

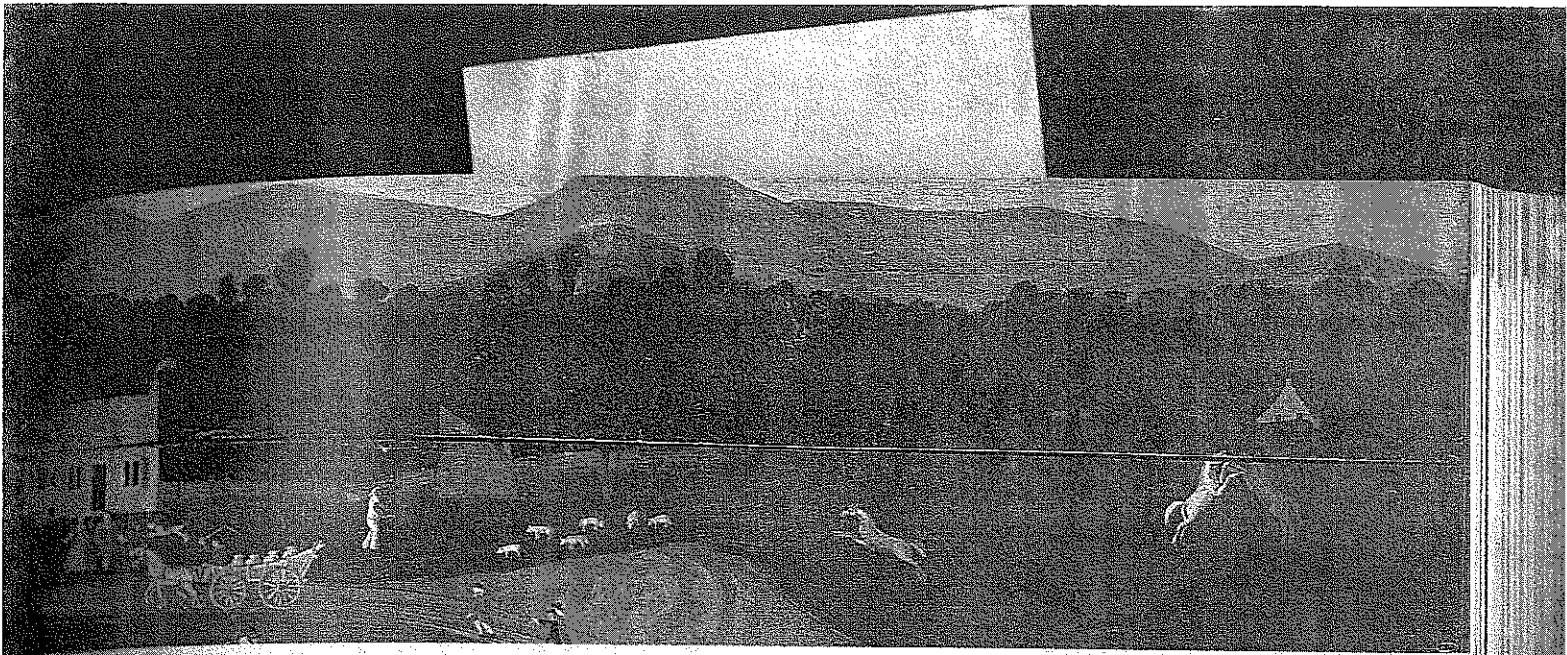
What is an American?

Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur

In this great American asylum,¹ the poor of Europe have by some means met together, and in consequence of various causes; to what purpose should they ask one another, what countrymen they are? Alas, two-thirds of them had no country. Can a wretch who wanders about, who works and starves, whose life is a continual scene of sore affliction or pinching penury²—can that man call England or any other kingdom his country? A country that had no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws with jails and punishments, who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of this planet? No! urged by a variety of motives, here they came. Everything has tended to regenerate them: new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system. Here they are become men; in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegetative mold and refreshing showers; they withered and were mowed down by want, hunger, and war. But now, by the power of transplantation, like all other plants, they have taken root and flourished! Formerly they were not numbered in any civil list of their country, except in those of the poor; here they rank as citizens. . . .

What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few

1. asylum (ə-sī'ləm): a shelter.
2. penury (pĕn'yə-rĕ): extreme poverty.
3. vegetative mold: loose, crumbly soil that is rich in nutrients and helps plants to grow.



Van Bergen Overmantel (1732–1733), attributed to John Heaten. Oil on wood (fireboard), 15¼" × 73½", New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York. Photo Copyright © New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York.

kindred as poor as himself were the only cords that tied him. His country is now that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence.⁴ *Ubi panis ibi patria* [where my bread is earned, there is my country] is the motto of all emigrants. What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European or the descendant of a European; hence that strange mixture of blood which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a man whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He* is an American who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *alma mater*.⁵

Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great change in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry⁶ which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which

will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit. The American ought, therefore, to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor; his labor is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest. Can it want a stronger allurement? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and to clothe them all, without any part being claimed, either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot,⁷ or a mighty lord. Here, religion demands but little of him; a small voluntary salary to the minister, and gratitude to God. Can he refuse these?

The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must, therefore, entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American. ❖

4. consequence: importance.

5. *alma mater* (āl'mə mā'tər): A Latin phrase that literally means "nourishing mother."

6. industry: energetic devotion to a task or endeavor; diligence.

7. abbot (ăb'ət): the head of a monastery.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

kindred (kĭn'drĭd) *n.* relatives or family
allurement (ə-lōōr'ment) *n.* attraction; enticement
despotic (dĭ-spōt'ĭk) *adj.* like a dictator
servile (sur'vel) *adj.* humbly submissive; slavish
subsistence (səb-sĭs'tens) *n.* livelihood