COMMODORE VANDERBILT'S LIFE.

Cornelius Vanderbilt was born on the 27th day of May, in the year 1794, on a farm on Staten Island. His father was a well-to-do agriculturist, not possessed of any considerable fortune, indeed, but owing no debts and owning his land. The produce of the farm was sent to the New-York markets in a periagua daily, and the young Cornelius took a periagua daily, and the young Cornelius took charge of this craft, which has now disappeared from our waters. He very much preferred sailing the periagua to going to school, and it cannot be doubted that among the Knickerbockers of those days this was a subject of commendation rather than of dispraise. He worked also on the farm, and studied in the Winter days, but never showed much love of literature, nor did he gain more knowledge than is furnished by the three Rs of the New-York Alderman. He was a faithful worker on the farm, however, and could plow and plant corn with the best. But his delight was on the sea, and while he was a mere boy he was acknowledged to be the most fearless sailor and the steadiest helmsman on the bay. All his thoughts and instincts were bent in that direction, and that he was a good farm hand was due not to any liking for the work, but to his love for his mother and his obedience as a son. His one dream was of having a periagua of his own, and sailing it as a ferry-boat between Staten Island and New-York. In those times there was no up-town region, for the business part of the City was in Hanover square and Pearl street; the Battery was a delightful park, and the strand was just being turned into State street, then the most fashionable locality of the City. When Cornelius Vanderbilt became sixteen years of age he bargained with his mother that he would plow eight acres of the farm and plant it with corn if she would give him $100 for the purchase of a boat. It is unnecessary to say that only a mother would have given such a sum for the work, but perhaps her object in the arrangement was to teach him not to neglect the occupation of husbandry, which in those days afforded a sure reward of rude comfort and domestic plenty. But from the time that he owned this periagua it may be doubted if he ever again took the tiller which for the next half century was to be to him a veritable sceptre.

From the 27th of May, 1810, it may be considered that Cornelius Vanderbilt put away childish things and became a man, earning his own livelihood and able to take his own part in the affairs of the world. He was but sixteen, but he had no difficulty in obtaining passengers for his ferry-boat, especially, it may be presumed, among the fairer portion of the Staten Islanders. For the young man was tall, vigorous, broad of shoulder, bright of eye, possessed of a complexion that any belle might envy, and having a very sweet and engaging smile which all the cares of a very extraordinary and busy life never effaced from his countenance. There was plenty of occupation for him, for the times favored his business. Staten Island was divided into large estates, farmed by aristocratic families, whose scions repaired to the Battery just as naturally as the denizens of the avenues crowd to Central Park now, or the drivers of fast horses haunt the boulevards and St. Nicholas avenue. There were also continual interchanges of courtesies and visitings between the high-toned inhabitants of State street and of Broadway, which, as a street, hardly reached then to Trinity Church, although there were magnificent villas along its line up to the creek that ran through Madison square. The life and soul of the place was the Battery, and those who were not afraid of angry skies and swelling waves among the islanders used invariably to take the periagua of young Vanderbilt for their daily trip to New-York for he was known far and near as the bravest and boldest pilot that ever handled a boat. And besides the genteel business, he had other sources of revenue, for England, plunged in the Napoleonic war, was furious with the services which America, as a neutral State, was able to perform for the French Emperor, and it was obvious that a vessel must sooner or later settle the power of a neutral flag to protect a cargo. The Government of the United States was in the hands of resolute men who were resolved to maintain so important a commercial principle, nor were they terrified by the vauntings of the conquerors of Trafalgar though it was evident that the war would be entirely a naval affair. Forts were being built on different parts of the bay and of Staten Island, and in the transportation of material Cornelius Vanderbilt was so fair and moderate in his pretensions as to obtain the greater share of the business. Not only did his periagua find constant occupation, but he purchased interests in other boats, and chartered more, so that when the war broke out, in 1812, he was quite a thriving man, and even then a personage in his own peculiar line. Young Cornele, as everybody called him, was the first person thought of when anything very dangerous or very disagreeable had to be done. When the winds were high, and the sight was blinded with driving sleet and snow, and the waves raged like angry wolves, it an important message had to be sent from the forts to the head-quarters in the City young Cornele was sent for. When the British fleet tried to force their way past Sandy Hook to the New-York in ashes, as the Admiral kindly promised the forts on Sandy Hook beat them off. A fearful storm was raging, but it was absolutely necessary to notify the commanding officer in the City of the attempt and its repulse, and to obtain reinforcements and fresh supplies in case of a renewal. A messenger was sent for the only man who could take a boat through the raging waters to the Battery slip. When Cornele Vanderbilt made his appearance the staff officer asked anxiously if a boat could live in such a sea. "Yes," said Cornelius, laconically, but firmly, "if properly handled." "Will you take us to the Battery?" was the next question. "I will," replied the young man, "but you will be under water half the time." He landed them in safety at the stairs, but they were like drowned rats, and such had been the fury of the winds and waters and the incessant movements of the boat, that one of them declared he had not had time to draw one full breath.

