

“In compliance with the Advice contained in these Letters”: Benjamin Franklin’s correspondence networks and the making of the *Autobiography*

Thomas J. Haslam

College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University, China. Email: haslam@stu.edu.cn

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Abstract

This study offers a quantitative approach to mapping out and examining Benjamin Franklin’s writing of his memoirs. It does so by situating the memoirs in the context of Franklin’s other and indeed primary writing activities: his participation in various correspondence networks. Both drawing upon and differing from previous scholarship, this study ascribes key aspects of the memoirs less to intentional design and literary craft, and more to Franklin’s writing habits and cognitive style as manifested over his career. This study further argues for a reconsideration of how Jane Mecom and William Franklin influenced the memoirs.

Keywords: Correspondence Networks, Benjamin Franklin, Data Analysis, Autobiography.

Introduction

If not for Benjamin Franklin’s correspondence networks, what we know as the *Autobiography*—which was never published in Franklin’s lifetime—would not exist at all. By good fortune, Abel James found manuscript that scholars have designed as *Part One* in 1782 because he was the executor of Grace Growden Galloway’s estate. Grace Galloway had come into possession of the manuscript when her husband Joseph Galloway, a prominent Pennsylvania politician and former protégé of Franklin, sided with the loyalist cause and fled to England in 1778. Upon recovering the manuscript, James, a Philadelphia Quaker merchant and political ally of Franklin, corresponded with both Franklin and Benjamin Vaughan, the editor of Franklin’s *Political, Miscellaneous and Philosophical Pieces* (1779), published in London during the height of the American Revolutionary War. Vaughan was a colonial sympathizer, admirer of Franklin, and also at that time a commissioner for William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne, who was serving Great Britain as Prime Minister and actively negotiating peace with France and the newly formed United States of America. In his 31 January 1783 letter to Franklin, who was then sole Minister and Plenipotentiary to France as well as a congressionally appointed commissioner to the peace negotiations, Vaughan (1783) encouraged Franklin to continue the memoirs so that “Englishmen be made not only to respect you, but even to love you” and hence “when your countrymen see themselves being well thought of by Englishmen, they will go nearer to thinking well of England.” Although Vaughan’s letter reads as an unabashed panegyric, his motives were in part undeniably political.

James (1782) had urged Franklin to continue writing his memoirs to “promote a greater Spirit of Industry and early Attention to Business, Frugality, and Temperance with the American Youth”; Vaughan (1783) had extravagantly suggested that Franklin’s memoirs could serve the

profound task of reconciliation, of peace-making within the greater Anglophone trans-Atlantic community while amending the historical record. Both men saw Franklin as an exemplary and yet representative personality, as have subsequent generations of admirers and critics. Both men also, intentionally or otherwise, were preemptively shaping Franklin's written legacy as they believed would best serve their constituents. They must have been at least partially persuasive, judging by Franklin's response and subsequent work on the memoirs.

Until he was contacted by James and Vaughan in the early 1780s, Franklin seemed to have either forgotten about or abandoned his previous effort. For the years 1772 to 1783, Yale University's definitive *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (1959-) have nothing similar to the manuscript Franklin wrote in Twyford, England during the summer of 1771 (a.k.a *Part One*). Not until sometime in 1784, after receiving the letters from James and Vaughan, did Franklin begin writing in Passy, France, the manuscript scholars designate *Part Two*, and professedly doing so "in Compliance with the Advice contain'd in these letters [by James and Vaughan], and accordingly attended for the Public" (in Chaplain, 2012, p. 67). He completed the section best known as the *Art of Virtue*, at just a bit under 5400 words. Nothing more. Franklin would return to Philadelphia in 1785, at the age of 79. But he did not begin working on the manuscript scholars designate as *Part Three* until 1788, and left behind a collection of unfinished and marked-up manuscripts when he died on 17 April 1790.

Since Sayre's (1964) landmark study, scholarship has paid considerable attention to the making of Franklin's *Autobiography* and its possible consequences for interpretation. Lemay and Zall (1981), working from the original manuscripts, produced an MLA-approved genetic text edition of the *Autobiography* which has formed the basis for subsequent scholarly editions. Aldridge (1967), Sappenfield (1973), Dawson (1978), Seavey (1988), Lemay (1990), Looby (1990), Shurr (1992), Haslam (1996), Green and Stallybrass (2006), and Anderson (2012) among others have all offered interpretations of the *Autobiography*, which are by no means in harmony, based in strong part on the manuscript history and perceived composition process.

This study benefits greatly from previous scholarship, but differs by taking a quantitative approach to mapping out and examining Franklin's writing of his memoirs.¹ It differs also by situating these manuscripts in the context of Franklin's other and indeed primary writing activities: his participation in various correspondence networks.² The Republic of Letters came first for Franklin, almost invariably, as the evidence will show. This study proceeds by taking the manuscripts in chronological order and employing data analysis to determine patterns in Franklin's writing activities and displayed cognitive habits that might provide insight as to why the memoirs were left unfinished even as the composition process spanned over 18 years. Unless specifically indicated otherwise, the source for all correspondence to and from Franklin is the *Digital Edition* (2006) of the *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (1959-), courtesy of Yale University. All dates, names, geographical locations of senders and recipients, and word counts of the documents in questions are likewise derived from *Digital Edition*, a.k.a. FranklinPapers.org.

1. The Twyford Manuscript, a.k.a. *Part One*, in Context

Franklin began his memoirs in the summer of 1771 while on vacation in Twyford, England, staying with his good friend Jonathan Shipley, Bishop of St. Asaph. His dates in Twyford were from 30 July to 13 August, and his likely writing days span from 31 July to 12 August, 13 days total. The chart

below, Figure 1, places the Twyford manuscript in the context of Franklin’s other writing activities during this time.

