

Syracuse University

**SURFACE**

---

The Courier

Libraries

---

Fall 1989

## An Unpublished Reminiscence of James Fenimore Cooper

Constantine Evans  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Evans, Constantine. "An Unpublished Reminiscence of James Fenimore Cooper." *The Courier* 24.2 (1989): 45-53.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Courier* by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES  
C O U R I E R



VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 2, FALL 1989

# SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES COURIER

VOLUME XXIV

NUMBER TWO

FALL 1989

---

- Audubon's *The Birds of America*: A Sesquicentennial  
Appreciation  
By David Tatham, Professor of Fine Arts,  
Syracuse University 3
- Audubon/Au-du-bon: Man and Artist  
By Walter Sutton, Professor Emeritus of English,  
Syracuse University 9
- Edward FitzGerald and Bernard Barton: An Unsparring  
Friendship  
By Jeffrey P. Martin, Syracuse University Library 29
- An Unpublished Reminiscence of James Fenimore Cooper  
By Constantine Evans, Instructor in English,  
Syracuse University 45
- The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Three)  
By Gwen G. Robinson, Editor, *Syracuse University Library  
Associates Courier* 55
- News of the Syracuse University Library and the  
Library Associates 89

# An Unpublished Reminiscence of James Fenimore Cooper

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY CONSTANTINE EVANS

A reminiscence of James Fenimore Cooper, written in 1889, lies among the papers of William Mather (1802–1890) in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University. It is written in pencil on two sheets of paper, one of which is the blank back of a Herkimer County newspaper supplement of 1889. Each sheet is folded to form a sort of booklet. Mather's text, as it stands, is disjointed and marred by occasionally confused syntax, illegible words, and repetitions. A series of false starts, of beginnings not decided upon, occurs before something of a narrative coherence is achieved. Material obviously intended for incorporation in a previous section ends the draft. Overall, the account struggles along, fitfully served by the memory of the eighty-seven-year-old Mather in his return to an event that had occurred forty-five years before. Nevertheless, once repetitive and extraneous material is deleted, what emerges is a late-nineteenth-century portrait of Cooper: a forceful and uneasy impression of both the man and the author.

William Mather was a physician who never practised his art; he took his degree of Doctor of Medicine from Fairfield Medical College in Herkimer County, New York, in 1826, but devoted his career to chemistry rather than to medicine. He held several academic appointments as a chemistry professor, his longest and last at Madison (now Colgate) University. Because he was, in his own words, "an ardent lover of the science of chemistry", Mather also travelled, giving lectures and demonstrations in chemistry, and thereby, it should be noted, acquired considerable regional fame.<sup>1</sup>

Cooper's interest in chemistry undoubtedly began when he was a

1. The biographical material on Mather, including the quotation from Mather, was derived from a description of the Fairfield Collection prepared by a Syracuse University Library staff member in 1954.

student at Yale College. His favorite professor was Benjamin Silliman, professor of chemistry, with whom he maintained a correspondence for many years. But a mind such as Cooper's casts a wide net: in a varied life that found him in youth a sailor, in young adulthood a farmer and landscape gardener, and finally a novelist, political theorist, and naval historian, Cooper was always a close observer of his country's intellectual growth. Alert to scientific matters, he took a keen interest in technological internal improvements—canals, railroad and highway systems, steamboats; and in such disparate branches of science as linguistics, geology, and Arctic explorations. During his European sojourn (1826–33), furthermore, he sought out and met Cuvier, Bunson, and the naturalist Bonaparte; at home, one of his closest friends was Samuel F. B. Morse. Elements from all these sources found their way into his writings.<sup>2</sup>

From this very brief sketch, then, it is easy to see that Cooper would be attracted to the chemical presentations that Mather gave in Cooperstown. He did in fact attend the lectures and demonstrations, and found Mather congenial enough to offer him the courtesies of his house. Significantly, Mather found a domestic Cooper at the quiet center of a stormy public life.

Near the end of his narrative Mather notes, "After I left Cooperstown I used to read of Mr. Cooper's being involved in Lawsuits with his neighbors". Mather is referring to the so-called Three Mile Point Controversy, which he explains briefly, but which perhaps requires further amplification.

