

MECHANIC TO MILLIONAIRE: THE PETER COOPER STORY



★★★★



Year Released: 2010

MPAA Rating: Unrated

Running Time: 60 minutes

Peter Cooper is mostly forgotten today – if his name turns up, it is usually in an elementary school history lesson that clumps together the names of prominent 19th century inventors.

But Cooper's achievements are clearly deserving of a second look, and Janet Gardner's documentary provides a pleasurable re-examination of the man and his achievements.

Born in 1791, Cooper was forced to drop out of school at a young age in order to help his less-than-successful entrepreneurial father. Fortunately, Cooper was a natural-born inventor and businessman – his early efforts in producing industrial-strength glue and an instant-flavored gelatin dessert mix (both derived from the same slaughterhouse sources!) helped him earn his first fortune.

Cooper earned his place in history with the 1830 creation of the Tom Thumb, the first American-built steam locomotive. The success of this creation helped to change the face of U.S. transportation – and the results can still be felt today by anyone that steps on and off a train. If that wasn't enough, Cooper's expansions into steel manufacturing and real estate investor further swelled his fortune.

However, Cooper opted to use his wealth for philanthropic purposes: he created Cooper Union in New York, which broke taboos by providing free co-educational college classes. Cooper Union was the setting of the February 1860 speech by Abraham Lincoln that helped secure his efforts to seek the White House.

Cooper would later support the activities of political activist Victoria Woodhull, whose 1872 presidential campaign broke the gender barrier in national politics. Cooper also got involved in politics, albeit with no success: his 1876 presidential campaign as the candidate of the Greenback Party made zero impact with the voting public. Then again, he was 85 years old at the time of the race. (He died seven years later.)

Gardner's film mixes rare photographs and handsomely produced dramatic re-enactments to offer the full depth and scope of Cooper's life, insights and achievements. The result is a winning celebration of a genuine American hero. With luck, this wonderful documentary will rescue Cooper from being assigned the textbook fate of just being the 19th century guy that had something to do with the railroad.