

# Cooper Square's Pigeons

By Patrick McGuire

*New York Times* (1857-Current file); Aug 23, 1980; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2004)

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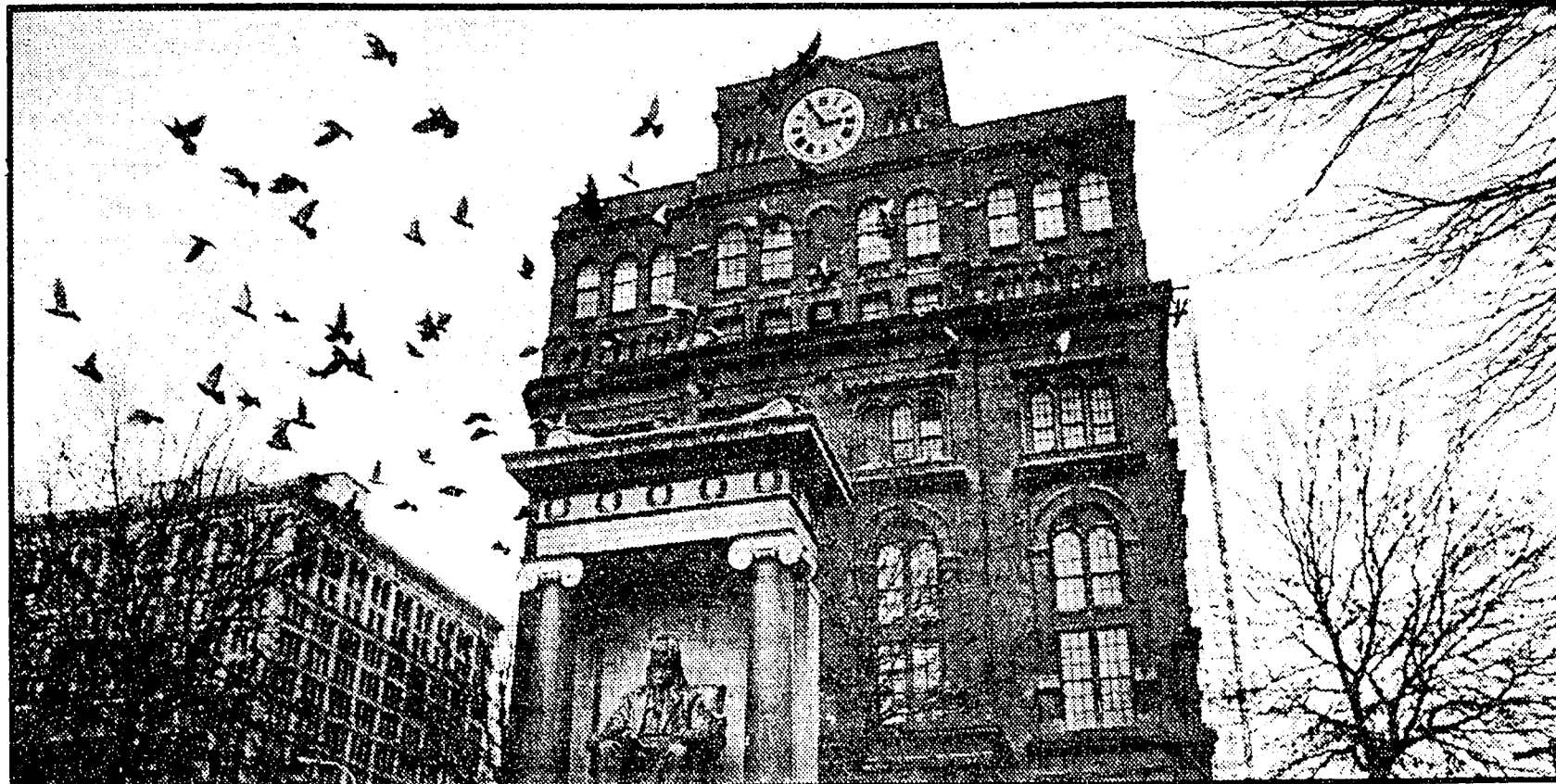
Pigeons know that happenstance governs their lives; so, at Cooper Square, they respond to my occasional feedings as if an old friend suddenly had asked them to dinner.

