

# Atlantic Mariner Benjamin Franklin: Advocate for the Protection of the Commons

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**Abstract**—*The enclosure of the Atlantic Commons has included the most basic human needs of survival from land and water to seeds and genomes—all in the name of capital profit. In this essay, I explore how our contemporary leaders have lost the sagacity of our US Constitutional Founders who knew that civic duty and public virtue were necessary requisites to liberty and democracy. I argue that Founding Father Benjamin Franklin proposed a moral and ethical obligation to the protection of the commons, its resources, its knowledge, its culture, and its ideas. In all of Franklin’s ventures, we see models of self-sustainable reciprocity of capital and virtue, which enables all people to share in the wealth of its resources.*

**Keywords**—*Benjamin Franklin, Atlantic Commons, Liberty, Private Property, Max Weber, Capitalism, Democracy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin envisioned himself as a man of the commonwealth dedicated to Republican virtue acquired through acts of beneficial civic good. Described by scholars as a “protocapitalist,” he provided a model for the construction of the entrepreneurial self-made man; yet, his life revealed his dedication to the free flow of global ideas that both enhances individual improvement and contributes to the public good. In this essay, I refute Max Weber’s 1905 “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” in which he associates Benjamin Franklin with the “spirit of capitalism.” The Weber Thesis ties the Puritan ethic and the rational pursuit of profit to the development of capitalism and entrepreneurial engagement in large-scale commercial trading practices with the principle aim of amassing capital fortune. Weber posits that, “We shall nevertheless provisionally use the expression ‘spirit of capitalism’ for that attitude which, in the pursuit of a calling [*berufsmäßig*], strives systematically for profit for its own sake in the manner exemplified by Benjamin Franklin” (19). It is my position that this is not “the real alpha and omega of Franklin’s ethic” (Weber 11). I argue that positioning Franklin within strict political, economic and ethical ideologies confines him to one location within an imagined space, and to the prescribed motivational behavior

prescribed by the ideological location. Rather, I argue that it is more accurate to dispose of all attempts at ideological linearity and confinement and position Franklin as the first American pirate of the Atlantic public sphere. Franklin defied the enclosure of not only his character by academics, but the commons at large. His public virtue, business acumen and “engagement in multitude of projects designed to improve his city,” testify to his dedication to the preservation and the protection of the commons (Landsman 144). Franklin’s manifest resistance to the enclosure of cultural knowledge and intellectual property demonstrates his willingness to resist privatization for the mutual benefit of humanity so that “knowledge should increase” (Franklin 136). His actions confirm Thomas Jefferson’s assertion that, “The field of knowledge is the common property of mankind” (791.)

In fact, Franklin’s Fluid Theory of electricity represents his ideological philosophy of resources and ideas moving in equilibrium throughout the Atlantic Commons.<sup>i</sup> From capitalism to philanthropy, and private interests to public virtue, it can be argued that “plus and minus” forces need to stay in a form of democratic balance and equilibrium without becoming too excessive and disrupting the fluidity of the socio-economic forces. Franklin’s ideology and actions represent this mysterious force, which attempt to maintain the free flow of ideas circulating in balance throughout the commons. I contend that Franklin’s myriad business endeavors situate him against the enclosure and re-feudalization of the Atlantic commons, its knowledge, its culture, and its ideas. To understand how founding father Benjamin Franklin resisted privatization and the enclosure of our cultural commons, it is necessary to first begin with a refutation of Weber’s Thesis.

## The Weber Thesis

Weber derives his characterization of Franklin’s spirit from two essays: “Hints for Those that Would be Rich” and “Advice to a Young Tradesman.” In “Necessary Hints to Those That Would Be Rich,” Franklin expounds on the purpose of money arguing that, “The use of money is all the advantage there is in having money” and that “the advantage that might be made by turning it in dealing, which by the time that a young man becomes old will

amount to a considerable sum of money” (*Autobiography* 663). What Weber does not consider is that Franklin also admonishes against the market credit system of trading when he states, “He that sells upon credit asks a price for what he sells equivalent to the principal and interest of his money for the time he is to be kept out of it” (Franklin, *Autobiography* 464). He admonishes for a cash economy, “in buying goods it is best to pay ready money” (Franklin, *Autobiography* 464). Weber’s allegation that Franklin is a utilitarian and that “all Franklin’s moral attitudes are coloured with utilitarianism,” encloses Franklin in a political space of utilitarian ethics in which there are no other considerations for his often times paradoxical behavior (Weber 52). Weber’s reading of “Advice to a Young Tradesman,” further attempts to enclose Franklin in the soul of a pure capitalist. His coaching to the young tradesman are founded on “on two words, *industry* and *frugality*; that is, waste neither time nor money, but make the best use of both” (Fisher 375). Here, we see Franklin’s awareness of the reciprocal nature of these virtues to govern the world. He tells him, “He that gets all he can honestly, and saves all he gets (necessary expenses excepted), will certainly become *rich*” (Fisher 375). Franklin counsels the young tradesman that he will receive blessings from his virtuous behavior. His advice is similar to Poor Richard’s aphorism that, “it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright” (74). The young tradesman must first fill himself up with virtuous industry and frugality to attain success.

