

# The Person Most Often Called The "first Civilized American" WasSelect One:a. Thomas Jefferson.b. Benjamin

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## Introduction

The phrase "the first civilized American" has been attributed to various historical figures, but it is most frequently associated with Thomas Jefferson. This designation, whether accurate or not, reflects the perception of Jefferson's role in shaping early American identity, his advocacy for enlightenment principles, and his influence on the cultural and political development of the young nation. To understand why Jefferson holds this distinction—or why he is sometimes called this—it is essential to explore his life, achievements, and the context in which this phrase emerged. Additionally, contrasting him with other prominent figures like Benjamin Franklin can shed light on different perspectives regarding civilization, progress, and American identity.

## Historical Context of the Phrase

### Origins of the Term

The term "civilized American" is a subjective label that has evolved over time. In the 18th and 19th centuries, European settlers and Americans alike often viewed their society as a pinnacle of progress and enlightenment, especially in contrast to Native American cultures and other indigenous peoples. The phrase "first civilized American" has been used to signify a figure who embodies the ideals of enlightenment, education, governance, and cultural refinement that define Western notions of

civilization.

## **Why Was the Phrase Used?**

Historically, the phrase has been used both admiringly and critically, depending on the speaker's perspective. In some contexts, it aimed to highlight Jefferson's role as a statesman, thinker, and advocate for education and liberty. In others, it reflected ethnocentric attitudes that equated Western European culture with civilization, often dismissing indigenous or non-Western cultures as "uncivilized." These connotations influence how the phrase is understood and who is associated with it.

## **Thomas Jefferson: The Contender for the Title**

### **Jefferson's Background and Education**

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) was a Virginia-born lawyer, planter, and politician who became the third President of the United States. His education at the College of William & Mary and his extensive reading in Enlightenment philosophy positioned him as a key proponent of reason, science, and education—values central to the idea of civilization.

### **Contributions to American Society and Governance**

Jefferson's accomplishments include:

- Drafting the Declaration of Independence, emphasizing individual rights and liberty
- Promoting education through the founding of the University of Virginia
- Advocating for religious freedom and separation of church and state
- Implementing policies that expanded U.S. territory (Louisiana Purchase), fostering national

growth

These achievements exemplify Jefferson's commitment to enlightenment ideals and his vision for a society based on knowledge, civic virtue, and progress.

## **Jefferson's Views on Native Americans and Civilized Society**

It is important to recognize that Jefferson's views on Native Americans were complex and often contradictory. While he admired certain aspects of indigenous cultures, he also believed that Native Americans should adopt European-style agriculture, governance, and religion to be considered truly "civilized." His policies and writings reflect both respect and paternalism, which are critical to understanding his place in the narrative of civilization.

## **Benjamin Franklin: A Competing Candidate**

### **Franklin's Background and Achievements**

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) was a polymath—an inventor, diplomat, printer, scientist, and statesman—whose contributions significantly shaped early American society. His pursuits in science, such as experiments with electricity, and his role in founding institutions like the University of Pennsylvania, mark him as a key figure in American enlightenment and civic development.

### **Franklin's Role in Defining Civilization**

Franklin's approach to civilization emphasized:

1. Practical knowledge and scientific inquiry

2. Self-improvement and civic responsibility
3. Promotion of education and literacy
4. Diplomacy and forging alliances, notably with France during the American Revolution

His emphasis on pragmatic enlightenment ideals and his influence on establishing American cultural institutions align with the qualities associated with "civilized" society.

## Comparison Between Franklin and Jefferson

While both figures contributed extensively to the American identity, their focuses differed:

- Franklin was more pragmatic, emphasizing science, civic virtue, and social cohesion
- Jefferson prioritized education, governance, and ideological enlightenment

Despite differences, both are seen as foundational architects of American civilization, which complicates who might be called the "first civilized American."

## The Significance of the Title: "First Civilized American"

### Historical Interpretations

The attribution of this title often depends on the criteria used:

- Political and philosophical influence (Jefferson)

- Scientific and civic achievements (Franklin)
- Overall contributions to American societal development

## Critiques and Modern Perspectives

Modern scholars critique the notion of labeling any individual as the "first civilized American," arguing that it oversimplifies complex cultural histories and dismisses indigenous civilizations predating European contact. The term also reflects ethnocentric biases that equate Western progress with civilization itself.

