

11

FROM FATHERS TO FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE

Political Personae in the Early Republic

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TAKING THEIR CUE from the social order in Great Britain, most colonial Americans accepted that public authority should be exercised by men who belonged to the so-called better sort. The phrase referred to an elite who combined superior wealth with genteel manners, classical learning, and a reputation for integrity. Prior to their Revolution, Americans presumed that social, political, and cultural authority should be united in an order of gentlemen. Artisans and common farmers could vote and hold offices in their locality—offices such as surveyors of roads or viewers of fences, offices that bore little honor, no pay, but some manual labor. But it was unthinkable that any man without all the attributes of gentility should seek the more honorific and lucrative public offices at the county or provincial level. “Surely,” Robert Morris of Philadelphia insisted, “persons possessed of knowledge, judgment, information, integrity, and having extensive connections, are not to be classed with persons void of reputation or character.” Almost universal and unquestioning expectation, rather than formal law, underlay the unitary authority of the genteel in colonial America. For lack of an aristocratic establishment, deference in America depended almost exclusively on public acceptance. A man was a gentleman only if other people publicly conceded that he had crossed—by breeding, education, and acquisition—that critical line separating the genteel few from the common many.¹

Sheer wealth was necessary but not sufficient for gentility. The acquisition of wealth was the easiest and usually the first attainment of public stature. The man who achieved new wealth almost invariably lagged in his acquisition of other requisite attributes: polished manners, urbane tastes, literary and legal sophistication, and a reputation for rectitude. Indeed, social mobility was vaguely suspect as subversive of a recognized and respected social hierarchy. The self-made man was vulnerable to the

biting epithet of "mushroom gentleman"—one who had sprung up overnight from the dung. A man of new wealth needed the approval of those already accepted by themselves and others as possessing the attributes of gentility. Nothing was considered more foolish, more fit for satire, than the presumptuous upstart who assumed airs he could not master.²

The Revolution threatened the political cult of gentility by creating unprecedented opportunities for aspiring men—opportunities to compete for an expanded number of electoral offices, to supply armies, to engage in privateering, to speculate in public securities, or to exploit the rapidly inflating currency in order to pay back debts at a fraction of their original value. Established gentlemen felt threatened by presumptuous upstarts who pushed their way into Revolutionary committees and legislative assemblies. In 1776 James Otis of Massachusetts complained, "When the pot boils, the scum will rise." Anxious about their own positions and status, established gentlemen sought, as best they could, to renew the distance between themselves and the *nouveau riche* by reiterating the importance of gentility as a prerequisite for authority. Most of the new men, they sniffed, had acquired wealth but few of the other traditional attributes of social superiority. Insisting that every society had a natural aristocracy, leading Whigs hoped that independence from British control would allow the meritorious to rise gradually and gracefully to their proper honors. But this hope for a republican meritocracy meant no abolition of hierarchical ranks with a distinct and unitary elite at the pinnacle. Those who acquired new property in the republic were supposed to take further pains to polish themselves into cultured and cosmopolitan gentlemen and to await social acceptance by the genteel before they sought political authority.³

The Federalists who dominated national and northern state politics during the 1790s tended to be new men of the 1770s and 1780s who had accepted the traditional expectation that power should accrue only to those who proved their gentility to the satisfaction of the established families of old status. Conversely, their Republican challengers in the North were still newer men of the 1790s and early 1800s who rejected the colonial cult of gentility in favor of a continuing revolution in social and political status. This chapter explores the two competing political persuasions of the early republic by examining the careers of two pairs of opposites who struggled for power in similar confrontations set in two different regions. In Otsego County in upstate New York, Federalist judge William Cooper confronted Jedediah Peck; while in Hancock County in the District of Maine (then part of Massachusetts), General

Henry Knox was challenged by Dr. Ezekiel G. Dodge. All four men began in modest circumstances and accumulated property and power over time. But the different timing of their ascents placed the two latecomers, Peck and Dodge, in conflict with the two who had enjoyed a more meteoric rise, Cooper and Knox.

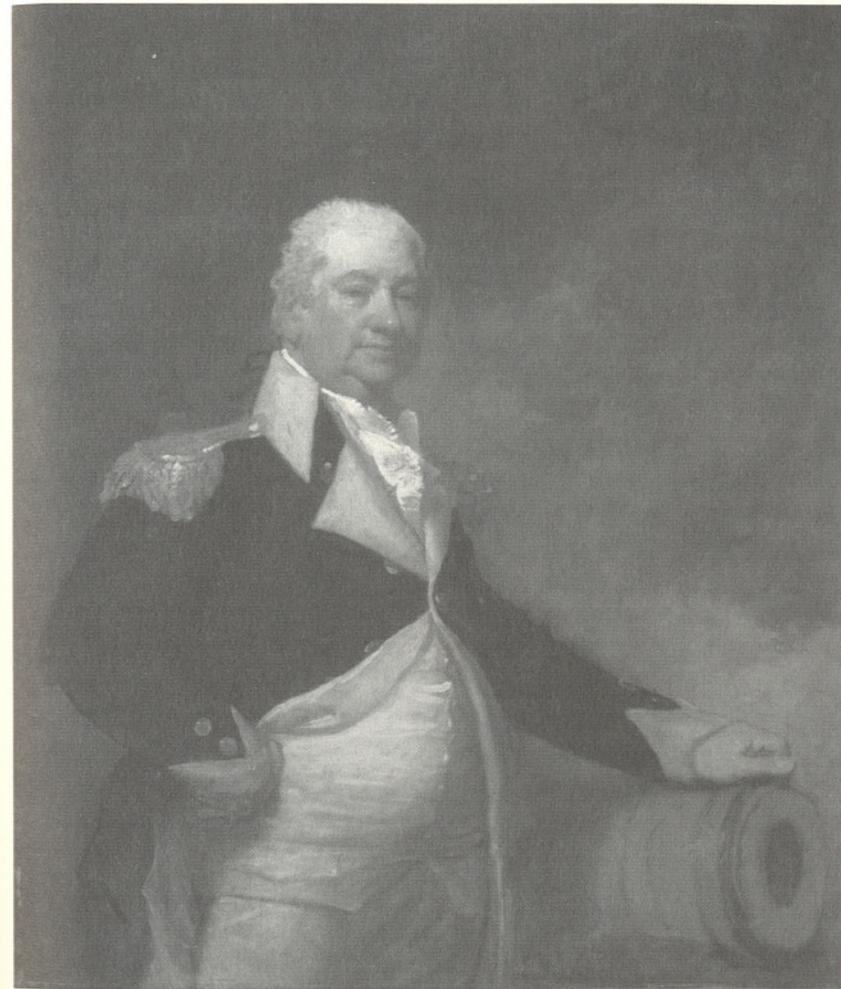
Coming into wealth and power during the years of war and of national consolidation, Cooper and Knox eagerly sought acceptance into the established elite. They did not believe that the Revolution would or should disrupt the unity of economic, social, cultural, and political authority in the same persons. They accepted the necessity of cultivating genteel ways to complete and, they hoped, perpetuate their new primacy. Having exploited the Revolutionary moment to clamber to the pinnacle of the social pyramid, the Federalist arrivistes wanted to preserve the social distinctions traditionally enjoyed by the colonial elite. They meant to consolidate the Revolution and stabilize America's social flux before it elevated over their heads newer, cruder men. To preserve their tenuous supremacy, Federalists strove mightily to weave tighter hierarchical networks of dependency binding lesser men, as clients, to their betters, as patrons. Federalists wanted to sustain a society where men could clearly identify their superiors, from whom patronage flowed, and their inferiors, from whom deference was due. To that end, Cooper and Knox and their fellow Federalists posed as "Fathers of the People"—well-meaning superiors ready to assist their lessers.⁴

