



**Name:** Matthew Vassar

**Years:** April 29, 1792-June 23, 1868

**Residence:** Norfolk, United Kingdom, Poughkeepsie, NY

### **Brief Biography**

Matthew Vassar was born to parents James and Ann Vassar in 1792 in Norfolk, England. Like other families at the time, the Vassar's saw the opportunity to immigrate to America and become free of the English Church. In 1804, at a young age, Matthew and his family settled in Dutchess County where his father began to brew English ale from barley he purchased in England. Matthew was uninterested in his father's business,

which he called distasteful. Matthew also misbehaved at school and had a chaotic daily life schedule that caused his dad to stop his education. As a result, James Vassar considered apprenticing his son to a tanner until he ran away.

After working at a country store in Balmville for three years, Matthew felt that he had proved to himself that he was capable of earning a living. Upon his return home, and eager to join the family business, the Vassar family brewery burned down, leaving James Vassar financially devastated. Matthew Vassar was determined to continue the brewing business and started by setting up a temporary brewery in his brother-in-law's old dye house.

Due to his status as a resident alien, Vassar could not enlist during the war of 1812, so remained home and founded a new brewery. He entered into a partnership with Thomas Purser, a wealthy Englishman, and formed The M. Vassar and Co. business; Purser's interest was sold to J.M. and N. Conklin Jr. As time went on his English ale was demanded by consumers and his business success allowed him to devote more time to public service. At the age of 27 Vassar was elected trustee of the Village of Poughkeepsie. A few years later the Conklin/Vassar brewery partnership dissolved, Matthew entered into a new partnership with his nephews, Matthew and John Guy. The next five years brought success and wealth as the demand for ale stayed relatively high in the face of a depression. By 1836 The Vassar Brewery had a new brick building on the riverfront above the Main Street dock. At around 4 stories high, with the capacity to produce 50,000 barrels per annum, the new waterfront building was spectacular. At around the same time in 1835 Vassar's public life began to progress to go along with the title of a rising entrepreneur. In 1835 he was elected as president of Poughkeepsie running on the improvement ticket.

In the 1840's Vassar's focus from ale shifted slightly with the return of his step niece, Lydia Booth, as successful schoolteacher and proprietor of a girl's seminary in Virginia. Vassar credited his niece with showing him the need for expanded education for women. An idea would come to Vassar on a trip to England in 1845, to expand his legacy with a physical monument. By 1861, after more business enterprises in the 50s, the first board of trustees for the college was established as well as having Thomas Alexander tefft to draw up the plans for the college. Vassar College would eventually open its doors to its first 353 women in 1865. Matthew Vassar would die on June 23 1868 while delivering his farewell speech to the board of trustees of his college.

### **Major Achievements**

During his life, Vassar worked hard to develop himself as an entrepreneur and a public servant. Vassar amassed a small fortune beginning in 1814 with the opening of his brewery M. Vassar & Co. The success

he found in with his English ale allowed him to deal with other business ventures. These included being a part of the incorporation of the Poughkeepsie Saving Bank and a shareholder in the Poughkeepsie Whaling company. In 1836 Vassar built a spectacular waterfront brewery above Main Street with the capacity to produce 50000 barrels of ale annually. At around the same time he was elected president of Poughkeepsie. Vassar's lasting achievement is Vassar College which opened its doors for women's education in 1865.

### **For More information**

Refer to, *Autobiography and Letters of Matthew Vassar* by Elizabeth Hazelton Haight

### Resources

<https://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/matthew-vassar/more-than-a-brewer.html>

<https://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/matthew-vassar/matthew-vassar.html>

By Thomas Williams, Marist '17