

THE NEW MAN (AND WOMAN)

A Frenchman named Michel-Guillaume de Crèvecoeur came to the colonies in 1756 and changed his name and citizenship. He traveled through the colonies as a salesman, surveyor, and a keen observer. In 1769 he married and settled down as a farmer in New York. During this time, he wrote *Letters from an American Farmer*. From the beginning, he observed a big difference between Americans and Europeans. He asked the question: "What, then, is this American, this new man?" The American had come from Europe, and might be of English, Dutch, French, Swedish, or German ancestry, and yet he had changed his attitudes to become an independent thinker who took pride in hard work and his property. "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions."

Other observers who came later, especially Alexis de Tocqueville (who came in the 1830s) noticed this same thing. Americans were different. The questions were what made them different, and how did they differ from Europeans? Various explanations have been given, and some are included here. They are not listed in any order of preference.

THE ACT OF LEAVING. The European often lived in the same house with his parents and grandparents; perhaps the family had lived in the same town for the last 150 years. People did not leave roots this tightly held out of some whim. It was hard to say good-bye to nation, language, town, family, friends, and possessions to go down the road toward the coast. After boarding the ship, they suffered seasickness and watched as others suffered various diseases and died. After weeks at sea, land was sighted, and the passengers became excited. In their hearts, they knew this was now their homeland, and they would never return to the village of their youth or see their parents again.

Once in America, they did not regain the loyalty to one place that they had in Europe. They freely moved from one town and colony to another in pursuit of new opportunities. Crèvecoeur wrote that the European arriving in America had a limited idea of what he might achieve, but he quickly outgrew that. "Two hundred miles formerly appeared a very great distance, it is now but a trifle; he no sooner breathes our air than he forms schemes . . . he never would have thought of in his own country."

THE FEELING OF INDEPENDENCE. In Europe and England, the farmer often worked for a nobleman or landlord. The pay was low, and opportunities to ever own a sizable amount of land were almost impossible. In America, land was available, and many who started out poor were now wealthy landowners. With that came the realization that if a person fails, it is his own fault; he cannot blame it on the system. That meant hard work, but



Michel-Guillaume de Crèvecoeur observed that even though settlers came from Europe, they became "new men" with new ideas when they became Americans.

it also gave a purpose to that work. Owning land was important. Crèvecoeur wrote: "Happy those to whom this transition has served as a powerful spur to labour, to prosperity." Others were lazy, and their pride in ownership, he said, had led them to inactivity and wasteful efforts.

This independence allowed a person to try and fail; if he failed, he was free to try again. Americans did not look down on those who failed, only on those who made no effort to succeed. The American was free to try different occupations, to move to new lands, to rise in rank.

THE OPEN CLASS STRUCTURE. The idea of a self-made man (or woman) seems as American as apple pie. Not everyone climbed the ladder of success and achieved great things. However, every colony had its success stories of individuals moving up from the bottom to prominence. Indentureds became large landowners, apprentices became merchants, and sailors became shipowners. Any white could become a respected member of society. A classic example was William Phips who began as a frontiersman from Maine and rose to become royal governor of Massachusetts.

INFLUENCE OF THE FRONTIER. The frontier offered many immigrants their first step up the ladder of success. One did not have to be educated or come from a good background to be accepted. Ability with an ax and Pennsylvania rifle were enough to impress others, and qualities like courage, strength, and endurance could make a man a local hero.

UNDERRATED PEOPLE. The English and Europeans looked down on Americans. One English writer described Americans as a "mongrel breed of Irish, Scotch and Germans, unleavened with convicts and outcasts." All colonials were viewed as unwashed, uneducated, and uncivilized. This view totally ignored the resourcefulness of the frontiersman and the inquiring minds of a growing group of American thinkers and writers.

Books covering religion, medicine, science, history, political thought, and the classics (in the original Greek or Latin) were read by many American leaders. The more popular books of sermons contained more than just religion, they included common sense views of society. Readings in history often questioned the divine right of rulers (the idea that God appointed a person to rule, and anyone disagreeing with him was wrong and evil).

Almost without notice by Europe, America was producing poets such as Michael Wigglesworth and Anne Bradstreet, artists like John Copley and Benjamin West, physicians like Dr. Benjamin Rush, and scientists worthy of being accepted as members of the Royal Society (the top scientific group in England). If the colonies had produced no one else, they could have taken pride in the writings and experiments of Benjamin Franklin.

Activity

Put the reasons given for the differences between Americans and Europeans on a list, and ask students to put them in the order of their importance.

Name _____ Date _____

POINTS TO PONDER

1. What determines a person's success or failure in our time? Would colonial Americans have had the same views?

2. Can a person today rise from the bottom to the top in America? What skills or training are important now that were not necessary in colonial times?

3. Which of the reasons given seem most important in explaining the difference between the European and American? Why?

Name _____ Date _____

CHALLENGES

1. What book did Crèvecoeur write?

2. What later writer also noticed a difference between Americans and Europeans?

3. Why was the long ocean voyage important in separating colonists from their European past?

4. What was the disadvantage of failing in America?

5. What was the American attitude toward failure?

6. Where did Sir William Phips begin, and where did he end?

7. What abilities impressed frontiersmen?

8. What was divine right?

9. Name two successful colonial American artists.

10. What colonial Americans achieved greatness in literature and science?