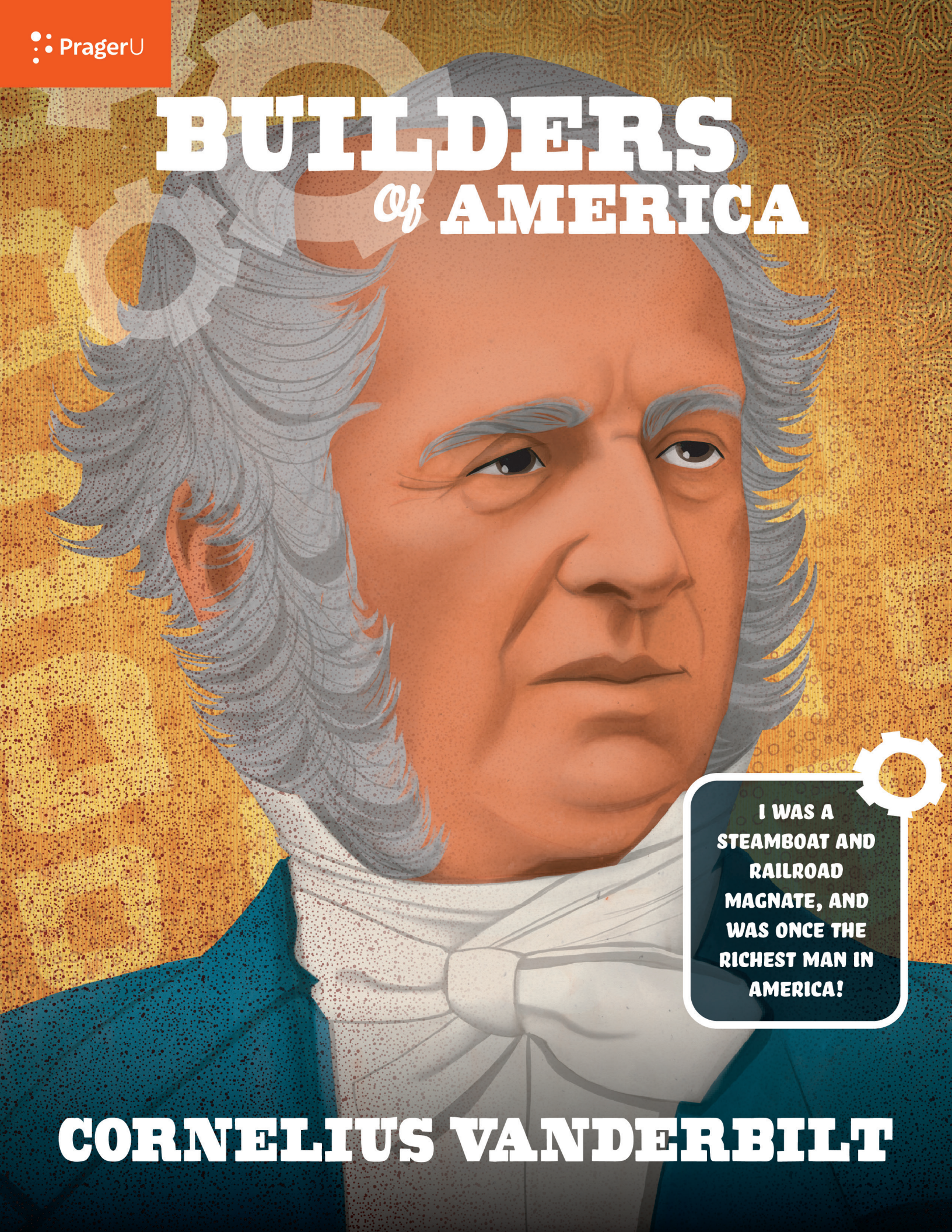


BUILDERS *Of* AMERICA



I WAS A
STEAMBOAT AND
RAILROAD
MAGNATE, AND
WAS ONCE THE
RICHEST MAN IN
AMERICA!

CORNELIUS VANDERBILT



PragerU is redefining how people think about media and education. Watched millions of times every day, PragerU is the world's leading nonprofit with educational, entertaining, pro-American videos for every age. From intellectual, fact-based 5-Minute Videos and powerful personal storytelling to animated shows made just for kids—PragerU helps people of all ages think and live better.

