

# The Commodore's Strange Gift

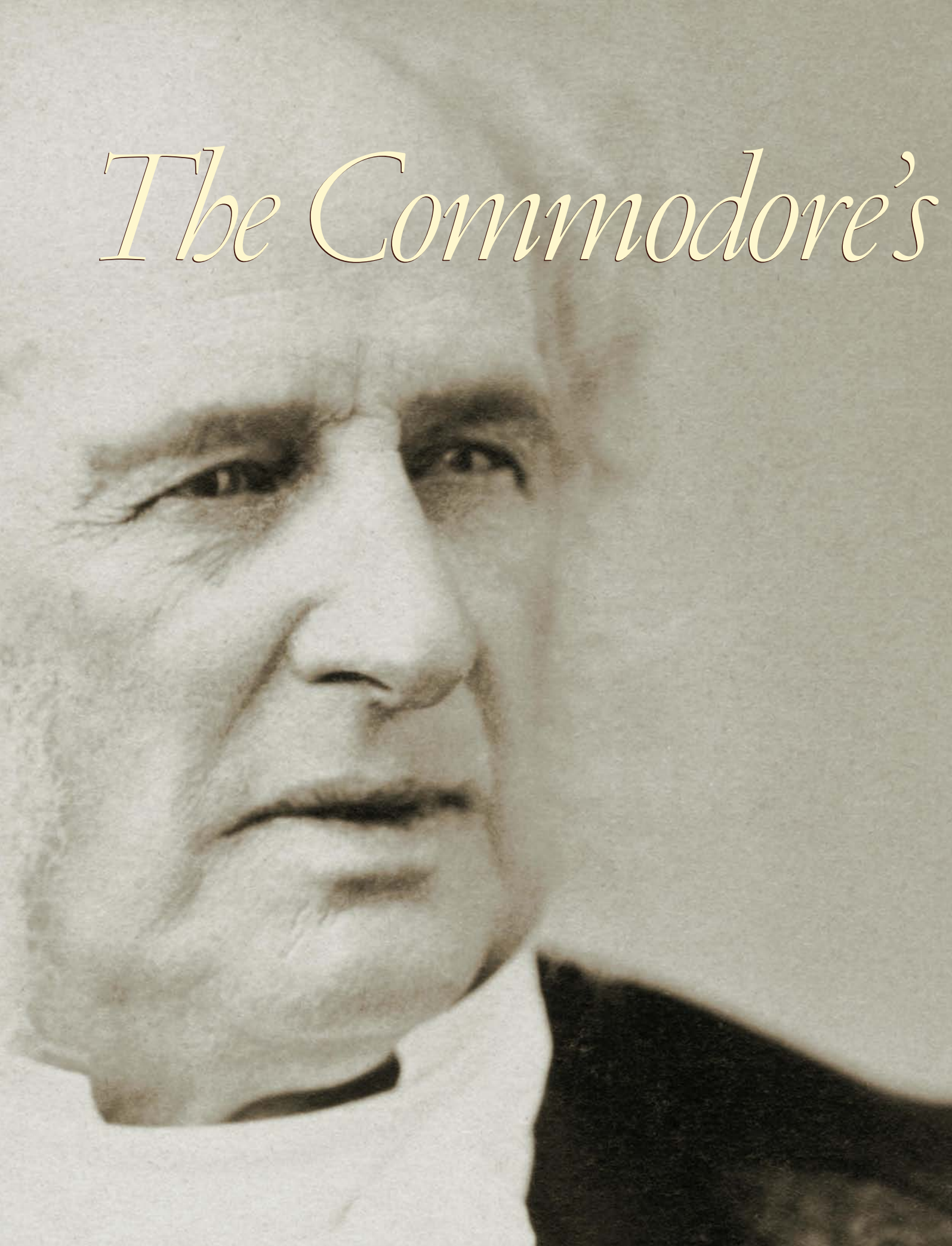
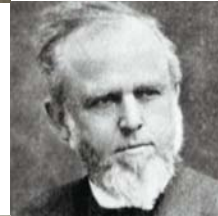
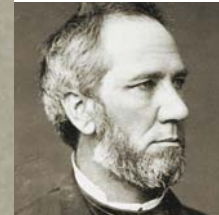
HOW TWO MEN OF GOD,  
TWO SHADY SISTERS,  
AND A WOMAN NAMED FRANK  
INFLUENCED THE WORLD'S RICHEST MAN  
TO FOUND VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY.

By MICHAEL MCGERR

The founding of Vanderbilt University is an extraordinary story, an unexpectedly salacious tale worthy of a primetime soap opera. Sex plays a leading role; so does sanctity—enough for a contemporary presidential campaign. And there are spirits: Ghosts flit in and out of the founding of a Methodist university in Nashville in 1873.

