

The Legend of Coopers Falls by Bryan Thompson

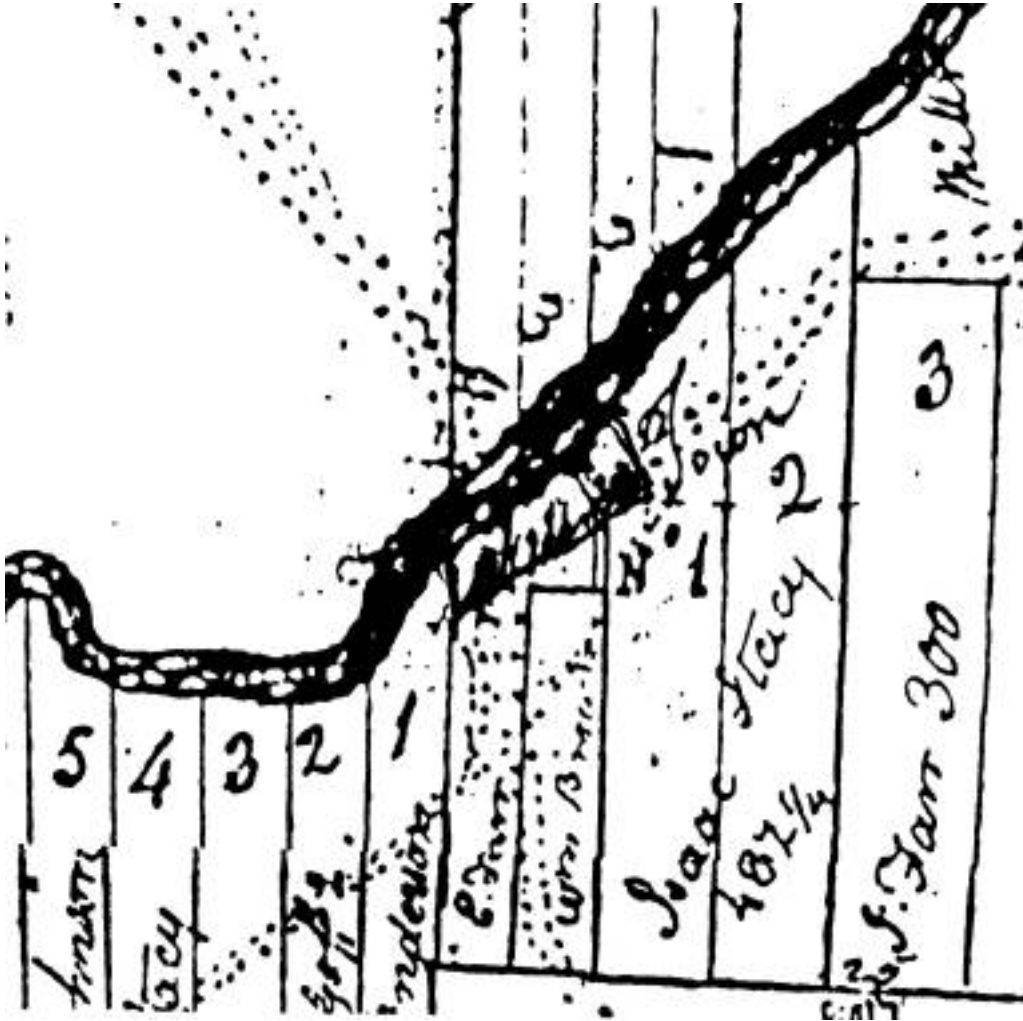
History is full of famous legends such as that of George Washington throwing a dollar across the Potomac. Though not based in fact, these stories are often repeated and as they continue, they grow and take on a life of their own.

The legend of Coopers Falls is perhaps the most famous of all the legends of De Kalb. Many of you are familiar with the legend...

William Cooper led his party of settlers through the wilderness to settle the new township. They settled at Coopers Falls where they built mills, houses, a store, a hotel and a thriving village that all later disappear almost without a trace. Some accounts also have the bridge at Coopers Falls built by William Cooper himself.

