

WILLIAM ARMSTRONG COOPER 1813-1909

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William Armstrong "Uncle Billy" Cooper is famous in Kentucky history as a Baptist minister and lecturer. For approximately three-quarters of a century he was active in the pulpit and on the lecture platform. Kind, revolutionary, daring, liberal and cheerful, he met every church, governmental and social problem tactfully and with determination.

--William came of a staunch, religious and patriotic breed. George Frederick Cooper (1759-1841), his grandfather, was born of Dutch parentage in New York State in 1759, at a place about midway between New York City and a village by the name of Little York situated on the banks of the Hudson River. The area is now a part of the great city of New York. In 1775, the grandfather, in company with a William Cooper, journeyed with Daniel Boone to Kentucky, where, in the years 1775-76, William raised a crop of corn on a tract of land lying on the left fork of Otter Creek above Clover Bottom near Boonesborough, Kentucky. Some historians believe that this crop, along with a similar crop planted by a John Cooper in a creek bottom near the present site of Paris, Kentucky, in 1775, to be among the very first crops harvested by white men in the area now known as central Kentucky. William Cooper later claimed the settlement and pre-emption to the Clover Bottom land, near Boonesborough, through Colonel William Henderson, and was granted the settlement for four hundred acres and pre-emption of one thousand acres adjoining, and a certificate was issued accordingly.¹

Some historians list the youthful Frederick Cooper as a member of Daniel Boone's posse that rescued Francis Callaway, Elizabeth Callaway and Jemima Boone from the Indians on July 15th, 1775.²

In 1777 the adventurous Frederick Cooper journeyed to York, Pennsylvania, where he entered the Revolutionary Army. He gave signal service during the war and drove a provision wagon to Valley Forge, coming in contact with George Washington. Later, he was moved south to North Carolina where he served as a corporal under Colonel Locke. Subsequently, service under Generals Gates and Sumter brought about his capture by the British, but he managed to escape a few hours later and served under General Morgan at Cowpens and at Eutaw Springs.

At one time or another during the Revolutionary War, Frederick Cooper served under the following officers: Capt.

McKeny, in the First Regiment of North Carolina, commanded by Col. Martin Butler; General George Washington and Major John Carmichael at Valley Forge, Elkhorn River, and Monmouth Court House; General Gates, Colonel Locke and Captain Enoch in South Carolina; General Davidson on Licking River in South Carolina; General Morgan and Captain Calston at Broad River, Packett River, and Cowpens; General Green and Captain Moore at 96, Salisbury, High Hills, Eutaw Springs, and Ashley River, near Charleston in South Carolina. He also served in the First and Tenth Regiments of North Carolina troops; in a Fifth Battalion (A) of Pennsylvania troops.

In only two of his many enlistments did Frederick Cooper enter the Continental Army as a substitute for another. In September 1777, he entered the service as a substitute for Jacob Welchay and in November, 1780, he entered the service as a substitute for Daniel A. Curs.³

Frederick was present at the Cornwallis surrender in Yorktown on October 19, 1781, and after receiving his discharge on August 28, 1782, he returned to Rowan County, North Carolina, where he married Dorothy Call, sister of Congressman Daniel Call, in 1781, and subsequently returned with his family to Kentucky.

There were born as a result of this marriage ten children, namely: Caty Cooper, born 1784; Anne Cooper, born February 1786; Daniel Cooper, born 1788; Henry Cooper, born September 25, 1790; John Cooper, born June 9, 1793; William Cooper, born November 25, 1787; Abraham Cooper, born November 9, 1798; Betsy Cooper, born March 1803; Isaac Cooper, born December 20, 1805; and Jacob Cooper, the youngest child, born in April 1808.

The graves of George Frederick Cooper and that of Jacob, his youngest son, were located on Beaver Creek in Wayne County and were never moved by the United States Government and are now, no doubt, many feet under water of the lake formed by Wolf Creek Dam. The greater part of the old Cooper homestead was owned by Oscar Phipps before Wolf Creek Dam was constructed. Part of the old homestead, too, is now under water.