Then there is the founder himself: Cornelius Vanderbilt, the grasping, hard-driving Commodore, richest man on earth, and one of the least likely benefactors of higher education. The Commodore's founding donation to his namesake university was truly a strange, fortunate gift—a reminder of the complexity of the human mind and heart and, ultimately, the best investment this great speculator ever made.

This page, clockwise from top: Holland McTyeire, Charles Force Deems, Victoria Woodhull, Frank Crawford Vanderbilt, Tennessee Claflin



Cornelius Vanderbilt was born in the right place at the right time—on a Staten Island farm in 1794, across the bay from what would become the leading city of the United States on the leading edge of the industrial revolution. Starting as a teenager with a simple one-masted periauger, Vanderbilt built a fleet of sailing vessels and then an armada of steamboats and steamships. By the 1850s his ships cruised as far west as California and as far east as England; the title “Commodore,” once a sarcastic putdown, had become an awed tribute to this capitalist worth more than \$10 million.

Typically, that wasn't enough for Cornelius Vanderbilt. Getting out of the ship business, he transferred his energies to railroads, the newest edge of the industrial revolution. By the late 1860s, well into his 70s, the Commodore had become a “railroad king,” ruler of an iron empire stretching from Manhattan across New York State towards Chicago. His pride and joy, the New York Central Railroad, helped make him fabulously rich. At some point in the 1870s, his fortune reached \$90 million to \$100 million, the largest in America and most likely the world.

#### A Hard Man in Love with His Own Name

Then and now, the Commodore was a difficult man to like. Pursuing profit remorselessly, he reveled in risk and loved economic combat. His willingness to drive competitors to the wall was frightening. He was no more lovable at home. A stern father and a misogynist, he had little time for his eight daughters and little patience with two of his three sons. When his wife, Sophia, balked at moving to Manhattan, he put her in an asylum until she changed her mind.

But, as I've found in researching a history of the Vanderbilt family, the Commodore was also a compelling figure, frequently misunderstood. In an age of unregulated economic competition, he had an essential integrity. Rather old-fashioned, he offered no sanctimonious platitudes about the virtues of capitalism. Strong, courageous and incisive, Vanderbilt



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drove himself hard, even in old age. Self-controlled, he lived fairly plainly; his only extravagance was his speedy trotting horses.

His obsession, especially in old age, was keeping the name Vanderbilt alive. The Commodore had a peculiar fascination with his own blood; his wife, Sophia, was his first cousin not once but twice over, the blood relative of both the Commodore's father and mother.

Obsessed with his name, Cornelius Vanderbilt had not done the obvious thing to memorialize it: He hadn't made large, ostentatious

charitable gifts. Like most wealthy men of the day, the Commodore believed charity sapped the morals of its supposed beneficiaries. His gift to the public was the ships he launched, the trains he sped, the cargo he carried, the jobs he created.

That was an increasingly controversial position. In “An Open Letter to Com. Vanderbilt” in 1869, Mark Twain sarcastically abused the millionaire. “Go, now, please go, and do one worthy act,” the writer begged. “Go, boldly, grandly, nobly, and give four dollars to some great public charity. It will break your heart, no doubt; but no matter, you have but a little while to live, and it is better to die suddenly and nobly than live a century longer the same Vanderbilt you are now.”

The stubborn railroad king never would have said it out loud, but he had already begun to come to the same conclusion. At an age when men hardly ever changed, the Commodore had begun one last effort to remake himself. Without knowing it, he had already set out on the route to Vanderbilt University.

In the summer of 1868, the Commodore and Sophia had gone their separate ways as so often before. He had headed north for his annual stay at fashionable Saratoga, with its round of horse races and card games; she, feeling unwell, had traveled to the quiet waters of Lebanon Springs at the eastern edge of the state. There were waters in Saratoga, too, but by then the Vanderbilts had been married for nearly 55 years.

The waters didn't help, so the 73-year-old Sophia journeyed back to New York where she suffered a stroke. Racing back on his special train at the unheard-of speed of nearly a mile a minute, the Commodore stayed with his wife until a second, unexpected attack killed her on Aug. 17.

However strained their relationship, marriage had helped structure Cornelius Vanderbilt's life for more than half a century. With

**An 1870 cartoon depicts the Commodore standing astride two railroads competing with industrialist James Fisk (1835–1872) for control of the Erie Railroad.**

Sophia gone, with his old friends dying off, the new widower was lonely. He had little interest in spending much time with his children. But Vanderbilt was still “wonderfully well preserved,” a reporter noted in the summer of 1869. “He steps as light as a shadow, and looks more fresh than some man of fifty.” Without a wife, the Commodore had more freedom than ever to pursue his fancies and his appetites. The result was a period of instability and experimentation.

