

**THE POUGHKEEPSIE FACTOR:  
THE LINK TO JAMES FENIMORE COOPER?**

By

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**I. INTRODUCTION (REVISED NOV. 2018)**

The year 2011 produced several revelations concerning the early distribution of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie.” The *Baltimore Sun* no longer topped the list of publications of “The Helmsman,” and the *Wisconsin Argus* no longer headed the list of “A”-versions. Instead, *The Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle* was head of the pack:

	<b>A-VERSION:</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>PLACE</b>	<b>B-VERSION:</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>PLACE</b>
	<b>DATE</b>			<b>DATE</b>		
	<u>1845:</u>			<u>1845:</u>		
1	19 JULY 1845	POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL & EAGLE	POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK			
2	26 JULY 1845	MAINE CULTIVATOR & HALLOWELL WEEKLY GAZETTE	HALLOWELL, MAINE			
3	14 AUG. 1845	MOHAWK COURIER	LITTLE FALLS, NEW YORK			
4				30 AUG. 1845	<b>B</b> ALTIMORE SUN	BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
5	02 SEPT. 1845	WISCONSIN <b>A</b> RGUS	MADISON, WISCONSIN TERRITORY			

As of October 2018, the publishing landscape of “The Helmsman” experienced no less than a Copernican Revolution. The first publication of the John Maynard sketch was no longer located in the United States, but in London, England:

	<b>A-VERSION:</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>PLACE</b>	<b>B-VERSION:</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>PLACE</b>
	<b>DATE</b>			<b>DATE</b>		
	<u>1845:</u>			<u>1845:</u>		
1	07 JUNE 1845	THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND MAGAZINE	LONDON, ENGLAND			
2	14 JUNE 1845	THE LANCASTER GAZETTE	LANCASTER, ENGLAND			
3	19 JULY 1845	POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL & EAGLE	POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK			
4	26 JULY 1845	MAINE CULTIVATOR & HALLOWELL WEEKLY GAZETTE	HALLOWELL, MAINE			
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The discovery of *The Church of England Magazine* as the very first publication of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” in no way diminishes the importance of Poughkeepsie as the first place of publication in the United States. Significantly, Poughkeepsie’s sparse population in comparison with the five largest American cities suggests that it was *singled out* as the starting point for distribution in the United States. According to the U.S. census of 1840, Poughkeepsie had all of 10,006 inhabitants, compared with New York City’s 312,710, Baltimore’s 102,313, New Orleans’ 102,193, Philadelphia’s 93,665, and Boston’s 93,383. Also, the standard route for distribution from England would have been one of these five most populous cities, not the town of Poughkeepsie. Just as *The Church of England Magazine* provides taletell coordinates that can be traced back to Cooper\*, the target audience of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” was not to be found in London, England, but along the Hudson River, the shores of Lake Erie, and the heartland of the United States.

## II. THE GEOGRAPHICAL COORDINATES

Poughkeepsie is located on the Hudson River, halfway between Albany and New York. As the Hudson River was used time and again by Cooper as a setting in his novels, the question of just how familiar Cooper was with the river is answered in the following quote:

“I had been familiar with the Hudson since childhood. The great thoroughfare of all who journey from the interior of the state towards the sea, necessity had early made me acquainted with its windings, its promontories, its islands, its cities, and its villages. Even its hidden channels had been professionally examined, and time was when there did not stand an unknown seat on its banks, or a hamlet that had not been visited.”

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Heidenmauer; or, The Benedictines. A Legend of the Rhine* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1868), p. viii (Reprinted in the Michigan Historical Reprint Series:

Cooper’s lines were part of the preface to *The Heidenmauer ; or, The Benedictines. A Legend of the Rhine*, his second European novel, penned in Paris in 1831. It may strike the reader as strange that an American writer residing in Paris should celebrate the Hudson while writing a German tale set on the Rhine. Yet Cooper was very much at home with the geography of both America’s and Europe’s waterways. The following quote comparing the Hudson and the Rhine leaves little doubt as to where Cooper’s preferences lay:

“To me it is quite apparent that the Rhine, while it frequently possesses more of any particular species of scenery, within a given number of miles, than the Hudson, has none of so great excellence. It wants the variety, the noble beauty, and the broad grandeur of the American stream. The latter, within the distance universally admitted to contain the finest parts of the Rhine, is both a large and a small river; it has its bays,

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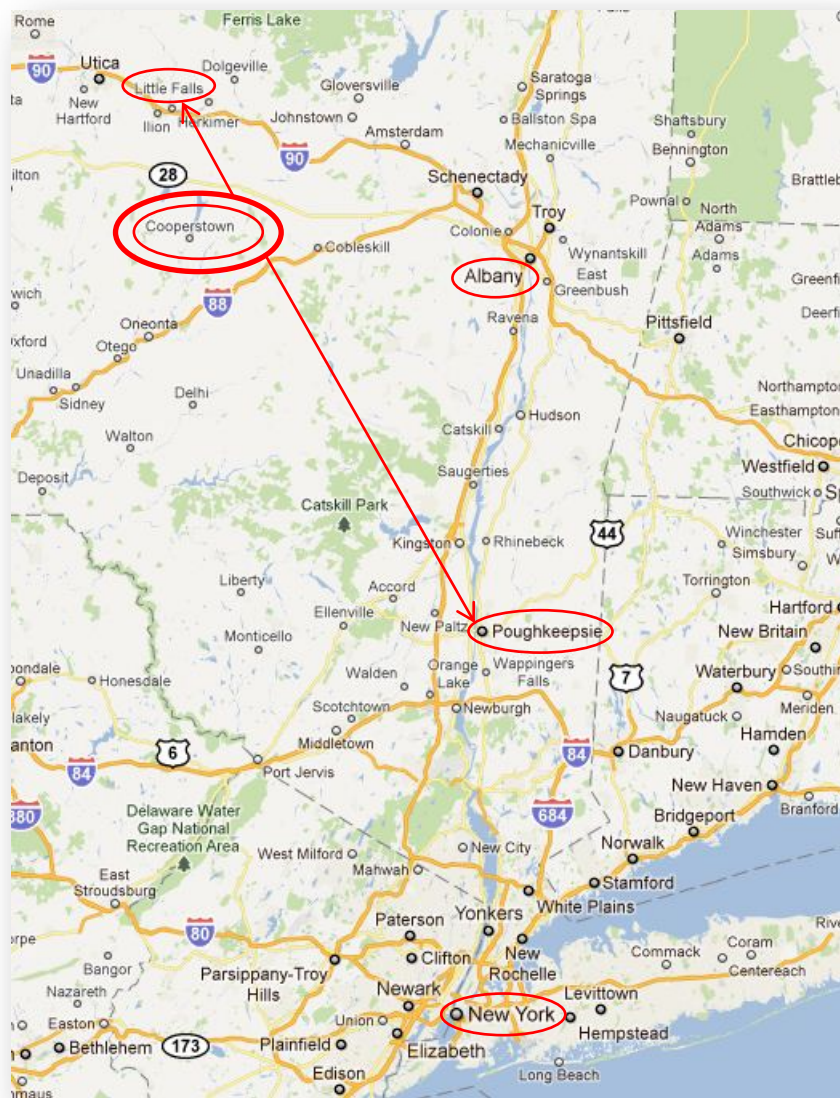
\*Cf. Norman Barry, “Two Transatlantic Passages: The Convolutional Path of ‘The Helmsman of Lake Erie’ to Poughkeepsie.” Johnmaynard.net: Prose Versions, subsection Anonymous.