When researching historical events, it is important to look at primary sources (things written at the time the events happened by people actually involved) first then look at contemporary secondary sources such as written histories (giving most credence to things written closest to the times of the events). The greater the distance in time from the actual events occurrence the less reliable the source becomes.

So why is the story of Coopers Falls considered a legend, rather than a simple statement of the facts about the first settlement of the Town of De Kalb? Because there is not one primary source that shows evidence of a Village of Coopers Falls in existence before 1851! The Town of De Kalb Town Record books mention the words. "Coopers Falls" for the first time in August 1854, when Coopers Falls school district number 24 was formed from parts of districts # 4, #8 #11 and #18 over the objections of the trustees of the effected districts.



William Cooper's Maps of the township drawn in 1803 and 1806 show the village with the mills slightly to the east of the village. The same configuration shows up on the 1814 Goff and Spencer Map and the 1821 St. Lawrence County map given to William Averill by John Fine.

Gouverneur Morris traveled down the Oswegatchie River from Gouverneur to Ogdensburg by flat boat in 1808. In his diary of the trip he describes in detail his stay in "Williamstown the capital of Judge Coopers settlement." He stayed the night at the Hotel, "...fairly seated in a well furnished room. The people are attentive and give me a good rusk with butter both good!" The next morning Morris proceeded down river about one mile to the mills which he bypassed by using the log loading ramp.

At least two dozen deeds, mortgages, and wills in the county courthouse dating from the period 1803 to about 1823 all refer to the village of Williamstown in the Town of De Kalb. These documents refer to lots in an area including all of the current hamlet of De Kalb and extending almost as far East as the Town Highway barn on US Rt. 812.

The town records of highway districts use the Mills as a descriptive break for districts to the East of the Village. In 1826, they begin describing this break as by the guide board in the road near Coopers Mills.

There is one hand bill in the Averill Papers collection of the NYS Historical Association that advertises a foreclosure sale for land of William Cooper's in Franklin county. The sale is to take place "at the Hotel in Cooper's Village in the Town of De Kalb,.....the first Monday in May 1809."

Turning to secondary sources. The first published history of De Kalb is Hough's (1853) account. It states (page 289) ..."they reached the location in De Kalbarriving on the 12th of June, 1803, with the other parties, at the present village of De Kalb. On the first day they put up the body of a house, and slept without a roof over their heads, the first night. On the second day , another house was built, and on the third day, a store, which like the others were of logs, and covered by barks. Clearings were begun in various places, and a party was set to work in preparing to erect a mill at the falls. A canal was blasted, and one or two houses were built." (page 290) "The first school in the town was taught by Bella Wills, a Methodist minister, in the winter of 1807, at **De Kalb Village, then called Cooper's Village**. In 1805, Judge Cooper erected a large Hotel, on a hill in the village" (page 618) May 2, 1812, . "Col. Benedict, to raise 43 men including noncommissioned officers These were to be embodied and stationed in the village of Williamstown [De Kalb] as soon as possible."

The second major secondary source would be L. H. Everts History of St Lawrence County New York (1878). They repeat directly the above items from

Hough plus: (page 354) "The first road in town was the one cut through in 1803 from the State Road to the site of De Kalb Village by the settlers who came in at the time, and for some time this was the only one, it being sufficient' for all purposes until the settlers became more scattered. (page 355)"De Kalb VILLAGE This place was originally called Coopers

Village, in honor of the proprietor...(page 356) The (post) office was given the name of De Kalb, which it retains, and the original name of Cooper's Village fell finally into disuses."

The third major history was written by Gates Curtis in 1894. At this point the historic record starts to get muddled. The people who actually remembered the events of settlement and most of their children were gone. On page 505 Curtis for the first time states " ... the settlement was made on the banks of the Oswegatchie, just above Cooper's Falls. ". However 1 page later he contradicts the first statement (page 506) "...arriving with others of the party on the site of De Kalb village June 12, 1803. The usual custom of putting up log houses was begun, and the first night was passed . within the walls of one without a roof."