Sophia's death intensified the Commodore's interest in the spirit world, the place where his mother, Phebe, and his one beloved son, George, a victim of the Civil War, already dwelled. More than ever the widower consulted “spiritual physicians,” who used the magnetic power of their hands to ease his body

and messages from the dead to ease his mind.

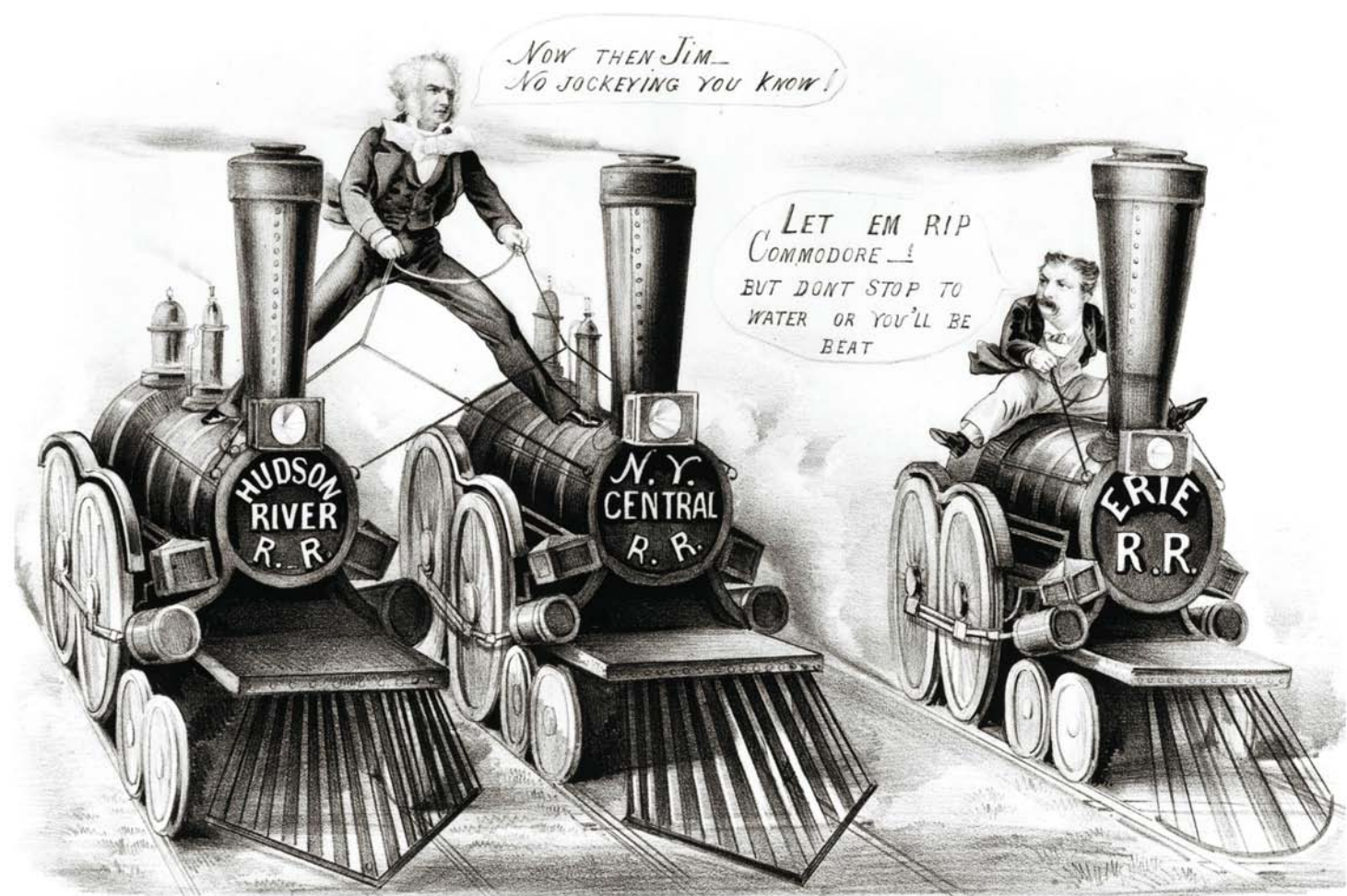
Vanderbilt's longing for contact with the departed was hardly unusual in post-Civil War America. Like the Commodore, millions of his countrymen mourned the death of family members on the nation's battlefields. Told by their ministers that the dead were near at hand, many people wanted to believe those spirits could communicate with the living through mysterious rappings and Ouija boards.

Vanderbilt was a bit skeptical about the spirits. He enjoyed the spiritual physicians' ministrations without having to trust their communications from the dead. The Commodore sometimes asked his mother and his wife for advice about the children.

