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James Fenimore Cooper: Young Man to Author

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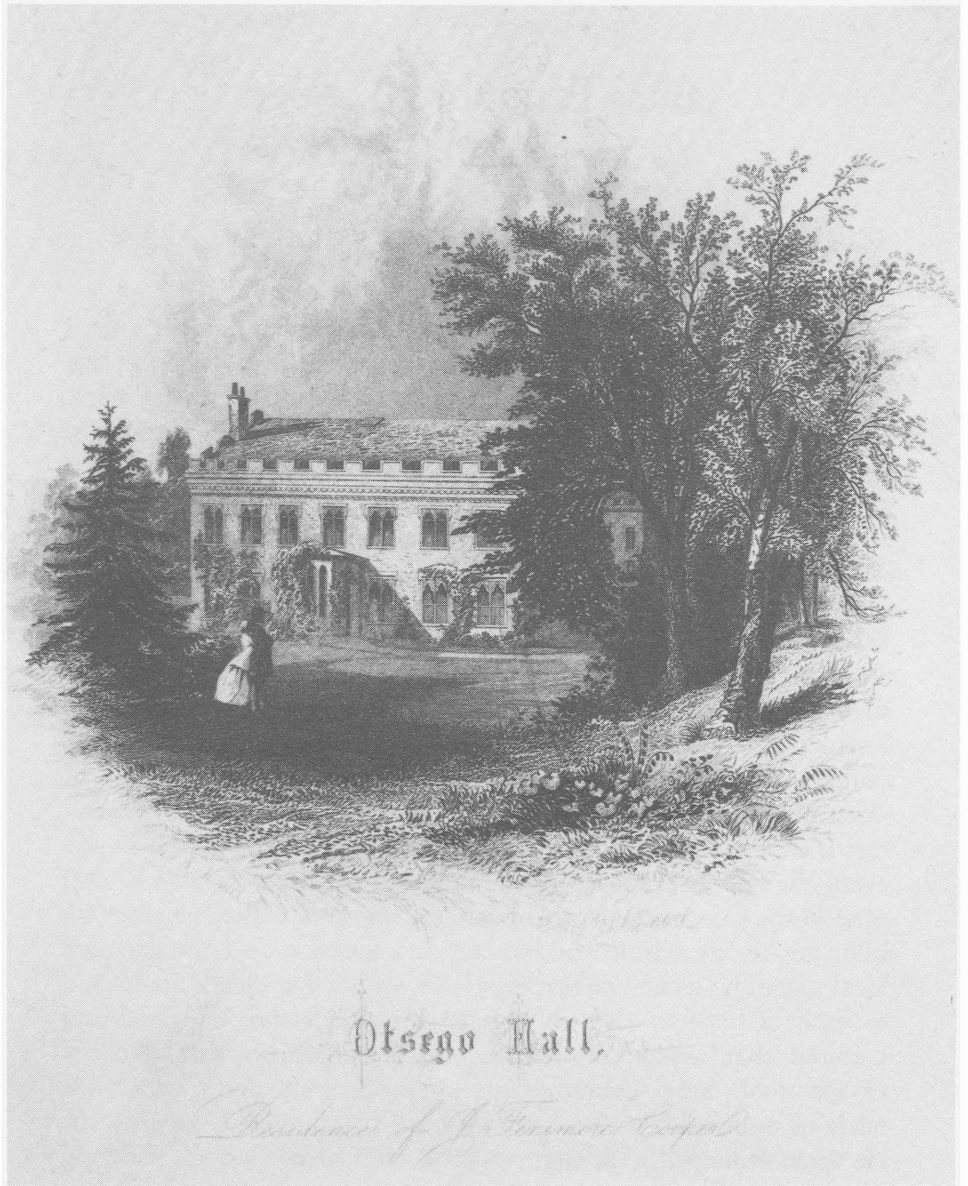
James Fenimore Cooper: Young Man to Author

BY CONSTANTINE EVANS

The distinctive event that marks the beginning of Cooper's progress towards a career as an author took place in 1805, when at age sixteen he left Yale College in disgrace. Uninspired by his studies, Cooper had devoted his collegiate life to solitary walks, a series of pranks, and at least one brawl. When in his junior year he ignited a gunpowder charge in the keyhole of a fellow student's door, he had his academic career concluded by the college authorities.¹

For what future career Yale was to be a preparation is not known. One critic, however, suggests that it "was entirely in keeping with William Cooper's [Cooper's father] view of life that his son should profit by the family increases in fortune and social position". We should note here that the youthful rise of William Cooper during the Revolutionary War was an American success story, with perhaps a smudge on it. One commentator remarks that he was "possibly, at worst, a war-time profiteer . . . at best, little more than an adventurous capitalist who took care to form the right connexions". In any event, he had in 1786, at age 31, sufficient wealth to acquire 40,000 acres in the Cooperstown area of upstate New York. These he promptly sold, greatly increasing his fortune. An active state politician and local judge, he gained power as well as wealth; but clearly he looked to each of his four sons to become the gentleman, educated and cultured, that he never was. Thus, after the debacle at Yale, William Cooper took direct charge of his son's education and Cooper was made to resume his studies for a year under a tutor at Cooperstown. He again remained indifferent to study, and Judge Cooper, thinking

1. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1960), 1:5. Hereafter cited as *Letters and Journals*. In the absence of a definitive biography of Cooper, I have especially relied on the biographical introductory sections and commentary of this authoritative work.



