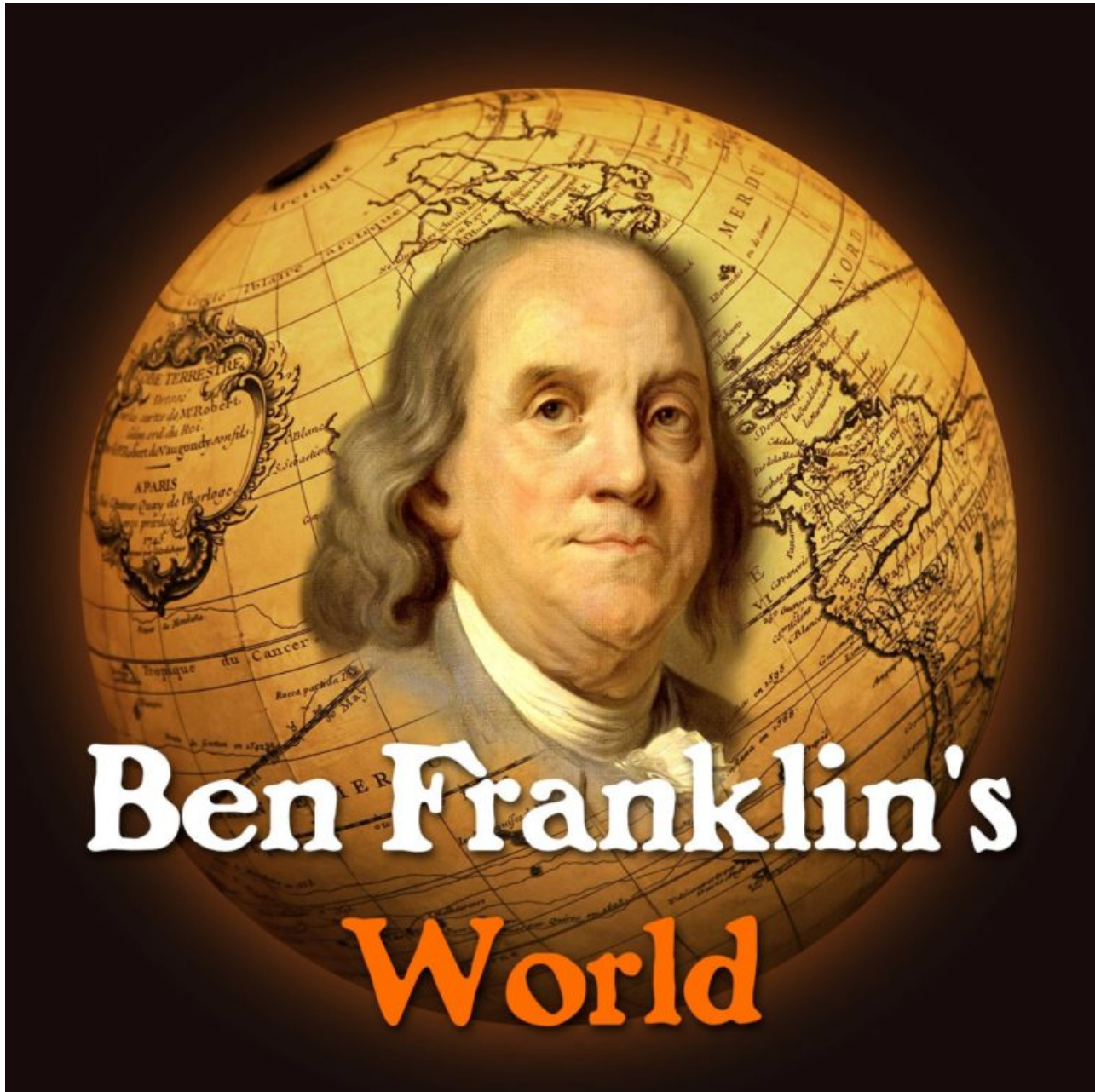


Ben Franklin's World





Courtesy of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture.

[Ben Franklin's World: A Podcast About Early American History](#) started as an experiment. Podcasts offer an intimate form of on-demand media that satisfies the desire for oral storytelling. Historians have great stories to tell, and more than a decade of experience interacting with people at museums and historical sites led me to believe that historians could use podcasts to find and cultivate a large public audience of people who love history and who craved the chance to interact with historians. I created *Ben Franklin's World* in 2014 not just as a podcast about early American history, but also as a podcast that investigates the historical process and encourages listeners to engage with it. The only question that remained: would anyone listen?

Why Podcasts?