Cooper and his family had returned from a seven-year stay in Europe in 1833 and resumed residence in New York City. Then, in August 1834, he repurchased his father's (Judge William Cooper's) house, Otsego Hall, in Cooperstown, the initial sale of which had been part of the dissolution of much of the family estate in the years following Judge Cooper's death in 1809. The return to Cooperstown

2. The information in this paragraph was gleaned from Harry Hayden Clark's comprehensive "Fenimore Cooper and Science", *Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts and Letters* 48 (1959): 179–204; and 49 (1960): 249–82. See also James Fenimore Cooper, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1960, 1964), 1: 216–18; 2: 94–101; 4: 313–14; and Dorothy Waples, *The Whig Myth of James Fenimore Cooper* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1938), 130.



residency was gradual. Though he intended to live there only in summer, the charms of the Hall and the financial burden of maintaining two residences eventually dictated a different arrangement; but Cooper's final return home after a seventeen-year absence also had a compelling psychological motive. He seemed to need to restore the Cooper name and position in the community founded by his father—and perhaps to redeem himself to his father's ghost for failing to keep up the family fortune after his father's death.<sup>3</sup> These subconscious promptings, however, form only the distant background to a much more visible series of events when the Coopers took up permanent residence in 1837.

Three Mile Point, a strip of land on the western shore of Otsego Lake, was originally owned by Judge Cooper. According to the Judge's will, the land was to be held in common by his heirs until 1850; then, whoever was the youngest descendant to bear the name William Cooper was to inherit the land. Both during and after the Judge's lifetime, the public, at first by permission, used the land as a picnic ground, thereby creating a tradition of public use. This practice ended in the summer of 1837. Damage to a tree "that had a *peculiar association with my father*" had prompted Cooper, the legal executor of his father's estate since 1834, to prepare a notice that was to be published in a local newspaper cautioning citizens against vandalism. But tempers flared all around when word spread about the intended notice, and instead, Cooper published a new notice forbidding further public use of the land.<sup>4</sup> Local reaction was immediate: a town meeting was held later the same day and among the resolutions adopted were to "recommend and request the trustees of the Franklin Library, in this village, to remove all books, of which Cooper is the author, from said library" and to "denounce any man as sycophant who has, or shall, ask permission of James F. Cooper to visit the Point in question".<sup>5</sup>

3. *Letters and Journals* 3: 213–15. I am also adopting here the interpretive approach of Steven Railton's Freudian biography, *Fenimore Cooper: A Study of His Life and Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978).

4. See Railton, *Fenimore Cooper*, 156–59; *Letters and Journals* 3: 271.

5. Quoted in Thomas R. Lounsbury, *James Fenimore Cooper* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1893), 145–46. I will have more to say about this landmark biography at the conclusion of the essay.

### NOTICE.

**T**HE public is warned against trespassing on the three mile point, it being the intention of the subscriber rigidly to enforce the title of the estate of which he is the representative, to the same. The public has not, nor has it ever had, any right to the same, beyond what has been conceded by the liberality of the owners.

J. FENIMORE COOPER,

Executor of the estate of the late Wm. Cooper.  
July 22, 1837

James Fenimore Cooper's warning notice to the public as it appeared in the *Freeman's Journal*, Cooperstown, 31 July 1837.

This parochial event, which eventually—if awkwardly—resolved itself, soon became “the match which touched off the dynamite”.<sup>6</sup> Whig newspaper editors, strenuously critical of President Jackson's Democratic administration and long opposed to Cooper's Jacksonian political views, took up the controversy. In 1838, a year later, when Cooper published his novel *Home as Found* (generally viewed as autobiographical) and incorporated the Three Mile Point episode as part of a satirical attack on America's cultural and moral decline, journalistic responses became especially vicious.<sup>7</sup> There followed an eight-year battle (1837–45) with the press, during which Cooper sued various Whig editors for libel. His suits were largely successful, but long-range damage was done to his popular reputation:<sup>8</sup>

it was a barren victory he had won. He had lost far more than he had gained. That such would be the results, he knew, while he was engaged in the controversy. It affected, at the

6. Robert E. Spiller, *Fenimore Cooper, Critic of His Times* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1931), 252. See also *Letters and Journals*, 3: 470–514.