#### Fortune Tellers and Fortune Hunters

Spiritualism had a further appeal for Vanderbilt, who remained, as a reporter delicately observed, “much of a ladies man”: The movement was largely dominated by women. Séances usually took place in the woman's sphere, the home, because 19th-century Americans typically died there, rather than in hospitals. In Victorian eyes, women—seemingly so passive, so spiritual, so angelic themselves—were ideal vessels for communications from the dead. Some women found service as spiritual physicians and mediums attractive because it was a rare chance to cast off their seeming passivity and seek careers, influence and power.

Not long after Sophia's death, the Com-



THE GREAT RACE FOR THE WESTERN STAKES 1870

modore met two of the most attractive spiritualists of them all—Mrs. Victoria Woodhull and her unmarried sister, Tennessee Claflin. Vickie and Tennie were the extraordinary daughters of Roxanna “Roxy” Claflin, a religious fanatic and mesmerist, and her brutal husband, Reuben “Buck” Claflin, a notorious horse thief, blackmailer and swindler. Shady and shiftless, the Claflins had roamed about Ohio before the war. Vickie and Tennie, beaten and starved by their cruel father, found solace and a kind of power in the spirit world. The intense, erratic Vickie easily fell into deep trances; the ebullient Tennie, eight years younger, specialized in fortune-telling, premonitions and visions.

In 1853, at the age of 15, Vickie escaped by eloping with her physician, Canning Woodhull, who turned out to be a philandering, heartless drunk. Bearing two children, Vickie supported her family by becoming an actress, a prostitute, and a “clairvoyant medium and magnetic healer.” She also became a passionate advocate of women’s rights and sexual freedom.

Tennie, meanwhile, had remained her father’s little meal ticket. From town to town the Claflins hawked “Miss Tennessee’s Magnetic Life Elixir,” a supposed cure for cancer and other ailments. In Illinois in 1863, Tennie was charged with manslaughter when this hideous, burning salve killed a woman suffering from breast cancer. (The Claflins

skipped town to avoid the trial, so she was never convicted.)

When Vickie had a vision to head for New York City in 1868, Tennie went along. By October, less than two months after Sophia Vanderbilt’s death, the sisters had opened their “Magnetic Healing Institute and Conservatory of Metaphysical, Mental and Spiritual Science.”

They were feminists; they were frauds; they were unique. And one day, not long after their arrival in New York City, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin turned up at Cornelius Vanderbilt’s house in Washington Place. The Commodore admired the “classic-countenanced” Victoria, but he was even more attracted to the voluptuous, 22-year-old Tennie, who, as a reporter once remarked, “displayed in the most aggravating way a wondrous shirt front.”

Soon the Commodore began giving them stock tips and apparently accepted \$10,000 of their money to manage on their behalf. Vickie became his “magnetic doctress.” According to the sisters, Tennie became Vanderbilt’s “housekeeper” and ministered to a variety of his needs. There were unsubstantiated rumors of a sexual relationship between the Commodore and the “ample” young redhead he called his “little sparrow.”

In the meantime, the Commodore was socializing with another pair of women. Forty-nine-year-old Martha Everitt Craw-

ford was the widow of a well-respected merchant and federal marshal from Mobile, Ala. Martha’s 30-year-old daughter, Frank Armstrong Crawford, had been divorced before the Civil War, her marriage the victim of interference from her own family. Like many Southerners, these husbandless Crawfords had seen their resources dwindle with the fortunes of the defeated Confederacy. Frank had taught music to help support the family. Mother and daughter were attractive women, but nothing like the exotic Vickie and Tennie.

Nevertheless, the Crawfords had something those free-love advocates lacked—a good bit of the Commodore’s genetic code. Like Vanderbilt and his wife, Sophia, Martha and Frank were direct descendants of the sea captain Samuel Hand and his wife, Phebe. Accordingly, the Crawfords had a special fascination for Cornelius Vanderbilt, the man who had married his first cousin and now yearned to commune with her spirit. Martha and Frank were both his and Sophia’s blood relatives—first cousins once and twice removed, respectively, of the Vanderbilts. The Crawfords had visited their New York cousins the year before Sophia’s death. Now the Commodore got to know mother and daughter even better, and soon the rumor began to circulate that the railroad king would marry the widow Crawford.

On the morning of Aug. 21, 1869, the Commodore turned up in the parlor of the

Tecumseh Hotel in London, Ontario, midway between Niagara Falls and Detroit. There a Methodist clergyman married him—not to Tennie Claflin, not to Martha Crawford, but to Frank Crawford.

### The Commodore and the Virtuous Woman

The wedding of America’s richest man to a woman 45 years his junior provoked wonder and amazement. The press chuckled over the railroad king’s latest “speculation,” his “last and most notable consolidation,” and clapped its forehead in amused disbelief at the relative ages of the bride and groom.