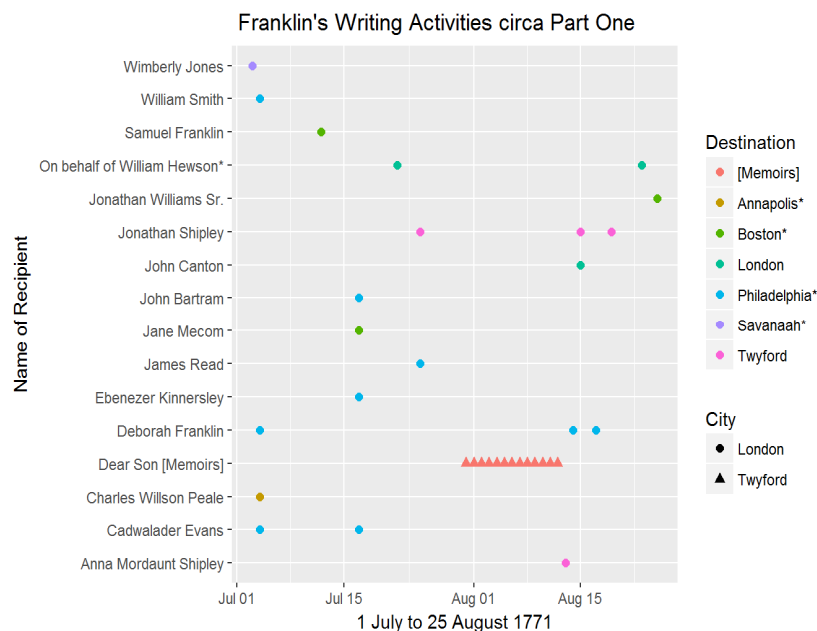


Figure 1: Time series analysis of Benjamin Franklin’s writing activities, 1771-07-01 to 1771-08-25.

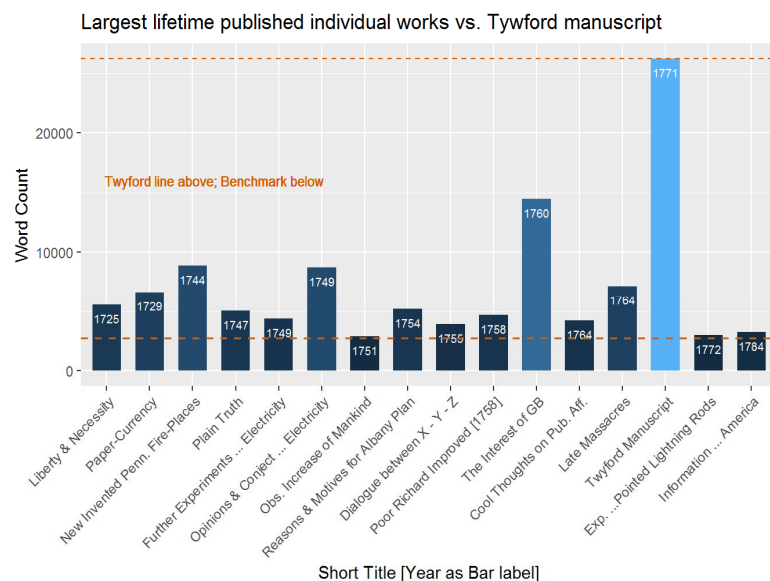


Figure 2: Franklin’s largest published individual works vs. the Twyford manuscript.

Figure 1 above shows that Franklin wrote often, but typically wrote in bursts or clusters—setting aside time to respond his numerous correspondents. On 4 July 1771, for example, Franklin wrote four letters for a rough total of 1292 words. On 17 July 1771, Franklin again wrote four letters—this time for a rough total of 2714 words. Based upon both the sample below and a more general survey of Franklin writing, to be discussed shortly, a benchmark of 2700 words per day—roughly, the 17 July 1771 effort—marks a heavy workload for Franklin.

Figure 2 above directly compares the Twyford manuscript to Franklin's longest published individual writings. The Twyford manuscript counts out at 26231 words (with a margin of error less than 1%). It is the largest known individual piece of writing that Franklin produced. The larger works Franklin was best known for in his lifetime, such as *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1751) or the *Canada Pamphlet* (1760) were edited compilations: the first of 25 letters, the second of two smaller treatises. (What scholars designate as *Part Three* of *Autobiography* was never published in Franklin's lifetime and is clearly pastiche, composed erratically over a total 16 to 20 months, with the bulk of it between August and December 1788).

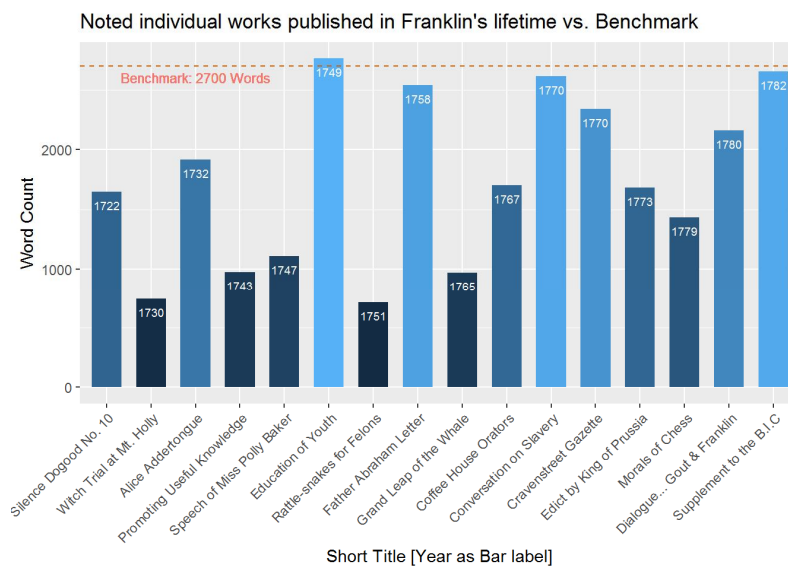


Figure 3: Well-known published individual works vs. Benchmark.

