

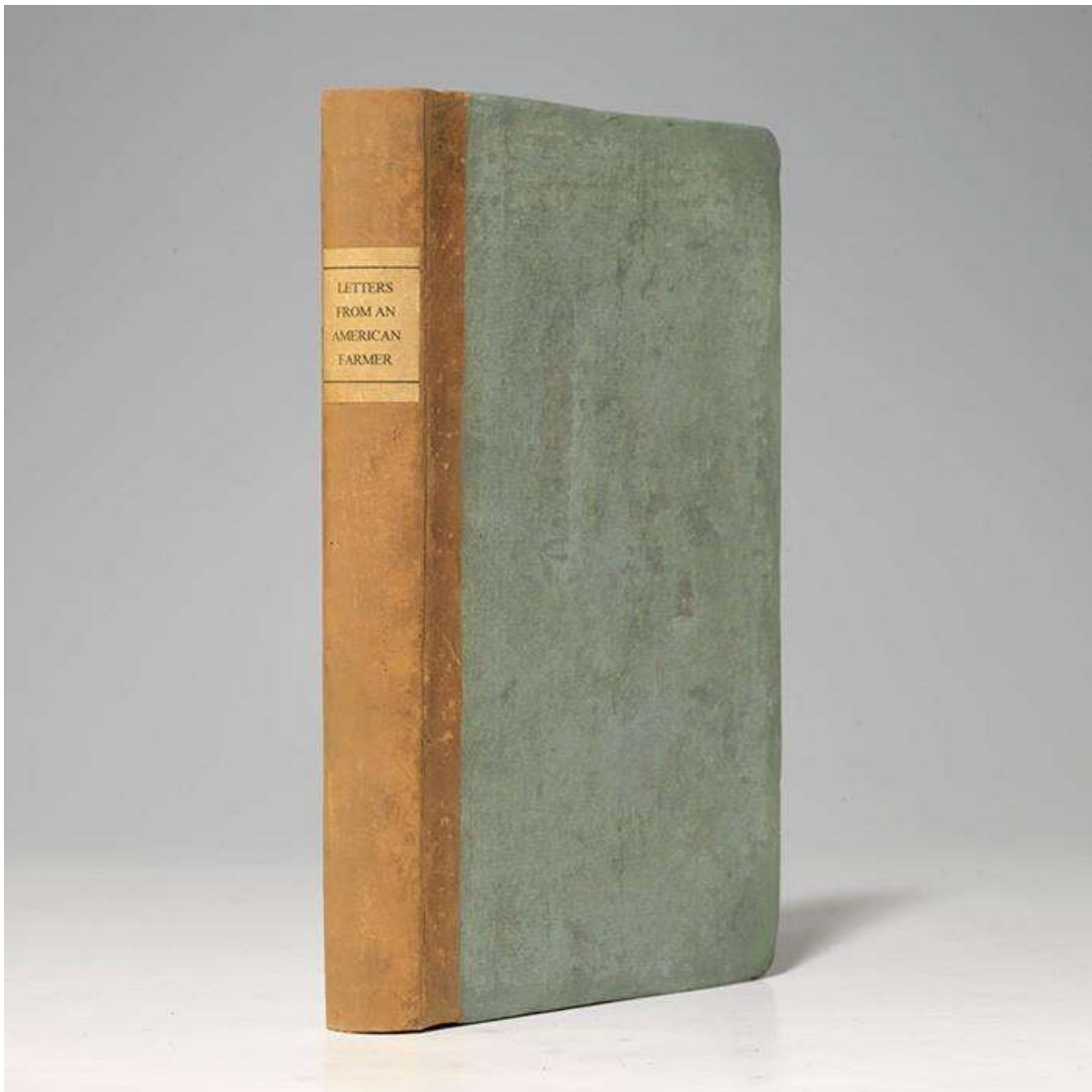
"Letters from an American Farmer" (1782), by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer; Describing Certain Provincial Situations, Manners, and Customs, Not Generally Known, 1782



L E T T E R S

FROM AN

AMERICAN FARMER;

DESCRIBING

CERTAIN PROVINCIAL SITUATIONS,
MANNERS, AND CUSTOMS,
NOT GENERALLY KNOWN;

AND CONVEYING

SOME IDEA OF THE LATE AND PRESENT
INTERIOR CIRCUMSTANCES

OF THE

BRITISH COLONIES

IN

NORTH AMERICA.