It was Frank who made the marriage acceptable. The new Mrs. Vanderbilt was an unusual woman, an elegant enigma. She had a man’s name—her father’s tribute to his revered business partner, Frank Armstrong. But the Commodore’s tall wife was gracefully feminine, her black hair and blue eyes lending her a quiet, winning dignity. She sang, she dressed well, and above all, she loved God. Frank was, a religious paper noted, “an accomplished Christian lady, a worthy member of the Methodist Church, and an active worker in Church and Sabbath School work.” No one doubted Frank Vanderbilt’s faith. Normally, divorce permanently clouded a woman’s reputation in Gilded Age America; but Frank, clothed in her dignity and her piety, seemed eminently respectable. Somehow no one, at least in public, questioned her motives in marrying the Commodore.

Frank’s piety legitimated the union but raised an interesting question about Cornelius Vanderbilt. As a religious writer gently put it, the Commodore “had been a very worldly and even profane man.” Thanks to his mother, he believed in the existence of God and the authenticity of the Bible. With his stern demeanor, his sharp blue eyes and his white cravat, the railroad king was often mistaken for a minister or a bishop. Still, Cornelius Vanderbilt had never shown any interest in organized religion, much less joined



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a church. The Commodore certainly knew what he was getting in Frank. He surely could have found a less devout helpmate such as the “ample” Tennie Claflin. But the Commodore, in a sign of some inner change, had chosen Frank.

The second Mrs. Vanderbilt quickly set to reforming her new husband. Frank firmly implored this most eminent of American “swearists” to clean up his language. She persuaded him to buy new clothes and new carpets. She got him to cut down on card games and séances. Most of all, she went to work on his soul.

Frank had some unexpected help in her reform crusade. Despite his marriage, the Commodore did not sever all his ties to Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin. There was no more magnetic doctoring, but the sisters opened up shop as “bankers and bro-

kers” early in 1870. Supposedly the world’s first women stockbrokers, “Woodhull, Claflin & Co.” caused an immediate sensation. Thousands flocked to get a look at “The Bewitching Brokers.”

Woodhull, Claflin & Co. made much of its apparent connection to Cornelius Vanderbilt. A prominently displayed portrait of the Commodore reassured customers. Rumors spread quickly that Vanderbilt was “the aider and abettor, if not the full partner, of the firm.” The press eagerly presented the sisters as “Vanderbilt’s protégés.”

Vickie and Tennie’s venture became an embarrassment for the Commodore. The idea of female stockbrokers was controversial. “In short,” a reporter declared, “the spectacle of these Broad street brokers is a disgusting and unnatural one.” Vickie and Tennie’s career as magnetic physicians and clairvoyants came out in the papers. Tennie told the press that she had expected to marry the Commodore. The sisters’ notoriety increased when they began publishing *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*, a forum for their outspoken views on women’s rights and free love. Vickie won still more notoriety by launching a well-publicized campaign for president of a nation that denied women the vote.

If Frank felt anger or embarrassment over the Commodore’s involvement with Vickie and Tennie, she shared her feelings only in private. As the saga of the “bewitching brokers” unfolded, Frank quietly intensified her campaign to reform the Commodore and save his soul. An astute judge of her aging husband, the second Mrs. Vanderbilt skillfully pushed him towards something he had always disdained—a sizeable act of charity.

Soon after arriving in New York, Frank and her mother had begun attending an unusual fledgling church devoted to newcomers to the city. The pastor, Dr. Charles Deems, was a Southern Methodist, but his “Church of the Strangers” was nondenominational. The congregation of this “free, independent church of Jesus Christ” met in rented rooms, up three difficult flights of stairs at New York University, not far from the Commodore’s house.



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The Church of the Strangers grew quickly, thanks to Dr. Deems, a short, powerfully built North Carolinian with a gift for simple, direct preaching. Before long, Frank began telling the Commodore how hard it was to climb those stairs at New York University.

As fiercely independent as the Commodore, Deems himself made no effort to solicit a donation from his parishioner's fabulously wealthy husband. This reticence was surely careful strategy; Frank and Deems knew Vanderbilt did not respond well to requests for charity. But in truth, the minister didn't much care for the Commodore. "I regarded him," Deems recalled, "as an unscrupulous gatherer of money, a man who aimed at accumulating an immense fortune and had no very pious concern as to the means." The cleric was also, he admitted, "a little afraid" of the imperious railway king.

Finally visiting the Commodore, Deems began to change his mind about this "unscrupulous gatherer of money." For his part, Vanderbilt decided he approved of Deems' religious "orthodoxy," as well as the minister's refusal to ask for money. One day, rather abruptly, the Commodore told Deems to come see him the next evening. Unintentionally playing hard to get, the minister explained he had other commitments for the next several evenings. Vanderbilt wasn't used to being told to wait, which made him that much more interested in Deems. When they did meet, Vanderbilt quizzed the minister about his plans for a building and then offered to give it to him.