To have completed the Twyford manuscript in just under a fortnight, Franklin would have to write just over 2000 words per day. That would have been a consistently heavy workload for him. Indeed, Franklin became celebrated as a writer for individual works typically under the benchmark of 2700 words, as indicated by Figure 3 below.

As his published works over a lifetime show, Franklin was a master of the short form who wrote to the occasion. This holds true even for his scientific writing, which focused on direct observation and experience of specific phenomena rather than arguments for first principles or abstract theorizing. His 10 May 1768 letter to Sir John Pringle, at roughly 1000 words, offers a masterful study in conducting a controlled experiment and developing a qualified model from data—but it starts with Franklin's concern about how the water level in canals affects transport, based on his experiences in Holland. Even the longer political works cited in Figure 3, each of which were almost certainly not written in one day, have a highly specific audience, purpose, and readily discernable context. This holds true for even the longest individual work published in Franklin's lifetime, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered* (1760), which offered not a general discussion of political theory as John Locke or David Hume might have done, but instead concerned itself with current and specific policies of the British empire regarding North America.

As a fellow correspondent in the Republic of Letters, the Scottish historian and philosopher David Hume, a friend and admirer of Franklin, makes for a salient contrast (Haslam, 2001; Winterer, Marcus, Mansfield, & Spillman, 2012). A preeminent essayist and letter writer,

Hume was also a master of the long form. Franklin never wrote anything similar in scale or scope to Hume's histories or major treatises. Nor, except for his youthful *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity* (1725), did Franklin write for an ill-defined general audience or at a level of ahistorical abstraction. Invariably, Franklin wrote to produce results in readers that he either knew or knew of: he wrote to the occasion and not to make claims against the future.

So why Franklin was writing the Twyford manuscript—and for whom? This brings us to a primary interpretative fork as to how scholars have understood the *Autobiography*. The majority view, presented as commonsense by scholars from Lemay (1968) to Seavey (1988) to Spengemann (1994) to Anderson (2012), is that Franklin must have been writing to a general audience and his opening address of "Dear Son" is a rhetorical ploy—an engaging ruse. Franklin was not actually writing his then 40-year-old son William, Governor of New Jersey, who surely knew the family stories. This position has obvious merit. In the 18th century, the conduct book or former "mirror for princes" had both taken an epistolary turn and become worldly advice from the older generation to the next. Of this genre, perhaps *Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman* (1774) by Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, remains the exemplar. (But although Stanhope knew his letters would be circulated, it is not certain that he ever intended they be published). Unlike Stanhope's didactic letters, however, the Twyford manuscript contains no such direct instruction. Moreover, when potential publishers asked about the Twyford manuscript, Franklin explicitly stated that he wrote it for William and family—not for the public.

In a 9 August 1786 letter, the Philadelphia publisher Matthew Carey wrote Franklin that "I have been repeatedly informed, that Some of your memoirs, written at an early period, have been lately found and restored to you" and begged Franklin's permission to publish them in the inaugural edition of the *Columbian Magazine*, one of the USA's first literary journals. The next day, in a 10 August 1786 letter, Franklin responded negatively, stating: "The Memoirs you mention would be of little or no Use to your scheme, as they contain only some Notes of my early Life, and finish in 1730. They were written to my Son, and intended only as Information to my Family." This reply might well be disingenuous. But Franklin made a similar comment on the Twyford manuscript itself after he physically recovered it upon his return to Philadelphia from France in 1785. The Lemay and Zall (1981) genetic text edition, which shows Franklin's revision process, reads as follows:

Thus far was written with the ~~simple~~ Intention expressed in the Beginning. ~~of gratifying the suppos'd Curiosity of my Son; and others of my Posterity: what follows being~~ and therefore contains several little family Anecdotes of no Importance to others. What follows was written many Years after in compliance with the Advice given contain'd in these Letters, and accordingly intended for the Publick. The Affairs of the Revolution occasion'd the Interruption. (p. 72)

The cancellation "of gratifying the suppos'd Curiosity of my Son; and others of my Posterity" has a bitter poignancy lacking from Franklin's response to Carey. William remained a loyalist during the American Revolution, siding with Great Britain. Franklin never forgave this. In his will dated 17 August 1788, Franklin effectively disinherited William—and felt the need to explain that "the part he [William] acted against me in the late war, which is of public notoriety, will account for my leaving him no more of an estate he endeavoured to deprive me of." At the time when

Franklin was writing the Twyford manuscript, however, he and William were partners in advancing both American interests and the Franklin family fortunes within the British empire.



Figure 4: A commonality word cloud showing the top 50 terms shared by Franklin's 17 July 1771 letter to Jane Mecom and the Twyford manuscript.

For Franklin, family fortune and family history seemed entangled and he was committed to recovering both. His 16 September 1758 letter to Jane Mecom, his youngest and favorite sister, described the recent tour Franklin and son William took of England where they “visited the Town our Father was born in and found some Relations in that part of the Country Still living.” This certainly anticipates the opening passage of his memoirs. But Franklin's 17 July 1771 letter to sister Jane, written shortly before the Twyford manuscript, contains strongly similar content. (See figure 4 below). It reads in part like a first draft. Moreover, his correspondence with Jane Mecom over family history, family affairs, and more would last his lifetime. Yet Franklin was doing more than writing letters.

