

Benjamin Franklin and America's Technology Deficit

In 1784, shortly after concluding the peace treaty with England, Benjamin Franklin published in France a short pamphlet entitled *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, advising those planning to immigrate that opportunities in the New World were limited. Why did the man who celebrated America's demographic boom for much of his life, and who had a very high opinion of economic opportunities in the New World, write such a discouraging pamphlet? Franklin explained that numerous prospective emigrants had approached him with questions and requests that attested to their "mistaken ideas and expectations of what is to be obtained there." These men imagined that Americans were "rich, capable of rewarding, and disposed to reward, all sorts of ingenuity; that they [Americans] are . . . ignorant of all the sciences; and consequently, that strangers, possessing talents in the belles-lettres, fine arts, &c. must be highly esteemed, and so well paid, as to become easily rich themselves." The pamphlet set out to correct once and for all these "wild Imaginations."

Franklin directed his discouraging remarks at one particular group: European manufacturers. The United States, he explained, did not follow the practice of European princes who offered high

salaries and privileges to manufacturers to induce them to migrate and introduce hitherto unknown advanced industrial technology. Many artisans had approached Franklin believing that America's industrial underdevelopment would allow them to condition their migration on receiving various advantages from Congress and the states. They demanded transportation subsidies, land grants, and salaried government positions in exchange for their industrial skills. But "Congress have no power committed to them, or money put into their hands for such purposes." All in all, the pamphlet encouraged hardworking Europeans willing to engage in agriculture and home manufacturing to emigrate, and discouraged those with dreams of English-like industrialization.¹

For artisans expecting that the separation of the agricultural colonies from the industrializing mother country would open up great opportunities to migrate and accumulate wealth, the words of America's most prominent spokesman must have sounded very disappointing. The new country, he declared, was not about to follow the European practice of offering inducements to entice skilled artisans.

Benjamin Franklin was the preeminent intellectual of the American Enlightenment. He had been an outspoken champion of American science and technology since the middle of the eighteenth century. As early as 1751 he wrote in "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind" that those who "invent new Trades, Arts or Manufactures . . . may be properly called Fathers of their Nation."² He recognized the infant state of American manufactures and their technological deficiencies, and neither ruled out technology piracy nor urged his countrymen to respect European prohibitions on the diffusion of technology. Yet, while aware of the degree of American technological dependence on England, first as a loyal subject and later as a patriotic American, Franklin did not succumb to the nationalist view of knowledge and never became a technology