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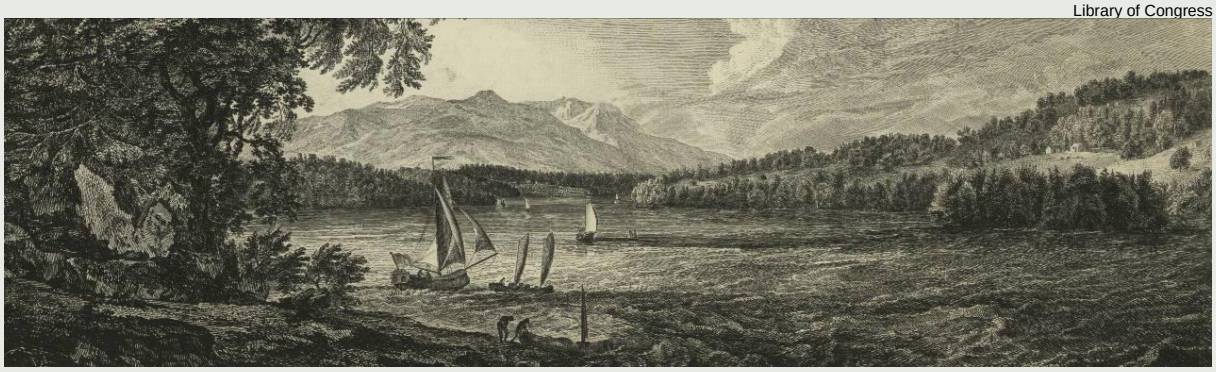

Paul Sandby, Thomas Pownall, *A View in Hudson's River of Pakepsey & the Catts-Kill Mountains, from Sopos Island in Hudson's River*, etching, London, 1761 (detail)

"We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory"

"What Is an American?" Letter III of *Letters from an American Farmer*

Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (as James Hector St. John)

written ca. 1770-1778, published 1782, selections

The landscape above depicts the New York Catskill Mountains in 1761—the embodiment of American expanse and opportunity, far from the class-locked societies of Europe. Here the Frenchman Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur bought farmland in 1764 after having served in the French and Indian War. He married and raised a family (his first child was named America-Francés) and lived the life of an "American farmer" until the upheaval of the American Revolution drove him first to join Loyalist refugees in New York City and then, after being imprisoned as a suspected spy by the British, back to his homeland in France. There he amassed his writings on American culture and agriculture into a series of "letters" to a fictional English recipient, publishing them in London after the war. The most famous of these letters is the third—"What Is an American?"—long considered the classic statement of this "new man": individualistic, self-reliant, pragmatic, hard-working, a stolid man of the land free to pursue his self-defined goals and, in the process, rejecting the ideological zeal that had racked Europe for centuries. While the letter is romantic and often utopian in its rhetoric, it reflects the real experiences of a European-born American (and naturalized New York citizen) who long pursued the question "what is an American?" As historian Edmund S. Morgan reflects, "Crèvecoeur's answer to the question was flattering to Americans of his own day, and it still reverberates in a society that has never stopped asking the same question of itself."[1]

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 [origins] 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 a hundred years ago all was wild, woody, and uncultivated![2]

___contrast of Europe and the British Atlantic colonies

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 everything and of a herd of people who have nothing.

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[1] Edmund S. Morgan, "Second Thoughts" (review of *More Letters from the American Farmer: An Edition of the Essays in English Left Unpublished by Crèvecoeur*, ed. Dennis D. Moore, 1995), *The New Republic*, 10 July 1995, p. 36.

[2] While reading, keep in mind that Crèvecoeur wrote *Letters* before and during the first half of the Revolution, and published them in 1782 after the war.

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Peter Bell, *A New and Accurate Map of North America*, London, 1771 (detail). Red dot marks approximate location of Crèvecoeur's farm, Pine Hill.

Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical [church-based] 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 cabin where cattle and men help to keep each other warm and dwell in meanness, smoke, and indigence.[3] A pleasing uniformity of decent competence appears throughout our habitations. The meanest [least/simplest] 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.[4] It must take some time ere [before] he can reconcile himself to our dictionary, which is but short in words of dignity and names of honor. There, on a Sunday, he sees a congregation of respectable farmers and their wives, all clad in neat homespun, well mounted [on horses] or riding in their own humble wagons. There is not among them an esquire, saving the unlettered magistrate.[5] There he sees a parson as simple as his flock, a farmer who does not riot [live in excess] on the labor 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!

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 . . .

___diversity and mixture of European peoples in America

The next wish of this traveller will be to know whence came all these people? They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed,[6] that race now called Americans have arisen. The eastern provinces [colonies] 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

[3] I.e., on sordid, beastly conditions, in smoke-filled abodes, in extreme poverty and need.
[4] I.e., with no European titles of nobility such as lord, duke, etc.
[5] I.e., no titled and privileged "gentleman"—the rank designated with "esquire" in England (and in the American colonies)—"saving the unlettered magistrate," i.e., except for a relatively uneducated judge or local judicial official.
[6] I.e., made up of a mixture of people brought together by happenstance, not by plan; not referring to sexual promiscuity.

Library of Congress — Sandby/Pownall, *A View in Hudson's River of Pakepsey & the Catts-Kill Mountains, . . .* , London, 1761 (detail)

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,[7] 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 [learning]; their ancient college, the first in this hemisphere;[8] for their industry,[9] 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 monarchial ingredients which are more prevalent in other governments have purged them from all foul stains? Their histories assert the contrary.

