



## Article

# The Question of Sharing: Thomas Jefferson and the Idea of Communal Property

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**Abstract:** Drawing from archival research, this article explores Thomas Jefferson's understanding of property and his embrace of a political community defined by communal sharing. Tracing the evolution of Jefferson's view on property holdings from the Anglo-Saxons to the American colonies to his speculative vision of ward republics, this paper argues that fears concerning economic and property inequities in the early republic compelled the principal author of the Declaration of Independence to endorse small, communal experiments. Importantly, this reading of Jefferson problematizes strict liberal or republican interpretations of his thought, further calling into question the philosophical heritage of the American republic. By evaluating personal letters from 1804 to 1824, this article offers an alternative reading of Jefferson, one that carefully showcases his wholly original, compelling, and radical democratic thinking. The significance of this heterodox interpretation has far-reaching implications on our understanding of the foundational principles of the early republic as well as how we address the issue of economic inequality in the modern-day United States.

**Keywords:** Thomas Jefferson; radical democracy; early American political thought; communal property; 19th-century communes



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## 1. Introduction

*“The question then becomes twofold: if a city is to be run well, is it better that all the citizens should share in all things capable of being shared, or only in some of them and not in others?” [1]*

—Aristotle

Thomas Jefferson is a complicated and complex thinker. His thought—sprawling, controversial, and on occasion contradictory—spans over seven decades, devoid of a definitive political magnum opus. This article affirms the complexity of his thought and argues that the Jeffersonian imagination contains a radical democratic dimension toward property. This side of Jefferson's thought is intimately concerned with the creation of the best type of dynamic political regime that could provide the conditions for freedom, equality, and happiness over time. To show this radical democratic side, an examination of Jefferson's understanding of property is warranted, one that pays particular attention to his embrace of a political community defined by communal property. Through archival research, I engage in a heterodox reading of Jefferson—one that places this key American Founder closer to a socialist orbit as previously offered by Richard K. Matthews and Michael Hardt—to expose his view on property and how a community defined by sharing is compatible with happiness [2].

This article is divided into three sections. In the first section, I explore Jefferson's understanding of property as a construct of positive law, rather than as a natural right. This is important because it directly informs his perspective on holding the earth in usufruct as well as his more substantial political vision that is centered on a pastoral, scientific farming socio-economic structure. Following my assessment of the broad conceptual framing of Jefferson's view on property, Section 3 explores the historical and philosophical sources of

his property worldview. Centrally, I show how Jefferson's appraisal of the allodial nature of property maintained by the Anglo-Saxons prior to the Norman Conquest in the 11th century informed his thinking on property relations in colonial America and his home state of Virginia. From his reading of the Anglo-Saxons, Jefferson inquired an important historical source that would become further refined over six decades engendering a systematic rejection of hierarchical, inequitable divisions of property. The pinnacle of his critique on inequitable property holdings reached its climax late in his life during his retirement phase at Monticello. In the final section of this article, I showcase his tepid, yet radical democratic embrace of communal property through an examination of personal letters conducted through archival research, which reveals a side of Jefferson's thought that tests the limits of early American scholarship by calling into question how far he envisioned the question of sharing within a political community.

## 2. Jefferson's View on Property

In this section, I explore Jefferson's understanding of property as a construct of positive law as well as his commitment to agriculture to help create the optimal conditions for citizens to achieve political freedom and economic security. To do so, I show how the possibility of happiness for a political community requires an embrace of scientific farming carefully integrated into a pastoral landscape that holds the earth in usufruct to ensure independence and self-sufficiency.

For Jefferson, no natural right to property exists and, as a result, only nature, not man, is the true creator of value [3]. Since individuals lack any natural right to property, the establishment and enforcement of property rights occurs via positive law. In a letter to James Madison on September 6, 1789, Jefferson extends his discussion on property, further outlining his unorthodox vision of the relationship between mankind and the earth. Repudiating primogeniture and hereditary claims to property, Jefferson offers a striking proposition. He categorically asserts, "I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self-evident, '*that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living*': that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it" [4]. From this position, Jefferson takes direct aim at both hereditary and aristocratic claims of prior generational supremacy, affirming the right of the *present generation*—freed from long-standing markers of rank, status, and wealth—to recreate the governing institutions for those of the present moment.

This attack on aristocracy is only adumbrated in his letter to Madison. A fuller articulation of his critique resonates in a missive to John Adams nearly twenty-four years later. Writing to Adams on the benefits of science, understood as an "attainable and useful" [5] field of study, Jefferson marks a distinction between *natural* and *artificial* manifestations of aristocracy. For Jefferson, virtue and talent—not pedigree or hereditary titles—were the truest reflection of a natural aristocracy that is the "most precious gift of society" [6] (pp. 562–568). Conversely, Jefferson sees artificial aristocracy predicated along lines of wealth and birth as a "mischievous ingredient in government and provision should be made to prevent its ascendancy" [6] (pp. 562–568).

Jefferson's condemnation of artificial aristocracy runs directly to his understanding of property and, as a corollary, its instrumental value to achieve happiness. Since the earth is utilized in usufruct and belongs only to the living generation devoid of prior generational claims, no perpetual agreement, whether in the form of land entitlements or political constitutions, can be permitted. Rather, Jefferson advocates for a release of debts, civil laws, property rights derived from positive law, and political constitutions, for each subsequent generation as an exercise of individual and generational right [7]. In short, prior laws, customs, and traditions do not bind the people of the present with "every constitution then, and every law, naturally expiring at the end of 19 years" [4]. Jefferson's repudiation of past holdings and his future-oriented vision stands out in opposition to the strongly pragmatic and respectful reverence held for past traditions and institutions expressed by his fellow American patriots, such as Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and John Marshall [8].