In this carrying business he was so successful and made so much money that he thought of settling a home for himself. Regularly from the hour he commenced ferrying with his periagua-boat, handed over his earnings to his mother, whose love for him and pride in him he repaid with the most perfect devotion. He married, in December, 1813, Miss Sophia Johnson, of Port Richmond, Staten Island, and, being then nineteen years and six months old, and expanded his transactions, as if the obligations that he had given hostages to fortune in the shape of a young, beloved wife had spurred him to increased boldness. He obtained from the Government, in the Spring of 1814, a contract for the transportation of provisions to all the forts in the bay for three months, and this entailed upon him the most extraordinary labors. For he was determined not to give up his ferriage, which was exceedingly profitable, so he carried the provisions in the night time. There were six forts, each of which received its provisions once a week, so that during these three months his only night of unbroken rest was on Sunday. But the profits of those nights were large and enabled him to build a beautiful little schooner for the coasting trade, which he called the Dorad, because he saw in it the El Dorado of future fortune. He was, however, not given to long-tailed words, so he shortened it down to Dorad. Out of this he coined money, and in the following year, in 1815, he built a very large schooner, called the Charlotte, which plied between New-York and the Carolinas, under the command of himself or his wife's sister's husband, a Mr. De Forrest. He was now above the reach of want and the necessity of incessant toil with his own hands, and this extraordinary boy, for such he still was, being only twenty-one years of age, began to think out in his great brain how the building of ships might be improved. He devoted his whole attention to the broad facts underlying construction, and very soon introduced such modifications as attracted the intelligence of the ship-building profession and confirmed the impressions of many that the young Cornele Vanderbilt possessed other qualities besides dauntless nerve, great endurance, thrift, modesty, and moderation. The reasoner began to prop out, and nautical men began to talk of the Vanderbilt model, and of Vanderbilt's views. What, between ship-building and ship-owning, when he balanced his books on the 31st December, 1817, being then twenty-three years and six months old, he found himself the master of $9,000 in hard cash, besides his proprietary interests in various vessels.

Had Cornelius Vanderbilt been an ordinary thinker he would have gone on in this path. He would have sailed and built and chartered vessels. Would have worked away at the coasting trade and have made a great fortune. But he was an extraordinary thinker, and even in the midst of his young flush of triumph in naval construction there was one thing that troubled him. This was steam. Fulton was beginning to sail his first regular boat up the Hudson, and some applauded and some derided the invention. The shipping men, as a class, pooh-poohed the whole thing, and very plausibly showed that in consequence of the cumbrous machinery and bulk of fuel, the new invention could not possibly be utilized for carrying freight, which was perfectly true at that time. Young Vanderbilt not only belonged to this class, but he was, in spite of his youth, a leader among the builders of ships, and had he been an ordinary thinker he would have been pushed into opposition to steamboating by his interests, by the applause of his fellows, and by the mere fact of his leadership. But all those influences which are so overpowering with the generality were not even felt by him. He simply reasoned the thing out in his own mind, and came to the conclusion that the future belonged to the steam-boats. So he renounced the coasting business, sold his interest in different vessels, and introduced himself to the steam-boat men of the time, who received the recruit gladly, unconscious that they were welcoming the man who was destined to give it the fullest development it has received in this or any other land. Fulton and Livingston had an unconstitutional monopoly of steam navigation in the waters of the State, and Thomas Gibbons was fighting them. He was running a transportation line between New-York and Philadelphia, by steamer from New-York to New-Brunswick, through the bay, and up the Raritan River to that city, thence by stage to Trenton, and thence by steamer to Philadelphia, down the Delaware. Vanderbilt, whose foible was his love of opposition, joined the Gibbons party, and was given charge of the New-Brunswick steamer, which indeed was the back-bone of the line. The Bellona (warlike name) was the title of the steamer, and under the management of Capt. Vanderbilt the line began to pay expenses. The stage-house at New-Brunswick was the property of Mr. Gibbons, but it was managed so very badly that it hurt the prosperity of the line, and the new power in its affairs soon recognized the fact. He offered to take charge of it, and this being accepted, installed his wife and family in the house, which, like magic, became as popular as it had been unpopular, and everything moved satisfactorily. The steam-boats were well managed, the house was well kept, the stage-coaches were clean, fast, and comfortable, and the excellence of the route was in everybody's mouth. It was universally praised, and moreover earned that solid reward which wise men consider so much better than empty praise, for it now cleared $40,000 a year.

