

Two of the *Erie*'s Lost and Saved:
James Fenimore Cooper's Personal Links with the 1841 *Erie* Tragedy

One of the Lost:

The Death of David S. Sloan, age 26

Linkage:

- a) **Geneva, New York: Bishop De Lancey's home**
- b) **Personal Link: Bishop William Heathcote De Lancey,
James Fenimore Cooper's brother-in-law**

Sloan, a victim of the Erie at the age of 26, took his Master's in Geneva, New York at Geneva College (later called Hobart), the same college Cooper's son, Paul Fenimore Cooper (1824-1895), attended beginning in 1840. In the spring of 1840, Sloan was confirmed in the Episcopal Church by Cooper's brother-in-law, Bishop William Heathcote De Lancey, the first bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York. The quality of education at Geneva College was also a major concern of Bishop De Lancey:

“Bishop De Lancey never ceased to give the school highest commendation in his addresses; he attended as many commencement exercises as possible during his episcopate; he strove, with the strong leadership of the Rev. Benjamin Hale, D.D., as President (1836-59), to make the College a center of sound learning and healthy spiritual growth.”

– “Some Aspects of the Episcopate of William Heathcote De Lancey, First Bishop of the Diocese of Western New York (1839-1865)” by Frederick J. Masterman, *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1964, p. 270.

New-Hampshire Patriot & State Gazette (Concord, New Hampshire)

September 23, 1841(Vol. XXXII, No. 1695), p. 1, c. 6-7

The following tribute to the memory of David S. Sloan, lost in the *Erie*, which we find in the *Geneva* (N. Y.) *Courier*, is unless we mistake, from the pen of a fellow classmate in college, and a friend who knew him intimately.

For the *Geneva Courier*.

A Tribute.

The friends of Mr. Sloan will be gratified to learn that his body has been recovered and interred. It was found near the town of Evans, in this state, not many miles from the spot where the steamboat *Erie* was burned, and taken in charge by a committee of the citizens

appointed with praiseworthy [sic] promptness, for the purpose of rescuing and protecting the remains of the victims of that disaster. In the letter from the committee, it is stated that he was indentified [sic] from papers found upon his person, and his residence ascertained from the circumstance of his money being chiefly in bills on the Geneva Bank.

It seems proper to seize the present occasion to give some account of the brief career of the deceased, and to pay a just tribute to his memory. Mr. David Scott Sloan was a native of Haverhill, N. H. where his parents and relatives still reside, and, at the time of his death, was about twenty-six years of age. He graduated at Dartmouth College in 1836, having maintained, while at that institution, a standing among the first scholars of his class, and **three years afterwards received the degree of Master of Arts from Geneva College.** Immediately after graduating, he commenced the study of law in his native town and continued to apply himself to it until the autumn of 1838 when by the blessing of God, he was led to consider seriously the subject of religion. His attention resulted in a hope that he had experienced the change from “death to life.” At this period, he moved to Geneva, where he publicly testified his faith in Christ, and adorned his profession by a virtuous life. **In the spring of 1840, he was baptized by the Rev. Mr. Irving, and confirmed by Bishop De Lancy [sic]. After a few month’s [sic] residence, he was appointed tutor in Geneva College** but he thought it best to engage in teaching a select school, which he continued at the time of his death. During his vacation, he went on a journey to Ohio, to visit a relative, and it was on this journey that he embarked in an evil hour on the boat which bore him to his grave, in the waters of lake Erie; there, amid the horrors of a scene which no imagination can conceive, he drew his last breath, and when he hoped to find a passage to his friends he found a path to heaven; there he, in that dismal night

“——sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of Him that walked the waves.”