___"the American, this new man"

In this great American asylum [haven], 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 [extreme poverty] — 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 [lacking] 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. 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 labors; 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 that government? It is derived from the original genius and strong desire of the people, ratified and confirmed by government. This is the great chain which links us all; this is the picture which every province exhibits, Nova Scotia excepted.[10] There

Here they are become men. In Europe they were as so many useless plants.

[7] I.e., comment disparagingly on them.
[8] Harvard College, created in Boston in 1636.
[9] I.e., industriousness.
[10] Nova Scotia had been part of French Canada until 1710 when the British gained the territory during Queen Anne's War. The French Catholic settlers (Acadians) and the native Mi'kmaq firmly resisted British rule for decades.

the crown [British government] 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 mosquitoes, has prevented men from settling there. Yet some part 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.[11] 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.[12] What then is the American, this new man? He is either a 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 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*.[13]

The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles. He must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions.

Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity [descendants] 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, vigor, 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 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, 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.

___Regional differences in the vast expanse of British North America

North America is divided into many provinces, forming a large association, scattered along a coast 1,500 miles extent and about 200 wide. This society I would fain [gladly] examine, at least such as it appears in the middle provinces. If it does not afford that variety of tinges and gradations which may be observed in Europe, we have colors peculiar to ourselves. For instance, it is natural to conceive that those who live near the sea must be very different from those who live in the woods; the intermediate space will afford a separate and distinct class.

Men are like plants — the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceed from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment. Here you will find but few crimes; these have acquired as yet no root among us. I wish I were able to trace all my ideas. If my ignorance prevents me from describing them properly, I hope I shall be able to delineate a few of the outlines, which are all I propose.

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[11] In 1755 the British began the forced emigration of Acadians from Nova Scotia; many later settled in French Louisiana ("Cajuns," from Acadians).
[12] Where there is bread, there is my country [Latin].
[13] Literally, nourishing mother; often used to refer to one's college or university [Latin].

Those who live near the sea feed more on fish than on flesh, and often encounter that boisterous element. This renders them more bold and enterprising; this leads them to neglect the confined occupations of the land. They see and converse with a variety of people, their intercourse with mankind becomes extensive. The sea inspires them with a love of traffic, a desire of transporting produce from one place to another; leads them to a variety of resources which supply the place of labor. Those who inhabit the middle settlements, by far the most numerous, must be very different. The simple cultivation of the earth purifies them, but the indulgences of the government, the soft remonstrances of religion, the rank of independent freeholders, must necessarily inspire them with sentiments very little known in Europe among people of the same class. What do I say? Europe has no such class of men. The early knowledge they acquire, the early bargains they make, give them a great degree of sagacity [wisdom]. As freemen they will be litigious — pride and obstinacy are often the cause of lawsuits; the nature of our laws and governments may be another. As citizens, it is easy to imagine that they will carefully read the news-papers, enter into every political disquisition, freely blame or censure governors and others. As farmers, they will be careful and anxious to get as much as they can, because what they get is their own. As northern men they will love the cheerful cup. As Christians, religion curbs them not in their opinions; the general indulgence leaves everyone to think for themselves in spiritual matters — the laws inspect [direct] our actions, our thoughts are left to God. Industry, good living, selfishness, litigiousness, country politics, the pride of freemen, religious indifference, are their characteristics. If you recede still farther from the sea, you will come into more modern settlements; they exhibit the same strong lineaments, in a ruder appearance. Religion seems to have still less influence, and their manners are less improved.

Now we arrive near the great woods, near the last inhabited districts. There men seem to be placed still farther beyond the reach of government, which in some measure leaves them to themselves. How can it pervade every corner; as they were driven there by misfortunes, necessity of beginnings, desire of acquiring large tracts of land, idleness, frequent want of economy, ancient debts; the reunion of such people does not afford a very pleasing spectacle. When discord, want of unity and friendship — when either drunkenness or idleness prevail in such remote districts — contention, inactivity, and wretchedness must ensue. There are not the same remedies to these evils as in a long established community. The few magistrates they have are in general little better than the rest; they are often in a perfect state of war — that of man against man, sometimes decided by blows, sometimes by means of the law; that of man against every wild inhabitant of these venerable woods, of which they are come to dispossess them. There men appear to be no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank, living on the flesh of wild animals when they can catch them, and when they are not able, they subsist on the grain.

American backcountry settlers

He who would wish to see America in its proper light, and have a true idea of its feeble beginnings and barbarous rudiments, must visit our extended line of frontiers where the last settlers dwell, and where he may see the first labors of settlement, the mode of clearing the earth, in all their different appearances; where men are wholly left dependent on their native tempers, and on the spur of uncertain industry, which often fails when not sanctified by the efficacy of a few moral rules. There, remote from the power of example and check of shame, many families exhibit the most hideous parts of our society. They are a kind of forlorn hope, preceding by ten or twelve years the most respectable army of veterans which come after them. In that space, prosperity will polish some, vice and the law will drive off the rest, who uniting again with others like themselves will recede still farther; making room for more industrious people, who will finish their improvements, convert the loghouse into a convenient habitation, and rejoicing that the first heavy labors are finished, will change in a few years that hitherto barbarous country into a fine, fertile, well regulated district.

Such is our progress, such is the march of the Europeans toward the interior parts of this continent. In all societies there are offcasts; this impure part serves as our precursors or pioneers. My father himself was one of that class, but he came upon honest principles and was therefore one of the few who held fast. By good conduct and temperance, he transmitted to me his fair inheritance, when not above one in fourteen of his contemporaries had the same good fortune.[14]

[14] Crèvecoeur was born in 1735 into an aristocratic family in Normandy, a region of northern France.

Forty years ago this smiling country was thus inhabited. It is now purged, a general decency of manners prevails throughout, and such has been the fate of our best countries [regions].