Otsego Hall, Cooperstown, New York, from *Pages and Pictures from the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper, with Notes by Susan Fenimore Cooper* (New York, 1865). The small sketches that accompany this article are by F. O. C. Darley as engraved by P. F. Annin for *Pages and Pictures*.

a disciplined life in order, decided that his son should have a career in the United States Navy.²

To qualify for entry into the Navy, Cooper sailed before the mast on the merchant ship *Stirling*, the absence of a naval academy making the merchant service a common training ground for naval candidates. *Stirling* sailed from New York on 15 October 1806, bound for London, and completed its voyage on 18 September 1807. With a facility that became characteristic of him once his interests were engaged, Cooper mastered a formidable range of seamanship and developed a passion for the sea. Significantly, Cooper was also exposed to the underside of life. According to another critic, the crew of *Stirling* was probably composed of “the flotsam and jetsam of society, derelicts, and drunkards, Ishmaels, . . . some of them in *delirium tremens*, whom the young Cooper, just barely seventeen, joined for his first voyage”.³ All this—combined with a stormy crossing, pursuit by a pirate ship, and the boarding by a British press gang—must have made the bowers of Yale and the relative comforts of home seem very remote to Cooper. But his experience did not defeat him.

William Cooper, former Congressman and still-prominent Federalist, then used his political influence to get his son an appointment in the United States Navy.⁴ His influence must have been, and indeed needed to be, considerable, for as one naval historian writes of Robert Smith, Secretary of the Navy: “Smith insisted that all application [for appointment to midshipman] should be accompanied with recommendations from men of worth and note who were personally acquainted with the young man”.⁵

A midshipman’s warrant, dated 1 January 1808 and signed by Thomas Jefferson, together with a blank oath of allegiance was sent

2. Robert E. Spiller, *Fenimore Cooper, Critic of His Times* (New York: Minton, Balch, & Co., 1931), 37; George Dekker, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Novelist* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1967), 3–8.

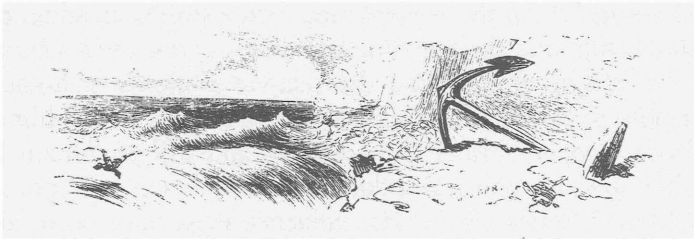
3. Warren S. Walker, *James Fenimore Cooper: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 7. Cooper eventually acquired a formidable knowledge of seamanship. The technical accuracy of his sea novels has always been appreciated by sailors.

4. Louis H. Bolander, “The Naval Career of James Fenimore Cooper”, *The United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 46 (1940): 543.

5. Charles Oscar Paullin, *Paullin’s History of Naval Administration, 1775–1911* (Annapolis, Md.: U. S. Naval Institute, 1968), 131.

to Cooper. On 20 February Cooper, who had been absent from Cooperstown, returned the oath, duly notarized, and four days later was ordered to report to the commanding naval officer at New York City.⁶

Cooper's choice of careers, although dictated by his father, seemed a happy one. The preparatory voyage on *Stirling* proved congenial to his adventurous temperament and provided an outlet for his extravagant energies; it also allowed Cooper to be on his own while at the same time obeying his father. The Navy offered a continuation of this independent/dependent relationship with his father. As events turned out, however, Cooper could not have entered the Navy at a worse time. A context to make fully intelligible Cooper's dissatisfaction with a naval career and his subsequent resignation from the service is established by consulting naval history.



The Constitution, which came into effect in 1789, empowered Congress to “provide and maintain a Navy” and named the President as “commander in chief of the Navy”. By congressional act, control of naval affairs was invested in the Department of War.⁷ The physical growth of the Navy, however, was neither rapid nor extensive. Equally slow was its removal from the jurisdiction of the War Department to an independent cabinet rank nine years after the Constitution had created it. The tardiness in each case can be explained by the fact that the very existence of a navy was strongly contested from the start.

Opposition to a navy was based on two broad positions, each reflecting Republican or anti-Federalist policy. The Republicans considered a navy a useless expense, especially in the face of an enormous national debt. Further, the fact that there was no pressing need

6. *Letters and Journals*, 1:9–10; 10n.

7. Quotations from the Constitution taken from synopsis in *Paullin's History*, 89–90.

for a naval force after the Revolution was a strong card in Republican hands. Objection to a navy was also founded on philosophic issues raised by the Revolution: "Permanent armies and navies", naval historians tell us, "were, in the popular view, the plaything of tyrants, the ornaments of that very system which America had just so violently repudiated".⁸ What finally removed opposition to a navy and initiated its subsequent growth in size and status was the sudden necessity to have one as a weapon to protect American commerce.

The capture of American ships and the ransom extorted by the Barbary States for captured American seamen became the strongest card the Federalists had to urge a naval program. National honor was the hue and cry. The result was the Naval Armament bill. It was, however, the so-called 'quasi-war' with France (1797–1800) that elevated the Navy to a cabinet status and gave it the prestige of an independent institution.

