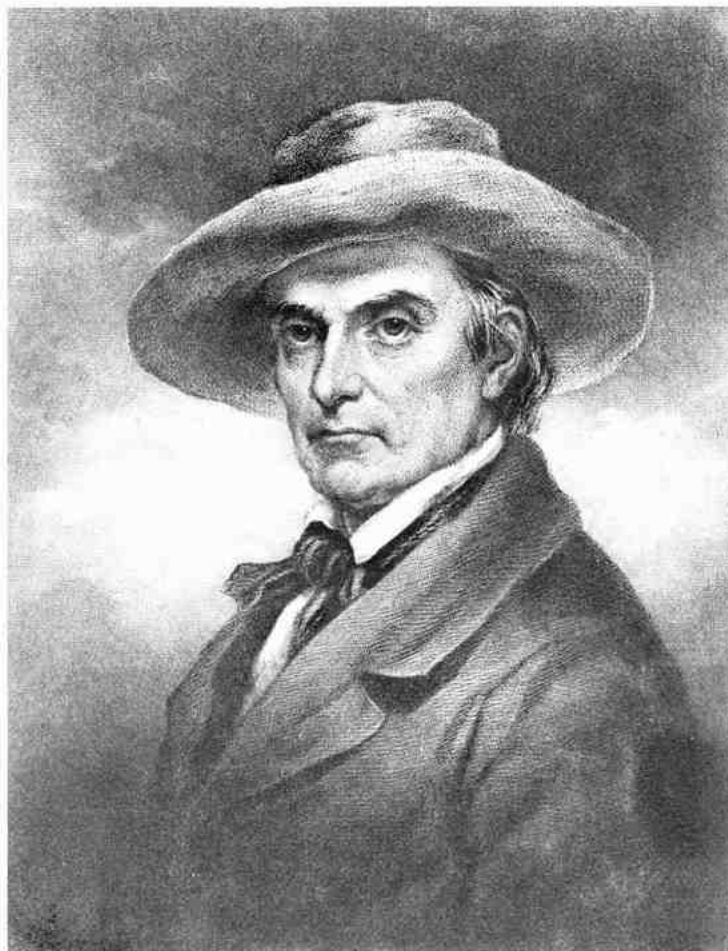


Daniel Webster and the Great Brook Trout

by *Kenneth Shewmaker*



The story seems too good to be true. In 1823, Philip Hone (1780-1851; businessman, diarist, and mayor of New York City from 1825 to 1827) saw an enormous brook trout in the Carmans River just below the tavern owned and operated by Samuel Carman. The Carmans River is on Long Island, and the alleged sighting took place near the town of Brookhaven, which was called the Fire Place in the 1820s. Hone shared his secret with Daniel Webster (1782-1852; elected United States Senator from Massachusetts in 1827), and the two friends spent several hours unsuccessfully trying to tempt the huge trout into taking a fly. Webster, who was an avid fisherman, became obsessed with the Carmans River leviathan, and four years later he had a second chance.

In 1827, the story continues, the huge brook trout was dislodged from its hiding place because of the repair of a water wheel. It darted from the millrace into the millpond, and soon became the subject of animated conversation at Samuel Carman's tavern. As luck would have it, Webster and Hone, in the company of Martin Van Buren (1782-1862; a United States Senator from New York in 1827),

were in town for another fishing excursion that spring. Webster and Hone fished all day Saturday without locating the great trout, and that evening they commiserated by imbibing too much rum at Samuel Carman's inn. Despite their hangovers, or perhaps because of them, Webster and Hone dutifully attended the services at Parson Ezra King's Presbyterian church the next morning. Leaving nothing to chance, however, Carman had stationed his servant (who has been identified as a man named either Apaius Enos or Lige) at the millpond with orders to keep a ready eye out for the big fish. The prophetic hymn of the day, of course, was "Shall we gather at the river, the beautiful, beautiful river."