Jedediah Peck and Dr. Ezekiel G. Dodge accumulated property and political ambitions at the moment when Cooper, Knox, and their compatriots were striving to consolidate their new power. Recognizing the threat posed to their further ascent by Federalist grandees, Peck and Dodge sensed the possibilities for themselves in promoting more explicitly democratic politics. To displace Cooper and Knox, Peck and Dodge needed to mobilize an expanded electorate among the white men of their communities. They looked to Thomas Jefferson as their national leader, called themselves Republicans, and invited the common people to reject the politics of paternalism. The Republicans of the northern states promoted a liberal vision of society where an impartial, minimal government would secure equal opportunity for all by refusing to countenance superior privileges for the elite. They promised voters that equal rights and equal opportunity would free the market to reward the industrious poor rather than perpetuate the idle rich, gradually eliminating all vestiges of hierarchy from American politics, society, and culture. Northern Republicans defended the ambitions of the common folk enhanced

by the recent Revolution. They dismissed the Federalists' denunciation of social mobility and anarchy as but a pretext for their efforts to subvert the republic and substitute the rule of an aristocracy. Thus Republican challengers spoke of themselves as "Friends of the People"—equals rather than superiors.⁵

THERE WERE striking similarities in the origins of Knox and Cooper. Both men began in modest circumstances. Henry Knox was born in 1750 in Boston, the son of a Scotch-Irish master mariner whose business failed in 1756 and who died six years later, when Henry was twelve. William Cooper was born in Byberry township, near Philadelphia, in 1754, the third son of a Quaker farmer. Both men were apprenticed in artisanal trades: Knox as a bookbinder and Cooper as a wheelwright. Neither man received more than the rudiments of a grammar school education. But as young men they were physically impressive: tall, strong, heavily built, but handsome. They were hearty, gregarious, generous, and clever men who made friends easily. A political foe once conceded, "Knox is the easiest man and has the most dignity of presence. . . . Knox stayed the longest, as indeed suited his aspect best, being more of a Bacchanalian figure" (fig. 4). James Fenimore Cooper recalled William Cooper as "my noble looking, warm hearted, witty father, with his deep laugh, sweet voice and fine rich eye, as he used to lighten the way, with his anecdote and fun" (fig. 5).⁶

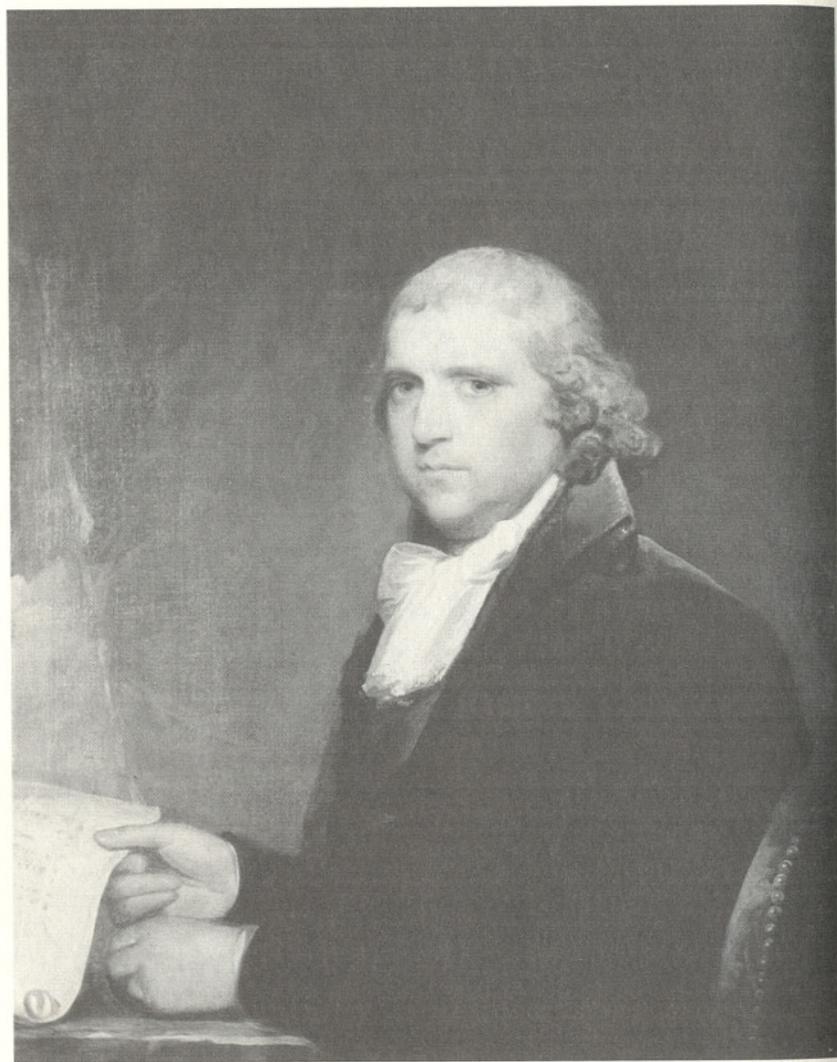
Knox and Cooper began their ascents with fortunate marriages to daughters of relatively wealthy and influential men. Each married at age twenty-one, unusually early for men in colonial America, especially for those with so little property. In June 1771 Knox married Lucy Flucker over the strong opposition of her shocked parents who belonged to Boston's social elite. Thomas Flucker was the provincial secretary for Massachusetts, and his wife Hannah was the daughter of Brigadier General Samuel Waldo, who had been the largest landholder in New England. In November 1774 Cooper eloped with and married Elizabeth Fenimore, the daughter of a wealthy Quaker landholder in Burlington County, New Jersey. It hardly reassured Richard Fenimore to hear his new son-in-law declare "that he was poor and she must shift for herself." In each case the new in-laws swallowed their pride and extended financial assistance that rescued Knox and Cooper from manual labor by elevating them into the ranks of shopkeeper-entrepreneurs. A month after his marriage, Knox opened a stationery and book shop in Boston. In 1776 Cooper had appeared on a Byberry tax list as a wheelwright without any taxable prop-