Exclusive of those general characteristics, each province has its own, founded on the government, climate, mode of husbandry [agriculture], customs, and peculiarity of circumstances. Europeans submit insensibly to these great powers, and become, in the course of a few generations, not only Americans in general, but either Pennsylvanians, Virginians, or provincials under some other name. Whoever traverses the continent must easily observe those strong differences, which will grow more evident in time. The inhabitants of Canada, Massachusetts, the middle provinces, the southern ones will be as different as their climates — their only points of unity will be those of religion and language.

Religious tolerance among Americans

As I have endeavored to show you how Europeans become Americans, it may not be disagreeable to show you likewise how the various Christian sects introduced, wear out, and how religious indifference [i.e., tolerance] becomes prevalent. When any considerable number of a particular sect happen to dwell contiguous to each other, they immediately erect a temple and there worship the divinity agreeably to their own peculiar ideas. Nobody disturbs them. If any new sect springs up in Europe, it may happen that many of its professors will come and settle in America. As they bring their zeal with them, they are at liberty to make proselytes if they can, and to build a meeting [church] and to follow the dictates of their consciences; for neither the government nor any other power interferes. If they are peaceable subjects and are industrious, what is it to their neighbors how and in what manner they think fit to address their prayers to the Supreme Being? But if the sectaries [e.g., parishes] are not settled close together, if they are mixed with other denominations, their zeal will cool for want of fuel and will be extinguished in a little time. Then the Americans become as to religion what they are as to country — allied to all. In them the name of Englishman, Frenchman, and European is lost, and in like manner, the strict modes of Christianity as practiced in Europe are lost also. This effect will extend itself still farther hereafter, and though this may appear to you as a strange idea, yet it is a very true one. I shall be able perhaps hereafter to explain myself better, in the meanwhile, let the following example serve as my first justification.

Then the Americans become as to religion what they are as to country — allied to all.

Let us suppose you and I to be travelling. We observe that in this house, to the right, lives a Catholic, who prays to God as he has been taught and believes in transubstantiation.[15] He works and raises wheat; he has a large family of children, all hale and robust; his belief, his prayers offend nobody. About one mile farther on the same road, his next neighbor may be a good honest plodding German Lutheran, who addresses himself to the same God, the God of all, agreeably to the modes he has been educated in, and believes in consubstantiation.[16] By so doing he scandalizes nobody — he also works in his fields, embellishes the earth, clears swamps, &c [etc.]. What has the world to do with his Lutheran principles? He persecutes nobody and nobody persecutes him, he visits his neighbors and his neighbors visit him. Next to him lives a seceder, the most enthusiastic of all sectaries.[17] His zeal is hot and fiery, but separated as he is from others of the same complexion [group], he has no congregation of his own to resort to, where he might cabal [conspire] and mingle religious pride with worldly obstinacy. He likewise raises good crops, his house is handsomely painted, his orchard is one of the fairest in the neighborhood. How does it concern the welfare of the country, or of the province at large, what this man's religious sentiments are? He is a good farmer, he is a sober, peaceable, good citizen. William Penn himself would not wish for more. This is the visible character; the invisible one [spiritual] is only guessed at, and is nobody's business. Next again lives a Low Dutchman, who implicitly believes the rules laid down by the synod of Dort.[18] He conceives no other idea of a clergyman than that of an hired man: if he does his work well he will pay him the stipulated sum; if not, he will dismiss him and do without his sermons, and let

[15] *Transubstantiation*: the doctrine in Roman Catholic Christianity that, in the celebration of the Mass, bread and wine are changed completely into the body and blood of Christ, that no material non-divine substance remains in the bread and wine.
[16] *Consubstantiation*: the doctrine in Protestant Christianity, with denominational variations, that Christ is spiritually but not physically present in the Eucharist, that its substance remains bread and wine.
[17] *Seceders*: Scottish Presbyterians (who left the Church of Scotland in 1732), described by Crèvecoeur as the most zealous of Protestant dissenters.
[18] *Synod of Dort*: meeting of the Dutch Reformed Church in Holland in 1618-1619 to settle doctrinal differences about the path to salvation.

his church be shut up for years. But notwithstanding this coarse idea, you will find his house and farm to be the neatest in all the country; and you will judge by his wagon and fat horses that he thinks more of the affairs of this world than of those of the next. He is sober and laborious, therefore he is all he ought to be as to the affairs of this life; as for those of the next, he must trust to the great Creator.

Each of these people instruct their children as well as they can [in religious doctrine], but these instructions are feeble compared to those which are given to the youth of the poorest class in Europe. Their children will therefore grow up less zealous and more indifferent in matters of religion than their parents. The foolish vanity, or rather the fury, of making proselytes [followers] is unknown here. They have no time; the seasons call for all their attention, and thus in a few years this mixed neighborhood will exhibit a strange religious medley that will be neither pure Catholicism nor pure Calvinism. A very perceptible indifference, even in the first generation, will become apparent; and it may happen that the daughter of the Catholic will marry the son of the seceder, and settle by themselves at a distance from their parents. What religious education will they give their children? A very imperfect one. If there happens to be in the neighborhood any place of worship, we will suppose a Quaker's meeting; rather than not show their fine clothes, they will go to it, and some of them may perhaps attach themselves to that society. Others will remain in a perfect state of indifference. The children of these zealous parents will not be able to tell what their religious principles are, and their grandchildren still less. The neighborhood of a place of worship generally leads them to it, and the action of going thither is the strongest evidence they can give of their attachment to any sect.

. . . thus in a few years this mixed neighborhood will exhibit a strange religious medley that will be neither pure Catholicism nor pure Calvinism.