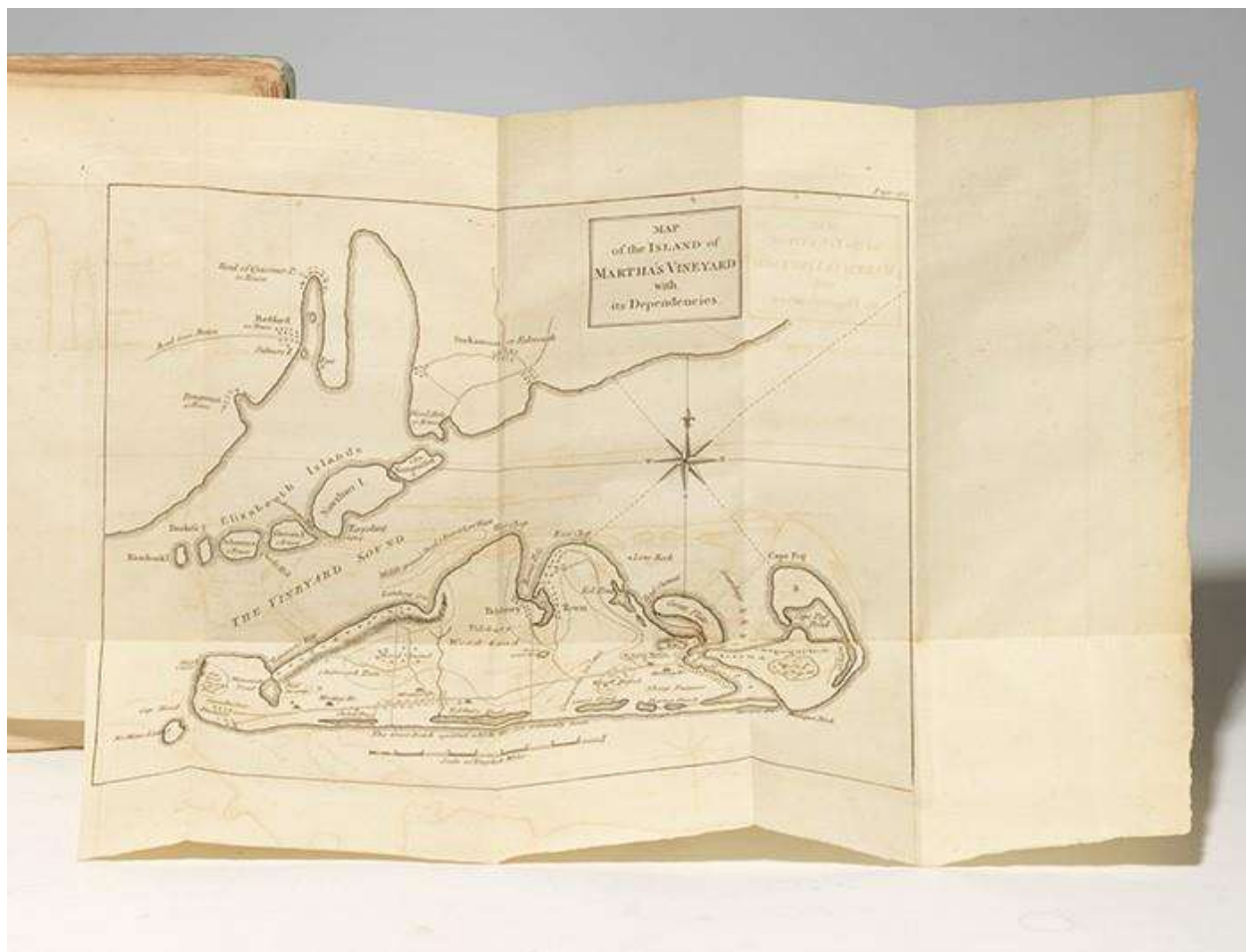
WRITTEN FOR THE INFORMATION OF A FRIEND
IN ENGLAND,

By J. HECTOR ST. JOHN,
A FARMER IN PENNSYLVANIA.