4. General Henry Knox, c. 1805, oil painting by Gilbert Stuart. (Deposited by the City of Boston. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

erty; by the mid-1780s he had acquired a store in Burlington City and a tavern and several farm lots in the adjoining township of Willingboro.⁷

During the war Knox enjoyed a more dramatic ascent by virtue of his enthusiastic participation in the Revolution. As the imperial crisis deepened, Knox was smitten with military ambition. He voraciously read books about military discipline and engineering and served as an officer in Boston's elite militia units drawn from the most respectable tradesmen and merchants. When the Revolutionary War began, Knox was one of the



5. William Cooper, 1798–98, oil painting by Gilbert Stuart. (Courtesy of the New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown)

new army's few officers with a sound technical knowledge of artillery and military engineering. He parlayed his knowledge and his ebullient personality into a lifelong friendship with George Washington and into a rapid promotion through the Continental ranks, rising to brigadier general within eighteen months and to major general by the war's end. Among the officer corps and war contractors he developed an extensive network of

useful friends who enjoyed powerful positions in the post-Revolutionary order. Appointed secretary of war of the United States in 1785, Knox held the post, at first under the Confederation government and later in Washington's administration, until 1794. He used his clout and army contracts to nurture his friends and garner extensive interests in an array of speculative land companies spread along almost the entire frontier arc from the Ohio territory through New York's St. Lawrence Valley to Maine. By contrast, until 1786 William Cooper remained an obscure storekeeper, tavern owner, and small-scale speculator because he had invoked his Quaker pacifism to stay out of the war.⁸

During the 1780s Cooper and Knox bid for membership in the ranks of America's wealthiest and most powerful men by acting with aggressive cunning to gain control of vast tracts of land on the frontier. They exploited the postwar opportunity to obtain thousands of acres at a critical moment when frontier land values were depressed but about to soar, when frontier land titles were tangled and uncertain but about to become more secure. Before the Revolution most of the then accessible tracts of wilderness on the frontier from Georgia to Maine belonged to wealthy and politically well-connected land speculators. The years of war and political turmoil ruined the plans and fortunes of many of those speculators who had gone deeply into debt to obtain their tracts or who remained loyal to the British government. The long years of brutal warfare with Indians and loyalists along the frontier drove out settlers and depressed land values. Most of the speculators who remained loyal to the empire had their land claims confiscated or at least paralyzed during the war years by the new state republics and their courts. Cooper and Knox recognized that frontier lands would inevitably soar in value as young families in the relatively crowded East took advantage of the return of peace to migrate north and west to seek new farms. Both men saw an opportunity to make their fortunes by employing their political connections to win legal control of certain contested frontier properties in advance of the inevitable tide of settlement. During the 1780s Cooper and Knox embarked on successful land grabs that came at the expense of older, more conservative interests who had been slow to protect and develop their claims. In the process they acted as new men rather than with the restraint expected of the ideal gentleman.⁹

The centerpiece of Knox's frontier empire was his controlling interest in the Waldo Patent, a tract of over a half-million acres located in Maine along the west bank of Penobscot Bay. On the eve of the Revolution, Lucy Knox's parents owned three-fifths of the Waldo Patent. Loyalists,

the Fluckers fled to England during the war. The commonwealth of Massachusetts confiscated their property, but Knox exercised his political influence to reserve one-fifth to his wife Lucy and, in 1784, to secure his own appointment as the state's agent to manage the confiscated two-fifths. As the agent, Knox was bound to satisfy the many claims by Flucker's creditors that threatened to eat up the entire value of the remaining property. In 1791 Knox used misleading advertising and intermediaries to manage the public auction of his in-laws' holdings in a manner that ultimately secured him possession at the bargain price of \$3,000, less than one-sixth of the price he would pay two years later to the other heirs of Brigadier Waldo for their two-fifths of the patent. One of the intermediaries reassured the anxious general that the sale had been "well conducted and . . . I believe not more than two in the room had the least idea that it was purchased for you and I assure you not one possible reflection or insinuation has been or can be made, as it respects you in this business." The creditors had to accept payment from the auction's paltry \$3,000 proceeds, less Knox's considerable expenses as agent. In the end the commonwealth netted nothing from its confiscation of Flucker's estate, because Knox's expenses and a small part of the creditors' claims exhausted the entire land sale proceeds.¹⁰

