Poor Richard's Almanack

The images on this page are from Poor Richard's Almanack. An almanac was one of the most important publications in colonial America, and nearly every household owned a copy. It provided people with valuable information as well as entertainment. The value of an almanac is best illustrated by the fourth image on this page, where the owner has written his name, declaring that the almanac is his.

Because almanacs were so important to colonists, printers would pay an astrologer a lot of money to do the calculations — almost as much as a Justice of the Peace was paid.

Benjamin Franklin was a man of science who was able to do his own calculations. He must have been somewhat accurate, because his two almanacs, Poor Richard's and Poor Robin’s, were some of the most popular in the colonies. You can see how widely these almanacs circulated by looking at the list of courts Franklin published — Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland. His almanacs could probably be found as far south as Georgia.

Benjamin Franklin was a man of science who was able to do his own calculations. He must have been somewhat accurate, because his two almanacs, Poor Richard's and Poor Robin’s, were some of the most popular in the colonies. You can see how widely these almanacs circulated by looking at the list of courts Franklin published — Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland. His almanacs could probably be found as far south as Georgia.

The monthly pages of the almanac also contain poems, advice, and historical information. Transcriptions of excerpts are below each image.

January 1753

Then from their Dens the rav’rous Monsters creep
Whilest in their Folds the harmless bestial sleep.
The furious Lion roams in quest of Prey.
To gorge his Hunger till the Dawn of Day;
His hideous Roar with Terror shakes the Wood.
To look at the stars in the belief that they influenced events on earth. Even an illiterate person could read the astrological symbols because it was so important to the agriculture of the colonial period.

The most important use of an almanac was to predict the weather and to help people know when to plant their crops. There were no weathermen in the colonial period, no daily forecasts to read or listen to. People relied on their almanacs to know the best time to plant their crops and when it was going to be a wet spring or a dry summer. But without modern science to rely on, people predicted the weather using astrology — studying the movements of the planets and stars in the belief that they influenced events on earth. Even an illiterate person could read the astrological symbols because it was so important to the agriculture of the colonial period.

The monthly pages of the almanac also contain poems, advice, and historical information. Transcriptions of excerpts are below each image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remark, days, &amp;c.</th>
<th>ri.</th>
<th>set</th>
<th>ph.</th>
<th>Aspects, &amp;c.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td>Circumcision</td>
<td>7 24 4 36</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Clouds and cold, with snow;</td>
<td>7 23 4 37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Days inc. 4 m.</td>
<td>7 23 4 37</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 6</td>
<td>Epiphany.</td>
<td>7 22 4 38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>rise 4 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>G 1 p. Epiph.</td>
<td>7 22 4 38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>w.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 2</td>
<td>wind and falling</td>
<td>7 21 4 39</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Interest, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 3</td>
<td>Days inc. 10 m.</td>
<td>7 20 4 40</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>seems against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 5</td>
<td>weather, then very cold,</td>
<td>7 19 4 41</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7 others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 18 4 42</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>rise 5 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 17 4 43</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sirius so. 10 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 G 2 p. Epiph.</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 16 4 44</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 2</td>
<td>Days incr. 18 m.</td>
<td>7 16 4 44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7's so. 7 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 15 4 45</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>so. 10 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 4</td>
<td>weather, but grows more</td>
<td>7 14 4 46</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>rise 4 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 13 4 47</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 6</td>
<td>Day 9 36 long</td>
<td>7 12 4 48</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 7</td>
<td>moderate;</td>
<td>7 12 4 48</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 G 3 p. Epiph.</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 11 4 49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 2</td>
<td>followed by Clouds, wind and</td>
<td>7 10 4 50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>sets 8 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 9 4 51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Philosophy as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 8 4 52</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>well as Foppery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 5</td>
<td>Conv. St. Paul.</td>
<td>7 7 4 53</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2, 3 often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 6</td>
<td>Day incr. 38 m.</td>
<td>7 6 4 54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>changes Fashion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 7</td>
<td>cold, with</td>
<td>7 5 4 55</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>rise 4 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 G 4 p. Epiph.</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 4 4 56</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7's sou. 6 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 2</td>
<td>snow or</td>
<td>7 3 4 57</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sirius sou. 9 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 3</td>
<td>K. Char. beheld.</td>
<td>7 2 4 58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 4</td>
<td>rain.</td>
<td>7 1 4 59</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Greatness of the Power, which has been exerted in the Creation, through every Object in Nature shows it, will best appear by considering a little the GREAT Works, properly so called, of Nature; the Sun, and Planets, and the fixed Stars. The Sun and Moon, the most conspicuous of us of all the celestial Bodies, are the only ones mentioned in the Sacred Text. But the Invention of the noblest of Instruments the Telescope, and the Sagacity of the Astronomers of later Ages, whose Observations have improved and corrected those of the foregoing, afford us a very different Idea of the Solar System from what the simple Consideration of those two most conspicuous Bodies gives us. As this may probably fall into the Hands of some, who have not Leisure or Opportunities of reading Books of Astronomy, the following Brief View of our System, and of the Immensity of the Creation, according to the Theory of the Moderns, may not be unacceptable.