From here on the legend begins to grow and change. Several newspaper articles that mix information about Williamstown and Coopers Falls together were written in the 1920's when the "new " state road came through both areas. By the time the sesquicentennial came around the legend had grown and taken on a life of it's own . Few if any authors bothered to go back to the original papers or even 19th century histories. Coopers Falls the mysterious first settlement ghost town was born. Writer after writer repeated and embellished the story! Meanwhile the actual first settlement Williamstown (Old De Kalb) went unrecognized.

So what is the Real **History of Cooper Falls?**

This area has been called over time: The Falls, The Mills, Cooper's Mills and finally Cooper's Falls. In 1803 Judge Cooper had a wooden sawmill built at the Falls. A freshet washed away the wooden mill in less than a year. In 1804 the

Judge had substantial new stone mills built . These mills included a grist mill with two runs of stone and a saw mill with a massive chain and winch for hauling logs and boats up into the mill from the river.



The Grist Mill and Blast Furnace circa 1880

Judge Cooper's account book describes the work as follows : "For erecting a stone dam across the river, in sixteen feet of water, for blowing a canal six perches in length. fourteen feet deep, eighteen feet wide at the top, and ten feet wide at the bottom, through a solid rock. For blowing half the width of the foundation of the grist mill and sawmills, ten feet deep, out of a solid rock, for filling up the other half of the foundation, and thirty feet beyond the gristmill in

twelve feet water, with 2630 loads of stone. For erecting the gristmill, with two run of stones and all the appendages. For erecting the sawmill with additional wheels, to draw, with a great chain, of one hundred feet in length, boats, logs & ca into the mills. For erecting a dwelling house, a good frame barn, clearing and fencing twenty five acres of land around the mills. For the loss sustained by the first saw mill being undermined and overset by a freshet. Provisions and miscellaneous expenses. See Amos Comely's Account of the particular items.”

“Amount \$9,049”

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According to the written histories starting with Hough in 1853 "one or two dwelling houses" were erected at the mills or falls in 1803. However in judge Cooper's detailed account ledger only a sawmill is listed as being built in 1803. A shanty, loghouse and barn were built in 1804 at a cost of \$154.

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William Cooper hired many people to work on the Mills. In 1804 he sent his older brother James, an experienced miller from Otsego county , to oversee the work. \$9,000 was a massive amount of money in 1804. Judge Cooper obviously had great hopes for the financial success of the mills.

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According to the Hough: Cyrus, Ashahel and Asa Jackson were in charge of building the mill frame. Only Cyrus's name appears in the Judges account book. Others who also were paid by the Judge for helping with the construction included: Alexander McCollom, Joseph Woodhouse, James Cooper, Stephen Titus, Shubal Weston, Gideon and Ford.

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During the erection of the grist mill in 1804 one of the Jacksons fell and received a concussion. This person had a trephining performed by Dr. Seeley using an annular saw fashioned from a thimble. The Potter Goff survey (1814) says the victim was Cyrus Jackson while Hough (1853) says the victim was Asa Jackson.

The surgery was paid for by giving Dr. Seeley a parcel of land the Jacksons had traded a \$45 double barrel gun for.

The first death in the township occurred at the Falls in September 1804 when George Cowdry was swept over the Falls in a flood.

Along with much work to develop the Falls, Judge Cooper also sowed the fatal flaws that were to keep the area from ever realizing its tremendous potential as an industrial center. When Cooper purchased the town of De Kalb, he financed it by organizing an investment group. These investors bought into "the concern" as "Tenants in Common" meaning they held all the land together undivided. He then required these investors to reimburse him for the expenses of erecting the Mills as they were held in common.

After Judge Coopers death the investors became disgruntled with Cooper's son Isaac's management of " The Concern". Led by Fredrick Depeyster the investors forced Judge Cooper's estate to partition the Township in the spring of 1815.

