



“People do not inquire . . . *What is he?* But *What does he do?*”

\_\_Benjamin Franklin\_\_

## *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*

1782, EXCERPTS

Benjamin Franklin spent almost one third of his life in Europe serving as a diplomat for the American colonies (seventeen years in England) and for the United States (nine years in France). While there, he often published letters and essays to explain America and its people to Europeans—primarily to rid them of misconceptions and what Franklin considered unjustified criticism. In this essay, published in French and English by Franklin’s press in Paris, Franklin addressed three misconceptions that elite Europeans held about the opportunities for *them* in the new nation. America was not a playground, Franklin let them know—no land of ease for entitled “gentlemen” of Europe who regarded labor as beneath them. It was a land of opportunity for the *useful*, for “hearty young Laboring men” who would build the nation and not exploit it. (Franklin’s need-to-have list also revealed the daunting spectre of settling the western lands to the Mississippi River, soon to be officially ceded to the United States.) Compare Franklin’s “information” with the followup advice offered by Benjamin Rush, a fellow Philadelphian, in a 1790 essay entitled *Information to Europeans Who Are Disposed to Migrate to the United States of America*.<sup>1</sup>

Many Persons in Europe having directly or by Letters express’d to the Writer of this, who is well acquainted with North America, their desire of transporting and establishing themselves in that Country — but who appear to him to have formed, through Ignorance, mistaken Ideas & Expectations of what is to be obtained there — he thinks it may be useful and prevent inconvenient, expensive & fruitless Removals<sup>2</sup> and Voyages of improper Persons<sup>3</sup> if he gives some clearer & truer Notions of that Part of the World than appear to have hitherto prevailed.

He finds it is imagined by Numbers [of Europeans]

that the Inhabitants of North America are rich, capable of rewarding — and dispos’d to reward — all sorts of Ingenuity;

that they are at the same time ignorant of all the Sciences, & consequently that strangers [foreigners] possessing Talents in the Belles Letters,<sup>4</sup> fine Arts, &c. must be highly esteemed and so well paid as to become easily rich themselves;

that there are also abundance of profitable Offices to be disposed of which the natives are not qualified to fill,<sup>5</sup> and that having few Persons of Family<sup>6</sup> among them, Strangers of Birth must be greatly respected and of course easily obtain the best of those Offices, which will make all their Fortunes;

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<sup>1</sup> See Section 8 of Theme 4: INDEPENDENCE in this primary source collection.

<sup>2</sup> *Removals*, i.e., acts of leaving one’s place of residence for another.

<sup>3</sup> i.e., those who would be making an inappropriate decision to move to America.

<sup>4</sup> *Belles Lettres* [French]: fine literature.

<sup>5</sup> i.e., that there are many well-paid government positions for which Americans are unqualified and must therefore be filled with Europeans.

that the Governments, too, to encourage Emigrations from Europe, not only pay the expense of Personal Transportation but give Land gratis [free] to Strangers, with Negroes to work for them, Utensils of Husbandry [farming] & Stocks of Cattle.

There [sic] are all wild Imaginations, and those who go to America with Expectations founded upon them will surely find themselves disappointed.

The Truth is that though there are in that Country few People so miserable as the Poor of Europe, there are also very few that in Europe would be called rich — it is rather a general happy Mediocrity [middle ground] that prevails. There are few great Proprietors of the Soil and few Tenants.<sup>7</sup> Most People cultivate their own Lands or follow some Handicraft or Merchandise<sup>8</sup> — very few rich enough to live idly upon their Rents or Incomes, or to pay the high Prices given in Europe for Paintings, Statues, Architecture, and the other Works of Art that are more curious than useful. Hence the natural Geniuses that have arisen in America with such Talents have uniformly quitted [left] that Country for Europe, where they can be more suitably rewarded.

*Reply to first misconception*

It is true that Letters<sup>9</sup> and mathematical Knowledge are in Esteem there, but they are at the same time more common than is apprehended [realized], there being already existing nine Colleges or Universities, viz. [namely] four in New England and one in each of the Provinces of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia, all furnish'd with learned Professors, besides a number of smaller Academies. These educate many of their Youth in the Languages and those Sciences that qualify Men for the Professions of Divinity, Law, or Physic.<sup>10</sup> Strangers [foreigners] indeed are by no means excluded from exercising those Professions, and the quick Increase of Inhabitants everywhere gives them a Chance of Employ, which they have in common [with] the Natives. Of civil Offices<sup>11</sup> or Employments there are few — no superfluous Ones as in Europe — and it is a Rule establish'd in some of the States that no Offices should be so profitable as to make it desirable.

*Reply to second misconception*

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These Ideas prevailing more or less in all the United States, it cannot be worth any man's while, who had a means of Living at home, to expatriate himself<sup>12</sup> in hopes of obtaining a profitable civil Office in America; and as to military Offices, they are at an End with the War, the Armies being disbanded. Much less is it advisable for a Person to go thither who has no other Quality to recommend him but his Birth.<sup>13</sup> In Europe it has indeed its Value, but it is a Commodity that cannot be carried to a worse Market than to that of America where People do not inquire concerning a Stranger, *What is he?* But *What does he do?* If he has any useful Art, he is welcome, and if he exercises it and behaves well, he will be respected by all that know him; but a mere Man of Quality who on that Account wants to live upon the Public by some Office or Salary will be despis'd and disregarded. The Husbandman [farmer] is in honor there, & even the Mechanic, because their Employments are useful. . . .