Starting in the late 1750s, Franklin took his status as the most prominent member of Franklin-Folger families to heart, and took it upon himself to serve as the *de facto* paterfamilias. He supported his nephews Benjamin Franklin Mecom, Jonathan Williams, Jr., and James Franklin in starting their own businesses. He worked to promote the Folger's interests in London. And, as first discussed in his letters to sister Jane and later in the Twyford manuscript, he visited the ancestral towns of his parents in search of information and family relics. Franklin also established relationships with the English branch of his family. In 1766, when his English cousin Thomas Franklin became a widower, Thomas left his 11-year-old daughter Sally with Franklin be raised in London. Franklin took this on willingly; or rather, delegated it to his landlady the kindly Ms. Mary Stevenson, who treated Sally half as a daughter, and half as a live-in maid (Lopez and Herbert, 1975, pp. 59-113).

Self-described in a 31 July 1758 letter to his English cousin, Mary Fisher, as “the youngest Son of the youngest Son of the youngest Son of the youngest Son for five Generations,” Franklin had a multi-generational vision of family and his new role within it. In the Twyford manuscript, Franklin describes with muted pride the tombstone he had placed over the grave of parents, honoring their memory and assuming the role of the head of the family (in Chaplain, 2012, p. 16). But his illegitimate son William, who would not only be accepted by colonial and British society but become the royally appointed Governor of New Jersey, was in 1771 both Franklin's seemingly

greatest achievement as paterfamilias and his most reliable political ally. As Franklin’s subsequent enduring anger and hurt would show, his son William mattered greatly to him.

Between 1771 and the outbreak of war, Franklin’s relationship with William had begun taking a turn for a worse. This explains how the Twyford manuscript wound up with Joseph Galloway. Galloway, as Lopez and Herbert (1975) have noted:

[was Franklin’s] closest collaborator in Pennsylvania campaigns and particularly in the struggle against the Penns. He had also been William’s teacher in the law. [...] During his ten years in England, Franklin had never stopped confiding in Galloway; William, too, had drawn closer to him than to any other American political figure. (p. 199)

To mend fences with William, and with his former protégé Galloway as well, Franklin met with both of them at Galloway’s estate in the spring of 1775. As Lopez and Herbert (1975) explain it, “those two [William and Galloway] had been his closest collaborators” and to bring them back into the fold, Franklin “had staked everything on this meeting” (p. 200). It did not go well. He left William and Galloway to return to Philadelphia and participate in the Continental Congress, and he left the Twyford manuscript at Galloway’s estate.

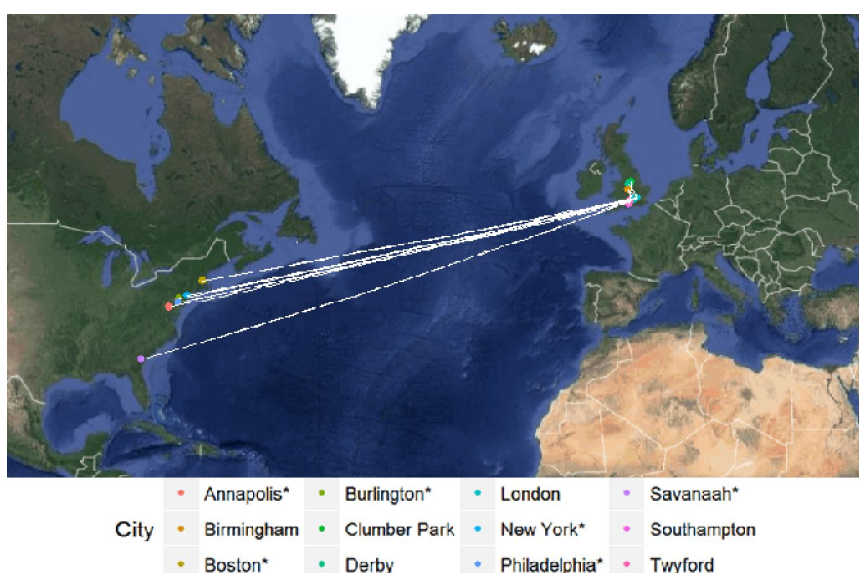


Figure 5: Franklin’s correspondence network from 1771-07-01 to 1771-08-25. [*] indicates British-America.

Manuscript culture in British America, as Shields (1991) has argued, offered a supplementary or even counter-discourse to print culture. The private circulation of a manuscript never intended for print might show the “peculiar nature of literary sociability”: a sociability “not consisting in the public spirit of a polity of a society-at-large, but in the *sensus communis* of an exclusive circle” (Shields, 1991, p. 286). By Franklin’s own account, the Twyford manuscript was never intended for print or the public: it was intended for an exclusive circle centered around son William, Franklin’s extended family, and likely other intimates such as Joseph Galloway. We should read Franklin’s opening words of “Dear Son” as participating in this *sensus communis*, and not as a mere rhetorical ploy to engage a presumed general reader.

Figure 5. above, the geo-mapping of Franklin’s correspondence network circa the Twyford manuscript, a.k.a. *Part One*, shows Franklin engaged with British North America, but firmly

situated with the greater British empire. The geo-mappings for Franklin's further writing of memoirs show quite different social networks, geographically and politically. The 1771 Twyford manuscript belonged to a social world the American Revolution profoundly de-centered, and one that Franklin strongly associated with William.

If we accept the minority position that William mattered to Franklin's writing of the Twyford manuscript (Looby, 1990; Shurr, 1992; Haslam, 1996) and that "Dear Son" was not just rhetoric, it offers insight regarding one of the mysteries surrounding Franklin's continuation of memoirs in Passy, France, sometime during 1784.

2. Locating the Passy Manuscript, a.k.a. Part Two

Although we have no exact dates for when Franklin started writing his memoirs again, Lemay and Zall (1981) cogently speculate that "it may have been after the Treaty of Paris was signed on May 12, 1784, and before August 6, when [Thomas] Jefferson arrived" as Franklin, Jefferson, and John Adams would begin negotiating with various European nations on trade and friendship agreements starting 31 August 1784. We know that Franklin had some leisure time during the summer of 1784, because he allowed his grandson and secretary, William Temple Franklin, to travel to England for what was part a personal holiday and part a family business trip. Something else happened in late July or early August 1784, however: Franklin received a letter from his son William, seeking reconciliation.