In a parallel set of political and legal maneuvers, William Cooper, in partnership with another Quaker merchant from Burlington, Andrew Craig, obtained a tract of 27,000 acres of fertile land beside Lake Otsego in central New York. The tract was part of a 100,000-acre domain that had been patented originally in 1769 by the province of New York to Colonel George Croghan, an Indian agent and trader. Deeply in debt and harried by multiple creditors, Croghan sold or mortgaged and remortgaged his Otsego lands in the years preceding the Revolution. He hoped to redeem the mortgages by retailing farm-sized lots to settlers, but wartime raids and counterraiders by Whigs and loyalists and Indian partisans destroyed the few small, new settlements at Otsego. Suspected of loyalism, Croghan had to lie low in Pennsylvania during the war while interest on his debts continued to mount. He died in 1782, leaving behind a tangled, encumbered estate. Despairing of ever collecting from Croghan's executors, one set of his creditors, a cartel of Quaker merchants from Burlington and Philadelphia, sold their title to his earliest Otsego mortgage to Cooper and Craig. They engaged the consummate lawyer in New York State, Alexander Hamilton, another new man elevated by the Revolution who cultivated favor among the families of old wealth and status. Without notifying Croghan's executors or the other

creditors, Hamilton revived a legal judgment issued in 1773 by the New York Supreme Court against Croghan. Hamilton secured a writ authorizing the county sheriff to hold a public auction of the Otsego lands in January 1786 to satisfy the unpaid debt held by Cooper and Craig. Learning of the impending auction, some of the other creditors engaged the legal services of Hamilton's archrival at the New York bar, Aaron Burr. He obtained a court order enjoining the sheriff from proceeding with the auction. But, swayed by either Cooper's threats or his promises, the sheriff ignored the injunction and the protests of Dr. John Morgan, one of the creditors who had hastened to the auction held at a crude tavern in a remote frontier hamlet. Cooper and Craig bought the tract for £2,700 (New York currency); in effect they accepted the land as part payment for the debt (£3,913.17.6) that they had purchased from the Burlington Company. By taking possession of the major asset in Croghan's estate, Cooper and Craig deprived the other creditors of the means to collect their debts.¹¹

IN ACQUIRING their wilderness empires, Henry Knox and William Cooper acted within the letter of the law but violated the niceties of genteel conduct. The genteel ideal imposed a paradox on the upwardly mobile. Wealth was a prerequisite for gentility, but in a competitive, commercial America, the acquisition of great property required an aggressive, secretive cunning that was at odds with the other attributes of gentility, especially a reputation for disinterested benevolence. Dr. John Morgan bitterly denounced Cooper and Craig as "men who place self-interest the first in the list of moral virtues, and [regard] justice to their neighbors, as an obsolete command." Morgan characterized his rivals as "men void of Principle & Veracity & full of low Cunning & Deceit." Joseph Wharton was another of Croghan's creditors ruined, in part, by Cooper's maneuvers. Wharton raged against "the man called Judge Cooper, as well from the remembrance of the sufferings of a virtuous family for many years by his subterfuges and contrivances—whereby we have sustained not only the loss of a great fortune, but met miseries of body and mind—in every shape unequalled and undeserved—and by which, he hath grown rich and great."¹²

Regarding themselves as established and virtuous gentlemen who deserved to preserve their primacy in the new republic, Morgan and Wharton invoked the ideals of gentility to denounce Cooper and to express bitter frustration at their deteriorating circumstances. The son and brother of wealthy Philadelphia merchants, Wharton became an accomplished

scholar of classical literature, a respected merchant, and a leading citizen. Born into a wealthy Philadelphia family and educated in medicine at the finest universities in Europe, Morgan had returned home to become a leading doctor and professor of medicine in the colonies as well as a moderate Whig active in the Revolutionary struggle. But while Cooper was on his way up the social ladder, Wharton and Morgan were on the way down. Ruined as a merchant by the change in trade routes wrought by the Revolutionary War, Wharton had to surrender his property to his creditors and withdraw into the semiseclusion of genteel poverty. Cashiered during the war from his post as physician-in-chief of the Continental army and defeated by Cooper and Craig in the scramble for the Otsego lands, Morgan became a poor and embittered recluse during the later 1780s. He blamed his declining fortunes on a weakening of deference by the common people toward the genteel. On October 15, 1789, his friend Benjamin Rush reported: "This afternoon I was called to visit Dr. Morgan, but found him dead in a small hovel, surrounded with books and papers, and on a light dirty bed. . . . What a change from his former rank and prospects in Life! The man who once filled half the world with his name, had now scarcely friends enough left to bury him."¹³

Wealth achieved, Knox and Cooper needed to prove themselves worthy of gentility: they needed to cloak their sudden and aggressive ascent by cultivating the marks of gentility and thus deflect the epithets of the Morgans, Whartons, Fluckers, and Waldos. Knox and Cooper reinvented themselves to prove to themselves and others that they were natural aristocrats innately deserving of the rewards they had seized. At a minimum, they had to present their wealth in a manner that betokened urbane refinement and grandeur. Both had to demonstrate that they could not only make money but consume it in a genteel fashion. To this end, Cooper and Knox erected great houses in the midst of their crude frontier settlements. Their mansions were conspicuous monuments to their elevated tastes as well as their superior wealth, statements of their builders' mastery over both their money and the landscape. It is especially significant that both men erected their mansions atop sites identified with the founders of the land claims Knox and Cooper had usurped. Knox's Montpelier arose on the hill in Thomaston where Brigadier Samuel Waldo had built his fort, his first mark of ownership in the Maine wilderness. In his new mansion Knox hung a full-length portrait of Waldo as both a trophy of conquest and a symbol of his claim to be the brigadier's proper heir. Similarly, William Cooper built Otsego Hall precisely where Colonel Croghan had established his compound in 1769. (Cooper named

the new village around his home Cooperstown.) Although barely literate, Cooper stocked the mansion with an impressive library that he had purchased out of the confiscated estate of Sir William Johnson, the prewar owner of a baronial estate in the nearby Mohawk Valley. By subsuming the old relics and displaying symbols of old wealth, the mansions insisted that the new claimants were the natural but superior successors to the previous owners.¹⁴

