James Fenimore Cooper had a remarkably boring, wealthy existence. His parents were shrewd and ambitious, easily acquiring money and power. Thus he was exposed early on to the finer pleasures of life.

A rich line of ancestry connects the author to the land which was the focus of his most well-known novels. William Cooper, his father, who was to become one of the most successful founders of new settlements in the colonial republic, was descended from the English Quakers who had come to West Jersey around the year 168- and had prospered. In 1775 William married an heiress, Elizabeth Fenimore, undoubtedly of English descent. During the American Revolution and right after it ended, Cooper and a business partner bought up the rights to a barren, unproductive colonial grant of land on Otsego Lake in central New York. After a visit in the fall to survey the lonely, empty countryside, William opened up the sale of land early in 1786 and was so successful that many settlers came even before the snow had melted. After several years of traveling back and forth between his luxurious New Jersey home and the wilderness, Cooper decided to settle permanently in Cooperstown, the new village he had constructed on the southern shore of the lake. There is a tradition that at the last minute his wife refused to stir from her armchair, and he had to carry her out in it before the great wagon-train could start with its load of household goods, servants, and seven children. The youngest child on the journey was only fourteen months old when they arrived at Cooperstown in November 1790. He had been born in Burlington, New Jersey on September 15, 1789, and had been named simply James Cooper. (It was not until 1826 that as an act of family piety he was to add the "Fenimore" to his name.)

The risks of life in the new settlement were not those we usually associate with pioneering. Just the year before, the settlers had almost starved to death. Only William Cooper's influence in the legislature enabled him to get adequate supplies. The Indians, a traditional frontier enemy, were not really a danger. They had been severely beaten in the Revolution; only a few came occasionally to hunt and fish or to sell that townspeople brooms and baskets they had hand-crafted. The memory of their earlier massacres was still powerful, and when James was five a great Indian alarm brought the men out on picket duty. This false alarm was his closest experience to Indian warfare, and from the safe distance of forty years, Cooper would find the whole incident ridiculous. Perhaps this accounts for his comfort with using tons of Indian warfare in his books.

In a few years William Cooper acquired a judgeship, a seat in Congress as a Federalist, and a fabulous mansion. He was kind to his tenants, but harsh to his political opponents. His brutal tactics did much to ruin the Federalist party in New York. James was sent to the local Academy for a few years before being transferred to the care of an Episcopal clergyman in Albany. The Reverent Thomas Ellison's small school offered all of the advantages to which the son of a wealthy Federalist was entitled: connections to powerful people and instruction in the grand, prejudiced style of the old country. In 1803, after Ellison' death, Cooper entered Yale College. He was thirteen, "a fine sparkling beautiful boy of alluring person and interesting manners," as one of his teachers, scientist Benjamin Silliman. His charm never ceased for those who loved him. He was expelled from Yale in his junior year for traditional undergraduate misconduct?there is a story of an explosion in a college room and of a donkey placed in a professor's chair. His brother's career at Princeton had already been cut short by what appears to be an attempt to burn down the college.

In October 1806 Judge Cooper sent James to sea as a common sailor. Cooper enjoyed his year on the Sterling. The passage to England was long and fraught with storms. The author mostly drifted around London alone or with his shipmates. After his return to
America, Cooper was commissioned a midshipman. His three years in the Navy, which would make him an authority on Naval warfare his entire life, were spent peacefully. In 1809 William Cooper was leaving a political meeting in Albany and was killed when an opponent of his struck him on the head. The worldly position of James was much improved. He inherited $50,000 immediately and still had a remainder interest with his brothers in the $700,000 estate. Less than half a year later he was engaged to marry Susan Augusta De Lancey, a woman from a fine, wealthy family. The marriage took place in 1811, and Cooper resigned from the Navy. In the next few years the couple moved between Cooperstown and Susan's native Westchester. They settled in the latter around 1817, and built a home near Scarsdale. The Coopers had a thoroughly happy, old-fashioned marriage in which the husband ran the show but the wife still got her way. Five daughters and two sons were born to them, and one of each gender would die in infancy.

Between 1813 and 1819 Cooper's five brothers all died. Cooper had to support their widows and children. Around the last of these deaths he began to write. One evening when his wife was unwell, he was reading aloud the latest English novel of family life. He threw the book down in disgust, saying he could write a better story himself. Susan challenged him to do so. James set to work immediately. His first novel, Precaution, was finished in 1820. It is a moral tale that imitated the style of Jane Austen. Most heartily agree that it was a terrible book, but luckily Cooper improved with age. In the next two decades he would go on to write the famous Leatherstocking Tales, one of which was *The Last of the Mohicans*, published in 1826. Cooper wrote many political articles for local papers. The money he had as a young man was not wasted, so he and his family remained well-off for his entire life. Cooper claimed that he still he had lived up to his artistic vision when he died in 1851, but as most lovers of the adventure story will agree, he came close enough.