

Topic 3.11

Developing an American Identity

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

J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782

Learning Objective: Explain the continuities and changes in American culture from 1754 to 1800.

A truly unique American identity would take at least a generation, if not more, to become clearly established and recognized. Admiration of the influence of the “founding fathers,” the leaders who declared independence, fought a war to achieve it, and created a new system of government, became the core of an American identity which continues today. A clear example of this influence is demonstrated by the actions of George Washington. His Farewell Address (Topic 3.10) and two-term tradition as president retain their relevancy in varying degrees today. That people still debate the meaning of the founding fathers’ words and ideas reflects their importance in understanding the United States and its people, then and now. In the process of forging an identity, Americans retained much of their ancestors’ culture and traditions. The evolving identity would be built on the foundation of the people and culture of the 13 colonies (Topic 2.7), formed by the thought and experience of the Revolution (Topics 3.4 and 3.6), and enlarged by regional differences (Topic 2.3) and the ongoing additions of immigrants.

Social Change

In addition to revolutionizing the politics of the 13 states, the War for Independence also profoundly changed American society. Some changes occurred immediately before the war ended, while others evolved gradually as the ideas of the Revolution began to filter into the attitudes of the common people. Together, these changes fostered growing awareness of how the United States was different from Great Britain and the rest of Europe.

Abolition of Aristocratic Titles State constitutions and laws abolished old institutions that had originated in medieval Europe. No legislature could grant titles of nobility, nor could any court recognize the feudal practice of primogeniture (the first-born son’s right to inherit his family’s property). Whatever aristocracy existed in colonial America was further weakened by the confiscation of large estates owned by Loyalists. Many such estates were subdivided and sold to raise money for the war.

Separation of Church and State Most states adopted the principle of separation of church and state. In other words, they refused to give financial support to any religious group. The Anglican Church (which became known as the Episcopal Church in the United States) formerly had been closely tied to the king's government. However, it was disestablished (lost state support) in the south. Only in three New England states—New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts—did the Congregational Church continue to receive state support in the form of a religious tax. This practice was finally discontinued in New England early in the 1830s.

Regional Variations As the example of church-state separation shows, all of the states did not change at the same time. The regional differences that emerged in the colonial period continued to shape how the states evolved. The term “southerner” had entered common usage in the 1780s. The biggest difference was in slavery. While slavery continued to decline in northern states, it became stronger than ever in southern states.

Visitors also noticed differences in how people acted. In 1785, Jefferson wrote to a friend in France that an observant visitor could determine the line of latitude simply by paying attention to the character of the people in the area. In general, said Jefferson, northerners were more serious and persevering in their work, while southerners were more generous and forthright in their speech.

Political Change

The development of political parties (Topic 3.10) both added to and reflected the American identity. The distinctions between the two initial parties, the Federalist and Democratic-Republican, had their origins in the debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over the ratification of the Constitution. These distinctions matured largely based on regional differences and distinct views of the roles, functions, and powers of the federal government. The evolution of political parties continues today, as does the distinctiveness of an American identity.



The Great Seal includes symbols that represent the United States. For example, the stars represent the 13 original states, the olive branch represents a desire for peace, and the arrows represent a readiness to go to war. The white stripes represent purity, the red stripes represent courage, and the blue field represents vigilance.

Source: U.S. Government. Wikipedia.org.

Cultural Change

While much of the nation's culture reflected its British origins, gradually a distinctive national identity evolved. This change was facilitated by the expansion of newspapers in the late 1700s as a means of communication and a source for political discussion. Writer Charles Brockden Brown explored the meaning of an American identity through novels. In Philadelphia, **Charles Wilson Peale** opened what is recognized as the first art gallery. In the 1790s, **Pierre-Charles L'Enfant** developed the design for Washington, D.C., **Gilbert Stuart** painted the nation's leaders, and the American Academy of Fine Arts held its first exhibition. Later, developments such as the first dictionary for American English and a book on American geography would continue the process of creating a distinctive culture.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain what stayed the same and what was altered in American culture in the period from 1754 to 1800.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Culture (ARC)

Charles Wilson Peale

Pierre-Charles L'Enfant

Gilbert Stuart

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1-2 refer to the following excerpt.

“Friends, what then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a 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 Frenchwoman, 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 labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. . . .

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 [poverty], and useless labor he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence—this is an American.”

J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782

1. The clearest way to modify or refute the answer given in the excerpt to the question, “What then is the American, this new man?” would be to point out the important role of
 - (A) the enslaved African Americans who worked on plantations
 - (B) the leaders who wrote the Constitution
 - (C) the development of political parties
 - (D) the ideas in Washington’s Farewell Address
2. Which of the following groups best represents the change described in the last sentence of the excerpt?
 - (A) American Indians who lived in the region before Europeans arrived
 - (B) Puritans who settled in Massachusetts Bay in the 17th century
 - (C) Indentured servants who became free after working for a master for several years
 - (D) Elected leaders who served in legislative bodies during the colonial period

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

Use complete sentences; an outline or bulleted list alone is not acceptable.

1. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
 - (a) Briefly explain ONE specific historical difference between the cultural life in the American colonies under British rule and life in the newly independent United States.
 - (b) Briefly explain ONE specific historical similarity between the cultural life in the American colonies under British rule and life in the newly independent United States.
 - (c) Briefly explain how ONE legal change impacted the cultural life of the colonies and the United States in the period 1754 to 1800.