



Name: Cornelius Vanderbilt

Years: May 27, 1794 -Jan. 4, 1877

Residence: Port Richmond, Staten Island, N.Y., New Brunswick, NJ, New York City, NY

Brief Biography

Cornelius Vanderbilt was born on May 27, 1794 in Port Richmond, Staten Island, N.Y. to Cornelius Vanderbilt and Phebe Hand. Vanderbilt's father was a farmer that improved his income by participating in boating in the New York Harbor. In 1795, his family moved to Stapleton where Cornelius had little interest in school. After age 11, Cornelius dropped out of school and worked with his father. This work with his father led to an interest in boating. When Cornelius turned sixteen, he was able to purchase a \$100 sailboat with money from his parents. This led to the development of a ferrying and freight business in which Vanderbilt would transport people and goods between Staten Island and New York City.

After finding success with his first business venture, Vanderbilt used his skills to help with the War of 1812 by transporting supplies to forts in the area. In 1813, Cornelius married Sophia Johnson, his first cousin. Together, Cornelius and Sophia had 13 kids.

Soon steamboats began to show up in the harbors which proved to be faster than Vanderbilt's sailing boat. Because of this, Vanderbilt sold his boats and started work as a captain for Thomas Gibbons who happened to own a steamboat business. Vanderbilt moved his family to New Brunswick, New Jersey. After years of hard work and lots of effort, Vanderbilt achieved success in the steamboat industry and by 1829 he left Gibbons. By this time, Vanderbilt had acquired about \$30,000.

Vanderbilt then went into business with a line of steamboats that he had created and moved his family back to New York City. By 1830, Vanderbilt had established a steamboat service. Due to the low rates Vanderbilt was able to maintain the fastest and newest steamboats and was also able to expand his business. Vanderbilt had so much control over the area that rival steamboat owners paid him to keep his ships off the Hudson River. Vanderbilt then moved his business to the northeast.

By 1850, railroads started to gain attention so Vanderbilt shifted his focus and resources to this new mode of transportation. By 1853 he was worth an estimated \$11 million.

Vanderbilt's wife passed away in 1868 and shortly thereafter he married Frank Crawford. As Vanderbilt neared the end of his life he experienced an illness which eventually led to his death in 1877. Vanderbilt left most of his estate to his son William as well as William's sons.

Major Achievements

Vanderbilt was a major contributor to the success of both the steamboat and railroad industries. He provided transportation at low rates, cut transportation time dramatically and also provided unheard of luxuries during travel. He also created a route which allowed for transportation from New York City and New Orleans to San Francisco via Nicaragua. Vanderbilt is also responsible for buying and consolidating the Hudson River Railroad and the New York Central Railroad. Furthermore, he created the first route via railroad from New York City to Chicago. Near the end of his life, Vanderbilt was responsible for the construction of New York City's Grand Central Terminal.

For More information

Commodore Vanderbilt: An Epic of the Steam Age by Wheaton J. Lane; *Commodore Vanderbilt: An Epic of American Achievement* by Arthur D. H. Smith

Resources

American National Biography Online, Encyclopedia Britannica Online