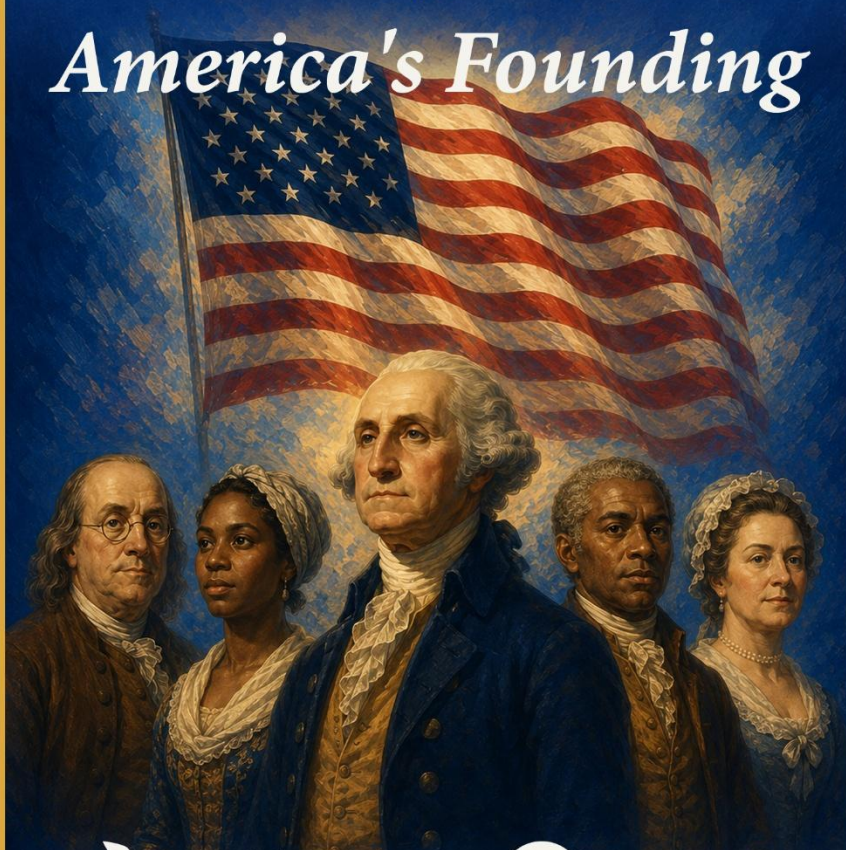


UNCONVENTIONAL EDUCATION

AND

America's Founding



Edited by Nasiyah Isra-UI

Unconventional Education and America's Founding

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Unconventional Education and America's Founding

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Foreword

by Nasiyah Isra-UI

Sitting down to write this introduction was exciting and daunting. My special interest has been the early Revolutionary period as far back as I can remember. As a young teen, I would enthusiastically devour dozens of books and articles on the American Revolution, the Founding Fathers, and the sociopolitical context of the era, and I would watch an extensive amount of documentaries. I would visit historic locations, like Monticello and Williamsburg, and research the creation of our government systems, even memorizing the Constitution's Preamble and paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. When I gained access to digital archives, my passion only grew. It is one of the reasons the second emphasis of my interdisciplinary degree was social sciences, where I focused primarily on humanities.

So, when I was asked to be the editor and author of a few chapters for this publication, I leapt at the opportunity, while also recognizing the honor and importance of this lofty task. Not only because it was focused on the era I spent hundreds of hours passionately researching since my middle school years, but because it was also emphasizing the uniquely unconventional educational backgrounds that helped shape the greats of this era. And all while celebrating the continued legacy of educational freedom as we come to America's 250th anniversary.

I remember the first time I learned that some of the people involved in America's founding were homeschooled or otherwise unconventionally educated. I remember feeling so overwhelmingly proud that I was a part of that legacy. It gave that era even more meaning for me, and inspired me to dive deeper into the ideas that shaped their educational upbringings. It is a part of history that very few people talked about, especially when I was growing up. Throughout my life, society always showed me that traditional schools were the gold standard, and homeschooling was othered. There were times in my childhood where I felt ashamed to say that

I was homeschooled because I didn't want people to think less of me or my academic merit.

The realization that homeschooling and other forms of unconventional education have been around since America's founding changed my outlook on the narrative behind education itself. As I grew, when people would push back on me being homeschooled, I remember starting to respond, "A bunch of the people who built this nation were homeschooled, too." Then, smiling, I'd add, "And look what they did!" Suddenly, I saw myself in the nation's founding, and realized I had no reason ever to be ashamed of the way I learned.

The founding fathers, founding mothers, and founder-adjacents whose stories are included in this book have always inspired me, and learning the context of their academic experiences just further empowered me. Their stories reveal what is possible when self-determination and passion are combined with academic prowess and resilience. Each of them, coming from vastly different parts of society, contributed something beautiful to the founding of the nation. Some, unlike many of the founding fathers we all know, were not as recognized for what they contributed to the story of America's founding. Their era was just not ready for them, but unconventional education still provided a means for them to learn and achieve, forever changing history.

Unconventional education created pathways to success that were tailored to these figures' unique needs and aspirations, even when those needs and aspirations didn't match societal expectations. Their brilliant minds thrived in spaces that encouraged them to ask questions, learn advanced topics and languages, and think deeply about the meaning of freedom.

I am confident that you will find this eBook deeply inspiring, whether you are a student, parent, educator, entrepreneur, or simply a curious reader. Nearly every chapter of this book was authored by an education entrepreneur who is carrying on the legacy of these stories with unconventional learning spaces of their own. Each edupreneur featured in this book selected a story that

was most connected to their work, either based on their unique journey or their geographical proximity. Each story included in this publication was selected intentionally to showcase how, even when faced with insurmountable odds, the story of America is forever unfolding through their legacies, past and present.

1. How John Adams Found His Own Way

by Kelsy Achtenberg

Before he helped shape a nation, John Adams was a student who didn't want to go to school. He liked the outdoors, avoided his studies, and resisted structure. By most modern standards, he wouldn't have stood out as exceptional, at least not in the ways we usually measure. And yet, he would go on to become a key architect of American independence.

