

The Vanderbilts - A Reprise

Study Moderators: Carol Emanuelson & Julie Machen

Wednesdays, 4:00–5:00 p.m.

6 weeks beginning April 16

AIL Classroom, Lethbridge Lodge, Colby-Sawyer College

Maximum number of participants: 45

Known for their incredible wealth and luxurious lifestyles, the Vanderbilts earned their place in society as the richest family in the United States. They lived in spectacular homes, spent money like it was going out of style, left scandals in their wake and gave the world a storied legacy. This mini series will tell the tale of some of the most prominent and notable members of the Vanderbilt family.

Week 1 – Julie Machen: Cornelius Vanderbilt

Described by some as the first tycoon and by others as a robber baron, Cornelius Vanderbilt began life in what many would view as poverty. He grew up when this country was just getting started and would go on to make his fortune first by water and then by rail. When he died, his wealth was estimated to be about \$100 million in 19th century dollars, which would translate to billions today. This segment of the series will look at both his extraordinary business dealings and his equally unconventional personal life.

Week 2 – Kathy Bollard and David Click: Cornelius Vanderbilt II

The eldest grandson of the Commodore has been described as “a serious man...who worked harder than any of his clerks.” He married a fellow Sunday school teacher and “devoted a full quarter of his time to his charitable interests.” But the life he and his wife, Alice, built in many ways exemplified the excesses of the Gilded Age. They came to embrace the competitive ostentation that characterized their Vanderbilt generation, building a home that occupied an entire block of Fifth Avenue in New York City and effectively disinheriting their eldest son for marrying a woman they considered a social climber. While today, they are perhaps best known for their lavish Newport retreat, “The Breakers,” their lives illustrate the complexity of the Vanderbilt family legacy.



Julie Machen



Kathy Bollard



David Click

Week 3 – Julie Machen: The Women of the Marble House

Alva Smith would marry into the incredibly wealthy Vanderbilt family and use that wealth to build mansions and outshine even Mrs. Astor with her phenomenal parties. Her only daughter, Consuelo, reluctantly became the Duchess of Marlborough while still in her teens. Both women were products of the Gilded Age. But both would eventually divorce and remarry – thus, breaking the mold. When Alva’s second husband died, she would be instrumental in the suffragette movement while Consuelo would lend her fame and fortune to numerous worthy causes. They were remarkable women with amazing tales to tell.

Week 4 – Carol Emanuelson: The Biltmore

The Biltmore was the ultimate indulgence of George Washington Vanderbilt II, a third generation descendant of Cornelius Vanderbilt. The property was built on 125,000 acres in the vicinity of Asheville, North Carolina. George, his wife Edith and their daughter, Cornelia, occupied the 250-room home and entertained frequent distinguished guests with lavish parties. All who lived or stayed at the Biltmore were pampered by a staff of 40 servants. Cornelia married British aristocrat John Cecil. Ten years later, she concluded that life at the Biltmore was dull. Her crucial decisions at this point left a lasting legacy for the Vanderbilt family.

Week 5 – Carol Emanuelson: Gloria Vanderbilt

Gloria Vanderbilt is best known as a socialite, artist, designer and mother of broadcast journalist Anderson Cooper. As a fifth-generation Vanderbilt, she experienced life in ways that most people can only imagine. In childhood, she endured a controversial custody battle, inherited great wealth and lived in a position of privilege. She was married four times, dabbled in various careers, garnered fame, suffered shocking betrayals and confronted profound loss on her journey through life. Did this amazing woman embody or redefine the image of the Vanderbilts?

Week 6 – David Bashaw: What Happened to the Vanderbilt Fortune?

When Commodore Vanderbilt died in 1877, his estate was worth \$2.9 billion in today’s money. The special world of luxury and privilege that he created lasted but a brief moment. Within 30 years after his death, no member of his family was among the richest people in the United States. It is claimed that when 120 of the Commodore’s descendants gathered at Vanderbilt University in 1973, there was not one millionaire among them. How do you blow the world’s largest fortune?



Carol Emanuelson



David Bashaw