Mr. Sloan possessed a vigorous understanding, a retentive memory, a lively imagination, a good judgement [sic] and a faculty of concentrating his powers upon a necessary occasion. He was clear in his conceptions, embodied them in impressive language, and enforced them with appropriate illustrations. He possessed forecast and perseverance; was sagacious in anticipating obstacles and skillful and persevering in obviating them. He was prudent but resolute; though he did not expose himself to useless danger, when it was necessary to incur it he did not shrink from it. He was economical but generous; and while he never lavished his means, he gave liberally where charity demanded. He had many friends, to whom he was courteous, attentive and steady; and he indulged no enmities. Those from whom he differed in opinion or interest, he treated with urbanity and honor. He was social in his disposition, and his numerous acquaintances will testify to his readiness to do them service, and his power to interest and amuse them. An advocate of those plans for religious and moral improvement, which he thought useful, he was not only active himself, but infused his own spirit into others. Although earnest in his character and eager to press on to the accomplishment of his ends, he was never indifferent to counsel. No one estimated more accurately the value of opinion; no one laid up the opinions of the wise and good and governed himself by them more carefully. In whatever he undertook, he approved [sic] himself energetic, intelligent and high-minded [sic]. He lived a sober, righteous and godly life. He dies widely and deeply deplored. Called from the midst of them who esteemed and loved him, and whose confidence and affection he warmly returned—cut down in the dawn of his promise, without an hour’s warning, without a parting message, without one incident of his last moments—he has gone to the world of the spirits; leaving his to afflicted relatives, the wealth of an unsullied character, and to all who know him, a virtuous example.

One of the Saved:

Case No. 2:

The Survival and Rescue of Levi Beebe, not yet 12

Linkage:

- a) Cooperstown, New York, Cooper's home
- b) **Personal Link: New York Supreme Court Justice Samuel Nelson,
James Fenimore Cooper's neighbor and friend**

A HEROIC BOY is here described in a letter from Buffalo concerning the burning of the *Erie* Steamer, which we find in the N. York *Commercial Advertiser*. It is a thrilling incident:

The burning of the Erie and the loss of above 200 lives have cast a gloom over the whole community. There are stricken hearts and vacant places in social circles around us.

Such disasters bring out heroic qualities. For example, the astonishing coolness and self possession of young Levi Beebe – not 12 years of age.

He had been at the military school at Cooperstown and came to Buffalo on his way home (to Cleveland) with Chief Justice Nelson who placed him in charge of the master of the *Erie*.

[The man referred to is Glieson, the Clerk. For further details, see the excerpt following Levi's story taken from the *New-York Log Cabin*.]

On the bursting out of the fire, he ran round the ladies' cabin for safety, but the fire sweeping round, in both directions, he laid hold of the tiller chains and slipped down the stern; there he grasped the rudder, or some appendage of it, and was towed thro' the water nearly two hours, heavily as the boat plunged in the violent sea.

The fire came so near him that his hands were badly burned – and he was obliged to wet his head constantly to prevent his hair from taking fire.

At one time his ankle [sic] was grasped by a man who swept past, but he was so exhausted that he succeeded in shaking him off. At another a large man, "a strong swimmer in his agony," caught hold of him. The lad reasoned with him on the folly of pulling him off when both would be drowned in consequence, and eventually, with great difficulty, got clear of him and saw him sink.

Heart rending shrieks rose above the roar of the waves and the crackling of the flames – more than two hundred persons were drowning or burning around him – yet amid all these difficulties and horrors he kept his hold with unabated resolution, and with a clear understanding and observation of the whole fearful scene.

The boat he says, burned in two and a man helped him up on the stern portion, from which they were taken by the *DeWitt Clinton*.

New-Bedford Mercury (New-Bedford, Mass.), Fri. Aug. 27, 1841, p. 1, c. 4, vol. XXXV, no. 8.

The Log Cabin (New-York), Saturday, August 21, 1841, published by H. Greeley. Vol. I, New Series No. 38, p. 4, c. 2.

Excerpt from “**The Burning of the Erie**”

Young Beebe, whose courage and self-possession has been particularly noticed in many public prints, was attending a Military School at Cooperstown, and was on his way to visit his friends in Cleveland. At Buffalo he was placed under the particular charge of the unfortunate Glieson, the Clerk. When the fire broke out, his friend G. took him by the hand, and after in vain endeavoring to find some mode of escape for him, he advised him to slide down the tiller-chains. This he did, and G. accompanied him. While thus hanging, the fire often poured over them in livid sheets; but they hung on, changing hands, and dashing water in their faces with the hand at liberty. The little fellow succeeded in holding on until rescued; but poor Glieson sunk a few moments too soon to be saved. The boy’s face was a good deal burned, and his leg somewhat bruised by a burning timber which fell upon it. He describes, as the most fearful part of the dreadful scene through which he passed, the shrieks of those who were vainly struggling to press themselves through the windows of the cabin, which was filled with fire and smoke.

Who was Chief Justice Nelson, the man who, on August 9th, 1841, placed young Levi Beebe in Glieson’s care? The following obituary provides clarification:

The Troy Weekly Times (Troy, N.Y.), Saturday, December 20, 1873, Vol. XVIII, No. 25, p.2, c. 4

OBITUARIES.

