



Nathaniel Shipman, aka “Natty Bumppo”

From the Otsego Farmer, July 19, 1912

This is the story in substance of the original of Cooper’s “Natty Bumppo” as it was written by the Hon. L. Chandler Ball of Hoosick Falls, N. Y. some sixty years ago. It is furnished by The Otsego Farmer, by James A. Beckett, Esq., of that place. Of course, it must be taken into consideration that it was written to prove the claim of Nathaniel Shipman to recognition as the original Natty, while it has been accepted hereabouts as a well-established theory that David Shipman was the genuine claimant. The article does throw considerable light upon questions that have arisen in the minds of those who have given the subject consideration and will be read with interest by any such, no matter upon which side they may have a leaning. As

Mr. Beckett says, there was only one man who could have settled the difficulty and his body lies these many years in Christ churchyard.

Nathaniel Shipman, a noted hunter and trapper, came to the Walloomsac valley at the close of the last French and Indian War, or about the year 1760. It is said that in the interval before that war he was with a detachment of soldiers sent to build a stockade which was located near the mouth of the Walloomsac River for the protection of the few settlers on and near the old war trail of the French and Indians, whose atrocities in this section are a matter of history.

Shipman married and made his home in the Walloomsac valley, in what is now the northeastern part of the town of Hoosick. He was a noted hunter and trapper and was the friend of the Mohican Indians who remained in this district, and was treated by them with great respect and confidence. They hunted and lived together, and had fought side by side in the last French and Indian war. In this way Shipman became noted as a scout and Indian fighter, and was the trusted servant and friend of a distinguished British officer, for whom he always retained a most sincere affection.

When the war of the Revolution broke out, his loyalty to his friend (the British officer) made him hesitate to join the American army, and his apparent indifference to the patriot cause subjected him to the suspicion of being a Tory. Later, when the invasion of Burgoyne became imminent, and the feeling against Tories ran high, Shipman was attacked by his neighbors, tarred and feathered, and driven out of the place where he then lived, and all trace of him was lost.

Nothing is known of Nathaniel Shipman’s family, except that his daughter, Patience Shipman, born October 14, 1762, was married in 1796 to John Ryan, of the town of Hoosick. John Ryan was one of the most prominent and influential men of this section in his day. He came to this section when a mere boy, as the agent of the heirs of Jacobus Van Courtland, one of the four original grantees of the Hoosick patent. He was a man of the highest integrity, and was all his life one of the most trusted and best-liked men in the town. Besides holding nearly all the minor offices in the town, he was supervisor for nine years, he was a member of the convention to amend the constitution of the State in 1801, and he served as a member of Assembly in 1803 to 1806. He was the first in this district to be elected as a Republican, as the anti-Federal party was then known.

While in Albany in 1803, he became acquainted with Judge William Cooper of Cooperstown, who related to him many of his trials and adventures in settling his large, landed estate in Otsego County. Judge Cooper also told Mr. Ryan about an aged white man, who in company with a Mohican Indian lived in a hut or cave near Otsego Lake. This white man was represented as a famous hunter, and a warrior of some celebrity in the French and Indian wars, a man of quaint speech and simple habits and, like his Indian companion, a true son of the forest. Judge Cooper constantly referred to the eccentric habits of the old hunter, and made his quaint sayings the subject of his daily conversation with his friends and acquaintances to such an extent, that when Mr. Ryan returned to his home at the close of the session, he related to his family the stories which Judge Cooper had told him of the old hunter of Otsego lake and his quaint sayings and doings.

Mrs. Ryan at once declared her belief that the old hunter whom he described to her was her father, who had been missing for twenty-six years. At the earnest solicitation of his wife, Mr. Ryan went to Cooperstown, making the journey of several days on horseback to see the old hunter, and thus relieve his wife's anxiety. On reaching the cabin of the hunter he found the confirmation of his wife's belief, for the white hunter described by Judge Cooper proved to be his wife's father, Nathaniel Shipman.

When urged by Ryan, Shipman returned with him to Hoosick, and was made known to their friends, and cared for as long as he could be induced to stay, but his old habits were strong and the next spring he wandered off and again made his home in the forest. On the approach of winter, he was found- in a cave on the east side of the Green Mountains. Being well supplied with food for the winter, he refused to return with the friends who discovered his camp but promised to return later. The next year he returned and lived with the Ryan family until his death in 1809. He was buried in the Ryan lot in the village burying ground, by the side of an uncle of Mr. Ryan named Jacobs, who was the first person buried there, and in the course of time his son-in-law and daughter were buried beside him.

The story of how Nathaniel Shipman was found at Otsego Lake, and the restoration of his family after an absence of twenty-six years, through the agency of Judge William Cooper, was known to the people of this vicinity a score of years before the publication of "The Pioneers" by his son, James Fenimore Cooper. Therefore, long before the character of Leatherstocking was created, and for that reason, as well as from the high character and standing of those through whom it has come down to us, it should have far more weight with unprejudiced minds than the unsupported assertion of interested persons, no matter how often repeated.

