

# NEW INTRODUCTION

Edward Renehan



JAY Gould (1836–1892) has gone down in history as the consummate Gilded Age robber baron. For more than three decades he astonished and oftentimes outraged Wall Street with his grand schemes for manipulating stocks, bonds, and various derivatives, eventually amassing a fortune that stood at \$125 million by the time he died (or \$3.5 billion in today’s dollars). His impact on the financial landscape of his time cannot be overstated. He owned, at various times, the Western Union Telegraph Company, the Missouri Pacific Railroad, the Union Pacific Railroad, the Manhattan Elevated Railroad, and (briefly) the *New York World* newspaper. His majestic mansion, Lyndhurst, on the banks of the Hudson River at Tarrytown, New York, remains today a landmark and showcase owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.\* Gould also owned another mansion, on Fifth Avenue in New York, now demolished.† Both mansions were very far away, in miles and in time, from Gould’s birthplace, a humble farmhouse in rural Roxbury, New York—the tiny Delaware County hamlet where Gould was raised along with his contemporary, and nearby neighbor, the future essayist/naturalist John Burroughs.‡

Gould had deep roots in Delaware County. His paternal grandparents, Abraham Gould, Jr., and Anna Gould, came from Connecticut and settled in Roxbury in 1789, at a time when the place was known as “West Settlement” and comprised a part of the Hardenbergh Patent. (Settlers paid rent for their lands to the influential Hardenbergh family and their partners, who owned approximately two million acres in Delaware, Ulster,

\* The National Trust for Historic Preservation inherited the estate in 1961, upon the death of Jay Gould’s youngest daughter, Anna Gould. There is a website: <http://www.lyndhurst.org>.

† 579 Fifth Avenue, at the northeast corner of the intersection with 47th Street.

‡ Late in life, Burroughs (1837–1921) was to comment: “It is a curious psychological fact that the two men outside my own family of whom I have oftenest dreamed in my sleep are [Ralph Waldo] Emerson and Jay Gould; one to whom I owe so much, the other to whom I owe nothing; one whose name I revere, the other whose name I associate, as does the world, with the dark way of speculative finance.” John Burroughs, *My Boyhood* (Garden City: Doubleday & Page, 1922), 27. Note that the original Gould farmhouse, in which Gould was born, still stands on Roxbury’s West Settlement Road and is in private hands.

Green, Orange, and Sullivan Counties.) On Gould's mother's side, he was the great-grandson of two other Hardenbergh renters, John and Betty Taylor More, who emigrated from Scotland and settled in what became the town of Hobart in 1772. Thus, they became the very first white people to make a home anywhere in Delaware County. The Mores later founded the town that became Moresville, where John operated a prosperous tavern and inn. John More died in 1840, at age ninety-five—leaving four-year-old Jay as one of more than one hundred and twenty great-grandchildren.\*

At Jay's Lyndhurst mansion, in the surprisingly small office where he tended to his affairs when at that residence, one sees an ancient transit surveying tool propped in the corner. Gould used this relic as a young man in the 1850s when, not wanting to follow in his father's and grandfather's footsteps as dairy farmers, he tried to make a living doing surveying work for land speculators, railroad developers, road builders, and other clients throughout the Catskills and as far north as Albany.

At the same time that he worked at his surveying, Gould also pursued two separate projects that fit well with his primary trade. One idea was to create a large and comprehensive full-color map of Delaware County, to have various businesses and landowners pay a fee to see their locations and names highlighted, and to then sell copies of the map, which he would publish himself (through the Philadelphia printers Collins and Keeny). His other project was to research and write a full history of Delaware County, which he would likewise publish himself and to which he would sell prepublication subscriptions.

While journeying about the county doing surveys, Gould regularly paused to talk with elderly farmers and other citizens, interview them about historical events and folklore, and earnestly record their words in a series of notebooks. (Whenever possible, he also sold his interviewees subscriptions to his forthcoming book, in which he promised their families would be mentioned.) Many of those families have descendants who remain in Delaware County, many in their original houses. Therefore, one wonders how many first-edition copies of Gould's *History of Delaware County and Border Wars of New York* might lurk on dusty bookshelves in centuries-old farmhouses within the watershed of the Delaware's East Branch. (Interestingly, when I looked through Gould's extensive private library at Lyndhurst, I could not find a single copy of the book. It may be, however, that a few were to be found in the equally large library at Gould's Manhattan mansion, the entire contents of which were auctioned off in the early 1940s.)