But while the Navy continued to be the object of political wrangling, it was developing a life of its own in terms of martial honor, heroism, and glory. The high point of the Navy's self-consciousness was the Tripolitan War (1801–1805). The war made heroes, and the heroes made a compelling tradition of naval daring and courage. Ironically, this blossoming of esprit de corps took place during the administration of the Navy's greatest adversary, Thomas Jefferson. According to one naval history source:

The triumph of the Jeffersonian Republican Party, in the presidential and congressional elections of 1800, foreshadowed radical changes in naval policy. The Federalist defeat meant a shift of political power from the seaboard to the interior, and from commerce and finance to agriculture. . . . And it was not beyond the realm of possibility that the new regime might abolish the sea-going Navy altogether.⁹

Jefferson, of course, could not get rid of the Navy, but he could and did reduce its size and transform it. His "dry dock" plan, which in-

8. Leonard F. Guttridge and Jay D. Smith, *The Commodores* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 3.

9. Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776–1918* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1939), 50.

volved laying up the American fleet in a Washington shipyard, produced a tremendous uproar, for the officer corps was to be deactivated, as the absence of ships obviated the need for crews. Jefferson's "dry dock" scheme, however, failed to receive congressional approval. But a measure that did gain legislative approval was his controversial "gun boat" policy—"another of his naval inventions", and "his most useless".¹⁰

A gun boat was a small tactical vessel designed to be used in shallow water and was nearly useless for deep sea navigation. Referred to as "Jeffs" by naval wags, these vessels were unpopular since they did not train personnel for sea duty.¹¹ Cooper, speaking from direct personal experience, writes, in his own *History of the Navy*, that Jefferson's plan "for a short time, threatened destruction to the pride, discipline, tone, and even morals, of the service":

There can be no question, that, in certain circumstances vessels of this sort may be particularly useful; but these circumstances are rare occurrences, as they are almost always connected with attacks on towns and harbours. . . . The American coast has an extent of nearly two thousand miles, and to protect it by means of gun-boats, even admitting the practicability of the method, would involve an expenditure sufficient to create a movable force of ships, that would not only answer all the same purposes of defense, but which would possess the additional advantage of acting, at need, offensively. In other words, it was entailing on the country the cost of an efficient marine, without enjoying its advantages.¹²

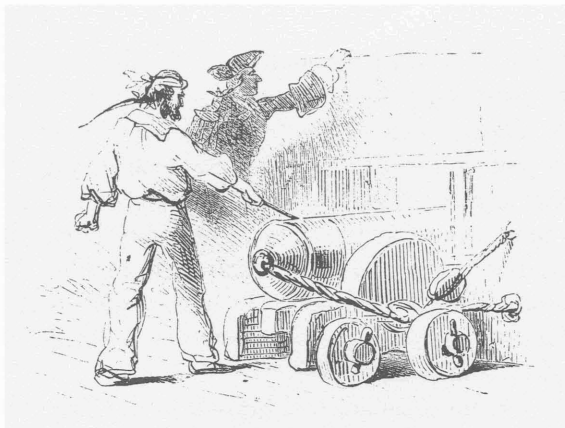
In 1807, the year before Cooper entered the Navy, Congress authorized the construction of 188 gun boats, more than tripling a like authorization in 1806.¹³

10. Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 128; 133.

11. Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 135; Guttridge and Smith, *Commodores*, 172; Sprout, *American Naval Power*, 58–60.

12. J. Fenimore Cooper, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America*, abridged edition (Philadelphia: Thomas Cowperthwait & Co., 1841), 232–33. See also: Henry Walcott Boynton, *James Fenimore Cooper* (New York: Century Co., 1931), 44–45.

13. Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 134.



The young Cooper, of course, having no idea that “the pride, discipline, tone, and even morals” of the Navy were being menaced, entered at the height of Jefferson’s policy of pacifism. At this time the Navy had only twelve sea-going vessels, and there was little enough employment for naval officers, let alone for midshipmen just entering the Navy.¹⁴ Cooper’s first duty was attached to the bomb ketch *Vesuvius*, in New York for repairs.

A respite from idleness came on 5 July 1808, when Cooper was transferred to Lake Ontario to serve under the command of Lt. M. T. Woolsey. There were war winds in the atmosphere, and Cooper’s transfer was part of an executive decision to fortify both Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, where the British had ships. Woolsey’s instructions included the construction of a 16-gun brig of war. The British were busy building a brig of their own across the lake, an activity which caused some tension; however, in a letter to his oldest brother, Richard, Cooper remarked that although he had purchased a pair of pistols he would not need them.¹⁵ The duty was in fact peaceful, and Cooper apparently had a merry winter with his comrades.

By the spring of 1809 Cooper was becoming bored—but he was showing, by his subsequent actions, an initiative with regard to the management of his destiny previously absent from his conduct. On 8 April he wrote to Paul Hamilton, now Secretary of the Navy in James Madison’s new administration, for a transfer to a station of

14. Bolander, “Naval Career”, 543.

15. *Letters and Journals*, 1:10.

“actual service”.¹⁶ Also in the mails was Woolsey’s recommendation for Cooper’s promotion. Cooper’s request and Woolsey’s recommendation were ignored. On 13 September Cooper wrote to Hamilton requesting a year’s furlough to make a European voyage.¹⁷ The object of the voyage was to accumulate more knowledge of seamanship—not at the time an unusual request. The Navy Department granted this request, but Cooper wrote Hamilton from New York that he could not find a ship for Europe. He wished permission, therefore, to cancel his furlough and to be transferred to *Wasp 18*, under the command of Lt. James Lawrence.¹⁸

Lawrence, having distinguished himself in the Tripolitan War and being destined in four years to trade his life for naval glory, was a formidable and persuasive figure. Interestingly, he was in fact born, eight years earlier, next door to Cooper’s own birthplace in Burlington, New Jersey. Whether Cooper appealed to this neighborly connection is not known, but he, as one commentator notes, “succeeded in wangling a berth aboard the *Wasp*”.¹⁹

Cooper developed a fast friendship with Lawrence, “the perfect man of war man”,²⁰ as he later recalled him in his own history of the Navy, and in the words of a later naval historian “one of the most gallant and attractive personalities in the annals of the United States Navy”.²¹ But much as Cooper may have enjoyed the society of the charismatic Lawrence, he again found himself landlocked. If Cooper had any sea duty at all during this period, it lasted only four days—a voyage from New York to Boston.²² To make matters worse, he was assigned tedious recruiting duties in New York. Cooper’s naval career was running into the sands.

