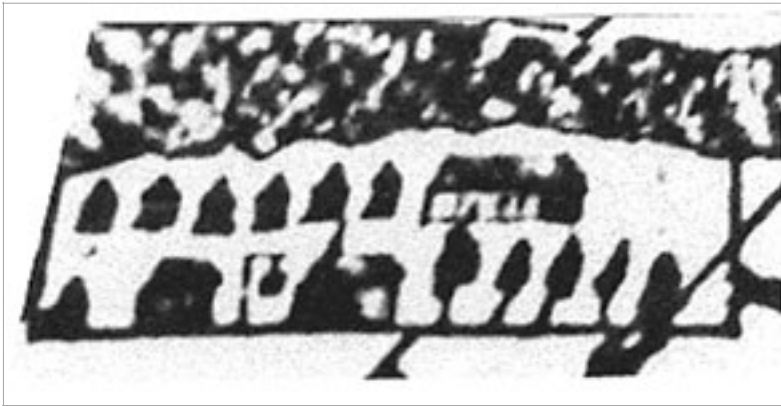


The Village of Williamstown by Bryan Thompson

The first “village” in the township of De Kalb was known as Williamstown or Coopers Village. It was little more than a cluster of cabins in the wilderness. Yet William Cooper had great plans for the place. Within a year he was selling and contracting village lots 35 feet wide by as little as 150 feet deep for house and store lots. This in an area that was surrounded by at least 60,000 acres of undeveloped wilderness.



Sketch of the Village of Williamstown or Cooper’s Village taken from William Cooper Land Book circa 1815. New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown

Life was hard for these early settlers. Alexander McCollom who ran Cooper’s first primitive store described his business in November 1803, “I have purchased very considerable quantities of furs since your leaving this place and have every prospect of purchasing more when those goods are on hand. The want of powder and lead is great amongst the Indians.” He apparently was acting as much as a trading post with the natives as a supply house for the settlers.

The first winter was very hard. McCollom described it in a letter to William Cooper in June 1804, “Picture to yourself the deplorable and I may say wretched condition we were all placed in on the bank of a River whose waters after the uncommonly hard winter had spread far beyond its usual bed and drove the greater part of the villagers from their habitations. The houses of those who were not sufferers being

all small and ill suited to admit, one, two or three large families, when scarcely of size adapted to their own convenience. And to add to all this several families coming in at a late season of the year, who not being provided with any kind of shelter, were obliged to live at the mercy of their neighbors for a covering to keep them from the inclemency of the season, and among these a lady who was far advanced in a state of pregnancy without a place for herself and numerous offspring to put their heads."

The first crude log houses were mostly clustered on the riverbank. Alexander McCollom's house was on the west bank of the Oswegatchie River several hundred feet to the North of the current bridge in Old De Kalb. By 1805 the village settlement had moved to higher ground on the hill beside the river. The accompanying map of Williamstown is based on an undated map of the village included in the William Cooper papers at Hartwick College. This is probably the village plot map made by Potter Goff in 1814.

Based on deeds, mortgages, letters and the Potter Goffs village survey, we will take a virtual tour of the Village of Williamstown, its inhabitants and businesses, from 1803 to about 1820. After this era, the Cooper family were no longer involved and the name Williamstown was entirely replaced by De Kalb Village. Alphanumeric symbols represent specific areas on the map.

Starting at the designated north end of the map, the first property (A) is that of Isaac and Abigail Stacy. This village lot was part of a much larger lot of land that extended almost to the mills on lots 305 and 306. The house, built in 1806, was a large 40 feet by 20 feet building. It, along with a 30 by 40 barn and two sheds, were located on five village lots bought by the Stacy's in 1805. Isaac was not particularly happy with his farm in De Kalb. By 1814 he complains of his having done bad since his living in the township from leaving a good farm in Otsego through the persuasion of the Judge (Cooper)" (Potter Goff p. 28). Stacy along with many others, could not pay for his lots and in 1815 he signed back the house

and a group of lots (AI) in the village west of his house to the proprietors. The AI property was 30 3/4 acres of land situated between Canton Street and the Oswegatchie River. This undeveloped land would have extended the village plot to the outskirts of the Mills. Isaac Stacy, and later his son Henry, received a lease on the farm property and house to be used by them "until the land is needed for village lots." Their house was a stage coach stop in later years.

The next place we come to as we head south on Canton St is the shoemakers shop (E) owned by Silas Preston. Preston purchased the 35 by 150-ft. lot from William Cooper in 1809. He operated the shop in partnership with Mr. Little.

