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WHERE THERE IS A WILL THERE IS A WAY

On the occasion on the 222nd anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's death (April 17, 1790)

Benjamin Franklin's contributions were elegant, abundant and stunningly diverse. From Founding Father to diplomat, from the first fire department to the first lending library, and from printer to scientist, he earned the moniker: the First American.

Among his most eloquent contributions is Franklin's Last Will and Testament. Its thoughtful breadth gives posthumous witness to an exceedingly well-ordered mind, a heart devoted to the common good, and a profound sense of obligation to the next generation.

On this 222nd anniversary of his death (April 17, 1790), Bostonians are especially indebted to him. It was in his will that Franklin entrusted to the town of his birth and childhood a precious charge. He bequeathed "to the inhabitants of the Towne of Boston" £1000 for the purpose of supporting young artisans.

Unlike many of the Founding Fathers, Franklin belonged to the "leather apron" class. His father was a tallow chandler. As a young man Franklin apprenticed with his printer brother. Printing afforded him both a living and a public voice. From this trade he learned character, citizenship and the rewards of industry.

In the codicil to his will Franklin wrote, "I have considered that among Artisans good Apprentices are most likely to make good Citizens." Noting further that two friends helped set him up in business, and crediting to this the basis of his fortune, he continued: "I wish to be useful even after my Death...in forming and advancing other young men that may be serviceable to their country..."

Franklin specified that his bequest be deployed as a revolving loan fund benefitting young married tradesmen who had completed their apprenticeships and were ready to start their own businesses. Franklin named as fund managers the Selectmen of the Town of Boston and the ministers of Boston's oldest Congregational, Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches.

Franklin further specified that at the end of two hundred years the trust would dissolve. By then, however, the trust was worth \$400,000. What to do? Interested parties played tug of war over the remainder of the trust and legal battles ensued.

It was in 1904 that the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court issued a ruling that remains the legal basis for the management of Franklin's bequest. The court ruled that Franklin's legacy to Boston was a public charity. The court further assigned itself the right to appoint its managers. Taking their cue from Franklin's will, it specified a Foundation board composed of the Mayor, the ministers of Boston's oldest Congregational, Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches and eight "virtuous and benevolent citizens willing to bestow a part of their Time in doing good." Among these citizens was Henry P. Bowditch, former Dean of the Harvard Medical School, William Endicott, formerly Grover Cleveland's Secretary of War, Boston's Mayor Nathan Matthews, MIT's President Henry S. Pritchett and James J. Storrow. The court gave to the board full authority over the assets of the Franklin Fund of Boston.

The Fund managers pondered what course to take and how to employ the remaining funds, all the while keeping Franklin's intentions in mind. But times had changed. With the increase in factories and manufacturing, master craftspeople had all but disappeared and the apprentice system had gradually faded. Franklin's original intent, so practical and timely in the late 1700's, was a misfit in the early 1900's.

Providentially, the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie appeared and offered to match the \$400,000 on two conditions: first, that the managers establish an industrial school to offer training for jobs in the new economy and, second, that Boston supply the land. The deal was struck.

Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology was born. Established in 1908 and located in Boston's South End, the private, non-profit technical college serves a highly diverse student body of nearly 500 students representing 40 nationalities enrolled in its bachelor's and associate's degree programs in engineering and industrial technologies, as well as certificate programs. True to its first benefactor's intent, the college teaches practical skills and knowledge, equipping its graduates for today's economy, while refusing to allow finances to prevent any student from pursuing their dream.

We typically hail the great ones on the anniversaries of their birth. Today we hail Benjamin Franklin on the anniversary of his death, profoundly grateful to this original and exceptional Bostonian for his generosity to generations yet unborn.

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