7. A few of the studies related to this period in Cooper's life are: John P. McWilliams, Jr., *Political Justice in a Republic: James Fenimore Cooper's America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion, Politics and Belief* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1957); Ethel R. Outland, *The “Effingham” Libels on Cooper*, University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature, No. 28 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1929); James Roger Sharp, “Andrew Jackson and the Limits of Presidential Power”, *Congressional Studies: A Journal of the Congress* 7 (1980): 63–80.

8. Lounsbury, *James Fenimore Cooper*, 197–98.

time, his literary reputation, and, as a result, the sale of his writings; and since his death [1851] it has been a principal agency in keeping alive a distorted and fictitious view of his personal character.

So much acrimony, generated for so long a time, had made his libelers successful.

It is, then, from this perspective that Mather's narrative, which now follows in edited form, can be best understood.

#### WHAT I REMEMBER OF JAMES FENNIMORE [sic] COOPER

In looking over my journal of past events I find that on the 19th day of Feb. 1844 I arrived in Cooperstown, N. Y. with a load of boxes containing an assortment of Chemicals together with chemical and philosophical apparatus to considerable extent designed for a course [of] popular lectures with experiments on Chemistry and kindred sciences. About that period during a portion of each year when not occupied with Classes at Madison University I visited some of the cities and many prominent colleges of the state for the purpose of lecturing and Cooperstown was one of the number. These lectures were sustained by subscription and an amount at least sufficient to defray the expenses was usually pledged before commencing lectures. I had heard of James F. C. also of his father before visiting Cooperstown. His father, Judge Cooper, was a great land holder and a pioneer settler in that portion of the state after whom I think the place was named. If the son James Fennimore was not a pioneer settler<sup>9</sup> he was at least a pioneer author at [an] early period when very few in this country had attempted to write a book or at least very few books written by American authors were read and our brethren across the Atlantic would ask the question Who reads an American book?<sup>10</sup> I

9. William Cooper settled his family in Cooperstown in 1790, when Cooper was an infant of 14 months. (James Grossman, *James Fenimore Cooper* [New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949], 9–10.)

10. This famous sneer of Sidney Smith (1771–1845) echoed throughout the nineteenth century; it is often given the form Mather uses, but Smith's actual words were, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?". Smith's query appeared in his essay for the *Edinburgh Review*, of which Smith was a distin-



have recently noticed an article in the *Century Magazine* in regard to Mr. Cooper as an author in wh. he is represented as one of the earliest if not first who produced readable books which every body wishes to read and wh. have been translated and read in other languages than the English.<sup>11</sup> My object in writing this is not to speak especially of Mr. Cooper as an author but to call to mind some events in regard to my acquaintance with him while I tarried a few weeks in Cooperstown. In looking over the list of subscribers I noted the name of JFC and this was what I expected as he was known to be wealthy and public spirited, yet I did not ask or anticipate any especial attention from him.

After giving my introductory lecture and when [I] was well started in my course I was surprised to receive from Mr. Cooper an invitation to dine with him on a certain day wh. he designated. . . . Of course I was punctual in accepting of his invitation, and outside of the family I found at the table only one guest besides myself and that was Judge Nelson of the Supr. Court of U.S.<sup>12</sup> As far as I recollect his family consisted besides himself of four unmarried daughters. . . . He introduced me to his daughters who from circumstances I concluded were highly educated and from appearances were accomplished young ladies, but of a taciturn disposition and I held but very little conversation with them. These daughters I thought were rather reticent. One of these daughters I think is now head of a Young Ladies Episcopal School at C[oo]perstown].

After dinner [Cooper invited Judge Nelson and me into his study.

---

guished editor, in January 1820. (Quoted in James D. Wallace, *Early Cooper and His Audience* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986], 12–13.)