As individuals as well as each ensuing society ought to be unencumbered from the stringency of social, economic, and political hierarchies, Jefferson turns to the earth as the appropriate locus for individual development. Unequivocal in his advocacy for the cultivation of the earth via agricultural endeavors, Jefferson sees farming as the human activity par excellence as farmers are God's chosen people [9] (p. 226). The striking sub-header for Query VII of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781–1782) provides insight into his penchant for farming. Opening the query, Jefferson poses a question, "A notice of all that can increase the progress of human knowledge?" [9] (p. 77). His response is telling, contradistinction to intellectual and philosophical proposals, offering instead a rigorous analysis of the contributing factors, such as suitable temperatures, levels of rainfall, and geographical locations, necessary for the flourishing of agriculture. Human knowledge and progress are thereby contingent upon individuals turning their talents, skills, and energy to an enrichment of the earth. In Query XXII, Jefferson is steadfast in his promotion of agricultural development over involvement in foreign commerce and financial sectors, postulating, "[...] turn all our citizens to the cultivation of the earth; and, I repeat it again, cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens" [9] (p. 183). Again, he echoes similar sentiments regarding the virtuous farmer in an August 23, 1785 letter to John Jay, writing that the "cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous [...]" [10] (pp. 426–428).

Considering Jefferson's depiction of aristocracy, those who toil the land can rightly be seen as members of a natural aristocracy, advancing mankind towards complete enlightenment. C.B. Macpherson picks up this latter element of Jefferson's claim, particularly the belief that farmers are independent citizens because an individual's possession of property ensures a life freed from oppressive, exploitative wage-labor [11]. In a letter to Samuel Kercheval, dated 12 July 1816, Jefferson renounces the oppressive, dehumanizing working conditions of the European laborer, specifically because it does not afford the worker with any time to "think" [12] (pp. 222–228). Jefferson writes, "as the people of England are, our people, like them, must come to labor 16. hours in the 24. give the earnings of 15. of these to the government for their debts and daily expences; and the 16th being insufficient to afford us bread, we must live, as they now do, on oatmeal & potatoes" [12] (pp. 222–228). To escape the fate of exploitative labor and excessive taxation, Jefferson turns his sights to the soil. Not only is there more "time" for a farmer to exercise his capacities, but as Jefferson details in his September 6, 1785 letter to Geismar, there is more "freedom, more ease and less misery" in the rural setting of Monticello compared to the dense urban spaces of Europe [10] (p. 500). In this sense, Jefferson views an independent farmer as perfectly suited to engage in a project of self-development due to sufficient time and physical space, affixed to a rural, bucolic landscape.

Importantly, Jefferson expresses worry on ecological degradation and its effect on individual development relating to a "species of happiness" [13] (p. 187). In Query XX of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson favors a cultivation of wheat over tobacco precisely because of the extreme impact that tobacco farming has on the land [9] (p. 175). From his personal note of March 1811 titled, "Scheme for a System of Agricultural Societies", Jefferson provides a litany of recommendations for the proper treatment of farmlands. Notably, he mentions: a rotation of crops according to soil and climate; a principle of cultivation for wheat; a recognition of effective instruments to "correct the slovenly and unproductive practices too generally prevalent"; the utilization of "manures, plaster, green-dressings, fallows, and other means of ameliorating the soil"; and the creation of a report outlining useful husbandry techniques and practices [14]. Understood in inter-reliant terms, Jefferson understands the cultivation and flourishing of the earth as a reflection of the development and progression of mankind. By toiling the soil, Jefferson believes an individual becomes inoculated from the excessive realms of economic and political coercion, while at the same time, properly engaging and developing their intellectual, physical, and moral faculties. Jefferson, therefore, advocates for both the proper cultivation of society and the earth writ large.

Jefferson's ecological concerns also extend to the very type of agricultural system that is conducive to development and sustainability. While Jefferson has frequently been cast as a steadfast advocate of agrarianism, a strict reading of this classification vitally ignores both his fears of ecological ruin and his embrace of appropriate scientific and technological advances. Rather than viewing Jefferson squarely as an agrarian thinker, it is more fitting to consider him, as Richard K. Matthews argues in his work, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson*, as a proponent of scientific farming. Matthews contends, "[...] Jefferson seeks a pastoral ideal, a form of scientific farming in which the farmer can take advantage of all the arts of agriculture [...] [2] (p. 47). Succinctly summarizing Jefferson's thinking, Matthews writes, "Quite simply, he wants all the benefits of science, technology, and agriculture without any of the costs of industrialization" [2] (p. 47). Matthews' account stresses Jefferson's promotion of an integration between science and pastoralism, an element that ties directly to his refutation of a society governed by an artificial aristocracy. In a letter to John Adams, on 28 October 1813, Jefferson fashions together his previous ideas on virtue via farming and the dissolution of artificial aristocracy in a discussion on the progression of science. He forecasts that "an insurrection has consequently begun, of science, talents, and courage against rank and birth [...] [6] (pp. 562–568).

Jefferson's promotion of a pastoral society is not indicative of a prior socio-historical epoch, but a scientific advancement that acquires the benefits of agrarianism, while nullifying the brutalizing effects of modernization and industrialization. For Jefferson, pastoralism is not a reactionary process. Instead, it is a future-oriented socio-economic structure that is sustained by the labor and ingenuity of the present generation to revolutionize modes of production, thus enabling individuals more time away from the labor process and greater availability for personal and political energies. The centrality of property and pastoralism in Jeffersonian thought has far reaching implications for his understanding of politics and the prospects for an enlightened citizenry. With his writings on property, ecological concerns, and pastoralism in place, I now turn to the historical and philosophical sources that helped to shape his property worldview. This step is necessary to trace his evolution on property holdings and the important turn towards communal sharing.

