

A Country Place in the Gilded Age

The Gilded Age, the period following the Civil War to the turn of the century, was a time of unparalleled growth in industry, technology, and immigration. Captains of industry, men like Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and others amassed unimaginable wealth, while the average annual income in the US was around \$380, well below the poverty line.

The term 'Gilded Age' was coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their 1873 book, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. The term refers to the process of gilding an object with a superficial layer of gold to improve its appearance. Established millionaires viewed nouveau riche families like the Vanderbilts, who flaunted their wealth

by building ostentatious homes, throwing extravagant balls, and using their money to buy social prominence, as gilded—all show, no substance.

Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt (1794–1877) rose from poverty to become a shipping and railroad tycoon. He turned a 100-dollar loan from his parents into a multi-million dollar fortune and left the bulk of his money to his eldest son William.

William expanded the railroad operations, doubling the Vanderbilt fortune in just eight years, but his eight children lived lives of excess, extravagance, and self-indulgence. They built 40 opulent mansions and country estates, and entertained lavishly, largely depleting the family money.

In 1895 William's son Frederick, pictured below right, (1856–1938) and his wife, Louise, (1854–1926) pictured far right, bought Hyde Park to use as their spring and fall country estate. McKim, Mead & White, America's top architecture firm, designed the mansion in the neoclassical style with Beaux-Arts ornamentation and incorporated the latest innovations: electricity, central heating, and indoor plumbing. They added the Pavilion, a coach house, power station, gate houses, two new bridges over Crum Elbow Creek, boat docks, a railroad station, and extensive landscaping. Many of the mansion's contents were bought in Europe from wealthy families who had fallen on hard times.

Furnishings and construction costs totaled around \$2,250,000.

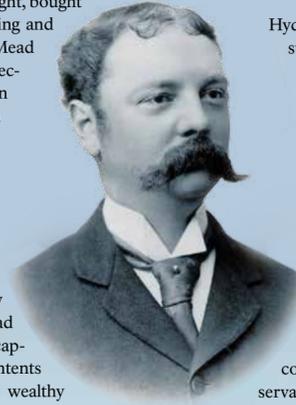
Hyde Park was in many ways self-sustaining, providing food and flowers for the family's needs here and at their other homes. When the Vanderbilts were in residence, as many as 60 staff worked here. Staff lived on or near the property and attended to the grounds and extensive farm. Personal staff traveled with the Vanderbilts and lived in the mansion with the family. Seasonal laborers were hired from the community and lived in the servants' quarters.

Frederick, a quiet man, preferred to avoid social occasions, but Louise loved to entertain, throwing lavish weekend parties with horseback riding, golf, tennis, and swimming followed by formal dinners and dancing. When Louise died in 1926, Frederick sold his other houses and returned to this estate for the last 12 years of his life. He was active in business, directing 22 railroads until his death in 1938. His estate totaled \$76 million, over \$1.2 billion today.

Gilded Age estates like this flourished in the 1890s—until the income tax (1913), World War I (1914),

and Great Depression (1930s) made their upkeep all but impossible.

The couple had no children and left the Hyde Park mansion to Louise's niece, Margaret Louise Van Alen, who tried to sell the estate but found no buyers. Her neighbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, suggested she donate the estate to the National Park Service as a monument to the Gilded Age. She agreed and the Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site opened to the public in 1940. The farmlands were not part of the donation and remain in private hands. The lavish mansion and its contents remain virtually unchanged from the time the Vanderbilts lived here.



Dasson annular clock



View of Hudson River
MATTHEW GARRET

The Vanderbilts in America: A Rise to Wealth

1650 Jan Aertsen Van Der Bilt is the first Vanderbilt ancestor known to reside in America.

1794 Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt born on Staten Island, New York City, to Cornelius and Phebe Hand Vanderbilt.

1810 Cornelius borrows \$100 from parents and buys first two-masted sailing barge to start a ferry service from Staten Island to Manhattan.

1817 Cornelius captains a steamship for Thomas Gibbons and assists in legal battle against steamship monopolies, opening the way for his own shipping business.

1821 William Henry Vanderbilt, one of 13 children and first son, born to Cornelius and first wife Sophia.

1830s–40s Cornelius expands shipping empire, begins railroad management.

1841 William marries Maria Kissam. They have eight children.

1851 Cornelius' Accessory Transit Company provides shorter, cheaper transportation from New York to San Francisco. He gains national prominence.

1856 Frederick, sixth child, is born to William and Maria.

1861–65 During the Civil War Cornelius donates steamship to the Union Navy. Receives Congressional Gold Medal. Acquires and consolidates rail lines in the Northeast and Midwest.

1870s Cornelius consolidates two core companies, creating New York Central & Hudson Railroad. William slashes costs, increases efficiency, turning it into one of the most profitable large enterprises in America.

1871 Cornelius opens Grand Central Depot on 42nd Street, New York City, the largest train station in North America.

1877 Cornelius dies. William inherits most of father's fortune, nearly \$100 million, to great displeasure of his siblings.

