A Look at the Life of the Commodore
Born 200 years ago this May 27, the man who gave the bequest that made Vanderbilt University more than a gleam in a Methodist bishop's eye was in many ways an unlikely choice as an educational benefactor.

He preferred the outdoors to the confines of the classroom and left school at age 11. His own handwriting was virtually illegible, his grammar atrocious. He was a man who never wasted words, and the words he did utter were remarkable mostly for their richness of profanity. The wealthiest man in America at the time of his death, he was not known for his philanthropy and made only one other significant charitable contribution during his lifetime.

It is Hollywood's loss that Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, the man who shortly before his death gave nearly a million dollars for the founding of a Southern university, was born too early for his larger-than-life persona to be fully exploited.

The fourth of nine children born to a family of modest means, he built his fortune from a single small ferry to a steamship empire, and, relatively late in life, went on to multiply his already considerable fortune several times over by buying up and improving railroad lines.

The above artwork featuring the Commodore is taken from an engraving on a Vanderbilt University diploma dated 1889.
Cornelius: “In response to those who claim that Vanderbilt had a great role in developing necessary transportation for a growing nation, it should be stated that for years he idled all the vessels on his East-to-West Coast Nicaraguan route in response to heavy tariffs by the owners of the rival Panamanian passage, and if he showed a fine patriotic spirit in offering [President Lincoln during the Civil War] to sink the Merrimac, it is equally true that the vessels that he chartered to the U.S. Navy for the expedition to New Orleans turned out to be rotten and unfit for ocean duty.

“The contrast between heroism and meanness is constantly baffling in the study of his long career. The man who was willing to kindle a small civil war in Nicaragua against such unprincipled adventurers as the shippers Cornelius Garrison and Charles Morgan and the wild Central American political fanatic William Walker, the man who, after age 70, had the foresight and energy to alter railroads, build the empire of the New York Central lines, and put together the railroad systems, the most important transportation for a growing nation, it should be stated that he was often a character and so rapidly increasing in number that there was bestowed upon him by acclamation the title of ‘Commodore.’ This honorary badge of distinction he wore all his life, and the designation, first applied facetiously, was at last universally employed as a serious recognition of his worth and power.”

In most ways, even after he became wealthy, the Commodore remained a simple man, though he did have an eye for horseflesh and kept a fine stable.

During the War of 1812, Cornelius was awarded a government contract to supply nearby U.S. military operations with provisions. In 1814, he built the schooner Dread, and a year later added a coating vessel, the Charlotte. By 1818, with several boats and $9,000 to his name, he contracted to go to work as a steamboat captain at a salary of $1,000, less than he could make on his own.

The move was a shrewd one, however. The steamboat industry was yet new, and Cornelius learned the business at someone else’s expense. He learned, for example, how much pressure could be allowed to build up before the boiler would explode, putting passengers in peril of death by scalding or flying shrapnel.

In 1824, Cornelius bought the steamboat Bellona and went into business for himself. In 1829 he built his first steamboat. By the time he reached the age of 40, noted Cornelius Vanderbilt’s official biographer, W.A. Crofut, he was worth half a million dollars. “He had a score of vessels in commission, most of which he had built himself, and these were of so superior a character and so rapidly increasing in number that there was bestowed upon him by acclamation the title of Commodore.’ This honorary badge of distinction he wore all his life, and the designation, first applied facetiously, was at last universally employed as a serious recognition of his worth and power.”

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“He always despised show and ostentation in every form. No lackey attended him: he held the reins himself,” wrote Crofut. “He ate sparingly at all times, and of the plainest and most wholesome things; rarely took wine, and generally retired at 10 o’clock.”

Cornelius’s great-great-grandfather, Jan Aertson, an illiterate farmer, immigrated to New York as a indentured servant in 1650 from the Dutch village of Bilt, whence the name Vanderbilt was eventually adopted by the family in a series of variations. Cornelius’s father, also named Cornelius, was a Staten Island farmer and ferryman from whom he inherited his reserve and brevity. His mother, Phebe Hand, is credited with instilling in Cornelius his traits of thrift and industry.

Shortly before his 16th birthday, he and his mother struck a bargain: if he would finish plowing a rocky eight-acre field by his birthday, she would loan him $100 with which to buy a periauger, one of the low barges used to ferry passengers and provisions between Staten Island, Manhattan, and other localities.

A year later Cornelius had done well enough to return the money to his mother, along with an additional $1,000 to be contributed to the family income.

In the years that followed he gained a reputation for getting his passengers to their destinations quickly and safely.

The hard physical labor helped build the physique for which he was admired all his life. As soon as he had earned enough money, he would add another, larger ferry to his fleet. Staten Island supplied much of the food that a growing Manhattan needed, and Cornelius added to the income earned from passenger fares by trading, buying whatever might be for sale on one end of his route and selling it at the other.