### A First Great Act of Charity

This new business of philanthropy wasn't so easy. To Vanderbilt's amazement, Deems suspected some devious financial stratagem or a trick to make him a kept man, a "chaplain." The minister angrily turned down the first large act of charity the Commodore had ever attempted. Vanderbilt made clear he had no use for a chaplain and wanted Deems to maintain his independence. In a comic scene, the minister finally

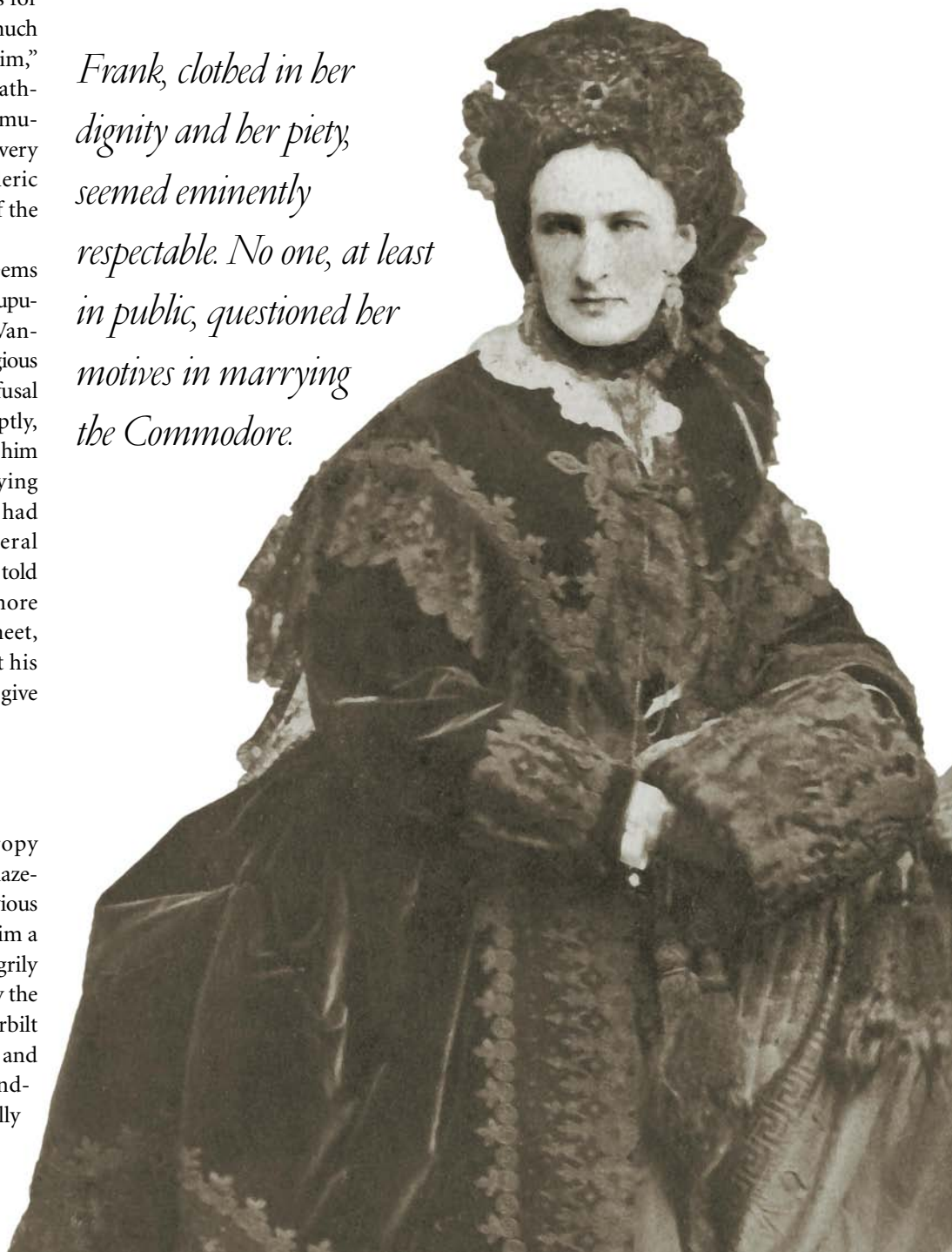
relented and accepted the gift. The Church of the Strangers bought its new building in July 1870, two months after the appearance of *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*.

News of the Commodore's gift stunned the public. "Commodore Vanderbilt has just done a good deed, unsolicited," marveled *Harper's Bazaar*.