11. The internal evidence clearly points to Brander Matthews' article, in a feature called "Open Letters", titled "James Fenimore Cooper's Centenary", *Century Magazine* 38 (1889): 796–98. Cooper was born 15 September 1789. [James] Brander Matthews (1852–1929), playwright, short story writer, and one of the leading men of letters of his day, taught at Columbia from 1892 to 1924. See Lawrence J. Oliver, "Theodore Roosevelt, Brander Matthews, and the Campaign for Literary Americanism", *American Quarterly* 41 (March 1989): 93–111.

12. Samuel Nelson (1792–1873), a resident of Cooperstown since 1825 and an especially valued friend of Cooper, was a Democrat, and as a jurist was an "authority in the field of admiralty and maritime law"—the Navy and the law were two of Cooper's passions. (*Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Nelson, Samuel"; see also Ralph Birdsall, *The Story of Cooperstown* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925], 299–325.)

He talked about the late war (1813) with Great Britain and about his experience on ship board during or after the war.]<sup>13</sup> He seemed to know everything about a ship and could talk like a genuine sailor. He knew which was the laboard and which was the stabboard side of a ship something which I have never learned although I know the stem from the stern of a ship. What nonsense it is to a landsman to hear the sailors talk about the jib-flying jib and jib boom of a ship. This knowledge of life on the ocean wave was of much use to Mr. Cooper in writing some of [his] books.<sup>14</sup> Another subject upon wh. he conversed was his travels in Europe. He had maps or charts around his apartment in wh. as he pointed out I could trace the different routes he took among the European Kingdoms and nations. Of all the rivers of Europe the river Rhine in his opinion had the preference. He considered it as the Hudson of Europe. It seems that steam boats on that river had attained a considerable degree of perfection 45 years ago, when this interview took place. Mr. Cooper was so successful as an author that I think a little vanity in him may be excused.<sup>15</sup>

I do not recollect in particular about the pen ink and paper which

13. The bracketed material summarizes a confused passage in Mather's manuscript. Cooper was in the U.S. Navy, 1808–11; he saw no active service, but his knowledge of naval affairs was profound. He had written *The History of the Navy of the United States of America* in 1839, which, it should be noted, initiated another court appearance for his supposedly biased account of the controversial conduct of Jesse Duncan Elliott, Oliver Hazard Perry's second-in-command, during the Battle of Lake Erie. Cooper masterfully demonstrated, in a hearing before three referees, the accuracy and impartiality of his account, even to the admiration of his enemies. For a colorful rendering of this bizarre episode, see Lounsbury, *Cooper*, 208–30; and *Letters and Journals* 3: 357 *passim*.

14. Mather at times seems to blend his recollection of Cooper with Brander Matthews' article; he may have had in mind here Matthews' observation that Cooper "invented the sea tale just as Poe invented the detective story—and in neither case has any disciple surpassed the master". (Matthews, "Centenary", 797.)

15. Cooper's "vanity" emerges as the theme of Mather's account, although he tempered it with an apologist's demur. In this he clearly echoed—or simply agreed with—Matthews, who noted: "No doubt Cooper had his faults, both as a man and as an author. He was thin-skinned and hot-headed. He let himself become involved in many foolish quarrels. He had a plentiful lack of tact. But the man was straightforward and high-minded, and so was the author". (Matthews, "Centenary", 798.) It should be added that Matthews, in turn, echoes the Lounsbury biography, which he mentions with praise.

he used and wh. occupied the table in the room[.] But he said to me  
it substance Here I sit and write, the printer prints and sends it out  
and often it makes a great stir and commotion among the people.<sup>16</sup>

The Coopers were Episcopalians and I have no doubt but that the  
family constituted one of the main pillars of that Church at Coop-  
erstown, but if James Fennimore read his responses in church in the  
same way old Roger De Coverley<sup>17</sup> did in the reign of Queen Ann  
in England I did not notice it, that is, Sir R. pronounced his re-  
sponses a little behind the rest of the Congregation. Mr. C. had  
however a very correct ear for music. One Sabbath the organist was  
absent and a new man supplied his place. When I next met Mr. C.  
he complained bitterly of the bad playing of organ on the previous  
Sabbath.

