

There were no exclamations, no talk at all. Seconds and then minutes passed, and the curiosity and anticipation that had brought them to the falls curdled into horror and shame. Thousands, unable to talk or look each other in the eyes, turned and walked silently away. Within minutes, nearly everyone was gone. That night, while haunted spectators played the scene over and over in their minds, and while journalists and preachers worked on what they would say, Joab Britton's pleasure yawl, lined with burning torches, scoured the chasm for the corpse of Sam Patch.⁵¹

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CELEBRITY

They did not find the body. Days and then months passed, and many believed that Sam Patch was alive. Sam, the story went, had swum behind the waterfall to a rock ledge where he had hidden dry clothes and a bottle of rum. He waited until dark, climbed out of the chasm, and headed east. A few days after the last leap a letter signed by Sam Patch appeared at the entrance to the Arcade Building. Sam promised to deliver a speech at the Eagle Tavern a few days later. Some placed bets on whether he would appear (the tannery owner Jacob Graves, a former player in the town band, wagered one hundred dollars that Sam would keep his promise) and a crowd showed up on the appointed day. Sam was spotted in upstate villages, and a New Yorker claimed to have met and spoken with him in Manhattan. In late November a Boston paper printed a long letter from Sam Patch. The leap at Rochester had been a "capital hoax," wrote Sam. The Sam Patch who made the leap was a man of straw and paint, weighted with rocks to ensure that it would sink. The real Sam Patch stood in the crowd, enjoyed the grief and elegies, and walked out of Rochester. The stories persisted for years. When Nathaniel Hawthorne passed through Rochester in 1832, locals told him that Sam Patch had hidden behind the waterfall, and that he was still alive.¹

Two weeks after the leap an upstate newspaper reported that Sam's body had been found in the chasm. Surgeons, said the paper, had discovered that both shoulders were dislocated and, worse, that Sam had suffered "the rupture of a blood-vessel, caused by the sudden chill of the atmosphere through which he passed to the water." Newspapers all over the Northeast picked up the story, but the Rochester papers remained silent. There had been no body. A similar bogus story surfaced in February.²

In March 1830 a laborer named Silas Hudson found the body of Sam Patch. Hudson was working at the Latta House in Charlottte, where the Genesee River empties into Lake Ontario. On a cold March morning he walked the hotel's horses to the river to water them. He kicked through the spring ice, and up bobbed Sam Patch. Hudson ran to the Latta House and fetched the owner and some others, and they pulled the body from the river, laid it out on a stoneboat, and hauled it to the hotel. There was a school nearby. Some of the boys and girls, though they knew they would get a licking, ran out of the schoolyard and joined the little crowd around the stoneboat.³

The dead man was indeed Sam Patch. The body had been in the water for four months and had been dragged down seven miles of riverbed and over the lower falls, but it was in remarkably good shape—proof, said an unkind editor, of the preservative effects of alcohol. Most of the hair was gone; the face was battered, and there was a deep gash over one of the eyes. But there were no broken bones, and Cochran's band pants and the Irishman's black scarf were still in place. The doctors had their look, then Sam was buried in a little graveyard near the mouth of the Genesee. Someone put up a rough wooden board with an epitaph:

Sam Patch
Such is Fame

The epitaph was mistaken: Sam Patch was famous not only in the last months of his life but for decades after his death. Americans heard about Sam Patch in newspapers, sentimental poetry, and parlor magazines. He showed up in comic annuals, farmers' almanacs, dream books, and minstrel shows, and Sam Patch stage plays were mainstays of democratic theater for the rest of the nineteenth century. Sam's name and sayings entered popular speech and stayed there. "Some things can be done as well as others" became a popular saying—both a throwaway line and a sign of calm determination. Angry people were "as cross as Sam Patch." "What the Sam Patch?" and "Where in Sam Patch" were common ways of swearing without swearing, and Americans pinned the name Sam Patch on anything or anyone that jumped or dropped or fell. In 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry's expedition to Japan adopted a castaway Japanese sailor named Sentoro, took him on as a servant and mascot, and named him Sam Patch. There have been four children's books and two modern novels about Sam Patch. A President of the United States owned a horse named Sam Patch. There was a Sam Patch brand of cigar.⁴

This was modern celebrity, and Sam Patch was one of its American pioneers. Sam had been born into the unstable margins of a world governed by inheritance, fixed social rank, and ordained life courses—a world where people like Sam Patch did not become famous. Public renown had followed the classical forms of the Romans: it was the unsought result of civic, religious, or military accomplishment, enjoyed only by disinterested, civic-minded gentlemen. The founders of the American republic were such gentlemen. They were deeply concerned with fame, but they knew that ambition and fame-seeking must be grounded in disinterested service. Transgressions of that rule led—as in the notorious case of Aaron Burr—to infamy. Americans during the lifetime of Sam Patch knew classical fame in the person of George Washington, the planter-patriot who led the Revolution, established the new republic, and then retired to his farm with his dignity and integrity

intact. They had seen classical fame most recently in the national tour of the "Old Republican" Lafayette—another gentleman who served humanity without looking for applause.⁵

