

Meeting Ben Franklin

During my family's five-week summer visit to Boston in 1985 while I worked at the Air Force Cambridge Laboratory, Jeannette and the kids visited museums and historical sites during the week. Boston was a treasure trove of American History. My family enjoyed stories about the American Revolution where it actually happened.

My family was of an ideal age to endure a protracted, summer-long vacation together, including the 3,500-mile journey each way from San Diego to Boston. Michelle, the oldest, was sixteen and just learning to drive. In fact, she had her learners permit and learned how to drive in Boston, which goes a long way in explaining her aggressive driving habits. And, Laura at eight was in elementary school and primed to report about, "What I Did Last Summer," when she returned to class in the Fall. Each of our children has said the trip to Boston in the summer of 1985 was the best family trip we ever had.

We traveled to Boston in an old, white, 1969 Dodge station wagon which already had over 150,000 miles on it before we left on the trip. The six of us traveled from San Diego with all our clothing and other necessities packed in a dozen cardboard apple boxes stacked on the roof. We looked like the Beverly Hillbillies. Although, it was a nine-passenger wagon, we often traveled with the back seats folded down, so three or four of the family could lie down on a mattress in back. It was more comfortable that way, particularly at night when I did most of the driving.

When the entire family arrived in Boston, we stayed in a three-bedroom suite at Bentley College, a small business school near Bentham, Massachusetts, famous for making Bentham watches. During the week while I worked at the Air Force Laboratory, the family toured historic homes, museums, and famous sites. On the weekends I joined them to see major tourist sites like Faneuil Hall, the Old North Church, the Concord Bridge, the USS Constitution, the Fine Art Museum, and Ben Franklin's home.

One weekend we traveled south to Plymouth Rock and Cape Cod. We even got to live on Cape Cod and swim in the surf for the weekend due to the generosity of Jeannette's childhood friend, Susan Cohen, who owned a summer cottage there with her husband. On another weekend we traveled north along the coast to visit Salem and Gloucester. Salem was the site of the witch trials and a restored home called "Green Gables." The shore in downtown Gloucester was lined with fishing boats and canneries. We felt like donning yellow rain parkas to match the image of the old Gloucester fisherman.

Three of my favorite memories for the summer were when the kids met Benjamin Franklin at Buckman Tavern in Lexington, Massachusetts; touring the USS Constitution (See the story in this Boston series entitled, "Old Ironsides"); and watching the Boston Red Sox play the New York Yankees with my son, Daniel, at Fenway Park (See the story in this Boston series entitled, "Fenway Park").

Benjamin Franklin was reenacted by a local history buff who was Ben's spitting image. He showed the kids how a kite and key could be used in a thunderstorm to demonstrate that lightning has the same properties as static charge generated by rubbing a glass object with animal fur. He also told them how he plotted the first synoptic weather map (A display of weather data on a map, like temperature and pressure, observed at the same time over a geographic region). Franklin solicited the information by letter from dozens of his friends and colleagues in the colonies. He had asked them to send him a description of the weather at their home on a specific day and time during a recent storm.

Franklin plotted the temperature, pressure, wind, cloudiness, and precipitation data collected from his friend's letters on a map. From this synoptic weather map he could see how the storm was organized geographically and how it moved across the country from west to east. Ben was credited as being the first true meteorologist in America because of the knowledge he gained from his studies on the movement of storms using synoptic weather maps.

Of course, Franklin was better known for publishing *Poor Richard's Almanac*, a guide to planting and harvesting, based more on climatology, than meteorology. He was not only a scientist, but a printer. He wrote the almanac, printed it, and sold them across the country. Farmers throughout the Americas scheduled planting,

growing times, and harvesting of their crops by his prognostications. The manner in which Franklin recommended timing for planting gave the impression he had special, if not divine revelation, about weather and storms. He also included phases of the moon, tide tables, and "Wise saying and Proverbs" in his yearly pamphlets. Poor Richard's Almanac is prepared by several publishers yet today and used by some farmers, particularly in the Northeast.

Not only was Ben Franklin a scientist and a printer, he was also a silversmith, an author, an inventor, and a statesman. He started the first library and fire station in America. When visiting his home in downtown Boston we saw several examples of mugs, candlesticks, and dinner ware he designed and sold. Some were made from pewter and others of silver. We saw examples of the Franklin stove and glasses he created. And during our visit to Philadelphia on the way to Boston, we visited Independence Hall where Franklin participated in the congress which declared our independence from Britain. Franklin was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Visiting Boston was a unique opportunity for our entire family to experience the early history of the United States from more than just books. The personal life of our nation's founders was on open display in the churches, homes, and taverns of old Boston. Those of us who grew up in the Midwest, the plains, the mountains, or the West Coast seldom have an opportunity to visit historical sites like those in Boston for an extended amount of time. Our family had an entire summer!