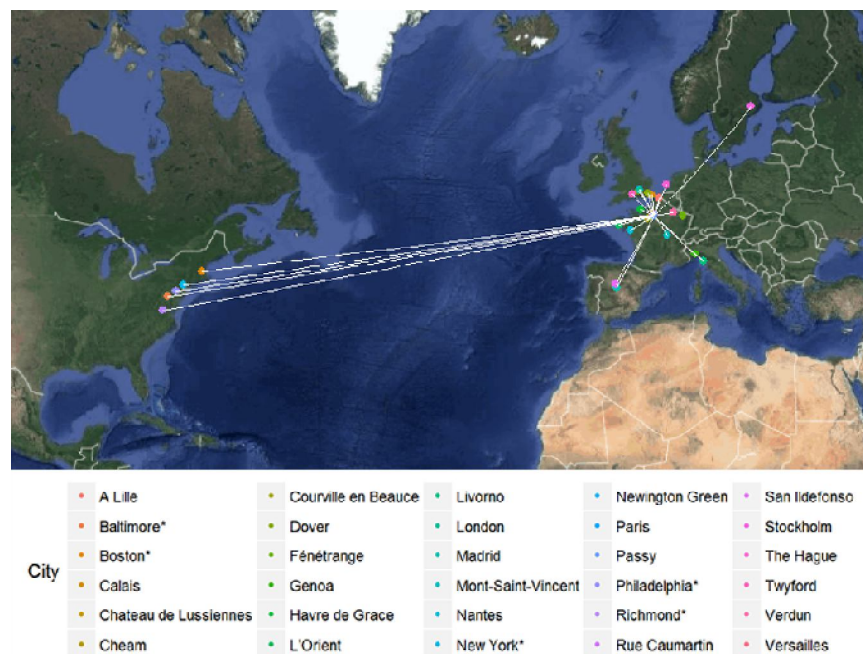


Figure 6: Franklin's correspondence network from 1784-07-22 to 1784-08-31. [*] indicates USA.

Figure 6 above provides a geo-mapping of Franklin's correspondence network from 22 July 1784, the date William postmarked his letter, to 31 August 1784 when Franklin presumably returned to his official duties.

Not surprisingly given his official responsibilities, Franklin’s correspondence network had become more Euro-centric, de-emphasizing the British Empire. But if we run a time series analysis, an important pattern emerges concerning Great Britain. Figure 7 below breaks down the correspondence by nation, and by whether Franklin was the recipient or the sender. As it shows, Franklin had steady stream of correspondence from France, and to a lesser degree, from the USA. His replies to same are far more irregular. Most of this correspondence concerns diplomatic business, or individuals seeking political favors. But after son William wrote Franklin on 22 July, a letter which was likely received shortly afterwards as the Packet service between London and Paris was fairly regular, we have a noticeable uptake in Franklin writing letters to Great Britain, and primarily to recipients in London, including Franklin’s reply to William on 16 August. Moreover, unlike the letters Franklin wrote to French or American recipients during this time, most of the Great Britain letters are personal.

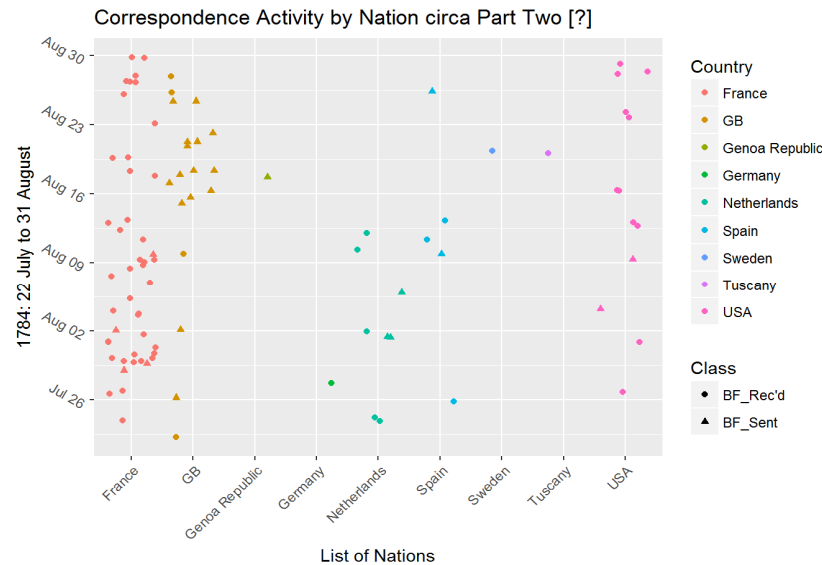


Figure 7: Time series analysis of Franklin’s correspondence network from 1784-07-22 to 1784-08-31.

Did the 22 July letter from William affect Franklin’s writing activity in the summer of 1784, and hence possibly contribute to Franklin continuing his memoirs? The second part of that question is speculative, but first part can be quantitatively assessed. Before Franklin wrote William on 16 August, roughly 23% of all letters he sent from 22 July to 15 August were to recipients in Great Britain; from 16 August to 31 August, less than half the total time considered, the ratio jumps to 85%: a significant increase of 62%. By a simple number count, from 22 July to 15 August, Franklin wrote 13 letters: 3 of which were to recipients in Great Britain. From 16 August to 31 August, Franklin wrote 14 letters: 12 of which were to recipients in Great Britain.

22 July to 15 August, 1784	16 August to 31 August, 1784
3 of 13 letters sent to GB: 23%	12 of 14 letters sent to GB: 85%

Table 1: Quantifying the possible “William effect” on Franklin’s writing in summer 1784.