## Conclusion

The designation of Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin as the "first civilized American" encapsulates contrasting visions of what constitutes civilization—whether it is enlightenment, scientific progress, governance, or cultural refinement. Jefferson's role as a founding father and his advocacy for education and liberty have often led to his being labeled with this honor. However, Franklin's multifaceted contributions in science, civic institutions, and diplomacy equally exemplify the qualities associated with a civilized society. Ultimately, the phrase remains a reflection of historical perceptions, and modern understanding encourages us to recognize the diverse and complex origins of American civilization, including the rich indigenous cultures that predate European influence.

Note: The use of the phrase "first civilized American" is context-dependent and often debated. Both Jefferson and Franklin played pivotal roles in shaping what many consider the foundation of American civilization, but the title's appropriateness is subjective and reflective of particular historical values and biases.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Who is often referred to as the 'first civilized American'?**

Benjamin Franklin is most often called the 'first civilized American.'

### **Why is Benjamin Franklin considered the 'first civilized American'?**

Because of his contributions to education, diplomacy, scientific progress, and civic virtues, Franklin epitomized the ideals of civility and enlightenment in America.

### **How did Benjamin Franklin exemplify civilization in early America?**

Through his inventions, writings, public service, and promotion of social and moral virtues, Franklin significantly shaped American society's development.

### **What are some notable achievements of Benjamin Franklin that contributed to his reputation?**

His roles as a diplomat, inventor, writer, and founding father, along with his work on the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, highlight his influence.

### **Are there historical debates about whether Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin should be called the 'first civilized American'?**

Yes, some historians discuss their contributions, but Franklin is most commonly recognized for this title due to his broader influence on American civic and cultural ideals.

### **In what ways did Benjamin Franklin promote civility and enlightenment ideals?**

Through his writings like 'Poor Richard's Almanack,' his advocacy for education, and his diplomatic

efforts, Franklin promoted virtues of civility, knowledge, and progress.

## **Is the title 'first civilized American' officially recognized or more of a historical nickname?**

It is more of a historical nickname reflecting Franklin's role in shaping American civility and progress, rather than an official designation.

## **How did Franklin's contributions influence later American leaders and society?**

His emphasis on education, civic virtue, and scientific inquiry laid foundational values that influenced subsequent generations and American identity.

## **Could Thomas Jefferson also be considered the 'first civilized American'?**

While Jefferson was a pivotal figure in American history, Franklin's early influence on civility and enlightenment ideals has led to him being more commonly called the 'first civilized American.'

## **Additional Resources**

The Person Most Often Called The "First Civilized American" Was Benjamin Franklin

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## **Introduction: Setting the Stage for Civilized America**

The phrase "first civilized American" evokes a complex tapestry of historical, cultural, and social

considerations. It implies a figure who embodies the virtues, innovations, and societal advancements that laid the foundation for what we now recognize as a modern, civilized nation. Among the many influential figures in early American history, Benjamin Franklin has earned this moniker more than any other, owing to his multifaceted contributions as a statesman, scientist, diplomat, writer, and social reformer. This review explores the reasons behind this designation, examining Franklin's life, achievements, and enduring legacy that collectively justify his title as the quintessential "civilized American."

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## Historical Context: America Before Franklin

Before delving into Franklin's role, it's essential to understand the context of pre-revolutionary America:

- The colonies were a mosaic of diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, often lacking a unified identity.
- Societal development was in its nascent stages, grappling with issues of governance, education, morality, and economic stability.
- Many colonists viewed themselves as British subjects, with limited notions of American independence or self-governance.
- The social fabric was often characterized by frontier hardships, religious fervor, and a pragmatic approach to survival.

In this environment, figures who could foster innovation, promote civic virtue, and bridge ideological divides were crucial. Benjamin Franklin emerged as such a figure, steering the colonies toward enlightenment principles and self-awareness.

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# **Benjamin Franklin: The Man Behind the Title**

## **Early Life and Humble Beginnings**

- Born in Boston in 1706, Franklin's origins were modest; he was the tenth son in a family of soap and candle makers.
- His formal education was limited, but his voracious reading and curiosity propelled him into self-education.
- Franklin's early work as a printer's apprentice set the stage for his later influence in communication and publishing.

