Vanderbilt family/Ran Abramitzky

The Vanderbilt family was one of the richest and best known families in America throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The fortune of this colorful family, whose members collected art, engaged in yachting and horse breeding and built grand mansions, came mainly from the steamship and railroad industries. Despite being competitive businessmen ever thinking about their own welfare first, the Vanderbilts became famous for their generosity and philanthropic activities.

A highly competent self-made businessman and entrepreneur, **Cornelius ("Commodore") Vanderbilt (1794-1877)** was the first family member to become rich. Born in Staten Island NY, he bought a small boat at age 16 and began bringing passengers to and from New York City. During this time, he gained a reputation for honesty and reliability. In 1818, he began to work for a steam boat owner and in 1829, already a rich man, decided to go on his own. Vanderbilt started a line from New York to Philadelphia before moving to the Hudson River and later to Long Island Sound. His strategy was to cut costs and prices below those of his competitors and to maintain a highly reliable service. More than once, his competitors bribed him to move his business elsewhere. By 1848, Vanderbilt had already become a millionaire, but his competitive nature pushed him to the next adventure. The discovery of gold in California created new demand for voyages from the East Coast to California, but existing routes were long and dangerous. Establishing the American Atlantic and Pacific Ship Canal Company in 1849, and the Accessory Transit Co. (ATC) in 1851, Vanderbilt opened a new route passing through Nicaragua instead of Panama, which shortened the trip substantially and made it less hazardous. In the early 1860s, Vanderbilt quit the steamship industry and moved into railroads. By 1867, after gaining control of the Harlem Railroad, he had become the president of both the
Hudson River Railroad and the New York Central, and then he merged the two. Vanderbilt failed to gain control of the Erie Railroads, but succeeded in connecting NY City to Chicago and in turning New York Central into the world’s first four-track road. His contribution to the development of the transport system of the Northwest United States and Southern Ontario was crucial, as many of his railways persisted long after he died. In 1873, he contributed $1,000,000 to establish Vanderbilt University. Leaving behind an estate worth $100,000,000, the “Commodore” died as the richest man in America of his time.

William Henry Vanderbilt (1821-1885), the eldest of 13 children, inherited most of his father's empire, but not before proving himself a competent businessman. In 1864, he was appointed vice-president of the New York and Harlem Railroad, then, upon his father’s death, became the president of the New York Central. He founded the College of Physicians and Surgeons, which is now the medical school of Columbia University, and generously contributed to Vanderbilt University and Saint Bartholomew's Church as well as to other institutions. Expanding the family’s railroad system, William Henry Vanderbilt doubled his father's fortune and left most of his estate to his sons Cornelius and William Kissam. Cornelius Vanderbilt the second (1843-1899), who started as an assistant treasurer of the New York and Harlem railroad in 1865, became the Chairman of the board of directors of the New York Central in 1883. Donating to various institutions, particularly to charities, Cornelius died at 56, leaving behind more than $50,000,000, the bulk of which to one of his sons, Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt. William Kissam Vanderbilt (1849-1920), who initiated the family’s tradition of building luxurious houses, was a leading yachtsman and was active in the management of the family railroad business, especially after the death of his brother Cornelius the second. George Washington
Vanderbilt (1862-1914) was the youngest son of William Henry. A man of books and fond of art, he is famous for building the Biltmore estate in North Carolina in 1895, which was a grand country house and an important architectural creation.

Among forth generation family members, the better known are Cornelius the second's children, Gertrude Vanderbilt (1875-1942), who organized art exhibitions and was a patron of American art, and Cornelius Vanderbilt the third (1873-1942), who was a talented inventor. Consuelo Vanderbilt (1877-1964), William Kissam's daughter, became famous for being forced to marry a duke she didn't love. Her brother, Harold Striling "Mike" Vanderbilt (1884-1970), was a talented yachtsman, who won the America's cup three times and invented the game of contract bridge.

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