At age 19 he married Sophia Johnson, daughter of his mother’s sister. Sophia bore a striking resemblance to his mother. Cornelius’s parents had discouraged the marriage, fearing that children born of the union of two first cousins would be idiots.
passengers had anticipated as a highlight of the trip, when Cornelius became angry with a delay caused by a health officer. The 23 passengers were all family members except for a chaplain, a family physician, and their wives. When he was asked how he got on with the Commodore, who could be particularly curt with members of the clergy, the chaplain, the Reverend John O. Choules, said, "The Commodore did the swearing and I did the preaching, so we never disagreed."

In London, George Peabody gave the party the use of his boxes at the opera at Covent Garden. Not all of Europe was so gracious, however. Clarice Stasz, author of The Vanderbilt Women, wrote that while the British press noted that the yacht’s splendor exceeded that of the queen’s with its lavish appointments, "...the English ruling class for the most part avoided the 'vulgar' family. ...Despite the impression the North Star voyage made abroad and at home, the Vanderbilts remained anathema to old society. It would take another generation before the word 'Vanderbilt' was penned in an elegant hand on an invitation to a societal ball."

**Righting the Railroads**

Cornelius might have made his entry into railroads sooner had it not been for a New Jersey train accident in 1833 that left him seriously injured and colored his attitude toward the future of the locomotive. But by the 1860s, wrote Meade Minnigerode in Certain Rich Men, “after selling all his boats, when he came to examine these railroads with which the commerce and traffic of the future were bound up, he found a labyrinth of little disconnected roads, improvidently managed, all cutting each other’s throats in a senseless competition which plunged them, so frequently, into disastrous bankruptcies and receiverships.”

He began purchasing railroad stock and consolidating small run-down lines in the New York area. By 1865, having purchased controlling interest in the Harlem Railroad several years earlier, he also controlled the Hudson River Railroad and began merging smaller lines to form the New York Central Railroad, of which he became president in 1869.

"...He held himself answerable to no one, least of all the public and the minority stockholders...he was the directorate, he was—in so many instances—the law, he was Dictator. The country gained by it, he and the stockholders profited," wrote Minnigerode. "How he did it is another matter. A matter of financial persuasion, of Legislatures mollified, and courts of justice subsidized, of intrigue and speculations in the pursuit of which he was simply the most conspicuous and terrifying exponent of his era...."

Cornelius could be terrifying to his own family as well. His youngest son, George Washington Vanderbilt, the only one for whom he showed any affection, most resembled his father in looks and personality. A West Point cadet, George died after contracting malaria during the Civil War.

A second son, Cornelius Jeremiah, was an epileptic with a weakness for gambling who never gained his father’s approval. "Since he ran away in his eighteenth year, and fled to California as a sailor, and his father retaliated by locking him up as a lunatic, the two had been on the worst possible terms," wrote Croffut. "Cornelius Jeremiah was a...cadaverous-looking man...nervous, suspicious, petulant, and almost continually in bad health. He was known, more than once, to fall in a fit at a gaming table, recover, and play on." More than once, the Commodore was heard to say of his second son, "I’d give a hundred dollars not to have named him Cornelius."

The oldest son, William Henry, was in his early years dismissed by his father as a "good for nothing". "beetlehead," and a "blatherskite." But William Henry had a head for figures and first impressed his father by making a poor Staten Island farm profitable. When his eldest son got the better of him in a business deal, Cornelius sat up and took notice. Eventually he made William Henry an associate, giving him increasing responsibility for the family businesses. In the end William Henry gained the bulk of his father’s fortune. And it was William Henry who, in a rather roundabout way, may have had something to do with his father agreeing to give the money that he did not fund the university that today bears the family name.

**Cornelius and the Clairvoyants**

Like millions of Americans of his time, the Commodore was a believer in occult practices and enlisted the help of mediums to contact departed family members. Following his wife Sophia’s death in 1868, according to Stasz, Cornelius became involved with the Claffin sisters, two mediums who claimed to be able to materialize ectoplasm. Victoria was said to have been clairvoyant from the age of three; Tennessee, the younger, had once been billed as "The Wonder Child" in a traveling medical show.

"Tennessee, with her petite, overeagerness...tempted men with her flamboyant gaiety and proclivity to stand very close to them during a conversation, closer than a lady should," wrote Stasz. "Adding to that forwardness were her quick hands, which would emphasize a phrase by patting or caressing a gentleman with most pleasing results."

The family of Cornelius, however, was not so pleased with the results. The Commodore took to calling Tennessee his little sparrow, and the Vanderbilt children feared that their aging father would be vulnerable to this form of hunter’s advances. Stasz maintained that Cornelius even proposed marriage to Tennessee but that she refused...
In any case, in early 1869 the Commodore's children, William Henry specially, thought it appropriate to find a more suitable outlet for their father's amorous intentions, and arranged a visit from distant Alabama cousins, Martha Mrs. Robert L.) Crawford and her daughter. The daughter, wrote Paul K. Conkin, Distinguished Professor of History at Vanderbilt, in Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University, "...because of a foolish promise by the parents to name their first child, regardless of sex, after a close family friend, gained the unlikely and forbidding name of Frank Armstrong."