It is true that from observing Franklin’s myriad business and scientific ventures that his actions are motivated by the development of the political economy; and, perhaps, Weber is correct in his statement that his actions represent “almost classical purity” (Weber 52). Conversely, suggesting that Franklin’s actions were based on maximization of profit in the “spirit of capitalism,” denies historical evidence to the contrary. Capitalism and Puritanism asceticism were supportive allies in the creation of the economy of the colonies. Neil Landsman argues that, “capitalism displaced traditional forms of enterprise and older economic attitudes” and “were replaced by utilitarian ideals” (2946). Franklin’s secularized discourses on morality replaced the bible (for some) to construct an Atlantic “ethos,” and “morality” to direct the customs and manners of America’s early colonists. Franklin helped promote expanding Atlantic trading systems; his business acuity helped shape colonial empire. T.H. Breen likens him to a cultural anthropologist for Franklin understands that, “Americans “must ‘know,’ must ‘think,’ and must ‘care,’ about the country they chiefly trade with” (Breen 17).

This is not a defense for or against capitalism, but a qualification to Weber’s characterization of Franklin’s “exploitation of opportunities for exchange” (52). If Weber’s position were true in articulating his agrarian ideal, then Franklin would not have “complained that English land policy in India had viciously displaced indigenous populations to make way for the market economy” (Sturges 43). On the whole, Weber is correct in noting that, “capitalism presents the calling as a catalyst that energized people to transform themselves and the world around them” (Houston 2953). Weber even concedes the ascetic sense of Puritan self-denial inherent in colonial capitalists as they “get(s) nothing out of his wealth for his (their) own person—other than the irrational sense of ‘fulfilling his vocation’ ” (Houston. 2958-2960). Nevertheless, the dichotomy of Weber’s “worldly asceticism” contradicts his very thesis: to make a profit without personal realization of the benefits of profit is no profit at all. An “agent of godly purposes” will not accrue personal profit gain and in the same instance be a “medium of godly action” (Houston 2968).

Franklin’s life captures the mysterious tension between these two extremes of godly and worldly power and advances a discourse entirely different from what Weber proffers. Franklin sees the interconnectivity of all discourses and power relations, as necessary components of the same sphere of public domain; like his Fluid Theory, discourses both positive and negative are imperative not only for the flow of ideas but also for imagining communities founded on the basic principles of democracy.

#### **The Intellectual World of the Atlantic Commons**

Discussions of intellectual property—the term to signify ownership of ideas, art, knowledge and other non-tangible items—are embedded in a complicated Atlantic History and cartography of cultural contestation.

Most Pre-modern agrarian culture had a system of communal land holdings in which members of the community shared in the common rights and access to its resources. Roman Senator Publius Cornelius Tacitus’ *Dialogus, Agricola, Germania* observes Germanic tribes held their agricultural land in common “for tillage by the whole body of cultivators,” not for the private interest of only a few (169). The idea of the commons has a rich history as a viable form of communal systems granting members access to all the rights, privileges, organizational structures that protect and manage its communal uses. Atlantic communities were able to avoid Garrett Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons” because a system of checks and balances concerning overuse and exploitation were set in place to acknowledge the “carrying capacity,” after which

the commons deteriorates. From as early as 1217 In *The Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Sir William Blackstone prescribes available remedies for when the commons “is incommoded or diminished, or “enclose{d}” (118). These penalties included “precluding from enjoying the benefit to which he is by law entitled”(Blackstone 118). Such regulations and penalties were instituted to secure Hardin’s “carrying capacity” of the commons and deter it from overuse and deterioration. Dramatist Henry Fielding writes in *Tom Jones*, “the ancients may be considered a rich Common”(552). Heraclitus of Ephesus provides the most powerful declaration concerning privatization of the commons: “The Logos is Common to all.”