[From the Daily Times, Dec. 15]

EX-JUDGE SAMUEL NELSON.

Ex-Judge Samuel Nelson, late associate justice of the supreme court of the United States, died suddenly at 2 o’clock Saturday afternoon, at his residence in Cooperstown, N. Y. On Monday last he complained of having taken a slight cold, and was confined to his room up to Friday afternoon, when he went down stairs and spent the afternoon in the parlor. Saturday morning, he went down to breakfast and appeared as well as usual. While sitting in his chair in the afternoon listening to the reading of a letter by Mrs. Nelson, he made an inquiry in regard to it, and then without a word or sigh suddenly expired. So quiet was his death that it was supposed he had fainted, and not until the physicians pronounced him dead was the truth realized. We copy the following concise account of his life from the *New York Times* of yesterday:

The late judge had just completed his eighty-first year, having been born on Nov. 10, 1792, at Hebron, Washington county, N.Y. Both his father, John Rodgers Nelson, and his mother, Jane McCarter, were of Irish descent, their ancestors having emigrated from the north of Ireland to Salem, Washington county, about the middle of the eighteenth century. The deceased was sent to the district school at a very early age, and was prepared for college at a classical school in Salem, taught by Rev. Mr. Gross, and afterward at Granville Academy, the principal of which was Salem Towne of spelling-book fame. He entered Middlebury college, Vermont, in 1811, and graduated August 1813. He studied law in Salem under

Messrs. Savage & Woods, both of whom were distinguished lawyers, Savage having been subsequently chief justice of this state, and Woods a judge in Madison county. In the year 1816 Mr. Woods removed to Madison county. Nelson accompanied him and was admitted to the bar at the January term of the supreme court in 1817. He soon located himself in Cortland village, Cortland county, where he practiced his profession with great success. In 1820 he was appointed a presidential elector and voted for the election of James Monroe for the second term. In 1821 he was appointed postmaster of Cortland village, and in the same year he was a delegate to the state convention for the revision of the constitution, where he advocated the abolition of the property qualification for voters. In April, 1823, he was appointed by Gov. Yates circuit judge under the new constitution he had helped to frame, and he held this office for a period of eight years. The circuit comprised the counties of Otsego, Delaware, Chenango, Broome, Cortland, Tompkins, Tioga and Sullivan. On Feb. 1, 1831, he was appointed by Gov. Throop to the supreme court, succeeding Judge William L. Marcy, who was elected United states senator. On August 31, 1837, Gov. Marcy appointed him chief justice of the state of New York, vice Judge Savage, (his former preceptor,) resigned. He held this position until 1845, when he was appointed by President Tyler associate justice of the United states supreme court, succeeding Judge Thompson. In 1846 he was elected a delegate to the state constitutional convention but took no active part in its deliberations. He received the degree of LL.D. from Middlebury college, Columbia college and Geneva college. The soundness of his decision against the fugitive slave law in the celebrated Dred Scott case brought his name prominently and favorably before the public at that time. He was a member of the joint high commission that framed the Treaty of Washington and was at all times the trusted and esteemed counselor of different administrations, and on several occasions during the civil war rendered valuable services to the Union by his firmness and patriotism. President Lincoln and Mr. Stewart frequently expressed their appreciation of Judge Nelson's services. At one time during the war Mr. Seward, with nearly all the diplomatic corps, visited Judge Nelson at his residence at Cooperstown, ostensibly for recreation, but in reality, it is known that certain important questions of international law and other public questions were submitted to him for his decision. He retired from the bench exactly a year ago and was succeeded by Judge Ward Hunt. On his retirement, all the leading members of the bar passed resolutions in which high tribute was paid to the efficient services rendered by him during a long and honorable career in the administration of justice. Judge Nelson was married twice. First in 1819 to Miss Pamela Woods, oldest daughter of one of his preceptors, Judge Woods of Madison county. She died in 1822. In 1825 he married Miss Catherine A. Russell, daughter of Dr. Russell of Cooperstown, who with four children, two sons and two daughters, survive him. United States Commissioner Kenneth G. White is married to one of the daughters, and when in this city the late judge spent most of his time with Mr. White. The other daughter is the wife of Rev. Dr. Beech of the Episcopal church in Twentieth street. **One of the sons, Rensselaer Nelson, is judge of the United States district court of Minnesota.**