Determined to emulate the aristocratic hauteur of the great landlords of the Hudson Valley, William Cooper designed his mansion as a copy of the manor house in Albany belonging to Stephen Van Rensselaer, the wealthiest and most prestigious of New York's landed magnates. Otsego Hall was the largest and most elegant dwelling in New York's new postwar settlements north and west of the Hudson Valley. In 1803 the mansion shocked a visiting Quaker who admonished Cooper's "want of good Philosophy in Laying out Money to adorn thy House which I thought Looked more Like the Lofty Spaniard, attached to popish Immegary, than the wise and prudent American." But Cooper was willing to shock the piously plain in order to impress the secularly genteel.¹⁵

In 1793-94 Henry and Lucy Knox built their mansion on an even grander scale. Four stories tall, subdivided into nineteen rooms, containing twenty-four fireplaces, surrounded by a double piazza, and trailing two matching crescents of nine outbuildings, Montpelier was the largest and most ornate private building north of Philadelphia. Knox's closest friend, General Henry Jackson, was astonished at the extravagance and expense lavished on a structure situated amid the new clearings and small houses of a frontier settlement. "From the first to this moment have I *protested* and that in the most serious manner against the *magnitude* & expense of the house you propose building," Jackson wrote. "It will be much larger than a country meeting house and . . . , it will cost more money than you have an idea of or ought to be expended in that country." But Knox brushed aside Jackson's warning because the mansion bought the effect he sought. In 1796 a visiting clergyman observed, "The General's house with double piazzas round the whole of it &c exceeded all I had seen." A decade later Leverett Saltonstall, the scion of one of Massachusetts's preeminent families, visited Montpelier and remarked, "It seems to fancy the seat of a prince with an extensive establishment."¹⁶

In addition to displaying taste and magnificence, genteel wealth was supposed to demonstrate benevolence: gracious and obliging munificence to inferiors. Henry Knox was especially masterful at staging acts of seemingly disinterested generosity to evoke deference from his settlers.

To mark Montpelier's completion, on July 4, 1794, the Knoxes roasted a whole ox, erected temporary tables around the piazzas that sat one hundred at a time, and threw open their doors to a gaping throng of curious men, women, and children who, summoned by a public announcement, had gathered outside the grounds at dawn. "The house was so much larger than anything they had before seen, that everything was a subject of wonder," one of the Knoxes' daughters later recalled. Determined to ease settler resentments of his claims on them for land payments, Knox toured the Waldo Patent dispensing presents. In October 1794 Henry Jackson reported, "The people are now perfectly contented & happy in consequence of your late visit, and the operation of *Bibles, Rums, Spelling Books, Brandy, Primmers, Sugars and Tea*. The effect of these has worked your salvation with a little gallantry on the part of you . . . with some of their wives & daughters." Knox also employed dozens of local men in an array of businesses he established in Thomaston and the adjoining town of Warren: barrel works, saw- and gristmills, stores, wharves, shipping, limestone quarries and kilns, brickworks, fisheries, farms, and a canal. These expensive and unsuccessful ventures drove Knox deeply into debt, but he persisted, not only because he daily expected them to yield rich returns but also because they created extensive webs of patronage that made most of the people in the two towns, directly or indirectly, his clients.¹⁷

Although possessed of a keener awareness of the bottom line, William Cooper recognized the importance of cultivating a paternal image with his settlers. He took unusual pains to settle his lands quickly and compactly by offering especially good terms and by investing generously in community improvements. During the late 1780s, when Otsego's new settlers endured hardship and poverty, Cooper procured emergency food supplies from the state. He also organized maple sugar production so that they could produce an immediate cash crop to purchase desperately needed supplies. Once the settlers mastered the wilderness, began to reap surpluses from their lands, and started to meet their payments to Cooper, he subsidized refined institutions in Cooperstown village: a social library, an academy, and churches.¹⁸

By acts of benevolent superintendence, Cooper and Knox claimed to be "Fathers of the People" meriting deference from those they assisted. In 1801 Henry Knox insisted, "My relation to the settlers as a father and guardian and my reputation ought to be the security in the mind of every settler that my intention is to be their close friend and protector and they are to be assured that all my conduct shall conform to this idea and it will

be a duty they owe to themselves to suspect the man to be their enemy who shall make a contrary suggestion." For a time, Knox and Cooper enjoyed the political affirmation they longed for from their neighbors. Thomaston's citizens routinely elected Knox to represent them in the Massachusetts General Court. Running for Congress in 1794, Cooper won 84 percent of the votes cast in Otsego County. When he ran for reelection in 1796, he increased his hold on Otsego's voters to 91 percent. In 1796 Cooper's future rival Jedediah Peck lauded his landlord as "the poor man's benefactor and the widow's support—the Father of his County." Another political supporter effused that "under the guardianship of a MAN of happy genius, sent by Heaven to civilize this country," Otsego County had passed from "a dismal wilderness: a habitation for the wolf, the bear and the panther" to "a state of high cultivation—producing all the necessaries and many of the luxuries of life."¹⁹

A father of a rural county had to perform a delicate balancing act in mediating between his common neighbors and the political elite gathered at the state and national capitals. His standing depended upon a mix of local popularity, expressed at polling places, and social acceptance by the statewide brotherhood of gentlemen, manifested in the private circles of the elite. On the one hand, recognized standing among fellow gentlemen could endow a political intermediary with sufficient gravitas to overawe local challengers. It helped Henry Knox that he was known in the Waldo Patent as a Revolutionary War general and an intimate associate of President Washington and his cabinet. On the other hand, the intermediary who could command local popularity could win acceptance in genteel circles so long as he proved his virtue by proffering to them his political interest.