As the long-winded Parson King droned on, Carman's servant tiptoed into the church with the news that the big brook trout was swimming about in the millpond. Webster, Hone, Carman, and the servant left their pews as inconspicuously as possible. Guessing what was afoot, other members of the congregation also began to slip out, until only the most pious remained. Finally, Parson King, who also was a dedicated fly fisherman, uttered a hasty benediction and headed for the door. The entire congrega-

tion gathered at the river to watch the ensuing battle between a great man and a great fish.

Webster first caught a small brookie, which he gently released unharmed. About half an hour later, however, the big fish was hooked. The cast was long, the fly landed daintily, the strike was ferocious, the battle was nearly as protracted as Reverend King's sermon, and the memorable words were uttered by Carman's servant: "We hab you now, sar!" What they allegedly had was a world record-breaking 14½ pound leviathan.

Samuel Carman, the story continues, traced the outline of the great fish against a wall, and Philip Hone transferred Carman's scratches onto a linen. Sometime later, a local blacksmith or carpenter made a wooden replica of the gigantic brook trout. This facsimile served as the weathervane on Parson King's church for fifty years. Unfortunately, the cherrywood plank, which had been made a third larger than the original outline in order to provide it with the proper proportions for the church spire, was struck by lightning, which may explain the splintered appearance of that artifact, which still is in existence.



The Carmans River remains a lovely and challenging fishing stream today, as shown in this recent photograph by Craig Woods.

As for Webster, Hone, and Van Buren, they immediately set out for New York City with their trophy. The trout, which was prepared in a tasty and rich sour cream sauce, was served with white wine at Delmonico's. Daniel Webster, the story concludes, was so delighted with his experience that he sent Samuel Carman one hundred dollars.¹

Such is the legend of Daniel Webster and the great brook trout. Is there any truth to the story? In trying to answer that question, the place to begin is with the various accounts of the incident. For the most part, they are characterized by carelessness and slipshod scholarship. In *Bellport and Brookhaven*, Daniel Webster is identified as "a Senator from New York," which he never was.² The article

in *Fly Fisherman* by James and Craig Wood relies on *Bellport and Brookhaven*.³ Nicholas Karas claims that the record-breaking catch "was authenticated and witnessed" by many people, including Philip Hone, Parson King, and Martin Van Buren. Although Karas states that he used Hone's diary, he offers no citation to that document, or, for that matter, to anything else written by any of the alleged eyewitnesses to the dramatic event.⁴ Like Karas, Ernest Schwiebert provides no citations to his many references. Schwiebert, however, is somewhat more restrained than Karas. He calculates that reducing the size of the weathervane by a third would mean that the brook trout was approximately 25 inches in length and about 9 or 10

lbs. in weight, not 14½ lbs.⁵ Charles Eliot Goodspeed is the most scholarly of the authors, and the most cautious. He quotes an unidentified "prominent resident" of the town of South Haven as the source of the Webster trout story. Goodspeed goes on, however, to observe that two other early renditions of rumors about a big fish being taken in the Carmans River "make no mention of Webster's having caught the fish." Goodspeed even speculates that the trophy in question might have been a salmon, not a trout.⁶

The Webster trout story, in sum, is built on foundations of sand. Except for an oversized fish weathervane of uncertain origin, a Currier and Ives print showing a trout that hardly seems to have the girth required for a 14½ pounder,⁷ and a name plate on a pew in Parson King's church bearing the inscription "The Suffolk Club," the evidence is thin. Even the name plate is not very helpful. According to the legend, Webster was a member of "The Suffolk Club."⁸ The group, however, was not formed until 1858, and Webster left this world in 1852.

Being a Webster scholar, as well as a fly fisherman, I dearly hoped that the story was true. Accordingly, I made a search of the historical records, including the Papers of Daniel Webster at Dartmouth College. Drawn from many depositories, the Webster Papers at Dartmouth constitute the most complete compendium of Webster's correspondence, speeches, and writings in existence today.

The quest began on a promising note.



A close-up of the small plaque on the old weathervane.