LONDON,
PRINTED FOR THOMAS DAVIES IN KINGS LANE COFFEE-
GARDEN, AND LOCKYER DAVIS IN HOLBORN.
MDCC LXXXII.

*Mitchell-William Geer
de Goussier*

the indigo, the rice of China. He does not find, as in Europe, a crowded society, where every place is over-stocked; he does not feel that perpetual collision of parties, that difficulty of beginning, that contention which oversets so many. There is room for every body 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 labourer, sober and industrious? he need not go many miles, nor receive many informations before he will be hired, well fed
F 4
at



"THE AMERICAN OUGHT TO LOVE THIS COUNTRY": *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*, 1782 FIRST EDITION WITH FOLDING MAPS IN SCARCE ORIGINAL BOARDS

First edition of this influential early work on American life and customs, "as literature unexcelled by any American work of the 18th century" (Howes), with two folding maps of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, in scarce original boards.

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur became the first to ask and answer, in print, "What is an American?"

Born in France, Crèvecoeur "emigrated to Canada during the last of the French and Indian Wars. He served under Montcalm and later seems to have explored near the Great Lakes and the Ohio River. He landed at New York in 1759, took out naturalization papers, traveled extensively in Pennsylvania and New York, and settled with his American wife.

He spent idyllic years on his New York farm until the Revolution, when, as a Loyalist, he was forced to flee to New York [where he was imprisoned for three months as a spy] and then to France. During the quiet decade prior to the Revolution, he probably wrote most of the *Letters from an American Farmer*.

In 1783 Crèvecoeur returned to America only to discover that his wife was dead, his home burned, and his children had disappeared, as a result of an Indian raid. Eventually he found his children and settled in New York, where as French consul he attempted to cement the friendly relations of the two countries" (*Oxford Companion to American Literature*).

Crèvecoeur's remarkable "letters" offer an account of his experiences in the American colonies. For many years he was the most widely read commentator on America, and his candid observations on American life drew many Europeans across the Atlantic.

The cherished notion of this country as a melting pot originates with Crèvecoeur: "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?" Crèvecoeur contends that "the American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein 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 allurements?"

With two pages of advertisements at the rear. Sabin 17496. Howes C883. Streeter II:711. Rich I:302. Early owner signature; gift inscription.

(CREVECOEUR, Michel Guillaume Saint Jean de) ST. JOHN, Hector J. *Letters from an American Farmer; Describing Certain Provincial Situations, Manners, and Customs, Not Generally Known*. London: Printed for Thomas Davies and Lockyer Davis, 1782. Octavo, original blue-gray boards sympathetically respined, uncut.

Some text leaves cleaned, expert restoration to spine and boards. An excellent and desirable uncut copy in original boards.

Introduction

"Letters from an American Farmer" stands as one of the earliest and most significant works in American literature, first published in England in 1782 during the closing year of the Revolutionary War of Independence. The timing of its publication was particularly fortuitous, as attention was focused on America during this pivotal moment in history when the new nation was taking shape before the eyes of the world¹. Written by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a French aristocrat who had emigrated to America and become a farmer, the book was composed over a period of seven years prior to the American Revolutionary War while he was farming in the fertile Greycourt region of Chester, New York³.

The book's original, considerably longer title was "Letters from an American Farmer; Describing Certain Provincial Situations, Manners, and Customs not Generally Known; and Conveying Some Idea of the Late and Present Interior Circumstances of the British Colonies in North America"³. This expansive title hints at the broad scope of the work, which consists of twelve letters covering a wide range of topics, from the emergence of an American identity to the slave trade³. The letters are structured as a fictional correspondence between James—an American farmer living in the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania—and an English gentleman identified only as Mr. F. B., though only James' letters are presented to the reader³.