1878 Frederick graduates from Sheffield Scientific School (Yale). Marries Louise Anthony.

1885 William dies, leaving an estate of \$195 million to his eight children.

1895 Frederick and Louise purchase Hyde Park estate.

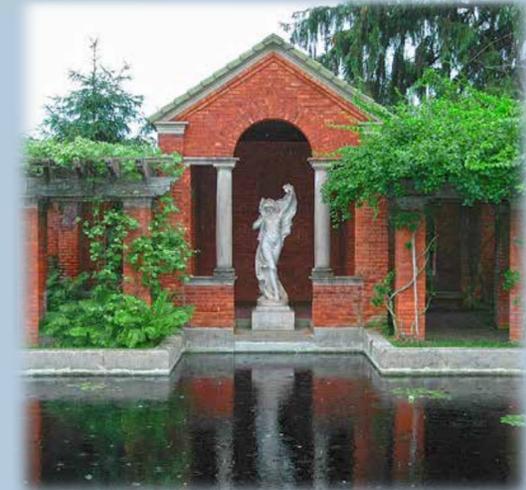
1899 Grand Central Depot is enlarged and becomes Grand Central Station.

1904–13 The new Grand Central Terminal (GCT) is built in sections on Depot site. Design insures trains are not delayed.

1926 Louise dies.

1938 Frederick dies, leaves Hyde Park estate to niece Margaret Louise Van Alen.

1940 Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site established.



The reflecting pool is a focal point of the formal gardens.
ALL PHOTOS NPS UNLESS NOTED

1949 65 million passengers pass through GCT, equivalent to 40 percent of the American population.

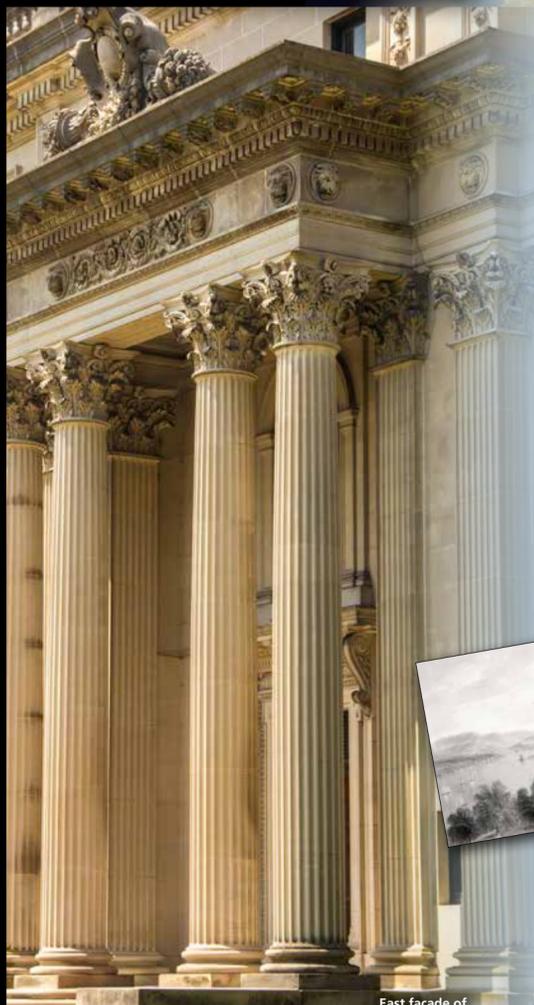
1950s Glory days of rail travel end.

1967 GCT designated New York City landmark, saving it from demolition.

1968 New York Central merges with Pennsylvania Railroad to form Penn Central.

1970 Penn Central files for bankruptcy and is dissolved by the courts.

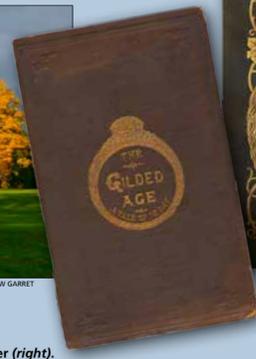
1994 Metro-North takes over GST operation, restores it to 1913 splendor.



East facade of Hyde Park



View of Hudson River from Hyde Park (left). Guests were greeted at the beautiful front entrance (above).
MATTHEW GARRET



1873 novel by Twain and Warner (right).



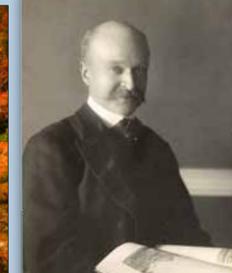
The 1903 *Millionaire Households* advised how to manage your home.



The Vanderbilts constructed the all-electric Grand Central Terminal (above, ca. 1916) when steam locomotives were banned in New York City following a fatal crash in 1902.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Constructed in 1897 the White Bridge was one of the first steel and concrete bridges in the US.



Charles F. McKim, architect, designed Hyde Park.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



In 1910 the Coach House, which originally housed carriages and stables, was converted to include a garage.
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