The Quakers are the only people who retain a fondness for their own mode of worship; for be they ever so far separated from each other, they hold a sort of communion with the society and seldom depart from its rules, at least in this country.

Thus all sects are mixed as well as all nations; thus religious indifference is imperceptibly disseminated from one end of the continent to the other — which is at present one of the strongest characteristics of the Americans. Where this will reach no one can tell; perhaps it may leave a vacuum fit to receive other systems. Persecution, religious pride, the love of contradiction, are the food of what the world commonly calls religion. These motives have ceased here. Zeal in Europe is confined; here it evaporates in the great distance it has to travel. There it is a grain of powder enclosed; here it burns away in the open air, and consumes without effect.

___Effects of isolation on backcountry settlers

But to return to our back[country] settlers. I must tell you, that there is something in the proximity of the woods which is very singular [unique]. It is with men as it is with the plants and animals that grow and live in the forests — they are entirely different from those that live in the plains. I will candidly tell you all my thoughts, but you are not to expect that I shall advance any reasons. By living in or near the woods, their actions are regulated by the wildness of the neighborhood. The deer often come to eat their grain, the wolves to destroy their sheep, the bears to kill their hogs, the foxes to catch their poultry. This surrounding hostility immediately puts the gun into their hands. They watch these animals, they kill some; and thus by defending their property, they soon become professed hunters. This is the progress: once hunters, farewell to the plow. The chase renders them ferocious, gloomy, and unsociable. A hunter wants no neighbor; he rather hates them because he dreads the competition. In a little time their success in the woods makes them neglect their tillage. They trust to the natural fecundity [richness] of the earth and therefore do little; carelessness in fencing often exposes what little they sow to destruction; they are not at home to watch. In order therefore to make up the deficiency [in food], they go oftener to the woods. That new mode of life brings along with it a new set of manners, which I cannot easily describe. These new manners being grafted on the old stock, produce a strange sort of lawless profligacy, the impressions of which are indelible. The manners of the Indian natives are respectable compared with this European

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A View in Hudson's River . . . , London, 1761 (detail)

medley. Their wives and children live in sloth and inactivity; and having no proper pursuits, you may judge what education the latter receive. Their tender minds have nothing else to contemplate but the example of their parents. Like them they grow up a mongrel breed, half civilized, half savage, except nature stamps on them some constitutional propensities. That rich, that voluptuous sentiment is gone, which struck them so forcibly — the possession of their freeholds no longer conveys to their minds the same pleasure and pride. To all these reasons you must add their lonely situation, and you cannot imagine what an effect on manners the great distance they live from each other has!

Consider one of the last settlements in its first view: of what is it composed? Europeans, who have not that sufficient share of knowledge they ought to have in order to prosper; people who have suddenly passed from oppression, dread of government, and fear of laws, into the unlimited freedom of the woods. This sudden change must have a very great effect on most men, and on that class particularly. Eating wild meat, whatever you may think, tends to alter their temper, though all the proof I can adduce is that I have seen it: and having no place of worship to resort to, what little society this might afford is denied them. The Sunday meetings, exclusive of religious benefits, were the only social bonds that might have inspired them with some degree of emulation in neatness. Is it then surprising to see men thus situated, immersed in great and heavy labors, degenerate a little? It is rather a wonder the effect is not more diffusive. The Moravians and the Quakers are the only instances in exception to what I have advanced. They never settle singly; it is a colony of the society which emigrates. They carry with them their forms, worship, rules, and decency. The others never begin so hard; they are always able to buy improvements, in which there is a great advantage, for by that time the country is recovered from its first barbarity.

Thus our bad people are those who are half cultivators and half hunters; and the worst of them are those who have degenerated altogether into the hunting state. As old plowmen and new men of the woods, as Europeans and new made Indians, they contract the vices of both. They adopt the moroseness and ferocity of a native without his mildness, or even his industry at home. If manners are not refined, at least they are rendered simple and inoffensive by tilling the earth — all our wants are supplied by it. Our time is divided between labor and rest, and none left for the commission of great misdeeds. As hunters, it is divided between the toil of the chase, the idleness of repose, or the indulgence of inebriation [drunkenness]. Hunting is but a licentious idle life, and if it does not always pervert good dispositions, yet when it is united with bad luck it leads to want [lack of food]. Want stimulates that propensity to rapacity and injustice, too natural to needy men, which is the fatal gradation. After this explanation of the effects which follow by living in the woods, shall we yet vainly flatter ourselves with the hope of converting the Indians? We should

rather begin with converting our backsettlers; and now if I dare mention the name of religion, its sweet accents would be lost in the immensity of these woods. Men thus placed are not fit either to receive or remember its mild instructions. They want [lack] temples and ministers, but as soon as men cease to remain at home and begin to lead an erratic life, let them be either tawny [i.e., Indian] or white, they cease to be its disciples.

Thus have I faintly and imperfectly endeavored to trace our society from the sea to our woods; yet you must not imagine that every person who moves back [into the backcountry] acts upon the same principles or falls into the same degeneracy. Many families carry with them all their decency of conduct, purity of morals, and respect of religion, but these are scarce; the power of example is sometimes irresistible. Even among these backsettlers, their depravity is greater or less according to what nation or province they belong. Were I to adduce proofs of this, I might be accused of partiality. If there happens to be some rich intervals, some fertile bottoms, in those remote districts, the people will there prefer tilling the land to hunting, and will attach themselves to it; but even on these fertile spots you may plainly perceive the inhabitants to acquire a great degree of rusticity and selfishness.