as narrow passages among the meadows, its frowning gorges, and its reaches resembling Italian lakes; whereas the most that can be said of its European competitor, is that all these wonderful peculiarities are feebly imitated. Ten degrees of a lower latitude supply richer tints, brighter transitions of light and shadow, and more glorious changes of atmosphere, to embellish the beauties of our western clime. In islands, too, the advantage is with the Hudson, for, while those of the Rhine are more numerous, those of the former stream are bolder, better placed, and, in every natural feature, of more account.” - *The Heidenmauer*, pp. viii-ix

Already in the year 1828, while in Paris, the question where, exactly, Poughkeepsie was located, became a bone of contention:

“Not long since an artist of reputation came to me, in Paris, with a view to get a few hints for a map of the Hudson, that had been ordered as an illustration of one of our books. He was shown all the maps in my possession, some of which were recent and sufficiently minute. I observed some distrust in his manner, and, in the end he suggested that an old French map of the Canadas, that he had in his pocket, might possibly be more accurate than those which had just been received from America. The map was produced, and, as might have been expected, was utterly worthless, but an intimation to that effect was not well received, as the artist had not been accustomed to consider the Americans as map-makers. At length I was compelled to show him Poughkeepsie laid down on his map directly opposite to Albany, and to assure him gravely that I had myself travelled many a time in a north and south direction, from sunrise to sunset, in order to go from one of these places to the other, and that they were eighty miles asunder!”

- James Fenimore Cooper, *Gleanings in Europe: The Rhine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), Letter X, p. 101; cf. *Letters & Journals*, I, pp. 246-47, Jan. 25, 1828.



The distance from Cooper's residence in Cooperstown to Poughkeepsie is 125 miles; from Cooperstown to Little Falls, 31 miles. Albany to Poughkeepsie is now 76 miles. The map is a contemporary Google map.

Even the names of ships can teach poor sailors a smattering of geography:

"You read Whig newspapers principally, I rather think, Mr. Spike," answered the lieutenant, as has been just mentioned, "while we on board the Poughkeepsie indulge in looking over the columns of the *Union*, as well as over those of the *Intelligencer*, when by good luck we can lay our hands on a stray number."

"That ship, then, is called the Poughkeepsie, is she, sir?" inquired Spike.

"Such is her name, thanks to a most beneficent and sage provision of Congress, which has extended its parental care over the navy so far as to imagine that a man chosen by the people to exercise so many of the functions of a sovereign, is not fit to name a ship. All our two and three deckers are to be called after states; the frigates after rivers; and the sloops after towns. Thus it is that our craft has the honor to be called the United States ship the Poughkeepsie, instead of the Arrow, or the Wasp, or the Curlew, or the Petrel, as might otherwise have been the case. But the wisdom of Congress is manifest, for the plan teaches us sailors geography."

"Yes, sir, yes, one can pick up a bit of l'arnin' in that way cheap. The Poughkeepsie, Captain—?"

James Fenimore Cooper, *Jack Tier* (1848), (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Edition, March 2010), Vol. 31, Ch. IV, p. 83

(At this point it may perhaps be appropriate to point out that the steamer strangely named the *Jersey* in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" was named after the *state* of New Jersey.)

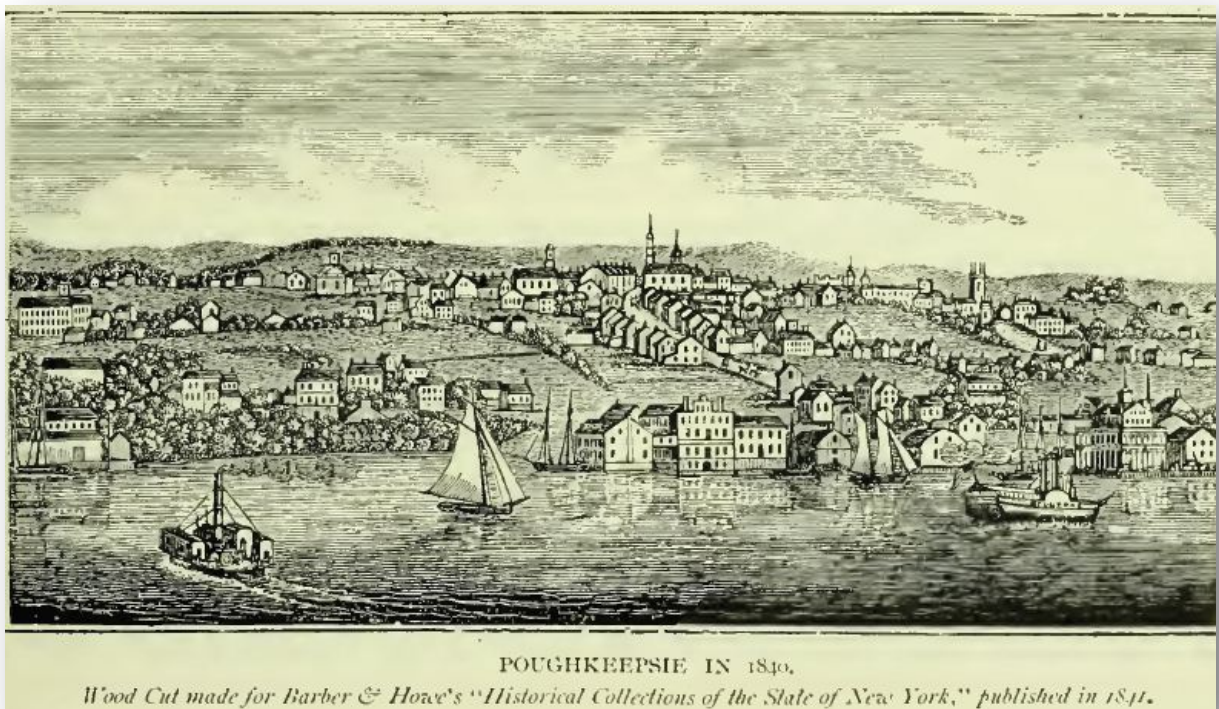


Illustration courtesy of [The Eagle's history of Poughkeepsie from earliest settlements 1683 to 1905 by Edmund Platt](#) (1865-1939) (Poughkeepsie: Platt & Platt, 1905), p. 137.

### III. A PINCH OF HISTORY

#### A) "INDIAN INCURSIONS"

Just how vulnerable was Poughkeepsie in the context of American history? In *The Deerslayer or, The First Warpath* (1841), we read the following passage:

"It is a matter of history that the settlements on the eastern shores of the Hudson, such as Claverack, Kinderhook, and even Poughkeepsie, were not regarded as safe from Indian incursions a century since, and there is still standing on the banks of the same river, and within musket shot of the wharves of Albany, a residence of a younger branch of the van Rensselaers, that has loopholes constructed for defence against the crafty enemy, although it dates from a period scarcely so distant. Other similar memorials of the infancy of the country are to be found, scattered through what is now deemed the very centre of American civilization, affording the plainest proofs that all we possess of security from invasion and hostile violence, is the growth of but little more than the time that is frequently filled by a single human life."

