

Slavery in New York: Through the Lens of James Fenimore Cooper's Written Works

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose to analyze James Fenimore Cooper's written works, including *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* and "A Defense of Slave-Owning America," in terms of the ways that these works, and others, represent Cooper's attitude and the attitude of Americans toward slavery and the black community during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly those residing in the state of New York.

Keywords: slavery, Palatine Germans, Herkimers, James Fenimore Cooper, abolitionism, amalgamation, mixed race, democratic nation

La esclavitud en Nueva York: a través de la lente de las obras escritas de James Fenimore Cooper

RESUMEN

En "La esclavitud en el estado de Nueva York: a través de la lente de las obras escritas de James Fenimore Cooper", propongo analizar las obras escritas de James Fenimore Cooper, incluyendo *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* y "A Defense of Slave-Owning America" en términos de las formas en que estas obras, y otras, representan la actitud de Fenimore hacia la esclavitud y la comunidad negra, así como la actitud de los estadounidenses a fines del siglo XVIII y XIX, particularmente aquellos que residen en el estado de Nueva York.

Palabras clave: esclavitud, alemanes palatinos, Herkimers, James Fenimore Cooper, abolicionismo, amalgama, raza mixta, nación democrática

纽约州奴隶制：透过詹姆斯·费尼莫尔·库珀作品视角

摘要

在《纽约州奴隶制：透过詹姆斯·费尼莫尔·库珀作品视角》一文中，我提出分析詹姆斯·费尼莫尔·库珀的作品，包括*The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* 和“支配奴隶的美国防御”，分析这些作品及其他作品以何种方式代表费尼莫尔对奴隶制和黑人族群所持的态度，以及18世纪末和19世纪时期美国人的态度，尤其是那些居住在纽约州的美国人。

关键词：奴隶制，Palatine Germans, Herkimers, 詹姆斯·费尼莫尔·库珀，废奴主义，异族通婚，种族混合，民主国家

Slavery has taken many forms in different parts of the world throughout history. In 1619, the first African arrived in the colonies—in Virginia, specifically. The spread of slavery—particularly the race-based slavery that became a divisive institution in the nineteenth century—was not inevitable. Early American colonists used various forms of free labor, including the subjugation of Native Americans and the prolific use of indentured servitude. In the central New York region, the setting of much of Cooper’s writings, there was an influx of indentured servants during the early eighteenth century. Palatine Germans fled their homes in the southern Palatinate region of Germany for a variety of reasons: floods, famine, religious persecution, the ongoing wars of Louis XIV of France, and the circulation of pamphlets promoting opportunities in North America. Unlike black slaves, who were introduced to the colonies forcefully, German ref-

ugees were presented with opportunities of freedom and land in exchange for labor. Palatine refugees were sent to New York by Queen Anne, who negotiated their terms of servitude with then-Governor Hunter; the Palatines were to live in the Hudson Valley on the land of Robert Livingston to produce tar pitch out of local pine trees for the Royal British Navy. As a result of this unique, collective experience, Palatine refugees—some of whom later became slave owners—viewed slavery differently than much of the American public.

James Fenimore Cooper believed in the principles of abolitionism. However, Cooper did not view slavery as a national crime, as many hardline abolitionists did. Cooper thought that slavery would die a natural death in due course.¹ Thus, Cooper was content to explain the moral and ethical evils of the institution of slavery, while predicting that its demise was imminent.²

In Cooper's *Defense of Slave-Owning America*—in which Cooper defended the uniquely American institution from foreign criticism—Cooper argued that slavery was viewed by the majority of Americans as an evil, immoral practice, but that it remedied more easily in theory than in actual practice. Cooper's argument was a reflection of the notion shared by many Americans that slavery is not a palatable practice but that blacks are also not equal in any fundamental way. This sentiment also reflected that of the Founding Fathers at the inception of the American nation. The Founding Fathers also promoted a conflicted sentiment: slavery was considered immoral and detrimental to the principles of a democratic government, but blacks were considered by the majority to be innately inferior to whites. Thomas Jefferson argued this very idea. Jefferson also bought and sold slaves, advertised for fugitives, and ordered the punishment of fugitive slaves.³

Cooper also—although he did not approve of slavery—chose to defend slave-owning America against foreign criticism, as he argued that others did not understand the circumstances of its existence in an otherwise civilized and enlightened nation.⁴ There was an abundance of available land to cultivate and develop and not enough able bodies to work it. Thus, slavery and indentured labor became a fundamental aspect of the developing nation. As such, there existed within colonial America and the American nation after the Revolutionary War a dual view and relationship with slavery.