Henry Knox and William Cooper had to strike different balances in playing their roles as intermediaries. Knox had taken greater pains to educate himself, by reading the literature in his Boston bookstore and by emulating the mores and manners of gentility. He also had achieved a national reputation for public service and extensive political connections during the years of Revolution and war. Compared to Cooper, Knox could bank more on his external standing as a gentleman and concede less to the expectations of his common neighbors. Regarding public office as his due as Thomaston's preeminent gentleman, Knox refused to solicit openly votes from the common folk; he felt that hints properly placed by his managers ought to suffice with the Thomaston town meeting. Knox wanted the townspeople's honorific recognition that he was their political father to come reflexively, without overt solicitation.²⁰

Compared to Knox, William Cooper was an unpolished and uneducated rustic unable to spell consistently, write grammatically, cite classical authors, or assume the dignified reserve of a complete gentleman. In 1789 he apologized to a correspondent, "P. S. Thee will at all times be Pleasd to excuse bad Spelling as I was Never Larnt to write nor Cypher but have taking [them] up my Selfe." Unable and unwilling to display the social distance from commoners expected of the ideal gentleman, Cooper frequented the taverns of Cooperstown and occasionally doffed his coat to wrestle challengers in the main street. Despite his lackluster education and rough manners, William Cooper was welcomed into the homes, correspondence, and confidence of Albany's preeminent political gentlemen—Leonard Gansevoort, Philip Schuyler, Abraham Ten Broeck, and Stephen Van Rensselaer—partly because of his boisterous charm, intelligence, and good humor, but largely because they appreciated the Otsego votes he offered them. They were willing to overlook Cooper's lack of style—of "tone"—in gratitude that he forsook the alternative political path of Anti-Federal populism. In May 1792 Schuyler lauded Cooper's success in mobilizing Otsego's voters in support of John Jay, the Federalist candidate for governor of New York. "Report says that you was very civil to the young and handsome of the [other] Sex, that you flattered the Old & Ugly, and even Embraced the toothless & decrepit in order to obtain votes. When will you write a treatise in Electioneering? Whenever you do afford only a few copies to your friends." Schuyler could celebrate Cooper's possession of popular arts that he would have found frightening either in the opposition or in himself.²¹

Cooper knew that his standing with the gentility of New York depended on his ability to deliver the votes of his neighbors. Consequently, his popular persona of bonhomie could give way to angry, uncomprehending resentment of those who declined to return deference and gratitude. In the election of 1792, William Cooper pressed a ballot bearing Jay's name into the hands of a young settler named James Moore. The young man later testified:

I opened it, and looked at the name that was in it and made answer in a laughing manner, "Judge Cooper, I can not vote so, for if I do vote for Governor, I would wish to vote clearly from my own inclination, as I did not mean to be dictated to by any person at that time." Judge Cooper appeared in a joking manner, and in good humour until that time. He then took the ballot out of my hand; which he had given to me, and appeared to be in a passion. Judge Cooper then said to me, "What, then young man, you will not vote as I would have you. You are a fool, young man, for you cannot

know how to vote as well as I can direct you, for I am a man in public office." He then walked away, and seemed to be in a passion.

A more aloof gentleman would have been insulated from such a frustrating encounter with an unusually independent voter. Philip Schuyler and Henry Knox could count on their friends to press ballots into the hands of common folk.²²

Variations on a common theme, Knox and Cooper typified the early republic's several great landlords who recognized their affinities by uniting in Federalist politics. Others of this stripe were Benjamin Lincoln and Robert Hallowell Gardiner in Maine; George Cabot, Christopher Gore, and Israel Thorndike of Massachusetts; Matthew Clarkson, Thomas Morris, David Ogden, David Parish, Oliver Phelps, Robert Troup, and James Wadsworth in New York; and George Clymer, Samuel Meredith, William Bingham, Robert Morris, and John Nicholson in Pennsylvania. They were beneficiaries of the Revolution, prosperous men who had vastly increased their political and economic fortunes by aggressive speculations in public securities, government contracts, and frontier lands. But they dreaded displacement by still newer men who were ready to take a shortcut to political authority by eschewing the efforts necessary to win approving nods from those already comfortable in the ways of gentility.²³

Identifying themselves with social order, the Federalist elite characterized their challengers as unscrupulous and ambitious demagogues whose triumph would substitute anarchy for society. In 1799 Cooper intercepted handbills that charged the Federalists with plotting to destroy the republic and establish a monarchy. He worried that "the offenders will escape unpunished—and dissatisfaction grow among the people until it is too late for the civil system." In 1800 Knox luridly warned that unless the state government sent troops to disperse his militant back-country settlers, "a collection will soon be made of the most audacious and bloodthirsty villains that ever disgraced the surface of New England." Federalists eloquently preached the importance of a hierarchical and stable society, guided by precedent: the sort of society that America had begun to approximate before the Revolution, the sort of society that would have obstructed the rise of William Cooper and Henry Knox.²⁴

COOPER AND KNOX each found his Republican nemesis in a formerly trusted lieutenant: Jedediah Peck and Dr. Ezekiel Dodge. Peck and Dodge were aggressive, ambitious men who initially enjoyed the patronage of the dominant Federalist in their respective counties. But Peck and

Dodge began to feel confined by the limits of the patronage that Cooper and Knox believed was appropriate. To maintain the full value of their new status, the Federalist gentlemen were obliged to be sparing of the patronage they extended to men they could not accept as peers. By constraining the ambitions of Peck and Dodge, Cooper and Knox gave one more proof to themselves and onlookers that they were discriminating gentlemen. Peck and Dodge, however, came to recognize that further advance to community preeminence required undercutting their mentors.

Peck and Dodge emigrated to the frontier in search of better opportunities to obtain property and higher status than their crowded hometowns in southern New England could provide. Jedediah Peck began life inauspiciously in 1748 in Lyme, Connecticut; he was one of thirteen children born to an obscure farmer. After at least one voyage as a sailor and three years' service in the Continental army as an enlisted man, Peck emigrated westward to settle in Burlington, one of William Cooper's settlements in Otsego County. A frontier jack-of-all trades, Peck was at once a farmer, surveyor, millwright, and sometime Baptist preacher. A political associate remembered:

Judge Peck, although a clear-headed, sensible man, was an uneducated emigrant from Connecticut. His appearance was diminutive and almost disgusting. In religion he was fanatical, but in his political views, he was sincere, persevering and bold; and although meek and humble in his demeanor, he was by no means destitute of personal ambition. . . . He would survey your farm in the day time, exhort and pray in your family at night, and talk on politics the rest part of the time. Perhaps on Sunday, or some evening in the week, he would preach a sermon in your school house.

