



## FOUNDING FEMALES Female Qualifying Ancestor Index

**Female Ancestor Number: 050**

**Name: Franklin, Deborah (Read)**

**Dates:**

**Born c. 1704, Birmingham, England**

**Died: 19 Dec 1774, Philadelphia, PA**

**Colonial Society: PA**

**Date added to ROA: January 2023**

**Service: Woman of Distinction: Business owner/manager**

**Authority:** Fry, Jennifer Reed, "Extraordinary Freedom and Great Humility: A Reinterpretation of Deborah Franklin," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vo. 127, No. 2 (Apr 2003), pp. 170, 175-6, 195-6; McKenney, Janice E., "Women of the Constitution, Wives of the Signers" (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), pp 67-71.

### **Biography:**

Deborah Read Franklin is a quintessential example of feme sole law, which following under the British system, allowed for single/divorced/widowed women or women whose legal subordination to her husband has been invalidated by a trust, prenuptial agreement, or judicial decision. As the wife of the very busy, and often absent preeminent statesman, Benjamin Franklin, Deborah Franklin could execute contracts and handle all manner of financial matters and business enterprises, separate from her husband as a feme sole trader.

Deborah's parents immigrated from Birmingham, England in 1711. Her father, John Read, was a carpenter who found quick success in the growing port town of Philadelphia. Between 1716 and 1724, Deborah's father had acquired several lots of land, including 2 houses, off present day Market Street, between Third and Fourth Street. After her husband's death, Sarah Read utilized a well-developed network of female businesswomen to maintain work and regain the properties her husband had previously mortgaged off, the property that later would become the centerpiece of Franklin Court (still extant today).

After Deborah's first husband (John Rogers) abandoned her (and Philadelphia) she met a young inexperienced Ben Franklin. Franklin's common law marriage (Sep 1730) gained him not just a wife, but a mother-in-law who ran businesses. Working side-by-side (1730-48) in their print shop, stationary store, and post office, Deborah and Ben, built one of the most successful printing businesses in the Colonies. The work expanded Deborah's network and community reach, especially when Ben was named postmaster of Philadelphia in 1737. (Extant account books show many entries in Deborah's handwriting.)



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Franklin retired from his printing business in 1748, which allowed them both to expand into other areas of interest. In 1757, before Ben was sent to England as an agent representing the Pennsylvania Assembly, he signed power of attorney to Deborah. In his will, written at the same time, Ben's bequest far exceeded the traditional "widow's third" of the property, as he left her the bulk of the estate, especially recognizing her contribution to the family's successes. He also made all post office accounts payable to Deborah so she could keep a watchful eye in his absence.

By 1769, with her husband still in England, Deborah suffered a paralytic stroke, an event that would be repeated, and ultimately be her demise just five years later. After a ten-year absence, Ben returned to Philadelphia in 1775, publicly acknowledging he no longer had a representative to take care of his business dealings.

Deborah and Ben had two children: Francis Folger Franklin b. 1732, died of smallpox at age 4; daughter Sarah "Sally" Franklin was born in 1743 and married Richard Bache. Ben had an extra-marital son William Franklin b. 1730 to an unknown mother, who was also raised by Deborah. Present-day tourists enjoy visiting Deborah and Ben's grave at Christ Church Burial Ground, where they often throw "good luck" pennies on their graves in honor of Ben's motto "a penny saved is a penny earned."