Podcasts serve as the perfect medium for our mobile, digital age. They are downloadable and streamable audio programs you can listen to whenever and wherever you want. Podcasts emerged around 2004 when portable digital devices like the iPod came to the marketplace and the number of listeners has grown year over year since then. Edison Research estimates podcast listenership in the United States has grown from 27 percent of the American population over the age of twelve in 2013 to 40 percent in 2017. Further, the number of Americans over the age of twelve who listen to podcasts on a weekly basis has grown from 7 percent in 2013 to 15 percent, or an estimated 42 million people, in 2017.

Podcasts are popular because they allow listeners to edify and entertain themselves when they commute to work, go for a run, walk their dog, or perform household chores. Listening to a podcast is an intimate experience. When you listen to a podcast through earbuds, you invite your favorite host(s) to speak directly to you, and you alone. When you listen over an audio system, such as the one in your car, it is often because you need someone to keep you company.

This intimate listening experience combined with historical storytelling, which, at its core, is about people, make podcasts an effective way for historians to humanize the past and their profession.

As for me, I discovered podcasts in 2012 when I read about them in a book. At first, I listened to podcasts about writing, productivity, and digital media. Then I looked for podcasts about history, but I could not find one I liked. No history podcast discussed my favorite period—early America—and I could not find one that offered more than a basic, Wikipedia-like article about a historical topic or a recitation of history books and articles—often with presentist commentary about those books and articles. I wanted to listen to a history podcast that offered more substance; I wanted to listen to a podcast that went beyond the basic facts and discussed history in way that told me *where* historians found their evidence and *why* they chose to interpret it the way they did. After months of lamenting the lack of such a podcast, I decided to create one.

Designing a Podcast: Format and Technique

Over a decade of experience working in public history told me that historians could use podcasts to find and expand a large audience of people interested in their scholarship and the process behind it. But how could I create a program people would listen to?

Eighteen months of research into podcasts revealed that successful shows release episodes with high-quality content, presented in a consistent format, on a regular schedule. Every episode of *Ben Franklin's World* releases on Tuesday mornings at 1:30 am Eastern Time and most episodes feature the same format: a promo spot for a sponsor, an introduction to the episode, an interview with a guest scholar, a hypothetical history segment called the "Time Warp," the guest's closing remarks, and a brief summary of key points from the conversation.

I learned that the way you speak really matters. Listeners prefer podcasts whose hosts include them in their conversations and stories. The best hosts ask questions that acknowledge listeners' participation. They make use of "you," "we," and "us" when they phrase questions and engage listeners in asides that provide the context they need to understand the conversation. I use these techniques in *Ben Franklin's World*.

For example, when I interviewed [Lonnie Bunch, the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture](#), in December 2016, I asked questions such as "When we spoke with Jim Horn about different historical sources, he told us about oral histories and how they can be great and also problematic. Lonnie, do you encounter any challenges, you know, using the oral histories about the documents and artifacts you collect as you create museum exhibits people can trust?" and, "As we're talking, I get the sense that people

really fascinate you. And I wonder if you would tell us about your first research project, which investigated leaders of free black communities in America prior to the Civil War. Was it the people who attracted you to this project?" As I engage listeners in asides like these, I imagine looking at one of them while I am speaking. Then I imagine turning to face my guest and posing my question to them. This technique allows listeners to feel as though they are in the room where the conversation is taking place (even though the "room" is fictive because I conduct my interviews remotely).

I also include listeners in the conversation by posing questions that they have told me they would like guest scholars to answer. Before most interviews, I post a call for questions in a private listener community on Facebook.

Working to include listeners in conversations adds to the intimacy of the podcast listening experience. My research made clear that the more listeners experience a conversation as though they are participants in it, the more connected they will feel with a podcast, its host, and with the subject matter featured in episodes. *Ben Franklin's World* cultivates a sense that history is an enterprise everyone should support. By working to include listeners in my interviews, I am helping listeners forge a personal connection with history.

***Ben Franklin's World* and the Promises of Podcasts for History**

Ben Franklin's World released its first four episodes on October 7, 2014. Although I had done my research, I released those first episodes wondering if anyone would listen. Much to my relief, the answer proved to be "yes." It became an overwhelming "YES!" quickly.

In October 2014, *Ben Franklin's World* received 288 downloads over five episodes. By January 2015, it spiked to 50,951 downloads. I cannot pinpoint the exact reason for the sharp and quick growth in its monthly download totals, but I observed two factors at play. First, iTunes featured *Ben Franklin's World* on the front page of its "New & Noteworthy" category, first within the category of history and then for the entire iTunes store. Second, friends, colleagues, and active listeners told other people about the show. Listeners have been, and continue to be, the best promoters of the show, which now averages over 160,500 downloads per month.