Our Founding Fathers Thomas Jefferson and particularly Benjamin Franklin also embrace Heraclitus’s global vision for the sharing of our land and resources and provide a deep visionary cultural ideology that has been ignored in our contemporary times. Lockean notions of private property, however, modify the idea of a commons to all. MacArthur fellow Lewis Hyde refers to this in his text, *Common as Air*, as “the Lockean proviso,” a restriction on the theory of private property (38). Although Lock argues that once European labor and aboriginal land mix together, they are exempt from the commons and results in the exclusion “of the common right of other men;” a declaratory exclusionary rule exists to this provision of personal property acquisition (Hyde 38). The commons will only maintain private acquisition when “else may then be denied access, at least where there is enough, and as good” (Locke). These Lockean provisos guided the public and private actions of Franklin and enlightened his entrepreneurial endeavors. Whether it was *philanthrocapitalism*, *eco-capitalism* or *capitalism with a conscience*, Franklin’s Fluid Theory was informed by the protection of the good of the commons.<sup>ii</sup> These economic structures are the antithesis of Weber’s theory of “ruthless exploitation” (Alan 62). Franklin’s collective commons was an enlightened public community managing and sharing collective resources for the promotion of the common interests of the imagined community.

It is no wonder then that upon the creation of his myriad discourses, the library, the woodstove, the lightening rod and the map, Benjamin Franklin bequeathed his creations to the public domain of the commons for the good of the community, only collecting fees and monies in some instances in order to maintain their continued existence. Although it is possible to consider this a form of “Puritan Asceticism” it is certainly not a “philosophy of avarice” as Franklin’s actions validate a personal and civic duty to the

preservation of the Atlantic commons (Weber 51). If scholars need to categorize Franklin’s ideological space, then at worst, Franklin is one of the first proponents of philanthrocapitalist fluidity in which “positive” (philanthropy) or “negative” (capitalist) fluid repels itself and is attracted to the substratum of common matter—the Atlantic at large.

### Early Formations of Monopolies

Copyright protection in America had its own historical development influenced by the 1710 Statute of Anne, which acknowledged the limits on ownership rights:

For the general good of the world, therefore, whatever valuable work has once been created by an author, and issued out by him, should be understood as no longer in his power, but as belonging to the publick; at the same time the author is entitled to an adequate reward. This he should have by an exclusive right to his work for a considerable number of years. (Hyde 53)

The Statute of Anne provided for one of the first privatizations of cultural knowledge laws, which granted the creator a specific term of ownership. In this case, it was an “exclusive right” for a reasonable amount of 28 years. After 28 years, the cultural knowledge then reverted to the cultural commons for the benefit of the people. The limitation on ownership rights suggests the danger in ownership of cultural knowledge in perpetuity and provides for the first provisions to establish a right to exclude. Writers were given formal legal protections as incentives to create and write and preserve their creations for a limited number of years, while the limitation on ownership, in turn, fostered the enhancement of learning.

Framers of the Constitution also followed a similar economic theory of Enlightenment based on checks and balances to prevent monopolies on ownership; for the most part, they argued that reasonable time limits must be placed to encourage the development of knowledge and the arts. In “Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Madison, September 6, 1789,” concerning the drafting of the US Constitution, he writes that a Bill of Rights is imperative for “...{p}roviding clearly and without the aid of sophisms for freedom of religion, freedom of the press, protection against standing armies, restriction against monopolies, the eternal and unremitting force of the habeas corpus laws, and trials by jury” (Peterson 439). Jefferson believed that strict curtailment against monopolies interfered with protections afforded under the Bill of Rights; yet, his 1788 letter to Madison shows his suspicions on monopolies held by authors and inventors:

The saying there shall be no monopolies lessens the incitement to ingenuity, which is spurred on by the hope of a monopoly for a limited time, as of 14 years; but the benefit even of limited monopolies is too doubtful to be opposed to that of their general suppression. (Peterson 440)

In Jefferson's discourse, we see the language of limited monopolies for the purpose of encouraging the exchange of ideas. In "James Madison's 1788 letter to Jefferson," he concedes that although monopolies are "among the greatest nuisances in government," they nonetheless encourage "literary works and ingenious discoveries" and are too valuable to be wholly renounced" (Peterson 274). The cautionary rhetoric of limited monopolies is reiterated in numerous colonial documents including Madison's essay entitled "Monopolies, Perpetuities, Corporations, Ecclesiastical Endowments" which strongly affirms that, "perpetual monopolies of every sort are forbidden by the genius of free governments" (Hyde 7). The limited time advisory propelled Thomas Jefferson to draft legislative laws with a proposed time-limitation based on his principle that "the earth belongs in usufruct to the living" (Peterson 444). In Jefferson's 1789 letter to Madison, he qualifies his position on the commons employing forceful comparisons between life and death:

This principle that the earth belongs to the living and not to the dead is of very extensive application . . . It enters into the resolution of the questions, whether the nation may change the descent of lands holden in tail [i.e., limited to a specified line of heirs]; whether they may change the appropriation of lands given anciently to the church they may abolish the charges and privileges attached on lands including the whole catalogue, ecclesiastical and feudal; it goes . . . to perpetual monopolies in commerce, the arts or sciences, with a long train of et ceteras. (Jefferson 444)

By placing limited regulations on monopolies, the Founders encouraged the diffusion of cultural knowledge and shared ideas for the benefit of the Atlantic Commons. The civic duty that propelled these men to widen the avenue of communication for all commonwealth members can be seen in the innovative business actions of Benjamin Franklin.