James Fenimore Cooper, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

In the Mohawk Valley, there was a unique perspective of slavery. The Palatine Germans, who eventually settled in the Mohawk Valley, the Schoharie Valley, and parts of Pennsylvania, were formerly indentured servants of the British government. Various Palatines amassed wealth as a result of land grants and trade. With wealth came the necessity for labor, and the Palatines used indentured labor, tenant farmworkers, and the enslaved. The Herkimers—a local prominent Palatine family—amassed such wealth that they acquired a reported thirty-three slaves, which was an unusually large number in this region. The will of General Nicholas Herkimer, who left upon his death the bulk of his estate to his brother George,



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included the stipulation that “my negro slaves, Dick, Sam, and Mary to be well used in their ages in remembrance of good and faithful service—should they be misused such to be taken from my brother George by my executors.”⁵ As a result of the experience of the Palatines in a position of servitude, there was a different view of slavery in which there was a willingness to free enslaved persons without the fear of violent retaliation, especially if their treatment violated what was considered fair. This sentiment was not widely shared; Cooper expressed his distaste for slavery; but shared the concerns of many of his contemporaries regarding the threat of slave rebellions or violence perpetrated by freed slaves.

Until the eighteenth century, the image of Africans was generally positive. They were farmers and cattle-breeders; they had industries, arts, and crafts, governments, and commerce. In ad-

dition, Africans had immunity to Old World diseases. They were better laborers, and they had nowhere to escape to once transplanted to the New World. The colonists themselves came to believe that they could not survive without Africans.⁶ During the infancy of the American Republic, there were differing views of the practice of enslavement. Certainly, slavery was inconsistent with the values espoused in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This declaration was in direct contrast with the practice and institution of African enslavement. James Madison asserted that slavery was indeed inconsistent with Republican ideals.⁷ Madison was not alone in his abhorrence for slavery; Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, John Adams,

John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington were among the multitude of founders and statesmen who indicated a distaste—if not outright aversion—to slavery.⁸ These men were unable to translate this aversion to any political or social action against slavery, although there were a number of weak attempts made to initiate emancipation legislation. For example, in 1789, Benjamin Franklin composed and published numerous essays in support of abolishing slavery. Franklin's final public act was to send a petition to Congress on behalf of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, which called for the for the abolition of slavery and an end to the slave trade. The petition, which was signed on February 3, 1790, asked the first Congress to “devise means for removing the Inconsistency from the Character of the American People” and to “promote mercy and justice toward this distressed Race.”⁹

General public perception of the black community in the eighteenth century was negative and unfavorable. Blacks were viewed, almost consistently, as intellectually and morally inferior, lustful, lazy, and prone to violent tendencies.¹⁰ Concerning their physical inferiority, blacks were described by Thomas Jefferson as “aesthetically inferior ... they can't blush, and they themselves prefer white features ... as uniformly as ... the preference of the Orangootan for the black women over those of his own species.”¹¹ This general characterization echoes the sentiment of Jefferson's fellow citizens. Blacks were viewed as innately intellectually, physically, and morally inferior.