It is in consequence of this straggling situation and the astonishing power it has on manners [behavior], that the backsettlers of both the Carolinas, Virginia, and many other parts, have been long a set of lawless people; it has been even dangerous to travel among them. Government can do nothing in so extensive a country. Better it should wink at these irregularities than that it should use means inconsistent with its usual mildness. Time will efface those stains. In proportion as the great body of population approaches them, they will reform, and become polished and subordinate. Whatever has been said of the four New England provinces, no such degeneracy of manners has ever tarnished their annals. Their backsettlers have been kept within the bounds of decency, and government, by means of wise laws, and by the influence of religion.

What a detestable idea such people must have given to the natives of the Europeans! They trade with them; the worst of people are permitted to do that which none but persons of the best character should be employed in. They get drunk with them and often defraud the Indians. Their avarice, removed from the eyes of their superiors, knows no bounds; and aided by a little superiority of knowledge, these traders deceive them, and even sometimes shed blood. Hence those shocking violations, those sudden devastations which have so often stained our frontiers, when hundreds of innocent people have been sacrificed for the crimes of a few. It was in consequence of such behavior that the Indians took the hatchet against the Virginians in 1774.[19] Thus are our first steps trod, thus are our first trees felled, in general, by the most vicious of our people; and thus the path is opened for the arrival of a second and better class, the true American freeholders; the most respectable set of people in this part of the world: respectable for their industry, their happy independence, the great share of freedom they possess, the good regulation of their families, and for extending the trade and the dominion of our mother country.

The freedom and opportunity that America offers Europeans

Europe contains hardly any other distinctions but lords and tenants. This fair country alone is settled by freeholders, the possessors of the soil they cultivate, members of the government they obey, and the framers of their own laws by means of their representatives. This is a thought which you[20] have taught me to cherish — our difference from Europe, far from diminishing, rather adds to our usefulness and consequence as men and subjects. Had our forefathers remained there, they would only have crowded it, and perhaps prolonged those convulsions which had shook it so long. Every industrious European who transports himself here may be compared to a sprout growing at the foot of a great tree; it enjoys and draws but a little portion of sap. Wrench it from the parent roots, transplant it, and it will become a tree bearing fruit also. Colonists are therefore entitled to the consideration due to the most useful subjects. A hundred families barely existing in some parts of Scotland, will here in six years, cause an annual exportation of 10,000 bushels of wheat: 100 bushels being but a common quantity for an industrious family to sell, if they cultivate good land. It is here, then, that the idle may be employed, the

[19] Lord Dunmore's War, 1774, in which Virginia defeated Indians who had been attacking new settlements in western Virginia (now West Virginia and Kentucky).
[20] Crèvecoeur's letter writer, James Hector St. John, is addressing the fictional English recipient of his "letters."

useless become useful, and the poor become rich, but by riches I do not mean gold and silver. We have but little of those metals. I mean a better sort of wealth — cleared lands, cattle, good houses, good clothes, and an increase of people to enjoy them.

This is every person's country; the variety of our soils, situations, climates, governments, and produce, hath something which must please everybody. No sooner does a European arrive, no matter of what condition, than his eyes are opened upon the fair prospect.

There is no wonder that this country has so many charms, and presents to Europeans so many temptations to remain in it. A traveller in Europe becomes a stranger as soon as he quits his own kingdom; but it is otherwise here. We know, properly speaking, no strangers. This is every person's country; the variety of our soils, situations, climates, governments, and produce, hath something which must please everybody. No sooner does a European arrive, no matter of what condition, than his eyes are opened upon the fair prospect. He hears his language spoke, he retraces many of his own country manners, he perpetually hears the names of families and towns with which he is acquainted; he sees happiness and prosperity in all places disseminated; he meets with hospitality, kindness, and plenty everywhere; he beholds hardly any poor, he seldom hears of punishments and executions; and he wonders at the elegance of our towns, those miracles of industry and freedom. He cannot admire enough our rural districts, our convenient roads, good taverns, and our many accommodations; he involuntarily loves a country where everything is so lovely. When in England, he was a mere Englishman; here he stands on a larger portion of the globe, not less than its fourth part, and may see the productions of the north, in iron and naval stores; the provisions of Ireland, the grain of Egypt, the indigo, the rice of China. He does not find, as in Europe, a crowded society, where every place is overstocked; he does not feel that perpetual collision of parties, that difficulty of beginning, that contention which oversets so many.

There is room for everybody in America. Has he any particular talent or industry? — he exerts it in order to procure a livelihood, and it succeeds. Is he a merchant? — the avenues of trade are infinite. Is he eminent in any respect? — he will be employed and respected. Does he love a country life? — pleasant farms present themselves; he may purchase what he wants and thereby become an American farmer. Is he a laborer, sober and industrious? — he need not go many miles nor receive many informations before he will be hired, well fed at the table of his employer, and paid four or five times more than he can get in Europe. Does he want uncultivated lands? — thousands of acres present themselves, which he may purchase cheap. Whatever be his talents or inclinations, if they are moderate, he may satisfy them. I do not mean that everyone who comes will grow rich in a little time; no, but he may procure an easy, decent maintenance by his industry. Instead of starving he will be fed, instead of being idle he will have employment; and these are riches enough for such men as come over here. The rich stay in Europe; it is only the middling and the poor that emigrate. Would you wish to travel in independent idleness, from north to south, you will find easy access, and the most cheerful reception at every house — society

Library of Congress — Sandby/Pownall, *A View in Hudson's River of Pakepsey & the Catts-Kill Mountains, . . .* , London, 1761 (detail)

without ostentation, good cheer without pride, and every decent diversion which the country affords, with little expense. It is no wonder that the European who has lived here a few years, is desirous to remain. Europe with all its pomp is not to be compared to this continent, for men of middle stations or laborers.