In this employment Capt. Vanderbilt remained twelve years, during which time he accumulated, the very small sum of $30,000. Nobody who knew the man can doubt that had he remained in his former position he would, at the end of the twelve years, have been much richer. But there was an indefinite possibility of expansion in the one, and the scope of the other was bounded. It is certain that he accepted the subordinate capacity to study out the capabilities of steam-boat transportation. He remained in Mr. Gibbons' service so long for a multiplicity of reasons. The first and the strongest was that in the outset he had to fight the minions of the New-York monopoly. The steamer Bellona violated the patent of Livingston and Fulton from the time she left the mouth of the Raritan until she reached her dock in New-York, and *vice versa*; and until the supreme resort of the law had declared the patent unconstitutional, he was subject to repeated arrests. He fought the monopolists with the most determined courage and perseverance, and, in the language of the fable, made the tail of the fox eke out the skin of the lion. For, to avoid the unpleasantness of continued arrests and bailings, he taught a lady to steer, and, when the hirelings of the law approached, dived down into the recesses of the boat, so that he could not be found, and the writ had to be indorsed, "non est inventus." Then his loving partner had become attached to New-Brunswick, where she was now surrounded by a very numerous family; and finally Mr. Vanderbilt's affectionate nature was greatly influenced by the strong regard and esteem felt for him by Thomas Gibbons. It was hard to break away from ties which appealed to his big heart; but his reason told him that the Philadelphia business was but a small matter, and that the great City of New-York would develop an enormous steam-boat commerce. His eager eyes were fixed upon the traffic of the Hudson and the Sound; his strong sense and acute reasoning showed him how these could be developed and expanded, and he longed to put into practice those principles of construction and management which he had forged in his brain, and which only awaited the fulfillment of practical operation. So in 1829 he resigned his position, to the great grief of Thomas Gibbons, who offered to sell him his line, and told him to pay for it out of the profits, an offer who in plain terms told him that he could not carry on the business without him. But the larger theatre of operations was what he wanted, not the mere accumulation of money, so he went away.

In the Spring of 1830 he appeared as a rival to the great capitalists who controlled the Sound and Hudson steam navigation. The fight was bitter, for though the new-comer had all the advantages of superior knowledge and perfect management, he came into competition with long purses that were willing to make great sacrifices to ruin him. His wonderful grasp of details and perfection of economic principles enabled him to make so strong a fight with his little hoard that his chief antagonist, Stevens, of Hoboken, believed he was being backed by Gibbons, and surrendered the fight. Vanderbilt now had the current with him, and began to build magnificent boats for the Hudson in opposition to Daniel Drew, who, after a short contest surrendered to the young cock of

The New York Times
Published: January 5, 1877
Copyright © The New York Times

the walk, and transferred his boats to the Sound. But when, as the time went by, the traffic increased, Drew united Vanderbilt with himself in the Sound traffic, which then began to assume very great proportions. Without acknowledged rivals, and with warm ambort from capitalists engaged in developing inland steam navigation, Vanderbilt built so many magnificent steamers that the public christened him by acclamation the Commodore, just as the soldiers of the First Napoleon had nicknamed him the Little Corporal. His boats were faster and better, they were more comfortable for passengers, and more commodious for freight than any which had hitherto been seen. Moreover he ran them at the lowest paying fares, being satisfied that by so doing he invited travel, while an opposite course would repel it. These things will seem trifles to the present generation, who, accustomed to see steam-boats built upon the Vanderbilt model and run in accordance with his idea, have no conception of the state of things which existed before his time. To understand how potent was the impulse which he gave, it is necessary to travel in other lands, on Rhine steamers and English river boats, where the influence of Commodore Vanderbilt was never felt, and which have never left the grooves of ordinary constructors. Here, where the influence was early given, it still survives, and the men who build in accordance with its spirit, obtain credit for enterprise and a sound sense which by right should be shared with him. His one feible of opposition was an immense boon to the public, for wherever his keen eyes detected a monopoly he pounced down upon the offanders and literally drove them from the rivers. Nor did he, when he had vanquished them, establish a monopoly of his own. His principle of low rates, founded upon acute reasoning, was never violated, so that in every way the public were the gainers. And he was now confessedly a power in the carrying business, and men quoted the opinion of the Commodore as something that stifled argument and carried conviction.