Then, on 22 December 1809, Cooper’s father died, the victim of apparent manslaughter; he had been struck from behind by a political enemy after leaving a political meeting in Albany. Cooper, as

16. *Letters and Journals*, 1:13.

17. *Ibid.*, 15.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 6.

20. Quoted by Beard (*Letters and Journals*, 1:16n), whose citation reads, “*History of the Navy*, II, 105–106”.

21. Captain A. T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905), 2:141.

22. Bolander, “Naval Career”, 544.

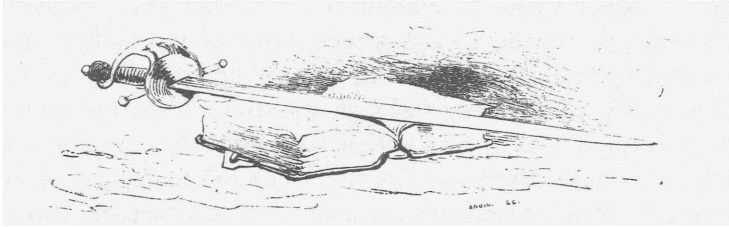
did each of his four brothers, inherited \$50,000 and twenty-three specified farms. Although now in a financial position to leave the service, Cooper wrote to Hamilton on 3 May 1810, requesting a year's furlough "owing to the recent death of my Father" and the necessity of immediately attending "to my private affairs".²³ Cooper further explained that the furlough was the alternative to resignation. It is important to notice that Cooper is stretching a point by saying his father's death was "recent". The full ambiguity of the letter—and, indeed, of Cooper's conduct—is readily apparent when the Hamilton letter is compared to Cooper's letter to his brother Richard,²⁴ dated 18 May 1810, six days after receiving his one-year furlough. In the first portion of his letter, Cooper told Richard how on a previous visit to New York he had mentioned his intent to resign from the Navy: ". . . my only reason at that time was the blasted prospects of the service". Cooper then mentioned that he had written his resignation and submitted it to Lawrence, who "very warmly" recommended that he give the service another year or two; nevertheless, Lawrence would use his influence to procure Cooper a year's furlough. Cooper noted that he had accepted this arrangement, adding that it was in his power to resign at the end of the year "should the situation of the Country warrant it".

The first portion of the letter to Richard provided a background to the Hamilton letter, but the second portion, frequently cited by Cooper scholars, presented a new reason for resigning from the service—a reason presumably concealed from Lawrence and certainly from Hamilton. In a rapid shift in tone the younger brother confronted the present head of the family with the news that he was planning to be married to "the daughter of a man of very respectable connections and a handsome fortune". After assuring Richard of the high social rank of Susan Augusta De Lancey's family, he instructed him to "take your Hat and go to mother, the boys, girls" to ask if there is any objection to the marriage; Cooper averred that there had better not be. Richard was then to "take your pen in hand" and write Susan's father of the "happiness and pleasure" the Cooper family would experience upon the marriage. The concluding passage of the letter, "I wish not to interrupt you in your attempt to clear the

23. *Letters and Journals*, 1:16; 17n3.

24. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

estate”, indicated that Cooper’s furlough request had less to do with his father’s death than with his having met Susan De Lancey.



As noted, Judge Cooper had left a substantial estate. What concerns us here, however, is what has been seen as another part of Cooper’s inheritance: an “intense devotion to the ideal of the function of the gentleman”. It is in Cooper that “the agrarian dream of a thriving country-side dotted with splendid yet democratic gentry to lead and serve the people had its most energetic, and sincere, spokesman”.²⁵

Dates are now especially important. Since Cooper had only met Susan sometime in that spring of 1810,²⁶ his 18 May letter to his brother suggests both ardor and a strong resolve.

Cooper’s proposal of marriage has been called his first decision as a man.²⁷ In other words, it was a life-decision made independently of his father and yet made possible by his father’s death. Cooper was now, at the appropriate age of twenty-one, psychologically as well as financially prepared to step into his father’s shoes. The two halves of his letter to Richard make manifest Cooper’s transition from immaturity to maturity. Completing the picture is a much later letter to the Navy Department, written to clear up a snag attending his actual resignation on 28 April 1811; here Cooper reveals in effect that Susan’s acceptance of Cooper’s proposal was contingent on his resignation from the service.²⁸

25. Edwin Harrison Cady, *The Gentleman in America* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1949), 103–4.

26. *Letters and Journals*, 1:6.

27. Stephen Railton, *Fenimore Cooper: A Study of His Life and Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 39.

28. *Letters and Journals*, 1:25; 25n; 26n3; 27–28; 29n3; 71–74; 76–78; 89–91; 92–93; 105–8. The Secretary’s letter (dated 6 May 1811) accepting Cooper’s resignation

“I loved her like a man and told her of it like a sailor”, Cooper wrote to Richard. Thus, half-in and half-out of the service, Cooper took his first tentative steps towards his new identity.

