



The Pioneers; Or, The Sources of the Susquehanna

James Fenimore Cooper

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EXCERPT:

As this work professes, in its title-page, to be a descriptive tale, they who will take the trouble to read it may be glad to know how much of its contents is literal fact, and how much is intended to represent a general picture. The author is very sensible that, had he confined himself to the latter, always the most effective, as it is the most valuable, mode of conveying knowledge of this nature, he would have made a far better book. But in commencing to describe scenes, and perhaps he may add characters, that were so familiar to his own youth, there was a constant temptation to delineate that which he had known, rather than that which he might have imagined. This rigid adhesion to truth, an indispensable requisite in history and travels, destroys the charm of fiction; for all that is necessary to be conveyed to the mind by the latter had better be done by delineations of principles, and of characters in their classes, than by a too fastidious attention to originals.

New York having but one county of Otsego, and the Susquehanna but one proper source, there can be no mistake as to the site of the tale. The history of this district of country, so far as it is connected with civilized men, is soon told.

Otsego, in common with most of the interior of the province of New York, was included in the county of Albany previously to the war of the separation. It then became, in a subsequent division of territory, a part of Montgomery; and finally, having obtained a sufficient population of its own, it was set apart as a county by itself shortly after the peace of 1783. It lies among those low spurs of the Alleghanies which cover the midland counties of New York, and it is a little east of a meridional line drawn through the centre of the State. As the waters of New York flow either southerly into the Atlantic or northerly into Ontario and its outlet, Otsego Lake, being the source of the Susquehanna, is of necessity among its highest lands. The face of the country, the climate as it was found by the whites, and the manners of the settlers, are described with a minuteness for which the author has no other apology than the force of his own recollections.

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