It was impossible that such a man should remain inactive during the California gold fever, which was such a stimulus to every form of industry. The Pacific Mail Steam-ship Company began to run its steamers in 1848, and in the following year the Panama Railroad was surveyed and commenced. Commodore Vanderbilt, having reasoned out the matter in that quiet way which says less than it knows, convinced himself that the Nicaraguan Isthmus was the true route to California. He the same year obtained a charter from the Nicaraguan Government for a ship-canal and transit company. The former grant fell into abeyance, but the latter was immediately utilized. He built a fine steamer, the Promethens, and sailed down to Nicaragua, exploring the channel of the San Juan del Norte, and the lake beyond, and finally fixing upon San Juan del Sur as the port on the Pacific side. Part of the route was by staging, and in fact the arrangement which he established was curiously similar to the old Gibbons route between New-York and Philadelphia. In July, 1851, the new line was formally opened, and such were its intrinsic advantages and so great the reputation of the Commodore, that it at once leaped into public favor and became a formidable rival of the Panama route. It was, indeed, the shortest, the cheapest, and by far the healthiest way to the golden lands; nor can it be doubted that in the future it will be the route as soon as a man of enterprise comes to the front, or opportunity for it returns to the country. But during the time that Commodore Vanderbilt was connected with it it was exceedingly successful, and he reaped from it very great profits. He was now, however, so very wealthy that he determined to take a long rest. So he sold to the Nicaragua Transit Company, which he had formed, all his vessels and interest in the route, and building himself a palatial yacht of 2,000 tons, called the North Star, he started on a long cruise in the European seas with all his family.

This consisted at that time, May, 1853, of fourteen persons—himself, his wife, and twelve children. The eldest was a girl, Phoebe Jane, now Mrs. Cross, whose husband was a Captain on one of the Commodore's Pacific steamers; the second was another girl, Zibeniah, now Mrs. D. B. Allen, whose husband is a very wealthy retired merchant; the third was William H. Vanderbilt, to whom his father had given a superb education at an agricultural college, and had settled on a large farm on Staten Island; the fourth was also a girl, Emily, the wife of Mr. W. K. Thorne, a gentleman of great wealth; the fifth was another daughter, Eliza, wife of Mr. Osgood, the broker; the sixth was still another daughter, Sophia, wife of Daniel Torrance, a wealthy merchant of a leading Montreal family; the seventh was another daughter, Maria Louisa, who married Horace G. Clark; the eighth was a son, Francis, who died at the age of forty; the ninth was another son, Cornelius, still living, and who has not imitated the civic virtues of his father or his brother; the tenth was a daughter, Maria Electa, who married Nicholas La Bau; the eleventh was another daughter, who married Capt. Barker, became a widow, and in second espousals married M. Lafitte, of Paris; and the twelfth was George, who graduated with distinction at West Point, and served most creditably in the Army of the Union during the slaveholders' rebellion, where he contracted the seeds of disease of the lungs, of which he died at Nice.

The magnificent steam-ship which he modestly called his yacht excited admiration at every port where he touched, but the man himself excited more. The discovery of gold in America had turned the attention of the world more strongly toward that peculiar land in the West where a republican form of government had succeeded in maintaining itself in spite of the predictions of political prophets and the reasoning of philosophers. Here was a specimen of American production in the steamer North Star, and in its Captain, planner, builder, and owner was a still more interesting specimen of what republican institutions could develop. The English people who met him were delighted with him, and showered attentions upon him and his family. He was banqueted and complimented in every place that he visited, and as John Bull and the Russian bear were eyeing each other in a most menacing way prior to the declaration of hostilities in 1854, it is almost unnecessary to say that every attention which had been shown him in England was doubled and trebled in the Russian ports. There was a difference, however, and an extreme one. In England it was the people alone that honored the great American in every way that suggested itself to their ardent admiration. But in Russia it was the people and the Government. The Grand Duke Constantine, second son of the Emperor Nicholas, accompanied by the Admiral in Chief of the Russian Navy, visited the North Star repeatedly, and the latter obtained drawings of the walking-beam engine, which very much surprised him. In Constantinople the Pashas of Sultan Abdul Medjid were still more profuse in their expressions of esteem and regard, for they were well aware that the Russians were going to attack them, and they looked upon this country as a neutral land that might be exceedingly useful in case of prolonged naval hostilities. But what surprised all the people of Europe was that this man represented nothing in the way of official dignities. He was simply a great ship-owner sailing in his yacht for his own pleasure, accompanied by his family. It was difficult to make this believed anywhere, but nearly impossible in the Italian ports of Austria. They could not believe it They took the vessel to be the forerunner of some dreadful attack in the name of liberty. When the Vanderbilts took their walks abroad in Lechorn, they had the honor of being escorted by a military officer, for fear of accidents, and a crowd of ununiformed *shirri* hovered about them. It was a wonder that they were not arrested, but the fear of American indignation was greater than than now, and no such incident took place. The North Star was, however, placed under the most rigorous surveillance, and armed launches with loaded howitzers, patrolled ceaselessly around her. This rather detracted from their enjoyment of sunny Italy, which was then, however, under a black cloud, and they were delighted to exchange the Austrian ports for the English ones of Malta and Gibraltar, where they were most flatteringly received. In fact, the English people were delighted to see a man like Vanderbilt, possessed of an ample fortune, taking his pleasure on the high seas and steering his great ship into port just as an English gentleman would do his yachting schooner.