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer or, The First Warpath* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), Ch. I, pp. 15-16

#### B) CAPITAL OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Poughkeepsie's importance in the above quote is emphasized with "even Poughkeepsie." During the War of Independence, Poughkeepsie, in Dutchess County, was to become a key component in assuring the success of the Americans, for, by the end of December, 1777, Poughkeepsie had become the seat of government of the state of New York! The significant contribution made by Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County during that conflict is documented in Governor George Clinton's letters written from Poughkeepsie:

##### GOVERNOR CLINTON'S LETTERS.

Several hundreds of the letters of George Clinton were written in Poughkeepsie, but I have found in them nothing to indicate what house he occupied. They contain much of local interest, however, and from them could be constructed a history of the Revolution, nearly complete, and containing much new material. They show, among other things, that Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County were of paramount importance during the second period of the war. Dutchess was the only county not at some time invaded by the enemy, it paid more taxes than any other county, furnished a very large proportion of the provisions necessary for the army, and also a large number of soldiers. In emergencies Dutchess was the main stay of the State. Without its aid, without the aid of the sturdy band of patriots in Poughkeepsie, it is hard to see how the Highlands could have been held, perhaps it is not too much to say, how the Revolution itself could have been won. The difficulties of

building the new fortifications, of finding provisions, of raising money, of keeping the army together during the years of holding on, were serious enough, as will appear. As to the importance of Dutchess County the following statement<sup>1</sup> of taxes paid by the counties of the State from the Declaration of Independence to Oct. 1st, 1781, is significant:

Albany	£ 875,720
Dutchess	1,116,141
Ulster	620,008
Orange	280,741
West Chester	79,450
Tryon	32,450
Charlotte	3,821
	<hr/>
	£3,008,479

<sup>1</sup>Clinton Papers, Vol. VII, p. 366.

It must be remembered that New York, Kings, Queens, Suffolk, Richmond and a part of Westchester Counties were in the possession of the enemy. Charlotte County is now in Vermont and Tryon became Montgomery after the war.

*The Eagle's history of Poughkeepsie from earliest settlements 1683 to 1905* by Edmund Platt (1865-1939), pp. 48-49.

### C) FISHKILL & DUCHESS COUNTY IN COOPER'S *THE SPY: A TALE OF THE NEUTRAL GROUND*

Cooper's first great success as a novelist came in 1821 with the publication of *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground*. Although Westchester County, New York, serves as the "neutral ground" when the novel begins, the action in the final third moves north to the southern tip of Dutchess County, particularly the area around Fishkill, just 13 miles south of Poughkeepsie, which was clearly in the hands of the Continental Army. Fishkill (also "Fish-kill") is cited four times in *The Spy*.\*

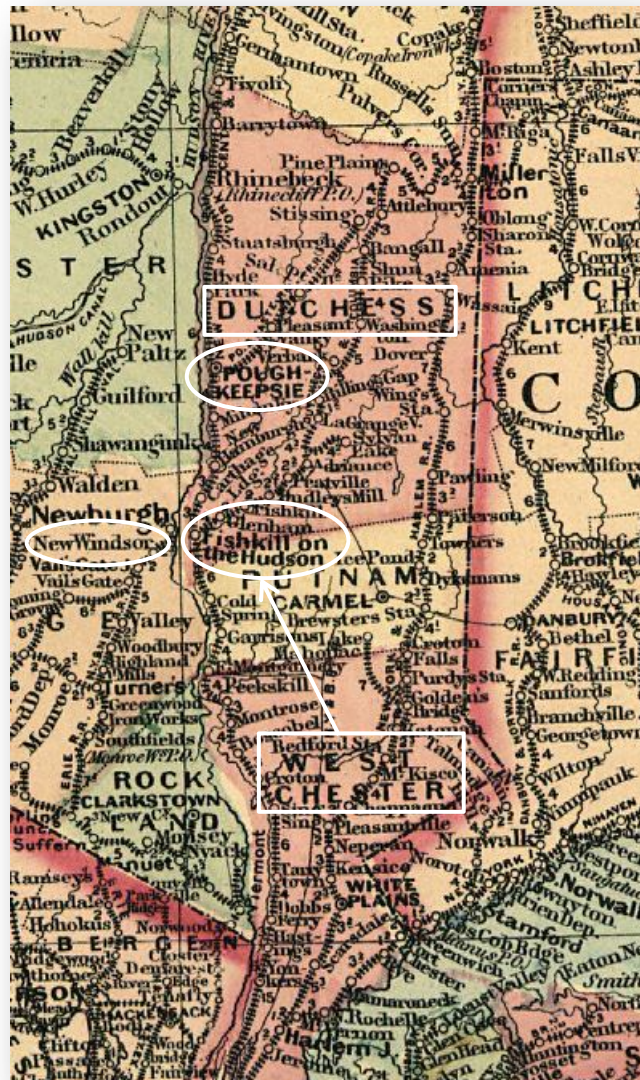
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\*References to *The Spy* are from the Cooper Edition: James Fenimore Cooper, *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2002). "Fishkill" is cited on pages 390 & 411. The spelling "Fish-kill" is on pages 314 & 343.

Cooper's biographer of the early years, Wayne Franklin, makes the following statement:

"It is rarely if ever noticed that the book's loco-centric subtitle—*A Tale of the Neutral Ground*—hardly applies to the last third of the action, which mostly takes place in the area north of the Croton River (the point at which, Cooper himself remarks, "the Neutral Ground ceased" [*Spy* 2:135]). The novel after the northward shift, in other words, is no longer properly a tale of the Neutral Ground."

Wayne Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 347-348.



The action in *The Spy* shifts to the north from the so-called "neutral ground" of Westchester to Dutchess County. "Washington held his headquarters at New-Windsor" (Ch. XXVI, p. 326). This segment of the Aston & Adams' map of "New York and part of Ontario" depicting New York by counties dates from 1871.

Cooper's novel was based on the legend of the first spy in the service of the Continental Army, a man often alleged to be Enoch Crosby (1750-1835) of Dutchess County.\* Cooper himself later denied, though not categorically, that his novel was based on Crosby, a name he had never heard.

Benson John Lossing, while researching the Revolutionary War, sent Cooper the following lines on Aug. 19, 1850:

"The fact that Jay was one of the Committee of Safety who employed Crosby in the 'secret service' of course gives the coloring of truth to the assertion. Will you have the kindness to inform me whether Barnum is correct, as I am desirous of avoiding error, even in a matter of such slight historical importance." (MS:YCAL)

[*Editorial comment:*] Since Cooper did not absolutely deny a possible connection between Crosby and Birch, Lossing referred to Crosby in his history as "the alleged reality of the novelist's fictitious Harvey Birch" (*The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution; or, Illustrations, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the War for Independence* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852], II, 122). -*The Letters & Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Vol. VI, pp. 212-213, Ftn. 1

As might be expected in America's first spy novel, both the necessity and role of disguises provoke the reader to seek to understand what sort of man is beneath the disguise.

