What is an American? (1782)
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I wish I could be acquainted with the feelings and thoughts which must agitate the heart and present themselves to the mind of an enlightened Englishman, when he first lands on this continent. He must greatly rejoice that he lived at a time to see this fair country discovered and settled; he must necessarily feel a share of national pride, when he views the chain of settlements which embellishes these extended shores. When he says to himself, this is the work of my countrymen, who, when convulsed by factions, afflicted by a variety of miseries and wants, restless and impatient, took refuge here. They brought along with them their national genius, to which they principally owe what liberty they enjoy, and what substance they possess. Here he sees the industry of his native country displayed in a new manner, and traces in their works the embryos of all the arts, sciences, and ingenuity which flourish in Europe. Here he beholds fair cities, substantial villages, extensive fields, an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges, where an hundred years ago all was wild, woody and uncultivated! What a train of pleasing ideas this fair spectacle must suggest; it is a prospect which must inspire a good citizen with the most heartfelt pleasure. The difficulty consists in the manner of viewing so extensive a scene. He is arrived on a new continent; a modern society offers itself to his contemplation, different from what he had hitherto seen. It is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess every thing and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself. If he travels through our rural districts he views not the hostile castle, and the haughty mansion, contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabbin, where cattle and men help to keep each other warm, and dwell in meanness, smoke, and indigence. A pleasing uniformity of decent competence appears throughout our habitations. The meanest of our log-houses is a dry and comfortable habitation. Lawyer or merchant are the fairest titles our towns afford; that of a farmer is the only appellation of the rural inhabitants of our country. It must take some time ere he can reconcile himself to our dictionary, which is but short in words of dignity, and names of honour. (There, on a Sunday, he sees a congregation of respectable farmers and their wives, all clad in neat homespun, well mounted, or riding in their own humble waggons. There is not among them an esquire, saving the unlettered magistrate. There he sees a parson as simple as his flock, a farmer who does not riot on the labour of others. 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; nor is this
pleasing equality so transitory as many others are. Many ages will not see the shores of our great 
lakes replenished with inland nations, nor the unknown bounds of North America entirely 
peopled. Who can tell how far it extends? Who can tell the millions of men whom it will feed 
and contain? for no European foot has as yet travelled half the extent of this mighty continent!

The next wish of this traveller will be to know whence came all these people? they are 
mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous 
breed, that race now called Americans have arisen. The eastern provinces must indeed be 
excepted, as being the unmixed descendants of Englishmen. I have heard many wish that they 
had been more intermixed also: for my part, I am no wisher, and think it much better as it has 
happened. They exhibit a most conspicuous figure in this great and variegated picture; they too 
enter for a great share in the pleasing perspective displayed in these thirteen provinces. I know it 
is fashionable to reflect on them, but I respect them for what they have done; for the accuracy 
and wisdom with which they have settled their territory; for the decency of their manners; for 
their early love of letters; their ancient college, the first in this hemisphere; for their industry; 
which to me who am but a farmer, is the criterion of everything. There never was a people, 
situated as they are, who with so ungrateful a soil have done more in so short a time. Do you 
think that the monarchical ingredients which are more prevalent in other governments, have 
purged them from all foul stains? Their histories assert the contrary.

In this great American asylum, 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 penury; 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. Every thing 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 vegitative mould, 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 lists of their country, except in those of the poor; here they rank as 
citizens. By what invisible power has this surprising metamorphosis been performed? By that of 
the laws and that of their industry. The laws, the indulgent laws, protect them as they arrive, 
stamping on them the symbol of adoption; they receive ample rewards for their labours; these 
accumulated rewards procure them lands; those lands confer on them the title of freemen, and to 
that title every benefit is affixed which men can possibly require. This is the great operation daily 
performed by our laws. From whence proceed these laws? From our government. Whence the 
government? It is derived from the original genius and strong desire of the people ratified and 
confirmed by the crown. This is the great chain which links us all, this is the picture which every 
province exhibits, Nova Scotia excepted. There the crown has done all; either there were no 
people who had genius, or it was not much attended to: the consequence is, that the province is 
very thinly inhabited indeed; the power of the crown in conjunction with the musketos has 
prevented men from settling there. Yet some parts of it flourished once, and it contained a mild 
harmless set of people. But for the fault of a few leaders, the whole were banished. The greatest
political error the crown ever committed in America, was to cut off men from a country which wanted nothing but men!

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 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: Ubi panis ibi patria, is the motto of all emigrants. What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family 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. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry 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 labour; his labour 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, or a mighty lord. I lord 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 labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. --This is an American.