When the Commodore returned he was met with the intelligence that the British Government had withdrawn the Cunard steamers from the American mail service. There were in those days four steamers only per month, which sailed every Saturday. Two of these were English, belonging to the Cunard line, and two were American, belonging to the Collins line. The English paid their steamers £16,000 for carrying the mail each voyage, and Congress paid the Collins Company $33,000 for the same service. The Cunard steamers were withdrawn by England to be used as transports for troops, that country having resolved on the invasion of the Crimea. Commodore Vanderbilt immediately made an offer to Congress to fill up the vacancy left by the retirement of the Cunarders, and carry the mail for the same sum which the British Government had given. The Collins Line and its backers rose up in arms. It was not denied that one steamer per fortnight was entirely insufficient, but the proposal to save the Government so much money naturally roused the ire of those who were receiving so much more for the same service. Collins called upon the Commodore, and offered to back his proposal with all his Congressional influence if he would ask for the same remuneration from the Postmaster General that he himself was receiving. "For," said Collins, "you cannot possibly do it for less. Why, I'm not making any money by my steamers, as all the world knows." "No," said Vanderbilt. "I'm patriotic in the matter. If an Englishman can do it for $16,000 I'm sure I can, and I won't admit that a Britisher can beat us in anything." That is not business, Vanderbilt," remonstrated the subsidy man. "I can't make it pay as it is." "Then," retorted Vanderbilt coldly, "you've got into a business that you don't understand. Let me have the opportunity, and I'll make it pay." The interview was at an end, and the subsidy party resolved to show the Commodore that if they were not a match for him in conducting a steamer line, they were in Congressional tactics. The session of 1854 dragged out, and nothing was accomplished. At the commencement of the next session the Commodore laid another proposal before Congress, which was to establish a line of steamers between New-York and England, to carry the mails for $19,759 the round trip, and to beat the Collins boats twenty-four hours every trip or forfeit payment. He could not secure the contracts, however, in spite of this offer, but by his letters on subsidies he convinced Gen. Pierce, then President, that they were wrong in theory and rotten in practice, whereupon the President vetoed the Collins subsidy. Then arose a cry to heaven, and many papers gravely asserted that the arrogant Vanderbilt had bribed the President with a sum of $50,000 to do this thing. The Commodore wrote in answer an open letter to the President, which was published in pamphlet form and distributed by myriads, by which he conclusively disposed of thy lie, and added a few more hard hits at the subsidy system.

Occupation always comes to a man that loves it, and while his contract was hanging fire in the Congressional committee rooms he found himself engaged in trouble with the Nicaragua Transit Company. The gentlemen who had the controlling interest having, like Jashurun, waxed fat, like that nation also began to kick and refused to fulfill their engagements. The Commodore wrote them a note of tremendous brevity, which ran: "Gentlemen, you have undertaken to cheat me. I won't sue you, for law is too slow. I'll run you. Yours truly, Cornelius Vanderbilt." In a few months he had organized another fleet and commenced an opposition line on the same road, and was fast redeeming his word when Walker burst upon the place, and, having established himself as ruler, annulled all contracts and stopped all traffic. This he did to be avenged on Vanderbilt, who had very curtly refused to help his enterprise in any way, or to allow any of his men or stores to be conveyed on his steamers. When the gray-eyed man of Destiny had been removed from the scene by shooting, and the agents of Vanderbilt resumed operations, it was found that the harbor on the Pacific side, San Juan del Sur, had become choked either by intention or accident, and the route was now impracticable, and was therefore transferred to Chagres. But the original transits line was irretrievably bankrupted and annihilated. In the California shipping business the Commodore remained for nine years more, making plenty of money, but not satisfied. He used to say that things were all right on the Atlantic side, but very unsatisfactory on the California half. "For," said he, "the swindling in the business of supplying steamers is outrageous. If my Captain is a smart man he cheats me, and if he is a dull man the dealers cheat him, so that in any event there is a swindling drawback." But in spite of this he continued in the traffic until 1864.