Sam Patch won a new kind of fame. He was born into obscurity, and he did nothing that classicists considered worthy of renown. Yet he *wanted* to be famous and he succeeded: he made a name that everyone knew, deeds that everyone had heard of, virtues and peculiarities that were the stuff of boyhood fantasies and barroom jokes. There were other, similar new celebrities in the 1820s. Sam shared the spotlight with the half-mythical western heroes Mike Fink and Davy Crockett, and with the actor Edwin Forrest, who was emerging as the workingman's tragedian. Even the comic Philadelphian Colonel Pluck competed for attention. Newspapers in the fall of 1829 talked about Fanny Wright, the notorious British feminist and socialist who traveled about the country preaching against marriage and religion. There were the Siamese Twins, who arrived in America that fall and were drawing crowds and a lot of discussion. There was, of course, President Andrew Jackson, who won his fame in the old military way, then became the first President with a "personality" and some of the trappings of modern celebrity. And there was Sam Patch, who rose from low beginnings to make a name known throughout the republic—simply by leaping waterfalls.⁶

Americans who read the newspapers in the late 1820s (whether they liked what they read or not) learned that anyone could be famous. Democracy, commerce, and new kinds of popular imagination were rising all at once. Cut loose from their pasts and picking their way through uncharted territory, Americans crafted themselves as their ancestors had crafted chairs and farm fields. Celebrities played a part in that: they dramatized the possibilities of individual self-making in the nineteenth century. At the same time, celebrities were *commodified* individuals—imagined and sold by a new apparatus of publicity (newspapers, popular theater, democratic literature) that shaped stories for an emerging mass audience. The

Sam Patch who reached the public was seldom, to borrow Sam's phrase, the Real Sam Patch. The celebrity Sam Patch existed first in newspaper stories that gave few details about him, then in talk about those stories, then in the work of actors, poets, preachers, newsmen, and writers who had their own uses for Sam Patch, then in talk about all of that. (Here the distinction between "authentic" folklore and commercial "fake" misses the point. Celebrity is one of the materials from which people in democratic, capitalist America make their folklore and themselves.)⁷

Sam's posthumous notoriety was strongest in the 1830s and 1840s, when living memory of his leaps was fresh. These were also the years of Jacksonian democracy and the invention of a two-party politics that, along with celebrity and the newspapers and much more, marked the rise of a mass democratic public in the United States. Whigs and Democrats reduced public debate to two choices. Those alternatives shaped politics decisively, and they went a long way toward organizing individual personalities. The man who identified himself as a Democrat or Whig disclosed his position on big questions on nationality, economic development, and the proper nature of government. At the same time, he dropped powerful hints about his cultural loyalties: the church that he attended, the entertainments that he patronized or avoided, the newspapers that he read and believed, the women whom he found attractive, the notions of manhood that he adopted or rejected—and what popped into his head when he heard the name Sam Patch. Most of the writers, actors, and others who invented the celebrity Sam Patch were openly Whigs or Democrats. The same was true of people who read the newspapers and went to shows. There are countless ways of talking about the posthumous Sam Patch, but it makes historical sense to note that Americans remembered Sam Patch in distinctively Whiggish and Democratic ways.

The literati of the old seaport cities (an emerging cluster of New York critics and writers in particular) were almost unanimously supporters of the Whig Party. They were few in number and out of step with much that was becoming American, but they were wealthy and educated, they viewed themselves as the makers of American taste, and they controlled important printing presses. These gentlemen upheld the old society of rank and classical notions of fame. They disliked Sam Patch because he was vulgar, and because he transgressed the order of renown. In tones ranging from genteel wit to outright disgust, the Whig literati confronted the unsettling fact that Sam Patch was famous.

"Celebrity of character gives every republican a title," bemoaned the Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post's* account of Sam's first Rochester leap. Sam was determined to escape "the gloomy shades of obscurity" and to "immortalize his name among the great men of the age," and the paper suggested that Sam affix "Some things can be done as well as others" to his family crest (it was better than "that wishy-washy stuff, which composes the arms of other great men"), that he call himself "Samuel Patch, Esq.," and that he leap from Paterson to Washington to address Congress. A New York City editor, similarly upset by the disorderly implications of modern celebrity, pronounced Sam Patch "indisputably the most distinguished man of his day, with the exception of Miss Fanny Wright."⁸

Two weeks after Sam's death, William Leete Stone's *New-York Commercial Advertiser* published "A Monody, made on the late Mr. Samuel Patch, by an admirer of the Bathos." The admirer was Robert Sands, "a clever and learned Columbia man" who was a gentleman poet of New York City. Between his mock admiration for Patch's bravery and his contempt for Sam's low ambition ("drunk, with ruin and with renown"), Sands managed to fit in references to Pope, Longinus, and Byron, and to make comparisons between Sam Patch and Leander, Sappho, Empedocles, Icarus, Helle, Vulcan, Apollo, Phaeton, Alexander the Great, and the off-

spring of Maia: they all reached for too much, and they all fell. Sam would join them on the roll of failed classical heroes:

His name shall be a portion in the batch
Of the heroic dough, which baking Time
Kneads for consuming ages—and the chime
Of Fame's old bells, long as they truly ring,
Shall tell of him; he dived for the sublime,
And found it.