PragerU Kids teaches history, civics, financial literacy, and American values to children across the K-12th grade spectrum. With kids shows, books, and educational resources for every grade, PragerU Kids offers content that parents and teachers trust and children love. Watch for free and learn more at PragerUkids.com.

All text and illustrations Copyright © 2024 Prager University Foundation.

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

PragerU is a registered trademark of Prager University Foundation.

Published by PragerU

15021 Ventura Boulevard #552

Sherman Oaks, CA 91403

Meet Cornelius Vanderbilt

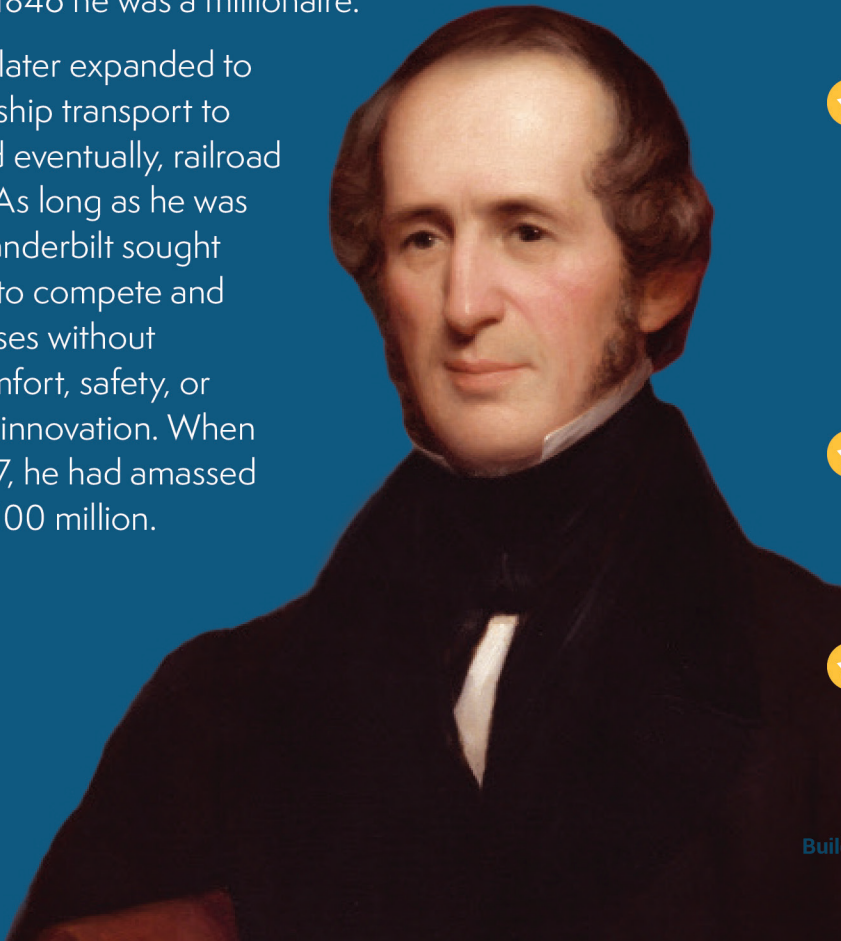
Cornelius Vanderbilt grew up on the waterfront as the son of poor farmers. At 16, he borrowed \$100 to buy a flat-bottomed sailboat, which he used to ferry passengers between Staten Island and New York City.

Vanderbilt quickly earned a reputation as an able boatman who provided reliable service, even in the most **inclement** weather. During the War of 1812, he transported provisions to strategic government outposts.

He later worked as a steamboat captain for Thomas Gibbons, and the two conspired to break a government-enforced monopoly by charging much lower rates. Their efforts would succeed, ultimately resulting in an 1824 Supreme Court case that struck down the **monopoly**.

Over the next decade, Vanderbilt established his own steamboat business in the Northeast, offering **unprecedented** luxury, service, and low fares. He was so successful that his competitors paid him to leave, and by 1846 he was a millionaire.

His operation later expanded to include steamship transport to California, and eventually, railroad construction. As long as he was in business, Vanderbilt sought creative ways to compete and reduce expenses without sacrificing comfort, safety, or technological innovation. When he died in 1877, he had amassed a fortune of \$100 million.



