

Student Handout 4-Biographical Sketch of Joseph Priestley

Joseph Priestley was born near Leeds, England in 1733. He was raised in a Calvinist family, and later became a minister and mastered Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, German and Italian. His liberal, Unitarian beliefs created clashes with many congregations and church leaders. He traveled to Pennsylvania as a provincial agent in the 1760s where he met one of the brilliant minds in America, Benjamin Franklin. It is with Franklin that his interest in science was encouraged. Upon his return to England, he writes about his discoveries of the conductivity of graphite and the invention of "soda water" (carbon dioxide in water) which earned him election to the French Academy of Sciences. He later identified oxygen and nitrous oxide and was also the first to discover photosynthesis.

Being an accomplished scientist did not keep him from controversy. His liberal religious and political beliefs were often considered radical. Priestley wrote *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, a book that took a critical look at the Church of England. He also supported the French Revolution and the abolishment of the British monarchy. Priestley's radicalism caused an angry mob to burn his home and church in Birmingham in 1791. With few options available he left for London and later in 1794, immigrated with his family to Pennsylvania to escape persecution.

He was welcomed in Philadelphia, but his political ideas proved controversial here as well. He sided with the Jeffersonian Republicans, which provided the Federalists with political ammunition because they could now strongly link Jeffersonians with the French Revolution. Priestley wrote for "The Aurora" (Franklin's Philadelphia newspaper), and supported the Republican cause. In Northumberland, Pennsylvania, where he moved his family to settle, his political views were accepted, but his religious views were not. His political positions were radical (or a threat) enough for Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to want to deport him, but Priestley was saved when Thomas Jefferson won the Presidency. Priestley lived the rest of his years in his Northumberland home, conducting experiments, and writing on spiritual and political matters. He died quietly on February 6, 1804. Joseph Priestley is still considered by many to be one of the greatest scientific minds of the enlightenment.