Long before that time, however, he had turned his attention to the subject of Atlantic steamers. The Government did not give him the mails, but he avenged himself by creating a New-York and Havre Line, which was fitted with the fastest steamers that had ever been seen. In this line were the Ariel, the Harvest Queen, and the never-to-be-forgotten Vanderbilt. This last was built in 1853 at a cost of $900,000 in gold, and it had a tonnage of 5 000 register. It was the pride of his heart, the idolized result of his matured knowledge of ship-building, and it answered all the expectations that he had formed of it. For there was intense emulation excited among the rival lines, the Cunard and the Collins, but the Vanderbilt beat them all, and made incredibly short passages. The war of the slaveholders' rebellion broke out shortly afterward, and instead of ruining everybody, as was supposed, it gave an intensely febrile activity to every form of production and every effort of enterprise. But the uprising brain of the Commodore saw that it would end in taking from the reluctant hand of Columbia the sceptre of the ocean, and would give to Great Britain the carrying trade of the world. Yet the decline of American shipping was invisible to all but him, for just as the setting sun is larger in appearance and more splendid in color than the same orb at its meridian height, so did our carrying business seem more prosperous and destined to greater triumphs for the last few years before it disappeared. And his restless brain was now taxed to consider these things, and to discover what form of enterprise was the most capable of development. But while he slowly matured his views for leaving the shipping business and accepting new tolls and new responsibilities, the exigencies of war sought him out and brought him as a chosen counselor to the President of the nation. The Merrimac iron ram of the Confederates, coming out of its shelter at Richmond, had sunk the Cumberland and wrought such havoc with the Union fleet as filled loyal men's hearts with gloom. The triumphant career of the ram had been stayed by the Monitor, but naval men were of opinion that this had been a lucky hit and might not occur a second time. The President had consulted with Secretary Stanton, and they both had talked with naval men. The latter were unanimous upon the point that if the ram could be fought and smashed there was but one man that could do it, and his name was Cornelius Vanderbilt.

To this man came a telegram asking for his presence in Washington. He came to the house of the Secretary of War, and was greeted with enthusiasm. "Will you," said Stanton, "save the President!" "Certainly," was the reply, and to the President's presence the pair went. "Now," said Mr. Lincoln, "can you stop that rebel ram, and for how much money will you do it!" He answered, "I think I can, Mr. President, but I won't do it for money. I do not want the people of this country to look upon me as one who would trade upon her necessities and make blood-money out of her wounds." Mr. Lincoln shook his head, and evidently thought that the Commodore was a Confederate sympathizer, for he said: "What's the use of further talking? You won't do anything for us, Isee." Vanderbilt said: "I don't know about that, Mr. President. I place myself and all my resources at your disposition without pay, and I believe I can protect the fleet and prevent the Merrimac from passing Old Point Comfort. I have a ship which I give to you for this purpose. You will place a crew on it, and fit it up for sailing at your expense, and I will take charge of it. Only let me be free from the control of your Navy Department, and I'll answer for it that the Merrimac won't pass Old Point Comfort." Joyfully the patriotic proposal was accepted, and in thirty-six hours the Vanderbilt, with the Commodore in command was at its station in Hampton Roads. The officer in charge of the fleet sent a boat asking to see the veteran, who was at that time more than sixty-eight years of age, and Commodore Vanderbilt went on board the flag-ship His reputation as a skillful pilot was known to every one, and when he said that he would run down the Merrimac as a hound runs down a wolf, and, striking her sai dships, would send her to the bottom, the all believed that he would do it, and looked admiringly at his huge steamer, the shadow of whose black hull loomed upon the water like the reflection of a great cloud. "How can we help you?" said the chief officer. "Only by keeping severely out of my way when I am hunting the critter," was the amusing response, at which every one laughed. But the coursing match never came off, for the spies who swarmed about the Federal council carried the story to Richmond, and when the Merrimac had repaired damages from her brush with the Monitor, her Captain, who had been in Vanderbilt's employ, and knew his antagonist, declined to come out from his hiding-place. Nor did the Confederates ever dare again to send her up the Roads. But the idea of the Commodore bore fruit, and when the gallant Farragut stormed the forts and rebel fleet at Mobile the frigates put on the ram Tennessee *chors au combat* in the manner that he had proposed. Everybody knows the story, and how the wooden frigates butted against the mail-clad ram so fiercely that the seamen could not keep their feet and had to surrender, being knocked senseless by the incessant concussions.

Although the brave old gentleman could not remain long at the station, he left behind him a Captain possessed with his ideas and trained in his school. When the pirate Alabama commenced her ravages the Vanderbilt steamer was dispatched in quest of her, and hunted her for more than a twelvemonth. Then the magnificent engines and boilers, by such a strain, were rendered momentarily unserviceable, and they were taken out and the vessel sold to a firm in the grain business, who called it the Three Brothers. (It is in active use to the present hour.) The reward of the Commodore for his patriotism was the Congressional vote of a large gold medal and a series of complimentary resolutions. This was well enough for what he had personally done—for the services he had rendered and the counsel he had given. But it must strike the impartial mind that it was rather an inadequate return for his magnificent donation, which had only been given for a purpose, and when that purpose had been accomplished ought certainly to have been returned to him. When the medal was voted, which was in January, 1864, some months before the destruction of the pirate by the Kearsarge, the value of the Vanderbilt must have been more than one million and a half in currency. Mr. Vanderbilt had his medal, and could say when he looked upon it, "This is all I received in exchange for the finest steamer that was ever launched."