One of Colonel Stone's rival editors condemned Sands's "Monody" as "a hundred and seventy one lines of vulgarisms" and a sustained crime "against rhyme, reason, the king's English, and common sense." Sands continued to live and write among the New York literati.⁹

In 1840 the *Knickerbocker Magazine* published a long poem on Sam Patch. The *Knickerbocker* spoke for a circle of New York Whigs who practiced writing as a leisured avocation and who aspired to make their city, their magazine, and themselves the arbiters of American cosmopolitanism and taste. The author of "The Great Descender" was a gentleman physician named Thomas Ward who wrote under the pseudonym "Flaccus." "The Great Descender" was a mock epic in the dark modes of the literary sublime. The Sam Patch of the piece is solitary, half-crazed, obsessed with fame. ("His care-worn features, wild and fever-tinged / Bespoke a soul ambition's fire had singed.") Sam cannot think of a way to become famous. He asks the stars for help, and spies a meteor crossing the sky: "Renown is mine!—the heavens have marked the way: / Yon meteor whispers: wherefor climb at all, / Since fame as well irradiates things that fall?" and he is off and jumping. The poem lumbers through twenty-four pages of epic heroism, sublime and philosophical asides, science lessons, and the odd genteel joke (Sam's death: "He yielded, vanquished by a drop too much"), and ends with what the modestly anonymous Flaccus really had in mind:

Oh! Happy chance that gave thee for my theme!
 Now, linked together, will we sail the stream;
 Thou shalt be called the Patch whom Flaccus sang,
 Or I the bard who Patch's praises rang:
 Yes! I shall buoy thee on th' immortal sea,
 Or, failing that, thyself shalt carry me!

Flaccus's unembarrassed cupidity, not to mention the *Knickbocker's* readiness to put it into print, was possible only because the notion that an American could become famous either by leaping waterfalls or writing about people who did such things was new. (In the case of Flaccus, it didn't work. The *North American Review* praised the effort to make literature out of Sam's "strange notoriety," but pronounced the story's mix of "the mean and sublime" too difficult a task for even the best of genteel poets. Edgar Allan Poe was less friendly. Poe roundly disliked the *Knickbocker's* attempt to stake out an emerging American literature as the province of New York gentlemen. He lambasted "The Great Descender" as "twattle," "elaborate doggerel," and an "atrocity" that proved the Knickerbocker Circle's incompetence in literary matters. As for Flaccus, he was simply "the very worst of all the wretched poets that ever existed on the earth.")¹⁰

After 1840 the parlor magazines and New York poets moved away from Sam Patch, but they returned to him whenever they encountered instances of low fame, low ambition, and the mindless bravado that went with both. A balloonist who got drunk before ascending was "like Sam Patch, so famous for a similar absurdity." The celebrated French novelist and critic Madame de Staël might travel openly and in sin with an English lover, but a magazine warned, while one woman might get away with such indiscretions, "it would be just as safe for others to follow her example, as it would have been for a man to have jumped down Niagara after Sam Patch." A young Civil War lieutenant told his mother, "I shall rival Sam Patch at a leap, and jump to the head at once. Three months is enough to make a colonel of me." (He

was, of course, killed.) When President Andrew Johnson, against the very public advice of General Ulysses Grant, removed Philip Sheridan from his post as military reconstructor of Louisiana and Texas, one commentator noted that the removal "shows [Johnson] to be a bold man, but of the kind of boldness that led Sam Patch to leap upon the Genesee Falls—to his destruction." King Louis Philippe built a regime upon demagoguery and facade, and was doomed to fall like Sam Patch. Ralph Waldo Emerson lowered himself to deliver half-coherent public lectures for money, wrote one critic: "his readers, at least, if not his hearers, are fully justified in looking upon him only as a sort of intellectual Sam Patch, who makes it his profession to go about the world, leaping down precipices, plunging into abysses, in every deep seeking a still lower [*sic*] in which to expose himself for the sake of the applause and the pay, which men are always willing to bestow on any one who is fool-hardy enough to entertain them with such extravagances."¹¹

Sam also survived as a target of polite wit, usually by being put into learned company in which he was comically out of place. Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club entertained itself with a poem about Sam Patch, and the medical faculty at that school included him (along with the Sea Serpent and the Siamese Twins) as a doctor in its Latin parody of the Quinquennial. When a book on prominent men of the nineteenth century included such unworries as the sensational journalist James Gordon Bennett, the camp-meeting preacher Peter Cartwright, and the duplicitous showman P. T. Barnum (all of them Democrats), a reviewer wondered why such a silly list of "noticeables" could not be expanded to include, among other undeserving Americans, Sam Patch. Whigs recognized the problem: a new kind of popularity was overrunning good sense. "A cheap method of notoriety, the world over, is this rearing and plunging," preached Mark Hopkins to the young men of Williams College. "Sam Patch, leaping over Genesee Falls, could gather a greater crowd than Daniel Webster."¹²

The genteel circles that included Flaccus and the Hasty Pudding were a minority within the Whig Party. Northern Whiggery found its core constituency among an emerging middle class that called itself “respectable.” Middle-class Whigs embraced democratic ambition and the self-made man. But they knew that the free individual could be dangerous, and they insisted that ambition be acted out within a disciplined and domestic bourgeois universe. In distinguishing laudable aspiration from destructive self-seeking they found their bad examples among gamblers, confidence men, speculators, merchants who sold slaves or whiskey, and—to a remarkable degree—entertainers. The daredevil Sam Patch provided a near-perfect example of self-fashioning gone wrong: he was an itinerant showman who had no home, he avoided useful work, he was reckless, he drank, he sought fame for its own sake, and he corrupted the young.