At-a-Glance

- ★ Born on May 27, 1794, in Staten Island, New York.
- ★ A shipping and railroad **magnate** who became the richest man in America.
- ★ Called “Commodore” because of his work in the boating industry.
- ★ Recognized as a central figure in America’s industrial revolution.
- ★ A classic market **entrepreneur** whose tactics spurred innovation and made travel more affordable for his customers.
- ★ **Maligned** as a “Robber Baron” by many modern historians.
- ★ Died on January 4, 1877, in New York, New York.



A Humble Mooring

Cornele (short for Cornelius) Vanderbilt was born on May 27, 1794—the fourth child of Cornelius Vanderbilt and Phebe Hand. He grew up near the water at Stapleton on Staten Island. From their modest home, the family enjoyed views of the Narrows and Long Island, where they could observe a steady stream of boats traversing the harbor. From an early age, Vanderbilt developed an eye for sailing vessels and could easily distinguish between them.

The family's farm produced meager crops, so Vanderbilt's father worked odd jobs on the water to supplement the family's earnings. In his small sailboat, Vanderbilt Sr. carried produce to sell at the city market.

Vanderbilt learned to sail at an early age so that he could help his family. He was eager

to take on even the most demanding labor to avoid going to school. Under constant pressure to make ends meet, his father depended on his help and did not insist on a formal education.

At age 12, Vanderbilt was entrusted with a complex mission: to remove the cargo of a wrecked vessel off Sandy Hook and bring it to New York. His success in negotiating with the teamsters and ferrymen during the mission won his father's confidence.

Vanderbilt greatly respected his mother, Phebe, a resourceful woman who tended to and sold her own crops, stashing the earnings in the old family clock. She frequently rescued the family from financial ruin with her hidden savings.



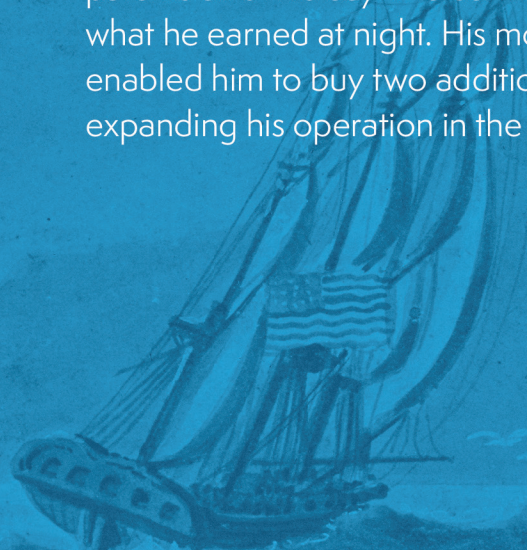
Vanderbilt the Boatman

Just before his 16th birthday, Vanderbilt shared his dream of becoming a sailor with his mother. Since he was not permitted to leave home until age 21, they made a special arrangement. She would loan him \$100 to buy his own sailboat, and he would repay the loan by carrying passengers between Staten Island and the city. Vanderbilt was also required to earn the loan by plowing and planting an eight-acre parcel on his family farm.

He accepted the challenge with confidence and completed the farming task in one month, enabling him to buy the sailboat and

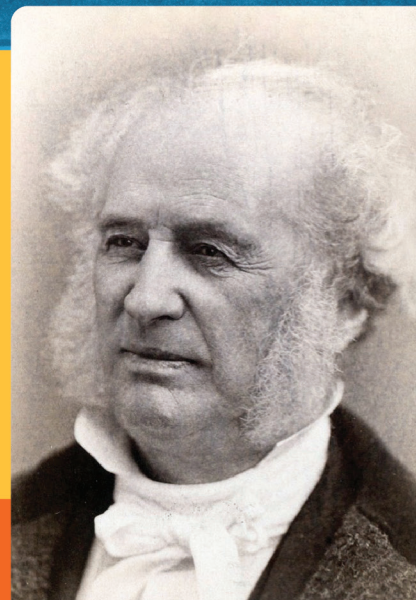
launch his business. In addition to ferrying passengers, he accepted various freighting assignments, working day and night.

