

*James Fenimore Cooper:  
Entrepreneur of the Self*

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'I am anxious for the answers immediately as I am in hourly expectation of my whaler and wish the work off my hands before she comes in— . . . .'

Cooper to his bookseller, Andrew Thompson Goodrich, May 31, 1820<sup>1</sup>

IT IS BY NOW a biographical truism that in the years following the War of 1812, through the early twenties, James Fenimore Cooper found himself in increasingly tight financial straits, partially because of difficulties bequeathed him with his father's estate and partially because of his own inability to set his affairs right. As his situation worsened, he undertook a number of speculative ventures to save his dwindling inheritance, but seems to have mismanaged all of them. In addition to bartering his inherited lands and borrowing against them, he set up a frontier store and purchased other properties in De Kalb, New York, he purchased a whaling ship, and, as James Beard puts it, 'he ventured the most quixotic experiment of all, the writing and publication of fiction.'<sup>2</sup> As it would turn out, the most quixotic

We would like to thank the American Antiquarian Society and the Princeton University Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences for their generous support of our work on Cooper, and Henry S.F. Cooper, Jr., for permission to quote from unpublished Cooper manuscripts.

1. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, 6 vols., ed. James Franklin Beard (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960), 1: 42. Hereafter cited as Beard.

2. Beard, 1: 24.

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of course proved the most profitable. It would be tempting to think that the novelist succeeded only because the entrepreneur had failed, but in fact the reverse is true. Cooper's career as novelist depended at least in part on his success, both financial and imaginative, with his peculiar purchase of the whaling ship *Union*.

Whatever the eventual outcome of Cooper's various speculations, they, like the rest of his activity during the eighteen-teens, seem aimed at escape. Indeed, we know that quite literally Cooper tried to escape his financial troubles in Cooperstown by returning to Westchester, to a small farm in Scarsdale provided by his wife's family. But if Cooper's move to Westchester was meant to remove him from troubles in Cooperstown, it hardly succeeded. By the fall of 1819, James had lost his remaining two brothers, and found himself the sole Cooper son and executor of his father's estate. It had been a year of heavy losses in other ways as well. A postwar panic and depression, caused chiefly by the optimistic overextension of credit, peaked in 1819 with the collapse of many state banks. Cash was short everywhere, no less for the Coopers than anyone else. Again and again, Cooper's agent for the DeKalb lands wrote to him asking if he would accept livestock or whiskey in payment for his leases and goods, and Robert Campbell in Cooperstown had similar troubles.<sup>3</sup> In a typical letter, he informed Cooper in April of 1819, 'I have been unable to communicate anything of importance relative to the redemption of the leases [to your debtors]. . . . They consider cattle the same as cash.'<sup>4</sup> Not only was cash extremely short, but the federal government ordered the branches of the Bank of the United States to accept no notes but their own, to present all state bank notes for immediate payment, and to renew no personal notes or mortgages. This last step, though long overdue in terms of the national economy, hit the Cooper estate particularly hard because so much of the estate's value was tied up in land, and only added to the

3. Courtland Cooper to JFC, May 5, 1818, James Franklin Beard Papers (JFBP), Box 10. American Antiquarian Society (AAS).

4. Robert Campbell to JFC, April 5, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

difficulties and entanglements bequeathed by Judge William Cooper to his sons nine years earlier.

We now know a great deal about the financial specifics of those entanglements, thanks to Alan Taylor's very thorough and engaging study of the Judge and his town.<sup>5</sup> What is certain above all is that as the estate sank, Cooper made no attempt to rescue it, and in what seems an almost willful oblivion, he turned his attention instead to setting a whole new venture afloat. There were of course already the somewhat hefty expenses associated with the construction of Angevine, his home in Westchester, and smaller outlays, such as the \$100 for new dishes, and \$243.50 for Cooper's militia uniform, modest but surprising sums, considering the situation in Cooperstown.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, much to the chagrin of the De Lanceys, his wife's family, Cooper began a series of mortgages on the Hickories, the 159-acre farm just next to Angevine, that had been in the De Lancey family since the early eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, the three mortgages that Cooper took on the Hickories would cost him the goodwill of his wife's family,<sup>8</sup> but in the meanwhile the most apparently outrageous of all Cooper's expenditures came in the spring of 1819, when he signed a deed for the whaling ship *Union* and sent her on the first of three voyages to Brazil and Patagonia. Not much has been made of this unusual venture by Cooper's biographers or critics, perhaps because, as most of them indicate, it seems simply one more of the doomed financial schemes that characterized his aimless activity between 1817 and 1821,<sup>9</sup> and in terms of imaginative dividends, certainly none of Cooper's sea novels parallel the dazzling performance of *Moby Dick*. But in many ways, the episode is more central than has

5. Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 386-405.

6. Feb. 23, 1819, and July 16, 1818, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

7. See James Pickering, 'Fenimore Cooper as Country Gentleman: A New Glimpse at Cooper's Westchester Years,' *New York History* 72 (July 1991): 298-318.

8. Beard, 1: 87.

9. Not one of Cooper's biographers, except his daughter, has suggested that the *Union* was anything but a financial disaster.

been realized. Despite its escapist overtones, its chief interest lies in the fact that it coincides in both time and place with Cooper's first attempts as a novelist, and that it bears on just this event precisely because of its immediate financial and long-range imaginative success.