As David McCullough recounts in *John Adams*, Adams's early years were marked by a lack of interest in formal schooling. His father was frustrated by his son's resistance and sent him to work as a farmer, hoping that physical labor might create discipline and appreciation for education. It worked, but not through force. Adams eventually returned to school with a new sense of purpose not because he had to, but because he chose to (McCullough).

That distinction matters. There is a difference between learning that is required and learning that is owned. Learning that is forced creates compliance. Learning that is owned creates growth. That difference shows up in classrooms every day. Some students complete every assignment, follow every direction, and still are disconnected from what they are learning. Others push back, avoid, or disengage, not because they lack ability, but because they have not yet found ownership in the process. When learning becomes something students choose to engage in, rather than something they are simply told to do, the experience changes.

Today, much of education is still built around structure, pacing, and performance. Students are expected to move together, learn the same material, and demonstrate understanding in similar ways. Success is often defined by finishing the assignment, getting the right answer, and meeting the standard. But Adams's story challenges that model. His path wasn't consistent, efficient, or clean (McCullough). It was human. Human learning isn't linear. It includes moments of resistance, curiosity, struggle, and growth. It involves trying, failing, stepping away, and returning again. When

we expect learning to look the same for every student, we miss the very moments where meaningful growth is happening.

In *The Education of John Adams*, R.B. Bernstein explains that Adams's intellectual development didn't happen in a straight line or within the walls of a classroom. His growth was shaped through reading, reflection, conversation, and experience. He studied law through apprenticeship rather than formal instruction, sharpening his thinking through real-world engagement rather than isolated exercises (Bernstein).

His education wasn't something delivered to him. He built his own learning through questioning, experience, and engagement (Bernstein).

Adams's view of education extended even further. He believed learning was not just about personal growth, but about learning how to contribute meaningfully to society. He emphasized the importance of civic and liberal education that develops judgment, virtue, and the ability to think critically. As explored in a *Law & Liberty* article on Adams and education, he saw learning as essential to sustaining a free society, not just advancing individual success ("Education and the Man").

This kind of learning that is based in both personal ownership and civic responsibility requires time and trust. It requires space for students to explore ideas, struggle with concepts, and develop their thinking. It asks educators to look beyond immediate results and focus on long-term growth.

Adams's path didn't just shape him... it shaped the nation. As an important voice for independence, he played a crucial role in persuading others to break from British rule, helping push the Continental Congress toward declaring independence. He later served as a diplomat in Europe, where he helped secure alliances and negotiate the Treaty of Paris, formally ending the Revolutionary War (McCullough). As the nation's second President, Adams faced political division and had to make difficult, often unpopular decisions, including avoiding a war with France ("10 Little-Known Facts").

These accomplishments weren't the result of someone who simply followed directions or met standards. They were the result of someone who could think independently, stand up for what he believed, and lead with conviction. These skills developed over time through experience, reflection, and self-direction (Bernstein).

Adams was known for being blunt, opinionated, and even difficult. According to the National Constitution Center, he was not someone who fit neatly into expectations or prioritized being well-liked. He was deeply committed to his beliefs, even when those beliefs made him unpopular ("10 Little-Known Facts"). That kind of personality doesn't always thrive in environments that reward agreement and compliance, such as modern-day schools. In fact, it can be seen as disruptive, disrespectful, and non-compliant. But as history has shown us, it can also be the foundation of leadership.

The traits that defined Adams are not easily measured. They don't usually show up in test scores or worksheets. They develop over time, often unevenly, through struggle and growth (Bernstein). And yet, these are the very traits we hope students leave school with. We want them to think for themselves, to question, to engage deeply with the world around them, and to develop integrity. If those are the outcomes we value, then we have to consider whether our systems are truly designed to develop them.

So what would happen to a student like John Adams today? Would we see potential, or would we try to correct it? Would we see his curiosity, or label it as a lack of effort? Would we give him the space to step away and return when ready, or insist that he stay on pace with everyone else?

These questions don't suggest that structure has no place in education, but they do challenge us to think about how much space we allow for individuality within it. Not every student's path will look the same, and not every learner will engage in the same way at the same time.

Education, at its core, isn't about producing perfect students. It's about developing thoughtful, capable, and self-aware people. It's about helping young people understand how they learn, what they

value, and how they engage with the world around them. Those things don't always develop on a schedule.

Adams didn't become influential because he excelled within a system. He became influential because he learned how to think for himself. Before he helped define a nation, he first had to define his own path, and in doing so, he helped shape the kind of citizen a free society depends on.

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2. Building a Future for Everyone: The Story of James Forten

by Nicole Stewart

Somewhere in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776, a 10-year-old boy stood in a crowd outside the State House and heard the Declaration of Independence read aloud for the first time. Those words about liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness became the compass he carried for the rest of his life. That boy was James Forten. And 250 years later, his story deserves to be part of America's celebration.

Forten was born free on September 2, 1766, to free Black parents in Philadelphia. When his father died young, his mother refused to let poverty extinguish his future. She enrolled him in the Friends' African School, run by Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet, where he learned to read and write. He attended for only two years before the family needed him to work full time, but that hard-won literacy became the most powerful tool he would ever own.

At 14, Forten enlisted in the Revolutionary War, was captured by the British, refused an offer of comfort in England, and walked home to Philadelphia after seven months as a prisoner. He rose from sailmaking apprentice to owner of one of the city's most successful businesses, becoming one of Philadelphia's wealthiest citizens—Black or White. Then he used every dollar of that wealth to hold America to its founding promise.

For Forten, education and freedom were inseparable. In 1818, Philadelphia launched a public school system that excluded Black children, even as their parents paid taxes. Forten responded immediately, co-founding the Augustine Education Society to fight for access. When the city's school for Black children opened in 1822 and later faced closure due to neglect and underfunding, Forten organized the community, rallied the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and personally lobbied to keep it open. The school survived. It was later renamed the James Forten Elementary School.

He didn't stop there. When public institutions failed, he built private ones. In 1819, he and his wife Charlotte partnered with fellow Black families to open their own school. His daughter Margaretta became a teacher. His son William attended the Oneida Institute in New York, receiving the classical education and skilled training Forten believed every Black American deserved. Three of his daughters co-founded the first biracial women's abolitionist organization in the country. He didn't just fight for the next generation; he raised them.

