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Erin Atchison

**Transporting Elizabeth's Piano:
Literature and the Piano in the
Early American Republic**

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Erin Atchison

Transporting Elizabeth's Piano: Literature and the Piano in the Early American republic

In *The Pioneers* by James Fenimore Cooper there is a piano in the Hall of Temple Mansion. The piano is small and unobtrusive, and it is noted only by the presence of the young hunter Oliver Edwards, who is later revealed as the gentleman Effingham. He is unexpectedly at ease with, and indeed contemptuous of, the lavish surroundings:

The hand that held the cap, rested lightly on the little ivory-mounted piano of Elizabeth, with neither rustic restraint, nor obtrusive vulgarity. A single finger touched the instrument, as if accustomed to dwell on such places. (68)

This is not Cooper's first reference in the novel to the piano. A few pages earlier, he likens Temple's conversation to a musical accompaniment:

...his conversation at such moments was much like an accompaniment on the piano, a thing that is heard without being attended to. (65)

These three sentences can say more about Cooper's use of social conventions than his entire interior descriptions put together. The nonchalant mention of a piano alludes to Elizabeth's social grace, Marmaduke Temple's responsibilities as a father, and even Oliver's uncertain social standing. Furthermore, if Oliver is accustomed to dwell with the piano, then he is equally comfortable with its owner Elizabeth.

When Cooper was writing *The Pioneers* the piano was popular and desirable, but still an extremely expensive household object. In the year of *The Pioneer's* publication, 1823, a journalist wrote in the *Boston Euterpeiad* that pianos