

Jason “Jay” Gould

1836-1892

Jay Gould was born on May 27, 1836 in Roxbury, New York, the only son of a poor farmer. When he eventually succumbed to tuberculosis on December 2, 1892, he left behind an estimated fortune of \$77 million. Over the course of his lifetime Gould became one of the most influential men in the United States during a turbulent post-Civil War era.

Commemorative Essay by Liam O’Sullivan, Tarrytown

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Jay Gould, the Skunk of Wall Street

I was first introduced to Jay Gould as I skimmed through a long list of the names of the Hall of Fame nominees, few of which meant anything to me. There were two Rockefellers, a Beekman, and a Paulding, all names very much prevalent in the Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow area today. These men certainly impacted the area, but they seemed like the obvious choices. What stood out to me was the small description that accompanied Gould's name, where he was described as the "Skunk of Wall Street." As I learned more about the man, it was difficult to avoid comparisons to Jordan Belfort, the modern day "Wolf of Wall Street." Both men amassed almost unimaginable wealth through stock manipulation and other business ventures, and both men were ripped apart by the media throughout their lives. While no mass polls were ever taken on the public's perception of the two men, both Gould and Belfort would likely have held the intangible title of the most hated man in America. Not to say this attitude was entirely unjustified, as they both showed a penchant for flagrant bribery, among other crimes.

One of the most notable accusations levelled towards Gould was that he bribed the brother in law of then U.S President Ulysses Grant as part of a grand plot to control the gold market (Nocera 1). In the end, Jordan Belfort's and Jay Gould's careers take two very different paths. Belfort would be arrested and become an FBI informant, selling out many of his friends in the process (Belfort 65), and eventually serving about two years in prison. Gould survived a few brushes with the government, despite his mischievous actions often being

common knowledge. Both of these powerful men showed, and took full advantage of, the dark side of American capitalism (Nocera 1).

Tycoon, robber baron, rogue (1), these were all commonplace terms used to describe Jay Gould. He engaged in a long, drawn out battle with Cornelius Vanderbilt over control of the expanding railroad industry (Haviland 52), and was a genius in the art of manipulating stock. None were safe, including the President, as he took full advantage of the fledgling post-Civil War government in any way he could to build his fortune. His “questionable business” would earn him his title of “The Skunk of Wall Street” (52). He was once implicated in an attempted kidnapping of an enemy on Canadian soil which nearly led to a U.S invasion (Terrel).

When the last heir of Lyndhurst, Gould’s home, died, the estate was set to become a public museum. Even the people of Tarrytown themselves disapproved, saying, quote, “The decent, law-abiding citizens of Tarrytown would welcome any fitting memorial to a worthy American, but they question any memorial to a person with the reputation of Jay Gould” (Priol). This all leads one to question why Jay Gould deserves to be honored in any way, shape, or form. For one thing, hindsight shows he was simply a member of a generation of robber barons. He was also capable of doing good for the American people, playing a major role in the expansion of railroad and communications networks westward (Gross). While locals were certainly skeptical of any honoring of “The Skunk,” Lyndhurst has, along with Sunnyside and Kykuit, become a reminder of an older, more romantic time in the Hudson Valley (Kintrea). Tarrytown was where Jay Gould came to be

at peace, to rest from the daily battles on Wall Street and simply be a father and husband. It's hard not to pity a man who describes himself as the most hated man in America on his death bed (Priol).

Biographers today describe Gould as “an exemplary, successful, long-term C.E.O”(Nocera 1). Many of them believe his sinister image was largely a creation of the press, an effort to portray him as an especially malevolent tycoon that was simply inaccurate. As time goes on, perhaps Jay Gould can be seen as the man he was, not the “sinister creature” (Cassat) that he was made out to be.

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