

8 What Is an American?



"There is room for everybody in America," said Hector St. John Crèvecoeur.

Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (mee-SHELL ghee-OME jahn duh krev-KUR) was a Frenchman with red hair, freckles, a small frame, and a cheerful face. When he was 19 he went to Canada and fought in the French and Indian War on the side of the French. Crèvecoeur was a mapmaker for General Montcalm.

But when Crèvecoeur saw the English colonies and the freedom they offered, he changed his ideas. He decided to move. He settled on a farm (in what is now New York

state) in 1759. Now, you may be wondering about his strange name. It comes from two French words: *crever*, meaning "to break," and *cœur*, meaning "heart." *Crèvecoeur* means "broken heart." (Remember that.)

When Crèvecoeur moved to New York he took an English name: Hector St. John. (He also kept his French name and used it when he went to France. Today we call him Hector St. John Crèvecoeur.)

Hector St. John Crèvecoeur fell in love with America. He knew that in Europe the aristocrats—wealthy, privileged people—owned most of the land. In America most people were yeoman farmers. That means they owned and worked small farms. Crèvecoeur thought farming an ideal life and the English colonies an ideal place—although he also said that some Americans were destroying the land, and that others were always "bawling about liberty without knowing what it is."

Crèvecoeur soon married and had a family. He was so happy living on his farm that he decided to write a book about his life in America. In his book he asked a famous question. "What is an American?" he

They Should Have Made Them into Cider

Everyone with an apple tree in his yard—not just farmers like Crèvecoeur—made cider, and the Rev. Mr. Whiting of Lynn, Massachusetts, was no exception. He always had a barrel on tap for guests.

And it hath been said that an Indian once coming to his house and Mistress Whiting giving him a drink of cider, he did set down the pot and smacking his lips say that Adam and Eve were rightly damned for eating the apples in the garden of Eden, they should have made them into cider.

American Pie

Crèvecoeur didn't just write down beautiful thoughts. He was a farmer and lived off what he grew. You can dry your own apples following his instructions:

You may want to know what we do with so many apples....In the fall we dry great quantities. ...Our method is this: we gather the best kind. The neighbouring women are invited to spend the even-

Crotches are sticks with a fork at one end, so that they will support another stick laid on the fork. A **scaffold** is a supporting framework made of poles or pipes. **Accelerate** means to speed up.

Dr. Henry Ames of Massachusetts published a popular almanac. In 1762 he wrote:

*All men are by nature equal
But differ greatly in the sequel.*

What did he mean by that?

ing at our house. A basket of apples is given to each of them, which they peel, quarter, and core. The quantity I have thus peeled is commonly 20 bushels, which gives me about three of dried ones. Next day a great stage is erected anywhere that cattle can't come. Strong crotches are planted in the ground. Poles are horizontally fixed on these, and boards laid close

together. When the scaffold is thus erected, the apples are thinly spread over it. They are soon covered with the bees and wasps and sucking flies of the neighbourhood. This accelerates the drying. Now and then they are turned. At night they are covered with blankets. If it is likely to rain, they are brought into the house. This is repeated until they are perfectly dried.

asked. How would you answer that question?

This is what Crèvecoeur said: *The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions.*

In this new nation, Crèvecoeur wrote, people who were mostly the

poor and unwanted of other lands forgot Old World hatreds, married each other, and became successful, self-confident citizens. *I could point out to you a man whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a Frenchwoman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations.*

That kind of thing didn't happen in Europe—especially since most of those people were of different religions.

Crèvecoeur was trying to tell the Europeans that something special was happening in this land they had colonized. *We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed. We are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be.*

Crèvecoeur said it was opportunity and freedom that had made America an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges, where a hundred years ago all was wild, woody, and uncultivated!

American laws, he said, let people think for themselves. *The law inspects our actions; our thoughts are left to God.* Americans, he said, were good citizens who *carefully read the newspapers...freely blame...governors and others.* (Now, when he talked about blaming governors, Crèvecoeur had a certain New York governor in mind. He was Governor William Cosby—you remember him.)

Crèvecoeur understood that America had been settled by people who were fed up with Old World problems. Most Americans didn't like societies that kept rich and poor apart. *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.* Crèvecoeur was warning

FROM COLONIES TO COUNTRY

Europe. Americans had new ideas and those ideas might even spread beyond the seas. Would Europe listen to the warning?

Letters of an American Farmer got published in six countries and was immensely popular. It is still read today. But here is something sad: Crèvecoeur's name came true. His heart was broken. It happened when Crèvecoeur took his eight-year-old son to Europe to get his book published. When he came back to America his wife was dead, his house was burned, and his two younger children were gone. Indians had attacked. He found the children in Boston living with strangers (the Indians had let them go), and they all began a new life. This mended Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's heart—at least a bit. But even that broken heart never caused him to lose his faith in the basic decency of all the peoples—Indian, English, French, Spanish, Dutch, African, German, and others—who were forming a new kind of society in the land he loved.

Hector St. John

Crèvecoeur introduced alfalfa, a cattle feed crop, to America; he also introduced the American potato to Normandy, in France.

By Crèvecoeur's time, the 13 colonies were filling up with large, prosperous farms like this one near Baltimore.