Beyond education, Forten was a tireless advocate who consistently invoked the Declaration of Independence as a weapon for justice. He organized thousands to oppose legislation that would have restricted free Black Americans' rights. He helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. He funded William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper *The Liberator*. When the cause needed money, strategy, or a voice, Forten showed up.

His story is of relentless, creative optimism. He heard America's promise as a child and spent his entire life building the institutions that could make it true. As America turns 250, James Forten stands as a reminder that the ideals of 1776 were never self-fulfilling. They required people willing to demand them, fund them, and teach them to the next generation. That is exactly what he did.

And that is worth celebrating.

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3. The Education of Alexander Hamilton

by Denise Lever

Alexander Hamilton is often remembered for his extraordinary contributions to the founding of the United States, but less attention is paid to the conditions that shaped him. His education was characterized by self-improvement, mentorship, responsibility, and real-world experience rather than a standardized path. He developed habits of curiosity and discipline that shaped his growth. The qualities that made Hamilton an influential leader were not formed through orthodoxy, but through agency, opportunity, and a commitment to life-long learning.

Hamilton was born in 1755 or 1757 in Charlestown on the island of Nevis, in the Caribbean. Within a few years of his birth, Alexander's father went bankrupt and abandoned his young family. Suffering instability and poverty, both Alexander and his mother contracted yellow fever, and his mother died.

Fortunately, Alexander possessed ambition. He had begun clerking in the mercantile of Nicholas Cruger when he was around 8 years old. Hamilton proved himself capable, and by age 14, when Cruger was away, Alexander was carrying out many important tasks. He was trusted to buy and sell merchandise, inspect shipping cargo for quality, and finalize contracts. This time of apprenticeship was "the most useful part of his education," according to Hamilton's son John. This is where he learned the fundamentals of accounting, trade, and logistics, and the value of stable currency.

Although his earliest education consisted of private tutoring, and was supplemented by a small collection of his mother's books, Hamilton's formative education was firmly anchored in survival, responsibility, and meaningful contribution.

While supporting himself, he found escape through writing. Young Alexander was a writer of poetry, which caught the attention of the Reverend Hugh Knox, who was a tutor and mentor of Hamilton. Hamilton's later contribution of 51 of the 85 *Federalist Papers* speaks to his continued commitment to prolific expression.

On August 30, 1772, a hurricane hit the island of St. Croix. Hamilton wrote a dispatch to his estranged father to relay the devastation the island experienced. The letter, which contained political commentary on the local government's response to the disaster, was published in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*. The community was impressed and collected donations to fund Hamilton's education. Through this scholarship, coupled with generous support from a cousin, the young writer was sent to the North American Colonies.

Alexander arrived in New York City a few weeks later with a letter of introduction from the Reverend Knox. He studied at Francis Barber's grammar school, where he made rapid progress, conquering a decade of lessons in Latin, Greek, and mathematics in one year.

By age 16, Alexander was ready for college. He applied to Princeton, where the admission test was an oral examination. It was a complete success. Alexander requested to expedite his college experience, hoping to complete it in less than four years, ideally two. The president of Princeton denied his request. Ironically, they had earlier accepted an accelerated pacing request from another student, Aaron Burr.

Hamilton was committed to the idea that he could master the material required for a college education more quickly than the traditional pacing. He applied to Kings College, now Columbia, and they accepted him and his self-paced proposal.

Hamilton advanced rapidly because his education was tied to demonstrated ability and intense self-directed study rather than rigid chronology. This self-paced advancement is fundamental to Hamilton's accomplishments.

Later, Hamilton would say that what many might attribute to genius was actually hard work:

Men give me credit for some genius. All the genius I have lies in this, when I have a subject in hand I study it profoundly. Day and night it is before me. I explore it in all its bearings.

My mind becomes pervaded with it. Then the effort that I have made is what people are pleased to call the fruit of genius. It is the fruit of labor and thought.

Another habit of Hamilton's: he was a voracious reader. A few years later, when he was on campaign with Washington's army, he carried a copy of Malachy Postlethwayt's *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* in his pack. His work ethic, discipline, and commitment to self-improvement proved unwavering.

In 1777, Hamilton became an "aide-de-camp" to General George Washington. This was another powerful mentorship that would last over two decades until Washington's death in 1799.

Alexander Hamilton's education is a study of self-improvement, empowerment, and a commitment to life-long learning. His relationship with mentorship, agency, and responsibility accelerated his independence and his contributions to the nation's founding. His story reminds us that education is most powerful when it prepares people to contribute meaningfully to the world around them.

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4. The Makings of Greatness: The Education of George Washington

by Nasiyah Isra-UI

I have always had an obsession with the 1700s. Growing up, I spent a lot of time studying that era, including the Founding Fathers and their academic journeys. It always fascinated me how many of them grew up kind of like me: in small learning groups, with tutor instruction, and with lots of self-directed study fueled by a love of books. George Washington was one of those individuals who specifically piqued my interest. Like me, he was born and raised in Virginia, and primarily taught himself through self-directed learning and apprenticeships. His story always reminded me a lot of my own.

Little is known about his early childhood. By the time Washington was a teen, his father had passed away. Washington quickly stepped up to support his family in this tragedy, helping maintain the family lands alongside his older brother Lawrence. This served as a pivotal moment for his formative education, providing him with a foundation in land management, business finance, and thoughtful leadership.

When he wasn't receiving home tutoring or working the land, Washington primarily attended small learning centers that would today most closely resemble a microschool or homeschool co-op. Though his older brothers attended private preparatory schools in England, Washington never went to preparatory school or college due to limited family finances after his father's untimely death. Like most boys at this age, in his older adolescence, Washington started to study in-depth mathematics and land surveying, preparing for a trade.

Washington completed a number of training and educational programs in this area of focus, focusing deeply on penmanship as well as the art of surveying land, gaining practical experience in the field under mentors. At 13, he copied down all 110 "Rules of Civility

& Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation,” a self-taught manual for social learning and character building.