Using Potter Goff and Silas Spencers's 1814 map of the town, they drew lots and tried to equitable divide the property. However the Mills (Lot 304 and 50 acres across the river off Lots 94 and 95) Lot 305 , the village plots and the ore bed (15 acres off lot 392 now in the Town of Hermon on the Ore Bed Rd.) were not easy to divide equitably and so continued to be held in common.

After this date to gain a clear title to property in this area a person was forced to get deeds from as many as a dozen different owners with shares ranging from 40/60ths down to 2.5 /240ths The only persons who managed to get a clear title to any of the property were Dr. Seeley to 30 acres of lot 304 in 1815 and James Cooper who purchased 5 1/2 acres in 1816.

James Cooper appears to have run the mills throughout the first 20 years of their existence. Having a diverse group of owners all with separate claims became a liability almost immediately. John Fine wrote to Isaac Cooper in May 1815 that

the grist mill was out of order and that it would cost \$400 to set one up in the existing frame. He recommended against doing this as he said no profit could be made from such an enterprise at present. He recommended setting up a fulling mill instead. In July 1815, Fine wrote again, the proprietors in New York wanted the mills repaired immediately. Already the different owners and advisors were arguing about how to manage the property.

James Cooper started repairs to the mills in March and June 1816, when he hired local millwright Abraham Fisk to repair the water wheel , millstone and gears. However when Seth Pomeroy came to De Kalb as the Cooper's agent in December 1816, he reported that "The Mills have undergone considerable repairs & were almost done. Mr. Fine stopped them where they were when I came on & they are in quite an open situation." Mr. Fine stopped the repairs because of money he was owed by the Cooper family, only one of the many owners of the mills.

In 1821, the title of ownership of common lots became even more garbled when the Brigden family sued William Cooper's estate over debts dating back to 1794. They won a chancery decree, which led to the eventual bankruptcy of the Cooper heirs. They seized many of Coopers properties and had them sold, but not the mills or other lands in De Kalb.

In 1822 William Averill with his brother James Averill and Attorney John Fine purchased at foreclosure auction the Cooper family lands in De Kalb and the families share in the Mills in De Kalb. This did not include the shares of William Cooper jr. deeded to Fredrick Depeyster and Luther Bradish in 1816. Averill purchased 37/60ths of the Mills for a paltry \$480!

The Averill group now owned a majority share in the Mills. They proceeded to grant deeds and sell property as though it was theirs exclusively. They sold their interest in the Mills to Roger and Edward Sargent, two millers from Oswegatchie.

The Sargents traded the mills in 1831 to James Cooper (older brother of the Judge) for his farm on the Old Canton Road.

About this time James divided his 5 acres lot at the Falls into 3 lots selling them to his sons: Courtland, Hamilton and William. Though no clear records have been uncovered for this time period it appears that James continued to run the Mills and live there. The mills consisted of a sawmill and gristmill.

However, as the sawmill and gristmill continued to operate, other factors were coming into play. Several of the original proprietors were trying to sell their interests in the Mills. Among those who owned a share through 1840 were: Fredrick Depeyster, James F. DePeyster, Henry Van Rensselear, Charlotte C. Daubenny, Henry Waddell, John R. Murray, William Ogden, Loyd S. Daubenny, John W. Tate, Thomas B. Tate, William Bayard, Henry Barclay, Henry N. Brush, Luther Bradish, John Fine, James Averill, and William Averill.

In 1832, Anna Marie and Catherine Brigden realized that there were still unclaimed Cooper lands in De Kalb. They brought their Chancery Decree to the St. Lawrence County Sheriff and received a Sheriff's deed for Lot 305. (Lot 305 lies between the current Hamlet of Old De Kalb and Cooper's Falls.) They quietly held onto this land for 18 years.

Meanwhile in the 1840's, Orin Fisk enters the scene. A De Kalb attorney, Orin was raised in De Kalb, served as the Town of DeKalb's Supervisor from 1847 to 1849 and again from September 1850 until 1856. He was also chairman of the St. Lawrence County Board of Supervisors in 1849-50. He died in January of 1857.