### 3. Historical and Philosophical Sources

In the previous section, I offered Jefferson's understanding of property. Primarily, I aligned his belief of property as a construct of positive law as a necessary institution to prevent economic exploitation and political domination. Imprinted on Jefferson's view of property was a bucolic, pastoral vision that saw the earth held in usufruct in an analogous manner to his perspective on the holding of laws, constitutions, and debts. While these considerations were important, what is apropos now is to show from where—historically and conceptually—Jefferson's formulation of property as positive law emerges.

The substantial thrust of his property worldview is sketched out in "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" (1774). Jefferson appeals to Anglo-Saxons practices of allodial property to show how it has been severely misunderstood in the American colonies, turning to the historical treatises of John Dalrymple, Henry Spelman, and William Somner, as he carefully notes in his *Commonplace Books* [15]. Rejecting the claim that property holdings in the colonies were instituted by the legitimacy of the Monarch's transfer, Jefferson traces the introduction of feudal property relations in Anglo-Saxon England. "Our Saxon ancestors held their lands, as they did their personal property, in absolute domination" Jefferson attests, "disencumbered with any superior, answering nearly to the nature of those possessions which the feudalists term allodial" [16] (p. 20).

Importantly, I lean on Merrill Peterson's claim in *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* that "the shadow of the English heritage hovered over Jefferson's mind" [17]. While much has been written on the effect that Jefferson's Whig interpretation of the Saxons has played on his thought, especially concerning common law, constitutional engineering, and orthography [18], there persists a failure to align it in relation to his more radical leanings. Specifically, an impulse remains by way of a strictly liberal or republican account, which

morphs Jefferson's reading of the Saxons *always in relation to the past*, as a quasi-artifact of historical interpretation, or even, as Joseph J. Ellis argues, as complete fabrication [19]. Centrally, a more robust inquiry is needed that identifies the shift within Jefferson's thought that moves from history to political theory by means of action at the hands of politico-historical actors. Here, I suggest that Jefferson's assessment of the Anglo-Saxons helps to stress his preference for small, localized spaces of politics populated by active, duty-bound citizens within a community of sharing [20] (pp. 704–707), [12] (pp. 458–461).

Although the Saxons were free from any superior force over their land, Jefferson suggests that this practice was halted by William's conquest following the Battle of Hastings. From this crucial moment, Jefferson notes that freedom experienced anterior to the fateful Norman invasion became interrupted—including property holdings—by monarchical-feudal laws of possession. Yet Jefferson contends that the Norman Conquest, and the subsequent insurrections that procured an enlargement of the kingdom, failed to bring about a total consolidation of property relations for all members of Saxon Britain.

Specifically, the scope of feudal conditions was counteracted by the Saxons refusal to engage in a non-consensual transfer of allodial holdings to the crown. Pressure by royal officials, in the practice of "persuasions or threats" [16] (p. 20), sought to force surrender from a withholding enclave of non-conformists. However, according to Jefferson's understanding of history as a "weapon in a perpetual struggle between liberty and tyranny" [21], his reading of the Saxons highlight persistent challenges against the crown, emblematic of a refusal to capitulate and relinquish their property to a superior entity, even in the face of legal punishments inflicted by "Norman lawyers" to break their spirit [16] (p. 20). The lands held by the Saxons, specifically those who refused to swear feudal fiat to the crown, had crucially, therefore, "not been surrendered to the king", and consequently were not beholden to him [16] (p. 20). In this way, an understanding of a hierarchical feudal system in England was a misnomer to Jefferson; instead, "Feudal holdings were therefore but exceptions out of the Saxon laws of possessions", rather than the rule [16] (p. 20).

In this light, Jefferson sees the ending of primogeniture and entails in a purifying fashion, absolving future generations of the stain of feudal and unnatural hierarchies initiated by the Norman Conquest. Herbert E. Sloan captures the importance of abolishing primogeniture and entails to Jefferson, relating directly to his understanding of an artificial aristocracy explored in our discussion of his October 1813 letter to Adams, suggesting:

Entail and primogeniture, Jefferson believed, were Norman introductions, props for the 'aristocracy' that stood between the people and the full enjoyment of their rights. He was convinced at the time—and later—that abolition of these pernicious practices would have only the most salutary results. Destroying primogeniture and entail, recognizing the allodial character of landholding—these were essential parts of the program Jefferson worked to secure in the first flush of the Revolution, and both were intended to restore the invaluable 'practice of our wise British ancestors.' [22]

The repercussion of an eradication of social barriers of rank thereby cuts two ways in Jefferson's analysis. Primarily, it demonstrates an impulse in Jefferson's thought for a re-vindication of Anglo-Saxon principles, which imbues the very possibility that a community could be erected upon an ethos that strives in constant pursuit for a particular space in which all inhabitants are considered active participants. Beyond the strong ancestral implication of Jefferson's efforts, there is also a decisively Americana strain of thought operating here. Namely, the historical influence animates his "Bill to Enable Tenants in Fee Tail to Convey Their Lands in Fee Simple" from 1776 which aims at the obliteration of artificial distinctions to reopen a new plane of history for the progression of the rights of man [23] (pp. 560–562). The purging of archaic titles suspends, and then, at once, yet repeatedly through collective action, moves beyond an axis of domination through the creation of a new kind of society, one that announces its discontinuity with a conservative ordering of time, history, and politics.