#### **Common Knowledge**

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin affirms his dedication to the educational benefit of the commons when he describes his first attempt to "clubbing our books to a common library" (34). After Franklin and Junto Club members outgrew their

small room at Mr. Graces he details his development of the first subscription library:

This was the mother of all the North American subscription libraries, now so numerous. It is become a great thing itself, and continually increasing. These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges. (34)

In the development of the library, Franklin recognizes the commonwealth's desire to learn substantiated by his belief that: the community as a matter of common right should share cultural products. Franklin's library served as a model for the replication of other library systems throughout the colonies.

In the discussion of the library we further witness the subordination of the self for the expression of the whole when Franklin writes in his *Autobiography*, "I . . . put myself as much as I could out of sight, and stated it as a Scheme of a Number of Friends, who had requested me to go about and propose it to such as they thought Lovers of Reading" (64). This idea of putting the self out of sight in order to contribute to the commons was evidenced throughout Franklin's writing in his use of pseudonyms to conceal his private identity and interests and to construct the civic actor speaking to an imagined community of shared interests. Franklin's first publication *The Dogood Letters*, follows the example of Steele-and-Addison's *Spectator* written in the form of self-erasure.

Franklin continues his private renunciation throughout his life in the creation of other imagined public characters in order to elevate the idea of the civic actor over the private interested individual actor and guide and construct civic cohesion, solidarity and virtue. This process of self-erasure contributed to the vibrant flow of opinions and ideas; numerous anonymous pamphleteers enlarged public discourse of debate. An example of the anonymous circulation of cultural knowledge and opinions are the pamphlets of the 1729 Tobacco debate (Hyde 152). Franklin's belief in the value of the pursuit of cultural knowledge itself and "The Knowledge of Nature," itself can be seen in his "June 11, 1760 Letter to Mary Stevenson," in which he advises that the pursuit of knowledge is not an aim unto itself, "but if to attain an eminence in that, we neglect the knowledge and practice of essential duties" to our family, neighbors and friends (*Autobiography* 31). Franklin



suggests that in order for pursuits of knowledge to be worthy and commendable they must contribute to the welfare of the community, otherwise, “we deserve Reprehension” (31). His dedication to enhancing the knowledge of civic actors of the cultural commons can be seen in his pamphlet on *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth* which he distributed the “principal inhabitants gratis” (1927 Kindle). We also see in the development of his academy his first tendencies towards philanthrocapitalism and the realization that charitable work cannot exist solely on capital contributions, but must generate its own income in a circulatory process of private and public capital flow in order to maintain its original goals and objectives. Franklin writes:

...{a}s soon as I could suppose their minds a little prepared by the perusal of it, I set on foot a subscription for opening and supporting an academy; it was to be paid in quotas yearly for five years; by so dividing it, I judg'd he subscription might be larger, and I believe it was so, amounting to no less, if I remember right, than five thousand pounds. (1928 Kindle)

Franklin recognizes that the best way to promote his educational goals is to ensure its financial success. An institution's ability to self-generate income for the good of the whole is not Weber's idea of exploitive, greedy self-interest capitalism. Upon retirement from his printing business, Franklin writes in his *Autobiography* of spending his retirement years for “leisure to read, study make experiments, and ...produce something for the commons for the Benefit of mankind” (qtd. in Hyde, 112). Franklin's philanthrocapitalism focuses on the providing for common spaces in the interest of its civic actors to generate common good, not self-interest. Intellectual property and the ownership of ideas were of little consideration for a man who believed in the spread of knowledge. Instead of a concern for the ownership of an idea, Franklin was concerned with how ideas and knowledge could benefit the community. He best expresses this belief when discussing his motivation for the publication of his 1732 *Almanack*. Under the name of Richard Saunders, Franklin narrates how he “endeavor'd to make it both entertaining and useful,” noting that he also made a profit from it, because of its utility. More importantly, he notes that he saw it as a “proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People, who bought scarcely any other Books” (Rushforth and Mapp 253). He describes the myriad expository modes the *Almanack* contained for the benefit of acquiring both wealth and virtue. His attention is to

circulation of cultural products, not the circulation and personal growth of monies and capital interests.

