

to the production of raw material and small-scale manufacturing were somewhat successful. The colonies remained primarily agricultural and their people and governments directed most of their energies to the concerns of farmers, husbandmen, and planters. Imperial restrictions on the dissemination of certain industrial information held back the issuing of patent monopolies, which remained quite rare throughout the colonial period.¹¹ Restrictions on the diffusion of technology retarded the development of some American industries. In textiles, in particular, late eighteenth-century England busied with innovation, yet in the North American colonies spinning wheels and looms were hardly changed from the seventeenth century. Americans were slow to adopt new technologies, however, even in industries where no restrictive imperial policy existed. Printing presses were heavy and complex and until the middle of the eighteenth century all colonial printers had to import them from England because no local carpenters could build them. Even the fonts had to be imported from England before 1768 when Abel Buell established a type foundry in Killingworth, Connecticut.

In general, American industrial backwardness had less to do with the British restrictions than with the specific conditions and business practices in the colonies. The continental colonies of North America were supposed to provide raw materials—wool, cotton, and flax—but the cloth had to be made in England; otherwise, according to mercantilist reasoning, the metropolis would lose its dominance in trade. The crown allowed Americans to spin and weave for local home consumption, but prohibited them from exporting the finished products. These restrictions however, failed to check the growth of colonial spinning and weaving because there was another economy in which notions of sharing technology were privileged over secrecy. Women from all classes and in a variety of regions engaged in domestic manufacturing of clothing. Wives, widows, and daughters taught one another how to operate newer looms and

spinning wheels and wove for their families and the local market. The impact of these women on the American economy was so great that colonial officials complained that household manufactures came at the expense of British imports. Ultimately, the colonial textile industry might have lagged behind that in the metropolis because of the preeminent market position of homespun cloth.¹²

While shortages of natural resources in Europe fueled searches for technological improvements, abundance in the New World made the adoption of new technologies less necessary. The forests of the northeastern and Mid-Atlantic colonies provided wood for constructing homes, ships, and furniture, as well as providing the colonial economy's main source of energy. Traditional European energy conservation practices were replaced by reckless colonial overuse, ultimately leading to the radical deforestation of the region. European commentators were appalled by the "incredible amount of wood" that was "squandered" in the colonies.¹³ Differing attitudes toward the use of energy slowed down the transfer of some technologies across the Atlantic. The burning of coal powered England's industrial revolution well into the nineteenth century. In North America, however, wood and charcoal were cheaper and readily available. Moreover, the colonies were rich in waterpower sites that rendered steam engines unnecessary except at geographically flat locations. Consequently, the economy of colonial America all but ignored most industrial innovations regarding fuel in England. For all their technological deficiencies and industrial dependency on the metropolis, however, the economy of the colonies grew at a rapid pace and generated widespread prosperity.¹⁴

The spectacular growth of the American colonial economy in the eighteenth century generated greater purchasing power for women and men who increasingly acquired manufactured goods. The American colonies earned the reputation of being the best poor men's country as by the third quarter of the century white Americans