At the end of his first season, Vanderbilt was so successful that he repaid the loan to his mother plus an additional \$1,000. He gave his parents all of his daytime earnings and half of what he earned at night. His modest savings enabled him to buy two additional sailboats, expanding his operation in the harbor.



“I didn’t feel as much real satisfaction when I made two million in that Harlem corner as I did on that bright May morning sixty years before when I stepped into my own [boat], hoisted my own sail, and put my hand on my own tiller.”

Cornelius Vanderbilt





BUILDING A BUSINESS

On December 19, 1813, Vanderbilt married Sophia Johnson. They welcomed the first of 13 children in their first year of marriage, propelling Vanderbilt to work even harder. His wife's thriftiness in managing their household enabled him to reinvest his earnings in the business.

Vanderbilt hired other boatmen to manage his successful ferry business so that he could devote his energy to coastal trade. Leading merchants were eager to conduct business with him, and he increased his earnings by transporting their goods up and down the eastern coastline.

He continued to add vessels to his fleet and oversaw their design and construction, suggesting various innovations that came to be known as "Vanderbilt methods" and "Vanderbilt models."

By the end of 1817, Vanderbilt noticed that steamboats were appearing with greater frequency on New York waters. As his sailing profits began to decline, he realized that the future belonged to steam.

Fierce Competition

The first American to operate a steamboat on New York waters was Robert Fulton. In 1807, his famous steamboat, the *Clermont*, hissed and sputtered four miles per hour up the Hudson River, transforming the boating industry. The New York government played an active role in establishing Fulton's business, granting him the right to carry *all* New York steamboat traffic for 30 years.

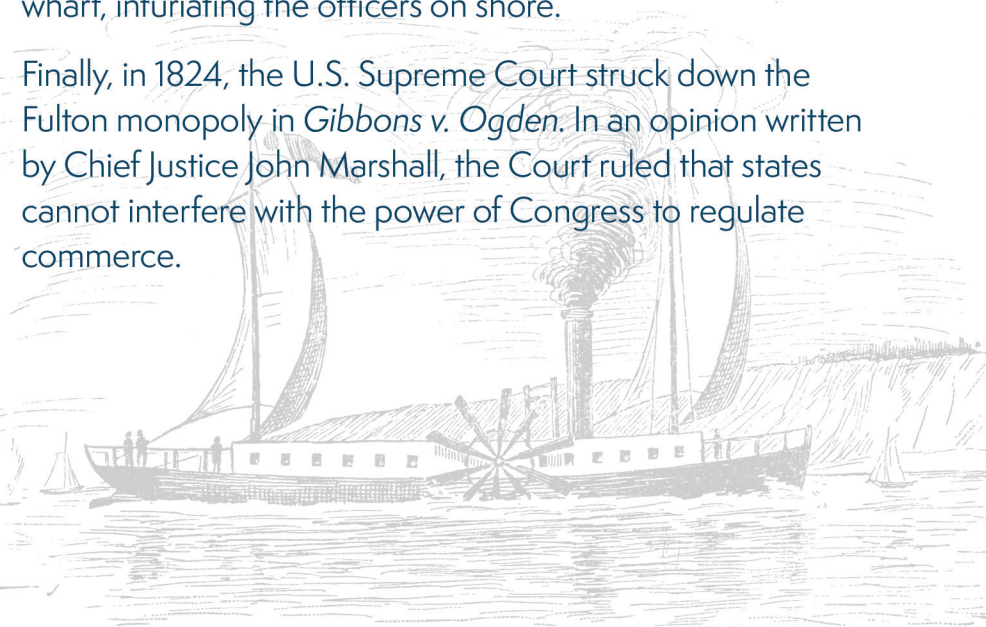
Thomas Gibbons, a New Jersey steamboat businessman, sought to break Fulton's monopoly and hired independent-minded Cornelius Vanderbilt to work as his captain. Vanderbilt accepted significantly less pay to learn the steamboat business from Gibbons, his first and only employer.

To crack the monopoly, Vanderbilt charged much lower rates, increasing the affordability of steamboat travel as well as his own popularity. However, by defying the monopoly, he was also breaking the law, and authorities attempted to arrest him for 60 consecutive days.

To avoid arrest, Vanderbilt devised several tricks. On the steamboat the *Bellona*, he constructed a secret closet accessed by a sliding panel. When police searched for him on board, he hid in the closet until one of his crew tapped on the panel, signifying that the officers had given up their search. The *Bellona* would mysteriously start up and leave the wharf, infuriating the officers on shore.