No one doubts that Cooper also loved the Navy—not the duties, which were tedious or nonexistent, but the camaraderie, which the passing years changed into a proud nostalgia. Cooper’s own history of the Navy attests his lifelong concern for the service.²⁹ Another dramatic career change lay ahead; but for now Cooper was not only leaving the Navy, he was leaving his boyhood.

Cooper’s transformation, begun at age thirty, from gentleman farmer of Scarsdale, Westchester County, to author seems to come out of nowhere. According to family legend, he began his first novel, *Precaution* (1820), after an abrupt remark to his wife that he could write a better book than the one he was reading aloud to her.³⁰ This sudden impulse to write a novel, however, signaled a family adventure, not a celestial visitation of the Muse, for Cooper was leading a busy and full life during the spring of 1820. A quaint but graphic rendering of Cooper’s enthusiasm for his life as a gentleman farmer was recalled by his daughter:

While *Precaution* was being written, the author was engaged in work decidedly more to his taste, the improvement of the grounds about the cottage of Angevine [the name of the Cooper farm]. Landscape gardening was a new art in America at that date. . . . But the cottage at Angevine was built at the precise moment when new ideas of these subjects were opening before the minds of the country gentry. Mr. Cooper became deeply interested in the subject of planning a lawn, building a ha-ha fence, and setting out trees. He was very daring in transplanting; the size of some of the elms caused neighbors to generally shake their heads. Always active in

was misdirected; Cooper was in the dark as to his status until the Secretary (now William Jones) finally confirmed his resignation (27 January 1813); the later letter referred to above was written 8 January 1823 to question what Cooper thought were monies erroneously charged to him while performing recruiting duties, and to claim pay he thought still due him dating to the time he received official confirmation of his resignation.

29. Bolander, “Naval Career”, 541.

30. Boynton, *James Fenimore Cooper*, 80. See also: *Letters and Journals*, 1:41–42.

his habits, he was generally in the fields while this ditching, and fencing, and transplanting was going on, often taking part in the work himself.³¹

Indeed, looking at Cooper at this point in his life, one is surprised by a somewhat obscure item in his subsequent biography: a dying Franz Schubert calling for Cooper's novels to console his last hours.³²

But, in fact, Cooper's career as an author did not come out of nowhere; it emerged from a series of painful circumstances that began just as he was making the transformation from naval officer to gentleman farmer.



Cooper's year furlough was granted 10 May 1810; he was married 1 January 1811 at his wife's home in Mamaroneck. He immediately made plans for a civilian and domestic life; on 28 April 1811 he honored his pledge to Susan to resign from the Navy, apparently timing his resignation to coincide with the expiration of his furlough. During this interval he rented a small farm, appropriately named Closet Hall, in New Rochelle, about five miles from Susan's family home. The residence was to be temporary, for Cooper concluded his resignation letter to the Secretary of the Navy, "I shall await your orders at Cooperstown where any orders from the Navy Department will find me".³³

31. Susan Fenimore Cooper, "A Glance Backward", *Atlantic Monthly* 59 (1887): 202.

32. Peggy Woodford, *Schubert: His Life and Times* (New York: Midas Books, 1978), 52.

33. *Letters and Journals*, 1:25.

But Cooper's plans to return to Cooperstown were thwarted by the misdirection of the Navy's acceptance letter. The confusion that followed pinned Cooper to New Rochelle and at the same time cooperated with his wife's persistent desire to live near her family. Not until 27 January 1813 did Cooper, after a complicated correspondence, receive official confirmation of his resignation. He was then free to move to Cooperstown. Finally, in July, four months after the birth of their second child, the Coopers left New Rochelle.

The move to Cooperstown was inaugurated by tragedy: the Coopers' first child, Elizabeth, died within a month. This event, tragic in itself, no doubt further alienated Susan from her provincial surroundings and augmented her need to be in a familiar setting. Susan returned for a visit home less than a year later.

The situation—Susan's desire to be near her family, her dislike of Cooperstown—was complicated by Cooper apparently caring little for his wife's Mamaroneck circle. The resulting awkwardness is revealed by the following passage from a letter Cooper wrote to Susan on 30 June 1814, during her projected six-week visit to her family. It is a long gossipy letter, the recital of local news broken by expressions of painful loneliness: "I received no letter from you last night although I certainly expected one. I suppose you so much engaged by your Friends that they give you, [sic] little time to yourself. Of this I cannot complain after having had you entirely my own for the preceding year—We have had no rain for two weeks. Every thing is suffering greatly—I am fearful our crop of hay will be but small. Corn looks well other crops tolerable."³⁴

While observing the texture of Cooper's private life, we should also notice that Cooper's public life accorded well with his father's views. In other words, Cooper was fulfilling his role as a public-spirited landowner by founding Bible and agricultural societies and being active in the state militia. But what he seemed to lack—both he and his brothers—was his father's ability to make and manage money successfully. In brief, Susan's desire to live near her family was satisfied in the autumn of 1817. By that time Cooper had gone through his cash inheritance; and largely because of the prodigality of his brothers, much of his father's estate was vanishing under previous debts and claims. A new, large stone house, named Fenimore, was finished but unoccupied (and would remain unoccupied, for it

34. *Ibid.*, 31.

burned down in 1823). While Cooper and his wife were paying an extended visit to Susan's parents, his mother died. Cooperstown now must have represented only the shell of a life, and so, when in January 1818 the De Lanceys provided him with a farm in Scarsdale, Cooper, deeply in debt, must have seen the chance for a new start. He had nothing to lose.