The consistent release of high-quality content has played a large role in attracting and keeping listeners. Each episode of *Ben Franklin's World* presents listeners with a detailed conversation about some aspect of "[Vast Early America](#)"—the idea that we need to think about early American history as a field that encompasses four centuries of history spread across four different continents—through the lens of a guest scholar's discussion of a book, historic site, museum, or digital project. No episode summarizes a whole project. Rather, each episode explores one or two themes and some aspect of the guest's methodology.

For example, [in episode 136, I interviewed Jennifer Van Horn](#) about her book, *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America*. Three of the eleven questions I posed focused on her historical sources and how and why she interpreted those sources the way she did. These questions allowed listeners to get a sense of how Jennifer chose the objects she discusses in her book, why she focused on the objects left behind by wealthy early Americans and not poor early Americans, and how she analyzed and interpreted the objects she used. Further, the question that asked her to describe her analysis and interpretation also inquired why the work she does to recover the practical and metaphorical functions of early American objects matters today.

This focused technique, which explores both history and the historical process, provides listeners with a rich educational experience. Guests know they do not have to provide a comprehensive account of their entire project during our hour-long conversations and so are free to offer nuanced, thoughtful comments on specific themes the interviews pursue. Listeners love the detail guests provide because it allows them to leave each episode feeling knowledgeable about a historical topic.

The methodology questions I feature in each episode have prompted many listeners to send me questions about how historians work. These historical process-related questions inspired the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture's [Doing History: How Historians Work](#) series, which debuted in January 2016.



Courtesy of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture.

On the last Tuesday of each month throughout 2016, *Doing History* episodes were posted in the *Ben Franklin's World* feed in order to provide listeners with detailed explorations of how historians select research topics, conduct research, use archives, analyze sources, and how they organize and write about

their research. The series began with a special bonus episode about why historians study history, and concluded with another bonus episode about the role of history and historians in the public. Like *Ben Franklin's World*, *Doing History* started as an experiment: Just how interested were non-historians in investigating the process of history?

Between January 2016 and July 1, 2017, the fourteen episodes in the *Doing History: How Historians Work* series have received 196,355 downloads from eighty-one different countries. The success of the series prompted the creation of a second season, [*Doing History: To the Revolution!*](#) This series allows listeners to explore not just the history of the American Revolution, but also how scholars construct that history. The series offers listeners a chance to investigate both early American history and the process by which historians have come to know what they know about the past. Episodes in the series post from September 12 through the end of 2017.

More Than Just an Audio Program: Podcasts as Tools to Engage Listeners

Podcasts serve as a gateway to other media about history, serving as a tool for historians to engage with people who have an interest in the stories they tell. Listeners often contact me and guest scholars because we invite them to do so, providing our e-mail addresses and Twitter handles at the end of each episode. Listeners also have the option to join a free, private listener group on Facebook. They use this group as an opportunity to interact with me, show guests, and each other. They pose questions about history and share information about historical events, exhibits, and articles of interest.

Listeners also contact us about the stories we discuss in each episode, stories that inspire them to think historically about the world. Sometimes it prompts them to purchase a book or visit a museum or historic site they heard discussed on the podcast. In a survey I conducted in September 2015, 41 percent of *Ben Franklin's World* listeners reported that they had later purchased a guest's book or visited their museum or historic site after they had heard a guest speak on the podcast.

Ben Franklin's World also has many academic listeners who use the podcast to enrich their teaching and study of early American history. K-12 teachers report that they use information communicated in episodes to enrich their classroom lessons and student activities. College professors assign episodes of the podcast and the *Doing History* series to students as a way to expose them to a wider array of historians, historical topics, methodologies, and ideas than they could otherwise fit in their syllabi. Graduate students use episodes to study for comps, and professional historians listen to keep up on the latest literature in the field.

So will non-historians listen to a podcast about scholarly history and the historical process? Yes, they will. *Ben Franklin's World* and the *Doing History*

series have proven that podcasts offer historians an important tool for reaching out to different publics and helping them understand the importance of studying history and of the work historians do. The success of these programs proves that scholars do not have to simplify their work to engage the public. In fact, a large part of the success of these programs is due to the detailed way scholars present complex ideas about history and make them accessible to non-historians.

Further Reading & Listening

Todd Henry's *The Accidental Creative: How to Be Brilliant at a Moment's Notice* (New York, 2011) introduced me to podcasts. Henry also has a podcast, [Accidental Creative](#).

For statistics on podcast listening in the United States, see Edison Research, "[The Infinite Dial, 2017](#)," especially pp. 39 and 44.

For the official announcement of the *Doing History* series on *Ben Franklin's World*, see Karin Wulf, "[Doing History](#)," *Uncommon Sense—The Blog*, OIEAHC, January 22, 2016.

You can explore *Ben Franklin's World* for yourself [here](#).

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