In the late 1820s Rochester’s respectable preachers and journalists railed against military parades, the theater, the circus, shooting matches, patriotic celebrations, public hangings—anything that drew citizens away from home and work and put them into pleasure-seeking crowds. The leaps of Sam Patch were among the worst of these. Patch roamed the country seeking fame and money. He seduced young men into his exhibitions of reckless daring, filled their heads with overheated fantasy and wild, impossible dreams, and left their spirits dissipated and ready for more. After Sam’s last leap, preachers and editorial writers blamed the public that had paid money and provided an audience for Sam’s audacious stunt. One told a Sunday school class that any of them who had witnessed the jump would be judged guilty of murder by God. Another spoke of “strange and savage curiosity.”¹³

Sam Patch himself demonstrated what happened when a young man shunned work and morality for a life of itinerant fame-seeking. Following Sam’s death a Providence paper disclosed that

he had worked in Pawtucket, but “gave up mule spinning for his idle employment, until his vaulting ambition o’r leapt itself and the loss of his life has been the consequence.” An English visitor to Rochester learned that Sam was “given to drinking, and led a sort of vagabond life, such as one may well imagine a young fellow would fall into, who got his living through the summer by diving into various gulfs and rapids for the amusement of the fun-hunting ladies and gentlemen.” Later, a local newspaper recalled Sam Patch as “an unmitigated ‘Loafer,’ stolid, besotted, ignorant; it was impossible, almost, to conclude that he could be ambitious [and here the respectable distinction between right and wrong ambition], and yet a love of notoriety was his ruling passion.” Those who would be prosperous and respectable were warned to stay away from shows. In 1836 the editor of Boston’s *Farmer’s Almanack* quoted Farmer Cautious: “Confound all these idle sharpers, who get their living by making the people stare.” The editor agreed: “So I say. If any one has a little money to spare, let him put it into the savings bank, that he may be benefitted by it at some future time, when the Durants and Sam Patches, the fish-gulpers, the tumblers, the fire-eaters and the jockey balancers, and all the wheedling crew will not be worth a last year’s bird’s nest.”¹⁴

There were funnier uses for Sam Patch, and writers for a middle-class public soon found them. Most obviously, Sam made a fine comic Yankee. William Leete Stone, of course, had concocted the first Yankee Sam Patch. Seba Smith, editor of the *Portland Courier* in Maine, made the second. The *Courier*, a Whig paper labeling itself “The Daily Courier and Family Reader,” refused lottery advertisements, and Smith took entertainment ads only from the Portland Museum, assuring his readers that it was a “rational and harmless enjoyment.” He hated Jacksonian democracy, and in his war against incompetence and selfish ambition he concocted one of the great Yankee characters: Major Jack Downing of Downingville, a down-easter, a supporter of Andrew Jackson, and a rising politician driven by groundless

ambition that was both cunning and naive. Smith's Major Downing would soon be a member of Jackson's Kitchen Cabinet and an aspirant to the presidency.¹⁵

The *Courier*, true to its ethos of family readership and rational enjoyment, printed no accounts of the Niagara and Rochester leaps of Sam Patch. But Patch's death was too good to pass up. Seba Smith's verse "Biography of Sam Patch" appeared early in 1830. Smith's Sam Patch was a poor man without talent or connections but with a thirst for fame:

And if he would become renown'd
And live in song and story,
T'was time he should be looking round
For deeds of fame and glory.

What shall I do? Quoth honest Sam;

"There is no war a brewing;

"And duels are but dirty things,

"Scarce worth a body's doing.

"And if I should be President,

"I see I'm up a tree.

"For neither prints or Congress-men,

"Have nominated me."

But still the maggot in his head

Told Sam he was a gump,

For if he could do nothing else,

Most surely he could jump.

Driven by applause, he went from waterfall to waterfall, winning fame and, at Niagara, the title "Squire Samuel O'Cataraact." (Seba Smith was evidently a reader and casual plagiarizer of Hiram Doolittle, Jun.) Then the fatal descent at Rochester:

And here our hero should have stopt,
And husbanded his brilliant fame,

But, ah, he took one leap too much,
And most all heroes do the same.

There was, of course, a Whiggish moral to the story: "It will deter others from jumping from the same heights that Sam did; and in these times of political excitement, why may not politicians derive a useful moral from the same, and learn to jump with moderation? They should be cautious of the cheerings and shoutings of warm partizans, for verily in politicks, as perpendicular heights, there are some jumps which are fatal." (A few years later, Smith identified the author as Major Jack Downing, who had recognized a kindred spirit in Sam Patch.)¹⁶

Hard on the heels of Jack Downing's Patch came "The Last Leap," a mock Yankee-dialect autobiography in Henry Finn's *American Comic Annual* for 1831. Finn's humor—like Seba Smith's—was decidedly Whiggish in tone: didactic, reformist, and worried about the wrong kinds of ambition. Finn's Sam Patch wrote his story on the eve of his last leap, "for the eggssample uv posterity." Patch begins: "The famullee uv the Patches are about as old as Josefs cote uv menny cullers; and by jumpin down as often as I hav, I hav pruv'd myself a genuine *desendent*—if they wur proprietors of land, it must have ben but a foo Patches." He goes on to his triumphs at Paterson and Niagara, and comments on the allure of cheap celebrity—"Hoo wood n't be a hero? hoo wood n't be proud of the shouts, wich is shouted fur a Gimral what conkers with his swore, and a jugular what swallers it." Finn, like Seba Smith, reassumed his own Whiggish voice when he concluded with a moral on the rights and wrongs of ambition: "Gentle Reader, it *was* his last jump.—The lesson is instructive. It will serve to teach you, that in all the concerns and contentions of our little life, the trials of temper—the propensities of passion—the many temptations that make the sweet music of social combination discordant—if you would keep yourself and others out of harm's way, adopt and act up to this homely precept: *Look, before you leap.*"¹⁷