In Scarsdale, at Angevine, Cooper vigorously duplicated his life in Cooperstown, participating in Bible and agricultural societies, the state militia, and extending the range of his public activities to include Clintonian Republican politics. He ensured his social standing by forming close ties with the prominent John Jay family. The biographical portrait of Cooper that we have seen in his daughter's description bears witness to the energy that he expended in making a life for himself and his family. But the portrait is incomplete.

Leaving Cooperstown was a severe blow to Cooper for reasons linked to his ambiguous relationship with the De Lancey family. First of all, Cooper was genuinely proud of his connection with the De Lanceys; he even worked on compiling a De Lancey genealogy. Judge Cooper would have approved of such a connection. But the De Lancey family was also intimidating. As one critic notes, the Coopers were social upstarts, whereas the De Lanceys had been one of the great Tory families of New York, and "in a state which had changed its politics but not its social structure, the De Lancey name was still a great one".³⁵ What in effect reenforced his sense of De Lancey superiority

35. Dekker, *Cooper: The Novelist*, 16.

was the fact that Angevine had been conveyed in trust to him, with Susan's two brothers—Thomas James and Edward Floyd De Lancey—acting as trustees. Under the terms of the conveyance, the property was not liable to Cooper's personal debts.³⁶ The De Lanceys obviously had their doubts about Cooper's ability to become solvent. This could not have been lost upon Cooper.

Thus, once the De Lancey family is seen as a psychological burden to Cooper, his daughter's description of his domestic activities takes on a new light. A touch of frenzy becomes evident—even in his landscape gardening. Beyond his genteel pursuits, we find a man investing in a frontier store in DeKalb, New York, and later in a whaler in Sag Harbor, a man speculating and mortgaging property to preserve the social status he saw as his own heritage as well as that of his wife: “. . . because he loved and admired [Susan] and because she was a De Lancey, he *had* to maintain and even improve his social and economic position”.³⁷

A fleeting acquaintance with Cooper's immense pride and bristling temperament, his strange penchant to sense a wrong, real or imaginary, makes predictable the break between Cooper and the De Lanceys.



All of Cooper's biographers agree that Cooper's marriage was the one unclouded, sustaining feature of his life. A part of Cooper's sunny domestic life was reading novels aloud to his wife. The novels were often the popular British fare of the day that Susan enjoyed. When, as we have seen, in the spring of 1820, he read one he didn't like, he produced one of his own—produced, that is, a tale set in England, a pastiche of the British novel of manners.

Although the writing of *Precaution* began as a novelty, Cooper

36. *Letters and Journals*, 1:87.

37. Dekker, *Cooper: The Novelist*, 17.

took enough interest in it to show it around. Encouraged by family and friends, he sought a publisher, in this case a bookseller who would have the book printed, bound, and distributed at the author's expense. The publisher he wrote to in New York on 31 May 1820 was Andrew Goodrich, who was the only publisher Cooper knew well enough to approach confidentially.³⁸ Goodrich took the job of publishing *Precaution*, while Cooper, in turn, viewed the operation more and more as a taxing emotional investment.

To make what follows fully intelligible, we have to appreciate that Cooper, at age thirty, was in many ways a failure. In spite of his energy and genuine ability, he could not gain economic freedom. By 1819 all his brothers had died, leaving Cooper responsible for the surviving families as well as a family of his own saddled with debt. It was debt that had forced him to abandon Cooperstown, the symbolic locus of his independence and identity. His wife's brothers were the trustees of the house he lived in, making him answerable to men of his own age. Furthermore, not having his father's speculative skills, Cooper was rapidly overreaching himself to salvage his father's estate. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that he looked at times upon *Precaution* as a possible cause of further failure and expense.

Cooper's first letter to Goodrich has the superscription "Most-strictly confidential",³⁹ which established the tone of anxiety characterizing the entire enterprise. Part of Cooper's desire for secrecy, reiterated in the letter, was related both to his fear of public humiliation and to his intention of passing off *Precaution*, which would be published anonymously, as an English novel. The ploy would automatically make the novel acceptable to the Anglophile literary public and thus increase the chance of profit.⁴⁰

Additional trials were made on Cooper's spirits as Goodrich's compositors blundered *Precaution* through the press. Harried by farm labors and trips to Sag Harbor, Cooper could not get to New York City to see his book printed. Correcting the proof sheets mailed to him was sometimes left to Susan. In an extended correspondence,

38. *Letters and Journals*, 1:43.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Donald A. Ringe, *James Fenimore Cooper* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1962), 25.

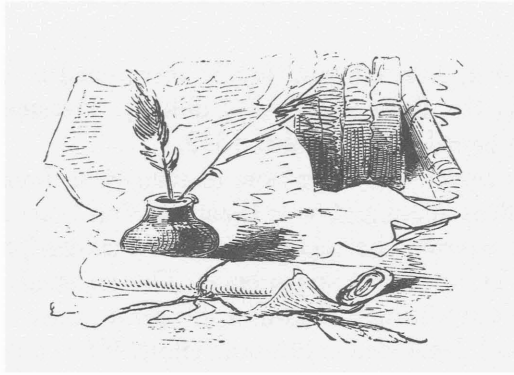
Cooper cajoled, insisted, and finally threatened a lawsuit to have Goodrich do the thing right—and quickly. *Precaution*, wretchedly printed, was issued 10 November 1820.