Before the year was out, Cornelius and Frank—43 years his junior—had gone to Canada. When asked why he had married the daughter and not the mother, who was closer to his own age, the Commodore, according to Stasz, responded, "Oh, no! If I had married her, Frank would have gone off and married someone else. Now I have them both." Handsome, well-educated, and refined, Frank was a great comfort to the Commodore in his declining years and even met with some success in reducing his legendary cursing.

**FRIENDLY PERSUASION**

It was at Frank's request that Cornelius later received another visitor from the South, the Right Reverend Holland Nimmons McTyeire, a Methodist bishop and a nephew by marriage to Mrs. Crawford. He came to New York in 1873, ostensibly for an unnamed surgical procedure, but also, wrote Conkin, with the likely hope of meeting Cornelius Vanderbilt and persuading him to help fund his dream, a Methodist university in the Civil War-ravaged South.

Frank and the bishop must have broached the subject of funding a Methodist university with some trepidation. The only time in his life Cornelius had given a sizeable amount of money had been, at Frank's urging, for a New York church. Wrote Croffut: "[The Commodore's] most persistent applicants for money were clergymen, and for them he felt an aversion not unmixed with contempt. As a rule he dismissed them abruptly, sometimes rudely, and once, when he had been annoyed persistently by a needy parson, he presented him with a free ticket to the West Indies and never heard of him again."

Thanks to Frank's advance work, the bishop fared better, and never even directly asked the Commodore for money. Conkin wrote that Cornelius Vanderbilt "...was seeking a suitable beneficiary for some of his money, a retarded claim to a type of immortality. Sheer emulation of other wealthy men, if nothing else, led him in this direction. McTyeire needed only to air the plans and give vent to his own enthusiasm. Soon Vanderbilt was intrigued, even fascinated."

Cornelius originally promised a gift of no less than $500,000, and by the time of his death the sum approached one million dollars. And none too soon. If the Claflin sisters had had their way,
Cornelius Vanderbilt might have given the money to aid the cause of women's suffrage. The Commodore had continued to have contact with the pair after his second marriage, giving them stock tips and setting them up as the country's first "lady stockbrokers" in a lavish marble office where clients sipped champagne from silver buckets. Victoria, an advocate of free love, announced herself as a candidate for U.S. president, long before women won even the right to vote. But by 1874, the sisters had fallen on hard times and, now active in the women's movement of the day, appealed to their old friend to become the "Patron Saint of this great cause." This time it was the Commodore's turn to refuse a proposal.

**Fortune and Misfortune**

In 1876, the 82-year-old Cornelius became mortally ill. His last eight months were long ones—for him and everyone around him. On his better days, he would curse his physicians, calling them "old grannies" and throwing hot water bottles at them. Two died during their attendance of him. Always a bad patient, he had once refused his doctor's recommendation to drink champagne for an internal ailment, saying, "Champagne! I can't afford champagne! A bottle every morning! Oh, I guess sody water 'll do!"

At one point, when the crowd of reporters keeping a 24-hour vigil outside his bedroom prematurely reported his death, he rose from his bed to give them a piece of his mind and had to be physically restrained. "If all the devils in hell were concentrated in me I could not have suffered any more," the dying man said. And after his death on January 4, 1877, wrote Croffut, "..doctors recorded that he had 'scarce a sound organ in his body,' was 'a dyspeptic through life,' and was a victim of almost every known intestinal, heart, kidney, liver and stomach disorder."

Cornelius Vanderbilt was buried in the family vault on Staten Island, leaving 63 descendants to mourn his passing and the terms of his will. Wishing for his fortune to remain intact, he had left nearly all of his estate to a single heir. Of the $105 million he left behind, $90 million went to William Henry and $7.5 million to William Henry's four sons. Other siblings received relatively small amounts, either in trust or cash or both. Frank received half a million in cash, 1,000 shares of New York Central stock, and the New York house in which they had lived.

The Commodore remembered the Claflin sisters by providing a trust fund to help them advance the cause of spiritualism; Tennessee was also bequeathed a scantly clad life-size painting of Venus. William Henry paid the pair an undisclosed sum of money to keep them out of the debacle that followed when Cornelius Jeremiah and three of his sisters contested the will on the grounds that their father had insane delusions and was of unsound mind. The court battle, lasting more than a year, included testimony from a procession of spiritualists who testified that the country's richest man had relied on their advice in financial dealings and other aspects of his life.

Theories of phrenology, another popular notion of the day, were also brought in to explain the Commodore's will. Jeremiah S. Black, counsel for the contestants, said, "Cornelius Vanderbilt's bump of acquisitiveness, as a phrenologist would call it, was in a chronic state of inflammation...morally and intellec
tually his mind was a howling wilderness."

In the end, the will was largely left intact. The contest over it was the first of many lawsuits and rifts that left family members scarred and estranged. Cornelius Jeremiah fatally shot himself in 1882. William Henry survived his father by only eight years. In that time he managed to double his father's holdings, but the stress took its toll.

Horace Greeley wrote that the Commodore's "physiognomy, one of the finest in America, has never yet been rendered worthy by any photograph, bronze, or picture."