Orin's father was Abraham Fisk who was granted a lot in the village of Williamstown by John Fine in March 1816 while Abraham was repairing the Mills. Abraham moved onto the lot and lived there for most of his life. However Mr. Fine, following his dispute with the Coopers over payments, never got around to supplying the deed.

Orin Fisk's first wife was a member of the Cooper family. Mr. Fine helped precipitate and later benefited greatly from the bankruptcy of the Coopers in De Kalb. Due to these unsavory business experiences, there was a natural animosity between Fine and Orin M. Fisk.

By 1847 Orin Fisk had managed to become the local legal representative of the interests of Fredrick Depeyster, Susan Daubenny and several of the other proprietors. He began to work as a local real estate promoter.

He wrote to William Averill in January of that year. He described the village of De Kalb as having great possibilities but "is only celebrated for its ruins". He tried to get Mr. Averill to sell a larger lot of land (one acre) within De Kalb village to Stephen Slosson who wished to open a store and ashery. He explained that he represented only the fractional interests of Depeyster and thus couldn't grant clear title. Wm. Averill responded to the letter "protesting that I know not of any interest in the lands mentioned by the person named or any other persons". Averill also immediately wrote to his brother James Averill and John Fine in Ogdensburg They responded that the land in the Village of De Kalb was "practically worthless and never would be worth much" but still should not be sold in larger lots.

Frustrated with his attempts to improve De Kalb village, Mr. Fisk turned to developing a competing village. He continued to work with the absentee proprietors. He even named two of his sons after them, William Coventry H. Waddell Fisk, and Fredrick Depeyster Fisk.

In 1849 he helped organize the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank road company with the stated purpose of bridging the Oswegatchie near Cooper's Mills. A Lattice bridge was built about 1851. A toll booth stood just to the south of the bridge. In 1851 he got the

Brigden's to grant him power of attorney to act as exclusive agent over their lands (Lot 305). He then went on to involve the interests of the DePeyster Family

and the Waddell family in Lot 304 and the Mills. In March of 1851 Orin's son Charles H Fisk surveyed portions of Lot 304 and Lot 305 into village lots and the village of Cooper's Falls was born. The new plank road became Main St.

Seeking to insure his families fortunes in the new enterprise Orin M. Fisk deeded lots to his children. Charles received the Hotel Lot Other village lots went to Orin L. Fredrick D. and Theodore. At the time Orin L. and Fredrick D. were only 9 and 3 years old!

In March 1854, Orin M. Fisk was assigned a title share gained in court by the Waddell's against the James Cooper family for their share of revenues from the existing Mills since the division of the lots. At the same time Fisk took on a mortgage to the Coopers for \$3215.70. Soon Fisk took on a second mortgage to Henry Van Rensselaer for \$700 to cover past income debts.

In May of 1854, Orin M. Fisk met with William C. H. Waddell and Fredrick DePeyster in New York City to form the corporation "The De Kalb Works at Coopers Falls". The corporation was to issue \$20,000 worth of stock. The trustees were Orin Fisk, James Brees, and William C. H. Waddell. The purposes of the mechanical, manufacturing, mining and chemical works corporation were to develop the lands owned by them at Coopers Falls. The new company began selling village lots.

In the Summer of 1854, Charles H. Fisk company secretary was advertising widely in newspapers the "**New Village of Coopers Falls.**"

"This company situated in the town of De Kalb in the county of St. Lawrence.....for the purpose of improving and bringing into use their valuable property at Cooper's Falls on the Oswegatchie River- being the best water power on the stream.