While "Letters from an American Farmer" was only moderately successful in America upon its initial publication, it gained immediate popularity in Europe³. This enthusiastic reception prompted Crèvecoeur to produce an expanded French version that was published two years later³. The work's significance lies not only in its timing during America's formative period but also in its exploration of what would become some of American literature's most pressing and recurrent concerns: American identity, celebration of the land's fertility, personal determination, and freedom from institutional oppression¹.

The Author

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur was a French American writer whose life spanned the tumultuous period of American independence. Born in France as an aristocrat, he emigrated to America where he transformed himself into a farmer, embodying the very transformation from European to American that he would later document in his writings¹. Crèvecoeur's own experience as an immigrant who adopted American ways and values gave him a unique perspective from which to observe and comment on the emerging American character.

During his time in America, Crèvecoeur established himself as a farmer in the fertile region of Chester, New York, where he wrote his "Letters" over a seven-year period prior to the American Revolutionary War³. His firsthand experience with American agriculture and rural life informed his writing, lending authenticity to his observations about American farming practices and the relationship between Americans and their land.

Crèvecoeur was deeply influenced by Enlightenment thinking, particularly physiocratic beliefs that emphasized the primacy of agriculture in a nation's economy and social structure⁶. These influences are evident throughout his work, as he explores the relationship between the environment and human development, often expressing views aligned with environmental determinism—the idea that human growth, development, and activities are controlled by the physical environment³.

As both a European aristocrat and an American farmer, Crèvecoeur occupied a unique position that allowed him to view America through a dual lens, comparing European and American societies while developing his own vision of what made America and Americans distinct from their European counterparts.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"Letters from an American Farmer" deserves its place in the American literary canon for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, it has a strong claim to be regarded as the first work of American literature, marking the beginning of a distinctly American literary tradition¹. Its significance extends beyond mere chronological primacy, however, as it addresses fundamental questions about American identity that would preoccupy American writers for generations to come.

Crèvecoeur's famous question "What, then, is the American, this new man?" articulated a central concern at a time when America was defining itself as a nation separate from Europe¹. This question of American identity—what distinguishes Americans from Europeans and what unites diverse Americans into a coherent national character—remains relevant today and has been explored by countless American writers since Crèvecoeur first posed it.

The book also articulates several foundational American myths and values that have shaped American self-perception. It presents an "impassioned, unqualified defense of American agrarianism," promoting the idea that America's strength and virtue lie in its agricultural character and the close relationship between Americans and their land³. This agrarian ideal would become a powerful current in American thought, influencing figures from Thomas Jefferson to Wendell Berry.

Furthermore, "Letters" explores the tension between America's ideals and its realities, particularly in its treatment of slavery. The work begins with optimistic celebrations of American freedom and opportunity but shifts to darker explorations of slavery's brutality, embodying what critics have called a "model of decline" that mirrors America's own struggle to reconcile its lofty principles with its troubling practices³.

The book's influence extends beyond American borders as well. It was more widely circulated during the ratification debates than even "The Federalist Papers," serving as a key resource for

understanding the emerging nation⁴. Its immediate popularity in Europe helped shape European perceptions of America at a crucial moment in the new nation's development³.

Finally, "Letters from an American Farmer" combines elements of multiple genres—documentary, sociological observation, philosophical travel narrative, and fiction—in what Thomas Philbrick has termed a "complex artistry"³. This generic innovation established patterns that would be followed by later American writers, who often blended factual observation with fictional elements to capture the American experience.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "What, then, is the American, this new man?"

This quintessential question from Crèvecoeur's third letter encapsulates the central concern of American identity that has persisted throughout American history¹. In our current era of increasing diversity and ongoing debates about what it means to be American, this question remains as relevant as ever. It challenges us to consider what unites Americans beyond geographical boundaries—whether shared values, experiences, or aspirations—and how American identity continues to evolve in response to changing demographics and global contexts.

2. "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions."