Finally, in 1824, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Fulton monopoly in *Gibbons v. Ogden*. In an opinion written by Chief Justice John Marshall, the Court ruled that states cannot interfere with the power of Congress to regulate commerce.

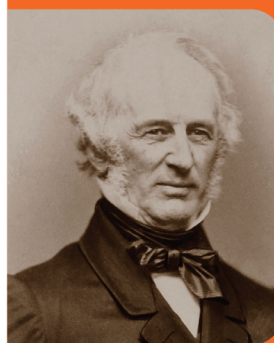
GETTY IMAGES





Full Steam Ahead

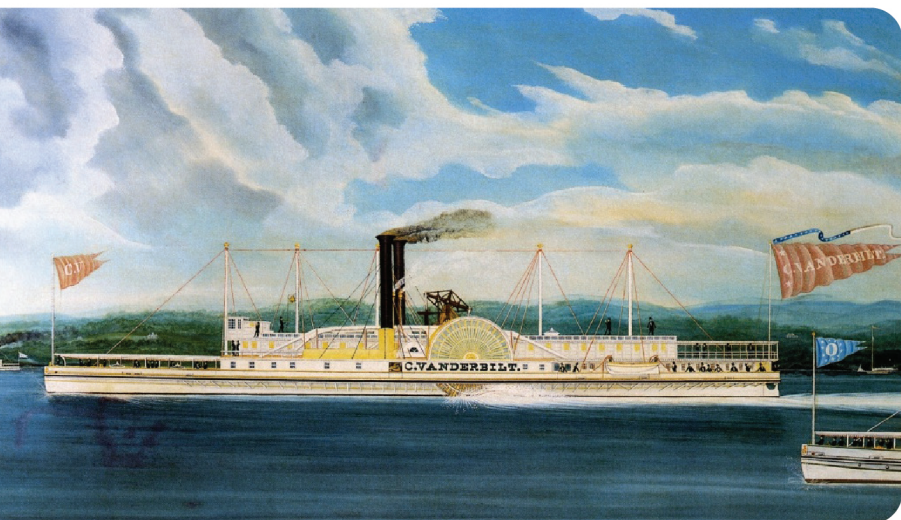
In 1829, Vanderbilt purchased two steamboats and went into business for himself, offering fast and reliable service at low rates. One of his largest competitors, the Hudson River Steamboat Association, tried to guarantee profits through a fixed three dollar fare. Vanderbilt challenged them by slashing the fare to one dollar, then to ten cents, and eventually to nothing. He counted on his 100 passengers buying at least two dollars of food on his boat to cover the daily \$200 operating cost.



The Steamboat Association offered to buy Vanderbilt out, giving him \$100,000 plus \$5,000 a year for ten years if he

would leave the Hudson River for the next ten years.

Vanderbilt invested his payoff money in bigger and faster ships. The *New York Evening Post* called him “the greatest practical anti-monopolist in the country” when he cut the New York City to Providence rate in half.



DID YOU KNOW?

Historians have long debated the effects of entrepreneurs on American commerce. The steamboat industry offers a snapshot of how entrepreneurs responded to various challenges and how those responses did, or did not, contribute to growth.

Political entrepreneurs such as Robert Fulton relied on government aid to build their businesses through monopolies, **subsidies**, **price-fixing**, vote buying, or stock speculation. As a result, politics and business became corrupted and made America less competitive. Since Fulton didn't have to deal with any competition, he could raise prices on consumers, eating away at the money they worked hard to earn.

Market entrepreneurs such as Cornelius Vanderbilt succeeded on their own by providing a superior product at a low cost. They enabled new technologies to flourish and services to improve. Steamboat builders were free to invent tubular instead of heavy copper boilers. Fuel costs were reduced by 50% when engineers discovered that anthracite coal worked well under the new boilers. Vanderbilt passed on these savings to his customers, lowering fares from seven dollars to three dollars.



Subsidy on the Seas

To meet the demand for overseas trade, many steamship operators sought federal aid. The U.S. government hired Edward Collins to build five ships that would carry mail to California. He spent several years building four luxurious ships, using taxpayer money to create elegant saloons filled with marble tables, olive wood furniture, and plush carpet. His costs were **exorbitant**, but with annual government aid of \$858,000, he had no incentive to reduce them.