By mid-1856, at age twenty, Gould had the map completed—and all

\* The John More Family Association, consisting of descendants John and Betty Taylor More, calculates the couple as having about sixteen thousand descendants. There is a website: <http://www.johnmore.com>.

the printing and distribution accomplished. Only a hundred or so copies were run off, and today the few remaining originals are much in demand, commanding high prices among collectors.\* That April, he also had his book in good order—in printer's plates, ready to go to press—when disaster struck. A fire completely destroyed the firm that Gould had commissioned to print the book. Not only were the printer's plates destroyed but also Gould's one copy of the original manuscript. Only a few proof sheets remained, preserving small slices of Gould's prose. Undeterred, Gould sat down and rewrote the manuscript during May and June. He issued the book under his homegrown imprint of "Keeny & Gould" that September. Once again, only a hundred or so copies were printed.

Gould's book is invaluable in that, through his fastidious interviews, he was able to assemble the closest thing we have to first-person accounts of the early settlement of the region. Gould's interviewees, some of them in his own family, were only a generation or two away from the first white people to come to the area.† They knew the old stories well. Without Gould's transcriptions of these early reminiscences and tales, a great gap would exist in the historical record of Gould's home region.

The book is considered not only a classic but also highly reliable in its accounts of people and events. As to reliability, Gould says this in his preface: "I do not claim that this work is free from error; perfection, in a history of this character, where much of the information to be relied upon is of an oral and indefinite nature, is an impossibility. I have been careful to weigh all the statements presented—to discriminate between truth and fiction—and have suppressed much apparently interesting matter, which lacked the proper authenticity, or conflicted with truth; still, doubtless, there is room for improvement."

Most notable, perhaps, is the vantage point the book provides for viewing the Delaware County Antirent war of the early 1840s, when many residents—although not, interestingly, Gould's father—successfully rose up against the Hardenbergh Patroons, demanding land reform and an end to their serfdom. Gould spoke to dozens of Antirenters and recorded their tales in painstaking detail, creating a record that remains of great use and importance to historians.

Soon after publishing his book, Gould departed for Manhattan and, more specifically, Wall Street. He rarely returned, although he remained in sporadic touch with old friends and cousins. In 1880, he came home to install a large marker above the simple Gould family plot in the burial

\* There are several original copies of Gould's map of Delaware County on public display. One hangs in the town hall of Andes, New York, and another in the hall of the Jay Gould Memorial Reformed Church in Roxbury, New York. Among collectors, Gould's map is considered something of a masterpiece of cartography.

† Indeed, Gould's own father—John Burr Gould—was said to have been the first white child born in Roxbury.

ground, at Roxbury's "Yellow Meetinghouse," where his parents lay. He made another brief visit in 1884, and again in 1887. Finally, in July of 1888, only a few months after receiving a diagnosis of tuberculosis—which, at the time, constituted a death sentence—he came back one last time with four of his children, intent on introducing them to cousins and familiarizing them with their roots.

The Goulds came into town by train. They slept several nights in Jay's elaborate private railroad car, *Atalanta*, which was pulled up on an Ulster & Delaware siding. Dispensing with his usual retinue of Pinkerton bodyguards, Gould walked his children about town and reminisced while, at the same time, greeting old neighbors. He showed his children the small attic space above what was once a tin shop where he'd worked on his map and his book, the little farmhouse in which he'd been raised, the still-smaller one-room school where he'd learned his letters, the graves of their ancestors, and a few of the spots where he and other boys, among them John Burroughs, had always liked to fish.\*

When I was researching my book *Dark Genius of Wall Street: The Misunderstood Life of Jay Gould, King of the Robber Barons*, I learned that after Gould's 1892 death members of his family continued to maintain a close relationship with Roxbury and the region around it.† His daughter Helen Gould Shepard established a summer home there, Kirkside, to which she returned every year until her death in 1938.‡ With her brothers and sisters, Helen endowed the building of Roxbury's Jay Gould Memorial Reformed Church, dedicated in 1894. Gould's son George Jay Gould established a summer home in the Delaware County town of Arkville, on the banks of Furlow Lake, which is still owned by the Gould family. George's grandson, my good friend Kingdon Gould Jr., was instrumental in the founding of the Catskills Center for Conservation and Development and in 2013 received the "Spirit of the Catskills" award from the Coalition to Save Belleayer. Kingdon passed away in 2018.

One senses that Jay Gould would probably be gratified to know that, all these years after his death, his family still remains connected to his natal region—also that his book continues to be respected and of use to people interested in the history of Delaware County and the history of the Catskills as a whole.

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\* The old tin shop in the attic of which Gould worked on his map and his book is now a gallery space, Liberal Arts Roxbury, located at 53525 State Highway 30, in the middle of the town of Roxbury.

† Edward Renehan, *Dark Genius of Wall Street: The Misunderstood Life of Jay Gould, King of the Robber Barons* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

‡ Helen Gould's summer home, 53865 State Highway 30, is now a senior living facility: the Kirkside Home for Adults.