Cooper's portrayal of enslaved and free blacks alike reflects the confusing nature of America's relationship and view of both slavery and the notion of universal equality. Although the practice of enslavement was considered morally deficient, the idea of racial equality was not accepted by the majority of Americans in the eighteenth century; thus, there was a disconnect between the need to eradicate slavery for the sake of the nation's morality and the need to maintain a racial hierarchy. Despite this, it was assumed that slavery would not exist in perpetuity, as it was an immoral practice. As such, it was imminent that slavery would be abolished in some manner. Jefferson, who was himself a slave owner, spoke in favor of abolition. There was a widespread notion of emancipation, with deportation soon thereafter. In 1813, a freeman in Massachusetts proposed—through the Senator of Massachusetts—that he should be permitted to take free blacks with him to the British colony of Sierra Leone. When this proposal went before the House, there was a consensus that the measure would rid the country of “free blacks, a part of our population which we could well spare.” Delegations that expressed this sentiment came from the colonies of New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Delaware, Vermont, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. This measure was ultimately defeated, but not because there was no consensus, but instead because there was a disagreement regarding embargo policies. In addition, the notion that blacks—slaves, in particular—were prone to violence was widespread and used to justify subjugation.

The term “miscegenation” did not exist in the 1820s when Cooper was writing some of the examined novels. This term was invented in the 1860s, around the same time that the discussion about modern racism was initiated, with an emphasis on “genetics” and “eugenics.” The primary goal was to compensate for the effects of the pending Emancipation Proclamation.¹² Before 1863, the prominent terms for describing interracial children were mongrelization and amalgamation. Another phrase that Cooper frequently used was “intermingling of blood,” which is less derogatory and more neutral.¹³

Cooper had a more accepting attitude toward the mixing of races concerning whites and Native Americans. In the *Wish of Wept-Ton-Wish*, Cooper emphasized the similarities between the settlers and the Narragansetts. This narrative seems to suggest that the similarities between the two races may prove to be the basis for intermarriage and intermingling. Metacom—in *Wish*—calls Naramattah—the white captive who has married Conanchet—“One who is neither white nor red.”¹⁴ However, Conanchet later forsakes his wife and child, and spoke about the necessity of keeping the races separated in a poignant speech. Conanchet compared different species of trees and argued that mixing two completely different types of trees that were not meant to grow together had angered the Great Spirit. Cooper was not only opposed to intermarriage outside of his texts but he also emphasized this concept within the boundaries of his fictional works through his characters’ interactions with different

races and the resulting consequences of mixed-race interactions.

James Fenimore Cooper did not approve of slavery. However, he did not engage in a direct attack on the practice itself, especially as it was a decidedly American practice during the nineteenth century. This philosophy was similar to the approach that ordinary Americans took with regard to slavery. Slavery was a practice that was condemned easily and sentenced to a short life of unfortunate necessity. However, outside criticism was unwelcome, as slavery was a pervasive practice within both the North and the South in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Cooper was offended by critiques of the United States and the continued practice of slavery, which was of a contradictory nature when viewed through an international lens. Cooper also defended the treatment of slaves in the United States, arguing that, “Doubtless there are many abuses, but in general they are at least well clothed and lodged, and far better fed than half the peasants in Europe.”¹⁵ Cooper argued multiple times that the American slave was far better off than the European peasant, in both treatment and conditions of labor. Cooper also argued that if not for the actions of the European colonial powers, slavery would never have been initiated in North America, nor would it have been needed. Further, one of the grievances expressed as a reason for the Declaration of Independence from England was the repugnant nature of slavery; during the Revolutionary period, Cooper argued,

slavery saturated all of the colonies; after declaring independence, fewer areas of the country had slavery as a common practice.¹⁶ Cooper maintained throughout this text that the black slave and the free black in America had more rights than some European citizens, stating “They are provided for in their age, are never seen cumbering the approach to the alters, objects of misery and disgust, imploring alms and exhibiting their ails and wants.”¹⁷ Thus, there were numerous justifications for slavery, although Cooper did not believe that slavery could—or should—continue to exist within a free, democratic society.