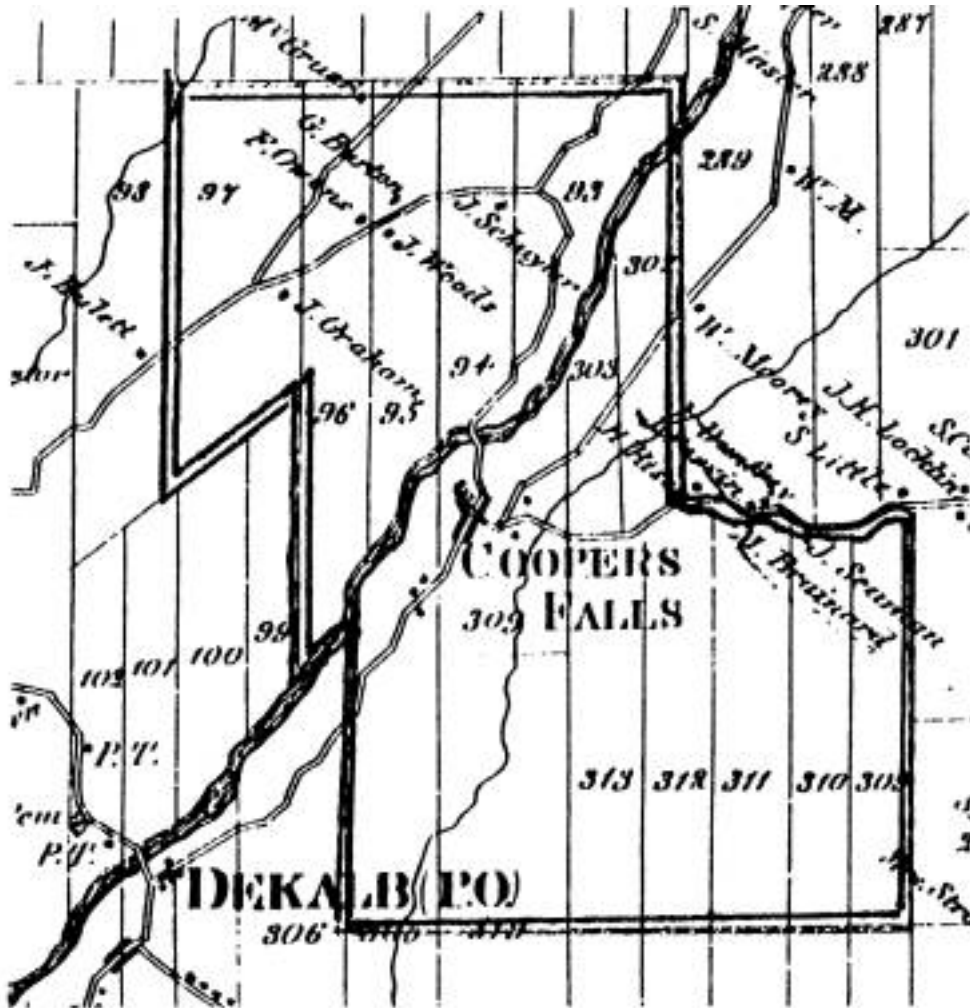
The mechanical erections now in progress and completed are a grist-mill, provided with all the modern improvements, and a sawmill which the company is

driving both night and day: They have in contemplation, and the arrangements are now completed for the erection of a blast furnace of large size, and will add various other machinery for the manufacture of wood and iron into articles of general use, as time and circumstances will allow.

The company would, therefore, now in its embryo state, offer to mechanics and others eligible sites with abundant water power for any mechanical purposes, and the most convenient sites on wide and commodious streets and avenues for private residences. All more or less, having views of the Oswegatchie river and having the convenience of stores, churches and other objects tending towards the comfort of its inhabitants."

The notice goes on to describe a system of 60 and 80 feet wide streets that have been laid out and promises to plank them as well as the sidewalks as soon as enough houses are built. "...The company will have completed in July a commodious store which... will be an eligible opening for a man of enterprise and business talent." The ad promises to remove all current "shanties and temporary constructions" . And to turn over the title to all streets as soon as the village is duly incorporated.

In August of the same year, the Cooper's Falls school district was created. This appears to be the one new community institution that "The Works " established. They did manage to get a few people to invest in the new village and a few houses were built In September 1855, Charles Fisk borrowed \$3000 from Fredrick Depeyster to build a hotel.



