

# PETER COOPER

## A MODEL CITIZEN

### FACTS

1. Date of Birth: Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1791 (Exactly 18 years prior to the birth of **Abraham Lincoln**)
2. Date of Death: Apr. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1883 (14 years after the death of his wife **Sarah Cooper**)
3. He received **very little formal education**. In his own words he said he had only "some three or four quarters" at a public school and that "there were no night schools or laboratories nor any means by which an apprentice boy could get information."
4. His father was a hatter; on his work for his father he said "I remember...being set to pull the hair out of rabbit skins, when **my head was just above the table.**"
5. On the risk he took at age 17: "The only time I ever trusted to chance for a profit...I got a very wholesome lesson. I had earned about 10 dollars beyond my immediate wants, which I invested, by the advice of a relative in lottery tickets, all which, fortunately for me, drew blanks. This impressed upon me the **folly of looking to games of chance** for any source of gain or livelihood."
6. At age 17, he took on an apprenticeship as a coach-maker; he remained in this capacity for four years until his employer offered to build him a shop and setup a business for him – a great offer, but in his own words, "I always had a **horror of being burdened with debt**, and having no capital of my own, **I declined his kind offer.**"
7. His first profitable invention was a machine for shearing cloth. His first sale of said machine was to Mr. Vassar, the founder of "the noble institution for female education, called the Vassar College."
8. Soon afterwards he engaged in business as a grocer. Using the money from the grocery and his sale of machines he purchased a **glue factory** between 31<sup>st</sup> and 34<sup>th</sup> streets while **incurring no debt.**
9. In 1828 he entered into a partnership with two fellows to purchase 3,000 acres of land in Baltimore for \$105,000. On this land he built the **Canton Iron Works**. When purchasing the land, he discovered his partners had deceived him in their ability to pay so he bought out their stakes and went at the venture alone.
10. Also in 1828 (at age 37) he was elected to his first public office, as **Assistant Alderman** of the City of New York. His first order of business as a public officer was locating a clean source of water for the city outside of its limits. His work culminated in the construction of the **Croton Aqueduct** and the **High Bridge**, the oldest standing bridge in the City of New York.
11. During the remainder of his time as an alderman, Peter Cooper participated in other important legislation such as those acts that **allowed the formation of the FDNY and NYPD.**
12. Soon after purchasing the Baltimore land, he produced the **first steam locomotive in the United States**. His locomotive Tom Thumb used his efficient invention for "rotary motion obtained for rectilinear alternating motion, without a crank." Tom Thumb raced against a horse-drawn train, to demonstrate its superior speed. While Tom Thumb broke down during the race, its commanding lead up to that point proved its value.
13. In 1853 he purchased 19,000 acres in Ringwood, New Jersey, which included the **Long Pond Ironworks**, which was managed by Edward Cooper and Abram S. Hewitt, and **Ringwood Manor** which now acts as a museum. Peter Cooper later installed **grand arched windows recycled from Cooper Union's Foundation Building** at the manor.
14. He founded an ironworks at 33<sup>rd</sup> St. near 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. which became a mill for rolling iron and making wire. Later this factory **rolled I-beams**, the first of their kind, to provide structure for **Cooper Union's Foundation Building**, making it largely **fire-proof.**

15. He soon created several ironworks in New Jersey which he later consolidated into the **Trenton Ironworks**.
16. In 1857 the New York State Legislature passed an act to give "corporate powers to the Trustees of Peter Cooper's Munificent Gift to Science and Art." This is the first public record of Cooper Union, and in this act Cooper Union is declared a **public institution with a board of trustees composed of representatives of other public institutions in the City and State of New York**, such as the Governor's office, the New-York Historical Society, and the Astor Library.
17. In 1859, Peter Cooper opened The Cooper Union, a **free school that admitted all students on the basis of merit alone**.
18. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln delivered his "**Right Makes Might**" speech at Cooper Union. Historians contend that this speech catapulted him to the presidency, and that **without Cooper Union, the United States may soon have fallen**.
19. Peter Cooper, with Cyrus Field and others, financed and pioneered the laying of the **first Transatlantic telegraph cable**. Despite several majors setbacks Peter Cooper persevered and ultimately it was due to his spirit that the project succeeded.
20. In 1876, he was **nominated to run for President of the United States** by the Greenback party; Peter Cooper is still the **oldest person** to be nominated by a political party for the presidency.
21. Throughout his later life, Peter Cooper often penned open letters to the legislature and other offices of government, including the presidency. Many of these letters were compiled by J.D. Zachos in 1877 [1].
22. After his death in the 1883, the New York Times wrote a story on the funeral procession, describing the **thousands of people that paid their respects** both at All Souls' Church (estimated at 15,000 people) and an even larger number of people that lined the streets along the procession route.
23. Peter Cooper is buried at **Green-Wood Cemetery** in Brooklyn. He has an isolated plot with the other immediate members of the Cooper-Hewitt family.
24. Miscellaneous Family Details
  - Edward Cooper, Son, Mayor of New York, President of Cooper Union
  - Abram S. Hewitt, Son-in-law, Mayor of New York, President of Cooper Union, Financed first subway line in New York
  - Sarah Cooper Hewitt, Eleanor Garnier Hewitt and Amy Hewitt Green, Granddaughters, founded the Cooper-Hewitt Museum
25. Other Miscellaneous Inventions
  - A method for extracting power from water currents that reacted both to the tide and speed of the current to garner greater efficiency. (Created while still a coach-maker's apprentice)
  - A horseless method of towing along the Erie Canal – not used because, to gain the right to construct the canal, Governor Clinton promised farmers along the proposed canal path that the horses pulling the boats would be fed by their grain.
  - A conveyor belt system for transporting iron ore powered primarily by gravity; used in his various ironworks operations.
  - A self rocking cradle, with music-box used to bring his children to sleep.
  - The powdered gelatin now known as Jell-O.

## REFERENCES

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- [4] *Charter of The Cooper Union for the Advancement Of Science And Art*, 1859.
- [5] H. Holzer, *Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President*. Simon & Schuster Lincoln Library, 2006.
- [6] *Peter Cooper's Funeral*, The New York Times, April 1883.

## ABOUT

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