It is proper, in the first Place, just to mention, That the real Magnitude, Distances, Orbits, and other Affections of the Bodies of our System are determined by what Astronomers call the Gravitations, and by their Eclipses, from the Sun, and their apparent magnitudes, and other Analogies, Methods, which would take up by far too much Time to explain here; by which it is possible to determine...

February 1759

Its Vigour by Adversity refines;
The Jewel must be polish’d ere it shines.
Camillus, Cato, each heroic Name,
Menstrous (to derive from its Fame
Howe’er exalted, or how ever low;
As equal Dignity of Mind they show
In them ye little, mimic, Patriots view,
What to your country, to yourselves is due;
To brave the Menace, and to scorn the Bribe,
Than Stairs, or Ribbons, more adorns your Tribe

Plutarch observes,
Particulars, at a Time when all the Citizens were crying out against him, and blaming his Conduct, like an able Pilot, who, in a Storm regards only the Rules of his Art for saving the Ship, and overlooks the cries, Lamentations, and Prayers of all around him; that Pericles, I say, after having taken all possible Precaution for the Security of the State, pursu’d his own Scheme, without troubling himself about the Murmurs, and Insults, the injurious Reprisals, and Accusations that were daily thrown out against him.

On the 1st of this Month, February, A.D. 1172, King Henry II of England surnamed Plantagenet, returned from taking Possession of Ireland.

Self-Sufficiency exposed

The Honour which Science and Genius confer, results not merely from literary Attainments, and the Talents of the Mind, but the good Use made of them; for a Man may be adorned with the Knowledge of every Thing that is Most Curious and exquisite in the Sciences, and yet be a bad Man. This makes a Man learned, but does not make him good. And if a Man be only learned...

Christianity and the Occult

Although we tend to think of colonial America as a deeply religious place, church attendance actually decreased throughout the colonial period. By 1760, fewer than 15 percent of adults belonged to a church. Church attendance was at its lowest point just before the Revolution. But although people did not attend church, Christianity was part of the popular culture. Most people, white and black, would have been familiar with biblical stories and poems even if they might not know the finer points of Christianity. Because people did not belong to any particular church, they were open to blending different traditions into a popular culture that had pagan influences, such as palm reading and astrology, as well as Christian traditions such as the baptism of children. Almanacs blended the Occult and Christian traditions. You can see the pagan influences in the astrological symbols in the pages above and in the Man of Signs, below; and the Christian influence is clear from the quotations from the Bible.

The Man of Signs

The Man of Signs is perhaps the most confusing image in an almanac. Before the 1800s, people had a very different understanding of the body. They believed that the weather and the alignment of the sun, moon, and stars could affect a person’s health. People believed that the world was made up of four elements – water, fire, earth, and air. The human body had four humors – fluids – that controlled its function, each corresponding to one of the four elements: blood (air), phlegm (water), black bile (earth), and yellow bile (fire). Each humor was in turn related to a particular temperament, so a person with more yellow bile (fire) might have a warmer body and a temper, while a person who had more phlegm (water) might be cooler in temperament. If the humors or elements became unbalanced, disease might be the result.