A European, when he first arrives, seems limited in his intentions as well as in his views; but he very suddenly alters his scale. 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 and embarks in designs [plans] he never would have thought of in his own country. There the plenitude of society confines many useful ideas, and often extinguishes the most laudable schemes which here ripen into maturity. Thus Europeans become Americans.

"thus Europeans become Americans"

But how is this accomplished in that crowd of low, indigent people who flock here every year from all parts of Europe? I will tell you; they no sooner arrive than they immediately feel the good effects of that plenty of provisions we possess. They fare on our best food and are kindly entertained. Their talents, character, and peculiar industry are immediately inquired into. They find countrymen everywhere disseminated, let them come from whatever part of Europe.

Let me select one as an epitome [typical example] of the rest. He is hired, he goes to work, and works moderately. Instead of being employed by a haughty person, he finds himself with his equal, placed at the substantial table of the farmer, or else at an inferior one as good. His wages are high, his bed is not like that bed of sorrow on which he used to lie. If he behaves with propriety and is faithful, he is caressed and becomes as it were a member of the family. He begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection. Hitherto he had not lived but simply vegetated. Now he now feels himself a man, because he is treated as such. The laws of his own country had overlooked him in his insignificance; the laws of this cover him with their mantle. Judge what an alteration there must arise in the mind and thoughts of this man. He begins to forget his former servitude and dependence, his heart involuntarily swells and glows; this first swell inspires him with those new thoughts which constitute an American. What love can he entertain for a country where his existence was a burden to him. If he is a generous good man, the love of this new adoptive parent will sink deep into his heart. He looks around and sees many a prosperous person who but a few years before was as poor as himself. This encourages him much. He begins to form some little scheme, the first, alas, he ever formed in his life. If he is wise he thus spends two or three years in which time he acquires knowledge, the use of tools, the modes of working the lands, felling trees, &c. This prepares the foundation of a good name, the most useful acquisition he can make. He is encouraged, he has gained friends; he is advised and directed, he feels bold, he purchases some land; he gives all the money he has brought over, as well as what he has earned, and trusts to the God of harvests for the discharge of the rest. His good name procures him credit. He is now possessed of the deed conveying to him and his posterity the fee simple and absolute property of two hundred acres of land, situated on such a river. What an epoch in this man's life! He is become a freeholder — from perhaps a German boor, he is now an American, a Pennsylvanian. He is naturalized; his name is enrolled with those of the other citizens of the province. Instead of being a vagrant, he has a place of residence. He is called the inhabitant of such a county or of such a district, and for the first time in his life counts for something; for hitherto [before this] he has been a cipher [number]. I only repeat what I have heard many say, and no wonder their hearts should glow and be agitated with a multitude of feelings, not easy to describe. From nothing to start into being, from a servant to the rank of a master; from being the slave of some despotic prince to become a free man, invested with lands, to which every municipal blessing is annexed! What a change indeed! It is in consequence of that change that he becomes an American.

What a change indeed! It is in consequence of that change that he becomes an American.

This great metamorphosis has a double effect — it extinguishes all his European prejudices. He forgets that mechanism of subordination, that servility of disposition which poverty had taught him; and sometimes he is apt to forget too much, often passing from one extreme to the other. If he is a good man, he forms schemes of future prosperity; he proposes to educate his children

better than he has been educated himself; he thinks of future modes of conduct, feels an ardor to labor he never felt before. Pride steps in and leads him to everything that the laws do not forbid: he respects them. With a heartfelt gratitude he looks toward that government from whose wisdom all his new felicity [happiness] is derived, and under whose wings and protection he now lives. These reflections constitute him the good man and the good subject.

Ye poor Europeans, ye, who sweat, and work for the great — ye, who are obliged to give so many sheaves [bundles of harvested grain] to the church, so many to your lords, so many to your government, and have hardly any left for yourselves — ye, who are held in less estimation than favorite hunters or useless lapdogs — ye, who only breathe the air of nature because it cannot be withheld from you; it is here that ye can conceive the possibility of those feelings I have been describing; it is here the laws of naturalization invite every one to partake of our great labors and felicity, to till unrented, untaxed lands!

Many, corrupted beyond the power of amendment [correction], have brought with them all their vices, and disregarding the advantages held to them, have gone on in their former career of iniquity [evil behavior] until they have been overtaken and punished by our laws. It is not every emigrant who succeeds; no, it is only the sober, the honest, and industrious. Happy, those, to whom this transition has served as a powerful spur to labor, to prosperity, and to the good establishment of children, born in the days of their poverty, and who had no other portion to expect but the rags of their parents, had it not been for their happy emigration. Others again have been led astray by this enchanting scene. Their new pride, instead of leading them to the fields, has kept them in idleness. The idea of possessing lands is all that satisfies them — though surrounded with fertility, they have moldered away their time in inactivity, misinformed husbandry [farming], and ineffectual endeavors. How much wiser, in general, the honest Germans than almost all other Europeans. They hire themselves to some of their wealthy landsmen and in that apprenticeship learn everything that is necessary. They attentively consider the prosperous industry of others, which imprints in their minds a strong desire of possessing the same advantages. This forcible idea never quits [leaves] them. They launch forth and by dint of sobriety, rigid parsimony, and the most persevering industry, they commonly succeed. Their astonishment at their first arrival from Germany is very great — it is to them a dream. The contrast must be powerful indeed. They observe their countrymen flourishing in every place. They travel through whole counties where not a word of English is spoken; and in the names and the language of the people, they retrace Germany. They have been an useful acquisition to this continent, and to Pennsylvania in particular. To them it owes some share of its prosperity. To their mechanical knowledge and patience, it owes the finest mills in all America, the best teams of horses, and many other advantages. The recollection of their former poverty and slavery never quits them as long as they live.