Daniel Webster was in the right place at the right time. From about May 23 to June 6, 1827, he was in New York City. None of the letters he wrote during that time, however, contains a single word about angling. Rather, his correspondence from late May to early June 1827 is mainly concerned with law and politics. I also examined Webster's correspondence with those mentioned in the various accounts as having witnessed the taking of the great brook trout, regardless of chronology. No letters to or from Apaius Enos, Reverend King, or Lige are contained in the Webster Papers. Webster did write one note to Philip Hone on April 30, 1831.⁹ In this routine document, however, Webster merely informed Hone that he would not be in New York City long enough to attend a memorial dinner. In 1845, Webster sent two letters to Samuel Carman, but neither referred to the catching of an enormous trout.¹⁰ On April 8, 1845, Webster told Carman that the weather was "so cold, I hardly know when I shall be your way," which indicates that he knew the tavern owner and considered making a trip to Fire Place. Nothing more, however, can be inferred from this interesting communication to Carman. Three Webster-Van Buren letters have been preserved, one undated and the others written in 1828 and 1836.¹¹ The undated document extended a dinner invitation to Webster, and the 1828 letter involved a legal case. The third letter, happily, did refer to a fish, but it was not a trout. On May 29, 1836, Webster invited Van Buren to a "Salmon" dinner. The fish, which Webster hoped had been "well preserved," had been given to him by a relative. None of the letters in the Webster Papers to or from the alleged eyewitnesses contained any reference to a large brook trout.

Since Philip Hone and Martin Van Buren play conspicuous roles in nearly all of the versions of the big fish story, their reminiscences also were scrutinized. None of the three published versions of Hone's famous diary, which he began in 1828, a year after the alleged occurrence, verifies the tale.¹² Indeed, one of Hone's diary entries seems to do the opposite. In April 1834, Hone observed that on a trip to the Carman's River he and his party "took some of the largest trout I ever saw," and the largest taken was 2 lbs. and 12 ounces—a long way from the assumed size of the great Webster trout.¹³

Since the manuscript of the Hone diary is more complete than the published versions and contains some items dating back to 1826, it also was examined. Hone did not actually begin to keep a systematic journal until 1828, and the documents prior to that time

The Size of Long Island Trout

by Frank Forester



The following account of the size of trout in Long Island was written by Frank Forester for George Washington Bethune's 1847 edition of The Compleat Angler. Though Forester's reputation for accuracy is far from untarnished, we have little reason to doubt this report. Notice that the only fish Forester knew of that approached the alleged weight of the Webster trout was, in fact, taken from Carman's, and that it was suspected, even by 1847, of having been a salmon. It seems likely that this is probably the "same" fish that has figured in the other versions of the big trout tale.

The principal distinctions that strike the careful observer between the trout of Long Island, or, indeed, I might say North America in general, and those of the British Isles, is, first, the great uniformity of size on the part of the former, which rarely exceed two or three pounds in weight, and *never*, so far as I have been able to ascertain, five or six—and, secondly, the fact that in the United States trout are never taken in the large rivers, or, if ever, so rarely as to prove the rule by the wonder arising from the exception.

On Long Island, there are some half dozen instances on record, within three times as many years, of fish, varying in weight from four to six pounds, taken with the rod and line. Two of these instances occur to me, as connected with circumstances which may render the relation acceptable, as of anecdotes very unusual, and almost, but that they are proved beyond the possibility of doubt, incredible.

Both these instances occurred at Stump-pond, on the north side; one in the pond itself, the other in the mill-pool, at the outlet.

A gentleman from New York, thus runs the first story, who had never thrown a line, or taken a trout in his life, and who had come out lately equipped with a complete outfit of Conroy's best and strongest tackle, all spick-and-span new, and point device, on throwing his hook, baited with a common lob-worm, into the water, was greeted with an immediate bite, and bob of the float, which instantaneously disappeared beneath the surface carried away by the hard pull of a heavy fish. The novice, ignorant of all the soft and shrewd seductions of the angler's art, hauled in his prize, main force, and actually, without the aid of gaff or landing net, brought to basket a five-pounder!

The fact is remarkable; the example decidedly unworthy of imitation!