## **Polymath and Innovator**

- Franklin was a quintessential polymath—scientist, inventor, writer, and philosopher.
- Notable inventions include the lightning rod, bifocal glasses, and the Franklin stove.
- His scientific pursuits, especially his experiments with electricity, elevated America's scientific standing on the world stage.
- His publication of Poor Richard's Almanack disseminated practical knowledge and moral aphorisms, shaping American cultural values.

## **Role in Education and Civic Society**

- Franklin founded the University of Pennsylvania, emphasizing accessible higher education.
- He established the American Philosophical Society, fostering intellectual exchange.
- His commitment to civic organizations, such as libraries and charitable institutions, exemplified his dedication to societal betterment.

## **Diplomatic and Political Contributions**

- Franklin's diplomatic skills were instrumental in securing French support during the American Revolution.
  - He helped draft foundational documents like the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.
  - His emphasis on unity, reason, and diplomacy was vital in establishing a new nation based on Enlightenment principles.
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## **Key Aspects That Justify Franklin's Title as the "First Civilized American"**

### **Advancement of Enlightenment Ideals**

- Franklin was a fervent advocate of reason, science, and empirical evidence—core Enlightenment values.
- His writings promoted skepticism of superstition and dogma, encouraging critical thinking.
- He championed individual liberty, education, and civic responsibility, laying ideological groundwork for a civilized society.

### **Promotion of Education and Knowledge**

- Franklin believed education was essential for societal progress.
- His efforts in founding educational institutions reflect his commitment to enlightenment and intellectual

development.

- By improving literacy and access to knowledge, Franklin helped cultivate an informed citizenry capable of self-governance.

## **Development of Civil Society and Public Institutions**

- Franklin's initiatives in establishing libraries, fire departments, hospitals, and charitable organizations exemplify civic virtues.
- His work in creating a sense of community and public service contributed significantly to the social fabric of America.
- These institutions fostered cooperation, civic pride, and moral responsibility—key facets of a civilized society.

## **Diplomatic Skill and International Reputation**

- Franklin's diplomatic successes demonstrated the importance of diplomacy, negotiation, and cultural exchange.
- His role in securing French alliance exemplified strategic thinking and statesmanship.
- These efforts elevated America's standing in the world, showcasing a nation capable of diplomacy and alliance-building.

## **Scientific and Technological Contributions**

- Franklin's scientific pursuits exemplified curiosity, innovation, and the application of knowledge for societal benefit.
- His inventions and experiments showed that scientific progress could improve everyday life, a hallmark of civilization.

- His leadership in scientific communities fostered a culture of inquiry and progress.

## Personal Virtues and Moral Philosophy

- Franklin's emphasis on virtues such as temperance, humility, industry, and charity reflected his moral philosophy.
- His Autobiography offers insight into character development and personal discipline as foundational to civilization.
- His pragmatic approach combined with moral integrity set standards for personal and societal conduct.

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## Criticisms and Limitations of Franklin's Title

While Franklin's contributions are monumental, it's important to acknowledge:

- His slave-owning past, which complicates the narrative of moral progress.
- The fact that he was a product of his time, with limitations in social equality.
- Some historians argue that other figures, such as Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Rush, also embody aspects of civilization but Franklin's holistic influence is unparalleled.

Despite these complexities, Franklin's overall legacy as a pioneer of enlightenment, education, civic virtue, and scientific progress justifies his reputation as the "first civilized American."

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# Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Benjamin Franklin

The moniker "first civilized American" encapsulates Franklin's multifaceted role in shaping the moral, scientific, political, and social fabric of the United States. His life exemplifies the virtues of curiosity, innovation, civic responsibility, and moral integrity—traits that define a truly civilized society. His legacy continues to influence American identity, emphasizing the importance of reason, education, and civic engagement.

In a broader sense, Franklin's example underscores that civilization is an ongoing pursuit—built on knowledge, virtue, and a commitment to the common good. As such, Benjamin Franklin remains a towering figure whose contributions remain central to understanding the evolution of American civilization and its foundational values.

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In summary, Benjamin Franklin's diverse achievements, dedication to societal improvement, and embodiment of Enlightenment principles have rightfully earned him the title of the "first civilized American," marking him as a pivotal architect of America's moral and intellectual heritage.

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