

## February 05, 2008

### Ben Franklin on "Stupid, Swarthy Germans"



Immigrants to America have always been feared and hated. Germans represent the largest group of immigrants to America, outnumbering the English and Irish by a wide margin. Nearly 20% of Americans can trace their ancestors back to Germany. But they were not universally welcomed to our shores. [Louis Rumbaut](#) (via [Matt Yglesias](#)) reminds us that one of our iconic founding fathers - Benjamin Franklin - warned about German immigrants overrunning America - in language that sounds very much like that of Mitt Romney and Roland Koch. Franklin warned that Germans were too stupid to learn English, and therefore represented a political threat to America:

"Those who come hither are generally of the most ignorant Stupid Sort of their own Nation...and as few of the English understand the German Language, and so cannot address them either from the Press or Pulpit, 'tis almost impossible to remove any prejudices they once entertain...Not being used to Liberty, they know not how to make a modest use of it...I remember when they modestly declined intermeddling in our Elections, but now they come in droves, and carry all before them, except in one or two Counties...In short unless the stream of their importation could be turned from this to other colonies, as you very judiciously propose, they will soon so out number us, that all the advantages we have will not in My Opinion be able to preserve our language, and even our Government will become precarious."

The other objection that Ben Franklin had to German immigrants was their "[swarthy complexion](#)", which was an affront to the "purely white people" who originally settled America:

Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the *English*, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion.

24. Which leads me to add one Remark: That the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small. All *Africa* is black or tawny. *Asia* chiefly tawny. *America* (exclusive of the new Comers) wholly so. And in *Europe*, the *Spaniards*, *Italians*, *French*, *Russians* and *Swedes*, are generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the *Germans* also, the *Saxons* only excepted, who with the *English*, make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, *Scouring* our Planet, by clearing *America* of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants in *Mars* or *Venus*, why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? why increase the Sons of *Africa*, by Planting them in *America*, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red? But perhaps I am partial to the Complexion of my Country, for such Kind of Partiality is natural to Mankind.

Of course, Franklin's animosity towards Germans may have another explanation: as a young man in Philadelphia Ben Franklin published the first German language newspaper in America - the [Philadelphische Zeitung](#) - which failed after only one year.

[http://www.dialoginternational.com/dialog\\_international/2008/02/ben-franklin-on.html](http://www.dialoginternational.com/dialog_international/2008/02/ben-franklin-on.html)  
(5.7.2016)

Benjamin Franklin (January 17, 1706– April 17, 1790) was one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. A renowned polymath, Franklin was a leading author, printer, political theorist, politician, freemason, postmaster, scientist, inventor, civic activist, statesman, and diplomat. As a scientist, he was a major figure in the American Enlightenment and the history of physics for his discoveries and theories regarding electricity. As an inventor, he is known for the lightning rod, bifocals, and the Franklin stove, among other inventions. He facilitated many civic organizations, including Philadelphia's fire department and a university