James Cooper and Robert Cooper, believed to have been relatives of George Frederick Cooper, came into Kentucky very early and both were killed by Indians. David Cooper, a son of James Cooper, moved from Pennsylvania to Kentucky in 1785. According to tradition, which is substantiated in many particulars by numerous records, two other Coopers, namely Malachi Cooper and his brother, Edward, settled north of the Cumberland River

in what is now the Fishing Creek Section of Pulaski County, about 1780. Caleb Cooper, an acquaintance but no relation of George Frederick, settled in what is now Wayne County, Kentucky, in 1784. Leonard Cooper, also an acquaintance but no known relation of George Frederick, settled at Harrodsburg about 1775, while a John Cooper settled near the present city of Paris, Kentucky, the same year.

Like George Frederick and many other Kentucky settlers of the era, all of these early Coopers were very strong adherents to the Baptist faith.⁴

Many of Frederick Cooper's descendants have been and are now nationally prominent in governmental, theological, and literary circles. Many of them have followed his example of leaving the old home to set out through the wilderness to establish a new one on a new frontier.

William A. "Uncle Billy" Cooper's father, the fourth child of Frederick, was a Baptist minister named Henry who was born September 25, 1790 in Wayne County, on the Kentucky frontier. During his brief thirty-six years, amid the frontier hardships and limitations, Henry Cooper became a man of honor and influence in the growing settlement.

At an early age, Henry Cooper professed religion and joined the Beaver Creek Baptist Church in Wayne County. After some years of study, he was licensed to exercise his religious and oratorical talents and in due time was ordained to the ministry. He is said to have been a young man of excellent promise. He was not allowed to remain long in his chosen field. In May, 1826, he became ill and he died on the first day of June, 1826.⁵

On January 11, 1811, Henry Cooper married Patience Back, and William Armstrong was their second child. He was born in Wayne County, Kentucky, in the Cumberland River Valley on May 4, 1813. He received his schooling from his father and settlement school masters. It is known that he was an able mathematician, surveyor, and had a thorough knowledge of Latin. He acquired an excellent library. Most of his books were on theological and biblical subjects, history, mathematics, and government. The library volumes were sold at public auction at his death; but a few, printed in the early part of the eighteenth century, remain in possession of his descendants. He was always intensely interested in governmental affairs and civic progress.

Reverend Cooper was one of three men who surveyed and established the boundary line between Wayne and Clinton counties of Kentucky. After the work had been completed, it was

discovered that the county was without funds and unable to pay the men for their many weeks of difficult work. When the county's financial distress was made known to the Reverend Cooper, he immediately donated his services, and his two colleagues followed his example.

During all of William Cooper's years in the ministry, he had no thought of turning his activity to financial profit. Irrespective of demand, he often traveled at his own expense and never at any time asked for or received any definite salary for his work. He was possessed of sufficient estate to enable him to pursue his work without material consideration, and further blessed with a desire to do so as well as a special gift for making and retaining money from his land.

William Cooper's non-profit custom of preaching was followed by his oldest brother, Elder Emberson E. Cooper, also a Baptist minister. From an article appearing in an Albany, Oregon, newspaper dated June 19, 1920, headlined: "COOPER FAMILY JOIN IN UNION SEVENTEENTH ANNUAL EVENT AT E. W. COOPER HOME. DESCENDANTS OF ELDER E. E. COOPER GATHER. FAMILY CONTAINS MANY MEN IN AFFAIRS OF STATE AND NATION," we learn that Elder Cooper "was proud to say that he served the Lord and the Lord's people without money and without price." According to the article, among the prominent persons expected to attend were Fred J. Cooper, a grandson and noted cartoonist, and Casper W. Hodgson, manager of the World Publishing Company, both of New York City. Mr. Hodgson's wife was a granddaughter of Elder Cooper.

At an early age, William A. Cooper developed a keen intellect, a convincing manner of speech, and acquired a thorough knowledge of the Bible and a very erect stature, which characterized him throughout his long life.

About the year 1833, William Armstrong Cooper was united in marriage with Sallie Cooper, a relative. Sallie Cooper had just returned home from boarding school. She was a charming young girl, a sweet character, well educated, and was of great assistance to her husband in his religious work. Their children were H. Lewis Cooper, born July 4, 1835; Leusetta A. Cooper (Judd), born May 28, 1842; Elizabeth Evelyn Cooper (Sandusky) born April 1, 1850; Littleton and Livingston (twins) Cooper, born July 10, 1852; and Cansaida Cooper, born November 10, 1855, who died in her twenty-second year.

