



VANDERBILT AND THE LEXINGTON DISASTER

A DESIGN FLAW RESULTED IN LONG ISLAND SOUND'S WORST STEAMSHIP SINKING

BY COLIN RIDLEY

It was a biting cold evening on 13 January 1840 as the paddlewheel steamboat SS *Lexington* was purposefully sloshing its way through Manhattan's East River and heading for Stonington, Connecticut. With the iron paddles digging deeply into the dark water, the vessel was about three hours out of New York when the First Mate went out on the deck. To his horror, he noticed a bright glare, smoke, and the beginnings of flames issuing from the ship's single smokestack. It was the harbinger of one of the worst shipping disasters to hit the East Coast.

During 1834, multi-millionaire

Cornelius "The Commodore" Vanderbilt issued orders for a new ship to be built. Cornelius was an American business magnate whose vast wealth and power came from the nation's burgeoning railroad and shipping industries. After being employed with his father's business, Vanderbilt worked his way into leadership positions in the inland water trade and invested in the rapidly growing railroad industry, thus effectively transforming the geography of the United States. One historian noted of "The Commodore" that "contemporaries, too, often hated or feared Vanderbilt or at least

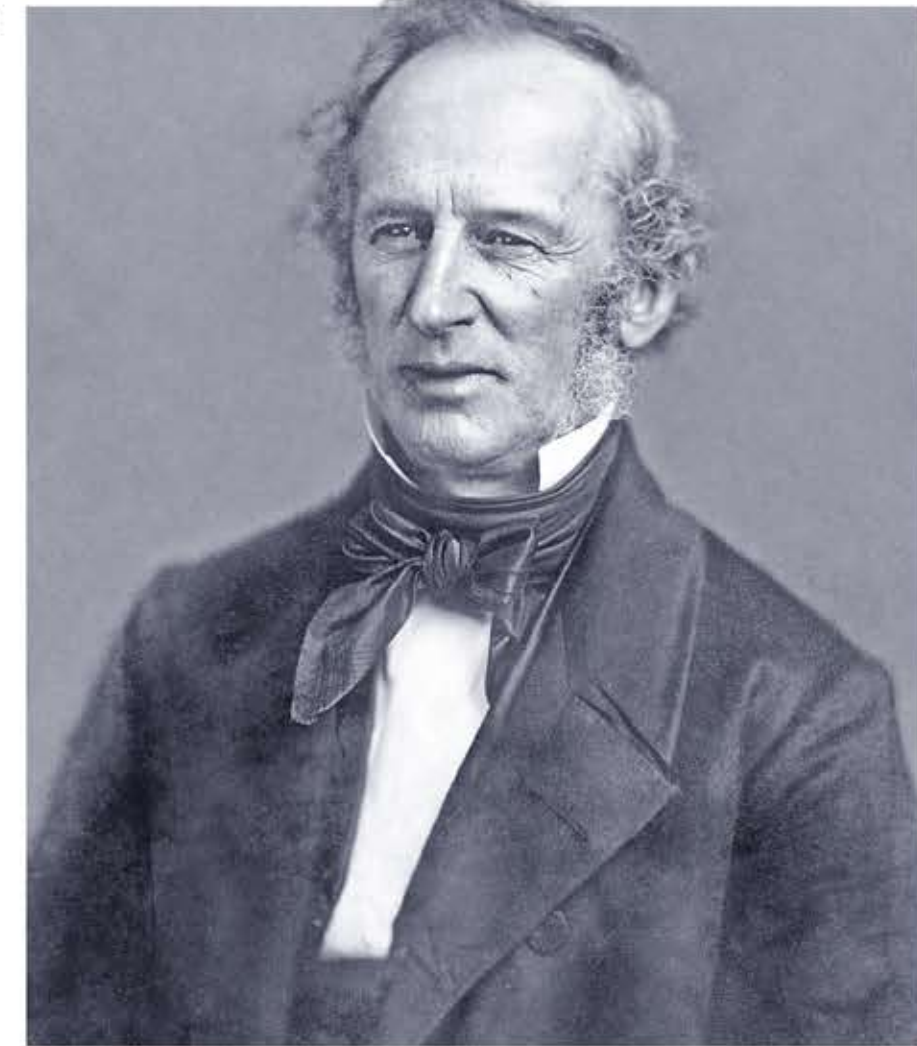
considered him and unmannered brute. While Vanderbilt could be a rascal, combative and cunning, he was much more a builder than a wrecker... being honorable, shrewd, and hard-working."

As a boy, Vanderbilt worked on his father's ferry boat in New York Harbor, quit school at eleven, and at age 16 decided to start his own ferry service. He purchased a periauger shallow draft, two-masted sailing ship with money borrowed from his mother and he named it *Swiftsure*. This was the beginning of his shipping empire. With this energy and optimism, he quickly built up his

business and other captains in the area began to call him "The Commodore," initially perhaps more out of derision than respect. It was a nickname that stuck with him through his life.

During 1813, Vanderbilt would marry his first cousin, Sophia, and they would birth an amazing 13 children. Although his ferry was quite busy, Vanderbilt bought his brother-in-law John De Forest's schooner *Charlette* and traded in food and merchandise in partnership with his father and others. However, in 1817, Thomas Gibbons, a ferry boat entrepreneur, asked Vanderbilt to captain his steamboat between New Jersey and New York. With plenty of brash energy, the young Cornelius kept his other businesses running profitably while also becoming Gibbons' business manager.

Gibbons was, however, fighting a steamboat monopoly in the waters of New York. This monopoly had been granted by paying off politicians by politically influential patrician Robert Livingston and Robert Fulton, who had designed the steamboat. Both these gentlemen had passed by the time Cornelius went to work for Gibbons and the monopoly was held by heirs.



Cornelius Vanderbilt — The Commodore — would become one of America's richest men through his steamships, railroads, and real estate investments.

Vanderbilt would be described as a "bare-knuckled capitalist."



ABOVE: The illustration of the destruction of the SS *Lexington* and the work of art that made Nathaniel Currier famous.