Nearly all of these letters concern re-establishing or maintaining friendships that existed well before the Revolution. This burst of writing took place after Franklin received William's 22 July 1784 letter from London, and on the same day Franklin chose to respond to William.

Figure 8 below shows Franklin's correspondence activities with Great Britain during this time period. We do not have proof of causation, but we have a strong correlation between the son William and father Benjamin exchange, and Franklin's other writing activities. The correlation is robust enough to defy coincidence. James wrote Franklin in 1782, urging him to continue the memoirs; Vaughan wrote Franklin on the same in 1783. But it seems unlikely that Franklin made any efforts whatsoever until around the time when William wrote him in the summer of 1784, seeking reconciliation.

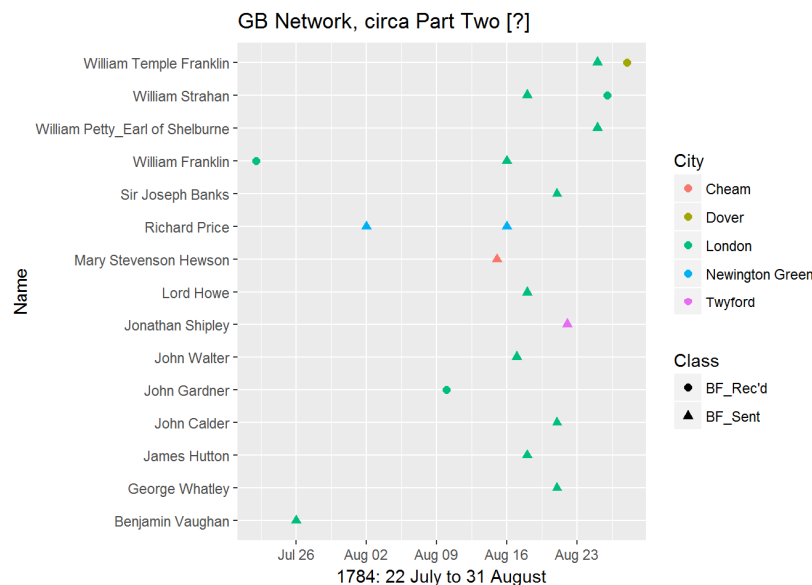


Figure 8: Time series analysis of Franklin's Great Britain correspondence from 1784-07-22 to 1784-08-31.

The commonly given explanation for Franklin delaying work on the memoirs is that he was too busy in France with his official duties. This explanation will not suffice. Franklin had established his own printing press at Passy, and produced some of his finest short form work in English, and even a few pieces in French (Livingston, 1914). Even with all his urgent responsibilities, Franklin found time to write humor, natural philosophy, and more—all the while maintaining his place in the Republic of Letters.

In his reply to William on 16 August 1784, Franklin stated that “nothing has ever hurt me so much and affected me with such keen Sensations, as to find myself deserted in my old Age by my only Son; and not only deserted, but to find him taking up Arms against me, in a Cause wherein my good Fame, Fortune and Life were all at Stake.” This must rank among the strongest language Franklin used at any point in his career. He added the following rebuke that “few would have censured your remaining Neuter, *tho’ there are Natural Duties Which precede political Ones, and cannot be extinguish’d by them.*” Yet even after all this, Franklin solicited William’s help with his written legacy. Vaughan had wanted to publish a second edition “of what he calls my Political Works,” Franklin informed William, but too many items were missing. William was tasked to either supply Vaughan with some of the missing documents or “delay his Publication till I can be

at home again—if that may ever happen." Even with the encouragement of admirers and surrogate sons like James, Vaughan, and Louis-Guillaume Le Veillard, Franklin in 1784 still had not separated his relationship with William from his written legacy. Nor was he willing to surrender control to others: despite everything which had occurred, he gave William priority over Vaughan in deciding what could be published. There were logistical reasons for this, certainly: but as Franklin's letter shows, there were strongly emotive causes as well.

Franklin wrote roughly 5356 more words for his memoirs in 1784, including the section best known as the *Art of Virtue*. This brought the memoirs roughly up to year 1733, meaning that Franklin had covered 27 years of his life at pace of roughly 170 words per year. The *Art of Virtue* does show the strong influence of Vaughan, who specifically requested it in his 31 January 1783 letter to Franklin, but as one of "the two works I allude to": Franklin's memoirs "in conjunction with your *Art of Virtue*." Vaughan knew of this presumably unfinished work due to Franklin's correspondence with Henry Home, Lord Kames, a guiding spirit of the Scottish Enlightenment, prolific author, and mentor to Hume, Adam Smith, and others.

In his 21 October 1761 letter to Lord Kames, Franklin pleaded that "you will not doubt my being serious in the Intention of finishing my *Art of Virtue*. 'Tis not a mere ideal Work." Likewise, in his 2 June 1765 letter to Lord Kames, Franklin once more promised that with a bit more leisure time, the "finishing my *Art of Virtue* shall be perform'd." And in his 25 February 1767 letter to Lord Kames, Franklin once again promised progress on the "*Art of Virtue*." But unlike Lord Kames, whose books the *Principles of Equity* (1760), *Introduction to the Art of Thinking* (1761), and *Elements of Criticism* (1762) all discuss known authorities and debate theory and practice, Franklin was a master of the short form who typically wrote from experience and observations to derive models and offer analysis. Even his fictional writings such as "The Speech of Miss Polly Baker" (1747) or "An Edict by King of Prussia" (1773) were modelled after factual accounts, and were frequently mistaken for such rather than as satires. The promised Kamesian-like *Art of Virtue* never happened because it was antithetical to Franklin's cognitive style and life-long habits as a writer. The *Art of Virtue* presented in the memoirs, at roughly 3416 words, offers both pragmatic guidance for self-improvement and a gentle satire on Franklin's earlier grand ambitions. It also, consistent with Franklin's writing habits, derives its primary content and conclusions from his experience and observations.

