“Back Country” Politics and Culture:
A Letter from Thomas Cooper to Joseph Clay

In 1803 the village of Northumberland on the shores of the upper Susquehanna River was the unlikely home of the renowned chemist and founder of Unitarianism, Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). Northumberland had another remarkable, though less well known, inhabitant, the reformer, philosopher, lawyer, newspaper publisher, and later, teacher, scientist, judge, and college administrator Thomas Cooper (1759-1839). Like Priestley, Cooper had come to Pennsylvania in 1794, hoping to establish a community of English immigrants to be located on the Loyalsock Creek. When plans for the community failed, however, Cooper and Priestley settled in nearby Northumberland, where, over the course of the next decade, the two men became close friends, sharing political and intellectual interests. Cooper even resided at various times in the Priestley household, according to biographer Dumas Malone.¹

Cooper’s interests were as wide-ranging as Priestley’s, but his political and religious views frequently stirred controversy and sometimes made his life difficult. His association with members of the Jacobin Club in Paris in 1792, for example, earned him the rebuke of Edmund Burke in the British House of Commons. His published criticism of President John Adams in 1799 led to his conviction under the Sedition Act and a six-month prison sentence. His political opinions and his behavior on the bench, which some found questionable, led to his removal from the Pennsylvania judiciary in 1811. His suspected atheism prevented him from becoming a professor at the

University of Virginia in 1819 and later almost resulted in his dismissal from the presidency of South Carolina College.\(^2\)

There is little of a controversial nature in the following letter, but it is remarkable nevertheless because it reflects not only the breadth of Cooper's intellectual concerns but also his connections with important Pennsylvanians and national leaders in the early years of the republic. Although he professed himself to be removed from the "center of Information," Cooper remained well-informed, even in the "back Country." In fact, despite his residence in the remote interior of Pennsylvania, Cooper was as much a part of the culture of urban sociability as he was a citizen of rural Northumberland, and this letter demonstrates the affability and wit that characterized polite social discourse in Britain and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Cooper's letter gives us not only a glimpse of the style of this discourse and the kinds of topics that comprised polite conversation but also information about the medium of intellectual exchange. David S. Shields argues that the practice of circulating literary manuscripts in the belles lettres tradition in the context of salons and social clubs waned with the emergence of public print media like the *Spectator* in London and the *New England Courant* in Boston. He asserts that this private manuscript culture disappeared in America after the Revolution.\(^3\) But Cooper's letter is evidence that this type of discourse survived in the networks of conversation and correspondence of men like Cooper and Priestley and that it continued to involve the exchange of essays and other literary manuscripts.

Dated December 10, 1803, at Northumberland, this letter is clearly part of a larger communication between Cooper and Joseph Clay (1769-1811), then a member of Congress from Philadelphia, but no other correspondence between the two has been located. Cooper and Clay's friendship quite likely resulted from their political associations. Both were Jeffersonian Republicans, and both had ties to the Republican newspaper, the *Aurora*, founded in Philadelphia in 1794 by Benjamin Franklin Bache (1769-98). It was Clay and Tench Coxe (1755-1824), a former commissioner of revenue in the Adams administration and recent convert to the Republican cause, who tried


to find a purchaser to continue publication of the paper after Bache’s death on September 10, 1798. Cooper was associated with the paper both as a writer and as an attorney. Cooper’s address to residents of Northumberland County on behalf of Thomas McKean’s (1734-1817) candidacy for governor of Pennsylvania was printed in the *Aurora* on September 11, 1799, and he served, from time to time, as legal counsel to William Duane (1760-1835), who succeeded Bache as editor of the *Aurora.*

Cooper’s letter to Clay begins with some personal observations about his recent illness and some witty remarks about the connection between body weight and habits of personality but turns quickly to Pennsylvania politics. He recommends to Clay the newly elected United States senator from Pennsylvania, Samuel Maclay (1741-1811). Prior to his election to Congress, Maclay had been speaker of the Pennsylvania Senate, in which post he had supported Cooper’s bid to become chief clerk of that assembly in 1801. Maclay was one of only two senators to vote for Cooper’s appointment. In this letter, Maclay is portrayed as a rustic, and Cooper assigns Clay the task of initiating him into decorous society by teaching him to drink wine.