Writing a novel—learning how to manage a dramatic narrative, move characters about and have them function in a concrete setting, as well as mastering the technicalities of manuscript preparation—was not to be an empty experience. The habitual energy Cooper brought to whatever interested him, his great pride, and his competitive nature all demanded continuing effort. If he could write a better book than the one he had read to his wife, so could he write a better book than the one he had just written for her. On 28 June 1820, while seeing *Precaution* through the press, Cooper wrote to Goodrich: “. . . by the persuasion of Mrs. Cooper I have commenced another tale to be called the ‘Spy’[,] scene in West-Chester, and time of the revolutionary war”. The situation in this case, however, differed significantly from the one producing *Precaution*, for from this date Cooper, slowly and haltingly, gravitated towards his new vocation. Although referring only to *The Spy*, he intuited the terms of his future career: “The task”, he wrote Goodrich, “of making American Manners and American scenes interesting to American readers is an arduous one—I am unable to say whether I shall succeed or not”.⁴¹

Fear of failure, now seemingly habitual with Cooper, doubtlessly played a major role in delaying the composition of *The Spy*. The first volume was actually written and printed before Cooper could bring himself to write the final volume. To reassure his publisher—and perhaps himself—Cooper wrote the book’s last chapter, which was set in type and paged, before composing the rest of the volume. A confident Cooper, writing in the preface of the third edition of *The Spy* (1822), recalled those days of trepidation: “While the book was in the press, we consulted with a few friends on the subject of abandoning its publication. We were persuaded to persevere, as it was urged that ‘Precaution’ had received a respectful notice from a few English periodicals and newspapers, and it was thought its author would be secure from loss.”⁴² *The Spy* was issued on 22 December 1821. It was a spectacular financial and critical success.

41. *Letters and Journals*, 1:44.

42. Quoted by Boynton, *James Fenimore Cooper*, 91–92.



Cooper's life as a gentleman farmer came to an abrupt end in the autumn of 1822. A quarrel with the De Lancey family over the way Cooper managed both his own money and his wife's property not under De Lancey control led Cooper to abandon Angevine and take his family to live in New York City.⁴³ But Cooper went to New York a newly emerged author, and not for reasons exclusively connected with the success of *The Spy*.

Cooper's transformation from gentleman farmer to author had been slowly unfolding between 1820 and 1822. During this interval Cooper had enlarged his acquaintance with some of the New York intellectual world and had become involved in tangential literary concerns. In June 1820, about the time Cooper wrote Goodrich that he was starting *The Spy*, Charles Kitchell, an old Navy messmate, started a patriotic quarterly, *The Literary and Scientific Repository*. By 1821, Cooper had begun to contribute reviews to this journal.⁴⁴ *The Repository* was published by Wiley and Halsted, who would in turn publish *The Spy*. Charles Wiley soon became Cooper's trusted friend and business associate, while Goodrich faded completely from sight. Prestigious publishers would follow: in a tribute to Cooper's literary business acumen, one critic notes that it "could not have been mere luck that [Cooper] gravitated towards the best literary publishers of his day".⁴⁵ What marked, however, the most overt shift in Cooper's new

43. *Letters and Journals*, 1:87–88.

44. A facsimile reproduction of Cooper's contributions to *The Repository*, together with an introduction and notes by James Franklin Beard, is found in *James Fenimore Cooper: Early Critical Essays (1820–1822)* (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimile & Reprints, 1977).

45. William Charvat, "Cooper as Professional Author", *New York History* 35 (1954): 503.

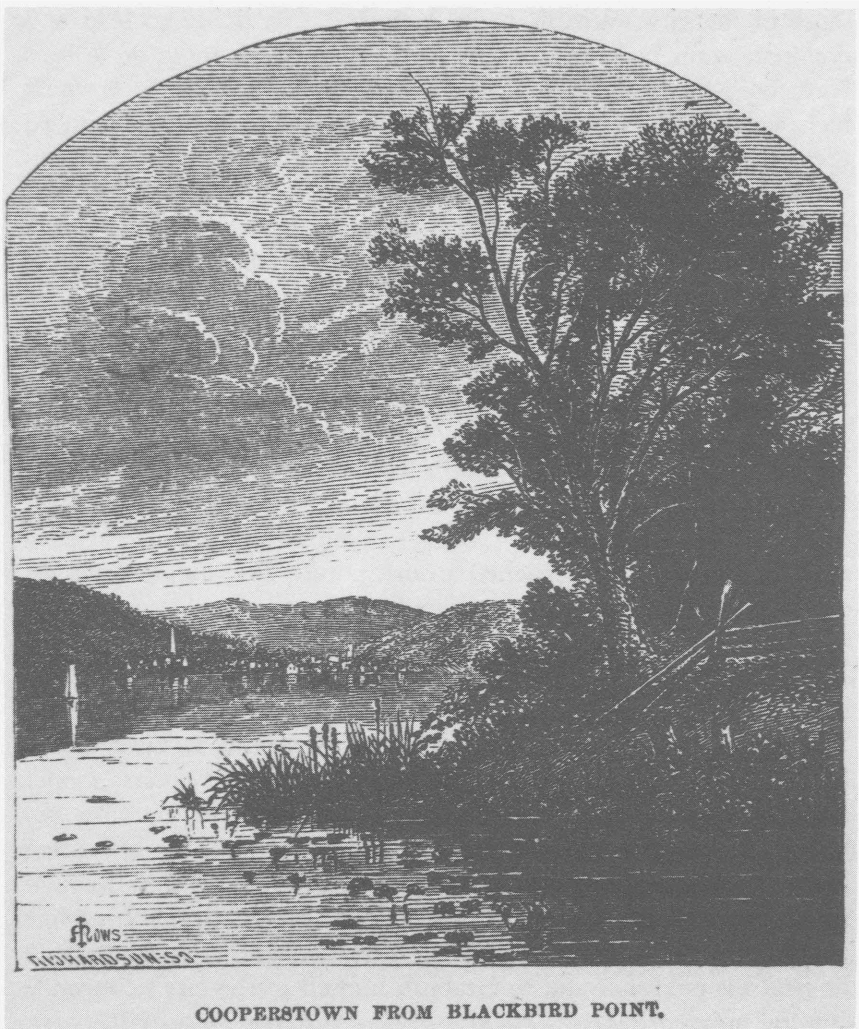
sense of identity were his social activities. His desire to lead and dominate soon had him holding forth in the back room of Wiley's bookstore—the "Den" as he called it. And by the same impulse which had caused him to organize Bible and agricultural societies, he founded (before 1822) his Bread and Cheese Lunch. This group, social and convivial in purpose, was composed of New York writers and artists, prominent doctors, lawyers, and merchants. It rivaled in popularity similar gatherings in New York City, and Cooper was its leading member.⁴⁶