William Cooper sought knowledge for its own sake, as well as for its practical application. He never relinquished his search

for fresh knowledge and wisdom, as shown by his letter of January 29, 1906, to his nephew, D. J. Cooper, The Dalles, Oregon, wherein he states that he is past ninety-two years of age, "but in good health; ride horseback or in buggy, eat heartily, sleep some and study theology."⁶

At the time William A. Cooper came into the ministry there were large sections of Wayne County that had no churches. He organized many churches in different sections of the county. He organized more churches and helped erect more churches in both Wayne and Clinton counties than any person in the history of these counties. If all of the early church records of Russell County were available, they would probably disclose that Russell County could also be included in the latter statement. Some of the rural churches that dot the countryside of Lincoln County are also largely the result of William Cooper's activities.

There exist a few large photographs of "Uncle Billy" Cooper, some of which still hang above the mantel-pieces and on the walls of homes in Wayne, Clinton, Pulaski, and Russell counties, Kentucky. He was also well known in Pickett, Fentress, and Clay counties, Tennessee, as late as 1900. In his earlier years, his ability and fame as a minister and orator brought him engagements in eighteen states, taking him as far east as Boston, Massachusetts, and as far west as Western Texas. He was most active in Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Georgia, and Texas. At the age of eighty-one, he spent a year in West Texas as a missionary.⁷

His extensive travel and nearly three-quarters of a century in the pulpit makes it impossible to obtain a really accurate record of the number of people he baptized, the number of marriages he performed, or the number of funerals at which he officiated.

John H. Spencer's *History of Kentucky Baptists* states that William Cooper supposed he had baptized well over two thousand persons at the time of its publication in 1885, which was twenty-four years before his death. Estimates at his death ran as high as six thousand baptisms and twenty-five hundred marriages. R. C. Kimble, writing in the *Wayne County Outlook* on April 30, 1909, estimated that he had baptized three thousand persons and married about thirteen hundred couples. But it is believed this estimate pertains only to Wayne County where he served his home church of Beaver Creek for more than fifty years. In the year 1876, he baptized four hundred fifty persons. He also served as pastor of the following Clinton and Wayne county churches: Clear Fork, Cumberland City, New Hope, Friendship,

Bethel, Mt. Pisgah, Taylor's Grove, Canadas Creek, Parnell, Mt. Pleasant, Charity, and Steubenville.⁸

By 1885 Reverend Cooper had been elected moderator of the South Concord Association at least nineteen times, had served as clerk two years, and preached the introductory sermon before it on at least eighteen occasions. A card from Samuel Colgate marked 1891, found in his effects, shows that he furnished Colgate University a copy of the minutes of the meeting which formed the South Concord Association of Baptists in 1825.

Among the thousands he baptized were many notable personages. According to his children and tradition, he baptized six persons who became governors of states. It is well known that he baptized two governors of Kentucky, namely, Thomas E. Bramblett and Preston H. Leslie, and two governors of Tennessee, namely, "Alf" and Bob Taylor.⁹

It has been said that W. A. Cooper had more influence on the public thinking in the 1800's than any other person in Wayne County. Services rendered his church and fellowmen were numerous, and he witnessed many difficult days. His fearlessness, influence, and abilities can be better understood by reading the following article, authored by Colonel M. W. Powers of Parmleysville, Kentucky, and published in the *Wayne County Outlook* in 1906:

A TIME THAT TRIED MEN'S SOULS

At Monticello, August, 1861.

Some of the older citizens of Wayne County can well remember the excitement that prevailed in our country forty-six years ago at the breaking out of the Civil War and how the passions of the people rose to a white heat during the month of August, 1861.

They can recall vividly the redoubtable Home Guards under the command of Major Layton, who was an ardent supporter of the Union, the arrest of suspected Southern Sympathizers who were carried before Judge Burton and required to take the oath of allegiance to the United States Government.

The tension now between persons holding different opinions about the war had become more and more strained resulting in a counter organization called the "State Rights Guards" in command of Captain Coffey. To complicate matters, the East Tennessee Loyalists came pouring over the mountains in grand military

fashion with fife and drum on their way to the nearest recruiting station. It was on Monday, the 25th of August, 1861, that the more judicious citizens of the county, men of all shades of opinion, beholding the excited state of the public mind and imminence of Civil War in our midst, called upon the Rev. W. A. Cooper to devise some plan to calm the troubled water. Mr. Cooper replied, "If both parties invite me, I will make the attempt though I fail."

This being done, Mr. Cooper appointed the next Saturday, August 30th, as a suitable day for the people to meet at the Court House in Monticello and he would address them.

Saturday came and the people poured into town from every part of the county. Mr. Cooper, then in the full strength of his intellectual vigor, spoke *for two hours and twenty minutes*, and at the close offered the following resolutions which were adopted without a dissenting voice:

1st—Whereas our country is in a great commotion and the destructive and immoral war is raging in our once peaceful and happy land, our streets filled with armed hosts and baleful rumors spreading with lightning speed, stirring the blood of men and exasperating them to the very highest pitch, severing the ties of friendship that have so long subsisted among friends; and Whereas it is the duty of all good citizens to calm the excitement prevailing, so be it resolved:

2nd—That we approve the position taken by the State of Kentucky that it is patriotic and conducive to peace, that we, the people of Wayne County, should be loyal citizens and that we arrange Home Guards as the law directs and that we arm and equip ourselves for self-defense alone, that being one (our) construction of the law.

3rd—Be it resolved that in our opinion the deplorable condition of our county appeals to us in a higher sense than any party spirit and that it becomes us in this dreadful crisis to sink party consideration, and from the depths of our hearts erase all prejudice and cultivate the spirit of the Holy Christian Religion. Be it resolved that we make

Liberty, Peace and Protection a common cause and that we unite the two Monticello Home Guards into one military organization subject to the same drill and training in the muster-field; that our former political division be forgotten in the security, safety and protection to our bank and other property.

4th—Be it resolved that the celebration of peace be our constant aim—that a mass meeting be held and that the voice of the people be heard; that we hoist a white flag with this inscription: "Peace is the Motto of Wayne County," and give such other proofs as will convince the world that we are for peace.

5th—Resolved that deploring the distressed condition of our common county we set apart the first day of October next as a day of fasting and prayer to Almighty God to grant us divine aid in restoring peace and prosperity and that all persons who possess the same spirit do all in consent with us.

There are two other sections of these resolutions which are lost, but suffice to say the adoption of them so overwhelmingly proves that Mr. Cooper's influence was supreme of the hour. This noble man is still living in Wayne County defending the cause of Christ every Saturday and Sunday in the different churches, often riding horseback twenty-five miles to fill an appointment. Though ninety-five years old, his mind is clear.

At the conclusion of Rev. Cooper's speech of August 30th, 1861, a huge white flag made from a tablecloth, bearing the inscription "Peace is the Motto of Wayne County," was hoisted and the citizens, most of whom carried concealed weapons, dispersed and went home.

According to the late Clem Cooper and E. O. Cooper of Monticello, Kentucky, Clem Cooper had a copy of the talk, but E. W. "Bud" Cooper took it back to Oregon with him when he last visited Kentucky. All efforts to locate a complete copy of what the late Captain John W. Tuttle, of Monticello, described as "the most interesting and best delivered speech that he had ever heard" have failed.

During his last years, "Uncle Billy" lived with his son Livingston Cooper on Beaver Creek in Wayne County. His daughter-in-law, Pernetie Smith Cooper, became a favorite

person with him as she was always careful to see that he was comfortable. She humored him, joked with him, and generally kept him in good spirits. These facts are clearly supported by a letter to D. J. Cooper in 1906, in which he states "I am living with Livingston, my son. I have a horse and buggy, a comfortable mansion to stay in, have plenty on the table three times a day, and good as any on the globe. The children are good to me, and I am in a good humor most of the time."

Twice within the two years preceding his death he was thrown by his horse named "George" and his leg was fractured. On each occasion it took a long time for his leg to heal. However, his ninety-sixth year found him back in the saddle, and he rode horseback up to within two weeks before his death.

Early in March of 1909 a sudden cold seized the old minister. The cold settled into pneumonia, which, after four or five days, ended life on March 31st. His mind remained clear and active to within an hour of his death.

Throughout his last illness, Reverend Cooper remained cheerful. Only for a few brief seconds did he become serious long enough to state that as he had clung to and carried the word of God throughout the greater part of his life, he wanted to carry and cling to the word of God in death, and thereupon he requested his son, Livingston, in the presence of his daughter-in-law, Pernetie, that in the event he died to make sure that he was buried with a Bible in his hands. Livingston carried out his last serious request.

He was buried in the Elk Spring Valley Cemetery at Monticello. The inscription on the monument marking his grave reads:

W. A. Cooper
Born May 4, 1813; Died March 31, 1909.
Seventy-three years a Baptist Preacher
in Wayne County, Kentucky.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Kentucky Historical Society *Register*, Vol. 21, p. 97. Frederick Cooper, Pension No. W3001, Abstract Pension Records, Wayne County, Ky., The Filson Club. Wayne County (Ky.) Court Clerk's office, Deed Books "C" p. 274, "G" p. 374. "L" pp. 253, 353, and "M" p. 134.

² J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists* (1886), Vol. II, p. 392. Letters of J. M. and W. A. Cooper to relatives in Oregon.

³ Pension No. W3001 *op. cit.*... Walter Clark, *State Records of North Carolina*, Vol. 16 (1782-83), p. 1035; Vol. 17 (1781-85), Army Account No. 2409, p. 201. *Pennsylvania Archives—Sixth Series*, Vol. 2.

⁴ Walter Clark, *op. cit.* Vol. 16, p. 1035 (10th Regiment, McRee's Company). Pension No. W3001, *op. cit.* J. H. Spencer, *op. cit.* Vol. 2, 392.

⁵ J. H. Spencer, *op. cit.* Vol. 2, p. 392. Kentucky Land Grants, Book 23,

p. 107. Wayne County (Ky.) Court Clerk's office, Deed Book "H" p. 256.

⁶ Marriage Records, Wayne County Clerk's office, pp. 81, 82, 83. Augusta Phillips Johnson, *A Century of Wayne County, Kentucky. The Western Evangel*, Abilene, Texas, May 19, 1909, p. 8. *Wayne County Outlook*, April 20, 1909. James M. Cooper, McCauley, Texas, *From Then 'Til Now*, printed at Abilene, Texas, November 15, 1915.

⁷ *The Western Evangel*, May 19, 1909.

⁸ R. C. Kimble, *Wayne County Outlook*, April 20, 1909. J. H. Spencer, *op. cit.* Vol. 2, p. 392.

⁹ Information furnished by a daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Sandusky, now deceased, of Harrodsburg, Ky., and Livingston Cooper, now deceased, of Moreland, Kentucky. Verification can be obtained from church records.

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 Kentucky Land Grants—Book 12, page 514. Date of Survey: March 14, 1806.
 Kentucky Land Grants 11-23, 1804, Wayne County, Cumberland River.
The State Records of North Carolina, Vol. XVI, 1782-1783 p. 1035. Also Vol. XVII, Abstract of Army Accounts of North Carolina, No. 2409, p. 201.
Pennsylvania Archives, Sixth Series, Vol. 2—Fifth Battalion (A) Lieut. Colonel Thomas Croaker, page 165.
 Wayne County (Kentucky) Court Clerk's Office, Deed Book 1 page 543, dated Dec. 20, 1798; Deed Book 22 page 94; Deed Book 22 page 107; Deed Book A, page 108; Book C page 46; Book C page 207; Book D pp. 75-260; Book G page 374; Book H page 111; Book H pp. 241 & 256; Book G page 274; Book H page 164; Book H pp. 252 & 256; Book L page 253; Book M page 134, 466 & 468; Book N page 328.
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Wayne County Outlook, April 20, 1909; October 1, 1928.
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 Livingston Cooper's Bible.
 Letters from Oattie Shearer Gregory, dated Jan. 6, 1941, Oct. 20, 1941, July 11, 1941.
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 J. H. Spencer, *History of Kentucky Baptists* (1886), Vol. II, pp. 392 and 393.
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 Letter signed by J. M. Cooper and W. A. Cooper to relatives in Oregon.
 Records of Clear Fork, Cumberland City, New Hope, Friendship, Bethel, Mt. Pisgah, Taylor's Grove, Canada's Creek, Parnell, Mt. Pleasant, Charity, and Steubenville Baptist Churches.