It goes without saying that the geographical coordinates of both Levi Beebe and Judge Samuel Nelson point to Cooperstown, New York, the home of James Fenimore Cooper. How well did Cooper know Samuel Nelson? Writing from Paris a decade earlier, on May 25th, 1831, to his nephew Dick (To Richard Cooper, Letter No. 207), he closes his letter with the request that Cooper's respects should be paid "in a suitable manner, to Mrs. Nelson." A footnote appended to "Mrs. Nelson," adds, "Mrs. Nelson (1805-1875), the wife of Cooper's friend [my emphasis] Samuel Nelson of the United States Supreme Court, was Catherine Ann, daughter of Dr. John Russell (RLB)" (Letters and Journals, Vol. II, p. 89 & p. 91).

A letter dated October 9, 1841, provides concrete evidence that Cooper was in close contact with Chief Justice Nelson, even on October 9, with regard to the 1837 McLeod case, which was

to be decided shortly afterwards with Chief Justice Nelson presiding (due to sudden illness, Nelson was obliged to give up the case).

It is understandable that America's leading maritime historian would have taken a keen interest in the case, which was tied to the North Eastern Boundary Question* and was a powder keg that could have led to war between the United States and Britain. McLeod, who had murdered an American citizen on the *Caroline* and boasted that he had "killed a d—d Yankee," was found not guilty because he had been acting on orders from the British government to put down a Canadian republican insurgency close to Buffalo on Canadian territory. The *Caroline*, while anchored on American territory, was suspected of carrying weapons to the rebels. She was seized by force, an unarmed American on board killed in the process. Afterwards, she was set fire to and ultimately dashed to pieces when she crashed down the Niagara cataract. If McLeod, a British subject, had not been exonerated, war between Britain and the United States would have been imminent. The case was so paramount and American fighting sentiments had been running so high that President Tyler, on December 7, 1841, devoted a considerable portion of his State of the Union Address to this thorny case. [Cf. *Cyclopædia of Political Science, Political Economy, and the Political History of the United States, McLeod Case*: <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Lalor/lCy694.html> and John Tyler, "State of the Union Address," 7 December 1841: http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/P/jt10/speeches/jt_1841.htm]

*Cf. *Pennsylvania Inquirer & Daily-Courier* (Philadelphia), Sept. 30, 1841, No. 78, p.2, c. 2-3: "Our Relations with Great Britain. The McLeod Case & North Eastern Boundary Question"

638. To Charles Jared Ingersoll

Hall, Cooperstown, Oct. 9th '41

Dear Sir,

My recollections of the McLeod affair are as follows.

The Chief Justice [Samuel Nelson] told me that Mr. [Jonathan L.] Wood[s], the district Attorney of Niagara County, who was once his partner, had sent him an abstract of the testimony, as it stood last spring, when the Chief Justice was required to go and try the cause. According to this abstract, several respectable Americans, who happened to be in Canada, swore that they saw McLeod get into, and come out of the boat &c, and heard him boast that he had killed a yankee &c. The alibi, it was also said, was attempted to be shown by means of a woman, or women of doubtful character. This, substantially, I repeat to you, with perhaps some further details to the same effect.

Since then, I understand the Chief Justice to say he has examined the testimony for the prosecution, and it struck him as insufficient to convict, unassailed. A general impression has got abroad that McLeod was not present.

All that the Chief Justice *first* said, appears to be proved, in terms, and by many witnesses; and everything now depends on the characters of these witnesses. I have read the opening for the defence, and I confess I begin to think McLeod *was* present. At all events it is pretty clearly proved that he boasted of having been present, and that deprives him of all just grounds of complaint.

It is odd that Capt. Appleby [*master of the Caroline*] should think he saw McLeod on board the *Carolina*, *that very night*, on the American side of the river, and that others on the English side should swear they saw him embark. You will perceive Appleby tells a companion that McLeod was one of the party before the vessel was out of sight.

Capt. Drew [the actual leader of the expedition against the *Caroline*] also refused to testify, on very insufficient grounds, when a man's life is involved in the issue. The reporters evidently incline to *peace*, and their accounts are to be taken with grains of allowance.

I was right in thinking the Supreme Court must sentence. I mentioned the discrepancy to the Chief Justice to-day, and he laughed at his own forgetfulness in having advised the Circuit judge not to sentence.