Vanderbilt competed with Collins by slashing prices to carry mail and passengers, finding creative ways to cut expenses. Instead of paying

high insurance rates, Vanderbilt hired excellent captains and invested in well-built ships that required little maintenance.

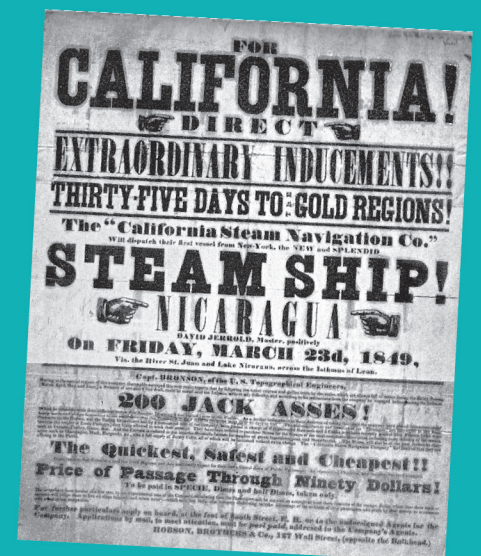
By contrast, Collins's ships cost more to build and were prone to leakage. By 1856, two of his ships sank and killed almost 500 passengers. He spent over \$1 million of government money to build a replacement, but it was so poorly constructed that it only made two trips before he sold it at a huge loss. As a result, Congress revoked Collins's aid and forced him to compete with Vanderbilt. He soon went bankrupt, making Vanderbilt the leading American steamship operator.

To California!

Two steamship operators were hired by the government to deliver mail to California in exchange for \$500,000 (later \$900,000) per year. Passengers paid \$600 to travel from New York to California via railroad over Panama.

From Vanderbilt's perspective, the subsidized California lines had been given an unfair advantage, so he devised clever tactics to compete with them. To shorten the route to California by 500 miles, Vanderbilt established a steamship line to take passengers to Latin America and a transit company to carry them through Nicaragua. He offered free mail delivery and a faster journey to California for a \$150 fare.

When Vanderbilt later lost rights to the canal, he competed directly with the subsidized lines on the Panama route, reducing his fare to just \$100. His competitors were infuriated that their business was being undercut, so they offered to pay him 75% of their government subsidy if he promised to stop running ships to California. In 1858, Congress was shocked to learn about the payoff and ended the mail subsidies. Vanderbilt had successfully exposed the corruption of the subsidy system.