This statement recognizes the transformative power of the American experience and the necessity of developing new ways of thinking to match new circumstances. Today, as America faces unprecedented challenges from technological change to climate crisis, Crèvecoeur's emphasis on innovation and adaptation in American thought remains pertinent. It reminds us that American identity has always involved reinvention and that addressing contemporary problems may require us to develop "new principles" rather than merely applying old solutions.

3. "Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow."

This metaphor exemplifies Crèvecoeur's environmental determinism, suggesting that human character is shaped by physical surroundings³. In our current context of increasing urbanization and digital environments, this quote prompts reflection on how our changing relationship with physical space affects who we are. It raises questions about how virtual environments might shape character differently from natural ones and whether we lose something essential when disconnected from the land.

4. "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."

This early articulation of what would later be called the "melting pot" theory of American identity anticipates America's development as a nation of immigrants. In our contemporary moment of heated immigration debates, this quote reminds us that cultural fusion has been central to American identity from the beginning. It challenges both nativist exclusion and rigid multiculturalism by suggesting that America transforms its diverse inhabitants into something new and powerful.

5. "The bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalts the mind of every citizen."

Crevecoeur here identifies property ownership as central to American freedom and dignity. In today's context of growing wealth inequality and changing notions of property in a digital age, this quote invites us to reconsider the relationship between ownership and citizenship. It raises questions about whether economic independence remains essential to full participation in American democracy and how we might ensure that all citizens have access to the dignity that Crevecoeur associated with property.

Five Major Ideas

1. The American as a New Human Type

Central to Crevecoeur's work is the idea that America has produced a new kind of person distinct from Europeans—"the American, this new man"[1](#). He portrays Americans as transformed by their environment and circumstances, shedding European habits and prejudices to become more independent, industrious, and egalitarian. This transformation is not merely cultural but almost biological in Crevecoeur's telling, as if the American environment itself reshapes human nature. This concept of American exceptionalism—the idea that Americans constitute a people fundamentally different from and superior to Europeans—would become a persistent theme in American self-understanding, influencing everything from foreign policy to domestic politics.

2. Agrarian Idealism

Crevecoeur presents an "impassioned, unqualified defense of American agrarianism," portraying the American farmer as the ideal citizen and agriculture as the foundation of American virtue[3](#). He celebrates the farmer's independence, self-sufficiency, and direct relationship with nature, suggesting that these qualities make farmers morally superior to urban dwellers and those engaged in commerce or manufacturing. This agrarian ideal would profoundly influence American thought, particularly through Thomas Jefferson, who famously declared that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God." Though America has become predominantly urban and industrial, the agrarian ideal continues to shape American self-perception and values, manifesting in everything from the celebration of rural "heartland" values to the modern sustainable agriculture movement.

3. Environmental Determinism

Throughout "Letters," Crèvecoeur expresses the belief that human development is shaped by the physical environment³. This environmental determinism appears especially in his descriptions of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, where he portrays the inhabitants' character and customs as direct responses to their geographical circumstances. This idea that landscape shapes human character would become a recurring theme in American literature and thought, from Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis to contemporary environmentalism. It suggests that American character cannot be understood apart from American geography and that changes to the American landscape necessarily transform American identity.

4. The Melting Pot

Crèvecoeur offers one of the earliest articulations of what would later be called the "melting pot" theory of American identity, describing America as a place where "individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men." This concept of America as a transformative crucible that forges diverse immigrants into a unified people with a shared identity would become a dominant metaphor for American assimilation throughout much of American history. Though challenged in recent decades by multiculturalism and recognition of persistent ethnic divisions, the melting pot ideal continues to influence debates about immigration and American identity.

5. The Contradiction Between American Ideals and Practices

The structure of "Letters" embodies what critics have called a "model of decline," as its initially optimistic tone gives way to darker explorations of slavery and frontier violence³. This shift mirrors a fundamental tension in American society between its lofty ideals of freedom and equality and its troubling practices of enslavement and conquest. By juxtaposing celebrations of American liberty with descriptions of slavery's brutality, Crèvecoeur highlights a contradiction that would become a central theme in American literature and history. This tension between America's principles and its practices continues to animate American politics and culture, from the Civil Rights Movement to contemporary racial justice activism.