Cooper’s mention of Maclay’s “arbitration bill” refers to judicial reform legislation that Maclay had introduced as a member of the Pennsylvania Senate and which provided for small civil claims to be adjudicated by a panel of arbiters presided over by a justice of the peace. Each time various forms of the bill were introduced, between December 1802 and the end of 1803, it was vetoed by Governor McKean. A final version of the bill was enacted on February 29, 1804, by which time Maclay was in Washington, and the legislation became law without the governor’s signature. Cooper wrote an article published in the Northumberland *Argus* on November 18, 1803, under the title “The Adjustment Bill,” stating his objections to the legislation. Despite his doubts about it, Cooper, as he says in the letter, believed the popularity of the bill would help propel Maclay into the governor’s office, an expectation which, of course, was never realized.

Governor McKean, Cooper feared, would be enticed to oppose the Republicans’ candidate for vice president in the following national elections,

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even though McKean himself was a Republican. Cooper’s reference to the
“ignorance and perversity of our state legislators” — who are clearly beyond
the pale of polite society in Cooper’s estimation — probably refers to the fact
that McKean and his fellow Republicans clashed over proposed reforms to
the state constitution. But Cooper’s fears about McKean going over to the
Federalists were unfounded; McKean did not become a candidate in the
national elections of 1804.

Cooper’s support of McKean when he was a candidate for governor in
1799 was undoubtedly a factor in McKean’s appointment of Cooper to a seat
on the Luzerne Commission, the position he occupied at the time of this
letter. The commission was created in response to the tangled state of affairs
in the Wyoming Valley, which had been claimed in colonial times by both
Connecticut and Pennsylvania. The result was that settlers from both states
and their heirs claimed legal title to land in the region. The Decree of
Trenton in 1782 had affirmed Pennsylvania’s sovereignty, but it did not
settle the question of conflicting claims by private individuals. After several
years of indecision, the Pennsylvania legislature in 1799 recognized titles
held by Connecticut settlers before the Decree of Trenton and established
the Luzerne Commission to compensate Pennsylvania claimants.

Harry Marlin Tinkcom notes that the governor had another incentive for
appointing Cooper to public office. Cooper’s friend, President Thomas Jeff-
erson, wrote to McKean on January 9, 1800, asking McKean to “take care
of” Cooper. Paul Leicester Ford includes in his Writings of Thomas Jeff-
erson a letter to Cooper in which Jefferson affirms his desire to see that Cooper
receives a government appointment. “The opinion I have ever entertained,
& still entertain as strongly as ever, of your abilities & integrity,” Jefferson
wrote, “was such as made it my wish, from the moment I came to the
administration, that you should be employed in some public way.” Jefferson
goes on to say that he considered state office to be most suitable, since it
would allow Cooper to remain in Pennsylvania where he could continue his

7 Malone, Thomas Cooper, 175-78; Sylvester K. Stevens, Pennsylvania: Birthplace of a Nation (New York,
1967), 169.
8 Malone, Thomas Cooper, 152-54.
Stimulus and Local Response (Harrisburg, 1950), 268.
close contact with Priestley. Although a judgeship was mentioned at that time, Cooper received the Luzerne Commission appointment in March 1801. Cooper finally received a judicial appointment in 1804 when McKean named him president judge of the Third Judicial District, comprising Berks, Northampton, Luzerne, and Northumberland counties.

Although Cooper's brief mention of Jefferson in his letter to Clay gives no hint of the extent of their relationship, the two, as is evident from what has already been said, knew each other well. Cooper met Jefferson during his first trip to America in 1793, and Jefferson mentions, in a letter to Tench Coxe dated May 1, 1794, his regret that Priestley and Cooper had not settled in Virginia instead of Pennsylvania. It was not until 1800, however, that the Jefferson-Cooper friendship blossomed, according to Malone. Indeed, that was the year when their correspondence seems to have begun, a correspondence that lasted until Jefferson's death in 1826. Jefferson apparently read Cooper's published writings, and Cooper was a guest at Monticello on at least one occasion. In 1817 Jefferson supported Cooper's appointment as professor of chemistry, mineralogy, and natural philosophy.