Although poorly educated beyond a memorization of much of the Bible, Peck possessed a persistent, shrewd intelligence that made him very popular among his fellow farmers.²⁵

Ezekiel Dodge shared Peck's ambition but not his piety. Born in 1765 in Abington, Massachusetts, Dodge was the prodigal son of a Congregational minister. According to tradition, Dodge was an exceptionally unruly boy who delighted in tormenting his elders. Once Dodge removed a minister's pocket handkerchief from his black Sunday coat, wrapped the handkerchief around a deck of playing cards, and restored it to the coat pocket. That Sunday, when the minister reached for his handkerchief in midsermon to wipe his beaded brow, he scattered the cards about his pulpit, to his congregation's horror. At age fifteen Dodge went off to an academy in Charlton, Massachusetts, conducted by Stephen Burroughs, who within a few years would become the most notorious confidence

man and counterfeiter in New England. One day Burroughs found his school in an uproar because Dodge "had gone into the upper loft of the house, and had most scandalously insulted some young women, who were at the back side of the schoolhouse." Apparently impressed, Burroughs declined to punish the young man. Dodge proceeded to attend college at Harvard. To no one's surprise, the college soon expelled him. After serving an apprenticeship with a doctor, Dodge migrated in 1789 to the frontier town of Thomaston in search of his fortune. By developing the valley's leading medical practice and by investing in mercantile voyages, local land speculations, and loans to cash-strapped farmers, Dodge became one of the town's most prosperous and influential men. Unusually cunning and confrontational, Dodge frequently appeared in court to face charges of usury, assault and battery, and failure to pay his debts. Once Dodge offered to decide a disputed debt by a game of cards, but when he lost he refused to pay on the grounds that a gambling debt is not recoverable by law (a jury decided against him).²⁶

Initially, Peck and Dodge got ahead with the assistance of the great men in their counties. When the New York state legislature established Otsego County in February 1791, William Cooper had Jedediah Peck named one of his associate judges in the county court of common pleas. At first Peck was a loyal subordinate who testified for Cooper in 1793 when a hostile state assembly investigated his electioneering practices and who promoted Cooper's candidacy for Congress in 1794.²⁷

Dodge's services and rewards were more covert than those exchanged between Peck and Cooper. Knox liked to boast that he never brought lawsuits against his settlers: men accepted his terms for land simply because they recognized how just and reasonable they were. In August 1800 he assured the governor of Massachusetts, "I have in no instance attempted to turn off a settler nor have I yet brought a suit against an individual, deeming it most preferable to give the usurpers full time to inform themselves of the conduct that would best secure their true and permanent interests." In reality, Knox confronted many settlers who declined to play their appointed roles as grateful clients. To harry selected squatters from the land without sully his paternal identity, Knox enlisted the services of Dr. Dodge to serve as an unscrupulous alter ego. Knox preserved his genteel image by subcontracting to Dodge the overt, aggressive acts inappropriate to a true gentleman. At bargain prices, Knox sold Dodge title to lots possessed by particularly recalcitrant settlers who refused to purchase Knox's title. Dodge then applied his considerable talents at intimidation to oust the occupants; he hired men

to topple fences, seize cabins, and forcibly mow the targeted settlers' hayfields; he engaged lawyers to conduct protracted litigation that exhausted the targets' finances. It was a nasty and violent business. In July 1792 one exasperated settler shot Dodge in "the fleshy portion of his posteriors." The doctor recovered, and eventually the lands fell into his possession. This arrangement allowed Knox to highlight the disasters befalling those who failed to buy his title, and it enabled Dodge to acquire valuable land at reduced rates. Sharp-witted and ambitious, Dodge did not let any paternalistic notions complicate his relentless pursuit of individual advantage. He behaved as Knox could have behaved at an earlier stage in his ascent.²⁸

Peck and Dodge became restive with their status as clients, as inferiors. They meant to become political insiders by encouraging popular resentment of the existing elite. Cyrus Eaton of Thomaston, who knew both Dodge and Knox, later explained that because the doctor was "naturally predisposed toward the Jeffersonian or Democratic party, as embodying greater latitude in thinking and action, [he] could not but chafe under the overshadowing prestige and influence of Knox. He accordingly did not scruple to foster the suspicions and charges of unfairness which he found existing in certain quarters, in regard to the manner in which the Waldo property had come into the gentleman's hands." Displacing settler resentments onto Knox, Dodge used the Jeffersonian party "as a stepping stone" to become "the acknowledged leader in the town."²⁹

In 1796 Peck began to pursue his ambitions beyond William Cooper's wishes. That spring Peck boldly sought one of Otsego's two seats in the state senate without first consulting his benefactor. Although Peck ran as a Federalist, he curried Republican support and launched populist attacks on his opponents as haughty elitists who acted "as though they had all the people at their command." He preached, "In Representative Governments the people are masters [and] all their officers, from the highest to the lowest, are servants to the people." His principal opponent, Jacob Morris, was a wealthy frontier landlord and the son of one of New York's leading colonial families. He contemptuously dismissed Peck as an "ambitious, mean, and groveling demagogue." Although Peck lost the election, and the two candidates preferred by Cooper prevailed (including Morris), the bitterly contentious campaign offended Cooper who cherished harmony in his county. In 1798 Peck lowered his sights and won a seat in the lower house of the New York state legislature. He proceeded to infuriate the Federalists by breaking party ranks to vote with the Republicans on key issues. Federalist leaders concluded that

Peck was further proof that common men should not be entrusted with high office. In January 1799 a Federalist writer in the Cooperstown newspaper, the *Otsego Herald*, attacked Peck and insisted, "No minds are more susceptible of envy than those whose birth, education & merit are beneath the dignity of their station."³⁰