It is evident from Cooper's "Chronicles of Cooperstown" published in 1838, that he had some Shipman in mind when he created the character of Leatherstocking, as in it he speaks of "Shipman the Leatherstocking of the region." The story of Nathaniel Shipman places him as the Shipman who was nearest to the Cooper family during the time that the author was at home, especially during his boyhood days when he was most likely to be impressed by the personality which he afterwards made famous in the character of "Natty Bumppo." That Nathaniel Shipman was such a man is shown in a letter written long after his death by Dr. Benjamin Walworth, younger brother of Chancellor Reuben Hyde Walworth, whose family resided here for more than twenty years from

1795. He said, "I knew him in some of the last years of his life, that is, I knew him as youngsters know a facetious, jovial old man who prefers the company of young people to the company of old age. He was generally known as Grandfather Shipman, and was always full of fun and frolic, and the young people were always pleased to have him with them. He spent the last years of his life with his son-in-law, John Ryan of Hoosick, until his death somewhere about the year 1809."

Nathaniel Shipman's life more nearly resembles the life of "Natty Bumppo" than does the life of David Shipman. Nathaniel was a hunter and a wanderer, whose early life was spent among the Indians, and as a scout and Indian fighter with the British soldiers, while David was a farmer whose life was spent with his family, with whom hunting was a pastime. Nathaniel served as a scout and guide in the last two French and Indian wars, and David, who was probably born in 1740 at the earliest, was only four years old when Nathaniel was serving in the war about which the Deerslayer was written. And again, Nathaniel was driven from his home in the Walloomsac valley because he would not join the American army in 1777, while David has left an honorable record as a soldier in that army in the Revolution. And last, was not the author led to name his character "Natty" because Nathaniel Shipman was the Shipman who filled his mind when he wrote "The Pioneers."

After reading the life of J. Fenimore Cooper it appears that his life was so ordered that there was not much chance of his coming in close or continued contact with David Shipman after Nathaniel left Cooperstown. Mr. Cooper entered Yale College in 1802, the year before Nathaniel left Otsego Lake. He left college in 1806, and went to sea, where he got his training for the navy. On his return in 1807 he was commissioned in the navy, and served until 1811, when he married Miss. De Lancey and went to live at Angevine, the Westchester estate of Mrs. Cooper's family, where his first novels, "Precaution" and "The Spy," were written in 1820 and 1821. So, it is extremely doubtful if he spent much time in the Cooperstown home from the time of Nathaniel's departure until after David's death in 1813.

It is claimed for David Shipman that he too furnished game, etc., for the Cooper family. This may well be true, because he lived in this vicinity about ten years after Nathaniel came to Hoosick with Mr. Ryan.

Soon after the publication of "The Pioneers," Azariah Eddy, a son of one of the wealthiest residents of Hoosick Falls, being in New York City, was shown by a friend a copy of that work which he had received, and on the fly leaf was written the names of the principal characters and their-originals, and opposite the name of Leatherstocking was written the name "Nathaniel Shipman."

Mr. Eddy was employed by Mr. Ryan to file and arrange his papers and letters both of a public and private nature, and in this confidential employment learned much of Mr. Ryan's personal history, especially that part connected with Mr. Shipman, and being interested in the story and knowing something of Shipman, he purchased a copy of "The Pioneers," and on his return read portions of it to Mr. Ryan, who listened with great interest to the description of Leatherstocking, and his exploits, until at some point in the story he started to his feet and exclaimed, "That is Father Shipman."

It is not often that two persons of the same name are claimants for such an honor. In personal appearance they were enough alike to be brothers, and there will always remain in our minds the impression that they were members of the same family, though there is no evidence of the fact. The prominence given to the claims of David Shipman as compared with the claims of Nathaniel, is explained by the fact that David was the ancestor of a numerous family who remained in that vicinity and did not know of the existence of Nathaniel Shipman except perhaps a dim tradition of a wandering elder brother who never married; while Nathaniel's family became extinct with the death in 1842 of Mrs. Patience Shipman Ryan, and there was no one who had a distinct personal interest in keeping the claims of Nathaniel before the public. It may be true that David and Nathaniel were not known to each other, but we deem it more than a mere coincidence that the name Patience, apparently originating with Nathaniel's daughter, has been preserved among the descendants of David Shipman.

When Judge Ball wrote the story of Nathaniel Shipman, he asked Doctor Walworth, then of Fredonia, N.Y., and Azariah Eddy, Esq., then of Lyons, Iowa, who was the executor of Mr. Ryan's estate, and others to give him their recollections of the matter. They had been residents of the town when Nathaniel returned, and from the result of this correspondence he felt confident that Mrs. Ryan was not mistaken when she believed that her father was the original of the hero of the Leatherstocking Tales.

After all, in the final analysis of a matter of this kind, in the absence of any declaration by the author, we must depend largely if not entirely upon circumstances to guide us, because the only person who could have decided positively who was the original of Leatherstocking, sleeps his last sleep amid the scenes which his magic pen revealed to the world with so much charm and beauty. And in the absence of any such declaration, we believe that the story enacted a score of years before Cooper revealed the beauties of "Glimmerglass" to an admiring world, warrant our belief that Nathaniel Shipman, whose remains lie in an unmarked grave in our old village churchyard, was the original of Natty Bumppo who for nearly a century has been known as Leatherstocking.