Franklin's promises to finish the *Art of Virtue* foreshadow his promises to finish the memoirs. Both works presented him with similar challenges. He did not write in the long form. Indeed, works over a certain length presented coherence problems, as revealed by his belated outlines for the memoirs. Likewise, he seldom had the opportunity or inclination to sustain a heavy writing load for days at time on one project. Besides his many civic commitments, Franklin was a known polymath with an evidently parallel cognitive style: he virtually never engaged in sustained serial efforts on one task. The nearest he came to doing so seems to be Twyford manuscript in 1771. Even the rightfully celebrated *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1751), published in book form in Franklin's lifetime, is a compilation of several related but independent efforts. His admirers might have demanded a completed memoirs just as Lord Kames earlier had hoped for the *Art of Virtue*, but as revealed by Franklin's relevant correspondence networks, Franklin was a creature of habit and still affected by his relationship with son William. This holds true even for Franklin's final years in Philadelphia.

4. The Philadelphia Manuscript, a.k.a. *Part Three*, in Context

After returning to Philadelphia in 1785, Franklin found better things to do than work on his memoirs. To name just a few, he was elected President of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council; he served as President for the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery; and he served as the oldest delegate at the Federal Constitutional Convention. All the while Franklin remained active in the Republic of Letters. Sometime in August 1788, Franklin renewed writing his memoirs—arguably not coincidentally, Franklin also had finalized his will on 17 August 1788, disinheriting William by “leaving him no more of an estate he endeavoured to deprive me of.” On 24 October 1788, Franklin wrote Vaughan that “I am now in the year 1756 just before I was sent to England” and health pending, “I hope to finish it [the memoirs] this winter.” Obviously, he did not, and we may look to his other writing activities to understand why.



Figure 9: Franklin's correspondence network from 1788-08-01 to 1788-12-31. [*] indicates USA.

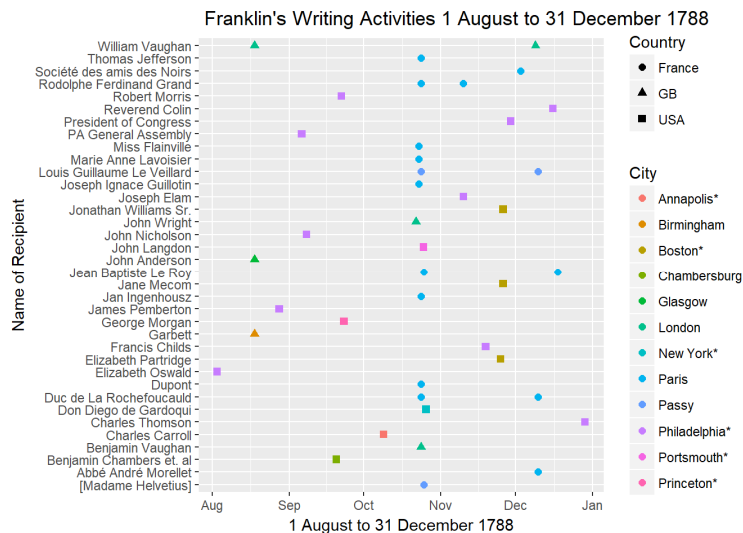


Figure 10: Time series analysis of Franklin's sent letters from 1788-08-01 to 1788-12-31.

Figure 9 shows Franklin’s correspondence network from August to December 1788. This network clearly centers on the new republic with connections to both Great Britain and Europe. The USA correspondence during this period primarily but not exclusively concerns either politics or business. The international correspondence primarily but not exclusively concerns either old friends or natural philosophy. Moreover, Franklin’s progress reports on the memoirs were sent outside the USA, to Vaughan in Great Britain and Le Veillard in France.

If Franklin had brought his memoirs up to the year 1756 when he wrote Vaughan in October 1788, Franklin was writing a pace of roughly 1425 words per year for the years 1734 to 1756. This was an expansion upon his previous pace, but not drastically so. To bring his memoirs up to date from 1756/7 to 1788, Franklin would need to have written at least another 45600 words or so. This was considerable amount for Franklin. Yet at the same time, it also entailed Franklin writing for 17 days or so at his benchmark heavy load rate of 2700 words per day. Cut the writing load in half, and Franklin would have needed 34 good days. Obviously, Franklin would have gone over the entire memoirs, made revisions, corrections, and so on. But his optimism that he might finish the memoirs before spring 1789, health pending, seems not unwarranted based on the projected work load alone. Yet again, however, Franklin did not do well with sustained serial cognitive tasks. Figure 10 below, which shows Franklin’s other writing activities during this time, reveals a familiar pattern—one found also in figures 1, 7 and 8.

Franklin wrote letters in clusters, perhaps even timing them to the departure of packet boats for his international correspondence. He wrote often, and almost daily: but not at a steady pace. Even for Franklin, however, the cluster in late October 1788 seems exceptional, and is worth a closer look as figure 11 below provides.

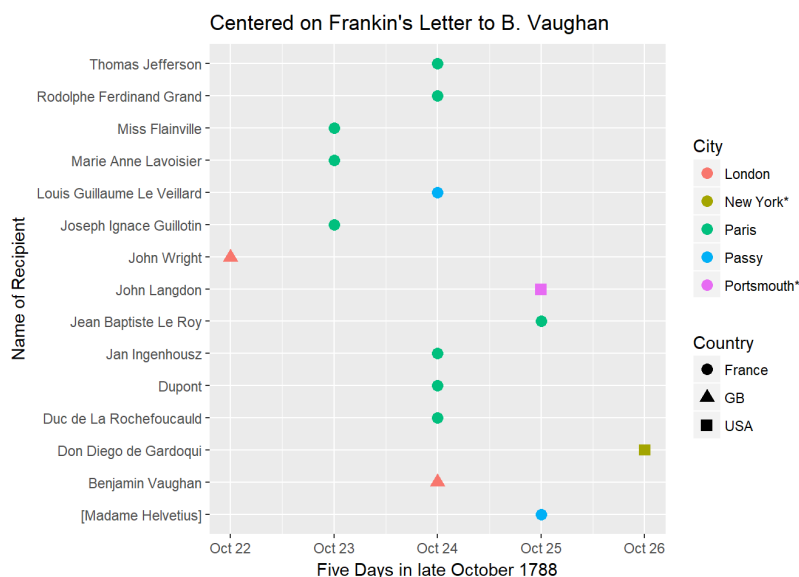


Figure 11: Restricted time series analysis of Franklin’s sent letters, 1788-10-22 to 1788-10-28.

On the same day—24 October 1788—that Franklin wrote Vaughan in London promising delivery of the memoirs by spring 1789, Franklin wrote an additional 6 letters to France; and between 22 and 26 October 1788, he wrote 15 letters total. Although the overall word count for all 15 letters over these 5 days is 3193 (with a margin of error < 1%), well within his benchmark performance of just two heavy writing days, Franklin was unquestionably feeling healthy enough

to get some work done. His brief spell of relative good health did not last, but Franklin likely failed to meet his promised deadline for an additional cause.

Franklin in fact would stall at 1757, the year in which he and William first went to England together. Arriving in port after a troublesome voyage, Franklin remarked: “I set out immediately with my Son for London, and we stopped a little on the Way to view Stonehenge on Salisbury Plan” (in Chaplain, 2012, p. 156). Franklin’s story in Great Britain, his time as colonial agent lobbying for American interests, cannot be separated from his relationship with William, then the Governor of New Jersey. This was difficult writing for a man who had only a few months earlier disinherited his son. Not until 13 November 1789, one year after his prediction to finish by spring 1789, did Franklin write an outline for continuing his memoirs: a listing of topics and events beyond 1757. But in fact, the last sentence in the manuscript copies that Franklin sent to Vaughan and Le Veillard in November 1789 for their suggestions reads: “We [Franklin and William] arriv’d in London the 27th of July 1757” (in Chaplain, 2012, p. 156). The memoirs almost ended with this promising journey of father and son, proud British-Americans, to the imperial capital. In fact, the edition published in 1818 by Franklin’s grandson and literary executor, William Temple Franklin, did end here—but Temple’s editing was deeply flawed (Lemay & Zall, 1981, pp. xx, lii-lviii).

His grandson’s literary sins notwithstanding, we know that Franklin wished things would have turned out differently even as he reasoned they could not. He had some ambiguity about the new American republic—now the center of his correspondence network. On 9 February 1789, fourteen months before he died, Franklin appended a published copy of his “Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union” (1754) with the following handwritten comments:

On Reflection it now seems probable, if the foregoing Plan or some thing like it, had been adopted and carried into Execution, the subsequent Separation of the Colonies from the Mother Country might not so soon have happened, nor the Mischiefs suffered on both sides have occurred, perhaps during another Century. [... the Albany Plan would have prevented] such terrible Expence of Blood and Treasure: so that the different Parts of the Empire might still have remained in Peace and Union.

His excellent analysis of why the Albany Plan was rejected notwithstanding (not included in the above extract), one must wonder how many of Franklin’s former fellow revolutionaries would have in 1789 shared his sentiment “that the different Parts of the Empire might still have remained in Peace and Union.” But it almost certainly would have been shared by two of Franklin’s former political allies, his son William Franklin and his once confidant Joseph Galloway, the original trustees of the 1771 Twyford manuscript.

Sometime between late 1789 and his death on 17 April 1790, and possibly even while on his deathbed in mid-April, Franklin scrawled in shaky hand a final seven manuscript pages, just over 1600 words, still concerning events in 1757, which Lemay and Zall (1981) have cogently argued comprises *Part Four* (pp. xxiii – xxxiii). More typically, scholars have designated all of the Philadelphia writing as *Part Three*. But these scholarly designations of “parts” presume a greater whole that never existed, not even in Franklin’s belated outline. What he left us is a collection of unfinished but related manuscripts given coherence as a book, an *Autobiography*, by subsequent generations of Franklin’s editors and readers.

Conclusion

Based upon data generated by quantitative analyses, as well as textual and historical evidence, this study has argued for a new and more parsimonious understanding of Franklin’s making of the *Autobiography*. It has ascribed certain key aspects of the memoirs less to intentional design and literary craft, in contrast to many previous studies, and more to Franklin’s writing habits, manifested cognitive style, and personal circumstances. It has also situated the development of the memoirs within Franklin’s primary writing activities: his participation in correspondence networks as a life-long member of the Republic of Letters. Finally, Franklin’s acknowledged genius notwithstanding, this study has also argued that Franklin as a habitual short form writer was more challenged by the task of composing his memoirs than previous scholarship has acknowledged, and likewise that his family relationships played a far greater role than previous scholarship has generally accepted.

Notes

1. The data science toolkit used was R, with RStudio. By email request, the author will happily provide an R markdown document (RMD) with the complete code and data visualizations.
2. The author acknowledges his gratitude to former students 黄惠清, 卢天赐, and 吴官, a.k.a, “Team Franklin,” for their outstanding work in a senior seminar (spring semester 2017) during which many aspects of this study were developed, discussed, and debated.

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Thomas J. Haslam currently serves as a Professor of English and Digital Literacies in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University. His research and educational projects engage using Data Science for the Humanities. He has published recent (2016-17) studies on Leonard Cohen, V.S. Naipaul, Wikipedia, and using Digital Tools for Higher Education behind the “Great Firewall” of China. His prior scholarship includes studies of Benjamin Franklin, Raymond Carver, and other figures in American literature.
