

Ben Franklin never forgot this conversation with his father...

When Benjamin Franklin was a boy he was very fond of fishing; and many of his leisure hours were spent on the margin of the mill pond catching flounders, perch, and eels that came up thither with the tide.

The place where Ben and his playmates did most of their fishing was a marshy spot on the outskirts of Boston. On the edge of the water there was a deep bed of clay, in which the boys were forced to stand while they caught their fish.

"This is very uncomfortable," said Ben Franklin one day to his comrades, while they were standing in the quagmire.

"So it is," said the other boys. "What a pity we have no better place to stand on!"

On the dry land, not far from the quagmire, there were at that time a great many large stones that had been brought there to be used in building the foundation of a new house. Ben mounted upon the highest of these stones.

"Boys," said he, "I have thought of a plan. You know what a plague it is to have to stand in the quagmire yonder. See, I am bedaubed to the knees, and you are all in the same plight.

"Now I propose that we build a wharf. You see these stones? The workmen mean to use them for building a house here. My plan is to take these same stones, carry them to the edge of the water, and build a wharf with them. What say you, lads? Shall we build the wharf?"

"Yes, yes," cried the boys; "let's set about it!"

It was agreed that they should all be on the spot that evening, and begin their grand public enterprise by moonlight.

Accordingly, at the appointed time, the boys met and eagerly began to remove the stones. They worked like a colony of ants, sometimes two or three of them taking hold of one stone; and at last they had carried them all away, and built their little wharf.

"Now, boys," cried Ben, when the job was done, "let's give three cheers, and go home to bed. To-morrow we may catch fish at our ease."

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!" shouted his comrades, and all scampered off home and to bed, to dream of to-morrow's sport.

In the morning the masons came to begin their work. But what was their surprise to find the stones all gone! The master mason, looking carefully on the ground, saw the tracks of many little feet, some with shoes and some barefoot. Following these to the water side, he soon found what had become of the missing building stones.

"Ah! I see what the mischief is," said he; "those little rascals who were here yesterday have stolen the stones to build a wharf with. And I must say that they understand their business well."

He was so angry that he at once went to make a complaint before the magistrate; and his Honor wrote an order to "take the bodies of Benjamin Franklin, and other evil-disposed persons," who had stolen a heap of stones.

If the owner of the stolen property had not been more merciful than the master mason, it might have gone hard with our friend Benjamin and his comrades. But, luckily for them, the gentleman had a respect for Ben's father, and, moreover, was pleased with the spirit of the whole affair. He therefore let the culprits off easily.

But the poor boys had to go through another trial, and receive sentence, and suffer punishment, too, from their own fathers. Many a rod was worn to the stump on that unlucky night. As for Ben, he was less afraid of a whipping than of his father's reproof. And, indeed, his father was very much disturbed.

"Benjamin, come hither," began Mr. Franklin in his usual stern and weighty tone. The boy approached and stood before his father's chair. "Benjamin," said his father, "what could induce you to take property which did not belong to you?"

"Why, father," replied Ben, hanging his head at first, but then lifting his eyes to Mr. Franklin's face, "if it had been merely for my own benefit, I never should have dreamed of it. But I knew that the wharf would be a public convenience. If the owner of the stones should build a house with them, nobody would enjoy any advantage but himself. Now, I made use of them in a way that was for the advantage of many persons."

"My son," said Mr. Franklin solemnly, "so far as it was in your power, you have done a greater harm to the public than to the owner of the stones. I do verily believe, Benjamin, that almost all the public and private misery of mankind arises from a neglect of this great truth,—that evil can produce only evil, that good ends must be wrought out by good means."

To the end of his life, Ben Franklin never forgot this conversation with his father; and we have reason to suppose, that, in most of his public and private career, he sought to act upon the principles which that good and wise man then taught him.

(Editor's Note: Story republished from [Project Gutenberg](#). Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American author who wrote during the first half of the 19th century.)