Let us start from the beginning of this particular story. When the Coopers moved to Westchester in 1817, their motives were at least twofold. Not only was Cooper himself doubtless attempting to escape the endless financial debacles in Cooperstown, but the relocation also satisfied Susan's desire to be near her family, and her husband's need for aristocratic connections.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the De Lanceys, Cooper's wife had a number of cousins on Shelter Island who were her own age and whose company she and her husband much prized. According to Cooper's daughter, her parents spent a good deal of time there during the summers between 1811 and 1819, leading 'a sort of semi-aquatic life' and participating in such activities as the secluded island afforded. The days were passed in hunting and fowling parties, excursions in small boats to the north and south forks of Long Island, and not least of all, in the reading of novels.<sup>11</sup>

Shelter Island was the Dering family estate, inhabited at that time only by the Derings and their relations. The island had come to the Derings by way of their marriage into the Sylvester clan, one of whom, in 1735, had entirely reconstructed the family mansion. It was rebuilt on the English model: three chimneys towered above rows of gabled windows, and on each side, the elegant and peaceful manor house was flanked by capacious porches that looked out over the elaborate gardens. Orderly gravel paths led through geometrical parterres bordered by trimmed boxwoods, and banks of forget-me-nots, portulacas, and spice pinks brimmed up all about. Near the head of the inlet in back of the

10. Beard 1: 24.

11. Susan Fenimore Cooper, in the 'Preface' to *The Sea Lions* (Boston, 1884), xii-xiii.

house, a stone bridge descended in moss-covered steps to a landing stage where small boats put out to Sag Harbor and neighboring towns. An historic house that still stands much as it was, it once had sheltered persecuted Quakers (hence the name 'Shelter Island'), and colonial governors clad in velvet coats had met with sachems from the local tribes within its halls.<sup>12</sup> It was here that the Coopers came to stay when they visited Susan's cousins.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, Charles Thomas Dering, scion of the island's ruling family, married Elizabeth Floyd Nicoll, the daughter of Susan De Lancey's maternal aunt. Meanwhile, Dering's sister, Margaret, married Elizabeth's brother, Richard Nicoll, so that both families were closely related to Susan Cooper, and through her, to James.<sup>13</sup> These somewhat complex interrelations are worth mentioning because they suggest that when the Coopers visited Shelter Island and its environs, they did so as guests of well-known and old families. These connections in turn would have made it possible for them to move freely in the otherwise tightly-knit and somewhat closed society of Oyster Pond (now Orient) and the Hamptons, and also to gain knowledge of the area's geography and industry.

The foremost of these was the whaling fishery in nearby Sag Harbor, a thriving port that by 1818 boasted a fleet of nearly fifty ships. During his summer visits, Cooper accompanied Dering many times to Sag Harbor, meeting the ship captains and whalers and learning of their adventures. The sights that he saw and the tales that he heard must have impressed themselves deeply in his memory and would later make their way into his fiction. Among other things, the famous, deep laugh of Natty Bumppo supposedly belonged to an ancient Captain Hand, who was frequently to be found on the street corners of the port, regaling his listeners with yarns of his days as a privateer and navyman at the

12. All information about the Dering house from W. Oakley Cagney, *The Heritage of Long Island* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1976), plate 48.

13. All genealogical information from Benjamin Thompson, *History of Long Island* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1918), 2: 210-24.

time of the Revolution.<sup>14</sup> Natty's popularity as a character superseded only that of Long Tom Coffin of *The Pilot*, and when Cooper published the book in 1824, the scene most praised by the reviewers was that in which Long Tom Coffin pursues a whale.<sup>15</sup> Cooper himself probably never participated in a whale hunt directly, but he would have heard many stories from the denizens of Sag Harbor, and he may even have watched from the shore as the whaleboats hunted their prey just offshore. Even those characters who had nothing to do with the sea itself but were part of the atmosphere in Sag Harbor played in Cooper's imagination. Dr. Sage, the wise old physician of *The Sea Lions*, is based on a certain Dr. Ebenezer Sage who lived with one of the Derings in his old age. Born in 1755, he had been an undergraduate at Yale with Joel Barlow and Noah Webster, and eventually became a congressman for Suffolk county before settling into his medical practice in East Hampton and Sag Harbor.<sup>16</sup>

It is also in *The Sea Lions* that Cooper most directly attests to the general excitement he felt while at Sag Harbor nearly thirty years before. After lamenting the homogeneity that pervaded most of America, he praises the eastern end of Long Island for having retained its local character, and most particularly he is impressed with the culture of Sag Harbor at just that date when he would have been passing time there:

It is as indispensable that a whaler should possess a certain *esprit de corps*, as that a regiment, or a ship of war, should be animated by its proper spirit. In the whaling communities, this spirit exists to an extent and in a degree that is wonderful, when one remembers the great expansion of this particular branch of trade within the last five-and-twenty years. It may be a little lessened of late, but at the time of which we are writing, or about the year 1820, there was scarcely an individual who followed this particular calling out of the port of Sag

14. Anna Mulford, *A Sketch of Dr. John Smith, Sage of Sag Harbor, N.Y.* (Sag Harbor: J. H. Hunt, Printer, 1897), 17.

15. See, for example, *The New York Patriot*, May 5, 1824, 6; *New York Mirror*, Aug. 19, 1824, 14, and Aug. 11, 1827, 5.