### Spread of Knowledge

In 1743, sixteen years after developing the lending library, Benjamin Franklin published “A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America.” Franklin saw the opportunity for interdisciplinary communities coming together for scientific and technological advancement. He premises the formation of his proposal based on the idea that unless ideas and discoveries are preserved and protected, they “die with the Discoverers and are lost to Mankind” (Sparks 14) In Franklin's essay, he argues since the “first drudgery of settling the new colonies” is “now pretty well over,” people should now “afford leisure to cultivate the finer arts, and improve the common stock of knowledge” (Sparks 14). He encourages discoveries “to the advantage of some or all of the British plantations or to the benefit of mankind in general” (Sparks 15). Franklin then outlines his proposal for the American Philosophical Society to develop an open commons of communication and correspondence to generate and “promote useful knowledge” (Sparks 15). Inspired by his social maxim, “Man is a sociable being” who thrives in the company of others,” he writes that the society should comprise at least seven “ingenious men,” who he suggests would “maintain a constant Correspondence” and represent different areas of expertise including “Physician, Botanist, a Mathematician, a Chemist, a Mechanician, a Geographer, and a general Natural Philosopher [scientist], besides a President, Treasurer and Secretary” (Spark 15). These members will correspond on the subjects ranging from botany to the “Improvements of vegetable Juices, as Ciders, Wines, &c. New Methods of Curing or Preventing Diseases. All new-discovered Fossils in different Countries, as Mines, Minerals, Quarries, &c. New and useful Improvements in any Branch of Mathematicks” (Spark 15). His member's interdisciplinary discourse branches into cartography, trading, arts and manufactures, geography, and agriculture leaving no intellectual field of humanities and sciences unattended. In addition, Founding Fathers Franklin, Jefferson and Adams, and Madison saw the liberty to communicate and cultural knowledge protection in terms of “a benefit actually gained” to the community, which extended to the protection of commercial products and innovations (Madison 7).

### Legal Enclosure Through Patents and Copyrights

Lord Mansfield of England provides one of the first English definitions of a patent, which according to Lewis Hyde is “a contract between the inventor and the public” (51). In this

contractual relationship, the “commercial advantage which the inventor gains is the reward, not for having made the invention, but for having disclosed it to the public so that when the limited period of his patent has expired, the public gains the free use of the new idea” (Hyde 51). The idea was that patents would stimulate more ingenuity and increase intellectual development and scientific innovation and provide limitations on privileges so that they do not interfere with access to the commons. Benjamin Franklin’s position on patents as a form of commercial enclosure is seen in his description of the creation of the Franklin Stove, which he describes in his *Autobiography*. According to Franklin’s account of his open stove in 1742:

I invented an open stove for the better warming of rooms, and at the same time saving fuel, as the fresh air admitted was warmed in entering ( I made a present of the model to Mr. Robert Grace, one of my early friends, who, having an iron-furnace, found the casting of the plates for these stoves a profitable thing, as they were growing in demand. To promote that demand, I wrote and published a pamphlet, entitled “An Account of the new-invented Pennsylvania Fireplaces; wherein their Construction and Manner of Operation is particularly explained. (97)

In this pamphlet, Franklin provides specifications of engravings detailing the shapes of the iron plates; schematic drawings; lengthy discussions of the advantages of the design over other stoves; and, finally, an anticipation of potential criticisms in the section “Objections answered” (Franklin, *Papers* 438). According to Franklin, even though the pamphlet was received favorably by the public, he turned down Governor Thomas’ patent offer. Franklin writes:

Gov’r. Thomas was so pleas’d with the construction of this stove, as described in it, that he offered to give me a patent for the sole vending of them for a term of years; but I declin’d it from a principle which has ever weighed with me on such occasions, viz., That, as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours; and this we should do freely and generously. (98)

Franklin’s refusal to legally enclose his intellectual property to the exclusion of others is testament to his civic duty to the Atlantic Commons.<sup>iii</sup> Later on in the passage, Franklin observes that a London Ironsmith appropriated his information from the “Pamphlet and working it up into his

own, and making some small changes in the Machine, which rather hurt its Operation, got a Patent for it there, and made as I was told a little Fortune by it” (98). The intellectual property thief is alleged to be James Sharp who published Franklin’s ideas about the stove in his 1781 “An Account of the Principal and Effects of American Stoves” (Lemay 603).

Sharp’s pamphlet uses Franklin’s 1744 pamphlet to detail a 28-page account of the “principle of the his improved air stove-grates, commonly known as the American Stove” (1). The text integrates Franklin’s experiments with the wood stove design during 1739-to 1739 and cites Franklin for his contribution. In the pamphlet, Sharp writes, “these Stoves are called American, because the first patterns in cast Iron upon this Principle were the Invention of the celebrated and ingenious Dr. Benjamin Franklin, who then resided in Philadelphia” (Sharp 2).