The Scotch and the Irish might have lived in their own country perhaps as poor but enjoying more civil advantages, the effects of their new situation do not strike them so forcibly, nor has it so lasting an effect. From whence the difference arises I know not, but out of twelve families of emigrants of each country, generally seven Scotch will succeed, nine German, and four Irish. The Scotch are frugal and laborious, but their wives cannot work so hard as German women, who on the contrary vie [compete] with their husbands and often share with them the most severe toils of the field, which they understand better. They have therefore nothing to struggle against but the common casualties

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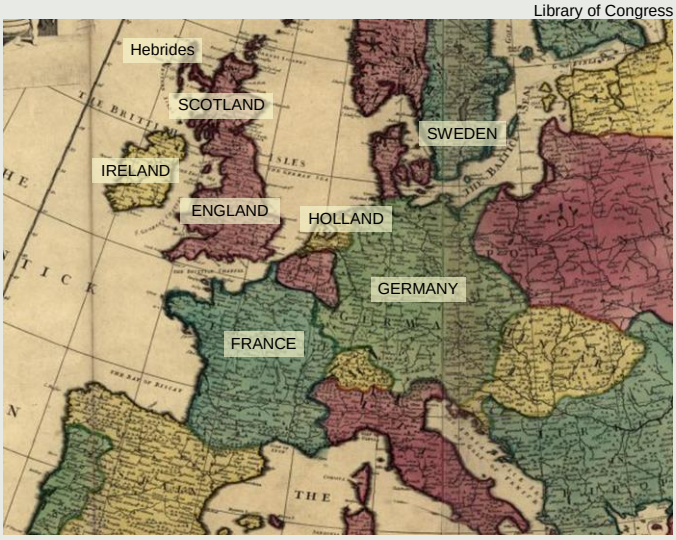

John Senex, *Europe,* London, 1725 (detail); labels added

of nature. The Irish do not prosper so well; they love to drink and to quarrel; they are litigious, and soon take to the gun, which is the ruin of everything. They seem beside to labor under a greater degree of ignorance in husbandry than the others; perhaps it is that their industry had less scope and was less exercised at home. I have heard many relate how the land was parcelled out in that kingdom. Their ancient conquest has been a great detriment to them by oversetting their landed property. The lands possessed by a few are leased down *ad infinitum* [forever] and the occupiers often pay five guineas an acre. The poor are worse lodged there than anywhere else in Europe. Their potatoes, which are easily raised, are perhaps an inducement to laziness: their wages are too low and their whisky too cheap.

There is no tracing observations of this kind without making at the same time very great allowances, as there are everywhere to be found a great many exceptions. The Irish themselves, from different parts of that kingdom, are very different. It is difficult to account for this surprising locality. One would think on so small an island all Irishman must be alike; yet it is not so. They are different in their aptitude to, and in their love of labor.

The Scotch on the contrary are all industrious and saving. They want nothing more than a field to exert themselves in, and they are commonly sure of succeeding. The only difficulty they labor under is that technical American knowledge which requires some time to obtain. It is not easy for those who seldom saw a tree to conceive how it is to be felled, cut up, and split into rails and posts.

As I am fond of seeing and talking of prosperous families, I intend to finish this letter by relating to you the history of an honest Scotch Hebridean[21] who came here in I774, which will show you in epitome what the Scotch can do wherever they have room for the exertion of their industry. Whenever I hear of any new settlement, I pay it a visit once or twice a year, on purpose to observe the different steps each settler takes, the gradual improvements, the different tempers of each family, on which their prosperity in a great nature depends; their different modifications of industry, their ingenuity, and contrivance; for being all poor, their life requires sagacity and prudence. In an evening I love to hear them tell their stories; they furnish me with new ideas. I sit still and listen to their ancient misfortunes, observing in many of them a strong degree of gratitude to God, and the government. Many a well meant sermon have I preached to some of them. When I found laziness and inattention to prevail, who could refrain from wishing well to these new countrymen after having undergone so many fatigues? Who could withhold good advice? What a happy change it must be, to descend from the high, sterile, bleak lands of Scotland, where everything is barren and cold, to rest on some fertile farms in these middle provinces! Such a transition must have afforded the most pleasing satisfaction. The following dialogue passed at an outsettlement where I lately paid a visit:[22]

> Well, friend, how do you do now? I am come fifty odd miles on purpose to see you. How do you go on with your new cutting and slashing?
>
> *Very well, good Sir. We learn the use of the axe bravely, we shall make it out. We have a belly full of victuals every day. Our cows run about and come home full of milk, our hogs get fat of themselves in the woods: Oh, this is a good country! God bless the king, and William Penn. We shall do very well by and by, if we keep our healths.*
>
> Your loghouse looks neat and light. Where did you get these shingles?
>
> *One of our neighbors is a New England man, and he showed us how to split them out of chestnut trees. Now for a barn, but all in good time; here are fine trees to build with.*
>
> Who is to frame it? Sure you don't understand that work yet?
>
> *A countryman of ours who has been in America these ten years offers to wait for his money until the second crop is lodged in it.*
>
> What did you give for your land?
>
> *Thirty-five shillings per acre, payable in seven years.*
>
> How many acres have you got?

[21] From the Scotch Hebrides, islands off the northwest coast of Scotland; see map, p. 12.
[22] Paragraphing and italicization added for clarity.

A hundred and fifty.

That is enough to begin with. Is not your land pretty hard to clear?

Yes, Sir, hard enough, but it would be harder still if it was ready cleared, for then we should have no timber, and I love the woods much; the land is nothing without them.

Have not you found out any bees yet?

No, Sir; and if we had we should not know what to do with them. I will tell you by and by. You are very kind.

