

Continuum of Greatness

*The Hall of Fame for Great Americans
at Bronx Community College , CUNY*



Peter Cooper

1791 - 1883

“The Great object I desire to accomplish is to open the avenues of scientific knowledge to youth so that the young may see beauties of creation enjoy its blessing and learn to love the author.”

Hall of Fame Facts

Peter Cooper (1791 - 1883)

- Elected into Hall of Fame : 1900
- Cooper was among the 29 persons to be elected into the Hall of Fame
- Cooper received 69 out of 97 votes
- Sculpture by : Chester Beach

Peter Cooper

February 12, 1791 - April 4, 1883



Peter Cooper was a highly successful American industrialist and prolific inventor. He is best known for his founding of the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. Inspired by the world renowned Polytechnic Institute in Paris, Cooper spent almost \$700,000, an enormous sum at the time, to create a world class institution for the engineering and business education for working class men and women. The Union, first opened in 1859, originally offered night classes in the applied sciences, and day classes for women in photography, telegraphy and secretarial skills. The classes were free. Even more remarkably for the time, there was no discrimination on the basis of race or religion. Thomas Edison and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter are among its most distinguished alumni. Cooper Union today contains three distinguished schools for art, architecture and engineering. The original imposing brownstone building continues to dominate New York's Astor Place.

The career of the man who made all this possible did not begin auspiciously. Peter Cooper had only minimal formal schooling when he began working in his family's small hat making firm. He later took equally modest jobs as a coach maker's apprentice, and as a cabinet maker, before accumulating enough capital to become a grocer. From there he would later become a successful manufacturer of machinery for the textile trade.

Greater business success began in 1828 when he started a profitable glue factory. This was followed by the momentous decision to participate in the construction of America's first railroads. Having established the Canton Iron Works near Baltimore in 1830, he soon won national reputation by building the first steam powered railroad locomotive made in America, the *Tom Thumb*. By 1845 he had become the first iron manufacturer to use anthracite coal to puddle iron in his New York City rolling and iron mill. He later moved to Trenton, New Jersey, where he began producing railroad iron in what was then the largest rolling-mill in the United States. Cooper's inventive genius seemed to know no bounds. In collaboration with his wife Sarah, he invented Jello, when at the suggestion of his wife Sarah he added fruit favors to another of his inventions, instant gelatin. As first president of the New York, Newfoundland & London Telegraph Co. he also oversaw the laying of the first trans-Atlantic cable, thus allowing almost instant communication between the United States and Europe.

1764
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John, Nicholas, Joseph and Moses Brown found what would later be Brown University



1859
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The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art receives its first students

1873
↓
Cornelius Vanderbilt, the greatest railroad builder of his generation, provides the initial endowment for Vanderbilt University.

1889
↓
John D. Rockefeller helps found the University of Chicago

1894
↓
Helen Gould, daughter of Jay Gould, helps endow both the NYU University Heights campus, and the Hall of Fame for Great Americans



1901
↓
John D. Rockefeller founds what later would become Rockefeller University for medical research



Cooper was also an important force in American politics. He played an active role from the 1850s in the anti-slavery movement, and was a strong supporter of the Union cause during the American Civil War. Concerned about the fate of Native Americans in the West, Cooper helped organize the privately funded United States Indian Commission, dedicated to the protection of Native Americans and the ending of warfare in the west.

In the end, it was the Cooper Union that was his greatest source of pride, and, barring Jello, his best known achievement. Peter Cooper was not America's first great educational philanthropist. The Brown family had already contributed in the eighteenth century to the creation of Brown University. Peter Cooper was a different kind of more modern, industrial capitalist. He was one of the first in a long line of industrial inventors and entrepreneurs who, by their inventive genius, greatly enriched both the nation and themselves. Then, proud of the fortunes they had accumulated, both they (and their children) handsomely endowed institutions of education, thus helping to ensure the continuing industrial progress in America, as well as a more general enlightenment. Among the greatest of these was philanthropists was Andrew Carnegie, another member of the Hall of Fame, who would help finance Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, as well as what would later become Carnegie Mellon University. It was through the generosity of Helen Gould, daughter of railroad tycoon Jay Gould, that New York University was able to build its architecturally important University Heights campus (now Bronx Community College), as well as the Hall of Fame for Great Americans, a National Historical Landmark that continues to inspire so many people today.



Cooper Union

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1912
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Andrew Carnegie funds an Institute in Pittsburgh that would eventually become Carnegie Mellon University



1915
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The Rockefeller Foundation funds the Peking Union Medical College

1924
↓
James Buchanan Duke provides an enormous endowment for what would become Duke University.



2000
↓
The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation helps expand educational opportunities in the United States



2006
↓
Warren Buffett doubles the size of the Gates Foundation endowment

Bibliography

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