In addition to Sharp’s republication of several of Franklin’s key ideas concerning the stove, James Durno published a similar 1753 version entitled *A Description of a New Invented Stove Grate: Shewing [sic] Its Uses and Advantages over All Others*, which is structurally more similar to Franklin’s design than Sharp’s version. According to Colin T. Ramsey, “Durno’s stove design, as described in *A Description*, is an exacting replica of Franklin’s, save for some small changes to the chimney intended to make Durno’s stove better at burning coal” (26). Ramsey suggest that it is “Durno, rather than Sharp, Franklin describes in the *Autobiography*” (26). Similar to Sharp, Durno appropriates Franklin’s public personae to appeal to his circulation by claiming that he has made improvements to the Pennsylvania Stove-Grate because now the stove comes “with greater advantages; for instead of the narrow Passage for the Smoke in the Pennsylvania Stove, there is a Chamber made in the Brick-Work” (21). Ramsey observes that, “Franklin’s practices of sending copies of ‘An Account’ to natural philosophers all around the Atlantic world had succeeded in generating interest in his stove design (22). Sharp and Durno were mutually engaged in the practice of appropriating ideas from the cultural commons and were the beneficiaries of this open knowledge. According to Bennet Woodcraft’s *Alphabetical Index of Patentees of Inventions*, Sharp acquired a patent for his American stove.

The development and subsequent patenting of the American stove provides one of the first illustrations that establish Benjamin Franklin as a leader in the promotion of the free flow of knowledge and ideas. It is certainly contrary to Weber’s “the distinctive mark of capitalism ‘striving for

profit' through 'continuous, rational ... exploitation of opportunities for exchange" (Houston 2598 ). Franklin's ideology of shared intellectual property diffused through a shared common space, positions him as a defender of the Commons. Documents show that contrary to a "philosophy of avarice," Franklin never pursued legal patents on his innovations and according to James Green and Peter Stallybras, "his ideas were a common treasury to be shared by all" (23).

### Scientific Commons

Franklin's scientific research further attests to Franklin's collaborative efforts of collective inquiry to discover new ways and methods to improve human life. In his Feb. 8. 1780 letter to Joseph Priestly, he laments that he was "born too soon" and at the same time recognizes that science can improve man's condition as long as "man would cease to be wolves to one another, and that human beings would at length learn what they now improperly call humanity!" (Franklin, *Autobiography*, 227). Again, Franklin reasserts the importance of perceiving the Atlantic as one territory open for the use and enjoyment of its land and resources for all of its members. By employing this metaphor on territorialism, Franklin contrasts wolves' patterns of attacking other wolves and compares them to individuals who do the same to protect private interests. His argument is for humanity to "cease to be wolves," and for humanity and science to progress and co-exist, collaboration is necessary. Franklin puts his ideology into practice with his collaborative work on the research of electrical currents with Philip Syng, Thomas Hopkinson, and Ebenezer Kinnersley, which contributed to theories of electricity.<sup>iv</sup> Franklin's details his experiments in his letters to Peter Collinson in which he deduces that an electrical force diffuses itself through substances, which nature directs in a balance of positive and negative electricity. In 1748, Franklin writes, "We made what we called an electrical-battery, consisting of eleven panes of large sash-glass, armed with thin leaden plates, pasted on each side" (Cohen 192). Franklin documents his experiments in his 1749 scientific notebook in "which he lists the various ways in which 'electrical fluid agrees with lightning'" (Hyde 115). His theory led to his famous kite experiment in which he replaced "a very sharp pointed wire," with a kite and was able to ignite sparks from the key dangled to the kite string "To determine the question, whether the clouds that contain Lightning are electrified or not" (Hyde 115). Franklin then details the experiment:

On the top of some High Tower or Steeple place a kind of sentry box big enough to contain a man

and an electrical Iron Rod rise, and pass bend out of the door and then upright 20 or 30 feet, pointed very sharp at the end. If the electrical stand be kept clean and dry, a man standing on it when such clouds are passing low, might be electrified, and afford sparks, the rod drawing fire to him from the cloud. (Hyde 115).