Farewell, honest man, God prosper you. Whenever you travel toward ***,[23] inquire for J. S. He will entertain you kindly, provided you bring him good tidings from your family and farm.

In this manner I often visit them and carefully examine their houses, their modes of ingenuity, their different ways; and make them all relate all they know and describe all they feel. These are scenes which I believe you would willingly share with me. I well remember your philanthropic turn of mind. Is it not better to contemplate under these humble roofs, the rudiments of future wealth and population, than to behold the accumulated bundles of litigious papers in the office of a lawyer? To examine how the world is gradually settled, how the howling swamp is converted into a pleasing meadow, the rough ridge into a fine field; and to hear the cheerful whistling, the rural song, where there was no sound heard before, save the yell of the savage, the screech of the owl, or the hissing of the snake? Here a European, fatigued with luxury, riches, and pleasures, may find a sweet relaxation in a series of interesting scenes as affecting as they are new. England, which now contains so many domes, so many castles, was once like this — a place woody and marshy, its inhabitants, now the favorite nation for arts and commerce, were once painted like our neighbors. The country will flourish in its turn, and the same observations will be made which I have just delineated. Posterity will look back with avidity [eagerness] and pleasure to trace, if possible, the era of this or that particular settlement.

Agreeable to the account which several Scotchmen have given me of the north of Britain, of the Orkneys,[24] and the Hebride Islands, they seem on many accounts to be unfit for the habitation of men; they appear to be calculated only for great sheep pastures. Who then can blame the inhabitants of these countries for transporting themselves hither? This great continent must in time absorb the poorest part of Europe, and this will happen in proportion as it becomes better known, and as war, taxation, oppression, and misery increase there. The Hebrides appear to be fit only for the residence of malefactors [wrong-doers], and it would be much better to send felons there than either to Virginia or Maryland.[25] What a strange compliment has our mother country paid to two of the finest provinces in America! England has entertained in that respect very mistaken ideas. What was intended as a punishment is become the good fortune of several. Many of those who have been transported [to America] as felons are now rich, and strangers to the stings of those wants that urged them to violations of the law. They are become industrious, exemplary, and useful citizens. The English government should purchase the most northern and barren of those islands. It should send over to us the honest, primitive Hebrideans, settle them here on good lands, as a reward for their virtue and ancient poverty, and replace them with a colony of her wicked sons. The severity of the climate, the inclemency of the seasons, the sterility of the soil, the tempestuousness of the sea, would afflict and punish enough. Could there be found a spot better adapted to retaliate the injury it had received by their crimes? Some of those islands might be considered as the hell of Great Britain, where all evil spirits should be sent. Two essential ends would be answered by this simple operation. The good people, by emigration, would be rendered happier; the bad ones would be placed where they ought to be. In a few years the dread of being sent to that wintry region would have a much stronger effect than that of transportation [to America as a felon]. This is no place of punishment. Were I a poor hopeless, breadless Englishman, and not restrained by the power of shame, I should be very thankful for the passage.

[23] Asterisks replace the name of a town, to remain undefined in this generalized account of a settler.
[24] Islands off the northeast coast of Scotland.
[25] In the 1700s thousands of criminals were forcibly sent from Britain to America—especially the southern tobacco-growing colonies—to be contracted as indentured servants. Colonists resented America being used a "dumping ground" for Britain's jails and prisons.

It is of very little importance how and in what manner an indigent man arrives; for if he is but sober, honest, and industrious, he has nothing more to ask of heaven. Let him go to work, he will have opportunities enough to earn a comfortable support, and even the means of procuring some land, which ought to be the utmost wish of every person who has health and hands to work. I knew a man who came to this country, in the literal sense of the expression, stark naked. I think he was a Frenchman and a sailor on board an English man of war [warship]. Being discontented, he had stripped himself and swam ashore, where finding clothes and friends, he settled afterwards at Maraneck in the county of Chester in the province of New York.[26] He married and left a good farm to each of his sons. I knew another person who was but twelve years old when he was taken on the frontiers of Canada by the Indians. At his arrival at Albany he was purchased by a gentleman [as an indentured servant], who generously bound him apprentice to a tailor. He lived to the age of ninety and left behind him a fine estate and a numerous family, all well settled, many of them I am acquainted with. Where is then the industrious European who ought to despair?

After a foreigner from any part of Europe is arrived and become a citizen, let him devoutly listen to the voice of our great parent [God] which says to him, "Welcome to my shores, distressed European. Bless the hour in which thou didst see my verdant fields, my fair navigable rivers, and my green mountains! If thou wilt work, I have bread for thee. If thou wilt be honest, sober, and industrious, I have greater rewards to confer on thee — ease and independence. I will give thee fields to feed and clothe thee, a comfortable fireside to sit by, and tell thy children by what means thou hast prospered; and a decent bed to repose on. I shall endow thee beside with the immunities of a freeman. If thou wilt carefully educate thy children, teach them gratitude to God, and reverence to that government that philanthropic government which has collected here so many men and made them happy. I will also provide for thy progeny [descendants]; and to every good man this ought to be the most holy, the most Powerful, the most earnest wish he can possibly form, as well as the most consolatory prospect when he dies. Go thou and work and till [farm]. Thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful and industrious."

Crèvecoeur concludes Letter III with the "History of Andrew, the Hebridean," a poor Scottish immigrant who in a few years of diligent labor learned the ways of an American farmer and established a prosperous backcountry farmstead.

Library of Congress

Paul Sandby, Thomas Pownall, *A View in Hudson's River of Pakepsey & the Catts-Kill Mountains, from Sopos Island in Hudson's River*, etching, London, 1761

[26] As had Crèvecoeur in 1764; see map, p. 2.