A third Yankee Sam Patch came from Canada. In 1836 William Halburton, a Tory magistrate in Nova Scotia, imagined a Yankee clockmaker named Sam Slick—yet another rustic and devoted upstart. Halburton was a British subject and a monarchist, and he thought that every republican was a self-serving fool. At one point he has Sam Slick console a preacher who is bewailing the fate of the Liberty Tree—once fenced and protected and pronounced the most beautiful thing in the world, now defiled by mobs until “it looks no better than a gallows tree.” Faced with the collapse of republicanism, Sam Slick—like Napoleon and the Americans before him—masks his failures by invading other countries. He casts an imperialistic eye on Nova Scotia, and thinks of enlisting Sam Patch into the cause. For Sam is alive. He entered the water at Niagara with such force that he swam through the earth and came up in the South Sea, where he was picked up by a whaling captain. (“In that are Niagara dive,” Sam explained to the captain, “I went so everlasting deep, I thought it was just as short to come up tother side, so out I came in these parts. If I don’t take the shine off the Sea Serpent, when I get back to Boston, then my name’s not Sam Patch.”) Sam Slick proposes hiring Patch to dive deep into the North Atlantic with a torpedo and blow up Nova Scotia to make way for American roads, canals, and republican bombast. (The plot against Nova Scotia was soon forgotten, but Sam’s dive to the other side of the world reappeared three years later in *The American Joe Miller*, a popular comic almanac.)¹⁸

Gentility and respectability were roughly uniform across the North, and Whigs fabricated political culture for a broad and self-conscious constituency. Jacksonian Democrats faced a more complicated task. Democrats ranged from New Hampshire yeomen to Indiana farmers to New York City artisans to Methodist preachers to Rhode Island mule spinners—a motley array of the marginal,

the local, and the disaffected. Democrats shared suspicions of the emerging commercial culture and the self-assured moralizers who often carried it. They also shared memories of a Revolution that endowed ordinary lives with dignity and that promised a democratic distribution of respect. But those commonalities were grounded in ways of life that were local and particular, and that often cared little about the wider world. It was the task of the Democratic Party to organize those local hopes and fears into a national democratic culture, and in doing that they turned to the new forms of communications and popular culture. Whigs denounced the rude and often silly democracy that made Sam Patch a celebrity. Democrats embraced it, had fun with it, and made much of their political culture out of it. In the process, Sam Patch became a model American democrat.

The Sam Patch who became most familiar to nineteenth-century Americans was fabricated by an actor named Dan Marble. Marble’s political affiliation is not known, but he certainly acted like a Democrat: he made his living as a low comedian at a time and in places in which Whig respectables denounced the theater out of hand; he was a spread-eagle patriot who hated Britain and monarchy (he narrowly avoided fistfights with royalists while touring Canada), and he transformed the stage Yankee—in the person of Sam Patch—into a popular democratic hero.¹⁹

In 1836 the twenty-six-year-old Marble was playing bit parts and telling Yankee stories with a strolling troupe in Buffalo. A local lawyer liked his Yankee sketches and presented him with an amateur play entitled *Sam Patch, the Yankee Jumper*. Marble played Sam Patch at Buffalo’s Eagle Theater in December 1836—acting before elaborate scenery and costumed, according to a boy who saw the performances, “much after the present caricature of Uncle Sam, minus the stars but glorifying in the stripes.”²⁰

Marble’s company moved on to Columbus, Ohio, where they transformed *Sam Patch* into an elaborate stage spectacle. They hired a master scene painter to make a huge Niagara backdrop for

the climactic scene, and carpenters and stage machinists built troubled waves in the foreground, with a wide trapdoor hidden behind the waves. Dan Marble, adding danger and physical spectacle to his shuffling, hands-in-pockets Yankeeisms, ended the play by leaping from the flies, forty feet down the painted Niagara, through the trapdoor, and onto bags of shavings, popping up while someone, somehow, created "a bubbling river of spray and foam, amid shouts of the heartiest western applause." It was a perilous leap. Marble injured himself repeatedly, and a machinist who insisted on making the jump at his own benefit performance took a few drinks, leaped in a fit of nerves, and broke his leg.²¹

The Columbus theater filled for every performance. Ohio boys leaped over fences and out of haylofts, and clerks jumped over their counters, all of them trying to be Sam Patch. Dan Marble could have taken his hit play directly to New York. Instead, he toured the western rivers, jumping Sam Patch in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Memphis, and Wheeling before heading east. He opened at the Bowers' Theater as the first democratic star to emerge from the western theaters, and he had learned a lot in the river towns. The farmers, laborers, and watermen of the Ohio Valley disliked actors (or anyone else) who put on airs. They insisted that players drink and sport with them, and they expected the occasional nod or knowing wink from the stage to the boys in the pit. They got all that from Dan Marble, as well as a jumping hero shaped to their tastes. New York's Bowers' audience encountered Sam Patch as a stage Yankee who had gone western. There were "flying leaps among the fancy—through a window by Sam," and someone named Phillip carried Katharine across a river during a terrible storm. Sam Patch shared a scene with Mrs. Trollope, and leaped Niagara Falls in a "union of courage and virtue—proving 'Some things can be done as well as others'—Mr. Marble will leap from the extreme height of the theatre, a feat never attempted by any one but himself [this neglects the wounded machinist back in Columbus], and prove that 'cold water can't drown love.'"²²