In Jefferson's view, the struggle of the American colonists was similar, yet ripe with a possibility to transcend the imperfections of the Anglo-Saxons. Accordingly, the Saxons' reliance on allodial holdings, and importantly, a challenge against an entry of a superior power over one's property, continued to form the basis of common law even in the colonies [24]. Land grants bequeathed by the crown in British America, often at the expense of small fees and rents, perpetuated a myth in the eyes of the colonists that all lands settled and vacant were held under the jurisdictional realm of a sovereign monarchical authority in perpetuity. As a result, deception took root in the colonies as the first settlers were convinced that newly discovered lands were under a command of a distant, transatlantic power upheld by feudal encumbrances [25]. For Jefferson, the crown—operating behind a veil of duplicity—violated not only the historical lineage of allodial property, but also a fundamental right of a new society to establish civil laws concerning property relations on their own terms [26]. This right—vitaly denied to the colonists—forms the basis and entire purpose of civil institutions within a specific society. A right that is importantly concomitant with Jefferson's belief that a legislature or even an entire society assembled collectively can determine the governing principles of property.

The actions of the Anglo-Saxons towards the encroaching and pervasive usurpations at the hands of the Normans serve as historical proof of the validity of the American colonists' right to allodial property holding as well as justification for challenges—diplomatically and violently, if necessary—against the crown. Again, Jefferson turns to the history of the Anglo-Saxons prior to the Norman Conquest to make his case. "America was not conquered by William the Norman", Jefferson holds, "nor its lands surrendered to him, or any of his successors" [16] (p. 20). He continues, bringing history into the present moment, into a pulsating need for action by the colonists, "Possessions there are undoubtedly of the allodial nature. Our ancestors, however, who migrated hither, were laborers, not lawyers" [16] (p. 20). Jefferson's claim that the ancestors of America were not trained lawyers, but rather laborers of the earth is crucial. It is important to recall that Jefferson views "Norman lawyers" at fault for their shrewd and scheming conduct that led to allodial landholdings to be given up to the victorious, conquering Normans. In this light, lawyers were responsible for ending the lineage of rightful ownership of property in England and helping to institute a feudal system that left the people at the mercy of a superior power. To Jefferson, these power-hungry minions of the crown were not the true founders of the new American society. America, according to Jefferson, was discovered and cultivated by those committed to toiling the soil and establishing a system of self-government reminiscent to basic principles of the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

While Jefferson only tentatively alludes to a symbiotic relationship between property and politics in his "Summary View", just a year later, it would play a prominent role in his thought. In June 1776, Jefferson took up the task of drafting a new constitution for his home state, hopeful for its adoption at the Fifth Virginia Convention. Written during the same summer months, Jefferson's constitution drafts lack the sweeping grandiose language expressed in the Declaration of Independence, yet its originality and radical vision are no less apparent and real.

In his view of Virginia's new proposed government scheme, Jefferson utilizes institutional mechanisms to marry together idealistic promises of economic/political freedom and equality. Specifically, Jefferson sought to extend the vote to all free, male inhabitants of the commonwealth to preserve individual liberty, promote civic virtue, and obliterate patrician politics ordered by artificial titles of wealth and status. In a letter addressed to Edmund Pendleton, written one month after his constitutional proposals were defeated in convention, Jefferson reveals that the primary objective of his efforts was to link a guaranteed allotment of property with the right to vote [23] (pp. 356–365). Jefferson was keenly aware that his idealistic proposal of a dynamic extension of suffrage would agitate his fellow Virginians. He opted, instead, to placate the sharp criticisms by implementing a property requirement for the vote. But Jefferson's efforts of appeasement were underscored by pragmatics and a sleight-of-hand mastery of logic to produce his intended conclusion.

Establishing a property requirement for suffrage, Jefferson fixes the threshold at either one-fourth of an acre within boundaries of a town or possession of at least 25 acres in the country. Centrally, these requisites merge property ownership with an individual's right to vote; however, in the final section of the draft, tilted "Rights Private and Public", Jefferson effectively invalidates the condition. He writes, "Every person of full age neither owning nor having owned 50 acres of land, shall be entitled to an appropriation of 50 acres or to so much as shall make up what he owns or has owned 50 acres in full and absolute dominion" [23] (pp. 356–365). From these premises, Jefferson, at once, implements a property requirement by barring those with less than 25 acres from voting, only to reverse the claim by guaranteeing 50 acres to all those without the stated plot of acreage. The result is a syllogism par excellence effectively permitting all free men to vote precisely because of an assured holding in property.

Jefferson neatly concludes his egalitarian property plea in direct homage to the allodial nature of the Anglo-Saxons. He urges, "Lands heretofore holden of the crown in fee simple, and those hereafter to be appropriated shall be holden in full and absolute dominion, of no superior whatever" [23] (pp. 356–365). Jefferson's advocacy for land equality directly translates into political equality enabling individuals to experience freedom on their own terms, rather than at the mercy of hierarchical, and often arbitrary, forms of governmental power. His identification of the Anglo-Saxon commitment to allodial property holdings contra feudal conditions thereby permeate his constitutional modeling. The Anglo-Saxons of the pre-Norman invasion configuration thus became superimposed upon his bucolic, pastoral vision of the Virginian countryside.

Jefferson's understanding of how property functioned as a positive right for the Anglo-Saxons certainly helped to shape his condemnation of feudal as well as colonial qua monarchical-authority holdings of property in the American colonies. But Jefferson's scorn for hierarchical, inequitable divisions of property remained constant throughout his life-long writings, forming the nucleus for a permeating critique of dominant liberal justifications of private property.