After I left Cooperstown I used to read of Mr. Cooper's being  
involved in Lawsuits with his neighbors. He was a land holder and  
his neighbors used to hold picnics and trespass upon his lands, with-  
out his permission. It might be said that he should have given them  
permission. True but if he did not choose to do it they should respect  
his wishes. There is no man perfect and Mr. C. might have been  
unfortunate or had his faults. If so [the] community shd. have [looked]  
upon them kindly and not embittered the latter days of his life.



A final historical note needs to be made in conclusion. Mather's  
reminiscence was inspired, as Mather himself says, by Brander Mat-  
thews' essay on Cooper. Through its acknowledged link with the

16. This allusion to Cooper's war with the press is suggestive of the calm with  
which Cooper faced his ordeal. James Beard writes: "As the son of Judge William  
Cooper, he had been introduced early to the atmosphere of legal warfare; and, as a  
young man, he had learned to live with equanimity in the midst of legal entangle-  
ments that would have immobilized most men". (*Letters and Journals*, 4: 4.)

17. Roger De Coverley was a fictional character created by the famed British es-  
sayist Richard Steele (1672–1729) for *The Spectator Papers*. One literary history de-  
scribes De Coverley as "a Tory country squire, aged and lovable, but politically  
incompetent. As an outmoded figure he was once or twice contrasted with the  
Whiggish Sir Andrew Freeport [another fictional character] in a manner prophetic  
of the social and economic revolution that was to occur in England at the end of  
the century." (Albert C. Baugh, ed., *A Literary History of England* [New York: Ap-  
pleton-Century-Crofts, 1948], 875–76.) This description illuminates Mather's allu-  
sion: it is, if only very tangentially, satirically apposite to Cooper's personal and  
public character as perceived by his detractors.

Matthews text, Mather's reminiscence can be seen to reflect not only the extensive evaluation of Cooper (and other American literary figures) being published in the 1880s, but the terms of that evaluation as well.

"The American Men of Letters Series", under the editorship of Charles Dudley Warner, produced between 1881 and 1904 twenty-two volumes of critical biographies, "illustrating", the prospectus said, "the different phases of American Literature [and] the social, political, and moral influences which have molded these authors and the generation to which they belong".<sup>18</sup> Out of this project came the first scholarly, astute biography of Cooper, by Thomas Lounsbury, in 1883. Brander Matthews' essay, as we have seen, appeared in 1889, Cooper's centenary.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of both Lounsbury's and Matthews' studies was to weigh Cooper's artistic achievement, his historical importance as our first famous novelist, and his personal integrity against his temperamental liabilities. These four factors, codified by Lounsbury, merged into the received academic portrait of Cooper in the late nineteenth century—and indeed for decades to come.<sup>20</sup> As always, Cooper created radical dissent: Mark Twain's formidable attempt at literary assassination, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses",<sup>21</sup> would follow in 1892. But by then American scholars might well have revised the British jibe "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" to "Where *can* we be praised?" Where indeed, if not in this complex, difficult man, in this author whose works were being read, it might be said, all over the world.

18. Quoted from endpapers promoting the series, and found in every edition of this series I have seen. Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900) was an essayist, critic, novelist, who with Mark Twain wrote *The Gilded Age*. There was also a companion series, "American Statesmen". "The American Men of Letters Series" marked a significant step forward in the long process of acceptance of American literature in the curricula of American colleges and universities. (See Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy: The Roots, Growth, and Maturity of a Profession* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986], especially pages 105–52.)

19. Susan Fenimore Cooper also offered a daughter's tribute in her "A Glance Backward", *Atlantic Monthly* 59 (1887): 199–206; and "A Second Glance Backward", *Atlantic Monthly* 60 (1887), 474–87. See also "Bibliographic Notes" in Spiller, *Fenimore Cooper*, 321.

20. Spiller, writing in 1931, states that the Lounsbury biography of Cooper "is still the nearest approach to a 'standard' biography, even though its attitude is unsympathetic". (*Fenimore Cooper*, 320.)

21. *North American Review* 161 (1895): 1–12.