Dan Marble's Sam Patch merged the old Yankee drolleries and the bombast of the western hero into a new and enduring American character—an early and successful attempt to merge regional types (Tennessee frontiersmen, Ohio-river flatboatmen, New York firemen, and Rhode Island mule spinners—heroes whom folklorists call Ring-Tailed Roarers) into a national democratic vernacular. Marble received three more Sam Patch dramas: *Sam Patch at Home*, *Sam Patch in France* (in which Sam cavorted "among the 'Monseieurs'"), and, for Marble's London tour in 1844, *Sam Patch, the Jumper*. The last is the one Sam Patch play for which a script survives. It is a very bad English melodrama that concludes with Sam Patch leaping Niagara Falls to kill three villains, rescue the lead characters, and save their land. The Sam Patch of this play had taken on not only a penchant for righteous violence but a new way of talking. "Well, I reckon I'm as hungry as a serpent," says Sam. "I can fight like a bullet, dance like a bed bug, sing like a tea kettle, & court the gals just as slick as a time-piece." Somewhere between Buffalo and London, it seems, the Yankee Sam Patch had merged with the western frontiersman to form an all-American democratic hero: steadfastly brave and capable of great mayhem, crudely funny, governed by a born democrat's transcendent knowledge of right and wrong, and prone to begin his sentences with "Well, I reckon."²³

While Marble acted Sam Patch in Buffalo, young Charles C. Brown was attending Jamestown Academy in nearby Chautauqua County, where he studied the classics. But of course he and the other boys fantasized and made up stories out of school. His composition book included essays on temperance, phrenology, liberty, Andrew Jackson, and Sam Patch. Charles worshiped Andrew Jackson as a model American hero, "one who to protect his country knew no difficulty to great to be encountered and who by his firmness and unconquerable perseverance amid surrounding dangers, had saved her from foreign and intestine foes," even when "thousands were perishing by the victors sword

and humanity shuddered at the sight." Jackson saved the republic, "not by the art of intrigue or the juggling tricks of diplomacy," but by doing the right thing and fighting against all odds.

Brown's composition book also included a "Eulogy on Sam Patch," apparently written by one of his schoolmates. The Sam Patch of the piece was like Andrew Jackson, only more so. Sam was a poverty-stricken orphan who hungered for fame, like (here it goes again) Empedocles, Demosthenes, King Henry, "Cesar," and Napoleon. He was, it turns out, a forgotten hero of the Revolution: "He was unfortunate he deserved many honors which others usurped and it is even whispered that many of the Laurels which Washington won ought in justice to have adorned the brow of Patch," who "acted a most conspicuous part in achieving and defending the liberties we now enjoy." Having been cheated of the renown due to him as the "principal agent" of the American Revolution, Sam Patch put down his arms and sought marital bliss. Unhappily, he became "the victim of a cross and scholding wife." It was at that point that Sam (in a victory of democratic justice over classical form) "resolved to fill the world with his fame," and to "accomplish this purpose without the aid of others"—the chicanery of gentlemen and the perfidy of women, apparently, justifying his descent into ambition. While we cannot re-create schoolboy dreams at Jamestown Academy, they seem to have featured transcendent individuals like Andrew Jackson and Sam Patch who triumphed over misfortune and the dishonest tricks of their enemies through courage and indomitable will. Both on stage and at Jamestown Academy, Sam Patch lived on as a hero of Jacksonian melodrama.²⁴

Democrats with education and literary taste came to their own terms with Sam Patch. The editors of *The United States Democratic Review*, which began publication in 1837, sometimes shared their Whig competitors' views of men like Sam Patch. In 1858 they denounced William Walker, a proslavery adventurer who tried to conquer Nicaragua with a ragtag army of American volunteers: "It was a kind of Sam Patch heroism, ludicrous and melancholy." In

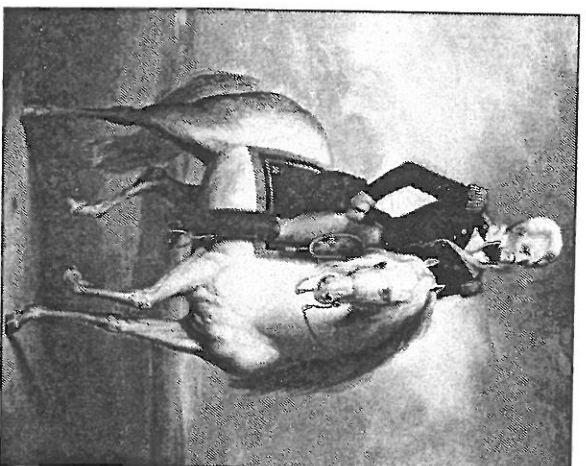
1847, however, the *Democratic Review* had sketched Mother Bailey, a Connecticut heroine of both the Revolution and the War of 1812, now eighty-eight years old and a model Democrat. She loved America and Andrew Jackson, and she hated British monarchy. (Her explanation of the potato blight of the 1840s: the British had buried their hireling Benedict Arnold in Nova Scotia, and the disease had spread from his accursed grave.) Mother Bailey was a spy old woman, "and even if she be called to *'trip it on the light fantastic toe'*, she can show you, Sam-Patch-like—"that some things can be done as well as others"—on the sole condition that the tune be 'Yankee-doodle,' or 'Jefferson and Liberty.'"²⁵