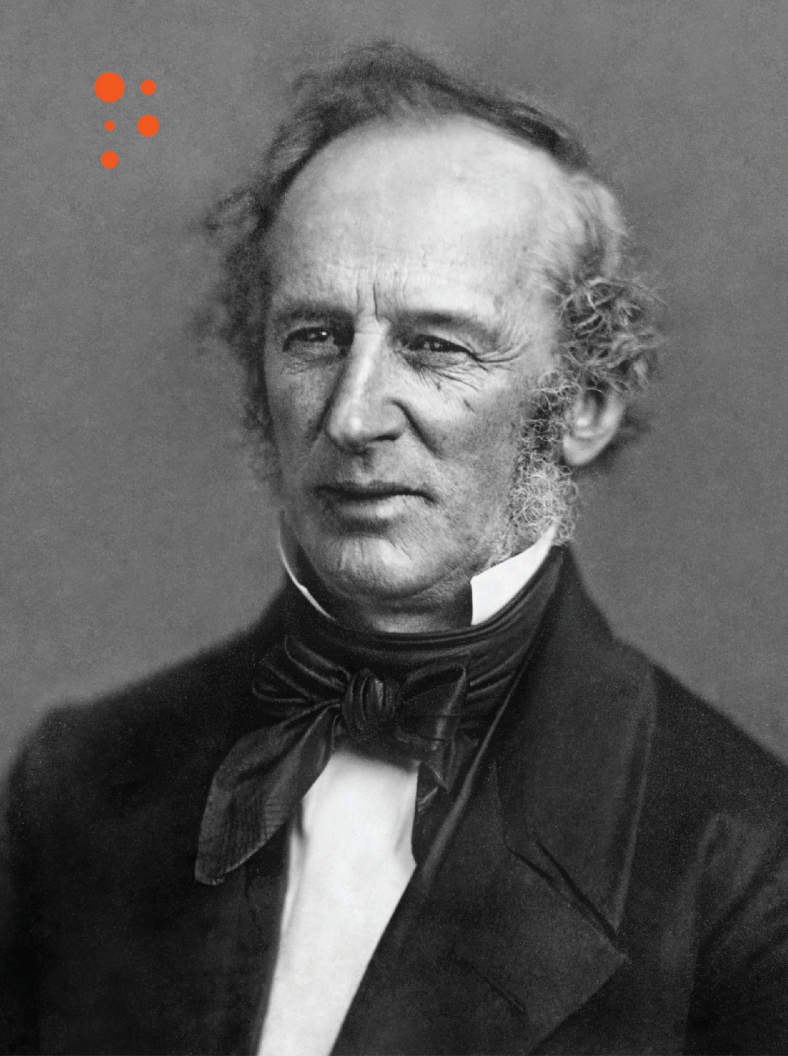
Fascinating Facts about Vanderbilt

- Vanderbilt knew only basic math and was illiterate, relying on phonetics for spelling.
- In the most humiliating experience of his career, Vanderbilt's large 26-ton vessel, named *Dread*, capsized and sank.
- In his fight to break the Fulton monopoly, Vanderbilt raised a flag on the masthead of Gibbon's ship that read, "New Jersey Must Be Free!"
- Vanderbilt built a \$600,000 steamship he named the *Vanderbilt*, the largest ship on the Atlantic. He later donated the ship to the U.S. during the Civil War.
- Vanderbilt ordered the construction of Grand Central Depot in New York City, creating jobs for thousands who had become unemployed during the Panic of 1873.

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Cornelius Vanderbilt was born on _____ to poor farmers, Cornelius Vanderbilt and Phebe Hand.
2. At age 16, Vanderbilt received a \$100 loan from his mother to buy a _____, which launched his business.
3. Vanderbilt learned the steamboat business from his first and only employer, _____.
4. _____ relied on government aid to build their businesses while _____ succeeded on their own by providing a superior product at a low cost.
5. To compete with the government-subsidized California steamship lines, Vanderbilt built a canal in _____ that shortened his route by 500 miles.
6. When Vanderbilt died in 1877, he was the _____ man in America, worth \$100 million.

Answer key on page 10



Later Life

Vanderbilt had come a long way since he purchased his first boat in 1810. During the 1850s, he began investing in railroads, buying stock, and ultimately acquiring multiple railroad lines in the Northeast.

After the Civil War, Vanderbilt sold his steamship fleet and focused exclusively on railroads, which had become extremely profitable. His New York Central railroad line extended over one thousand miles to Chicago and other midwestern cities.

Vanderbilt continued to manage his business interests until his death in 1877.



Word Scramble

1. TLARNIVDBE
2. TIPNACA
3. AEOTSBATM
4. TEENURPREEN
5. PLOONYMO
6. ISTVNE
7. DARLIROAS
8. ESIDBSSUI
9. ATNOVIRNO
10. ARENSSEGSP



The Profits Add Up!

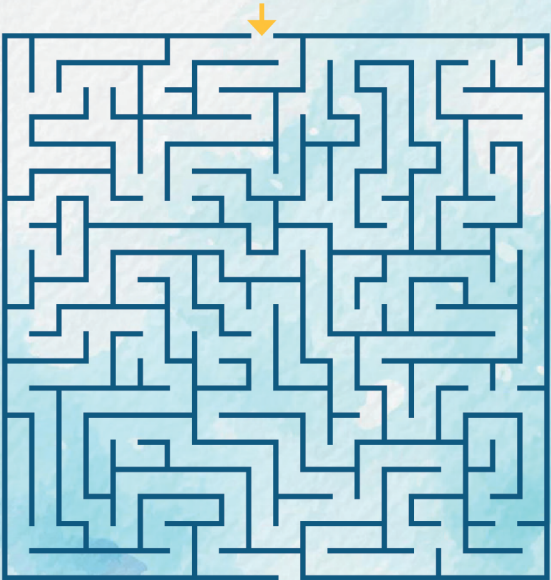
Help Vanderbilt calculate his earnings:

1. The Steamboat Association paid Vanderbilt \$100,000 plus \$5,000 a year for ten years to stop operating his steamboats on the Hudson River. How much did he earn?
2. When Vanderbilt challenged the California lines, his competitors offered to pay him 75% of their \$900,000 government subsidy to stop running ships to California. How much money did they pay him?