Three Major Controversies

1. The Problematic Figure of the Farmer

While Crèvecoeur presents the farmer as the representative American, modern critics question this characterization as problematic and exclusionary⁶. By elevating the freehold farmer as the ideal American, Crèvecoeur implicitly marginalizes other Americans—urban dwellers, laborers, women, enslaved people, and Native Americans—who do not fit this mold. This controversy reflects broader debates about who counts as "truly American" and whose experiences should be centered in American narratives. Critics argue that Crèvecoeur's agrarian idealism, influenced by physiocratic beliefs, creates a narrow vision of American identity that has been used to

delegitimize urban, industrial, and diverse America⁶. This controversy continues in contemporary politics, where appeals to "real America" often invoke rural, agricultural communities while implicitly excluding urban centers.

2. The Treatment of Slavery

One of the most significant controversies surrounding "Letters" involves its treatment of slavery. While Crèvecoeur includes a disturbing episode depicting slavery's brutality, critics have debated whether this represents genuine moral outrage or merely a literary device³. The text's shift from celebrating American freedom to acknowledging the "inhuman brutality of slavery" creates a tension that mirrors America's own contradictions³. Some critics see this as evidence of Crèvecoeur's disillusionment with America, while others view it as a strategic critique of American hypocrisy. This controversy reflects broader debates about early American attitudes toward slavery and the extent to which founding documents and early American literature should be criticized for their complicity with slavery or praised for their seeds of abolitionism.

3. The Question of Authenticity

Critics have long debated whether "Letters" should be read as a straightforward documentary account or as a work of fiction employing documentary techniques³. Early readings tended to treat the text as "a straightforward natural and social history of young America," while modern critics recognize it as combining "elements of fiction and non-fiction"³. This controversy extends to questions about Crèvecoeur's own authenticity—whether his persona as an American farmer represents his genuine experience or a literary construction designed to appeal to European readers. Some critics suggest that Crèvecoeur's vision of America was calculated to confirm European preconceptions rather than to accurately represent American realities. This debate about authenticity reflects broader questions about how America represents itself to the world and whether American self-narratives should be trusted or viewed skeptically.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "Letters from an American Farmer" because it offers a unique window into the formation of American identity at a pivotal moment in the nation's development. As one of the earliest works to ask "What, then, is the American, this new man?", it provides valuable perspective on how Americans have understood themselves and their relationship to their country¹. By engaging with this foundational text, contemporary readers can better understand the origins of persistent American ideals and contradictions.

The work's exploration of the relationship between Americans and their environment remains relevant in an era of environmental crisis and changing landscapes³. Crèvecoeur's environmental determinism challenges readers to consider how physical surroundings shape character and how changes to the American landscape might transform American identity. His agrarian idealism,

while problematic in some respects, offers a counterpoint to contemporary consumerism and disconnection from nature that many Americans find troubling.

Furthermore, "Letters" provides historical perspective on contemporary debates about immigration and American identity. Crèvecoeur's vision of America as a place where "individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men" represents an early articulation of the melting pot ideal that continues to influence discussions of assimilation and multiculturalism. By returning to this source, readers can better understand the historical roots of current controversies.

Perhaps most importantly, "Letters from an American Farmer" embodies the tension between American ideals and American realities that continues to animate American politics and culture³. Its movement from optimistic celebration to darker recognition of slavery's brutality mirrors America's ongoing struggle to live up to its principles. By confronting this contradiction in one of America's earliest literary works, readers can better understand that this tension is not a recent development but a fundamental aspect of American experience that each generation must address anew.

In an age characterized by polarization and competing visions of America's past and future, returning to foundational texts like "Letters from an American Farmer" offers common ground for civic dialogue about American identity and values. By engaging with this canonical work, Americans can participate in the ongoing conversation about what America has been, what it is, and what it might become.

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