This transaction certainly did not place any restraint upon his previously-arranged determination to withdraw from the steamer business altogether. He arranged with Messrs. Allen, C. K. Garrison, and Wheeler, that they should buy his steamers for three millions, one million down, the remainder in amounts as the ships earned them. In eighteen months they had wiped out the indebtedness, the Commodore had his three millions and the firm the steamers. While this business was being carried to a successful close the Commodore took a little turn in Wall street. It was his seventieth year, and his long, useful, and patriotic life had been passed among ships and steamers, but the reasoning of his brain had shown him that the day was done for the carrying trade and that the night was at hand. He began to acquire stock in Harlem, and quietly bought up all the shorts which the bears, Drew and others, were selling freely. The shares were ranging from eight to sixteen at that time, and as the amount of the total stock was not large, the great operators sold very much more than existed. When settling day come there was a dreadful yell from the gentlemen who wanted to cover their shorts, for all the stock in the market was in the hands of the old Commodore, to whom they had sold it. Drew was squeezed to the amount of a round million, and the rest in proportion. The Wall street men said, "Another king has come to reign over us," but the overwise ones shook their heads. They muttered about his being loaded up with unprofitable stock, and said he could never get rid of it. But he did not want to get rid of it. He had bought the stock to keep. Assuming the management he dismissed incapable and dishonest officers, introduced reforms, checked expenditures, and in an incredibly short time made the road a paying institution, a sound investment security. Then he went in for Hudson River, which was going for about 25. It had never paid, and was a foot-ball for theotreet. Everybody sneered at it, and John Tobin, a heavy dealer, sold him an enormous amount of the stock in one transaction. There was no secrecy about his dealings in Hudson River shares. He bought everything in the open market, and acquired a majority of the shares without the least concealment. Nobody understood the man. He was seventy-one years of age, but hale and hearty as a youngster of twenty. The world accepted him as the greatest steam-boatman that ever lived, but they did not comprehend that he was great at everything. And yet no one can reproach their blindness, for it was according to the dictates of common sense to believe that a man who was so superlatively superior in one line would not be able, when past the ordinary extent of life, to acquire all the details of a totally different calling. But the man was an extraordinary man, not to be judged by ordinary rules or average mental measuring rods, and those who applied them were woefully mistaken in their reckoning.

When he had Hudson River within his grasp he applied the same remedies to it as to Harlem, and very quickly the road was all right, and earning a dividend. It would have earned more, but the New-York Central, running from Albany to Buffalo, fought against it, and threw all its weight in favor of the Albany boats, owned by Daniel Drew. The fact is, that though Henry Keep, of New-York, was the President, the line was in the hands of an Albany clique, of whom Dean Richmond was the chief. Commodore Vanderbilt wanted to know whether there was to be peace or war between the two roads. Mr. Keep said peace, and there was peace during the Winter time, when the boats could not run; but as soon as the river was open Dean Richmond said war, and the freight of the New-York Central went to the boats as usual. Once only this trick was played, for the next Winter the stern mandate went from the lips of the Commodore, "Take no freight from the New-York Central." He was inexorable as fate itself, and as immovable as he had been when at the helm of the Vanderbilt, he had vainly waited for the appearance of the Merrimac at Point Comfort. The stock of New-York Central went down at a blow fifteen per cent, and the American public at last realized that this was a man of the real heroic grain, to whose leadership all could trust implicitly. Hudson stock kept rising, and the holders of Central murmured loudly. Finally Mr. Keep resigned, Mr. Baxter taking his place until the election, which was not until the 12th of November, in the year of grace 1867, and upon that morning Mr. Vanderbilt received the following letter:

NEW-YORK, Nov. 12, 1867.

C. Vanderbilt, Esq.:

DEAR SIR: The undersigned stockholders of the New-York Central Railroad Company are satisfied that a change in the administration of the company and a thorough reformation in the management of its affairs, would result in larger dividends to the stockholders, and greatly promote the interests of the public. They therefore request that you will receive their proxies for the coming election, and select such a Board of Directors as shall seem to you to be entitled to their confidence.

They hope that such an organization will be effected as shall secure to the company the aid of your great and acknowledged abilities. Yours respectfully,

EDWARD CUNARD,
JOHN J. ASTOR, Jr.,
REINHARD V. HUTTON,
JOHN STEWARD,

and others representing over thirteen millions of the stock.

The election was held in due course, but there was no opposition to the Vanderbilt ticket, which represented moreover six millions of his own besides the above.