One further point needs to be made about Cooper's transformation from gentleman farmer to author. Cooper was working on a third book—*The Pioneers*, first of the Leatherstocking Tales—even before he had heard of the stunning success of *The Spy*.⁴⁷ When Cooper moved to New York *The Pioneers* was ready for the printer. This book and not *The Spy* completed Cooper's transformation from gentleman farmer to author. Cooper's relationship with the De Lancey family had by now reached a crisis point. The dramatic success of *The Spy* may have done wonders for Cooper's fragile confidence, but his victory had a marring irony attached to it: *The Spy* is set in Westchester, and Westchester meant the De Lanceys. Indeed, the De Lanceys' Tory ancestors even figure in chapter ten of the novel. *The Pioneers*, on the other hand, is set in the thinly disguised Cooperstown of Cooper's boyhood. Thus, in writing *The Pioneers* Cooper escaped Westchester and returned to Cooperstown in the only way he could, imaginatively. More importantly, the very act of writing *The Pioneers* freed Cooper psychologically from De Lancey domination and established his independence and new identity on his home ground. On the literal level, Cooper took his family to New York to be near his publisher and to establish himself in the city's congenial cultural milieu.

Forming an interesting aside to these events is a minor drama unfolding in the real Cooperstown. The following is an extract from a letter written on 11 February 1822 by a Cooperstown resident:

46. A full account of this organization is given by Albert H. Marckwardt, "The Chronology and Personnel of the Bread and Cheese Club", *American Literature* 6 (January 1935): 389–99. The Club flourishes today as the Century Association, on West Forty-third Street, New York City.

47. *Letters and Journals*, 1:25.



View of Cooperstown, from *Pages and Pictures from the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper, with Notes by Susan Fenimore Cooper* (New York, 1865).

In the polite circles of the village there are now very much in vogue the publications of a former citizen, James Cooper Esq. These are two novels, two volumes each, the size of the most approved English works of this description. I have not yet perused either of them; I speak from their general reputation only. The first is called "Precaution". . . . It is said to have been in good demand even at London, and at least

the British Reviews have spoken favorably of it, considering that it emitted from this country. The other is "The Spy: a Tale of the Neutral Ground". . . . "The Spy" has been pronounced the best novel which has ever been written in this country. It has met with a sale unprecedented in our literature. The first edition, which came out last fall, has been taken up and a second one called for, which will immediately issue. The author is engaged in composing another for the press—"The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna". Whenever this shall appear I shall not omit reading it, should my opportunity be as great as my inclination. . . .

Some persons pretending that James Cooper has more vanity to father than wit to write a novel (perhaps, from the prejudice which is always felt against those seemingly superior,) have ascribed these publications to his wife or Mr. Atcherson [sic], his intimate friend. It is probable they are the joint efforts of the three who are individually more than respectable in literary acquirements. The last work has been dedicated to Mr. Atcherson; who can not consequently be supposed the author of it.⁴⁸

About a year after the publication of *The Pioneers* (1823), Judge Cooper's house, Otsego Hall, was sold to satisfy debts against the estate. Two years later, Cooper, now the famous and undisputed author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, took his family to Europe for seven years. He returned to Cooperstown in 1834 and repurchased his father's house. In time, Cooper was reconciled with the De Lancey family, but his home was in Cooperstown for the rest of his life.

48. Letter from Rensselaer W. Russell to Lt. J. W. Webb, 11 February 1822, James Watson Webb Collection, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University. Cooper's daughter relates a similar episode: "Quite as a matter of course, [*Precaution*] was supposed, at first, to have been written in England, and by a woman. The publisher, however, declared that it was an American work, and written by a gentleman of New York. . . . when, at last, the name of Mr. Cooper began to be whispered in connection with the tale, incredulity rather increased—the very suggestion was considered a piece of pleasantry. . . . For a long time it was attributed to an English lady, a near connection of Mr. Cooper." (James Fenimore Cooper, *Pages and Pictures from the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper, with Notes by Susan Fenimore Cooper* [New York: James Miller, 1865], 20).