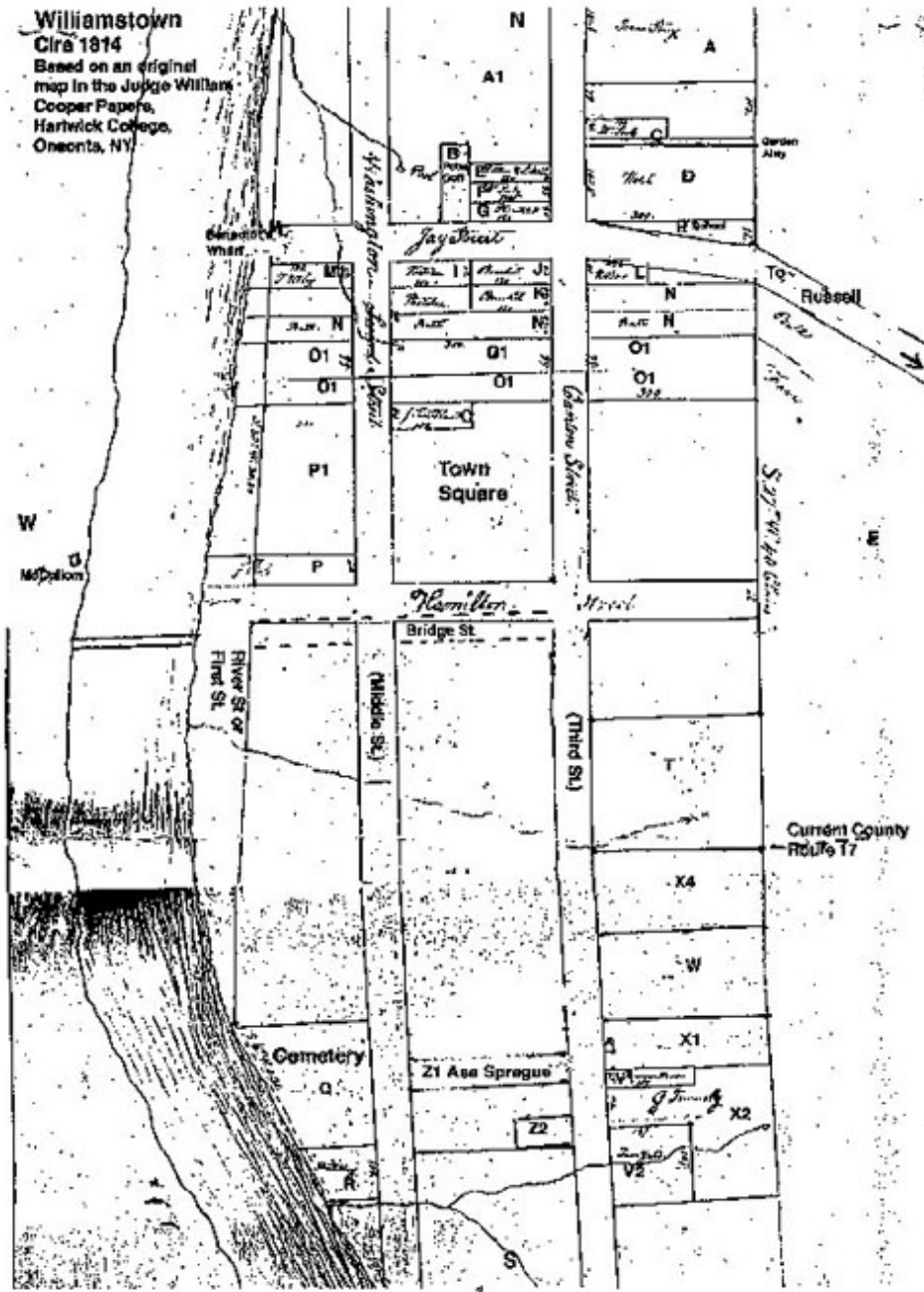
Next door to the shoemaker's shop was the office of Dr. John Seely (F), Seely was the first doctor to live in the township and a founding member of the Medical Society of St. Lawrence County. He purchased his 35 ft by 150-ft lot in 1806 from Wm. Cooper.

Dr Seely lived with his family here until 1809.

In 1809, Dr Seely purchased the House and Barn of Joseph Woodhouse (C) for \$400. Woodhouse, the town carpenter, had purchased the lot in 1808 and erected the house and barn.