The four elements also corresponded with astrological signs. Parts of the body were also believed to be governed, or more powerful, at different parts of the year. People read these astrological signs to know how their health might change throughout the year. Transcriptions of these pages are below.

1753 Introduction

To know where the Sign is.
First Find the Day of the Month, and against the Day you have the Sign or Place of the Moon in the 5th Column. Then finding the Sign here, it shews the Part of the Body it governs.

To know how the Health might change throughout the year.

Court dates and church meetings

One of the most important events in colonial America were court dates. Because of the long distances between towns, a judge or a group of judges traveled around the county and held trials on different days. It was easier and more efficient to move the judges to the people than to expect people to travel long distances. All of these different courts were responsible for overseeing different parts of the law.

Court days were important for the entire community. People might be involved in a minor incident, such as suing a neighbor for stealing a cow, or serve as a witness in a more violent crime. If they
Franklin has also listed the monthly meetings for Quakers and Baptists, two of the largest religious groups in Pennsylvania. The Quakers and Baptists, as well as other religious groups, held weekly church meetings, and some churches also held monthly meetings. Several congregations would meet at a given location to oversee charity for poor members and to discipline members who had committed sins. Essentially, Franklin is advertising both the secular courts and the religious courts of his day. Transcription of these pages is below.

January 1733

At Chester, the last Tuesday in May, August, November, and February.
At Lancaster, the first Tuesday in the Months aforesaid.
At Suffolk, the first, at Kent the second, and at New Castle the third Tuesday in the same months.

Supreme Courts in New-Jersey are held
At Burlington, the 1st Tuesday in May, 2d Tuesday in August, 1st Tuesday in November and 3d in February)
At Perth Amboy, the 2d Tuesday in May, 3d in Aug. the 2d Tuesday in Novemb. and the 4th in February.
At Gloucester, March 27, June 12. Sept 1s. Dec. 25

Supreme Courts in New York are held,
At Westchester, March 27.
At Richmond, April 10.
At Orange, April 24.
At Suffolk County, July 24.
At Albany, August 21.
At Ulster, Sept 4.
At Dutchess, Sept 11.
At Kings County, Sept. 18.
At Queens County, Sept. 25.

Courts of Sessions & Common Pleas are held,
At Albany, June 5. Oct. 2 and Jan. 16.
At Westchester, May 27. Oct. 23.
In Ulster, May 1. Oct. 2.
In Richmond, March 20 Sept 25.
In Kings, April 17. Oct. 16.
In Queens, May 15. Sept. 18.
In Orange, April 24 Oct 20.
In Dutchess Co. May 15 and Oct 16.

Provincial Courts in Maryland.
Two in a Year, held at Annapolis, viz. The 3d Tuesday of Mar. and 3d Tuesday of Octob.

County Courts in Maryland.
For Talbot, Baltimore and St Mary’s counties, the first Tuesday in March, June, August, and November.
At Dorchester, Cecil, Annapol. and Charles Counties, the second Tuesday in the same Months.
At Kent, Calvert, and Somerset Counties, the third Tuesday in the same Months.
At Queen Anne’s and Prince George’s Counties, the fourth Tuesday in the same Months.

Quakers General Meetings are kept.
At Philadelphia, March 18
At Salem, April 24
At Flushing, May 27
At West River, June 3
At Providence, 17
At Newport, 24
At Newton, 24
At Westchester, July 22

Baptists General Meetings are kept
At Welch Tract, May 13
At Cohanse, 20
At Piscataway, June 3
Philadelphia, Sept. 23

Fairs are kept
At Cohansie, April 24
At N-York ditto, & Nov. 6
At Salem May 1
At Chester 5
At Bristol, 8
At Philadelphia, 16

User Tags:
Benjamin Franklin
Christianity
colonial
courts
literature
An excerpt of court and church dates. January 1733.

Artifacts:
This fifteenth-century illustration shows the believed relationship between signs of the zodiac and parts of the body.

3 January 2018