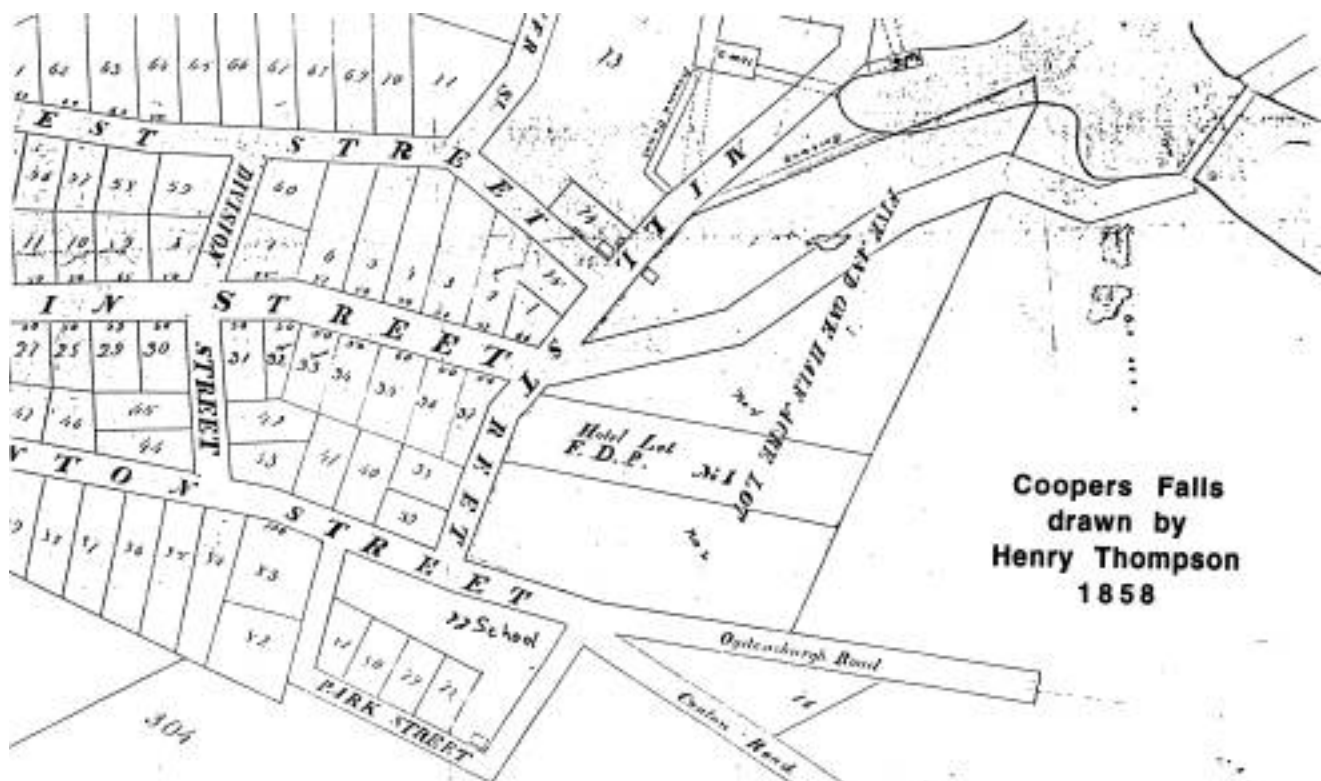
The Cooper Falls School District # 24 as laid out in August 1854. (Drawn on Beers 1865 Map of De Kalb.)

The new community now had a store, hotel and school. However, these investors in the new community were soon to find they had misplaced their trust.

In December 1855 The De Kalb Works at Cooper's Falls sold their real estate to Fredrick DePeyster. Orin M. Fisk sold by quit claim deed his remaining interests in lot 304 to John Watts DePeyster. John W. DePeyster had purchased several of the mortgages the Fisk's had drawn on the property.

After Orin M. Fisk died in January 1857, J. W. DePeyster wanted his money. He proceeded to foreclose on the Fisk estate and everybody they had sold or contracted parcels in the village to, including the trustees of School District #24!