Almost a decade after his attempt to grant 50 acres of land to all white males in Virginia, Jefferson expresses severe hesitation and concern over property inequality. Shortly after arriving in France to begin his duties as Minister Plenipotentiary, he pens an illuminating letter to Reverend James Madison on 28 October 1785. In the letter, Jefferson recounts an encounter with a "poor woman" 40 miles outside of Paris in Fontainebleau. Eager to acquire insights into the conditions of the "labouring poor", Jefferson converses with her at length, later chronicling her daily struggles [10] (pp. 681–683). Pondering the plight of the Frenchwoman and the laboring class generally, Jefferson asks a probing question, "I asked myself what could be the reason that so many should be permitted to beg who are willing to work, in a country where there is a very considerable proportion of uncultivated lands?" [10] (pp. 681–683). Echoing his proposed solution found in the 1776 Virginia Constitution draft, he admits that the "consequences of this enormous inequality" has resulted in tremendous "misery to the bulk of mankind" necessitating a much-needed political remedy [10] (pp. 681–683). "Legislators cannot invent too many devices", he proclaims, "for subdividing property" in an attempt to alleviate an "inequality of property" [10] (pp. 681–683).

Jefferson continues his remarks on property inequality by summoning a Lockean position, albeit cautiously. In a line of text that would fit seamlessly in Locke's *Second Treatise*, Jefferson writes, "The earth is given as a common stock for man to labour and live on" [10] (pp. 681–683). Jefferson's Lockean sensibilities of linking property with labor are certainly at play here; however, his argument carefully departs at this inference, ultimately terminating a probable Lockean conclusion. Richard K. Matthews and Elric M. Kline argue that Jefferson's 28 October 1785 letter should be read as an "implicit transcendence of Locke's theory of property", highlighting the intertwined nature of "property, equality, and economic freedom" to Jefferson's political philosophy [27]. While Locke's proviso of "enough, and as good left" [28] would eventually reach its limits on the European continent,

prompting a logical invitation to seek out new uncultivated lands in America, Jefferson foresaw the dynamics of a commercial society defined by liberal subjectivity as problematic for the American republic. Clearly testing the limits of Locke's theory of property, Jefferson turns to a natural rights position to advance his argument. Unlike Locke though, Jefferson's natural rights language deployed in the letter is not directly linked to a fundamental right of property, but rather to his pantheon of natural rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While these three rights are famously attached to the legacy of Jefferson, he, crucially, links these rights with the natural right of expatriation, which was explicitly influenced by his historical reading of the Anglo-Saxons. The connection between the tripartite classification of first order natural rights and the right of free mobility is found in Jefferson's efforts to amend the Virginia Constitution and then again, later, in epistolary form [29] (pp. 476–479), [30] (pp. 432–434). Jefferson writes, "Whenever there is in any country, uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right" [10] (pp. 681–683). Certainly Jefferson's claim that the unemployed poor could reasonably take-up and appropriate open plots of land conforms to a Lockean impulse for further exploration of uncultivated vistas. Yet, Jefferson dramatically contests such a landing point. Instead, he concludes by stressing that "it is not too soon to provide by every possible means" that all should possess, at the very minimum, "a little portion of land" [10] (pp. 681–683).

Jefferson's insistence for a far-reaching redistribution of property, first detailed in his Virginia constitution drafting, and then again, in the more polemical October 1785 letter, is central to his view on property. On both occasions, a fear of an external, supreme power over the people helps to shape the contours of his urgings and recommendations. Jefferson advocates for the proper implementation of political devices to assuage the dehumanizing effects of property inequality. Although his prescriptions to ameliorate the unequal effects of highly concentrated property holdings may be rendered palliative, the real thrust of his property worldview matures within the conceptual bounds of his ward system.

Discussion on Jefferson's ward system has been cursory or absent [31]. Strikingly, recent attempts to affirm Jefferson as an early American radical, such as Kevin R.C. Gutzman's *Thomas Jefferson—Revolutionary: A Radical's Struggle to Remake America*, only briefly even consider his ward system [32] (pp. 11, 65). Often dismissed and reduced to pure idealism that emerged in the later years of his life, the importance of direct political action by all members of the wards is, thus, woefully missing. However, to cast Jefferson's ward system off as a byproduct that manifested only at the end of his long political career is to dilute the germ of an idea that evolved throughout his thinking for over four decades. Jefferson's vision of a highly participatory political community did not suddenly percolate as a response to administrative and policy shortcomings during his presidency as Suzanne W. Morse suggests, but rather it first appeared in his writings before ascending to the presidency [33].

As Dumas Malone observes, Jefferson's 1776 constitutional draft for the Commonwealth of Virginia advocates for a transmission of knowledge through localized school districts. Further, Malone notes that Jefferson's horizontal scheme of education based at the community-level titled, "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge", was dismissed by the Assembly in 1776 and then again in 1779 [34]. Malone is correct to emphasize the destabilizing effect that such a policy platform would have enacted on the dominant social hierarchies of colonial Virginia, yet he fails to trace Jefferson's desire for a division of public space as a central method for organizing a political community.

Jefferson indicates this earlier impulse in a letter to Joseph Priestly on 27 January 1800, a full year before entering the Executive Branch. He writes,

About 20 years ago I drew a bill for our legislature which proposed to lay off every county into hundreds or townships of 5 or 6. miles square, in the center of each of which was to be a free English school; the whole state was further laid off into 10. districts in each of which was to be a college for teaching the languages,



geography, surveying and other useful things of that grade; and then a single University for the sciences. [35] (pp. 339–341)

While the letter certainly underscores an importance of education to Jefferson, it also reveals a reimagining of the boundaries of republics, both in substance and size. For Jefferson, the ward system enables an enlargement of the overall size of the American republic while at the same time ensuring that all citizens have both the time and space to engage in local politics.