Henry Wharton, a young American officer in the British army and separated from his parental home in Westchester County for 14 months, paid his sisters and aging father an unexpected visit while out of uniform. Wharton was later apprehended by the Americans, who took him to Fishkill, Dutchess County, to a military tribunal, where he was charged with spying for the enemy. Although pronounced guilty and sentenced to death by hanging, young Wharton was saved by Harvey Birch, a master of disguise.

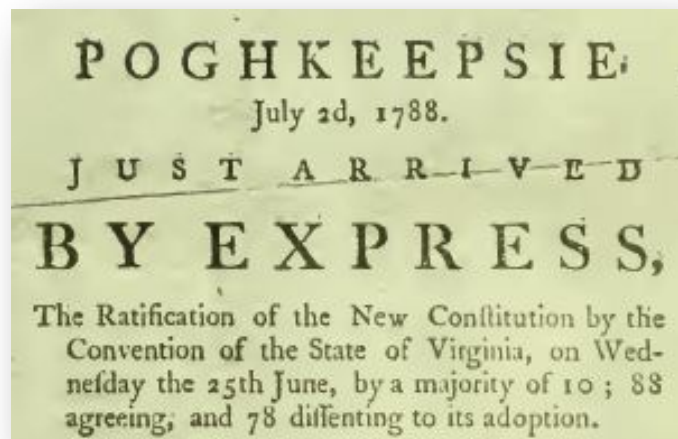
Harvey Birch was employed by Washington as a counterspy. Although Americans thought he was working for the British, he was actually gathering intelligence for Washington. In spite of his success, Birch was required to bear the stigma of a traitor to his country, even though he had always been loyal and risked his life at every turn. Certainly the question of why Birch should not be allowed to regain his good name after the war is not answered to everyone's satisfaction. Even Washington, from the very first chapter, is introduced reconnoitering Westchester in disguise as a "Mr. Harper." In the novel, the rendezvous between George Washington, again disguised as Mr. Harper, and his spy Harvey Birch also took place (Ch. XXX), we are told, "at the hut above Fishkill" [p. 390]. Of historical note: While Poughkeepsie was the capital of the state of New York, Fishkill became the official New York State Post Office!

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\* Cf. "[Enoch Crosby, American Patriot and Spy](#)"

#### D) THE POUGHKEEPSIE CONVENTION AND THE RATIFICATION OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

The Poughkeepsie Convention of 1788 to determine whether the state of New York should ratify the United States Constitution has, with obvious exaggeration, been described by one historian\* as “the pivot in the history of the English-speaking race.” It may be said that the delegates assembled at Poughkeepsie were hardly in favor of ratification. New York was a rich state and not at all interested in shouldering the burden of war debt of the “have-nots.” New York’s problem, however, was that a sufficient number of states had already ratified. New York hardly wished to be left out in the cold as the odd man out. Particularly, when the devastating news arrived that Virginia had accepted ratification, there was little choice but to bow to ratification while pleading for amendments.



*The Eagle's history of Poughkeepsie from earliest settlements 1683 to 1905* by Edmund Platt (1865-1939), p. 60. "Original in possession of Mr. John A. Roosevelt."

Yet even the possibility of amendment was rejected by Madison:

“...any condition would vitiate the ratification. The state of New York must either join the union now already formed or take the responsibility of staying out. All felt the gravity of the situation.” - *The Eagle's history of Poughkeepsie*, p. 59, c. 2

Governor Clinton’s support against ratification was slowly crumbling. On July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1788, the state of New York, at Poughkeepsie, voted for *unconditional* ratification of the United States Constitution by a vote of 30 to 27 [*The Eagle's history of Poughkeepsie*, p. 61, c. 1].

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\*Martha J. Lamb, *History of New York*, vol. 2, p. 321. Referred to on p. 57, c. 1, of Edmund Platt’s *The Eagle's History of Poughkeepsie*.

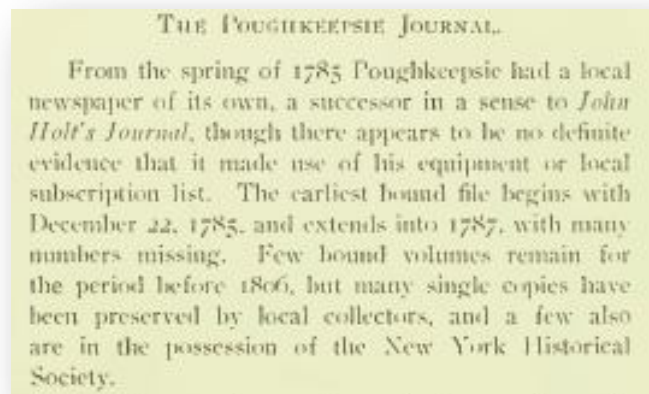
#### IV) THE POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL & EAGLE

##### A) FOUNDED BEFORE RATIFICATION

The nameplate *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle* was in use from 1844 to 1850:



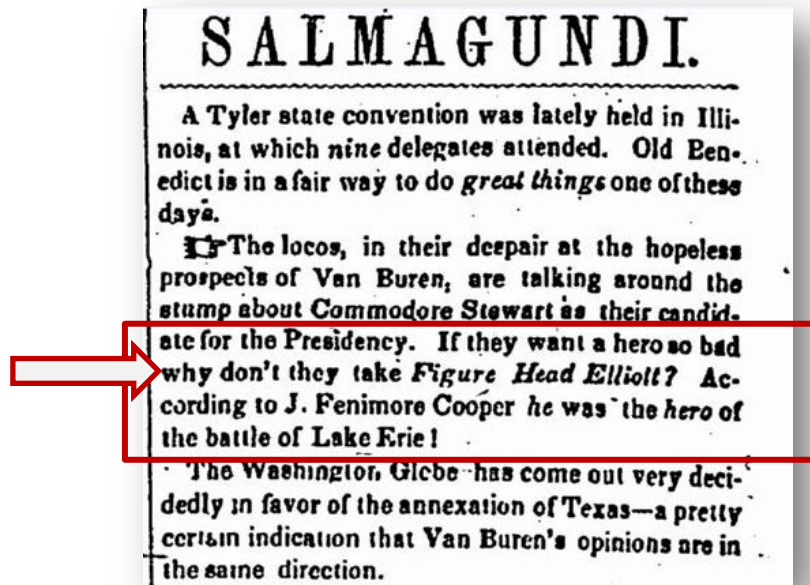
The newspaper began in 1785 and has been, though with varying nameplates, in print without a break since. This makes the newspaper one of the oldest in the country today, though, in Cooper's time, a mere 60 years of publication is less impressive.



*The Eagle's history of Poughkeepsie from earliest settlements 1683 to 1905 by Edmund Platt (1865-1939), p. 55*

## B) A NEW HELMSMAN: ELLIOTT FOR PRESIDENT!

The following tongue-in-cheek proposal appeared in the *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle* in 1844:



*The Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle*, April 27, 1844, p. 2, c. 8. Up to publication of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in July 1845, Cooper had endured six years of mockery and abuse for his support of Jesse Duncan Elliott in the Battle of Lake Erie (Sept. 10, 1813, during the War of 1812). Perhaps by 1845 he thought it was indeed time for a "new hero" — one who was neither an Oliver Hazard Perry nor an Elliott, but a John Maynard!

