



Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper

By Paul E. Johnson

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The true history of a legendary American folk hero

In the 1820s, a fellow named Sam Patch grew up in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, working there (when he wasn't drinking) as a mill hand for one of America's new textile companies. Sam made a name for himself one day by jumping seventy feet into the tumultuous waters below Pawtucket Falls. When in 1827 he repeated the stunt in Paterson, New Jersey, another mill town, an even larger audience gathered to cheer on the daredevil they would call the "Jersey Jumper." Inevitably, he went to Niagara Falls, where in 1829 he jumped not once but twice in front of thousands who had paid for a good view.

The distinguished social historian Paul E. Johnson gives this deceptively simple story all its deserved richness, revealing in its characters and social settings a virtual microcosm of Jacksonian America. He also relates the real jumper to the mythic Sam Patch who turned up as a daring moral hero in the works of Hawthorne and Melville, in London plays and pantomimes, and in the spotlight with Davy Crockett—a Sam Patch who became the namesake of Andrew Jackson's favorite horse.

In his shrewd and powerful analysis, Johnson casts new light on aspects of American society that we may have overlooked or underestimated. This is innovative American history at its best.

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- Sales Rank: #324467 in eBooks
- Published on: 2004-06-16
- Released on: 2004-06-16
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Little is known of daredevil Sam Patch (1800-1829). When he was seven, Patch, his mother and siblings were working in the mills of Pawtucket, R.I. The waterfalls that powered the mills attracted working boys like Sam, who'd compete at jumping from the heights. In his mid-20s, Patch moved to Paterson, N.J., where he worked as a skilled mule spinner. In September 1827, he made his first spectacular jump-right over Paterson's Passaic Falls-which he repeated the following July 4, declaring his motto: "Some things can be done as well as others." After Paterson, Patch jumped from a high cataract in Hoboken harbor, over Niagara Falls and over the Genesee Falls in Rochester, N.Y., where on a second leap, probably intoxicated, he died. Johnson, a history professor at the University of South Carolina, warns readers in his preface that Patch is a "front-porch story"-there isn't much of a story, but some interesting meanders. While Johnson makes a strong case that Patch was thumbing his nose at the capitalists with his Passaic Falls jumps, he admits that after Paterson, Patch was more interested in being a "showman and a celebrity" than in knocking anyone's politics, unless staying drunk can be interpreted as a political statement (which Johnson sometimes implies). In the end, Patch's handful of spectacular jumps just can't carry so much political baggage. Still, readers interested in shifting class dynamics in early Pawtucket, Paterson and Rochester may find some suggestive material here. 12 b&w illus.

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Review

"Nudged forward by Paul Johnson's consummate storytelling, the reader plunges headlong into the raging torrents of antebellum America, where manly artisans thrash about with scheming capitalists, incorrigible wastrels with prim reformers. Having taken the leap, the reader will find, as did Sam Patch, that you cannot go back. This is a wonderful, clever book."

--Mark C. Carnes, Ann Whitney Olin Professor of History, Barnard College, Columbia University

"With this little masterpiece, Paul Johnson proves yet again that he is one of the greatest artists currently writing history anywhere. Scholar, stylist, and intellectual daredevil, Johnson brings to life a forlorn and intrepid American hero--and an entire era in our past--while operating at the highest levels of subtlety, wit, and seriousness. *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* contains the kind of genius one expects from fine literature as well as from fine history. It is stunning." --Sean Wilentz, Princeton University

"On Friday, November 13, 1829, a cheering crowd watched a drunken factory hand named Sam Patch step bravely off the top of Genesee Falls at Rochester, New York--and vanish into legend. In this compact masterpiece of historical detective work, Paul E. Johnson manages both to bring this unlikely early American hero back to vivid life, and to say a good many fresh and provocative things about Jacksonian America, the industrial revolution and the cult of celebrity."

--Geoffrey C. Ward, author of *A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin D. Roosevelt*

From the Inside Flap

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