The emphasis that Jefferson places on the ward system as a means to resuscitate and rehabilitate the political was first noticed in Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* [36]. In *Nature's Man: Thomas Jefferson's Philosophical Anthropology*, Maurizio Valsania affirms Arendt's casting of Jefferson, suggesting that the concept of the wards are "downright Aristotelian" in orientation [37] (p. 48). Although hesitant to stress a communitarian side to the wards, Valsania does, however, suggest that according to Jefferson, the state lacks a legitimate right to its territory. Moreover, Valsania argues that Jefferson's philosophy is centered on a dynamic vision of a democratic society that sees all members freed from the state's scope of authority, empowered instead to engage in the task of self-government in the present moment [37] (p. 66). Further, Peter S. Onuf argues that Jefferson's theorization of localized democratic politics functions as a mechanism to dislodge a multitude of political societies from the very framework of the state [38]. The means to break the corrosive bond between local citizens and a centralized state, as Jefferson casts the sprawling federal government, runs directly to the explicit scene of politics found in the wards [39] (pp. 95–97).

At the base of Jefferson's pyramidal structure of government is the main concentration of political power housed in the ward republics. Drawing from historical examples of local politics, including the township configuration of the Anglo-Saxons, the tribal council structure of indigenous tribes, and the town hall meeting design found in New England, Jefferson believes that by dividing counties into smaller units, citizens will be able to "attend, when called on, and act in person" on matters concerning the immediate community [12] (pp. 222–228).

In a June 1824 letter addressed to Major John Cartwright, Jefferson elucidates the historical inspiration that shapes his ideal configuration of property arrangement. The plan envisioned by Jefferson is procured through an extensive division of space into localized, political units, known as ward republics. Jefferson opens the lengthy letter with an affirming tone, quickly situating the Anglo-Saxons as the rightful authors of the English Constitution. He continues, offering a historical telling, similar in substance to his January 1776 "A Refutation of the Argument that the Colonies Were Established at the Expense of the British Nation" albeit in abbreviated form, of the violations committed against the Anglo-Saxons by the Normans. Taking direct aim at Tory interpretations of history, found archetypically in the thought of the "great Apostle of toryism [sic]" [40], David Hume, Jefferson rejects a commonly held Tory position that holds the people as aggressors against the authority of the sovereign. Particularly, Jefferson condemns Hume's *History of England* accusing the Scottish thinker of historical misinterpretation, one that endangers the American republic by its veneration of centralized forms of governmental power [41]. Expressing the dangers of Hume's thought on the American mind, Jefferson describes the detrimental effects, "he will become also the tory of our constitution, disposed to monarchise the government, by strengthening the Executive, and weakening the popular branch, and by drawing the municipal administration of the states into the vortex of the general authority" [42]. Rather, Jefferson makes clear—in a point of commonality, as James W. Ceaser argues, with Real Whig Customary History—that "all power is inherent in the people", and can rightfully challenge encroachments advanced upon them [43].

As Jefferson further expounds on the Anglo-Saxons/American colonists' ancestral exchange, he abruptly, yet skillfully, takes up the issue of renewal and revision in the realm of public affairs. Citing his efforts to modify the constitution of Virginia, he focuses in on a key "improvement" that he is optimistic for adoption. "I hope they will adopt the subdivision of our counties into wards", he stresses, directly shifting the focus of the letter

towards the idea of the ward system [40]. He continues, first pointing to the physical specifications of each ward, and then, to its historic equivalent, writing, “the former may be estimated at an average of 24 miles square; the latter should be about 6 miles each; and would answer to the Hundreds of your Saxon Alfred” [40]. Key to the Cartwright letter, then, is Jefferson’s careful alignment of the operational capacities of his ward system in relation to the historical example of the Hundreds of the Anglo-Saxons [44].

Jefferson’s impulse to position his wards within the same lineage of the Anglo-Saxons is not arbitrary, but rather, it once again circles back upon his reading of history, one that elevates the chronicles of a free people prior to an entry of domination. Here, Jefferson’s reference to Alfred the Great carefully exposes a rupture in the Anglo-Saxons’ experience of freedom, a move that, on the one hand, merges together equality and freedom as an inseparable condition accessible only in a certain type of political community and, on the other hand, a necessary call for vigilance—and action—against an arrival of an external, superior force that relocates political authority away from the people.

The political and economic autonomy of the Anglo-Saxons, carefully arranged in a township configuration which permitted time and space for a life of independent subsistence, is central to understanding Jefferson’s perspective on the interplay between freedom/equality and property. Prior to the Norman Conquest, the Anglo-Saxons represented a challenge by the people against external forms of power. Primarily, this emerged in a persistent opposition to a giving-away of one’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness through the utilization of property as a mechanism to safeguard against excessive exploitation.

In the following section, Jefferson’s fears over the presence of external control over an individual’s property are detailed. Centrally, the lessons that Jefferson derived from the Anglo-Saxons significantly influenced his efforts to mitigate property inequalities in Virginia specifically and the American republic more generally. In the 1820s, Jefferson pushes the very limits of his thought concerning property holdings to its most mature position to explore the possibility of a political community defined by sharing, yet still fundamentally committed to the pursuit of happiness.

#### 4. The Prospects of a Community of Sharing

In this section, I take up Jefferson’s perspective on communal property and the limits of sharing within a political community through an engagement with a series of letters written *to* and *by* Jefferson from 1804 to 1824. This is necessary to showcase an unexplored side of his thought, one that is more receptive to socialist-communitarian, non-governmental societal experiments, and potentially destabilizes prominent canonical readings of Jefferson as a strict liberal or classical republican thinker.