In 1799 Cooper moved to reassert his control over his county's politics. At this critical moment he reiterated his allegiance to gentility by defining the populism promoted by Peck as sedition. Cooper desperately needed to restore his authority over his people or lose the basis for his claim to be a natural aristocrat worthy of admission to the Federalist inner circle. He knew that the Federalists in Albany expected him to act. For example, Daniel Hale wrote to Cooper about Peck, "This man appears to me and to many who know him, to be a strange, inconsistent, turbulent and I believe unprincipled Character. . . . I agree with you that it would be best for himself and for Society in general that he was reinstated in his original obscurity. This I believe will be *completely* the case before long and I am happy to find that you are disposed to further the business." In March, with Cooper's vigorous assent, Governor Jay and the Council of Appointment removed Peck from his position as a county judge. A month later, in the midst of Peck's campaign for reelection to the assembly, Cooper published a newspaper notice warning, "Every man who circulates two seditious printed Papers, disseminated by Jedediah Peck, through this County, is liable to two years imprisonment, and a fine of two thousand dollars, at the discretion of the Court." Yet Peck won reelection, and his supporters continued to circulate provocative handbills charging that the Federalists meant to destroy the republic and establish an aristocracy in the land. Cooper announced his determination "to silence those wretches. Mercy is a cardinal Virtue, but the Public tranquility is a Consideration not to be neglected." In September 1799 Cooper had Peck arrested for sedition and hauled in irons to New York City for trial.³¹

Cooper's desperate act proved disastrous for New York's Federalists because the public regarded Peck as a political martyr. The federal district attorney released Peck on bail and never dared to bring him to trial. In Otsego, Cooper's popularity collapsed as a result of his arbitrary arrest of Peck. At the end of October, beleaguered and perplexed, Cooper announced that he would not stand for reelection to Congress and would resign his post as first judge of Otsego County. He regarded his retirement as his ultimate act of paternalism, as he sadly explained to Governor Jay: "The Great Violence of Party amongst us, makes it neces-

sary to strive for a Cure and my withdrawing from all offices will not only make way for Others but also in some degree show that to give way and to forgive is the Onely Balsom that can heal animosities of the kind Existing among us and it will Come from no Person in the first instance better than from William Cooper, who had rather the child should be Nursed by a stranger, than that it should be hewn in pieces." Cooper hoped that the Otsego voters would rally around other, less controversial Federalists. But his retirement did not stem the steady erosion of Federalism in his county. In the spring election of 1800, a Republican slate led by Jedediah Peck won control of Otsego's delegation to the assembly. Otsego's transformation was critical to a statewide Republican triumph that had national consequences: by winning control of the assembly that would choose the state's presidential electors in the fall, the New York Republicans provided the critical margin of victory for Thomas Jefferson over the Federalist incumbent, John Adams. Thereafter, Peck dominated the Republican party in Otsego County until his death in 1821, and the county consistently voted for Republican candidates for state and national offices, except for brief interludes during the Embargo and the War of 1812.³²

In one county after another, Republican upstarts emerged to topple the local gentry from political power. One of those upstarts was Ezekiel G. Dodge. By 1804 he saw an opportunity for himself in the emerging public longing to defy Federalist elitism. Dodge declared himself a Republican and invited his neighbors to assert their equal access to respect by symbolically smiting their preeminent gentleman. The recently shrunken employment at Knox's financially battered business enterprises helped the doctor's efforts to promote the candidacy of Isaac Bernard to replace Knox as the town's representative to the General Court. At the same time Dodge covertly persuaded another Federalist, Joshua Adams, that he ought to run, thereby splitting the potential Federalist vote. Regarding his probable defeat as an unendurable humiliation, Knox withdrew his name, and Adams prevailed. A year later the town elected the Republican Bernard as their representative. On March 28, 1805, Henry Jackson Knox broke the news to his father, "The Jacobins of this town turn out so strong & the Federalists are so lukewarm that at March meeting all the Federal officers were turned out, and such men put in (as dismal to relate) who cannot neither read nor write intelligibly." Thomaston became a Republican stronghold, and Dodge eventually supplanted Bernard as the town's representative to the General Court.³³

Persistent but a proper Federalist gentleman to the end, Knox sent a rather plaintive note from Boston to his business manager in Thomaston on the eve of the April 1806 town meeting. "I suppose the representative will be a democrat. . . . But if it should be otherwise and the town should think proper to choose me, I should not decline, but good previous arrangements ought to be made. Of this hint you will make a discreet use." Not thinking Knox's candidacy proper, the townspeople reelected Bernard. In the summer of 1806, Charles Willing Hare, a fellow Federalist, visited Knox and reported "that his political and private influence was gone and therefore that there was no use in being longer connected with him." Where Cooper fell because he defended elite rule too aggressively, Knox fell because he remained too aloof, banking on a deference that no longer existed among the people of Thomaston.³⁴

By making themselves over into elitists during the 1780s and 1790s, Knox and Cooper underestimated the legacy of the American Revolution. Indeed, they set themselves up for their falls by attempting, during the 1790s, to bring the Revolution to a premature end. It is possible to imagine the ill-educated, rough-hewn William Cooper (if not the more polished Henry Knox) taking the alternative path, allying with Jedediah Peck in celebration of social mobility and public equality, the professed values of a new liberal social order. Instead, Cooper and Knox succumbed to a mirage that prevailed at the moment (the late 1780s and early 1790s) when they achieved wealth and power: the Federalist illusion that gentlemen could restore the colonial era's unity of economic, social, political, and cultural authority. They failed to recognize the enduring potential of the American Revolution's legacy to legitimate upstarts unwilling or unable to achieve or to endure genteel authority. Until the political reorientation wrought by the Civil War and Reconstruction, America's public life belonged to the Dodges and the Pecks. The fundamental change in the politics of the early republic was in the manner of public presentation. Men no longer earned authority by parading their personae of genteel superiority. Instead, leaders had to enact publicly their friendship for the people.³⁵

For notice of previous publication, see chapter 2, notes, and chapter 11, notes.

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