But my other friends, fellow sapiens, look upon my stale bread and cake as aid and comfort for the enemy. To them, pigeons are urban guerrillas that relentlessly attack civilians with surprise bombings.

This makes pigeons another New York vicissitude and, like muggings and union strikes, candidates for a Neil Simon quip.

When I feed the pigeons, I feed them only at odd hours. Mornings, they breakfast as they move near a sleeping derelict who couldn't quite make it to the shelter on Third Street the night before. Sometimes the bum wakes and chases birds and feeder. Wings shudder, and, once aflight, the birds glide in circles high over the square. Then they swoop down, testing for safety, and return to sky or breadcrumbs. At night, the same thing: The meal is disturbed by the cackling songs or yells of bums in their own continual flight from cops who chase them.

These excursions show not that pigeons are the enemy of New Yorkers — really, how often have you been



The New York Times/Neal Boenzi

sullied? — but that New York is the enemy of the pigeons at Cooper Square.

Consider geography. Cooper Square is a vast ocean of traffic, divided by five islands. Four of these islands are barren of trees or fences for perching and much too small for the wide unpredictable bobs and jumps peculiar to pigeons. For safety, the pigeons resort to the sky or the fifth and main island of the square.

Here, on this last island, they find refuge of a sort. A tall ponderous building — The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art — offers a few perches. In summer, pigeons line across the roof and cornices and windowsills as if they were critics at an opening. They don't use these perches in winter, however, for such ledges give little shelter from rain, snow and wind. Nearby, a picket fence encircles some trees and an old

green monument. The fence, of course, makes for comfy perching — but again only when weather is pleasant and especially when there's no traffic. Pigeons alight, relax and then suddenly shudder because a radio or whistle or horn unsettles their peace. The trees, too, offer seasonal refuge. Green with summer, they hold nests, but they become bare ruined choirs as October marches in. The only year-round shelter is the

monument to the brownstone's founder, Peter Cooper.

A granite wall and entablature and two Doric columns house Cooper's statue. On the wall, spray-painted slogans contradict the quiet dignity of the memorial. Cooper, nevertheless, sits with majestic verdigris, smiling upon the pigeons or welcoming them in from the rain. Green beard, green brows, green hair all bespeak a toughness, a firmness, a shaggy contradic-

tion to Mathew Brady's photo of Cooper as a stiff-collared, white-bearded, long-nosed, eyeglass-wearing personage of the 19th century. His green hands have a knottiness that reminds us that the philanthropist was first a worker with his hands, an inventor who made life easier. Cooper, at least as he sits here, is the ideal New Yorker: a worker and thinker who, for all his technology, is housed by the reminders of the classical past. His square is New York in miniature; for discrete, fleeting moments every day, bums, pigeons and the disparate populace touch each other and become brethren by the very proximity of contradiction.

Pigeons and bums are our brethren because they show us what it means to live without science or art. Their craft is to take what we give, and their craftiness is to remain unencumbered by what encumbers us.

We are kindred to them because they also show us something of ourselves. One night as I was feeding the pigeons, a panhandler asked me for a dime. His face was black with dirt and soot. He wore a tattered blanket that reeked of whiskey and urine. He smiled his crooked, dirty teeth as he asked again. Before I could turn away without answering, I was offering all the change in my pocket. He picked a single dime from my extended hand. Apparently, he had his dignity, too. And as he nodded thanks, I heard the sound and felt the impact of a pigeon's bomb. I didn't care much though I was wearing a newly cleaned raincoat; I had seen on that filthy old blanket the ubiquitous white-and-red button: I Love New York.

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