In October 1804, Jefferson received a letter from Cornelius Camden Blatchly, a New York physician. Born in Mendham, New Jersey in 1783, Blatchly worked exclusively with the poor, providing care, and writing extensively on the amelioration of poverty. In his letter to Jefferson, Blatchly invites the president to read, analyze, and scrutinize the enclosed manuscript that develops “a scheme for an American alphabet” [45]. Hopeful to receive the prudent advice from one of the “most illustrious literary characters in America” [45], Blatchly apologizes for transmitting the document during a current session of Congress, but nonetheless expresses great respect and excitement for a response. Blatchly’s letter reached the president as Jefferson recorded it on 17 November in his “Summary Journal of Letters” [46] (p. 213); however, Blatchly would receive no response from the third president of the United States.

Over the next two decades, Blatchly would continue to work with the poor, turning to politics to combat rapid levels of poverty in New York City. In 1820, he founded the New York Society for Promoting Communities, an association committed to communitarian ideals as envisioned by Robert Owen. Two years later, drawing directly from Owen’s *A New View of Society*, Blatchly penned his own concise manifesto on a communal arrangement of society, titled *An Essay on Common Wealth* [47] (p. 289). On October 6th of that same

year, Blatchly reached out to the sage of Monticello yet again, this time hopeful to receive Jefferson's insights on a new vision of society.

Blatchly opens the letter with a rousing invitation. Accompanying the letter is a copy of Blatchly's essay, imploring Jefferson to read it so that he may "comprehend our ideas of what society now is, and what it ought to be" [48] (p. 1). Blatchly proceeds to provide a succinct synopsis of the aims of the essay as well as the general ethos of this utopian society. He details:

We are well persuaded [sic] that pure and good communities, can only be instituted & established by people who have good hearts & pure principles; and who ardently desire to practice what an illuminated intellect manifests to them to be right & dutiful to God & man.—Our essays are, therefore, only for the virtuous & unprejudiced, who candidly desire & seek for goodness & truth;—and such as these only, are fit for erecting societies wholly on the social, impartial, and unselfish principle: or in other terms, on the self-denying principle. [48] (p. 3)

He concludes affirming his utmost love and friendship for the recipient. "I am assured by thy character, that thou will approve of our disinterested endeavours", Blatchly upholds, for their ultimate goals seek to "promote the prosperity, purity & peace of all people" [48] (p. 3).

Blatchly's letter was recorded as received by Jefferson on 13 October 1822 [46] (p. 414). Unlike the previous letter from 1804, Jefferson offers a response. Jefferson opens his 21 October 1822 letter to Blatchly with a note of gratitude, thanking him for the pamphlet as the claims put forth warrant much admiration. "Its moral principles merit entire approbation, its philanthropy especially", Jefferson offers, further adding his respect for "its views of the equal rights of man" [49] (p. 1). However, Jefferson is hesitant to offer a flat-out endorsement of its objective. Primarily, Jefferson is concerned that a vision of this accord would be incompatible with an "extended society, like that of the United States" [49] (p. 1). Instead, the "diffusion of light and education" offer the best means for an extended promotion of virtue and a proliferation of happiness. His reliance on this delicate balance of liberty and education through an intercession of reason strikes a resounding chord to a batch of 1787 letters addressed to Edward Carrington and James Madison as a suitable panacea for an ignorance on the part of the populace pertaining to public affairs [50] (pp. 49, 92).

Jefferson's tepid reply, although is not without significance. Commenting on Blatchly's position of communal property, Jefferson affirms its feasibility as well as the upshot of a community defined by sharing. He writes, "On the principle of communion of property, small societies may exist in habits of virtue, order, industry, and peace, and consequently in a state of as much happiness as Heaven has been pleased to deal out to imperfect humanity" [49] (p. 1). The utopian ideal of Blatchly and his fellow associates, therefore, resonates with Jefferson for the societal design is directly aimed at the creation and enjoyment of happiness. Unlike earlier writings, which equated a responsive extensive government with happiness, Jefferson here reverses course and expands the scope of happiness for a societal arrangement defined by communal property to its maximum level—to a plane of its terrestrial limit [50] (pp. 49, 92), [51] (p. 358).

Jefferson is, however, undoubtedly a thinker concerned with pragmatics as Francis D. Cogliano has shown [52], and thus after praising the benefits of communal property, he cuts directly to its practical aspect, affirming "I can readily conceive, and indeed, have seen its *proofs* in various small societies which have been constituted on that principle" [49] (p. 1). These empirical examples referenced by Jefferson are detailed in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where he praises the small communal societies of the indigenous peoples in North America [9] (p. 97). The Blatchly letter carefully represents an important point in Jefferson's thought that establishes a link between small societies—in this case, accentuating the role of communal property—and its direct relation to happiness as well as the realization of political freedom, akin to the Saxon Hundreds and the ward system.

Jefferson's affirmation of actual, real-world proofs of alternative societies resurfaces in a letter with William Ludlow, two years later. On 30 July 1824, Ludlow, secretary of the "common stock of the Rational Brethren, and the Church of God in union" [53], reached out to Jefferson to acquire his insights on the prospects of a new type of social organization. In a lengthy letter—nearly six pages long—Ludlow provides his views of the Society and their beliefs in how mankind would benefit from the creation of communities that hold property in common. To test such a proposition, Ludlow along with his brother, Israel, and James M. Dorsey, purchased land near Coal Creek, Indiana [54]. Intent on establishing a community "associated in scientific union", Ludlow describes the configuration of their future-home. He writes:

We shall suppose that fifty families hold a joint and equal interest in 3000 acres of land, their right of enjoyment, being founded upon the simple principle of moral rectitude: and that they settle upon the tract, the soil good, with water advantages for machinery. All the useful arts are understood by a sufficient number in union. The only test of fellowship, and enjoyment of all improvements to be an adherence to those established rules, that a common sense of rectitude must render evidently best. Is it not rational to believe; that by the united wisdom and actions of the associates; a far greater effect for the good of all can be produced by such organized union; than by any other method? [53]

The effects of this type of society on the physical, intellectual, and spiritual condition of man are clear to Ludlow. "The associates shall be freed from that corroding anxiety and turmoil", Ludlow contends, establishing a community defined by "a solid and permanent friendship, between those, who receive such superior and real benefits from one-another". Ludlow believes that their experiment in Coal Creek will be essential in proving that communitarian principles can be implemented at-large, as he offers, "And if fifty, or a hundred families, can enjoy those effects; five hundred, or a thousand, may not be too large an association". According to Ludlow, only a community of sharing can permit the full flourishing of mankind, enabling all to "reap the greatest possible benefit: [ . . . ] the perfection of machinery in manufacturing advantages, and the best perfected plan of education" [53].

Like the Blatchly letter, Jefferson opens his reply to Ludlow with an air of scientific inquiry. "We have under our eyes tolerable proofs" [55] (p. 1), Jefferson attests, speaking to the development and progression of societies. In agreement with Ludlow, Jefferson, too, believes that the promise of progress has not been fully realized, in large part due to the encroachment and usurping nature of excessive "machinery of government" [55] (p. 1). While he rejects Ludlow's claim for a return to a simpler state of society, Jefferson does delicately indicate interest for the establishment of an experiment to test a small arrangement of families living under an ethic of communal sharing. Sidney Hook points to the delicate interplay between societal form and happiness in Jefferson's thinking, stressing, "Happiness depends 'on the circumstances and opinions of different societies,' and is a matter of investigation and experimentation" [56]. Once again, Jefferson affirms the idea of property held in common *contra* natural, hereditary, divine, or positive claims. "Your experiment seems to have this in view", Jefferson writes, "A society of seventy families, the number you name, may very possibly be governed as a single family, subsisting on their common industry, and holding all things in common" [55] (p. 1).

Jefferson certainly raises concern over population growth and how communal property could be maintained to ensure stability [9] (p. 173), [57] (pp. 365–366), [58] (pp. 380–381), [59] (pp. 475–479). But Jefferson's cautionary words are counterbalanced by captivation. Closing the letter in such a manner, he writes, "The experiment is interesting; I shall not live to see its issue, but I wish it success equal to your hopes, and to yourself and society prosperity and happiness" [55] (p. 2). Jefferson's wish—the erection of an intimate, fraternal, communitarian organization—would dissolve in 1832, nearly six years after his death [60] (p. 141). However, the promise of a society defined by communal sharing,

an absence of coercive power, and an attainment of happiness for its members remains a captivating aspect of Jefferson's thought.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, I have proposed a reading of Thomas Jefferson that is more receptive to a radical democratic framing, which embraces an arrangement of a political community organized by way of communal property. An interpretation of Jefferson along these lines calls into question myriad strains of his thought, from English liberalism to classical republicanism to Scottish moralism, and significantly problematizes his position against communal property articulated prior to his correspondences with Blatchly and Ludlow. Rebuking Plato's call in the *Republic* for a sharing of property, wives, and children amongst the guardian class, Jefferson suggests that a community of sharing is antithetical to liberty and progress. The result of extreme sharing according to Jefferson, especially if applied in the context of the American republic, would leave all "men, women and children [living] pell mell together, like the beasts of the field or forest" [20] (pp. 451–455).

How then are we to square Jefferson's earlier scorn of Platonic republicanism with his more receptive consideration for communal experimentations expressed later in life during the 1820s? M. Andrew Holowchak has argued—while fully granting Jefferson's distaste for Plato's *Republic*—significant commonalities exist between the two thinkers [61] (pp. 76–105). Notably, Holowchak suggests that civic education and full, active political participation underscore both Jefferson and Plato's political philosophies. While Holowchak's analysis is impressive, particularly in its ability to accentuate numerous underappreciated aspects of ancient Greek thought on Jefferson, I depart in viewing Jefferson as a "political medianist" [62] (pp. 371, 383), opting instead to deploy a leftist framing that opens the possibility for a political community defined by sharing.

Importantly, I argue that resolving the tension misses the mark and loses sight of the historical and philosophical implications of his later position. Scholarship has too often attempted to nullify these sites of radical potential, casting them off as logical inconsistencies to produce a more conceptually neat presentation of his thought. Instead, scholars of the early republic stand much to gain by rethinking our methodological and epistemological starting points to deal with the issue of textual limitation more properly. Put differently, to explore the thought of Jefferson, or any of the American Founders for that matter, scholars ought to strive to expose potential lines of congruity and symmetry or fissures of discontinuity and destabilization set against the body of a particular text and a thinker's larger body of work.

To embark upon an examination of the political ideas and ideals of the early American republic is to initiate a historical voyage that sets its sight on the mores, norms, and institutions of a particular political landscape. However, by ignoring the historical significance of a political interrogation, we critically eradicate the active, productive forces that directly form a theory concerning the social realities of a political community. To borrow from Dick Howard, "political thought cannot be understood apart from the history in which it is embedded, any more than that history makes sense without considering the intentions of the actors" [63]. In this article, I have suggested that to comprehend the histories of the United States and, in turn, the events, people, and ideas that have shaped our present situation, we must continue to explore the thought of Thomas Jefferson, for new spaces remain that have yet to be explored, offering our contemporary gaze an entry into a vision that points toward an alternative configuration of political life in the United States.

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