10 Paul Leicester Ford, ed., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (10 vols., New York, 1892-99), 9:103-104. Although Ford dates this letter Sept. 1, 1807, it was likely written much earlier, since the subjects mentioned seem to date from early in Jefferson's presidency and since Jefferson closes the letter by asking Cooper to "communicate [his] respects to Mr. Priestley," who, if Jefferson means the elder Joseph Priestley, died in 1804. This letter is of additional interest because Jefferson mentions his apparent estrangement from a Congressman Clay, presumably the recipient of Cooper's letter. Jefferson was at a loss to explain Clay's inhospitable behavior.

11 Malone, Thomas Cooper, 174.

12 Ibid., 77; Ford, Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 6:508.

13 Malone, Thomas Cooper, 111.


15 See, for example, Jefferson's letter of March 25, 1800, to James Madison in which he comments on Cooper's On the Propriety and Expediency of Unlimited Inquiry, in David B. Mattern et al., eds., The Papers of James Madison (Charlottesville, 1991), 17:373-74, and his letter to Philip Norborne Nicholas of April 7, 1800, in which he mentions Cooper's "Political Arithmetic," in Ford, Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 7:439-40. See also J. C. A. Stagg et al., eds., The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series (Charlottesville, 1992), 2:388-89; Constance E. Thurlow et al., eds., The Jefferson Papers of the University of Virginia, with supplement (Charlottesville, 1973), 184; and Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear, Jr., eds., The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson (Columbia, Mo., 1966), 187, 423-24, 433-38.
and professor of law at Central College, the forerunner of the University of Virginia, but, as previously mentioned, opposition to Cooper's religious views delayed the effective date for taking up his duties in Charlottesville until 1819, when Cooper finally abandoned hope of teaching there and accepted a similar position at South Carolina College.¹⁶

After briefly mentioning European affairs, by way of a recent print depicting John Bull squaring off against Napoleon, Cooper introduces his "literary" topic, Benjamin Franklin's "Imitation of Genesis," or, as it is sometimes called, his "Parable against Persecution." Franklin, it seems, delighted in pretending to read from Genesis a story about Abraham, written in the style of the Authorized Version of the Bible. In the April 14-17, 1764, issue of the *London Chronicle*, London printer and publisher William Strahan (1715-85) reported having been present at a gathering that included a certain "friend from North America," obviously referring to Franklin. When the subject of persecution came up, the North American, says Strahan, advanced numerous arguments designed to convince his audience that persecution is reprehensible. Franklin capped his rhetorical performance by asking for a Bible. Turning to the book of Genesis, he "read" the story of Abraham and the stranger. Strahan was much impressed with it, though he could not help wondering how this story had hitherto escaped his notice. The next morning, Strahan searched Genesis diligently and finally concluded that he and the other guests had been tricked.¹⁷ Several years before the incident that Strahan relates, the Scottish judge and scholar, Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696-1782) heard Franklin recite the same story. He, too, was impressed with the tale and published it, without Franklin's authorization and without attribution, in his *Art of Thinking* (1761). Lord Kames's version is slightly different from the one Strahan published.¹⁸

Cooper asserts in his letter that Priestley had located the source of Franklin's story. Priestley, however, was not the first to notice that the story did not originate with Franklin. In a 1781 letter to *Gentleman's Magazine*,

