



by Bill Lazarus
photos by David Carter

When Vernon Weidner walks through the front door of a city hall, dressed in casual, modern clothes, minus a powdered wig, there's not even a question about it: he doesn't look a thing like Benjamin Franklin. Even when peering through his bifocals, Weidner really can't be mistaken for the long-dead American patriot who was a leader during the early years of this country.

That's an understandable and common mistake.

"He was born on a cold, wintry Sunday morning," Weidner recites. "So was I. He was born in a city that starts with a 'B' (Boston); so was I (Baltimore)." He touches his short, gray hair. "Both of us used to have brown hair. We weigh the same at the same age. We're the same height." How does Weidner know Franklin's real weight? He guesses by studying paintings of Franklin; artistic license is not included in his estimates.

Shucks, the two men are virtually twins.

Maybe not completely. "I know we don't really look alike," says Weidner, who travels about with a briefcase stuffed with Franklin-related material. The South Daytona resident – who is almost shy about his own life but animated when discussing Franklin – as usual spent the spring visiting area city halls and collecting proclamations that honored Franklin in conjunction

with the 210th anniversary of the patriot's death, April 17, 1790. "I got more this year," he exclaims.

Franklin's birth date starts Weidner off on another tangent: 17, he reports, is an important number in Franklin's life. The Boston-born printer, who grew up to be U.S. Ambassador to France and a delegate to the Continental Congress, patented 17 major inventions; started 17 major things, like the post office and insurance companies; held 17 major titles; was born on January 17 (in 1704); and ran away from home at age 17...

The list goes on and on. The importance of the number 17 "just struck me," says Weidner, who's not into reincarnation or numerology.

He's just into Franklin. The two men are united across the years in ways few people are. Weidner, 64, has devoted almost his entire life to making sure Americans don't forget the elder statesman of the American Revolution.

"I feel like I'm drawn by a magnet," he says. "I have to do this." Weidner has amassed dozens of scrapbooks on stories about Franklin – a couple from the *National Enquirer*, one of which said Franklin's ghost was startling people – organized local parades in Franklin's honor, visited the White House in costume

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— topped with the traditional powdered wig, people thought Weidner was masquerading as George Washington, to his disgust — and continually lectures about Franklin to any group that will invite him to speak.

He's also collected thousands of names on petitions which identify Franklin as the greatest American. "I have a standing offer to give \$100 to anyone who can name someone who did as many things as Franklin did," says Weidner, who has a miniature \$100 bill on his keychain. The petitions were sent to then President Jimmy Carter; Weidner never received a reply.

That hasn't stopped him. Nothing does, not even snickers from city clerks who are suddenly confronted by a mild, small, stocky, graying man with a mustache who wants a parade in honor of a patriot best remembered these days for flying a kite in a thunderstorm to test the theory that electricity and lightning are the same thing.

(Franklin survived the experiment; not everyone who duplicated the feat did.)

The Philadelphian, whose statue sits Lincolnesque in his adopted city, may actually deserve the attention. He's the only American leader to sign all four major early American documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the peace treaty with England and the alliance treaty with France. The tie to Independence Day makes July a big month for Franklin.



Creative and imaginative, Franklin came up with bifocals, the Franklin stove, street lamp, rocking chair and lightning rod, among other things. He organized the first circulating library, first American hospital, first street cleaning department and more.

The list is nice when included on an official proclamation, but Weidner wants something else. "I found out so many things about Franklin that people don't know," he says. "It's a crime and a disgrace that this country doesn't recognize his birthday."

Weidner is looking for some kind of official pronouncement, not a holiday in honor of his idol — Franklin was the first postmaster and wouldn't have approved of another holiday, he says. "If there were any more holidays, we wouldn't get mail at all," Weidner says, probably with his tongue in cheek.

It's hard to believe he's not kidding about the whole fixation, but it's definitely not a joke. Weidner's Franklin two-step started in 1952. At age 16, he entered a national essay contest sponsored by Ford Motor Company. Participants were supposed to

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identify their favorite American and explain why. Then in high school, Weidner was interested in printing as a career and so was drawn to Franklin, who was one of this country's most successful printers in the mid-1700s and a publisher of various magazines, including the popular *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

To his surprise, Weidner won. Most people might be momentarily happy, accept their certificate and forget the whole thing. Not Weidner, especially after his little project was placed in Dearborn (Mich.) Village – a replica of an early American community with many historical objects – and was seen by Henry Ford II. The son of the founder of the Ford Motor Co. saw Weidner's work, liked it and sent the young man a \$100 bill as a present.

Franklin, of course, is pictured on the \$100 bill.

With the money, Weidner started his own printing business in the family home. He later married, raised five children,

moved south in the 1960s to join his parents, ran a pet shop in Ormond Beach, a printing company, worked as a caretaker and a few other jobs until his retirement in 1997. And he never forgot Franklin.

He organized the Daytona Beach Franklin Society in 1984 – mentioning that name reminds him to pull a disk from his pocket imprinted with the Society's image and date. The group's still around and meets on important Franklin-related anniversaries.

Weidner, too, just keeps going on and on. "Maybe I'm meant to keep Franklin alive," he says.



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