16. Mulford, *Sketch of Dr. John Smith*, 22.

Harbor, whose general standing on board ship was not as well known to all the women and girls of the place, as it was to his shipmates. Success in taking the whale was a thing that made itself felt in every fibre of the prosperity of the town. . . .<sup>17</sup>

The opening of this paragraph suggests that at least part of the attraction of whaling for Cooper lay in its loose similarity to his earlier experience as a midshipman. Some of the appeal that it shared with his former seafaring days seems to have been in a kind of manly camaraderie that Cooper surely lacked at Angevine, given his strained relations with the De Lancey men, and in a potential for recognition that had just as surely evaded him in the role of gentleman farmer that he had come to occupy. When we remember Cooper's early love of the sea, and the fact that he had chosen to renounce his naval commission with his marriage, it is perhaps not in the least surprising that by late 1818 he was contemplating the purchase of a ship himself. With Charles Dering as a minor investment partner, the plan was brought to fruition only several months later.

Whatever psychological sense such an idea might make, Cooper's financial difficulties make one wonder how he could have undertaken still more risks. And yet, oddly enough, compared with most of Cooper's ventures, from a financial point of view, the project made sense. In the first place, as the above paragraph from *The Sea Lions* indicates, Cooper himself would have seen and appreciated the prosperity that characterized Sag Harbor. In 1819 Sag Harbor was outflanked only by the largest Massachusetts ports of Nantucket and New Bedford. Her ships and their outfits were valued at close to a million dollars, and the industry employed more than a thousand seamen.<sup>18</sup> The stories of the seamen on the streets and in the taverns, and the bustle of business, gave the town an air of romance that would have been difficult to match in

17. *The Sea Lions*, ed. Warren Walker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 14-15.

18. Susan Fenimore Cooper, 'Preface' to *The Sea Lions*, xvii.

Cooper's experience, unless it had been years before as a boy in his father's frontier settlement. The houses lining Main Street, topped by widow's walks, were large and inviting, and filled with exotic furnishings and bibelots brought by the whalers from distant ports. Surely the contrast between the growing seaport and the wreckage that was becoming Cooperstown was not lost to Cooper's acquisitive eye.

But the decision to buy the whaler was buoyed by more than a fanciful wish to replace the Cooperstown of memory with a home by the sea. Sag Harbor, of course, was merely indicative of an industry about to come into its own, and Cooper no doubt knew this. As early as 1815 the American whaling industry was beginning to emerge from the difficulties occasioned by the War of 1812 and a trade embargo. To be sure, there were setbacks. In November of 1818 Captain George Swain II returned in the *Independence*, saying, 'No other ship will ever fill with sperm oil in the South Seas.' But less than a month later, Captain Edmund Gardner discovered what would become the famous 'offshore grounds' in the Pacific Ocean, followed by the further discovery of fertile grounds near Japan.<sup>19</sup> Between 1816 and 1820 the total value of whale oils and bone brought into the United States jumped from \$71,522 to over a million and a half dollars, and the number of barrels being brought into American ports by native ships leapt from around 17,000 to almost 80,000.<sup>20</sup> Sperm oil had already become the preferred illuminant for lighthouses, and throughout New England the more costly spermaceti candle was replacing foul-smelling tallow.<sup>21</sup> Nantucket and New Bedford, originally the signal ports, were beginning to compete with new centers along the Atlantic coast, one of which was, of course, Sag Harbor. The whaling business was booming, and the ranks of investors were growing. As Dering would write to Cooper several

19. Alexander Starbuck, *The History of the American Whale Fishery from its Earliest Inception to 1876*, 2 vols. (New York: Argosy Antiquarian Ltd., 1964), 1: 96.

20. *Ibid.*, 2: 660.

21. Margaret Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.



months before the *Union* sailed on her first voyage, 'I am sorry to hear so many are about to engage in the whaling business but do not apprehend any difficulty. I have the vanity to think I can make myself acquainted with the economy of the business.'<sup>22</sup>

The particulars of that economy, though generally risky because of the possibility of wreckage and the variability of returns, nonetheless were attractive in many ways. On the average, only one percent of the total fleet of ships in the United States were wrecked at sea per year, but by 1820 most owners insured their ships and outfits, at an average of about two-and-a-half percent.<sup>23</sup> Above all, labor costs were cheap. The whaling industry had functioned since the seventeenth century on what is called the lay system. From captain to cabin boy, each crew member received, instead of a wage, a specified fractional share of the total net proceeds of a voyage. If the voyage made no money, neither did ship's mates or crew, shifting a great deal of the entrepreneurial responsibility from the owners to the laborers, and obviating the need for any initial cash outlay towards wages. A typical captain's lay in 1820 would have been between 1/16 to 1/18 of the total profit, whereas a crew member's take could have ranged all the way down to 1/250. In practice, however, many crew members returned from their travels owing the owner money for debts accrued in the course of the voyage, a state of affairs often put right by re-hiring the same crew member at a lower lay for the next voyage. When all was said and done, the owner usually came away with a little over seventy percent of the net proceeds of the voyage.<sup>24</sup>

In early April Cooper settled upon the *Union*, a three-masted, ninety-two foot ship of 262 tons, worth \$5,000. By the fifteenth of the month, he had signed an agreement with a Gordon S. Mumford, effecting the transfer of the ship.<sup>25</sup> Cooper paid out

22. Charles Dering to JFC, May 6, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

23. Elmo Paul Hohman, *The American Whaleman: A Study of the Life and Labor in the Whaling Industry* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), 273.

24. *Ibid.*, 217-43.

25. Agreement between Gordon Mumford and James Cooper, April 15, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

very little in cash, but managed the purchase instead in his usual fashion: he bartered his inheritance of encumbered lands for a new chance at financial success. This aspect of the venture was chancy. The agreement between Cooper and Mumford indicates that a \$1,000 down payment towards the total was made against four lots from the Cooper patent, with a note due in sixty days. Until payment, Cooper would assume all risks for the ship, then docked in New York City, but would have no legal right to remove her from port, encumber, or sell her.<sup>26</sup> Cooper must have been sure that he could raise the monies owed Mumford, because he immediately set about outfitting the ship, and in fact, by June 17, he had paid off the note.<sup>27</sup>

It is unclear how Cooper paid the remaining \$4,000 balance. James Pickering, in an article on Cooper's Scarsdale days, speculates that the mortgage on the Hickories financed the purchase of the *Union*, but since Cooper made the first of his three transactions on that property in June of 1818, long before he even mentions the general idea of buying a ship, this assertion seems unwarranted.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Taylor suggests that Cooper lost Fenimore House, his farm in Cooperstown, to Mumford, but again, the dates of certain transactions make this unlikely.<sup>29</sup> Cooper had mortgaged Fenimore House to Robert Sedgwick, the New York lawyer and brother of the novelist, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, again for debts accrued in early 1818, and it is not clear to whom he ultimately lost it.<sup>30</sup> The more probable story is that Cooper traded four additional lots of land for the balance of the whaler. On the same day that he signed the \$1,000 note against the lots in the Cooper patent, he exchanged with Mumford four additional lots of encumbered land in Otsego county, a total of about 450 acres, subject to their clearance in sixty days.<sup>31</sup> Apparently these

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. Pickering, 309.

29. *William Cooper's Town*, 396.

30. Pickering, 'Cooper as Country Gentleman,' 309.

31. These lots were, respectively, a farm known as Mount Ovis of 107 acres, another farm in the town of Edmiston of about 111 acres, a third farm in Pittsfield of 130 acres,

lands were conveyed to Mumford, because by late July the *Union* was in Sag Harbor, prepared to sail. The trade would have been shrewd on Cooper's part when we remember the general shortage of cash at this time. Letters to Campbell suggest that he first tried but was finally unable to sell or mortgage his inherited and encumbered properties in order to pay Mumford cash.<sup>32</sup> Instead, by trading the land for the ship, he might well at the other end expect a solid cash dividend for the oils and bone brought back from the voyage. Once in possession of the ship, he footed only two-thirds of the outfitting, contracting with his wife's cousin for the remaining third, which Dering evidently subsidized by the sale of small properties in and around Hamilton, New York.<sup>33</sup> By the 1840s joint-stock companies would be common in the whaling industry, primarily because the individual interests were larger and more expensive, but Cooper seems to have originated this idea in his own time, at least in the vicinity of Sag Harbor.<sup>34</sup>

In any case, long before Cooper had actually paid Mumford, he and Dering concocted elaborate plans for the outfitting of the ship. The process was complicated, as indeed Cooper would indicate in his description of Roswell Gardiner's attempt to outfit his ship in *The Sea Lions*. A typical outfit would have included many hundreds of items such as compasses, spyglasses, cooper's and carpenter's tools, hardware, whaling gear, spare spars and sails, lumber, oars, casks, anchors, medicinal supplies, sheathing copper, cordage, and the like. Moreover, the *Union* had been built in New Bedford in 1804 and required a great deal of work before she would be seaworthy. Although Mumford had sold Cooper all of the ship's equipment, including her boats, tackle, and cables,<sup>35</sup> most of this equipment needed to be replaced. The ship required entirely new rigging, new sails, repairs to the hull, and a myriad

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and a lot bequeathed by the Judge to Cooper of 100 acres. Agreement between Mumford and Cooper, April 15, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

32. Robert Campbell to JFC, April 29, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

33. Charles Dering to JFC, May 27, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

34. Mulford, *Sketch of Dr. John Smith*, 32.

35. Agreement with Mumford and Ship's registry, April 15, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

of detailed and specialized work. Cooper and Dering decided to have the repairs done in New York, doubtless because they had no other choice given Cooper's agreement with Mumford, and while Cooper saw to the ship's affairs from the City Hotel in New York City, Dering arrived in Sag Harbor in June of 1819 to see to the matter of the ship's boats, outfittings, and crew.

Dering's original idea was to make the *Union* a two-boat ship, which she eventually became, on the theory that the division of profits on this basis would provide the greatest financial incentive to a prospective captain and crew.<sup>36</sup> And, as Dering pointed out, a good captain and crew were essential, but the fact that the *Union* had had to remain in New York until the note to Mumford was paid and the land conveyed caused particular difficulties in this respect. The original master of the ship, Joshua Prentice, was ending his whaling days, and it was left to Dering to secure a new captain in Sag Harbor. But as he wrote to Cooper only a week after arriving there,

three of the whaling ships have arrived and have done very well but I find a difficulty in obtaining suitable officers and hardly know how to proceed as one of the captains that had come in is not going out again and his mate (the one that I contemplated getting) has the offer of that ship and there is one additional ship to fit with officers which is a new ship and she will obtain the best officers. I find great embarassments in not having the ship here as they will not ship until they have seen the vessel or some of the officers have in whom they can put confidence.<sup>37</sup>

Dering contemplated sending to Nantucket for a captain but decided against it because local loyalties would then have complicated his efforts to complete the crew. He also requested Captain Halsey, master of one of the ships recently returned to Sag Harbor, to come with him to New York to vouch for the condition of the *Union* to the Sag Harbor whalers, but finally the trip

36. Charles Dering to JFC, April 27, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

37. Charles Dering to JFC, July 4, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

was unnecessary. Within the month, he obtained the services of a fine old captain named Jonathan Osborne.

That Dering managed to get Osborne on such short notice for the fledgling venture is curious, for he was one of the best-known and most experienced captains in the area. Born in nearby Wainscott in 1771, Osborne was well liked among the Sag Harbor whalers, which no doubt helped Dering in procuring the rest of his crew. He deserved Dering's confidence in the first place because he already had over one hundred and fifty whales to his credit.<sup>38</sup> If, as one Sag Harbor resident insisted, Osborne was the prototype for Long Tom Coffin of *The Pilot*,<sup>39</sup> we can assume that he was a man of imposing physical stature with consummate harpoon skills. Whether, like Long Tom, he carried his harpoon with him everywhere he went, is another question, but he does appear to have been somewhat eccentric. Local legend has it that on one occasion, after everything had been readied for a voyage, he gave orders to cast off and under short sail worked the ship down Sag Harbor, when suddenly he ordered the anchor dropped, the sails furled and a boat lowered. He then told the crew that since he held the ship's papers, no one could give orders but himself. As he had a field of corn at home that needed cutting, he was going there to have it done and would be back later.<sup>40</sup> Whether or not this incident occurred under Cooper's ownership, or at all, it must bear some relevance to Osborne's character. Cooper would have appreciated the self-possession of the gesture, and in any case he must have been pleased with Osborne, for he captained the *Union* on each of the three voyages that it remained under Cooper's ownership.<sup>41</sup>

Having secured a captain, a first and second mate, and a further

38. Mulford, *Sketch of Dr. John Smith*, 31.

39. *Ibid.*, 22.

40. William D. Halsey, *Sketches from Local History* (Southampton, N.Y.: Yankee Peddler Book Co., 1966), 108.

41. Mulford, *Sketch of Dr. John Smith*, 40.

crew of nineteen men, Dering now faced difficulties with the provisioning of the ship and with obtaining new sails. Both were to have arrived in Sag Harbor by the end of July, and although Dering wrote twice to Cooper in New York, explaining that for every day that the provisions were wanting and the ship waiting, it was costing them between sixty and eighty dollars, no provisions came.<sup>42</sup> In particular, Dering was anxiously awaiting what would probably have been about forty barrels of salted beef and pork, but this was a small part of the total provision. A ship of the *Union's* size and crew, voyaging for eleven months, would have required up to several tons of bread, somewhere near nine hundred pounds of rice, and many more pounds of coffee, sugar, and lard. She would have carried as well barrels of flour and molasses, bushels of dried corn, peas and beans, a small amount of butter and cheese, and perhaps a few gallons of rum or other spirits.<sup>43</sup> To complicate matters further, as in all of his business dealings, Cooper seems not to have responded promptly—or else he ran into unforeseen snags with the merchants in New York. In any case, no provisions reached Sag Harbor until August 14.<sup>44</sup>

On August 19 the *Union* finally sailed from Sag Harbor, bound like all of the other ships from that port for Brazil and Patagonia, provisioned for twelve months, with four new boats. Two days later, Dering proudly wrote to Cooper: 'she went out of the Harbor very well. . . . The ship appeared in fine order and trim and sailed very well and went with every prospect of a successful voyage which I cordially wish her.'<sup>45</sup>

In the ensuing two and a half years Cooper seems to have benefited immensely from the *Union*—perhaps financially, and most certainly in terms of personal enjoyment. If in most respects Susan Cooper seems to have been a less than reliable biographer of her father, in two particulars she was accurate. In 'Small Family

42. Charles Dering to JFC, Aug. 10, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

43. Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 110-11.

44. Charles Dering to JFC, July 11, Aug. 4, Aug. 10, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

45. Charles Dering to JFC, Aug. 21, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

Memories,' she not only recalls that Cooper himself occasionally skippered the *Union* up and down the coast, but she also remarks that the venture was ultimately successful.<sup>46</sup> As to Cooper's skippering days, we know that Susan was right. *The Water-Witch*, *Miles Wallingford*, and *Jack Tier* all contain scenes that involve the navigation of Long Island Sound, and each is detailed in a way not possible without some first-hand knowledge on Cooper's part.<sup>47</sup> To some extent, Cooper owed this knowledge to the necessities of the business. Although the *Union* returned to Sag Harbor from each of its voyages during Cooper's ownership, once in port the oil needed selling and transporting. We know of at least two such short trips on the Atlantic coast during which Cooper was aboard. Susan remembers that upon returning from a voyage to Boston, he brought her a lifesize wax doll, and it is certainly possible that the *Union* travelled several times from Sag Harbor to the Massachusetts port.<sup>48</sup> The prices of sperm and whale oil fluctuated a good deal from port to port in the early twenties, due in part to supply and demand. When the *Union* returned from her second voyage in July of 1821, Cooper and his partners debated whether to sell in New York or Boston, and seem finally to have decided on the latter.<sup>49</sup>

We know, too, from the 1850 preface and the opening scene of *The Red Rover* (first published in 1827), that Cooper had visited Newport, Rhode Island, before leaving for his six-year sojourn in Europe in the spring of 1826. According to Susan, he made the trip to the old-time seaport aboard the *Union*. Newport was only just becoming a very minor whaling center itself by 1820, with one or two ships sailing and returning a year, so it seems somewhat unlikely that, as Susan suggests, the *Union* was taken there for repairs.<sup>50</sup> As Cooper himself wrote, Newport failed to live up

46. Susan Fenimore Cooper, 'Small Family Memories,' in *The Correspondence of James Fenimore Cooper*, 2 vols., ed. James Cooper (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), I: 38.

47. See *The Water-Witch*, 42-43; *Miles Wallingford*, 183-84; and *Jack Tier* (New York: W. A. Townsend & Co., 1860), 59, 68-69, 93, 99, 100.

48. Susan Fenimore Cooper, 'Small Family Memories,' 38.

49. Robert McDermott to JFC, July 7, 1821, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

50. Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Pages and Pictures* (New York: James Miller, 1865), 182-83.

to its promise as a potentially major port and was known primarily as a pleasure site:

No one, who is familiar with the bustle and activity of an American commercial town, would recognise, in the repose which now reigns in the ancient mart of Rhode Island, a place that, in its day, has been ranked amongst the most important ports along the whole line of our extended coast. It would seem, at the first glance, that nature had expressly fashioned the spot, to anticipate the wants, and to realize the wishes of the mariner. Enjoying the four great requisites of a safe and commodious haven, a placid basin, an outer harbor, and a convenient roadstead with a clear offing, Newport appeared to the eyes of our European ancestors, designed to shelter fleets and to nurse a race of hardy and expert seamen. . . . There are few towns of any magnitude, within our broad territories, in which so little change has been effected in half a century, as in Newport. Until the vast resources of the interior were developed, the beautiful island on which it stands was a chosen retreat of the affluent planters of the South from the heats and diseases of their burning climate. Here they resorted in crowds to breathe the invigorating breezes of the sea. Subjects of the same government the inhabitants of the Carolinas and of Jamaica, met here, in amity. . . . The beauty and fertility of the place gained for it a name which probably expressed far more than was properly understood at that early date [1759]. The inhabitants of the country styled their possessions the 'Garden of America.' Neither were their guests from the scorching plains of the South reluctant to concede this imposing title. The appellation descended even to our own time. . . .<sup>51</sup>

One wonders if Cooper simply decided one day to make a jaunt in his ship across the waters of Long Island Sound to this lovely setting. Perhaps, too, he was transporting casks of sperm oil from which the nation's candles were made, for Newport had been the hub of this industry since the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>52</sup> In any case, whatever his business required of him, Cooper did not lose the opportunity to quench his own longings as a former seaman, and seems to have sailed frequently in the *Union* simply for pleasure, especially in and around Sag Harbor.<sup>53</sup>

51. *The Red Rover* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 433-34.

52. Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 1: 149.

53. See Mulford, *Sketch of Dr. John Smith*, 16; and Cooper, *Pages and Pictures*, 182; and 'Small Family Memories,' 37.



Business was another matter. In *The Water Witch* Alderman Beverout exclaims at one point: 'Women and vagaries . . . their conceits are as uncertain as the profits of a whaling voyage.'<sup>54</sup> We, too, must remain somewhat uncertain about these profits. From the exchanges between Dering and Cooper in 1819-20, it is clear that the *Union* did not, as some of Cooper's biographers have supposed, return from a first and unsuccessful voyage in the summer of 1819, but rather that when she returned in July of 1820, it was from a first and at least moderately lucrative trip. Word had come from Pernambuco in December that as of October 21, 1819, the *Union* had touched there for fruit and was reported 'tight, staunch and strong.'<sup>55</sup> Later in the year another vessel brought word that she had 900 barrels of whale oil, and when she finally returned to Sag Harbor in July of 1820, it was with 1,220 barrels. Beard notes that this was not a good cargo for a vessel of the *Union's* tonnage, and that the \$7,000 or \$8,000 profit he received went primarily to reoutfitting the ship for its second voyage in August of 1820.<sup>56</sup> These assertions have for some reason determined all subsequent views of the whaling venture as a failure and a folly. But the details bear further examination. In the first place, had the *Union's* initial voyage been a financial failure, it is unlikely that a captain as renowned as Osborne would have agreed to sail with her again, since his profits depended wholly on the total profits of the venture. And, in fact, in the same letter of April 1819 in which Dering suggests outfitting the *Union* as a two-boat ship, he speculates that she can carry no more than 1,400 barrels.<sup>57</sup> If so, the first voyage fell only mildly short of its potential.

It nonetheless brought sufficient profit for Cooper to reoutfit her and send her off again by sometime in August, and much more to the point, the voyage allowed Cooper to finance the printing of his first novel, *Precaution*, and quite possibly that of *The Spy* as well. Cooper had been at work on *Precaution* at least

54. *The Water Witch* (1860), 161.

55. William Bryant to JFC, Oct. 21, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

56. Beard, I: 53 and 59.

57. Charles Dering to JFC, Apr. 27, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

since March of 1820, and by June 12, he had sent the draft off to his New York City bookseller, Andrew Thompson Goodrich.<sup>58</sup> At this point, his novelistic enterprise seems to have been wholly secondary to his whaling venture, for a number of times in June and early July he exhorts Goodrich to hurry with the proofs because he hourly expects the arrival of the *Union* and must drop all else to see to her upon her return.<sup>59</sup> As with most of his publishers, Cooper soon ran into difficulties with Goodrich. Not only were the proofs inaccurate and sloppy, but there seems to have been a disagreement about Goodrich's precise role in the book's publication and in the profits due him. In a letter of September 7-8, 1820, Cooper angrily informed Goodrich:

On the subject of funds there could be no misunderstanding—the Book is mine and you an agent—I was to pay the engagements and to receive the proceeds of sale—you were to be amply compensated for your trouble &c—this was the agreement—in addition thereto I promised to give you the money as soon as I received certain sums of money—a large portion of this money will be paid in a few days—still a large sum of money has been received and I came from Sag Harbor prepared to advance you the money.<sup>60</sup>

The syntax of the final clauses here is somewhat confusing, but it appears that Cooper was waiting to receive his share of profits on the *Union's* first voyage, and that with these proceeds he would pay Goodrich for his services as bookseller. He apparently had already received part of his share, but for some reason had been unable to convey this portion to Goodrich, and was still awaiting the balance from his whaler's proceeds. Whatever the misunderstanding, Cooper and Goodrich patched it up, because a month later he again wrote, more amiably this time,

Owing to your delay I have appropriated the money I brought with me to give you—but in the hands of Mr. C. Dering of Shelter Island I have money—this he was to have brought me a fortnight since on his way to the West—but unfortunately his father fell from a horse

58. Beard, 1: 48-49.

59. *Ibid.*, 46.

60. *Ibid.*, 58.

and is killed—I suppose I shall not see him and have directed him to send \$1000 to Mr. Wilkes. . . .<sup>61</sup>

The remaining records concerning the *Union* are scarce and contradictory, but it appears that her profits continued to underwrite Cooper's early attempts as a novelist. Dering either reduced his one-third interest or dropped out of the venture altogether before she made her second voyage, both because he had difficulty procuring insurance on his share of the outfits, and because, as he had written to Cooper in December of 1819, his affairs in Hamilton were exhausting any spare resources.<sup>62</sup> In his place, or in addition to him, Cooper took on a new partner, Robert McDermott, a New York City bookseller and stationer who provided Cooper with paper for both *Precaution* and his next novel, *The Spy*. The suggestion is that Cooper took on McDermott as a way of buying more credit for his publishing ventures, and later, it was in fact with McDermott that Cooper contracted the third and final mortgage on the Scarsdale farm, the Hickories, in May of 1822. Presumably, this money was meant to cover the unpaid costs of paper and printing, and in the agreement, it was stated that if Cooper was unable to pay the note by June 11, 1822, he would do so with the arrival of the *Union*. The record of Cooper's accounts with McDermott show that the sum he owed, a total of \$3,035, was paid with proceeds from the oil, and that by April 12, 1823, when Cooper was winding down his affairs with the ship, their accounts were square.

In any case, that the *Union* returned from her second voyage successfully is clear from a letter dated July 7 in which McDermott exhorts Cooper to hurry to Sag Harbor to oversee the distribution of the oil.<sup>63</sup> The fate of the ship grows murkier once she embarked on her third and most probably final voyage under Cooper's ownership. The United States Commission on Fish and

61. *Ibid.*, 65–66.

62. Charles Dering to JFC, Sept. 3, Dec. 5, 1819, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

63. Robert McDermott to JFC, July 7, 1821, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

Fisheries reported no voyages by the *Union* in the years 1821 or 1822,<sup>64</sup> but their records are at best spotty, and according to an accounting done by Dering in February of 1823, the ship returned from a third voyage early in the summer of 1822.<sup>65</sup> Although Cooper paid another two months insurance on the ship in October of 1823,<sup>66</sup> when she sailed again that summer, it was under a new captain who remained with her for many years after. This signals the end of Cooper's tenure as a whaling entrepreneur.<sup>67</sup>

The question is why, when the value of the whaling industry was about to peak as it did in 1824, Cooper would have sold his interest in the spring of 1823. It may be that the *Union* was a losing venture, but it is hard to see how he would have supported its second and third voyages, and indeed himself, his family, and his publishing ventures, had she failed. In fact, there is some evidence that Cooper had plans to invest in a larger ship and outfit, perhaps for voyages to the Pacific, at just this time, which suggests that the *Union* was more than a going concern. Attached to Dering's accounting of February 22, 1822, was a paper entitled 'Project of a Voyage for a Ship of 350 Tons from Sixteen to Twenty Months.' Since the *Union* was a ship of 262 tons, and had made voyages of no more than eleven months, Dering's 'Project . . .' must have been meant as an estimate for a prospective venture of potentially larger financial outlays and gains. The total expense, including \$7,000 for a new ship, came to \$11,875, but as Dering and Cooper would have known, a Pacific bound whaler in 1823 might well have returned with extremely profitable cargoes. Perhaps the third voyage of the *Union* had not been quite lucrative enough to enable this project to go forward, but it is also significant that the accounting done by Dering postdates Cooper's first fully successful publishing adventure by only three weeks. *The Spy* had been a

64. Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 1: 240 and 246.

65. Charles Dering, 'Account of Payments Received,' Feb. 22, 1823, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

66. 'James Cooper in Account with Robert McDermott,' Apr. 12, 1823, JFBP, Box 10. AAS.

67. Mulford, *Sketch of Dr. John Smith*, 49.

moderate success, running through three editions fairly quickly when it appeared in 1821. But when *The Pioneers* appeared in New York on February 1823, the first edition of 3,500 copies sold out before noon on the morning of publication, and moreover, it was the first of Cooper's books not to be pirated for an English edition.<sup>68</sup> The confluence of *The Pioneers'* success and the sale of the whaler suggests perhaps that Cooper had used the *Union* to keep himself afloat, and that when his writing finally showed signs of allowing it, he sold off a good investment at a better price in order to devote himself wholly to his newfound career as an author.

Even if we cannot know the precise dividends that Cooper reaped from his investment, the episode is telling in a number of ways. In the first place, it calls into question the popular view of Cooper's lack of entrepreneurial ability, as well as the unmitigatedly miserable state of his finances at this time. It is worth remembering that what is often taken as the final blow to Cooper's financial standing, the inventorying of his household goods after he had moved to New York City in 1823, was delivered by his old enemy William Holt Averill, the Cooperstown lawyer who delivered blow after blow to the Judge's crumbling estate and whose father had once made shoes for all of the Judge's children. In this sense it speaks less perhaps of Cooper's actual fiscal state than of former enmity. Above all, it is clear that the supposed disaster of the good ship *Union* purchased Cooper the financial leeway to underwrite his incipient career as a novelist, and perhaps equally significant, the two ventures seem linked as endeavors that freed Cooper's imaginative energies. It was just as Cooper was expecting the return of the *Union* in the spring of 1820, that he began work on his first novel, *Precaution*.<sup>69</sup> It would be published anonymously the following November in New York to resounding failure, but it marks the beginning of his career as an author and was followed

68. Beard, 1: 84-85.

69. Beard, 1: 41-42.

shortly by a string of extraordinarily successful novels, including the first of the Leatherstocking tales.

There are two versions of how Cooper launched his first literary undertaking. The first and most famous is passed down to us by his daughter. Writing of their days at Angevine, she explains:

He frequently read aloud at that time to my Mother, in the quiet evenings at Angevine. Of course the books were all English. A new novel had been brought from England in the last monthly packet; it was, I think, one of Mrs Opie's, or one of that school. My Mother was not well; she was lying on the sofa, and he was reading this newly imported novel to her; it must have been very trashy; after a chapter or two he threw it aside, exclaiming, 'I could write you a better book than that myself!' Our Mother laughed at the idea, as the height of absurdity—he who disliked writing even a letter, that he should write a book!! He persisted in his declaration, however, and almost immediately wrote the first pages of a tale, not yet named, the scene laid in England, as a matter of course.<sup>70</sup>

Almost all of Cooper's readers seem to have accepted this story, but it is perhaps as much a fiction as the novel that resulted. In the first place, Susan would have been seven at the time, and unless she stayed up very late, her story is for a number of reasons probably little more than family hearsay or misunderstanding.

A second version comes to us from Anna Mulford, a resident of Sag Harbor and the granddaughter of the Dr. Ebenezer Sage on whom Cooper's fictional doctor in *The Sea Lions* is modelled. According to Mulford, like the whaling venture itself, Cooper's life as novelist began on Shelter Island. Mrs. Cooper was there, visiting her cousin, Miss Nicoll, and Cooper was just returning from a visit to New York. With him, he carried Mary Brunton's novel, *Discipline*, to read to his wife and her cousin. Mulford suggests that it was Eliza Nicoll who proffered the challenge during a reading of Brunton's novel, and Cooper responded by beginning the novel.<sup>71</sup>

While awaiting the return of the *Union*, Cooper resided at a

70. Cooper, 'Small Family Memories,' 38.

71. Mulford, *Sketch of Dr. John Smith*, 20.

tavern at the foot of what is now Main Street in Sag Harbor. Peletiah Fordham, its eccentric proprietor, had helped Cooper in 1819 when provisions had failed to arrive from New York by bringing them himself, but Cooper owes a far greater debt to 'Duke Fordham,' as he was known, than that of provisions. It was there, according to Mulford, while seeing to the ship's outfit and the prospective distribution of its cargo, that Cooper amused himself by writing *Precaution*, and it is very possible that he began work on his second and more popular book, *The Spy*, there as well.<sup>72</sup>

That Cooper's biographers have ignored Mulford's story is somewhat peculiar. In the first place, knowledge of Cooper's true model, Brunton, opens the way for a new understanding of his early fiction and of his self-construction as an author.<sup>73</sup> As to the other particulars, perhaps in the most literal sense, it hardly matters whether Cooper began his novelistic career at Angevine or in Sag Harbor. But if Mulford is in fact correct, we can speculate that the freedom Cooper felt when near the sea, and perhaps the distance that the whaling venture provided from troubles both in Cooperstown and Scarsdale, both allowed him the imaginative space he needed to get underway. As his career proceeded and reached its zenith during his long stay in Europe, it would be just such distances that again and again appeared to be necessary to his imaginative functioning. The difference, however, between Cooper's later authorial ventures and the earlier ones is that between risk and certainty. By the late 1820s, it had become clear to Cooper that, against all odds, he could in fact make a living as a professional author, and indeed, he was the first American writer to do so. But because authorship was, in the early 1820s, a gentlemanly avocation with no apparent prospect for profit, Cooper's earliest attempts at fiction writing could only have been construed

72. *Ibid.*, 21. Mulford mentions only *Precaution*, but we know from various letters that Cooper was at work on *The Spy* while in Sag Harbor. See Beard, 1: 43-45, 52-53.

73. See Alliston and Schirmeister, 'Taking Precautions: Gender Identity and Authorial Persona in James Fenimore Cooper,' in *Studies in Biography*, vol. 3 (New York: AMS Press, 1997).

as a waste of time from a financial perspective. Only a fool would undertake to make a living as an author in the America of 1820. Perhaps, however, the whaling project provided a convenient and necessary excuse. The fact that the details of Cooper's whaling venture coincide in both time and place with his first sallies as an author, sallies which are clearly conceived by him as diversionary, suggests that his genuinely shrewd entrepreneurial activities with the *Union* allowed him to take risks in other directions. Such risks which, if viewed independently, would have seemed foolish, could be easily ignored amidst the immediate and detailed work of outfitting a whaler and seeing to the distribution of her cargo on site. It is a question of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is up to, and so permitting it a larger sweep.



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