In 1753, Franklin published his experiments in two separate articles on electrical currents in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and in *Poor Richard's Almanac* opening his results to the civic public for her mutual benefit. In the late fall of 1752, Franklin published the following in *Poor Richard's Almanack*:

How to secure houses, etc. from Lightning It has pleased God in his goodness to mankind, at length to discover to them the means of securing their habitations and other buildings from mischief byhunder and lightning. The method is this: Provide a small iron rod (it may be made of the rod-iron used by the nailers) but of such a length, that one end being three or four feet in the moist ground, the other may be six or eight feet above the highest part of the building. (24)

Franklin substantiation of his motivational intent for his scientific inquiry is prefaced with, "It has pleased God in his Goodness to Mankind, at length to discover to them," demonstrating once again his civic philanthropy behind his discoveries. Franklin proceeds with further instructions on how rods can generate electricity notifying the public that it is the passing of electricity between points through which the current flows. Electrical currents are balanced circulating charges. Franklin's collaborative theories demonstrate how contemporary science benefited from the interrelationship of scientific intellectuals contributing, integrating, and synthesizing concepts in an evolving dialogue of intellectual discovery. Franklin, realizing the importance of the interdisciplinary nature of scholarship and discovery, opens the discourse to the public at large in his June of 1753, "Request for Information on Lightning" published in in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* and newspapers in New York and Boston. It reads:

Those of our readers in this and the neighboring provinces, who may have an opportunity of observing, during the present summer, any of the effects of ightning on houses, ships, trees, etc. are requested to take particular notice of its course, and deviation from a strait line, in the walls or other matter effected by it, its different operations or effects on wood, stone, bricks, glass, metals,

animal bodies, etc. and every other circumstance that may tend to discover the nature, and compleat the history of that terrible meteor. Such observations being put in writing, and communicated to Benjamin Franklin, in Philadelphia, will be very thankfully accepted and gratefully acknowledged

(26).

Franklin's Collinson correspondence was read before the Royal Society and in 1753, Franklin was invited into the society and awarded the Copley Medal of distinction for his contributions to the field of science.

Franklin's Fluid Theory of Electricity posits that electricity as a fluid moves through the planet as a form of "electric fluid," which flows between excess and lack, positive and negative. For Franklin, excessive fluid created a positive charge and the lack thereof produced a negative charge. Franklin's Fluid Theory, although now defunct, is another example of how his individual and collective research was "motivated by his perception of its usefulness to the public" (Landsman 145).

### **The Carthography of Knowledge**

Another example of Franklin's contribution to the commons is the publication of the scientific chart of the North Atlantic Gulf Stream, which I argue is one of the first acts of Atlantic policy. In attempting to figure why it was faster to sail from America to Europe than from Europe to America (which took up to two weeks longer) he divulged mariner secrets of trading and fishing ship knowledge. Informed by whaling captain Timothy Folger's knowledge on the Atlantic migration of whales, Franklin began his inquiry into Atlantic current patterns. In his October 29, 1768 letter, Franklin describes Folger's role in the creation of the Gulf Stream chart: "Discoursing with Captain Folger," he writes:

I received from him the following information:  
That the Island in which he lives is Inhabited Chiefly by people concerned in the Whale Fishery, in which they employ near 150 Sail Vessels, that the whales are found generally near the Edges of the Gulph Stream, a strong current so called which comes out of the Gulph of Florida, passing Northeasterly along the Coast of America, and the turning off most Easterly running at the rate of 4, 3 1/2, 3 and 2 1/2 Miles an Hour; that the Whaling Business leading these people to Cruise along the Edges of the Stream in quest of Whales...

Integrating Captain Folger's knowledge on ocean currents, Franklin hypothesized that trade winds create the "Gulph

Stream," by pushing warm waters into the Gulf of Mexico. Franklin describes this northern warm water stream as flowing from the West Indies along the North American East Coast. On his 1775 voyage home from England, after placing a thermometer in the Atlantic Ocean he discovers a variance in ocean temperature and creates the first chart of North Atlantic hydrography later published in 1769. Franklin's act of publication divulges otherwise local regional knowledge, opening up maritime secrets to the public sphere of the Atlantic Commons. His dedication to the publication and distribution of cultural knowledge into the public domain still has profound influence today, as it is widely accepted that the Franklin-Folger chart maps the course of the Gulf Stream flowing from the Gulf of Mexico.

### **The Diffusion of Knowledge**

In Benjamin Franklin's letter of October 2, 1783, he writes: "The art of printing diffuses so general a light, augmenting with the growing day, and of so penetrating a nature, that all the window-shutters, which despotism and priest craft can oppose to keep it out, prove insufficient." Franklin's participation in the distribution of print materials throughout the colonies bears witness to his principles of spreading knowledge to increase the civic duty. Franklin is aware that it is only through the dissemination of knowledge through the public sphere that the community will prosper. Franklin viewed the press as an almost sacred venue for the distribution of information and believed publication of newspaper should "be easy and cheap and safe for any person to communicate his thoughts to the public" (Leicester 299). After alluding to Roman and Greek orators who only had their voice as an instrument of persuasion, because literacy was an issue, Franklin affirms the power of the press in the Republic.

