

Departure of “Willie Wallie” Astor Infuriates America

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When William Waldorf Astor abandoned the United States for England in 1890, he announced huffily that “America is not a fit place for a gentleman to live. America is good enough for any man who has to make a livelihood, though why traveled people of independent means should remain there more than a week is not readily to be comprehended.” The quotation is from Robert Kaplan’s 2006 book, *When the Astors Owned New York*, which details the career of William Waldorf Astor and his wealthy and powerful family. William Waldorf was the great-grandson of John Jacob Astor, who immigrated to the United States from Germany in 1783 and built a fortune, first from fur trading and later from buying and leasing New York City real estate.

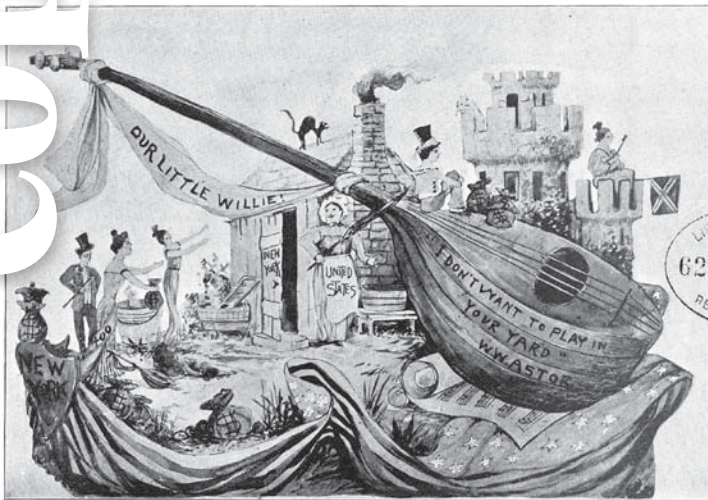
William Waldorf studied in Germany and Italy, where he developed a passion for belles-lettres, history, and art, and he subsequently earned a law degree from Columbia University.

Despite his privileges, a failed attempt at politics left him embittered, according to Kaplan. He served briefly in the New York State legislature but was narrowly defeated when he ran for the U.S. House of Representatives. *The New York Times* accused his failed campaign of “ignoble subservience to [the] machine dictation” of Republic Party bosses, and other newspapers denounced his aloof nature and his family’s record as landlords of tenement buildings.

Compounding his political grievances was his inability to prevail in a long-running battle with Caroline Astor, his aunt by marriage, for social primacy in New York City. When his father died, leaving him somewhere between \$150 and \$300 million, William Waldorf broke with the United States. His “aggressively insulting” words upon departing for England, cited above, elicited an angry response from the press, Kaplan writes.

In 1899 William Waldorf became a British subject, causing further outrage in the United States, exemplified by the illustration accompanying this column.

Titled *Exit “Willie Wallie” Astor*, it was registered in the Copyright Office on September 25, 1899, by the Priests of Pallas, a Kansas City organization best known for sponsoring elaborate fall festivals to boost local commerce. The junior fellows working in the Copyright Office this summer unearthed it among uncataloged elements of the Office’s historical deposits. See the story on page 7 for details about the junior fellows’ exhibit of other discoveries. ©



4. EXIT “WILLIE WALLIE” ASTOR.

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Sir Walter Scott’s prophetic soul must have seen the degenerate descendant of the hardy western fur trader when he wrote concerning the man who loved not his native land, that no matter how wealthy or famous he might be, he “living should forfeit fair renown” and should return to dust “unwept, unhonored and unsung.” William Waldorf Astor, who has renounced America and become a

subject of Queen Victoria leaves with no regrets from the United States, unless a few of New York’s 400 may feel saddened. New York herself realizes that the only loss is a count of one less in her census and exclaims “good riddance.” The proud heritage of American citizenship has been so tenaciously held to by the American born that “Willie Wallie’s” case gives him much notoriety.

The Priests of Pallas, the organization that registered Exit “Willie Wallie” Astor, noted in its application its intention to publish the illustration in Kansas City.