The other instance to which I have referred, is, in all respects, except the size of the fish, the very opposite of the former: as, in it, the success of the fortunate fisherman is due as much to superior science in his craft, as *his*, in the former, is attributable to blind and unmerited good luck.

The hero of this anecdote is a gentleman, known by the *nom de guerre* of Commodore Limbrick, a character in which he has figured many a day in the columns of the *Spirit of the Times*, and who is universally allowed to be one of the best and most experienced, as well as the oldest fisherman of that city.

After having fished all the morning with various success in the pond, he ascertained, it seems, that in the pool below the mill there was a fish of extraordinary size, which had been observed repeatedly, and fished for constantly, at all hours of the day and evening, with every different variety of bait, to no purpose. Hearing this he betook himself to the miller, and there having verified the information which he had received, and having satisfied himself that neither fly nor minnow, gentle nor red-worm, would attract the great trout, he proceeded, *horresco referens*, a mouse from the miller's trap, and proceeding to troll therewith, took at the first cast of that inordinate dainty, a fish that weighed four pounds and three quarters.

Another fish or two of the like dimensions have been taken in Liff. Snedecor's and in Carman's streams; and it is on record, that at Fireplace, many years since, a trout was taken of eleven pounds. A rough drawing of this fish is still to be seen on the wall of the tavern bar-room, but it has every appearance of being the sketch of a salmon; and I am informed by a thorough sportsman, who remembers the time and the occurrence, although he did not see the fish, that no doubt was entertained by experienced anglers who did see it, of its being in truth a salmon.

are mainly copies of speeches and lists of those invited to the dinner parties for which Philip Hone was justly famous. On May 31, 1827, about the time when the great brook trout was allegedly caught, Hone requested the presence of a number of eminent people. Daniel Webster was not among them. Webster's name first appeared as one of those invited for dinner on November 10, 1827. Whether he was actually a guest of Hone on the evening of November 10 is not known. More important, nothing whatsoever is mentioned in any of the 1827 documents about a massive brook trout that presumably was consumed at Delmonico's.¹⁴ Hone, in fact, did not come into close contact with Daniel Webster until 1830, when he visited the Senator in Washington.¹⁵ Thereafter, the two men developed a warm and lasting friendship, but this, of course, was years after the supposed incident on the Carmans River. The most colorful fishing excursion with Webster recorded in Hone's diary occurred in 1845, when Hone was a guest at Webster's estate in Marshfield. On July 9, the two men went fishing together aboard "the good sloop *Comet*" on Cape Cod Bay. The water was rough, and both Webster and Hone became seasick.¹⁶

In his autobiography, Martin Van Buren mentioned that he fished "in a pond a mile or two from my home," but he did not do so in the company of Daniel Webster.¹⁷ It is, in fact, unlikely that Van Buren ever went fishing with Webster, for he did not like the statesman from Massachusetts. Webster, according to Van Buren, was a man of "ill will" toward Democrats.¹⁸ Van Buren even bitterly characterized Webster as a person deficient "both in physical and moral courage."¹⁹ Although they occasionally corresponded with one another and may have eaten a hopefully well-preserved salmon together, Martin Van Buren and Daniel Webster were political opponents who did not much care for one another.

So, where does that leave us? The story of Daniel Webster and the great brook trout seems to be apocryphal. Hoping to find historical evidence confirming what is an absolutely wonderful tale, I found none. Webster certainly was a fly fisherman, and a good one at that. For example, in June 1825 he took, by his own account, "26 trouts, all weighing 17 lb. 12 oz." (which meant that the trout averaged nearly 11 ounces each) from what he called "that chief of all brooks, Mashpee." He also had the familiar experience of losing the big one, which broke his line. Recalling that fine outing on the Mashpee, Webster stated that he had never "had so agreeable a days fishing," nor did he "ever expect

such another."²⁰ Fortunately, he did have many other good days on the Mashpee and other trout streams, but there is no persuasive evidence that he ever landed a 14½ pounder on the Carmans River. Surely, he would have recorded such a gigantic catch for posterity in one of the hundreds of letters that he wrote after 1827, but, if he did, I have been

unable to find it in the Webster Papers. I hope that a reader of *The American Fly Fisher* will prove me wrong by producing written historical evidence upholding the legend of Daniel Webster and the great brook trout, but I am afraid that the tale is what some people call a "fish story," which, I think, means a story too good to be true.