¹⁷ William Strahan, "Postscript: To the Editor of the London Chronicle," *The London Chronicle; or, Universal Evening Post*, April 14-17, 1764, 368.
“H. S.” noted, as Priestley did later, the similarity of Franklin’s story to that related in Jeremy Taylor’s *Liberty of Prophecying*. In 1788 a contributor to the *Repository* remarked upon the likeness of Franklin’s tale to the one in a Latin translation of *Shevet Yehudah*, the work mentioned by Cooper and presumably the same book in which Taylor acknowledges finding the Abraham story. *Shevet Yehudah* is a work by the Spanish-Jewish historian Solomon Ibn Verga (1460-1554) that was translated into Latin in 1680. The passage that Cooper quotes is part of the dedicatory letter to the rulers of Hamburg written by the translator, George Gentius (1618-87), a German scholar of Middle Eastern languages and literature and official translator for the government of Hamburg. Gentius’s account of the story is not the original, as is evident from the passage quoted in Cooper’s letter, for Gentius himself attributes the story to Sa’dī, a thirteenth-century Persian poet. The story of Abraham is found in Sa’dī’s *Būstān*.

Franklin, for his part, dismissed accusations of plagiarism by asserting that he himself had neither published the bogus chapter of Genesis nor claimed it as his own. He further complained that his story’s unauthorized publication denied him the “amusement, which I used to take in reading it by heart out of my Bible, and obtaining the remarks of the Scripturians upon it, which were sometimes very diverting.”

Cooper’s letter is evidence, however, that the plagiarism question remained a subject of private conversation, despite the largely laudatory nature of public pronouncements on Franklin’s character in the decade following his

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21 During 1803 and up until his death in February 1804, Priestley was working on several publications, the research for which may have led him to *Shevet Yehudah*, including his *Socrates and Jesus Compared* (1803), *Notes on the Books of Scripture* (1803–4), and *A General History of the Christian Church* (1804). See *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley*, 163–68.


Cooper and Clay had almost certainly discussed the matter previously, and the traveler John Davis also reports that the same topic was the subject of a private conversation he overheard in a Washington tavern in 1801. An indignant New Engander defended Franklin against a Virginian’s accusation of plagiarism. A wager was made, and, with the help of Taylor’s book, the Virginian succeeded in proving that the “Parable against Persecution” was not originally Franklin’s. The Virginian went on to win two more bets, each time proving to the New Engander’s satisfaction that writings attributed to Franklin were in fact appropriated from an earlier source.

The manuscript of Cooper’s letter, in the hand of its author, is in the Special Collections of the Pennsylvania State University Libraries and was acquired by the university from a Massachusetts bookseller on November 15, 1968. It consists of a double quarto sheet folded according to common practice, sealed, and addressed to “Jos. Clay Esq’ MC / City / Washington.” There is no sign of a postmark, and the word “Free” is written in the upper right corner. I have retained Cooper’s spelling, punctuation, and abbreviations, except as otherwise noted. Obvious errors in copying and spelling are corrected in the text and shown in a note. I have not retained the long s, nor have I shown Cooper’s cancellations, all of which appear to be false starts. Missing letters are supplied within square brackets. Only those diacritical marks in the Latin passage indicated by Cooper himself are shown.

The Letter

Northumberland Dec’ 10 1803
Citizen,

I have been nearly bled to death this Summer for an Inflammation of the Brain. So much for being hot headed. I recovered, but I ate and drank so hard to make up for lost time that I now weigh 10 or 20 # more than before. I do not like this: I feel more lazy than heretofore, & I should almost lay it down as a rule that Obesity of body produces obesity of intellect, if I did not

24 See Melvin H. Buxbaum, Benjamin Franklin, 1721-1906: A Reference Guide (Boston, 1983). It is interesting to note that Priestley had written a spirited defense of Franklin in 1803 against the charge that he had incited his fellow Americans to revolution even as he was negotiating with the British government. See Joseph Priestley, “To the Editor of the Monthly Magazine,” Monthly Magazine 15 (Feb. 1, 1803), [1]-2.

know some very fat examples to the contrary. You too are of Pharaoh’s lean kine, and yet you can be as lazy as any body. I hope however you are compelled to work where you are, if so the Lord be praised.