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville were perhaps the most distinguished of the Democrats who found literary uses for Sam Patch. A young Hawthorne stopped over at Rochester in 1832, where, at dusk and alone, he viewed Genesee Falls—less to see the ruined and overdeveloped falls, he tells us, than to imagine Sam Patch. "How stern a moral may be drawn from the story of poor Sam Patch!" he wrote. We wait for another sermon on low ambition and imbecile bravado, but Hawthorne's lesson goes deeper than that: "Why do we call him a madman or a fool, when he has left his memory around the falls of the Genesee, more permanently than if the letters of his name had been hewn into the forehead of the precipice?" Hawthorne nodded to the classical limits upon fame, but he insisted that Sam Patch was not the only man who was transgressing them: "Was the leaper of cataracts more mad or foolish than other men who throw away life, or misspend it in pursuit of empty fame, and seldom so triumphantly as he? That which he won is as invaluable as any except the unsought glory, spreading like the rich perfume of richer fruit from various and useful deeds." "Thus musing," he continued, "I lifted my eyes and beheld the spires, warehouses, and dwellings of Rochester." He went on to compose one of the livelier accounts of the grasping busybess and boomtown growth that other and (to Hawthorne) equally empty ambitions had made be-

side Genesee Falls. Hawthorne was among the few literary defenders of Sam Patch. But only because he knew that democratic ambition (Sams', merchants' and millers', and his own) was breaking up an old world and replacing it with something new and morally uncertain.²⁶

Herman Melville reached conclusions more like those of the entertainer Dan Marble and the schoolboy Charles Brown. In *Redburn* (1849), Melville tells the story of a gentleman's son who becomes a common seaman. Early on, the boy laments that his mismatched, ill-fitting used clothes make him look "like a Sam Patch, shambling round the deck in my rags and the wreck of my gaff-topsail boots. I often thought what my friends at home would have said, if they could but get one peep at me." But as his sailor's education proceeds he drops his self-consciousness and takes on the dangers of life at sea: "It is surprising," he says, "how soon a boy overcomes his timidity about going aloft. For my own part, my nerves became as steady as the earth's diameter, and I felt as fearless on the royal yard, as Sam Patch on the cliff of Niagara." Weeks at sea had turned the ragged, ridiculous boy into a trained man who approached dangerous work without fear. At the same time, Melville had moved his literary deployment of Sam Patch between precisely the same two points.²⁷

Finally, there was Andrew Jackson himself. In 1833 the City of Philadelphia presented President Jackson with a beautiful white horse. The horse became Jackson's favorite. President Jackson posed for a painting (not in his presidential black broadcloth but in his Old Hero's uniform) astride him, and rode him every morning in his retirement, through the slave quarters and cotton fields of the Hermitage, his Tennessee plantation. At its death, the horse was buried on the grounds of the Hermitage with full military honors. Jackson, before he became America's Man on Horseback, had bred, raced, and traded horses. In a mock apology for his informal education, Jackson claimed, "I do



Andrew Jackson on Sam Patch, by Ralph Earl (courtesy of the Ladies' Hermitage Association)

not pretend to know much, but I do know men and horses." The name of President Jackson's horse was Sam Patch.²⁸

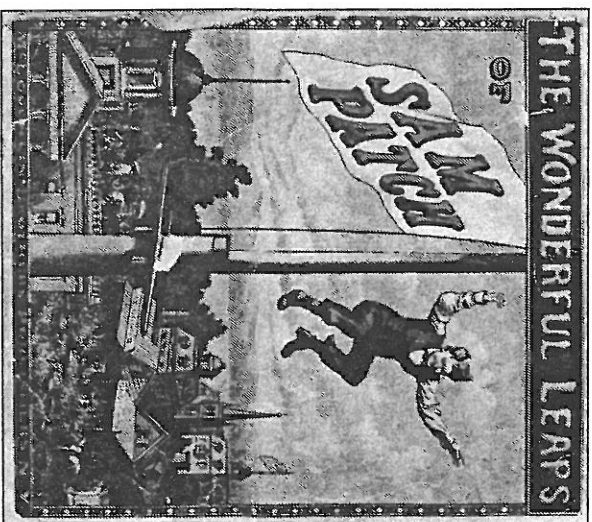
By 1850 (if we ignore the occasional genteel screed on low ambition) Sam Patch had lost the power to raise political and cultural hackles. He disappeared, then resurfaced as a plucky and harmless American folk hero. A children's book entitled *The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch* appeared in 1870. It was beautifully illustrated, and it featured a farm boy who loved to jump—from his mother's lap, from haylofts and church steeples, and from the dome of the national Capitol as well as from waterfalls. At about the same time, Sam appeared in a serious novel. In *Their Wedding Journey* (1871) William Dean Howells describes a honeymoon trip to Niagara Falls. At Rochester the groom is surprised to learn that his bride has never heard of Sam Patch,

and he tells Sam's story. With his superhuman leaps and his "Some things can be done as well as others," explains the young husband, Sam Patch supported "a great idea—the feasibility of all things"—a line that absorbed Sam Patch into a boundless and optimistic America that had never been his home.²⁹

