CHAPTER 2

The Battle over Technology within the Empire

When England began colonizing the North American continent early in the seventeenth century, no imperial statesman envisioned that these struggling outposts could become actual economic rivals. With the country torn by dynastic and civil wars, and hardly the center of industry and innovation, early imperial policy did not regulate the transfer of technology between the metropolis and the peripheries, assuming that at best the colonies would become sources of raw materials and potential markets. The nature of the economic and technological relationship between England and its North American continental colonies was transformed over the one hundred and seventy years of colonial rule. Whereas in the initial stages of colonization the metropolis allowed, and at times even encouraged, skilled artisans to migrate to the New World, in the second half of the eighteenth centuries, as some branches of the colonial economies began to compete with British counterparts, the Board of Trade tried to put the brakes on industrial development in North America by restricting the transfer of technology across the Atlantic. Indeed, the evolution in attitudes in Great Britain and America toward technology transfer foretold the deteriorating relations leading to the breakup of the Empire. American

embrace of clandestine and illegal appropriation of English industrial technology was at the heart of the revolutionary project.

Dependent Colonies

The joint stock companies that sponsored the early colonization efforts understood that if they hoped to profit from their ventures they had to entice workers to leave the homes they knew for a risky adventure in the wilderness. To make life in North America attractive to potential immigrants, expeditions had to include skilled artisans who could create in the New World some of the comforts of the old. As early as 1629, before John Winthrop and his famous entourage set foot in North America, the Massachusetts Bay Company hired Thomas Grove, a jack-of-all-trades, to move to America and help found the colony even though "[h]is salarie costs this Companie a great some of mony."[1]

The New England and Mid-Atlantic colonies attracted a sufficient number of immigrants and in the latter part of the seventeenth century generated enough homegrown artisans to make the shortage less acute. The colonies of the south, however, failed to attract a significant number of skilled immigrants and their slave economies were inhospitable to the growth of an indigenous independent free class of artisans. Early in the eighteenth century three Virginians anxiously reported that the absence of towns, markets, and capital left "but little Encouragement for Tradesmen and Artificers," and thus the colony was plagued by "the Dearth of all Tradesmen's Labour and likewise the Discouragement, Scarcity, and Insufficiency of Tradesmen." Nearly all of the capable master builders in the southern colonies before the Revolution were brought over to complete specific jobs. As late as 1746 South Carolinian recruiting agents traveled to London in search of printers, watchmakers, carpenters, sail and rope makers, and blacksmiths.[2]