And now began a series of improvements in the railroad system of the City of New-York which fairly transformed it. Commencing with the consolidation of the Hudson River and Central, and the leasing of the long line of the Harlem, (extending to Chatham Four Corners,) Mr. Vanderbilt next projected the building of the Forty-second Street Depot, and in due order followed the introduction of steel rails, the laying of a quadruple track from one end of the line to the other, and the wonderful engineering feat of sinking the City part of the track and arching it over for the prevention of accidents, and the improvement of that fine district along Fourth avenue. The speed of the trains was so greatly increased that to go from New-York to Albany in four hours became a common occurrence, yet the distance is fully 150 miles. The price paid, too, was and is smaller than on any other line in the country, for all the year round fares are two cents per mile, which is the average rate of the cheap Summer excursions on other lines. The system of the four tracks, two exclusively for passenger traffic and two for freight, is so superior as to have given indefinitely expansive powers to the carrying of western productions. By this plan the freight trains are run continuously like an endless chain, and can carry grain enough to load 200 vessels per day. By it also the safety of passenger travel has been brought to a maximum, and whenever an accident has taken place it has been by a combination of untoward circumstances impossible to foresee or to prevent. The depot at Forty-second street was in a great measure constructed according to the Commodore's own ideas, and the observant traveler will notice with surprise that the immense roof is supported upon trussed arches of iron, the one pregnant fact in the development of the use of iron in buildings. It is hard to realize that a man who had already lived far beyond the time allotted to mortals could still preserve such activity of brain as to be constantly accessible to new ideas. Here was a man who had made a life-long study of ship-building and the management of ships. At seventy years of age he saw clearly that America has lost the carrying trade of the world. He looked around him for something that may be improved and developed. He took the railroad system of his native State, put together the isolated pieces, rescued them from poverty and debt, and then created a scheme of improvements which places these railroads at the head of locomotive traffic in the universe. And these things he evolved out of a brain covered with the white hairs of more than eighty years. Nor was he in his eighty-third year less active. Little by little, and everything in its turn, the great plans of improvements were carried out, until the people who have been for a few years out of town can hardly recognize the old familiar things. Commodore Vanderbilt never stopped improving, but went on developing, maturing, and ripening his system, until death called him away from the scene where he had so long reigned without an equal.

In his private life the Commodore was always distinguished by three things—overwhelming affection for his family and his friends, hatred of ostentation, and love of solid comfort. He had lived for many years past in a great double brick house on Washington place, handsomely furnished, but without the least pretension. There are more gold and silver models of famous steam-boats in it than famous pictures, and indeed the fine arts are represented only by portraits. In the place of honor is a likeness of his mother, whom he cherished all his life with the fondest love. Opposite is a very fine portrait of his second wife, a very handsome and accomplished Southern lady, from Mobile, Ala., formerly a Miss Crawford. His first wife died in the early part of 1868, which left the Commodore alone in his big house, for all his children were married, and some of them had grandchildren even. So in the Fall of 1869 the house in Washington place received a new mistress, who has done its honors with much sweetness and grace. The master of the house was all his life surrounded by friends who repaid his affection by a love "this side idolatry," as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare. Every day they called upon him, or drove with him along Eighth avenue and across Macomb's Dam to Silbeen's Club-house, on Jerome avenue. For Mr. Vanderbilt was a great admirer of trotting-horses, and his team, Plow Boy and Post Boy, have been considered the fastest in the country. Iron in opposition, he was in private life entirely governed by his affections, nor did age take from him the sweet-smiling look of his boyhood. Before his second marriage he used to play whist and Boston every night at the Manhattan Club, but latterly his friends have dropped in of evenings and played with him.

The eldest son, William H. Vanderbilt, will perhaps take his father's place as a railroad man, though to compare him with his father would be idle. But had his father never been known the son would certainly have been among the foremost men, for if he has not a creative and original genius, he has an immense power of absorbing details. He is as much master of the facts of every department as the chief of it, and he is a model of hard-working industry. No man possesses the technique of railroad management in in as full a measure as he, and he is training up his sons in the same path. The elder son, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr., is Treasurer of the Harlem Road, and the second, William K. Vanderbilt, assists his father in his office. So the Vanderbilt lines will probably be managed by Vanderbilt sons for generations to come, to the great content of all interested. It is a fair prophecy that the line will not lose one cent by the death of Cornelius Vanderbilt, for the system which he created, and which his son William is now carrying out so thoroughly, will live long after him. And herein was displayed another proof of the transcendent powers of his genius, since he so vitalized the Vanderbilt lines and infused such energy into them that they will retain the effects for fifty years to come. That he did this in steam-boats is notorious, for though he left the business long ago, the impetus of his energy survives, and the stamp of his building genius is on every boat that leaves the slips.

The New York Times
Published: January 5, 1877
Copyright © The New York Times