The folklorist Richard Dorson rediscovered Sam Patch in 1945. In a series of articles, Dorson portrayed the leaper as a Ring-Tailed Roarer along the lines of Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, and Mose the Bowerly B'hoj. Dorson put Sam's name back in play, and among the results were three more children's books. Two are light and untroubled, but a tale put together by Arna Bontemps (of Harlem Renaissance fame) and the radical Jack Conroy pits the northeastern factory boy in jumping contests against a bullying western Hero. In 1986 there was a novel about Sam Patch, narrated by his bear.³⁰

The towns that had known Sam Patch remembered him in their own ways. Sam survived in the official memories of Pawtucket and Paterson only as a romantic oddity, but popular recollection was longer-lived. Paterson boys repeated the leaps of Sam Patch (they charged a quarter to visitors who wanted to watch), and people whittled souvenirs from the pine stump at Sam's jumping spot until the stump disappeared. At Pawtucket, boys jumped from the bridge until authorities put up a steel railing—backed up by a twenty-five-dollar fine—to stop them. In 1891 Pawtucket celebrated its Cotton Centennial with weeklong festivities that included a parade in honor of Samuel Slater. Following the parade, a fifty-year-old carpenter named Patrick Devlin joined the crowd on the bridge, climbed the railing, and jumped off. He told a reporter that he and his friends thought the celebration would be incomplete without a performance of this "ancient custom."³¹

Niagara Falls became a more popular tourist attraction, and its businessmen found small ways to cash in on Sam Patch.



Cover of *The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch* (authors' collection)

Middle-class honeymooners, day visitors, and the denizens of penny arcades and family hotels stood at "Patch's Point" and read the story of Sam Patch in their guidebooks. They also watched ropewalkers cross the chasm. In the twentieth century, barrel riders invented the most dangerous ways to play with Niagara. Sam was the first to test himself against the Falls, and he is honored in the Niagara Falls Daredavils Hall of Fame—tucked among rose gardens, wax-museum horror shows, money-changing booths, and franchise burger shops on the Canadian side.³²

Only Rochester nourished a public memory of Sam Patch. While respectables denounced Sam, others tried to have his body dug up and reburied at the Upper Falls—where he would greet visitors to the city. Taverns and canal boats displayed pictures of the Last Leap, and travelers were taken to the spot from which Sam had jumped. Sam's bear (or an animal advertised as such) was on display at a Rochester hotel. Little girls in Charlotte decorated Sam's grave with clamshells, and visitors—the sportsman

Sam Drake among them—showed up to pay their respects. In 1848 a Rochester boy named Hosea Hollenbrook, on the chance that someone might pay him for the performance, repeated Sam's leap at Genesee Falls. Hollenbrook was killed—in part, apparently, because he could not swim. Another jumper was Sam Scott. Scott had begun jumping from yardarms while in the Navy. In 1837 he came to Rochester and worked as a bartender at (coincidence seems unlikely) the Recess, in rooms below a music store. Scott left town to leap from bridges, ships' masts, and the tops of buildings in the late 1830s. Then he went to London, where he accidentally hanged himself performing a stunt before a horrified crowd.³³

The controversy over Sam Patch quieted down, and Rochester boosters found ways to make Sam a civic asset. Rochester did not remain a model boomtown. Sam Patch was one of its few claims to fame, and he became an adopted citizen. For many years, the predecessor of the New York Central Railroad stopped its trains while conductors pointed out the spot from which Sam had leaped. The town fathers determined to make Sam part of a civic celebration in the 1870s, and took the "Such is Fame" marker downtown and put it into a parade. Someone stole it, and the grave was unmarked until the 1940s, when a Rochester schoolboy launched a campaign that resulted in the erection of a proper headstone. On the west side of the Upper Falls, industrial development absorbed Sam's island late in the nineteenth century, and the area gave way to the abandoned factories and dangerous streets of a postindustrial city late in the twentieth. In recent years things have changed. The old militia ground and much of industrial Frankfurt are occupied by a new baseball park, and Brown's Race is restored and lined with restaurants and shops; postcards and souvenir pencils are available at Sam's Gift Patch. Above the falls, the visitor can cruise the Genesee River on the restored canal boat *Sam Patch*, and retire to a local microbrewery for a pitcher of Sam Patch Nitro Porter.³⁴

NOTES

I. Pawtucket

1. The date of the Patch family's arrival in Pawtucket is uncertain. They had lived previously in Marblehead, where their last entry in civil records was in February 1805. Sam's mother and sister joined a church in Pawtucket in April 1807. Family memory and subsequent folklore say they came to Pawtucket in 1807.
2. See in particular Alexander Hamilton, "Report on Manufactures, December 5, 1791," in Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Reports of Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1964), esp. 130–31 (quote, 130); Tenche Cox, *A View of the United States of America, in a Series of Papers, Written at Various Times, Between the Years 1787 and 1794* (New York, 1965; orig. 1794), 14, 55. No Manchesterers: George S. White, *Memoir of Samuel Slater, the Father of American Manufactures, Connected with a History of the Rise and Progress of the Cotton Manufacture in England and America* (New York, 1967; orig. 1836), 135. Such reassurances appear frequently in tracts reprinted in Michael Brewster Folsom and Steven D. Lubar, eds., *The Philosophy of Manufactures: Early Debates over Industrialization in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).
3. Gary B. Kulk, "Factory Discipline in the New Nation: Almy, Brown & Slater and the First Cotton Mill Workers, 1790–1808," *Massachusetts Review* 28 (Spring 1987), 165–84 (quotes, pp. 172, 173); "poor children": "Account of a Journal of Josiah Quincy," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2nd Series, 4 (1888), 124. Baptist: