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The Franklin Stove: Modern Materiality, Made in Pennsylvania

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From 1738 to 1784, Benjamin Franklin invented five stoves that were designed to consume fuel more efficiently, preserving resources during a climate crisis, specifically the Little Ice Age. Franklin’s response to bad winter weather generated not only cast-iron technology but also a science of climate change. His long-term project shows that the material contours of early America, often treated as background, can (and should) be pulled into the foreground to reveal the emergence of modern materiality. Consumerism, resource depletion, industrialization, climate change, fossil fuel dependence, and the unjust division of wealth have been functionally connected since the eighteenth century, but when, why, and how they were linked remain important for early Americanists to decipher. Franklin’s stove project reveals, for example, an early history of consumer choices in the Global North being made to seem enlightened, by conserving natural resources, even as they were retrograde, using enslaved labor and appropriated Native land. In Pennsylvania, these conditions generated the United States’ first industrialized economy, born during a climate crisis and responsible, in part, for generating our current crisis, a legacy from early America that should be acknowledged—and studied—as being at least as revolutionary as the American Revolution.