Following the foreclosure, the Cooper's Falls properties were deeded to James Mulford, the Columbia county attorney who represented DePeyster in the foreclosure action. J. W. DePeyster retained a mortgage of \$6500. Mr. Mulford thought he could make good where Orin M. Fisk had failed. He had Henry Thompson remap the Village, renaming many of the streets, and sold off lots.



Mulford sold the store and a house to Lewis Brown for \$300. He divided the sawmill and gristmill properties for the first time. Selling the gristmill for \$5000 to Orange McArthur in July 1860. The Sawmill and Machine shop were sold at the same time to Stephen Slosson . In 1863 Jedediah Thomas bought the sawmill and machine shop and then the store. He died a year later and the property passed to John Fosgate. Fosgate eventually sold the store to D. A. Moore (1871) who closed it.

In Fall of 1864 James Ryder, John Lowden , Dolphus Lynde, Elizabeth Sterling and Orville Strong formed the Coopers Falls Iron Company. They purchased the sawmill and machine shop from Jedediah Thomas's estate . Orange McArthur died in 1863 and his Grist Mill passed through D. S. Lynde and E. Sterling to the Coopers Falls Iron Company. A bank mortgage for \$6000 was obtained in 1868 to convert the gristmill into a blast furnace.

Meanwhile Mulford, as Fisk had before him, issued a series of land contracts for lots in the village. Unfortunately for these investors, Mulford died in 1861 without repaying his mortgage to J. W. DePeyster. Again in 1863 a large group of people were drawn into a mortgage foreclosure on the remaining village lots in Cooper's Falls . These too went to D. A Moore along with the hotel foreclosed by F. DePeyster.

In May 1869, the Bank began foreclosure proceedings. There followed a long series of suits and counter suits involving the investors in The Coopers Falls Iron works and the claims of the Waddell family (one of the original proprietors). Finally John Lowden (who also owned the Rossie Iron Works) gained title May 24, 1872. He sold the property the very next day to the Union Iron Company of Buffalo.

The Union Iron Company never operated the mills and sold the ruins to A. J. Moore in 1900. A.J. Moore also had to purchase a 1/10 part of the Iron company from another investor in 1903. Finally after almost 100 years one person again had control of the Mill property at Cooper's Falls.

The Moore family eventually sold (1914) the water power rights at the falls to the Oswegatchie Improvement Co., a group of local farmers, who wanted to lower the water level to drain their farms. They blew up the ruins of the Mills and dam, blasted a channel separating Bullhead Rock from the rest of the island, and permanently changed the face of the river.

In 1870, the town of De Kalb replaced the lattice bridge at Cooper's falls with a new iron bridge. By October 1872 the iron bridge had fallen into the river. It was never replaced.

D. A Moore and his family gradually purchased most of the remaining Village lots in Cooper's Falls as well as Lot 305 and 306 (the Moore farm) lying between Coopers Falls and De Kalb Village. D.A. Moore was a prominent St. Lawrence county politician. He served at various times as a member of the NYS Assembly and the NYS Senate. He brought many guests to stay at the family cottage at Cooper's Falls They ran a steam yacht up and down the Oswegatchie River . They even allowed the St Lawrence County Congregational Church Youth group to camp there.

One can easily imagine how tales could grow as people from near and far vacationed among the ruins of the "lost" village of Cooper's Falls.

Frozen in the clutches of the incredibly convoluted legal legacy of William Cooper, which took half a century to unwind. The village of Cooper's Falls failed in large part due to poor timing. The village never got off the ground until steam power was replacing water power in manufacturing. When they began to smelt iron, the railroads had arrived, allowing ore to be shipped easily to larger centers where it could be processed more cheaply and the boom iron market of the Civil War was waning. Although the duration of Cooper's Falls was brief,(20 years) it's story has all the elements of a good novel. Rich and famous people, big business, dreams, deceit, loss, even a murder right here in our small town. No wonder legends grew up around the place

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