Peter Cooper Biography

Peter Cooper

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Biography

Best remembered as a philanthropist, Peter Cooper was a prolific inventive genius and a highly successful manufacturer. Cooper was born in New York City, the son a Revolutionary army soldier who was active in numerous enterprises and involved young Peter in all of them. Although Cooper had only one year of formal education, his early experiences with his father prepared him for success in his varied business career. Apprenticed to a coachmaker at the age of 17, Cooper did so well that his employer paid him a salary and offered to back him in his own enterprise. Instead, Cooper went into the cloth-shearing business, in which he prospered. He then bought the rights to a glue-making process, improved it with his own invention, began operating a glue factory, and secured a virtual monopoly of the American glue business.

In 1828 Cooper moved into iron manufacturing, building the Canton Iron Works in Baltimore, Maryland, intending to supply the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The railroad was on the verge of failure, however, because of the twisting and hilly route its tracks followed. Most engineers at that time held that locomotives couldn't run on such terrain. Cooper promptly built America's first steam locomotive, which was small but powerful. In 1830 this "Tom Thumb" pulled 40 passengers at a speed of 10 miles per hour and proved that railroads could run on track that curved.

Cooper's business enterprises grew rapidly after this success. His iron business expanded into mines, foundries, wire manufactories, and rolling mills. In 1854 Cooper's Trenton factory produced the first iron structural beams for use in erecting fireproof buildings. Cooper became a principal backer and unwavering supporter of Cyrus Field's (1819-1892) project for laying the Atlantic telegraph cable. As president of the North American Telegraph Company, Cooper owned and controlled half of the telegraph lines in the United States. As an inventor, Cooper designed an early washing machine and various engines for powering watercraft.

As a member of the Board of Aldermen of New York, Cooper advocated free public schools, sanitary water supplies, and paid police and firefighting forces. In 1859 he founded Cooper Union in New York City, a college offering free courses in science, technical subjects, and art, and in 1876 Cooper was the presidential candidate of the Greenback party. Upon his death in New York City in 1883, Cooper was widely eulogized.