Next, on the southern side of Garden Alley and directly across from the Doctors office was the Cooper "Hotel or large house" and bam (D). This Hotel was built in 1805-06 and owned by the Cooper family. It was 60 feet square and 3 stories tall. It had a large ballroom on the third floor and a kitchen in the cellar. It was graced with four chimneys and sixteen fireplaces. The first Town Meeting of the town of De Kalb was held here in 1806. The Cooper Family, various proprietors and other dignitaries such as Gouverneur Morris stayed here when they visited the township. Town meetings were held here up until the 1830's. The Hotel was leased and operated by William Cleghorn and son from 1806 to 1813. On September 29, 1807, The Northern Lights Masonic Lodge #163 held its first meeting here. (This

was the first Masonic lodge chartered in St Lawrence Co.) William Cleghorn was the village postmaster from 1807 to 1809. Potter Goff took over the lease in 1813. Goff was the village postmaster from 1813 to 1819. The renters were required to pay \$50 per year rent and "put and keep the house in repair." The Hotel became the property of William Averell and co. in 1822. The Hotel fell into disrepair and fell down by about 1835.



Next door to the hotel on a small wedge of land (H) was the first schoolhouse in the village erected in 1807 and used for over forty years. The first teacher was Bela Wills.

On the corner of Jay and Canton Street stood William Cooper's store. This store was completed in the spring of 1805 to replace the original crude log structure

built in 1803. Thomas B. Benedict came from Woodbury, Connecticut in the spring of 1805 to run this store. He ran the store until about 1817 when Courtland C. Cooper took over its management. T. B. Benedict was the village postmaster from 1809 to 1813 and from 1819 to 1825.

At the foot of Jay Street was Benedict's Wharf (M). The Oswegatchie River was the main means of commercial transportation for the community in the early years. Gouverneur Morris entered the village from the wharf on his visit in 1807.

Adjacent to Benedicts Wharf on the corner of Jay street and Washington St. was the home of Timothy Utley (N). He probably occupied this lot by 1804. He did not pay for it and left prior to 1816. In 1816 John Fine hired Abraham Fisk, millwright, to repair the great wheel and other workings of the gristmill. Abraham Fisk took this lot as payment for his work. Fisk lived here for the rest of his life but never received a deed from the proprietors.

On the corner of Washington and Jay St, across from the Fisk/Utley house was the chair factory and residence of Peter Thatcher (I). Peter operated the factory in partnership with Ralph Thrall. In 1812, they employed 2 people in their factory. After Thatcher's death Thrall took over operation of the factory.

Half way up the hill on Jay Street stood the two story house of Potter Goff (B). Goff received the deed to this property in 1815, but the house was built some time before that date.

On the south side of Jay street, across from the store, was the home of Thomas B. Benedict the store keeper (J). He purchased this lot from Cooper in 1807 but Benedict had already erected his house there at the time of the sale. Benedict was a member and officer of the New York State Militia. Because of this, when the county militia was called up in 1812, they met in Williamstown. He was a brigadier general by the end of the war.

On the East Side of Canton St. across from Benedict's house was the home of Daniel Bowe (L) in 1810. By 1814 he was gone and a tailor by the name of Griffin had just leased the property. This was probably a small shop/residence. No deed was ever issued for this small lot, the smallest in the village. Directly behind this lot along the Russell Rd was the Town pound, a corral for fencing in stray farm animals.

Proceeding south on Canton St the next properties (K and N) were initially part of William Bell's farm within the village limits extending from the river to the eastern border of the village plot. He purchased the farm in 1803 from William Cooper. In 1806 he sold the southerly half of the strip (N) to William Brown. In 1808 Bell sold the southerly half (K) to John Ross. Unfortunately for Ross and Brown their titles were contingent upon a mortgage to Wm. Cooper by Bell. Bell became delinquent and Cooper foreclosed in 1808. Solomon Rich bought the lot at auction. He built a 20 by 26-foot house and a barn 30 by 24 on the lot. In 1810 Solomon Pratt traded a farm and land on Rich's purchase for this farm and lot. He sold (K) to his neighbor T. B. Benedict in 1811. He sold another small portion to his son in law Peter Thatcher for his chair business. Pratt and his wife died during the war of 1812 and in 1814 "Phelps the shoemaker" rented the house. In 1820 Seth Pomeroy purchased this property as part of his farm.

The next parcel (01) was the second 100-foot wide strip extending from the river to the eastern boundary of the town plot connecting to a farm outside the village. Elijah Farr purchased this farm in 1803. Elijah lived on the eastern end of his farm on Farr Creek and sold off this strip with an additional nine acres to Dr Seely in 1814. Dr Seely used this as his farm.