The Letters and Journals of JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, Vol. IV (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 175-176.

The close ties between Cooper and Judge Nelson are particularly apparent in the letter Cooper wrote to his old Yale Chemistry professor Benjamin Silliman in 1842. Petitioning Silliman to counsel Nelson's son Rensselear [spelled Rensselaer Russell Nelson, 1826 – 1904, in footnote 2, p. 314] , who was about to begin his freshman year at Yale, Cooper explicitly stated his relationship to Nelson:

“My present object, in addition to thanking you for your politeness, is to ask your kind offices for my young friend Rensselear Nelson, who goes to join the new freshman class at alma mater – you see I do not call her a *step*-mother. **Mr. Nelson is a son of my friend and neighbor, Judge Nelson, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of New-York.** We all feel an interest in his career, and, as he will be entirely among strangers, I venture to recommend him to your counsel and friendly offices.” - *Letters and Journals*, Vol. IV, pp. 313-314.

That Cooper and Judge Nelson remained close friends throughout the years is indicated in Cooper's last entry in his Journal (which was discontinued exactly three years and four months before his death):

JOURNAL XLIV

13 MAY TO 14 MAY 1848

Sunday, 14 May.

Numbers. Raining and cool. Most of us went to church, notwithstanding. About seventy persons attended. The Judge [Samuel Nelson] was there, having got home last evening. In the afternoon I read the service for my wife, who did not like to risk the weather. About five the wind went down, and it cleared. It seems as if all the clouds that passed in the last easterly storm, have been driven back by this from the west.

Cooper Collection, Yale University Library. *Correspondence*, II, 752. In: *Letters and Journals*, Vol. V, p. 350.

*As if David Sloan, Bishop De Lancey, Levi Beebe, Chief Justice Nelson, and the McLeod case were not sufficient to point to James Fenimore Cooper as an American writer and historian whose attention, due to personal contacts, his field of interest, and his very place of residence, must have been directed to events on Lake Erie. On November 7, 1841, in a letter to David Conner, Cooper reported how shocked he was to discover that his recently published *Naval History* was not permitted to be placed in the District School Library “on the ground that the book was controversial on the subject of the Battle of Lake Erie, and he [John Canfield Spencer, Secretary of War from 12 October 1841 to 3 March 1843] had uniformly declined admitting any controversial works” [Underscored words - Cooper's emphasis. Cf. *The Letters and Journals of JAMES FENIMORE COOPER*, Vol. IV, p. 187].*

Justice Nelson's son Rensselaer married a young lady whose maiden name was Beebe.

“Rensselaer R. Nelson, son of Judge Samuel Nelson, married Emma F. Wright Beebe on 3 November 1858.”

Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York and London: Macmillan and Company, and Smith, elder and Company, 1885-1912), 20 volumes.

A fascinating question is whether Levi Beebe had a sister named Emma F. Wright Beebe.

Emma F. Wright Beebe, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Vol. V, p. 284:
JOURNAL XXXIII,
12 FEBRUARY TO 29 FEBRUARY 1848

Tuesday, 15 February [1848].

“Miss Beebe [Ftn. 1: possibly Emma F. Wright Beebe] passed the evening with us, to take leave of us [=the Coopers].”

Young Levi was “not yet twelve years of age” in August 1941. Assume Levi had an attractive elder sister of fifteen by the name of Emma, whom Judge Nelson's son, Rensselaer Nelson (1826-1904) had taken an interest in. By 1858, the year of their marriage, Emma and Rensselaer would have been thirty-two years of age; in 1848, when “Miss Beebe” called on the Coopers, twenty-two. The question why Judge Nelson took it upon himself to personally accompany young Levi Beebe to Buffalo may thus involve close family ties between the Beebes of Cleveland and the Nelsons of Cooperstown. [Cf. “Delay at Buffaloe” – L&J, Vol.VI, p. 141]

Note: The section on Levi Beebe and Samuel Nelson has been in large part excerpted from N. Barry's “An Investigation of American Source Material Used by the *Gewerbe-Blatt für Sachsen* in Leipzig, Germany on October 8th, 1841, under the Heading ‘Loss of the Steamboat Erie,’” pp. 12-18. Cf. “1841 News Items”>”Eyewitness Accounts of the Fateful Night of August 9th, 1841”>”Other reports are contained in this essay.”

Norman Barry, Bad Schussenried, Germany, August 6, 2019