Not one to rest on her laurels, Frank continued her quiet work on Cornelius Vanderbilt's soul. Now she had an ally in Charles

Deems, a frequent guest at the Vanderbilt house. One evening the subject of education came up. "I'd give a million dollars today, Doctor," Vanderbilt vowed, "if I had your education!" Deems wondered whether the Commodore, a multimillionaire with only a grade-school education, really meant what he said. "I've been among educated people enough to see its importance," Vanderbilt admitted. "I've been to England, and seen them lords, and other fellows, and knew that

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I had twice as much brains as they had maybe, and yet I had to keep still, and couldn't say anything through fear of exposing myself."

The conversation continued a while before Deems, always canny with the Commodore, figured a way to provoke his benefactor. "Let me tell you," the minister said accusingly, "that you are one of the greatest hindrances to education that I know of." Surprised, Vanderbilt asked what he meant. "Why, don't you see, if you do nothing to promote education, to prove to the world that you believe in it, there isn't a boy in all the land who ever heard of you, but may say, 'What's the use of an education? There's Commodore Vanderbilt; he never had any, and never wanted any, and yet he became the richest man in America.'" Vanderbilt, taken aback, wondered what to do. Deems moved in on his goal: "Suppose you take that money and found a university." Artfully, the cleric added the finishing touch: The new institution could be called the "Vanderbilt University."

The Commodore was interested, but Deems' notion languished. Following a suggestion from Vanderbilt, the minister explored the feasibility of a Moravian school, dedicated to the faith of the Commodore's forebears. But the Moravians lacked the kind of strong leader Vanderbilt believed necessary to run "so great a work." Deems turned, then, to the idea he and Frank had no doubt had all along—the longtime dream of a Southern Methodist university in Nashville. One of the leaders of the movement for this "central university" was a Southern Methodist bishop, the Rev. Dr. Holland N. McTyeire, who was a friend of Charles Deems and both a kinsman by marriage and former pastor of Frank Vanderbilt. But the Commodore didn't take the hint and invite McTyeire to come see him.

### Revenge of the Bewitching Brokers

Then Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin once again provided their special kind of help. No longer associated with the Commodore, the "Queens of

Finance" and their family turned on their former benefactor in 1871. That spring Tennie and Vickie's mother, Roxy, set out to blackmail the Commodore, along with some other well known New Yorkers. Then Tennie took the stand to testify in a typically bizarre Claflin family brawl, Roxie's lawsuit against one of Vickie's former husbands. "I ... have humbugged a great many rich people, Vanderbilt included," Tennie proudly announced. "Commodore Vanderbilt knows my power."

Next it was Vickie's turn to tweak the Commodore in public. In a highly publicized address in February 1872, Woodhull compared the railway king to a thief. Railing against "these railroad magnates," she declared, "It is a crime for a single person to steal a dollar, but a corporation may steal millions of dollars, and be canonized as saints."

As late as 1875, the Commodore found

himself publicly dragged back into the saga of Vickie and Tennie. Subpoenaed to testify in an investor's suit against the sisters for fraud, Vanderbilt declared that he had not given them "any authority ... to use my name in their business."

Against the backdrop of continual reminders of the Commodore's folly in taking up with Woodhull and Claflin, Frank and Deems finally succeeded in bringing the multimillionaire together with Bishop McTyeire. In March 1873, the Vanderbilts hosted the Bishop at 10 Washington Place as he convalesced from surgery. Once more Frank had proved an astute judge of her husband: McTyeire, like Deems, was just the Commodore's sort of man. A driving, focused leader, the rather introverted bishop played his cards close to the vest, just like Vanderbilt. The Commodore sized up McTyeire quickly. "The greatest railroad lawyer I ever knew was destroyed," Vanderbilt told the bishop, "when you entered the ministry."

Frank, meanwhile, played her part. Driving past the Astor Library with the Commodore one day during McTyeire's visit, she spoke feelingly of "how much had been done for the young men of the North, while the few institutions of learning left in the South were struggling under the burden of debt, and the vast majority of the young men in that section were denied even such privileges as these poorly equipped institutions provided." When his wife told him she "longed" to help these young Southerners, the Commodore asked how. She replied simply, "A university."

The Commodore, who had done a great deal for two women of the North, now knew what he needed to do for this woman of the South. Before McTyeire left New York, Vanderbilt gave him a written offer of a \$500,000 endowment to support the Methodist "Central University" in or near Nashville. Before the month was out, the board of trust of the projected Central University accepted the Commodore's offer and renamed their institution "Vanderbilt University." (A later, second donation brought the Commodore's total gift to nearly \$1 million.)