Bordering on Washington St. just south of the Farr/ Seely farm was the house lot (0) occupied by Joseph Sweatland from 1810 to 1814. Joseph Sweatland was one of the laborers paid to help build Cooper's Hotel. No records have been found for this parcel.

Directly abutting this house lot and occupying the whole block between Canton and Washington Street was the Town Square laid out by Judge Cooper. After Wm. Averell and co. gained control of the Cooper lands they divided this parcel and sold it as house lots in the 1830's.

John W. Cleghorn occupied (P1) as early as 1806. He helped his father run the hotel. Next door on the corner of Hamilton and Washington Streets stood the home of (P) Ralph R. Bell. He purchased the lot in 1803. In 1807 he sold the house to John Ross, a Blacksmith. In 1817 Ross sold the house to Elisha Griffin, a tailor. In 1826 Griffin sold the house to William Floyd.

At the southern end of Washington Street was the distillery (R). Wm. Cooper sold this parcel to Elijah Utley in 1807 with the provision that it was "for the purpose and for the use of a still being erected thereon and set a going in the season for five years..... with the still and works now erected on said premises". The still had obviously already been working under Cooper's ownership. Utley sold the still to Elijah Pooler along with his farm in 1808. This was one of two stills in operation in the township at the time.

Next to the still lot was the first cemetery (Q) in the town laid out by William Cooper as part of his village plan. Burials were begun here in 1804. Cooper did not provide a deed before his death and the subsequent proprietors refused to donate the land for a cemetery. The cemetery was last used at the time of the Civil War.

Opposite the cemetery (Zi) was the store lot of Asa Sprague. This lot ran all the way from Washington St. to Canton St. Asa Sprague first appears in town records in 1812 but he didn't receive a deed for his store until 1816

Just to the south of Asa Sprague's store on Canton St. was the ashery (Z2). The ashery was where wood ashes were processed into pearl ash or potash. A valuable commodity during the settlement era, potash was an essential ingredient in

gunpowder. It was one of the few things settlers could sell for cash money. There were several conflicting titles for this lot; the earliest seems to be William Cooper, the carpenter (nephew of Judge Cooper). Also involved were John Rounds and Hiram McCollum.

Directly across Canton Street was the tanyard (V2) and tanner's house (Vi). Nathaniel Holt first operated this tannery in 1806. In 1809 Holt sold his interest (although he never had a recorded deed for it) to Isaac Stacy. In 1810 Stacy sold the property to James Averell Jr. and Gideon Townsley. Averell owned the largest tannery in N. Y. at Cooperstown. Gideon Townsley was the operator of the Williamstown operation. He was apparently very successful because he began buying up the surrounding properties starting in 1811 with (XI) and (X2). He had already built a "new house" on (XI) at the time.

In 1816 Gideon Townsley's brother in law Elias C. Paige came to work in the tannery with him. Paige immediately purchased the lot next to Townsley's (W) and built a house. After only one year in Williamstown, Paige sold his house and moved to Canton where he ran his own tannery. Gideon Townsley purchased the neighboring house lot the next year (X4).

Just North of the Townsley lands was the home of Seth Pomeroy. Seth Pomeroy, a Cooper cousin, moved to Williamstown as the Cooper's agent in December 1816. When this didn't work out he set up a farm in the village (T). He helped to organize the first Presbyterian association in the town in 1817. He eventually owned much of the north portion of the village.

The village streets are called by various names in the records. Along the Oswegatchie river shore was First, Water or River Street. The next parallel street was Second, Middle or Washington Street. The next was Third, Canton or Gouverneur St. Hamilton St. was moved "about 45 feet south" and became Bridge St. in 1820.

By 1814, Williamstown was an established village. The settlement offered most necessary frontier services. You could buy your leather, have it made into shoes. Visit the tailor shop for clothes. Have your horse shod at the Blacksmith. Have a new snath made at the millwrights. Sell your ashes at the ashery. Pick up your mail at the post office. Have chairs made at the chair shop. Shop at one of two general mercantile stores. Attend a Masonic meeting or Town meeting at the Hotel or just stop by to sample the wares of the local distillery and perhaps have a meal. The family could visit the doctor for medicine. Children could attend school or church in the schoolhouse and play in the Town Square. Just to the North of the village you could have timber sawed or grain ground at the Mills.

After just eleven years, Judge Cooper's dream village of Williamstown was at its peak. Within a few years, without his guidance and because of his tangled legal legacy the village would flounder and stagnate.

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This article would not have been possible without the diligent assistance of Jerald Martin who researched and indexed all De Kalb land transfers from 1803 to December 31, 1819