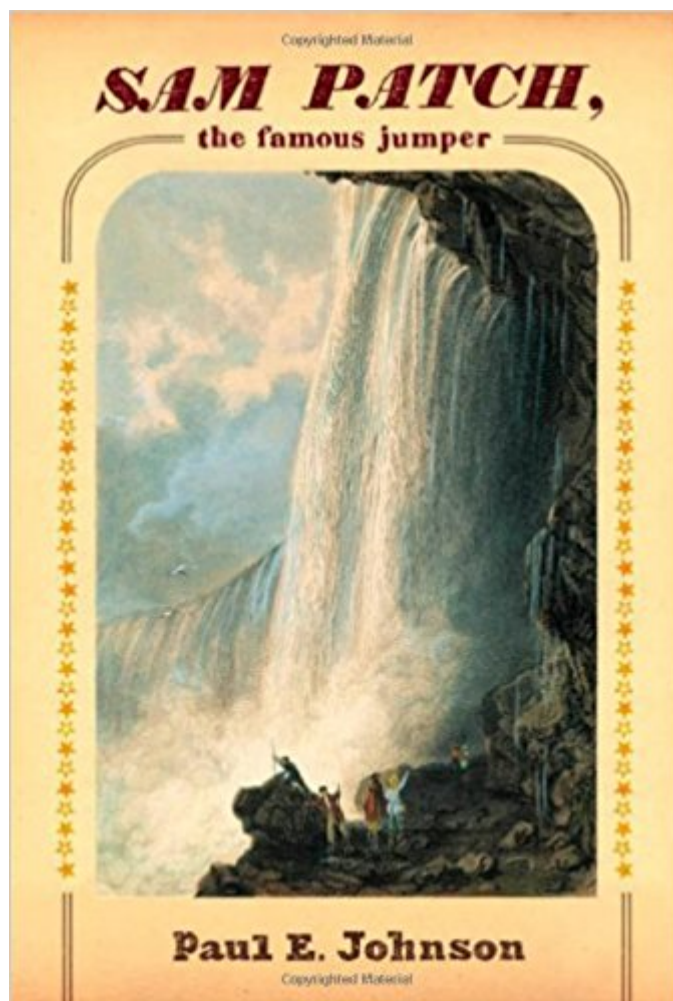


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# Sam Patch, The Famous Jumper



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

• 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

Johnson uses Sam Patch to channel his search for Jackson's America. Johnson explores all things wherever Sam Patch leads him, from the beginning of the end of the agrarian life in New England and the pecking order from boss spinner to mill children in Pawtucket's mills, to the new moneyed, old moneyed and no moneyed masses who crowd the picturesque Passaic Falls of Patterson. The chapter on Niagara is a dizzying flight into a history of British-American relations, the birth of ballyhoo tourism, and the partisanship of go-getter journalism. The character of Sam Patch remains mysterious throughout, but serves as the quintessential figure during a raucous, hilarious, often drunken moment when people were becoming devotees of nature worship, the manly arts, and fame-seeking. This is large history packed into a small book that contains countless historical threads each one rich in significance. Read it.

I would give this book no stars if that was possible. It was an assignment for History. The author prattles on incessantly. I found it difficult to find the point of the story because of all of the extraneous information he included. I read very quickly and in great quantities. This book was painful to read and took way longer than it should have. I am not exactly sure what the point of the story is. Good luck if you have to read it. Definitely not one I enjoyed.

Sam Patch was an American original who escaped my attention for forty-eight years. Professor Johnson's study of this mostly forgotten, irreverant showman has piqued this reader's thirst for more of the bold, eccentric and sometimes ambivalent personalities that have shaped this nation in often subtle ways. Not long after completing the author's chronology of the Patch family's slide from the respectability of the rural New England landholder and the influence of Calvinism, it becomes apparent that a documented record of just what manner of man Sam Patch really was is not to be had. From the standpoint of social status, Patch was a non-entity, a skilled textile laborer his sole identifying trait; that is, until he made public his hobby. Just what spurred Patch to leap the Passaic Falls at Paterson, NJ on July 4, 1828, effectively upstarting the elaborate holiday ceremonies planned by one of the city's wealthy and genteel manufacturing elite is uncertain. One effect of the feat was the galvanizing of the local labor force into an awareness of their potential to force reform in mill working conditions. No sooner had Patch had dried himself off when a consortium of mill owners issued an edict altering the daily work schedules of its employees, needlessly disrupting the domestic routines of thousands. Patch then betrays a political motive in answer to management with an encore jump during work hours just one week after the new schedule had taken effect. Patch's exploit was followed by a strike, arbitration and compromise. The Paterson jumps gave birth to

Patch's intriguing motto "Some things can be done as well as others." The cynical critic questions the depth and genuineness of Patch's social altruism based upon his lack of education, predilection to alcohol, and the complete absence of any concern, stated or implied, other than self-promotion during the remainder of his career. In fact, Patch, at the age of twenty-seven, having worked in the mills for twenty years, resigned his vocation permanently upon departing Paterson shortly after the second jump. After a brief exploit from atop a ship's mast in Hoboken, NJ, Patch emigrated to Niagara Falls for bigger game. Now an avowed professional jumper, backed by resort developers and sporting gentlemen, Patch thrilled crowds of commoners and elicited enmity from the Whig sophisticates and press. After a few successful performances, the venue shifted to Rochester, NY and Genesee Falls where class distinctions and responses to such behavior were at a premium. After an initial jump, a plan was hatched to erect a platform some forty feet above the millrace which paralleled the falls, raising his leap to an unprecedented one hundred-thirty feet. Unfortunately for our hero, he met his ultimate fate that day in 1829 when, unable to contain his passion for the bottle, he endeavored to jump while in a well-lubricated state, lost his form early in the air, hit the water on his side, and disappeared for four months before his body was hauled from under the ice of the Genesee River some seven miles downstream. On reconsideration, it is perhaps the case that Patch had an angle along reformist lines. Though unsophisticated in its method, the very inanity of Patch's nonconformist act served as a slap in the face to the righteous, overbred conceit of the upper classes and their proclivity for circumscribing the limits of self-determination for those less fortunate. In appropriating a mere mill-boy's pastime Patch defied the ruling gentry and dilettantes of morality to prevent his freedom of expression. Although his jumps lacked the ingenuity, utility or permanence of the engineering marvels which buoyed the emerging industrial revolution, they gave notice that democracy entitles a man to make his mark after his own fashion and, notwithstanding limited means, proof that "Some things can be done as well as others." Despite the absence of source material Professor Johnson has done a commendable job of resurrecting Patch's story from the confines of legend. Johnson's tedious labor is evidenced by his notes--drawn almost entirely from periodical literature. While it is not possible to forge an intimate acquaintance with Sam Patch, Johnson has provided the detailed social, political and religious milieu needed to understand his role in history. Johnson is also to be credited for the modesty of his prose, which makes this book smooth and entertaining.

Not a fan. The author tends towards bringing characters in and out and naming a lot of obsolete and obscure towns names which makes following what's going on difficult. Also, since there was not too

much documented history on Sam Patch there is a lot of guesswork and speculation.

Sam Patch is an intriguing figure and Johnson is a great storyteller.

I don't like the way the book is written but it was ok. It was for my American History before 1865 class. But it was okay to read.

book in very good condition.

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