After gaining enough experience to be invited to surveying parties organized by his neighbors, including prominent Southern figures like George Fairfax, he eventually became a full-time land surveyor after finishing his studies. Because of his early experience with hands-on learning of the trade, Washington’s surveying skills became so advanced that he eventually became the official land surveyor for the newly formed Culpeper County, Virginia.

With his name being in the minds of generals and politicians across Virginia due to his work, Washington was selected to accompany a military unit organized by Governor Dinwiddie in 1753 to scope out the growing French presence in what is now Pennsylvania, and convince the French to leave the area. This 900-mile journey tested Washington’s ability to navigate land and utilize his leadership skills, and solidified his reputation as a military leader. His written account of the journey earned him international acclaim in his early twenties. When the French and Indian War began in 1754, after numerous small skirmishes and even a military resignation, Washington was the one eventually tapped to lead Virginia’s forces, further solidifying his reputation as a war hero.

By the time Washington was selected to lead the Continental Army during the American Revolution, he was already an experienced soldier and land surveyor whose self-directed learning and one-on-one mentorship had made him one of the top respected leaders in the country. His leadership skills and passion for the cause made him one of the most respected and iconic figures of his era. His decisiveness and connection to land and loyalty allowed the US to win the Revolutionary War. It was that same self-made leadership that allowed him to preside over the Constitutional Convention, which allowed the US to go from fledgling independent former Colonies to a collective united front with a functioning government.

In 1789, Washington was selected to serve as the first President of the United States. George Washington’s education journey stands

as a testament to the power of self-directed education and hands-on experience in a trade of choice for young adults.

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5. To the Lost Poet: The Story of Phillis Wheatley

by Nasiyah Isra-Ul

As a child, I frequently learned of the core figures of the American Revolution and the inspiring tales of bravery, wisdom, and endurance. I loved learning of the Founding Fathers and their wives, the men and women who sacrificed it all to do something no one had ever done before. Yet, in all of these stories, I never saw someone who looked like me. As a young African-American child learning about this era, I was anxious to find representation in our country's founding, fellow African-Americans whose efforts also contributed to the formation of the United States during such a world-changing moment in history. As a teen, after years of reading and studying the Revolutionary Era, I stumbled upon the story of Phillis Wheatley. Not only was Wheatley homeschooled for the duration of her primary education; she continued to pursue a self-directed learning path with hands-on experience into adulthood.

Like some of my family and many of my ancestors, Wheatley was born in West Africa, likely around 1753. She was captured by slave traders, and after surviving a grueling journey across the Atlantic by force, she arrived in Boston around 1761. She was purchased by the Wheatley family, and named after the ship that brought her to America. After a bit of time working as a domestic servant, the Wheatleys realized that young Phillis had an amazingly gifted mind. They decided to feed that mind, relieving her of many of her domestic tasks and providing her with an education from home. She was given access to learning related to language, grammar, history, and religion. The more she learned, the more she craved to learn. The Wheatleys fed her thirst for knowledge willingly, at a time when very few enslaved African-Americans were permitted to read and write.

Wheatley continued to excel at languages, literature, and philosophy, mastering both Latin and Greek, and by 12, she had started publishing poetry. With the help of the Wheatleys, she started to plan for the publication of her first poetry collection shortly after. However, even at the behest of the Wheatley family,

many American publishers would not accept her because of her race and social status. Wheatley then set her sights on London's publishing sector, appealing to the publishing houses set on highlighting new voices from the Colonies.

In 1773, her hard work paid off, and Wheatley published her full collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, with the backing of funders and publishers in London. It was there that her work was most adored and she was deeply respected for her honesty and literary passion. She became the first African-American and only the third woman ever to have her work published at this scale. Wheatley returned to the US right around the time the Revolution was stirring hearts and minds about freedom, and she seized this moment to highlight the perspectives of African-Americans and emphasize the stake they had in the rebellion.

When America went into full-scale war with Britain, Wheatley used her prolific skills with the pen to craft poems about the Revolution, independence, and why she supported America's quest for freedom. Her work was recognized by key Revolutionary figures, who at first could not fathom such powerful words coming from the mind of an enslaved woman. She astounded many Colonial leaders of her era, including John Hancock, who visited the Wheatley residence just to watch her write and to confirm that the authorship was truly hers. She was even invited to meet George Washington after publishing a poem praising his efforts in the war.

Due in part to her success, Wheatley was freed in 1774, and went on to publish more works and continue to write about freedom, her views on slavery, and religion. Unfortunately, times had changed during the war, and without the backing of her previous supporters in London, Wheatley was unable to drum up enough support to continue publishing her works in the Colonies as she did before. By the end of the war, she was still a woman before her time, and America was still not completely ready for her voice. With all of her prior success, she died in 1784 with little to her name and her last poems lost to history.

Yet, even with Wheatley's end seeming so inconclusive compared to her potential and early success, her legacy remains. Her words still ring in the hearts and minds of Americans, her views inspired other African-Americans to speak up about injustice and fight for the cause of Liberty, and her poetry expanded American and British minds alike about what equality could truly look like.

Wheatley didn't have to be a soldier or diplomat to help build this country; all Wheatley had to do was do what she loved and speak up. Her early education gave her the confidence and foundational knowledge needed to continue learning and expanding, and allowed her to explore from an early age her love of literature and poetry. Unconventional learning gave Wheatley the freedom to learn that she otherwise would not have had. She started out just by doing what she loved, and the Wheatleys fostered that passion, against the expectations of society.

In her bravery, Wheatley rose above her assigned station in society and decided to use her voice for good at a time when very few African-Americans were visible leaders in the Colonies. Her poems left a lasting impression on American history and provided a foundation for elevating the plight of African-American Revolutionaries during the war, including those serving in the Continental Army. Her presence and passion helped American Colonists, including many Founding Fathers, understand the injustice of enslavement in a tangible way.

Wheatley will forever stand as an inspiring figure in America's founding, because her ideas about liberty not only helped make it possible for future generations of African-American authors and poets, but inspired the entirety of America to see that freedom is truly something worth fighting for.

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6. A “Franklin” of All Trades: How Self-Directed Education Shaped the Builder of a Nation

by Nasiyah Isra-UI

Benjamin Franklin has always stood out to me because of his unique, self-directed learning pathway. Even with the limitations of growing up in a lower-income household, Franklin rose above the barriers in education to study on his own using what he had. The world became his classroom, and what initially seemed like an unfortunate set of circumstances turned into Franklin’s greatest tool. Franklin excelled beyond what he could have learned in grammar school, mastering subjects that were far more advanced than what his age typically learned. He craved knowledge, language, and innovation, and his educational pathway allowed him to learn a trade and excel academically simultaneously.

In 1706, Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts, the 15th of 17 children. His father Josiah was a modest candle and soap maker in Boston. The family made a modest income, and with little money to fund 17 children’s educations, Benjamin only attended private school up until the age of 10. After that, Benjamin spent a portion of his childhood shadowing his father in the soap and candle business. He hated it with a passion, and knew that he wanted to do something different with his life.

In his spare time, Franklin would gather books and study the subjects that fascinated him. He would systematically study a new subject after mastery of another one, using textbooks, primers, and historical essays as reference points for his grammar and arithmetic. He even leveraged a British publication called *The Spectator* to learn the art of writing. His brilliant mind gravitated toward challenging subjects, and Franklin mastered them with ease, teaching himself to write proficiently on his own. Learning fascinated Franklin, and over time, he realized that he had a deep passion for languages, writing, and storytelling that went beyond a grammar school education.

At 12, Franklin decided to get an apprenticeship at his older brother's print shop while continuing to study on his own. With no formal training in communications, he became a gifted young writer, secretly publishing pieces for his own brother's newspaper under the pseudonym "Silence Dogood" as a teen. It was a striking success. Eventually, Franklin's secret writing was discovered, and at 17, he left for Philadelphia for a bit, and then for London to try and pave a pathway of his own in the newspaper business.

After a short stint in London working as a typesetter, he returned to America to start the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Now running a successful business in the Colonies, Franklin turned to more artistic and philanthropic pursuits, even becoming a polyglot with knowledge of Latin, German, Italian, French, and Spanish by the time he was in his thirties. The love of learning Franklin had as a boy hadn't even come close to fading. His witty thoughts and analytical mind helped him discover solutions in society that others ignored.

He eventually went on to publish *Poor Richard's Almanack* (the most reliable almanac in the Colonies), founded Philadelphia's first public library, created and served in America's first volunteer firefighting company, and set the foundation for some of America's first universities, hospitals, and scientific societies. In the 1740s, Franklin ran experiments on electricity and meteorology, created new kinds of reading glasses called bifocals, and built a number of inventions we still use today (e.g., the odometer, medical catheter). And this is still only a portion of his work. Franklin never stopped learning, and he never stopped building.

Franklin retired at 42 years old, after saving a comfortable fortune from his written works (he made almost no money from his inventions, insisting that they were for the public good), and moved into politics. Though he never became a US President, his efforts as a politician, diplomat, and advocate for freedom and equality left a lasting legacy in the US. His ability to speak multiple languages came in handy during the American Revolution, where Franklin was stationed in France to gain an alliance for the American Colonies. His writing abilities helped him publish accurate news for the

Colonies during the war, and eventually craft an initial draft of the Articles of Confederation. He advised the men behind the “Great Compromise,” a diplomatic agreement between the States that made the ratification of the US Constitution possible. His efforts helped America break free from Britain, and paved the way for the United States of America to be born. He was often a rational voice of reason in the middle of Colony disputes, and served in American politics for years during and after the war.

When he returned to America one last time in 1785, he set his sights on the abolition of slavery in the Colonies, serving as president of one of America’s first abolitionist societies. He died in 1790, with the entire new nation and a good many French politicians mourning his death.

Benjamin Franklin stands as a testament to the benefits of self-directed learning, which allowed him to learn at his pace, achieve what he wanted, and master the skills that interested him. His legacy as both a homeschool graduate and as a Founding Father shows what unconventionally-educated students are capable of when they are given the freedom to learn their way.

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7. How the Journey of Thomas Jefferson Has Shaped Modern-Day Education

by Angel Sobrino

Thomas Jefferson, drafter of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States, emerges as a founder who believed that education was the engine of a free republic. He argued that a nation could not remain self-governing unless its citizens were literate, informed, and capable of independent judgment. Scholars note that Jefferson saw education as a safeguard against tyranny and a prerequisite for civic participation.

Jefferson's philosophy on education was shaped by his Virginian upbringing, having had a mixture of private, classical instruction and mastered Latin, Greek, and French as an overly-ambitious teen. He excelled in languages, philosophy, and music, even becoming recognized in his community as an accomplished violinist. Jefferson often attributed his success to his strict study routine, as even with the violin, he proudly bragged of his daily three-hour practice sessions. By modern terms, some historians believe that Jefferson was neurodivergent, which would further highlight how his style of academic learning helped him excel in his own right and at his own pace. Regardless, self-directed learning provided Jefferson with a foundation for academic prowess that stuck with him through adulthood.

In his adult life, he continued that journey, passionately learning, writing, and pursuing knowledge at every chance he got, even writing a constellation of letters to his grandchildren, proposals, and experiments, revealing his belief that knowledge was both a personal right and a public necessity, rooted in ideas about liberty and human improvability. He continued to learn and study far into his adulthood, even compiling his own version of the Bible, known famously as the *Jefferson Bible*, for his own pleasure.

His academic passions helped him study and practice architecture, allowing him to design Monticello and numerous other structures in the region, including Virginia's capitol. He was also an avid

botany aficionado, and spent an immense amount of time outside documenting plants and animals. He famously stated, “I cannot live without books.” He had amassed such a collection of books in his lifetime, that by the time the Library of Congress was attacked during the War of 1812, Jefferson was able to rebuild the library’s collection from scratch by selling from his own.

Jefferson’s vision resonates with founders building education spaces today, specifically those learning ecosystems outside traditional systems. As founder of a home education program, The Hive Interactives, I stand among many ed-entrepreneurs in America who believe that learning is more about civic preparation than it is content delivery.

Inspired by his own learning, Jefferson recommended reading lists for his grandchildren that were steeped in classical education. Greek and Roman histories, moral philosophy, geography, and nature studies were among the topics. One of my favorites: a letter written from Thomas Jefferson to Cornelia Jefferson Randolph dated December 26, 1808, congratulating his 8-year-old granddaughter on “acquiring the invaluable art of writing.” Jefferson points her to epic poetry introducing her to Homer’s *Iliad* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, much like a “summer reading list” today.

And in a symbolic twist, Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

As America celebrates 250 years since that signing, Jefferson’s legacy calls for both admiration for his bold vision of an informed republic alongside an honest reckoning with the exclusions embedded within it. His life reminds us that the story of American education is not just about founding ideals, but about the ongoing effort to live up to those ideals.

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8. Mercy Otis Warren

by Jennie Jones

Some have called Mercy Otis Warren “Our Forgotten Founding Mother.” Although she wrote prolifically to promote the cause of the Revolutionists, was a close friend of more commonly remembered founders like John and Abigail Adams and Martha Washington, and was the first US woman to publish a history, her name isn’t always included among the stories of our country’s founding.

Born on September 14, 1728, Mercy, like all of us, inherited a world of cultural norms. These included daily life subsisting of hard work in either agrarian or maritime labor, strict adherence to Puritan moral codes, and limited formal educational opportunities beyond basic reading and writing. Like most Colonies of the time, Massachusetts prioritized the teaching of reading to all (free) children in order that they might read the Bible to become moral, contributing members of society. However, education beyond reading was often segregated by gender and social class.

Having been born into a wealthy family, Mercy had access to more educational opportunities, but it appears that the encouragement of the men in her life really made the greatest difference in her education, as well as her future contributions to the American Revolution. Mercy was given permission by her father to sit in on her older brother’s tutoring sessions, being introduced to Latin, history, philosophy, and politics—subjects generally considered unfit for the feminine mind. She also studied great literary works from her uncle’s large library including Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Hume, Homer, and Locke. Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* was a favorite.

To our modern lens, it might appear that Mercy Otis Warren was “unschooled”—given the time, space, and resources to follow her interests. Her passions led her to ask foundational questions, study a variety of ideas and worldviews, and form her own strong opinions about the principles of freedom.

Another principle of unschooling is that life provides the curriculum, and it appears that Mercy's childhood home provided great kindling for the fire that would burn in her later writings. Mercy's father's work as an attorney and political figure would have introduced her early on to Colonial politics. Based on the fact that he encouraged her interests in this arena, I envision how he might have allowed young Mercy to overhear his conversations. Much of her early years would have likely also been spent exploring sand dunes, piney knolls, and the Great Marsh which bordered their property, as well as performing daily domestic chores alongside her mother and 12 siblings. My own enthusiasm for interest-led learning would lead me to believe that she had an idyllic unschooled childhood.

However, in the context of the societal norms in which she lived, the reality is that she was unconventionally educated because she really had no other options. She was a bright mind who was fortunate to be surrounded by exceptional men who resisted the common view that women should be excluded from certain topics of discussion and learning. She was taught to read and then given access to an extensive library, which seems to have developed her ability to communicate her thoughts in writing. Her brother, whose tutoring sessions she had shadowed, continued to suggest books to her while he was away at Harvard. Later in life, her roles as wife to a Revolutionist and mother to five boys further developed her passion for writing and civic engagement. She was encouraged and aided by both her husband, James Warren, and her friend, John Adams, to write and publish her work, starting with a pseudonym and finally publishing under her own name. John Adams described her as having a "masterly pen" and being entrusted by God with "Powers, for the good of the world."

During the founding years of our country after the Revolutionary War, Mercy was critical of some of the Constitutional proceedings. She felt deeply the truth that all people are created equal and worried that the plans for the Constitution didn't yet do enough to promote that reality. While she, like many other female Patriots, practiced some restraint in her efforts to promote more equal opportunities for women, she never stopped voicing her opinion that

women's supposed "inferior intellect" was a result of limited access rather than nature. Her own life was a testament to this.

I set out to study her life, thinking that I would find evidence that passions, interest, and self-direction are valid forms of education. While this indeed led Mercy to what I consider the true definition of education—the ability to think, ask questions, research, and develop skills—I also discovered that Mercy still envied the opportunities for formal education given to the men in her life. Reading her words advocating that women be given equal opportunities for formal education made me realize how fortunate I am to be a woman standing on her shoulders. We are continuing to build the dream Mercy had, where all children are given access to the opportunities, spaces, and resources that best help them learn and develop their unique gifts.

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9. Benjamin Banneker

by Kym Kent

Every Sunday afternoon for the last three years, I've driven by an unassuming patch of land in Ellicott City that is home to the Benjamin Banneker Historical Park and Museum. I actually hadn't noticed it for at least the first year, and then occasionally I would silently promise to stop in and learn more about this landmark's namesake. It wasn't until presented with the opportunity to write this chapter that I finally fulfilled that promise to myself. I'm so glad that I did.

As our nation celebrates its 250th anniversary, the ideals of freedom, innovation, and self-determination are front and center; ideals that perfectly intersect with any conversation surrounding unconventional learning, and ideals that embody Benjamin Banneker. During a time when most Blacks in America were enslaved and prohibited from participating in any form of education, Benjamin Banneker's birth, educational story, and tremendous accomplishments stand as a testimony of what's possible when freedom, opportunity, and the unquenchable thirst for knowledge collide.

Banneker was born November 9, 1731, in Baltimore County, Maryland. The Banneker family, operating in an industry defined by slave labor, stood apart as both free men and landowners. Benjamin's father was Robert, a freed slave, married to Mary Banneky, the daughter of Mary Welsh, a White English indentured servant, and her husband, Bannka, a Black slave whom Mary freed. Together, Robert and Mary raised Benjamin along with his three sisters on the Welsh family's tobacco farm. In 1737, Robert and Mary purchased an additional 100 acres of land, listing Benjamin on the deed when he was merely six years old.

Utilizing a Bible, the only book the family owned at the time, Mary Welsh, the family matriarch, taught Benjamin and his sisters how to read and write. Benjamin's only "formal" education consisted of a few winter terms at a local Quaker one-room schoolhouse; however, that was all that he needed. Known as a voracious reader,

young Benjamin Banneker borrowed books from neighbors and family friends and, through this, was self-taught in literature, history, and religion and grew exceptionally talented in math, creating and solving mathematical puzzles.

Growing into young adulthood, with an added interest in studying machines, Banneker used a pocketknife to construct a wooden clock, equipped with a brass bell that chimed on the hour. What is most remarkable about this device, aside from the fact that it represented the first of its kind constructed in the United States, is that Banneker relied on memory to create it, having years earlier examined a wealthy neighbor's pocketwatch. It's said that he sketched the watch's inner workings and used mathematical ratios to bring his timepiece to scale. Word spread about this young man's creation, and visitors would come from miles around to see this remarkable clock, which kept perfect time for over 50 years, until Banneker's death in 1806.

While Banneker's achievements garnered local and regional acclaim, it was his work on surveying the land that would become the nation's capital, and his subsequent almanacs, that would cement his standing as one of the most intellectually gifted, self-learned men in this country's history. The road to this achievement began in his retirement, when, in his late fifties, his penchant for self-study turned toward astronomy.

Borrowing books, a telescope, and drafting instruments from his long-time friend and neighbor, George Ellicott, a skilled surveyor and astronomer, Banneker taught himself astronomy. Through his studies and mathematical applications, Banneker recorded star movements and created tables of locations of celestial bodies, known as ephemerides, and successfully predicted the solar eclipse of April 14, 1789, astonishing more prominent scientists of his day who had not anticipated this event.

It is with this backdrop that Banneker serendipitously found himself in the center of surveying the nation's capital. In January 1791, Major Andrew Ellicott, cousin to George Ellicott, was appointed by President George Washington to serve as a surveyor

under the direction of the French architect Pierre-Charles L'Enfant. The land to be surveyed was a 10-square-mile parcel along the Potomac River that would serve as the new nation's capital.

Recognizing the magnitude of the task, Major Ellicott traveled to his cousin George's home, hoping to convince him to join the survey team. However, burdened by work obligations, George declined and readily recommended Banneker, who was subsequently nominated by Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and appointed by President Washington to the survey commission.

From January to late April of 1791, Banneker served as Ellicott's scientific assistant, laboring long hours through the night, lying on his back observing stars, recording their movement over the zenith, which is the point directly above the observer. Banneker used an instrument known as a zenith sector to establish latitudes, and his work utilizing complex astronomical instruments earned him recognition in the local newspaper, the *Georgetown Weekly Ledger*.

During his time on the survey team, Banneker borrowed Andrew Ellicott's astronomical textbooks and completed his work on the ephemerides. Together with his tide calculations and weather predictions, in December 1791, Banneker published his first almanac titled *Benjamin Banneker's Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia Almanack and Ephemeris for the Year of Our Lord 1792*. Endorsed by Senator James McHenry, the almanac was an immediate success, selling out and requiring a second edition. The inclusion of tide tables made Banneker's almanac especially popular among river pilots, fishermen, and others whose lives and livelihoods depended on the waterways.

Just before the release of Banneker's first almanac, he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, imploring the Secretary of State to work toward ending slavery in the United States. Included with the letter was Banneker's handwritten, completed ephemeris. Impressed with Banneker's work, Jefferson immediately responded and forwarded the almanac to the French Academy of Sciences. Both Banneker's letter and Jefferson's response were included in Banneker's second almanac. Promoted by abolitionist groups, Banneker's almanacs

were published and sold throughout the United States, surrounding territories, and in England until 1797.

Banneker's life-long pursuit of learning continued until his death on October 9, 1806. Immediately after Banneker's death, his nephew returned the collection of borrowed books, instruments, and a worktable to George Ellicott, along with Banneker's astronomical journal. Tragically, all of Banneker's other possessions were destroyed as his house caught fire at the very moment his body was being lowered into his grave.

Honored with museums and educational facilities that bear his name, and commemorated on a postage stamp, Benjamin Banneker's life and achievements demonstrate that greatness, when rooted in curiosity and nurtured by even the most unconventional paths of learning, is truly unstoppable. With almost no formal education, driven solely by a thirst for knowledge, he went on to survey the capital of a new nation, predict celestial events to the surprise of other intellectuals of his day, publish almanacs that brought him worldwide recognition, and correspond with the Secretary of State as an intellectual equal.

Growing up in New York, I don't recall ever learning about Benjamin Banneker. What I missed back then has been gratefully gained through this opportunity to write about his life and legacy. As our nation joyfully marks its 250th anniversary, one of the greatest gifts we can give the next generation is the story of Benjamin Banneker. His journey is a reminder that America has always been at its best when the freedom to learn, to dream, and to contribute is extended to everyone.

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10. The Education of Abigail Adams and Her Children

by Kerry McDonald

I grew up in Weymouth, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston that claims Abigail Adams, wife of the second US President and mother of the sixth, as one of its most famous historical residents. The daughter of a long-serving minister, Abigail Smith was born in the town in November 1744 and became one of the most influential women of America's founding era. A key concern for her was education.

Biographer Woody Holton states that Abigail's "greatest regret in life was her lack of education" (Holton). She believed that girls should have the same access to education as boys, and would later write about issues concerning women and girls, urging in a famous March 1776 letter to her husband John Adams to "remember the ladies." More than two centuries later, I portrayed Abigail for Weymouth historical events as a student in the town's public high school, and was fascinated by her life and legacy. Indeed, one of my daughters is named Abby.

I eventually chose to educate Abby and her three siblings outside of a conventional classroom. That was a choice made possible by pioneers like Abigail whose early frustrations about unequal access to educational opportunities laid the groundwork for greater liberty—including the liberty to opt out of conventional schooling.

While schooling options were limited for Abigail, she nonetheless demonstrated that an individual can become highly educated and accomplished without formal schooling. According to Holton: "Abigail's inability to obtain much in the way of formal instruction did not leave her uneducated. Fondly remembered amateur teachers showed her how to write well and think deeply." Early on, these amateur teachers included her parents and, especially, her grandmother, followed later by the young friends and acquaintances who would visit Abigail's home during her childhood and adolescence.

This peer-led approach to education was particularly common at the time. “Networks of friends took responsibility for schooling each other,” writes Holton. “Even the well-to-do young men who benefited from the formal educational opportunities that were denied to Abigail often learned as much from their peers as from their teachers.” As a teenager, one of Abigail’s most influential peer-teachers was Richard Cranch, a suitor of her older sister Mary, whom he would later marry. Abigail credited Cranch with instilling in her a love of books and poetry, as well as letters, which would later play such an important role in cataloguing the country’s earliest days.

Years later, as John was away serving in the First Continental Congress, Abigail wrote in one of her many letters to her husband about her decision to keep her son (and future President), John Quincy, out of the local school and instead have him tutored by a cousin, John Thatcher, Jr., who worked as a law clerk for John Adams upon graduating from Harvard University.

In a letter to her husband dated September 16, 1774, Abigail wrote:

It is at last determined that Mr. Rice keep the School here. Indeed he has kept ever since he has been here, but not with any expectation that He should be continued, but the people finding no small difference between him and his predecessor chose he should be continued. I have not sent Johnny. He goes very steadily to Mr. Thaxter who I believe takes very good care of him, and as they seem to have a likeing [sic] to each other believe it will be best to continue him with him. However when you return we can then consult what will be best. I am certain that if he does not get so much good, he gets less harm, and I have always thought it of very great importance that children should in the early part of life be unaccustomed to such examples as would tend to corrupt the purity of their words and actions that they may chill with horror at the sound of an oath, and blush with indignation at an obscene expression. These first principal[s] which grow with their growth and strengthen with their strength neither time nor custom can totally eradicate.

The one-on-one tutoring arrangement for John Quincy was going well, and Abigail wanted her son to avoid “examples as would tend to corrupt the purity of their words and actions,” that she thought he may find in the local school. Indeed, this is a similar motivation for modern homeschooling parents who, according to survey data collected by the US Department of Education, indicate that a top reason they choose homeschooling is “concern about the environment of other schools” (NCES).

Whether in the 18th century or the 21st, opting out of local schooling for homeschooling and related educational approaches is a decision parents make by looking at the needs of their children, along with their own values about education and parenting. Of course, this ability to opt out presupposes that there is an available education choice that one is forgoing, something that was not widely the case for girls and women, as well as for racial and ethnic minorities, during the Revolutionary period. It is notable, however, that when Abigail had the choice to opt out of a local schooling option for her son, she did so, and became a model of a mother who pushed for equal access to educational opportunities while also embracing schooling alternatives.

Today, as the educational choices available to families become more abundant and accessible than ever, it is worth reflecting on the lives and choices of early education advocates like Abigail, and honoring their legacy in setting and stewarding the principles of liberty that continue to define this great country.

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Kym has graduated five of her six homeschooled children into college with scholarships, and serves as a teacher, mentor, speaker, and coach in the homeschool community.

Denise Lever is the founder of Baker Creek Academy and TrailblazED Microschool Leadership Forge. A former wildland firefighter and longtime homeschool mom, she now leads a growing network of self-directed microschools and mentors education founders nationwide. Denise is passionate about empowering learners, especially those who face challenges, and equipping others to build bold, personalized learning environments.



Jennie Jones is an Entrepreneur-In-Residence at FEE. She is a former professional ballerina, turned homeschooling mom of four, turned education entrepreneur. After taking a break from dance education, she started homeschooling her own children. Over the last seven years of homeschooling, Jennie started leaning more and



more into unschooling and interested, child-driven learning. An educator at heart, she always dreamed of opening a microschool. In September 2024, that dream became a reality when she launched The Treehouse Agile Learning Community in St. George, Utah. A home-based microschool that uses agile learning tools to foster intentional community, natural learning, and independence, The Treehouse currently serves homeschooled students ages 5–12.

Kelsy Achtenberg is an educator and the director at The Innovation School in Bismarck, North Dakota. With 15 years of teaching experience and a Master's degree in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, she specializes in hands-on, project-based learning that helps students connect classroom learning to the real world. Her work in innovative education has been recognized through several local and national honors, including the AIAA Trailblazing STEM award recipient, Bismarck-Mandan Chamber of Commerce Empowering Women in Business, and Lead4Change Fellow. Kelsy is also a proud mom to Reagan (7) and Nash (4) and lives in Bismarck with her husband Carter and their dog Kaya where she enjoys spending time with her family, baking, and traveling.



Angel Sobrino is founder and Executive Director of Miles4theMinds and Director of Learning at The Hive Interactives, where he designs



and scales youth-powered, adventure-based science and home education programs that center equity, curiosity, and hands-on learning. He holds an MS in Management and Leadership from Western Governors University and a BA in Psychobiology and Global Health from Florida International University, and he combines strategic partnership development, grant writing, and program design to expand access to experiential STEM and learner-led pathways.

Nicole Stewart is an inclusive, transformation-centered leader with over 20 years of experience working at the intersection of community engagement, education reform, and family empowerment. After nearly 20 years in education, Nicole retired to start her education consulting company and later opened her own school. Recognizing the need for transformative change in education, she launched the National Association of Black Microschool Leaders (NABML) to empower educators, homeschool parents, and community leaders to establish and sustain microschools that meet the unique needs of their communities.



Nasiyah Isra-UI is a Liberated Education Associate at FEE. She is a passionate educator, author, public speaker, and policy professional working at the intersection of education reform and disability justice. Homeschooled K-12, Nasiyah earned her undergraduate degree from Liberty University. As a teen, she founded Homeschool EmpowerED Inc., a nonprofit

empowering homeschooling families with digital resources and community learning opportunities. Nasiyah has served as a fellow and advisor for various organizations and is an avid coach and community leader. Passionate about digital storytelling, Nasiyah creates content on education reform, entrepreneurship, and her lived experience as a multiply-disabled policy professional. Nasiyah also

aspires to become an ordained rabbi and continue to grow as a Jewish leader, remaining true to her commitment to building inclusive and empowering learning spaces in her community and beyond. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing poetry, songwriting, multicultural cooking, travel, and spending time with her family and her leopard gecko.