*continued on page 86*

**Commodore** *continued from page 53*

Vanderbilt's gift, one of the largest philanthropic donations to that point in American history, commanded great attention. At the inauguration of Vanderbilt University in Nashville in October 1875, Charles Deems read aloud the benefactor's telegram of good wishes: "Peace and good-will to all men." Then, "with great tenderness of feeling," it was reported, the reverend quoted Scripture: "Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance of the sight of God." With that blessing the audience broke out into cheers.

No doubt, more than one of the Commodore's old antagonists snorted over newspaper accounts of the inauguration in Nashville. "Peace and good-will to all men," indeed! It was too much like the miraculous transformation of another hard-hearted businessman who had also spent some time with "spirits": Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' enormously popular *A Christmas*

*Carol*. But that was fiction. Could a real capitalist like Cornelius Vanderbilt truly change? Could he become, like Scrooge, "as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world"?

The Commodore would never be some real-life Scrooge, a dedicated philanthropist. His gift to Vanderbilt University resulted from a strange train of circumstances, an almost improbable run of luck.

But Vanderbilt University was not just an accident of marriage. Cornelius Vanderbilt, flinty, determined and calculating, did what he wanted to do. Marrying Frank, the Commodore knew she was different, knew she cared about religion and good deeds. The crafty veteran of so many stock manipulations surely realized what Frank was up to as she kept quiet about Woodhull and Claflin and lamented instead those flights of stairs and the needy men of the South.

No, the aging Commodore, eager to perpetuate his name, wanted it that way. So he and Frank danced a wonderful four-year marital gavotte that ended in the creation of Vanderbilt University.

It was a far better investment than he could have expected. Just about all the Commodore's other plans for immortality came to naught. His beloved New York Central Railroad no longer exists; his great family fortune is gone; hardly any male descendants, none of them famous, remain to carry on the family name. Instead, it is the former "Central University," with one of the great sports nicknames, the Commodores, that ensures the survival of the name Vanderbilt. ▼

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*This article is adapted from the inaugural Founder's Day Lecture presented March 16 by historian Michael McGerr at Vanderbilt University.*

**A.P.O.V.** *continued from page 69*

ver launched his obscenity investigation. Bettie was subpoenaed to testify and sat nervously for 16 hours in a Senate witness room, but was never called. The experience shocked her, though, and she told Klaw she wasn't having fun anymore.

If the first chapter in her adult life had been Holly Golightly, the second was more Frances Farmer. She ended up in a second marriage, to a Miami businessman named Harry Lear, but by this time she'd started to show signs of clinical schizophrenia. She became fanatically and eccentrically religious (telling her family there were seven gods and she was their prophet), strict to the point of cruelty with her stepchildren, and violent to herself and others. Charged with various crimes over a 10-year period—armed assault and attempted murder among them—she was hospitalized three times, the last time for 10 years in an institution for the criminally insane. When she was released, she was able to control the disease with medication, and her symptoms followed the normal course, lessening in intensity after menopause.

One fascinating aspect of the thousands of articles written about Bettie is that hard-

ly anyone looks at her history of mental illness—even though it raises questions about just what state of mind she was in from 1950 to 1957, when she was supposedly the world's most carefree nude model. (During one of her later episodes, she cried out that she needed to be punished by God for all her sins. This alternated with episodes during which she would decide she needed to kill somebody because God told her to do it.) At one point in the '60s, she moved back to Nashville and re-enrolled at Peabody, planning to get a master's degree in English, but she left after quarreling with a professor about some theological point. From then on, all her short educational stints were at Bible colleges.

All of this would be rich material for a psychologically complex Bettie Page film. Unfortunately, Mary Harron's recently released *The Notorious Bettie Page* is not that film. Harron ends Bettie's story in 1957, when she leaves New York, and thereby fails to grapple with the heart of the matter. Expertly portrayed by Gretchen Mol, the Bettie of the movie is the same Bettie rediscovered 20 years ago and raised to the status of a cult goddess. Hers is a war against prudery, economic exploitation and faithless men. But isn't it

possible that a war was going on within her own heart? What we're left with in the movie is the Bettie Cult. And if we were to analyze the tenets of that cult, they would be similar to the ones Herman Melville attached to Polynesian beauties in his early novels, to wit:

Bettie's naked insouciance is sex without guilt. Bettie's friendly smirk means she doesn't judge herself. Bettie's luminous blue come-hither eyes mean she doesn't judge me, either.

Bettie's simple pristine outfits mean she's the most beautiful woman in the world but doesn't know it. Bettie's willingness to do things other models won't do means she likes everybody, even the outcasts.

Bettie's playfulness means she can do any crazy thing ever imagined in the realm of the sexual subconscious and it will never be dirty. In fact, if there's one quality that defines Bettie Page, it's that she's so *clean*.

Bettie, in so many ways and to so many guys, was and is the perfect woman. Her fans might not be able to describe exactly what it was that she had, but *we* know, don't we?

She was the elusive Peabody Girl, come to life.