Now by the press we can speak to nations, and good books and well-written pamphlets have great and general influence. The facility with which the same truths may be repeatedly enforced by placing them daily in different lights in newspapers, which are everywhere read, gives a great chance of establishing them. And we now find that it is not only right to strike while the iron is hot, but that it may be very practical to head it by continually striking. (Leicester 300)

Franklin committed to the spread of knowledge beyond Colonial borders to the Atlantic at large. His engagement in an "international conversation allowed Franklin and his friends to theorize so fruitfully about electricity and to share so widely what they had discovered" (Hyde 2035-2036). His Atlantic dialogue with politicians, writers, artists,



tradesmen, scientists, and other members of society generated an inter-cultural, interdisciplinary dialogue in which ideas of liberty and civic duty intersect in a dynamic dialogue. Neither “morally base: materialistic, bourgeois, or calculating, as D.H. Lawrence alleged, Franklin is one of the first Americans who attempted to create a working model for philanthropic associations, which the United Nations defines today as nongovernmental organizations working for the benefit of the public commons. His aphoristic theory on public economy aligns ambition with moral virtue into a model of political economy and earth democracy. Virtue may be “the means of procuring wealth” he says in his *Autobiography*, but wealth serves the purpose of “securing virtue in turn (159). For Franklin, this model of self-sustainable reciprocity of capital and virtue moving across the Atlantic terrain enables its people to equally share in the wealth of its resources. He argues that Human Rights can take many forms and is not simply legislative in nature, but presupposes a moral and ethical obligation that can be realized by Atlantic actors through social agency, social advocacy and other philanthropic activities.

### Conclusion

The enclosure of the commons has included the most basic human needs of survival from water to genomes—all in the name of capital profit. These contemporary systems of market relations do indeed conform to Max Weber’s “capitalistic rules of action” and “instinct of acquisition” (II). Somewhere along our enlightened path of progress, we have destroyed our ozone, our forests, our deserts, our plains, our oceans, our rivers and our peoples. Somewhere along the way, our contemporary leaders have lost the sagacity of our Founders who knew that civic duty and public virtue were necessary requisites to liberty and democracy. Our ecosystems struggling on life support, and the majority of our earth’s peoples suffering from food and water insecurity, our Atlantic Commons is on the verge of

environmental, economic and social collapse. The reciprocal fluidity of private and public interests have been clogged by corruption and greed. The increasing fast-paced mobility across Atlantic spaces has linked the masses from all segments of society into a mass-media, mass-cultural and economic web of interests, wiping out traditional sense of place along its mass-transit empty highway (Creswell 45). In so doing, what remains are “unimaginative” constructions of what Tim Creswell refers to as “non-places” disrooted from the soil and humanity where people “coexist or cohabit without living together” (45). These homogenizing networks of commercial interests are “spaces of circulation (freeways, airways), consumption (department stores, supermarkets) and communication (telephones, faxes, television, cable networks” constructed and developed over every nook and cranny of the Atlantic Community (45).

I argue that we need to return to our Atlantic ideological roots, to articulate an alternative strategic model to the politics of progress and universality. Bruce E. Johansen writes that Benjamin Franklin “learned from American Indians, by assimilating into their vision of the future, aspects of American Indian wisdom and beauty. Our task is to relearn history as they experienced it, in all its richness and complexity, and thereby to arrive at a more complete understanding” (10). Native Indian epistemology is very much similar to Franklin’s theory on Universal Fluid and similar to his electrical Fluid Theory as both posit a necessity of fluidity, of balance, of moderation. “Universal space, as far as we know of it, seems to be filled with subtle fluid, whose motion, or vibration is called light” (*Autobiography* 248). It is this light that we must awaken within ourselves to guide us to an Atlantic democracy that fosters community, cooperation, and individual autonomy, while preserving and protecting our Atlantic communities and diverse ecosystems.

<sup>i</sup>I purposefully use proper nouns for Atlantic Commons and Fluid Theory in the context of this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> I use philanthrocapitalism as a term to define the use of free market economy to promote philanthropy and eco-capitalism as a term that integrates free market policies to promote environmental protection and awareness. Capitalism with a conscious espouses the Puritan Ethic of free market principles for the common good of the public sphere.

<sup>iii</sup> According to Colin T. Ramsey, “In the 1740s, patents were still a relatively novel legal instrument, and they were granted by the Crown, not colonial governors” (25).

<sup>iv</sup> Franklin's experiments were detailed in 1747-1750 in five letters sent to Collinson, which were published by Collinson a year later in an 86 page pamphlet entitled, "Experiments and Observations on Electricity, made at Philadelphia in America, by Mr. Benjamin Franklin, and Communicated in several letters to Mr. P. Collinson, of London, F.R.S."

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