

# Newsday

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## Review: "Mechanic to Millionaire: The Peter Cooper Story"

**Reason to watch:** The story of a 19th century inventor with Long Island roots.

**When/Where:** Tuesday night at 10 on WNET/13

## Inventive life of a 'Mechanic to Millionaire'

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Born in New York in 1791, Peter Cooper was one of the most astonishing people of the 19th century, even though many of us in the 21st may not be familiar with him. A hatmaker's son, he had little formal education, other than that conferred by his family's hard-knocks life moving from place to place in search of work, and ultimately settling in Hempstead.

Cooper would become one of the great inventors, industrialists and capitalists of the age. He designed and built America's first steam railroad engine and later made his fortune with a glue factory and iron foundry. He also ran for president in 1876 at the age of 85 on the Greenback Party ticket (he was a staunch supporter of paper currency who opposed the gold standard).

The most apparent manifestation of his legacy is Cooper Union, the privately funded college in the East Village of Manhattan. The school was open to women in a time where many public universities weren't. It was also here where a clean-shaven candidate for president, Abraham Lincoln, delivered one of his most famous speeches in 1860.

**MY SAY** Cooper's Long Island roots are eloquently established in Janet Gardner's documentary by incorporating various scenes of his early life filmed at Old Bethpage Village Restoration and the Long Island Museum of American Art, History & Carriages in Stony Brook. Cooper's original home in Bethpage is even shown. Cooper clearly had influence, but he eschewed flash. He was not Trumpster of the Gilded Age but a quiet, purposeful risk-taker who steadily built his wealth and power.

**BOTTOM LINE** For historians, this kind of life is a rich mother lode, but for TV viewers, these kinds of lives can be a bit static, and at times, "Mechanic to Millionaire" succumbs to a placid storytelling rhythm. Nevertheless, Cooper is someone well worth knowing.

Photo credit: AP Photo/ | American manufacturer and philanthropist Peter Cooper is shown in this undated photo at an unknown location. He founded the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City in 1859. Cooper was born in New York City in 1791 and died in 1883. (AP Photo)