Lost at Sea



Help Vanderbilt ferry passengers from Staten Island to New York City.



Answer key on page 10



GETTY IMAGES

Glossary

- **Inclement:** Severe, rough, or stormy, usually referring to the weather.
- **Monopoly:** When one company has so much control over a certain type of good or service that no other companies can make money selling that good or service.
- **Unprecedented:** Never before known or experienced.
- **Magnate:** A powerful or influential person, especially in business or industry.
- **Entrepreneur:** A person who starts and operates a business, usually with substantial initiative and risk.
- **Malign:** To make evil, harmful, and often untrue statements about someone.
- **Subsidy:** Money given by a government to a private person or company to support public programs or services.
- **Price-Fixing:** An agreement between companies in the same industry on what the price of a certain good should be, which often raises the price for consumers.
- **Exorbitant:** Going beyond what is reasonable in cost, quality, amount, or size.

Sources

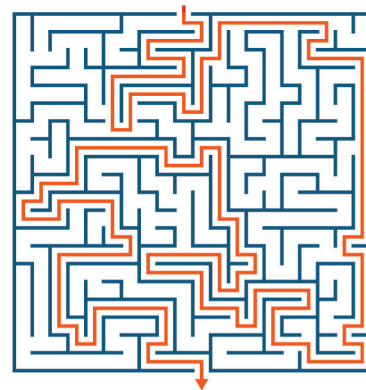
Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Cornelius Vanderbilt." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 May. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cornelius-Vanderbilt-1794-1877>. Accessed October 2021.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Gibbons v. Ogden." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 13 Apr. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Gibbons-v-Ogden>. Accessed October 2021.

Folsom, Burton, and Forrest McDonald. *The Myth of the Robber Barons: A New Look at the Rise of Big Business in America*. Young America's Foundation, 2018.

Lane, Wheaton J. *Commodore Vanderbilt: An Epic of the Steam Age*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (online edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.



FILL-IN-THE-BLANK KEY: 1—MAY 27, 1794. 2—SAILBOAT. 3—THOMAS GIBBONS. 4—POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS, MARKET ENTREPRENEURS. 5—NICARAGUA. 6—RICHEST.

WORD SCRAMBLE KEY: 1—VANDERBILT. 2—CAPTAIN. 3—STEAMBOAT. 4—ENTREPRENEUR. 5—MONOPOLY. 6—INVEST. 7—RAILROADS. 8—SUBSIDIES. 9—INNOVATOR. 10—PASSENGERS.

THE PROFITS ADD UP KEY: 1— $\$100,000 + (\$5,000 \times 10) = \$150,000$. 2—PART I: WRITE 75% AS A DECIMAL. $75 / 100 = .75$ PART II: $\$900,000 \times .75 = \$675,000$.

Take some notes!



A large area of the page is filled with horizontal blue lines, providing space for taking notes. A vertical red line runs down the right side of this area, separating it from the yellow sidebar.



READY FOR MORE?

Experience all the **FREE CONTENT** PragerU Kids has to offer!



STREAM FREE SHOWS ON YOUR TV OR TABLET

Download our FREE mobile or TV app to stream every PragerU Kids show! Or, watch any time at PragerUkids.com.



ENJOY HOURS OF FREE SHOWS

Browse over 300 educational videos for K-12, including game shows, cartoons, and inspiring reality shows.



EXPLORE WHOLESOME STORIES & AMAZING HISTORY

Download free e-books at PragerUkids.com or purchase printed copies on Amazon.



FREE RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS & PARENTS

Supplement your child's viewing experience with lesson plans & worksheets that meet educational standards.



ORDER NOW!

Inspiring Biographies

with Valuable Lessons

Stories Filled with History & Activities.
Perfect for Middle Readers 3rd-5th Grade!



Experience Fun, Interactive,
and Educational Content at
PRAGERUKIDS.COM