Notes

¹The story of Daniel Webster and the great brook trout as recounted above is a composite drawn from the following sources: Stephanie S. Bigelow, compiler, *Bellport and Brookhaven: A Saga of the Sibling Hamlets at Old Purchase South* (New York, 1968), pp. 30-31, 46-47, 87; Charles Eliot Goodspeed, *Angling in America: Its Early History and Literature* (Boston, 1939), pp. 199-200; Nicholas Karas, "Daniel Webster Meets Another Kind of Devil," *Rod & Gun* (Summer 1970); Ernest Schwiebert, *Trout* (2 vols.; New York, 1978), I, pp. 245-258; James and Craig Wood, "Long Island's Gift to American Trout Fishing: The Carmans River," *Fly Fisherman*, 7 (Winter 1975), pp. 46-50.

²*Bellport and Brookhaven*, p. 31.

³See James and Craig Wood, "Long Island's Gift to American Trout Fishing," pp. 46-47.

⁴Karas, "Daniel Webster Meets Another Kind of Devil," p. 12.

⁵Schwiebert, *Trout*, I, p. 248.

⁶Goodspeed, *Angling in America*, pp. 199-200.

⁷The Currier and Ives print, which was painted by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819-1905) in 1854, does not even mention Daniel Webster by name. It is entitled "Catching a Trout" and carries the caption "We Hab you Now, Sar." Although the angler playing the trout resembles Webster, I have found no evidence that Tait, one of America's greatest sporting artists, had the statesman from Massachusetts in mind. For information on the Currier and Ives print and Tait see Harry T. Peters, *Currier & Ives: Printmakers to the American People* (Garden City, New York, 1942) and E. Benezit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs* (Paris, 1976).

⁸See, for example, Schwiebert, *Trout*, I, p. 245.

⁹Daniel Webster to Philip Hone, New York, April 30, 1831 (Dartmouth College-Webster Papers).

¹⁰Webster to Samuel Carman, Boston, March 31, 1845; Webster to Carman, New York, April 8, 1845 (Suffolk County Historical Society, Riverhead, New York).

¹¹Martin Van Buren to Webster, [n.p.], [n.d.] (Dartmouth College-Webster Papers); Webster to Van Buren, Boston, September 27, 1828 (Massachusetts Historical Society-Van Buren Papers); Webster to Van Buren, [n.p.], May 29, 1836 (Phillips Exeter Academy).

¹²Allan Nevins, ed., *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851* (2 vols.; New York, 1927; Nevins, ed., *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851* (rev. and enlarged ed.; New York, 1936); Bayard Tuckerman, ed., *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851* (2 vols.; New York, 1889).

¹³Tuckerman, ed., *The Diary of Philip Hone*, I, p. 102.

¹⁴Philip Hone Diary. Volume I: January 17, 1826-April 4, 1829. New York Historical Society.

¹⁵See Nevins, ed., *The Diary of Philip Hone* (rev. and enlarged ed.), p. 23.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 736-738.

¹⁷John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren* (Washington, 1920), p. 536.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 561.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 662.

²⁰Webster to Henry Cabot, June 4, [1825] as printed in Charles M. Wiltse and Harold D. Moser, eds., *The Papers of Daniel Webster, Correspondence, Volume 2, 1825-1829* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1976), pp. 51-52.

As Kenneth Shewemaker points out in his article, he is a Webster scholar. We might explain that he is currently at Dartmouth, editing the diplomatic papers of Daniel Webster; this work, combined with his own familiarity with fly fishing, made him exceptionally well qualified to research the Webster trout story. His examination of the original source materials, which included Webster's own correspondence as well as various related diaries and manuscripts, constitute the first thorough study of the Webster trout episode, and we are delighted he shared it with us. He reports that as his academic work continues he is gathering information for a paper on Webster as an angler, and we hope to be hearing from him about that soon.