Cooper worked black characters into the main story plots in his novels, which was a progressive action on his part as a novelist. However, Cooper also created a prescribed, caricatured format for his black characters: misshapen, dense, simple, superstitious, and always smiling—even in the face of danger or serious situations.¹⁸ This is also found in Cooper's *Defense of Slave-Ownning America*, where it is stated that blacks are a “race proverbial for their light-heartedness. The laugh of the negro is merriment itself.”¹⁹ This is intended to demonstrate that the position of a slave—or a black society member—was not a cause for misery. It was the institution itself that was unjust. This depiction of blacks was present in various other works of Cooper. In the novel, *The Red Rover*, the character of Cassandra is a minor character; she is a slave, but she also plays an important role. She succeeds in helping rescue her mistress, Gertrude Grayson, through an act of rebellion, by distracting the

men aboard the pirate ship, against the objections of Wilder. In this manner, Cooper portrays Cassandra as a rebellious slave, which aligns with the fear that many Americans had regarding the enslaved: that they would rise up in rebellion against their respective authority figures, either individually or en masse.²⁰ This fear is a vivid example of the contradictory nature of the public assessment of slavery. On the one hand, slavery is immoral and contradicts the very principles of individualism, freedom, and democracy. However, those who have been enslaved are viewed as prone to violence and rebellion as a reaction to their unfortunate condition, so there must be a remedy before slavery can be abolished, as there are safety concerns for the remainder of society.

Cooper also allowed for some characters to display an open hostility toward white characters. In addition, there are instances where white characters defend the “good qualities” of black characters, bemoaning the fact that they are black and thus innately inferior despite their good qualities.²¹ Cooper placed all black characters—whether free, slaves, or of mixed race—in subordinate roles throughout the texts, although some actions taken by these characters contribute to the success of the main white characters. This is a reflection of the contradictory sentiment regarding the position of blacks in society, social equality, and the injustice and immorality of slavery. These sentiments were in contrast with one another, but continued to be prevalent.

James Fenimore Cooper was an important figure in central New York.

Cooper's texts highlighted the surrounding valleys and the rich history in this part of the country. These texts also mirrored the thoughts of many Americans regarding slavery—that it was an unethical practice that would eventually die a natural death—and the innate inferiority of all blacks, both free and enslaved. Cooper also echoed the idea that was shared by many regarding the mixing of the races and used the medium of fictional prose to espouse the dangers of intermarriage. Cooper defended the American practice of slavery by solidly placing the blame for the practice on European colonial powers and highlighting the concept of the diminished nature of American slavery after the nation declared independence from England. Simultaneously, Cooper defended the treatment of slaves—living within an immoral institution that he despised—by characterizing blacks as naturally suited to that position, as they were biologically programmed to be of a positive, happy nature under a multitude of circumstances. There are many contradictions to the position that Cooper takes concerning slavery and the treatment of blacks under the slave system; these contradictions are representative of the broad—and localized—public sentiment.

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Notes

- 1 "Fenimore Cooper's Defense of Slave-Owning America," *The American Historical Review* 35, no. 3 (April 1930): 575.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 William W. Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery," *The American Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (February 1972): 82.
- 4 "Fenimore Cooper's Defense of Slave Owning America," 576.
- 5 William H. Watkins, "Dean Miller of Little Falls, New York: A Mohawk Valley Slave." *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society*.
- 6 Audrey Smedley, "Origin of the Idea of Race." *Anthropology Newsletter*, November 1997. https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-09.htm.
- 7 Don B. Kates, Jr., "Abolition, Deportation, Integration: Attitudes Toward Slavery in the Early Republic." *The Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 1 (January 1968): 33–47.
- 8 Ibid., 34.
- 9 Petition from the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery to Vice President John Adams signed by Benjamin Franklin (front), February 3, 1790; Records of the US Senate, RG 46.
- 10 Kates, "Abolition," 40.
- 11 Ibid., 40.
- 12 Ibid., 191.
- 13 Ibid., 192.
- 14 Cooper, 204.
- 15 "Fenimore Cooper's Defense of Slave Owning America," 579.
- 16 Ibid., 578.

17 Ibid., 579.

18 Kates, 39.

19 “Fenimore Cooper’s Defense of Slave Owing America,” 579.

20 Therman B. O’Daniel, “Cooper’s Treatment of the Negro,” *Phylon* (1940-1956) 8, no. 2 (2nd Quarter, 1947): 166.

21 Ibid., 175.