The "Salmagundi" column [referring to a "hodgepodge" of news items] of the *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle* accuses Cooper of creating Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott the true hero of the Battle of Lake Erie and consequently attempting to dismantle Oliver Hazard Perry's sterling reputation. The reference to "*figure head Elliott*" may perhaps be explained in an article that appeared a decade earlier:

The Boston *Commercial Gazette* says:—"The city was thrown into an [*sic*] high degree of excitement yesterday morning, by a report from Charlestown that the figure-head of President Jackson, which was placed on the bows of the frigate *Constitution* by Commodore Elliott, had been mutilated during the night of Wednesday by some unknown hand. It appears that the head and shoulders of the President were fairly sawed off and carried away, no one knows where. The night was dark, the rain fell in torrents, the thunder rolled, the lightning flashed, and the sentinels slept upon their

posts! The *Constitution* lies between two seventy-fours, and the act is considered on all hands as one of a most daring character. The affair produced much merriment and exultation among the enemies of the President yesterday.”

*The Baltimore Gazette & Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore, Maryland), Monday evening, **July 7th, 1834**, p. 2, c. 4

Elliott, the commander of the *USS Constitution*, commonly known as *Old Ironsides*, and who greatly admired General Andrew Jackson, had a figurehead of Jackson, paid for out of his own pocket, placed at the vessel’s prow. The implicit message behind the figurehead was that it was Jackson, who, as “helmsman of the ship of state,” would always protect the Constitution (literally the ship but figuratively the document and all it stood for) in the murky waters of Whig politics. This created such disenchantment among Jackson’s political opponents, the Whigs, that they instigated the raid of the *Constitution* as described in the above article. Cooper, following publication of his *Naval History* in 1839, was subjected to a constant barrage of attacks simply because he attempted to show objectively that Elliott, second in command during the Battle of Lake Erie, had been delayed from entering the fray — not due to a lack of courage but due to a lack of wind.

Cooper’s frustration is apparent in the following quote:

“As for the Lake Erie affair, it was an easy task to show the rascality employed against me; but cui bono? Few persons read my pamphlet [Cooper’s 117-page pamphlet *The Battle of Lake Erie*, published in 1843, defending his position in his *Naval History*], and I am still vituperated as a falsifier of history. The coarsest calumny has been published against me, in connection with this affair has appeared since the explanations have been made. Unable to answer any thing, it runs into abuse and accuses me of *being hired by Elliott!*”

*Letters and Journals*, Vol. IV, Letter 747, pp. 437-438, to William Gilmore Simms, From Otsego Hall, Cooperstown, Jan. 5th, 1844

## V. CATCH A BIG FISH

Both Hallowell, Maine, and Poughkeepsie, New York, were engaged in ship-building. In Cooper’s *Afloat and Ashore* (1844), a reference to Poughkeepsie packets is made:

“The reader will have no difficulty in understanding that the Wallingford, constructed under the orders of an old sailor, and for his own uses, was a fast vessel. In this particular she had but one or two competitors on the river; packets belonging to Hudson, Poughkeepsie and Sing Sing.”

James Fenimore Cooper, *Afloat and Ashore, or, The Adventures of Miles Wallingford* (New York: AMS Press, 2004), Vol. I, Ch. XXX, p.489.

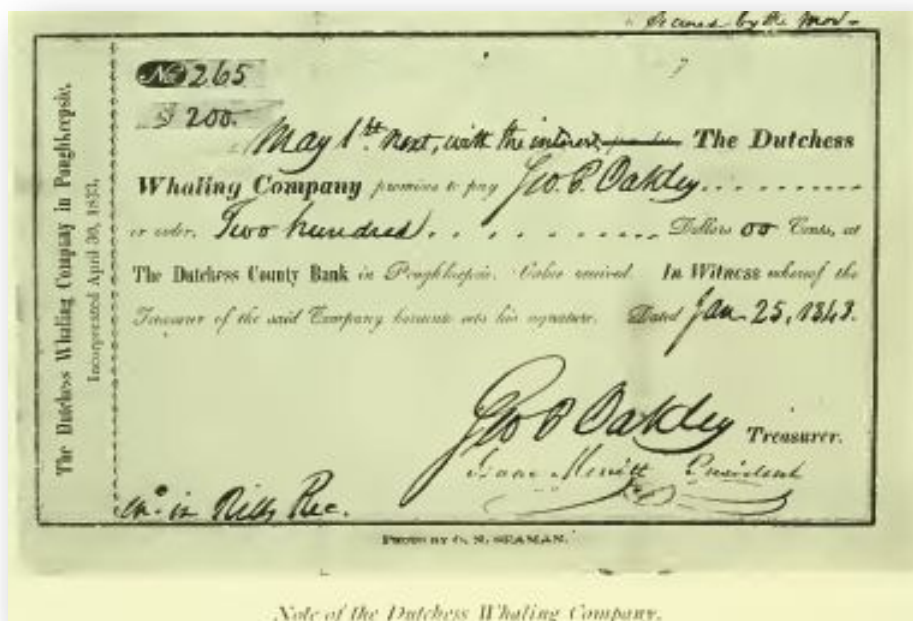
Indeed Poughkeepsie’s geographical location favoured her with her “first boom.”

POUGHKEEPSIE'S FIRST "HORN"—SHIP BUILDING FOR  
THE NEW NAVY.

Mr. Joel Benton has been quoted as saying: "In colonial days few were the people here; but they were a bright and stirring handful." They accomplished enough during the Revolution to justify this assertion, and the little town was a wonderfully busy place during most of the war. The fact of its location, far enough above the Highlands to be considered safe from the British, attracted a few families from New York, and also caused its selection as the place at which to build two of the thirteen frigates authorized by the Continental Congress in December, 1775. This selection gave the town its first importance, and at about the same time it became the centre from which the Revolutionary correspondence of the county was conducted, having been previously barred by its conservatism. December 7th, 1775. Egbert Benson

*The Eagle's history of Poughkeepsie from earliest settlements 1683 to 1905 by Edmund Platt (1865-1939), p. 39, c. 1.*

Poughkeepsie, like Hallowell, was also engaged in whaling.



*Ibid.*, p. 112

The Cooper biographer Wayne Franklin points out:

“Although Cooper never wrote a whaling novel, he was to include a whaleman among the characters of his first nautical tale (Tom Coffin in *The Pilot* [1823]), and in the late novel he called *The Sea Lions* (1849) he had his seal hunters turn aside from their regular business to chase and capture a sperm whale off the coast of Brazil. Here Cooper was drawing on his ownership of the *Union*.

Wayne Franklin, *The Early Years*, p. 296

In footnote 49, p. 620, *The Crater; or, Vulcan's Peak: A Tale of the Pacific* (1847) is also mentioned:

“Cooper also had the Pacific colonists in *The Crater* go whaling and devoted considerable space to describing the process; see *CR* 2:127-138.”

Cooper's acquisition of the whaling ship *Union* in 1819 was a gamble in an ambitious effort to disentangle himself from the burden of debt following his father's death and the extended family Cooper had become financially responsible for. Due to their own overestimation of the actual size of the inheritance and imprudent speculative ventures on the part of their father William Cooper, the heirs soon found themselves in financial straits. Needless to say, the Otsego estate was lost in the process. Cooper, perhaps as a gesture of filial piety, was, however, able to reacquire part of the estate following his return from Europe. Although the Coopers were hardly the “country sort” and preferred dividing their time between the cultivation and intellectual input of an urban community and the quiet life of the countryside, Cooper's own financial problems (his American revenues almost evaporating) ironically resumed *after* his return from a seven-year-stay in Europe from 1827 to 1833. By 1836, the Cooper family was able to move from New York City to a completely renovated Otsego Hall in Cooperstown. Yet at Otsego Hall they were obliged to accept the rural comforts of Cooperstown perhaps for longer periods than would otherwise have been the case. In 1845, Cooper was, as usual, amazingly productive, having – in Cooperstown – completed work on the first two volumes of his Littlepage trilogy (*Satanstoe* and *The Chainbearer*) while putting the finishing touches on his *Lives of Distinguished American Navy Officers* (1846), much of which had already appeared in *Graham's Magazine* (Philadelphia).

## VI. THE LEGENDS OF POUGHKEEPSIE & LITTLE FALLS

Poughkeepsie is an unusual name whose correct spelling may appear elusive:

“The name of this city, as found in records and on maps, exhibits a most curious specimen of orthographic caprice, it being spelt in forty-two different ways, as follows:--Pakeepsie, Pacapsey, Pakepsy, Paughkeepsie, Pecapesy, Pecapsy, Pecapshe, Pochkeepsinck, Poeghkeepsing, Poeghkeeksingh, Poeghkeepsink, Pochkeepsey, Pochkeepsen, Pochkeepsy, Pochkepsen, Pochkyphsingh, Pockeepsy, Pockepseick, Pockepseng, Poepsing, Poghkeepsie, Poghkeepsinck, Poghkeepsing, Poghkepse, Poghkepsen, Poghkeepsink, Poghkeepson, Poghkeepse, Pokeepsigh, Pokeepsingh, Pokeepsink, Pokeepsy, Pokesinch, Pokkepsen, Poughkeepsey, Poukeepsie, Poukeepsy, Pikipsi, Picipsi, Pokepsie, Pokeepsie, Poughkeepsie.”

[Benson J. Lossing, \*The Hudson from the Wilderness to the Sea\* \(New York: Virtue & Yorston, 1866\), Ch. X, footnote](#)

Whereas Buffalo is known as “The Queen City of the Lakes,” Poughkeepsie, according to *Wikipedia*, has the sobriquet “The Queen City of the Hudson.”

[Wikipedia](#), referring to [Britannica on-line](#) further states:

“The name derives from a word in the [Wappinger](#) language, roughly *U-puku-ipi-sing*, meaning "the reed covered lodge by the little-water place," referring to a spring or stream feeding into the Hudson River, south of the present downtown area.”<sup>[1]</sup>

My older edition of Britannica (15<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1986 printing) cites “waterfall,” allowing for a parallel with Little Falls, site of the 3<sup>rd</sup> known printing of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie.”

#### **A. “SAFE HARBOR:” THE LEGEND OF POUGHKEEPSIE**

Yet, a much older translation and one which Cooper in 1845 would have been familiar with, is “safe harbor.” The translation “safe harbor,” whether correct by contemporary standards or not, is based on the Indian legend of Poughkeepsie:

“Six miles below Hyde Park is the large rural city of Poughkeepsie, containing about 17,000 inhabitants. The name is a modification of the Mohegan word, *Apo-keep-sinck*,\* signifying "safe and pleasant harbour." Between two rocky bluffs was a sheltered bay (now filled with wharves), into the upper part of which leaped, in rapids and cascades, the Winnakee, called Fall Kill by the Dutch. The northerly bluff was called by the Dutch Slange Klippe, or Snake or Adder Cliff, because of the venomous serpents which were abundant there in the olden time. The southern bluff bears the name of Call Rock, it having been a place from which the settlers called to the captains of sloops or single-masted vessels, when passage in them was desired. With this bay, or "safe harbour," is associated an Indian legend, of which the following is the substance:-- Once some Delaware warriors came to this spot with Pequod captives. Among the latter was a young chief, who was offered life and honour if he would renounce his nation, receive the mark of the turtle upon his breast, and become a Delaware brave. He rejected the degrading proposition with disdain, and was bound to a tree for sacrifice, when a shriek from a thicket startled the executioners. A young girl leaped before them, and implored his life. She was a captive Pequod, with the turtle on her bosom, and the young chief was her affianced. The Delawares debated, when suddenly the war-whoop of some fierce Hurons made them snatch their arms for defence. The maiden severed the thongs that bound her lover, but in the deadly conflict that ensued, they were separated, and a Huron chief carried off the captive as a trophy. Her affianced conceived a bold design for her rescue, and proceeded immediately to execute it. In the character of a wizard he entered the Huron camp. The maiden was sick, and her captor employed the wizard to prolong her life, until he should satisfy his revenge upon Uncas, her uncle, the great chief of the Mohegans. They eluded the vigilance of the Huron, fled at nightfall, with swift feet, towards the Hudson, and in the darkness, shot out upon its bosom, in a light

canoe, followed by blood-thirsty pursuers. The strong arm of the young Pequod paddled his beloved one safely to a deep rocky nook near the mouth of the Winnakee, concealed her there, and with a few friendly Delawares whom he had secured by a shout, he fought, conquered, and drove off the Huron warriors. The sheltered nook where the maiden lay was a safe harbour for her, and the brave Pequod and his friends joyfully confirmed its title to *Apo-keep-sinck*.”

[Benson J. Lossing, \*The Hudson from the Wilderness to the Sea\*](#) (New York: Virtue & Yorston, 1866), Ch. X, p. 188

The legend of Poughkeepsie exhibits several parallels with Cooper’s famous work, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). The Delaware cosmology in both the Poughkeepsie legend and Cooper’s novel represents the earth as an island surrounded by water. This gave rise to the image of a tortoise:

“The Tortoise, or as it is commonly called, the Turtle tribe, among the Lenape, claims a superiority and ascendancy over the others, because their *relation*, the great Tortoise, a fabled monster, the Atlas of their mythology, bears according to their traditions this great *island* on his back, and also because he is amphibious....”

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans; A Narrative of 1757* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 366, Explanatory Note 309.23-37

The maiden’s uncle Uncas, “the great chief of the Mohegans,” calls to mind Uncas, the son of Chingachgook, of *The Last of the Mohicans*:

“Throughout the whole of these trying moments, Uncas had alone preserved his serenity. He looked on the preparations with a steady eye, and when the tormentors came to seize him, he met them with a firm and upright attitude. One among them, if possible, more fierce and savage than his fellows, seized the hunting shirt of the young warrior, and at a single effort tore it from his body. Then, with a yell of frantic pleasure, he leaped toward his unresisting victim, and prepared to lead him to the stake. But, at that moment, when he appeared most a stranger to the feelings of humanity, the purpose of the savage was arrested as suddenly, as if a supernatural agency had interposed in the behalf of Uncas. The eye-balls of the Delaware seemed to start from their sockets; his mouth opened, and his whole form became frozen in an attitude of amazement. Raising his hand with a slow and regulated motion, he pointed with a finger to the bosom of the captive. His companions crowded about him, in wonder, and every eye was like his own, fastened intently on the figure of a small tortoise, beautifully tattooed on the breast of the prisoner, in a bright blue tint.”

*Ibid.*, Ch. XXX, p. 309

“In the character of a wizard” may be translated as that of a “conjurer” in *The Last of the Mohicans*. When Natty “raps” the tribe’s conjurer over the head, he also assumes his disguise – a bearskin. By “playing the bear,” he is able to rescue Alice (Ch. XXV) and Uncas (Ch. XXVI). The theme of “lovers rescued,” although not successful with respect to Cora and Uncas (who are nonetheless united in a marriage ritual posthumously!) is a major motif in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

## **B. THE LEGEND OF LITTLE FALLS**

The motif of rescue and the reunion of two lovers is again a theme in the legend of Little Falls:

“Long years ago, when the river was broader and the falls were more lofty, a feud arose between two young chiefs of two of the clans of the Mohawk tribe, the Wolf and Tortoise. A maiden of the Bear Clan was the cause of the feud, as maidens often are. She was loved by both of the young chiefs, and for a time she so coquetted that each thought himself beloved by her in return. (As maidens often do.) Her father was a stern old warrior, and loved his child tenderly. Both chiefs had fought the Mingoes and Mohegans by his side, and the bravery of each entitled him to the hand of the maiden. Her affections were at length stirred by the more earnest importunities of the Wolf, and she promised to become his bride. This decision reached the ears of the Tortoise, and the embers of jealousy which disturbed both while unaccepted suitors, burst into a flame of ungenerous revenge in the bosom of the disappointed lover. He determined to possess the coveted treasure before the Wolf should take her to his wigwam. With well dissembled acquiescence in her choice, and expressions of warm friendship for herself and her affianced, he allayed all suspicions, and the maiden rambled with him in the moonlight upon the banks of the river when her affianced was away, unconscious of danger. The day approached for the maiden to go to the wigwam of her lord. The Tortoise was with her alone in a secluded nook upon the bank of the river. His light canoe was near, and he proposed a voyage to a beautiful little island in the stream, where the fireflies sparkled and the whippoorwill whispered its evening serenade. They launched, but instead of paddling for the island, the Tortoise turned his prow toward the cataract. Like an arrow they sped down the swift current, while the young chief, with vigorous arm paddled for the northern shore. Skillful as with the bow and hatchet, he steered his canoe to the mouth of the cavern described, as then upon the water's brink, seized the affrighted maiden, and leaped ashore, at the same moment securing his canoe by a strong green withe. The cave was dry, a soft bed of skins of beasts was spread, and abundance of provisions were there stored. At the tip of the cave, far above the maiden's reach, an opening revealed a passage through the fissures of the rocks above. It was known only to the Tortoise; and there he kept the maiden many months, until her affianced gave her up as lost to him forever. At length, while hunting on the southern hills in flowery May, the Wolf saw the canoe at the cavern. It solved the question in his mind. The evening was clear, and the full moon shone brightly. He waited until midnight, when, with an arm as strong and skill as accurate as his rival's, he steered his canoe to the mouth of this cavern, which was lighted up by the moon. By its light he saw the perfidious Tortoise sleeping in the arms of an unwilling bride. The Wolf smote the Tortoise, but the wound was light. The awakened warrior, unable to grasp his hatchet, bounded through the opening at the top of the cavern, and closed it with a heavy stone. The lovers embraced in momentary joy. It was brief, for a fearful doom seemed to await them. The Tortoise would return with power, and they had to make choice of death by the hatchet of the rival chief or by the waters of the cataract. The latter was their choice, and in affectionate embrace they sat in their canoe and made the fearful leap. The frail vessel struck propitiously upon the boiling waters, and, unharmed, passed over the gulf below. Down the broad stream they glided, and far away, upon the margin of the lower lake they lived and loved for two generations, and saw their children's children go out to battle and the chase. In the long line of their descent, tradition avers, came Brant, the Mohawk sachem, the strong Wolf of his nation.

[Max Reid, \*The Mohawk Valley: Its Legends and its History\*](#) (New York and London: G. P. Putman's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1901) with illustrations from photographs by J. Arthur Maney, Chapter XIX "Old Indian Names and Sites--The Legend of Little Falls"

As Cooper was very much America's legend-builder, it goes without saying that he was attuned to the legends surrounding the places he both loved and knew. It may perhaps be pointed out that the cave at Little Falls, though not to be found in Cooper's works, is an obvious parallel to the Glens Falls cave by Lake George in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

## VII. "THE GREAT POUGHKEEPSIE FORTUNE-TELLER"

In Cooper's *The Water-Witch; or, The Skimmer of the Seas* (1830), written while in Italy, with a view of the Bay of Naples and Vesuvius from his study, we find the following passage:

"There is a tradition in our family," said Oloff Van Staats, his eye lighting with a mysterious excitement, though he affected to laugh at the folly he uttered, "that the great Poughkeepsie fortune-teller foretold in the presence of my grand mother, that a Patroon of Kinderhook should intermarry with a witch. So should I see la Belle in the position you name, it would not greatly alarm me."

"The prophesy was fulfilled at the wedding of thy father!" muttered Myndert, who, notwithstanding the outward levity with which he treated the subject, was not entirely free from secret reverence for the provincial sooth-sayers, some of whom continued in high repute even to the close of the last century.

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Water-Witch; or, The Skimmer of the Seas* (New York: AMS Inc., 2010), Ch. XVIII, p. 200

Cooper's magical and refreshingly feminine *Water-Witch* represents a break with the conventions of society. As Thomas Philbrick worded it:

"In the concluding chapter of the novel Eudora [who played the male role of Seadrift in the novel] is offered the love of a father, the security of a wealthy marriage, and the companionship of a genteel friend: all values of civilization. And all these she rejects in a grandly romantic gesture for a life at sea with her lover, a life 'with a ship for a dwelling – the tempestuous ocean for a world!'"

Thomas Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 72

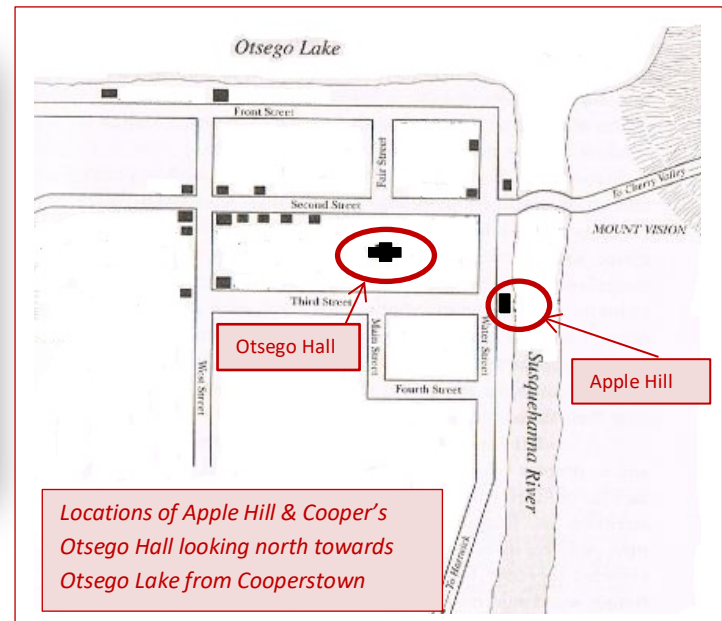
It is a paradox that a man like Cooper, of such aristocratic taste and refinement, would exalt the virtues of nature while exhibiting deep distrust in the corrupting influence of civilization. Just as Natty Bumppo rejects the constraints of society and seeks the most remote corners of the wilderness in which to live and be at one with his God, so, too, the mariner, riding the waves of an endless ocean, can only be distracted by the stars above, and, in so doing, sense the beauty of God's creation. Although Cooper believed in the inviolable rights of landowners and in the inherent rightness of the spread of civilization, he also felt the destruction that such encroachment on the wilderness wrought. *The Pioneers* (1823) is a case study of such environmental destruction.

Going beyond *The Water-Witch*, we might ask what the future would bring to Poughkeepsie.

A pivotal figure symbolic of the changing times was an historic painter turned inventor, who had painted the first view of Lake Otsego by Cooperstown in 1829: Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872).



Samuel F. B. Morse, Apple Hill, Cooperstown, 1829. Painted during a visit to Cooperstown. (Private Collection.)



With the opening of the first telegraph office in Poughkeepsie on October 19, 1846, the “lightning lines” of the New York, Albany and Buffalo Telegraph Company were transforming the spread of information. When in Paris, in the early 1830’s, the two close friends, Cooper and Morse, spent nearly every evening together. In 1847, Poughkeepsie became an essential aspect of Morse’s life:

“Two miles below Poughkeepsie is Locust Grove, the seat of Professor Samuel F.B. Morse, an eminent artist and philosopher, the founder of the American Academy of Design, but better known to the world as the author of the system of telegraphing by electro-magnetism, now used in almost every civilized country on the globe. For this wonderful contribution to science and addition to the world's inventions for moral and material advancement, he has been honored by several royal testimonials, honorary and substantial, and by the universal gratitude and admiration of his countrymen. Locust Grove is his summer retreat, and from his study he has electrographic communication with all parts of the United States and the British provinces. The mansion is so embowered that it is almost invisible to the traveler on the highway. But immediately around it are gardens, conservatories, and a pleasant lawn, basking in the sunshine, and through vistas between magnificent trees, glimpses may be caught of the Hudson, the northern and southern ranges of mountains, and villages that dot the western shore of the river. Here the master dispenses a generous hospitality to friends and strangers, and with the winning graces of a modest, unobtrusive nature, he delights all who enter the charmed circle of Locust Grove. For the man of taste and genius his home is one of the most charming retreats to be found on the banks of the Hudson from the wilderness to the sea.” [Benson J. Lossing, \*The Hudson\*, Ch. X, Part Two](#)

In the same year that Morse acquired his [estate at Locust Grove](#), Cooper, wrote the following while in New York City:

“Last evening I met Morse on the battery, not having seen him before in three years. The man is astride of streaks of lightening half the time, and one can never *fix* him. We had a long talk, and I am happy to find he is beginning to realize. I should think \$10,000 will hardly cover his receipts the coming year.”

*Letters & Journals*, Vol. V, p. 213: Letter 897. To Horatio Greenough, From the Globe Hotel, New York, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1847.

Cooper and Morse may be described as kindred spirits. As *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1986 printing) puts it:

“Among his [=Morse’s] friends were the French hero of the U.S. War of independence, the Marquis de Lafayette\*, whose attempts to promote liberal reform in Europe Morse ardently endorsed, and the novelist James Fenimore Cooper. Morse and Cooper shared several traits; both were ardent U.S. republicans, though both had aristocratic social tastes, and both suffered from American preference for European art.”

*Micropædia*, Vol. 8, “Morse, Samuel F(inley) B(reese),” p. 340, c. 3

According to Cooper’s letter of 1847, he had not seen Morse since 1844. There is, however, no documentation of a meeting between the two men taking place in 1844. If the encounter indeed took place, whether in Washington or, more likely, in New York (admittedly Cooper’s powers of retention were phenomenal), 1844 was a propitious year for Morse, whose career as a successful inventor was about to be launched. The official opening of the telegraph line from the Washington to Baltimore on May 24<sup>th</sup>, contained the following Biblical words Morse telegraphed to Baltimore: “*What hath God wrought?*” [Cf. *Numbers* 23:23. [The message](#): Library of Congress]

Cooper finished Part 1 of his double novel, *Afloat and Ashore or, The Adventures of Miles Wallingford*; by mid-April 1844; Part 2 was sent to his English publisher Bentley by the end of August. Already in the autobiographical treatment of the life of Ned Myers (*Ned Myers; or, a Life before the Mast*, 1843), Cooper had begun to make use of the revolutionary first-person narrator. Here again, Cooper uses his protagonist Miles Wallingford to emphasize familiarity with the Hudson and the ambition to own a *seat* by the Hudson:

“In that day, it was easy to enumerate every dwelling on the banks of the Hudson, that aspired to be called a seat, and I had often heard them named by those who were familiar with the river. I liked the thought of erecting a house on the Clawbonny property that might aspire to equal claims, and to be the owner of a *seat*; though only after I had acquired the means, myself, to carry out such a project. At present, I owned only a *house*; my ambition was, to own a *seat*. . . .

“We were all four of us seated on a rude bench, that my mother had caused to

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\*Both Cooper and Morse were close friends of Lafayette. [Morse’s famous oil portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette](#) (1825-1826) hangs in City Hall, New York.

be placed under the shade of an enormous oak that stood on the most picturesque spot, perhaps, on the whole farm, and which commanded a distant view of one of the loveliest reaches of the Hudson.”

James Fenimore Cooper, *Afloat and Ashore or, The Adventures of Miles Wallingford* , Pt. 1  
(New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2004), Ch. II, p. 25.

Cooper’s fixation with the estate Miles Wallingford inherited, then lost, and finally regained, may strike the reader as Cooper attempting to come to grips with his own life. Yet the question of the aesthetic beauty of a landscape, or even a lawn, obviously did not escape either Cooper or Morse:

“In addition to the trees, and a suitable garniture of shrubbery, this lawn [=Clawbonny’s] was coated with a sward that, in the proper seasons, rivalled all that I had read, or imagined, of the emerald and shorn slopes of the Swiss vallies [*sic*].”

*Ibid.*, Ch. I, p. 6.

Whether Cooper’s love of the Hudson and his descriptions of the virtues of a “seat” on the Hudson were a part of an encounter with Morse in 1844, must remain conjecture as no correspondence survives. Or whether the conversation was completely taken up with the advent of a revolution in communications, we shall never know. Yet the fortune-teller of Poughkeepsie may have foreseen that a technological era was beginning and that the wizard of that technology would choose Poughkeepsie as his Hudson home.

Bad Schussenried, August 30, 2011, with a revised Introduction due to the discovery of *The Church of England* Magazine (London, England) in October 2018.