*Reply to third misconception*

With Regard to Encouragements for Strangers from Government, they are really only what are derived from good Laws & Liberty.<sup>14</sup> Strangers are welcome because there is room enough for them all, and therefore the old Inhabitants are not jealous [distrustful] of them. The Laws protect them sufficiently so that they have no need of the Patronage of great Men,<sup>15</sup> and everyone will enjoy securely the Profits of his Industry. But if he does not bring a Fortune with him, he must work and be industrious to live. One or two Years' Residence give him all the rights of a Citizen, but the Government does not at present, whatever it may have done in former times, hire People to

*Reply to fourth misconception*

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<sup>6</sup> *Persons of family*, i.e., members of wealthy influential families with long standing in society.

<sup>7</sup> I.e., there are few wealthy owners of large farms and plantations, and there are few tenant farmers on the large plantations.

<sup>8</sup> *Merchandise*: an artisan trade.

<sup>9</sup> *Letters*: arts and literature.

<sup>10</sup> *Divinity*: theology, in preparation for the ministry. *Physic*: medicine.

<sup>11</sup> *Civil offices*: government positions.

<sup>12</sup> I.e., leave his home country.

<sup>13</sup> I.e., social standing in a prominent family.

<sup>14</sup> I.e., the state government do not need to entice Europeans through promises of land, slaves, transportation, etc., as the laws and freedoms of the U.S. are sufficient enticement to emigrate to America.

<sup>15</sup> I.e., workers do not need to align themselves with wealthy men to protect themselves from poverty, as in Europe.

become Settlers by Paying their Passages, giving Land, Negroes, Utensils, Stock, or any other kind of Emolument whatsoever. In short, America is the Land of Labor and by no means what the English call *Lubberland*<sup>16</sup> and the French *Pays de Cocagne*,<sup>17</sup> where the Streets are said to be pav'd with half-peck Loaves [of bread], the Houses tiled with Pancakes, and where the Fowls fly about ready roasted, crying, *Come eat me!*

**Who then are the kind of Persons to whom an Emigration to America may be advantageous? and what are the Advantages they may reasonably expect?**<sup>18</sup>

Land being cheap in that Country, from the vast Forests still void of Inhabitants and not likely to be occupied in an Age to come — insomuch that the Propriety of a hundred Acres of fertile Soil full of Wood may be obtained near the Frontiers in many Places for eight or ten Guineas — hearty young Laboring Men who understand the Husbandry of Corn and Cattle, which is nearly the same in that Country as in Europe, may easily establish themselves there. A little Money sav'd of the good Wages they receive there while they work for others enables them to buy the Land and begin their Plantation, in which they are assisted by the Good Will of their Neighbors and some Credit. Multitudes of poor People from England, Ireland, Scotland and Germany have by this means in a few Years become wealthy Farmers, who in their own Countries, where all the lands are occupied and the Wages of Labor low, could never have emerged from the mean [poor/harsh] Condition wherein they were born.

From the Salubrity [healthfulness] of the Air, the Healthiness of the Climate, the Plenty of good Provisions, and the Encouragement to early Marriages, by the certainty of Subsistence in cultivating the Earth, the Increase of Inhabitants by natural Generation is very rapid in America and becomes still more so by the Accession of Strangers.<sup>19</sup> Hence there is a continual Demand for more Artisans of all the necessary and useful kinds to supply those Cultivators of the Earth with Houses, and with Furniture & Utensils of the grosser Sorts<sup>20</sup> which cannot so well be brought from Europe. Tolerably good Workmen in any of those mechanic Arts are sure to find Employ and to be well paid for their Work, there being no Restraints preventing Strangers from exercising any Art they understand, not [sic] any Permission necessary. If they are poor, they begin first as Servants or Journeymen, and if they are sober, industrious & frugal, they soon become Masters, establish themselves in Business, marry, raise Families, and become respectable Citizens.

Also, Persons of moderate Fortunes and Capitals who, having a Number of Children to provide for, are desirous of bringing them up to Industry and to secure Estates for their Posterity, have Opportunities of doing it in America which Europe does not afford. There they may be taught & practice profitable mechanic Arts without incurring Disgrace on that Account<sup>21</sup> — but on the contrary acquiring Respect by such Abilities. There small Capitals [amounts of money] laid out in Lands, which daily become more valuable by the Increase of People, afford a solid Prospect of ample Fortunes thereafter for those Children. . . .

The almost general Mediocrity of Fortune that prevails in America obliging its People to follow some Business for Subsistence, those Vices that arise usually from Idleness are in a great Measure prevented. Industry and constant Employment are great Preservatives of the Morals and Virtue of a Nation. Hence bad Examples to Youth are more rare in America, which must be a comfortable Consideration to Parents. To this may be truly added that serious Religion under its various Denominations is not only tolerated but respected and practiced. Atheism is unknown there, Infidelity rare & secret, so that Persons may live to a great Age in that Country without having their Piety shock'd by meeting with either an Atheist or an Infidel. And the Divine Being seems to have manifested his Approbation [approval] of the mutual Forbearance and Kindness with which the different Sects treat each other, by the remarkable Prosperity with which he has been pleased to favor the whole Country.

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<sup>16</sup> In a traditional English ballad, a place of luxury and ease; later ascribed to North Carolina, as a land of laziness, by Virginian William Byrd in his 1728 *History of the Dividing Line*.

<sup>17</sup> In French literature, a mythical land of plenty and idleness.

<sup>18</sup> Embodying added.

<sup>19</sup> *Accession of Strangers*: emigration of foreigners.

<sup>20</sup> I.e., those that can easily be fabricated in a rough form and thus would not need to be imported from Europe.

<sup>21</sup> I.e., without suffering humiliation in low-status work (as in Europe, Franklin implies).