

“What Is an American?” by St. Jean DeCrevecoeur

Text: Handout



Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur was a French-born essayist who portrayed rural life in colonial America. His descriptions of the attitudes and hopes of the colonists persuaded many Europeans to settle in America.

Crevecoeur was born near Caen, France. When he was 19 years old, he went to Canada to fight with the French during the French and Indian War. In 1769, he bought a farm near Chester, N.Y., and began his literary career.

Crevecoeur wrote under the pen name of J. Hector St. John. He became best known for 12 essays collected in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), written to an imaginary friend in England. The essays describe such scenes as children coming home from school during a snowstorm and families fleeing an Indian massacre and also contains the famous passage “What is an American?”

Crevecoeur supported the British during the Revolutionary War in America (1775-1783). In his *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America* (published in 1925, after his death), he accused the patriots of greed and the abuse of power in their struggle for independence. Crevecoeur served as French consul to the United States from 1783 to 1790 and spent the rest of his life in France.

1. According to the author, how does America compare to Europe in terms of social classes and wealth?
2. a) What occupation were most Americans engaged in during the 1770s?
b) What are a couple of other occupations mentioned by DeCrevecoeur?
3. a) According to DeCrevecoeur, how do Americans view the law?
b) Why do they feel this way?
4. DeCrevecoeur says that in America, man is free, and he describes America as “the most perfect society now existing in the world.”
a) Was he correct, do you think? Explain.

b) Have things in America improved since the 1770s, or have they deteriorated? Explain.

5. Was making North America “entirely peopled” a good idea? Explain.

6. DeCrevecoeur describes America as an “asylum,” a place people go to escape danger, etc. Is this still the case today? Explain how it is or is not.

7. According to DeCrevecoeur, why did people come here from other nations?

8. What does DeCrevecoeur say has been the effect of becoming Americans on immigrants?

9. What is the problem with DeCrevecoeur’s definition and description of “an American” in the sixth paragraph? Whom did it leave out?

10. a) Do you agree that in the U.S., “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men”? Why or why not?

b) How was DeCrevecoeur using the term “race” in this statement?

11. On p. 93, what does DeCrevecoeur say about religion in the U.S.?

Whose rights does he seem to be ignoring in this statement?