quota, thus no federal funds? These can be the most vulnerable communities being passed over.

- How can states prepare for housing when blue skies funds do not exist?

In closing, I would like to say that the more we can do for our citizens before a disaster, to help them mitigate and become more resilient in the wake of the next event, the better we all will be. ◆

Benjamin Franklin

[continued from page 33](#)

ners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs.” Finally, when it comes to slavery (another human-made disaster), Franklin is torn between his own convictions – which have taken a 180-degree turn from keeping indentured servants in his households to becoming an abolitionist – and his aspirations to build a new nation, the United States of America. Franklin, an elder statesman and trusted advisor, was not as outspoken as he could have been about slavery. The Second Continental Congress, which upgraded the *Articles of Confederation* into the *U.S. Constitution*, made [many appeasements](#) to the southern states for a continuation of slavery, as an individual state right, until the Civil War and with it the passage of the 13th Amendment, which was ratified in 1865. Economic priorities overrode disaster priorities, probably for the first time in our new nation’s history.

Finally, Franklin understood egalitarian and humanitarian values and principles: how fragile they truly are. On the last day of the convention of that Second Continental Congress in 1787, a woman asked Franklin of the final results. Were we to be a republic or a monarchy? Franklin [replied](#) somewhat prophetically, “a republic, if you can keep it”.

Source

Benjamin Franklin: A Film by Ken Burns originally aired on the Public Broadcast Service (PBS) on April 4th and 5th, 2022. Check local listings for future over-the-air future broadcasts. The film is also available on demand, and via DVD and Blu-Ray at www.pbs.org. ◆