I desired Maclay to become acquainted with you. He is right headed, and bold. I doubt much about the expediency of his arbitration bill, &c as yet I doubt about the success of it in the house; but if it carries, and the people like it, Maclay will succeed M[c]Kean in spite of fate: &c he will deserve it. I wish you w’d teach him to drink wine at Washington, for he will have to do it when he becomes Governor. I dread lest the federalists should cajole old M[c]Kean to become Candidate for the vice Presidency: if they do, they will attempt to run him against Jefferson, and I fear the ignorance & perversity of our state legislators here, will give federalists a hold on him.

I hear they have imported a print in Philadelphia. Bonaparte is striding over all the kingdoms of Europe &c pointing with a very threatening attitude toward England. John Bull a short squat man with a round belly, round face, short black hair &c his arms a kimbo, accosts his enemy. Pray Mr Boneyparty, what do you want with me and be damn’ed to you? If you have a mind for a knock o’ the pate come along and be damned to you. 

But what of Politics can I write new, from the back Country to you at the very center of Information? Therefore I will quit the Subject and send you a literary article.

Franklin’s admired Imitation of Genesis has been traced up to Bishop Taylor’s liberty of prophesying. D’ Priestley t’other night shewed me the following passage which I send you. The title of the Book is as follows

שֶׁבֶת יְהוֹדָעָה (that is, Shebeth Jehudæ)
Tribus Judæ
Salamonis Fil. Virgæ
Complectens varias Calamitates, Martyria, Dispensiones &c &c Judæorum. De Hebræo in Latinum versa à Georgio Gentio. —Amstelædami

26 See Gen. 41:2 et seq.
27 With fears of a French invasion of England, several political cartoons featuring Napoleon facing off with John Bull or trampling the map of Europe appeared in 1803. A description of this particular print is not included in Mary Dorothy George’s Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum (11 vols., London, 1870-1959), but see 8:9980, 9981, 10048, and 10049.
28 MS: “Franklins”.
29 MS: “Judæourum”.
Apud Henricum Westenium clo Io LXXX (1680) quarto30

Extract from Page 3 of the Dedication to the Consuls & Senate of Hamburgh.

Illustrae tradit nobilissimus autor Sadus venerandæ antiquitatis exemplum, Abrahamum Patriarcham hospitalitatis gloria celebratum vix sibi felix faustumq31 credidisse hospitium, nisi externum aliquem tanquam aliquid præsidium domi excepisset hospitem, quem omni officiorum prosequetur genere. Aliquando cum Hospitem domi non haberet, foris eum quæsiturus campestria petit, fortæ virum quendam senectute gravem itinere fessum sub arbore recumbentem conspicit. Quem comiter exceptum, domum hospitem deducit, et omni officio colit. Cum cœnam appositarum Abrahamus et familia ejus a precibus auspice et tamen religiosam cœnæm prosequi vix sibi felix fatus, nisi externum aliquem tanquam aliquid praebendum domi excepisset hospitem, quem omni officiorum prosequetur genere. Aliquando cum Hospitem domi non haberet, foris eum quæsiturus campestria petit, fortæ virum quendam senectute gravem itinere fessum sub arbore recumbentem conspicit. Quem comiter exceptum, domum hospitem deducit, et omni officio colit. Cum cœnam appositarum Abrahamus et familia ejus a precibus auspice et tamen religiosam cœnæm prosequi vix sibi felix fatus, nisi externum aliquem tanquam aliquid praebendum domi excepisset hospitem, quem omni officiorum prosequetur genere.

For “faustumque” (spelled out in Q).

Q has “istiusmodi”.

MS: “rem rem”. Cooper obviously erred in copying “rem” twice, once at the end of a line of the manuscript and again at the beginning of the next line.

MS: “pro profano”. Cooper mistakenly copied the catchword “pro”.

Q has “e”.

For “unumq” (Q has “unumq;”).

Q has “suo exemplo”.

30 The translation of the title is as follows: “The Tribes of Judah/Solomon son of Verga/Encompassing various calamities, martyrdoms, dispersions, etc., etc. of the Jews. Translated from Hebrew into Latin by George Gentius—Amsterdam at the house of [Johan] Hendrik Wetsstein 1680 . . . quarto.” The Latin passage in Cooper’s letter has been collated with the printed text of George Gentius’s prefatory letter. Cooper’s punctuation and capitalization, which varies from the printed text, has been followed. The printed text, hereafter referred to as Q, regularly uses an ampersand for et and usually abbreviates the suffix “-que” as “-q;”. All substantive variants are indicated in notes.

31 Q has “istiusmodi”.

32 MS: “rem rem”. Cooper obviously erred in copying “rem” twice, once at the end of a line of the manuscript and again at the beginning of the next line.

33 MS: “pro profano”. Cooper mistakenly copied the catchword “pro”.

34 Q has “e”.

35 For “unumq” (Q has “unumq;”).

36 Q has “suo exemplo”.
veri numinis cultum\textsuperscript{38} eum perduxerit. Vos quoque Proceres\textsuperscript{39} nobilissimi, cum pari studio Judæorum gentem habeatis laudatissimo more et\textsuperscript{40} exemplo pietate potius servare quam sevira disciplina exclusere, eos tanquam perditas \textit{Xti}\textsuperscript{41} oviculas colligere quam dissipare mavultis.\textsuperscript{42}

I think there is no doubt of this being the original of Taylor's\textsuperscript{43} & his of Franklin's\textsuperscript{44} Fable. The Post is going off & so am I. DQO as the fashionable triad is.\textsuperscript{45}

Yrs Tho\textsuperscript{8} Cooper

\textit{Pennsylvania State University} \hspace{1cm} \textit{LAWRENCE BEASTON}

\textsuperscript{38} Q has "cultū", "ū" being a common abbreviation for "um".
\textsuperscript{39} Refers to the rulers of Hamburg.
\textsuperscript{40} 40 Q has "atq;".
\textsuperscript{41} Q has "Christī".
\textsuperscript{42} Thanks are due Allan Kershaw of the Classics Department at Pennsylvania State University for his advice on the translation of this passage, which is as follows:

"The most renowned author Sa'dī clearly relates that the exemplum of antiquity to be revered, the patriarch Abraham, celebrated for the glory of his hospitality, believed hospitality hardly fortunate or lucky for himself unless he, [standing before his house] as if some guard, would welcome to his home some foreign guest whom he would attend with every kind of courtesy. Once when he had no guest at home, he scoured the plain round about seeking for one, and, by chance, he caught sight of a certain man lying under a tree weighed down by old age and worn out from traveling. After he greeted him courteously, he led the guest home and took care of him with every courtesy. When the meal had been served and Abraham and his household said prayers, the old man reached his hand for the food with no sign of the practice of religion or devotion. When he saw this, Abraham addressed him as follows: 'My sir, it is hardly proper for someone of your age to take food without first showing reverence to the divine.' To which the elder replied, 'I am a fire worshipper ignorant of customs of that kind, for our elders taught me no such devotion.' Abraham, shuddering at this speech and thinking the business with the fire worshipper both of evil omen for himself and averse to the worship of his own God, threw the fire worshipper, who had been instantly removed from the meal, out of his house as a curse on his companionship and an enemy of religion. But to the most high God warned Abraham immediately: 'What are you doing, Abraham? Ought you truly to have done thus? I myself gave that old man, however thoroughly ungrateful to me, both life and nourishment for more than one hundred years; are you not able to give one meal to the man? Are you not able to bear him one moment?' Having been warned by the divine voice, Abraham, when he had called the elder back from his journey, led him home and attended him with such courtesies, devotion, and consideration that by his example he brought him over to the worship of the true God. Since you also, most noble leaders, by your most praiseworthy manner and example, consider the race of Jews with equal fervor, you choose to keep by your devotion rather than to exclude by severe discipline, to gather rather than to scatter those—as it were—lost sheep of Christ."

\textsuperscript{43} MS: "Taylors".
\textsuperscript{44} MS: "Franklins".
\textsuperscript{45} I have not identified this "fashionable triad." The second initial is doubtful; it may be E, G, S, or Y.