Mayor William F. Havemeyer

P. 53 William F. Havemeyer was born at No. 81 Pine St. in this city, on Feb. 12, 1804. His parents were German, and came to this country in the latter parts of the last century. His father, Wm. Havemeyer, was a refiner of sugars, and with his brother, Frederick C. Havemeyer, the two brothers lived plainly in Vandam St. for many years, and during his youthful years of Wm. F. Havemeyer, the two brothers lived plainly in Vandam, their old-fashioned houses being situated each on one side of the gate of the refinery. The son of William Havemeyer received a liberal education. Among the principal schools which he attended before he entered Columbia College in 1819, were Pickett’s, in Chanbers St.-one of the largest and best-known schools in the city at that day and Wykoff Village Academy, in Dominick St. He is spoken of by one of his school-fellows as having been a good-tempered and companionable boy, of aptness in learning. In 1823 he was graduated at Columbia College. His learnings were toward business pursuits, and he learned that trade in the refinery of his father, who retired from the business some years before his death, and in 1828 W.F. Havemeyer and his cousin Frederick C. Havemeyer succeeded to the control of business. The senior partner in the new firm had an office in Front St. near Maiden Lane, and sold the sugars from the refinery. He soon gained the esteem of his fellow-merchants by his encompromising integrity, his just and honorable dealing, the care he exercised in every detail of his business, and the prudent caution which he displayed. But his rugged positive character, the prompt and forcible way he had of expressing opinions which were not always agreeable to those with whom he associated, did not win affection swiftly, but impressed all who came in contact with him. He was a Democrat of the most uncompromising kind and in that time the principles of the Democratic party were by no means popular downtown. The administration of General Jackson commanded his heartless support, and he was then and after enthusiastic in his expressions of admiration for Jackson. From an early age he took a warm interest in politics and public affairs, and it was a frequent reproach of his through his life that respectable citizens in general take far too little part in determining how they shall be governed. To inflame such lukewarmness with zeal he was prompt to use all of his influence and his heartless efforts. In time he took a prominent position among the leading Democrats of the city. He was intimate with Silas Wright and Marcy and Flagg, and his words were of weight with those who guided the cause of the party in this city and with Mr. Wright when he became Governor of the State. His admiration and support of Gen. Jackson were followed by friendly relations with Van Buren, and correspondence passed between the two in which Mr. Havemeyer vehemently urged Mr. Van Buren to the firm in spite of all popular outcry, to imitate the example of Jackson, and not to falter or waver, as that would be fatal. Mr. Havemeyer’s confidence in his own opinions and his frankness in expressing them were shown long before. When he was still comparatively a young man he became a director in the Merchants’ Exchange Bank, in the early days of that institution. He predicted the collapse of the United States Bank years before it happened, and he insisted on the assertion again and again, although he was well-nigh looked upon as affected in mind for uttering it.

Mr. Havemeyer only remained in the sugar business fourteen years after he became the head of his firm, and retired in 1842 with a competency. He often told his friends that he had no desire to make great wealth, and expressed little admiration for men who made that their life’s aim. While in his business relations he had shown sterling honesty and a high tone of mercantile sentiment, his part in trade had not been of such a character as to demand talent of the bery highest order. Refining was fairly profitable in those days, but Havemeyer refinery, always clung to the old methods of refining, but the firm carried on business so safely that there was never any
doubt of their strength in the wide-spread failure and distrust of 1837. Men who were associated on friendly terms with Mr. Havemeyer in the years when he sold sugars in Front St. say that he was willing to help others, was gentle and benevolent in heart and act, though in his language something of asperity was not unknown. But ungracious language with him was sometimes assumed to cover his feelings. He is declared to have been willing through life to give his time for the benefit of others, especially for the friendless, and to have been charitable in secret, while his hatred of pretense and show made him strict in its concealment. Only those who knew him thoroughly knew his undeviating rectitude of intention, his whole-souled devotion to what he considered the true interests of the public and his genuine kindness of heart.

Mr. Havemeyer’s early retirement from active business pursuits did not prevent his connection with prominent interests with which his investments of his property had to do. In 1851 he was chosen President of the Bank of North America, and held that position for ten years, having the direction of the interests of the bank in the crisis of 1857. For many years before his death he had large interests in the Pennsylvania Coal Company, in which he was a director, and of which he acted as President in the absence of Mr. Ewen in Europe. He held a large amount of stock in the Long Island Railroad, of which he was Vice-President, and he was connected with an insurance company and other corporations.

For several years after his retirement from the sugar firm, public affairs took up much of his time. In 1844 he was a Presidential elector on the Polk and Dallas ticket. In the following year he was nominated by the Democratic party for the Mayoralty. The nomination was generally acceptable to the party, and Mr. Havemeyer was readily elected, although the Whigs and the Democrats were not very unequal in strength in the city. Four years later Mr. Havemeyer was again nominated as the Democratic candidate for Mayor, and was elected. His administration during his two terms was satisfactory to his party, and aroused no especial virulence of attack on the part of the opposition. It was notable for the scrupulous care which the Mayor gave to all the business details of his office, the rigid way in which he scrutinized warrants to which his signature was required, and for earnest effort for honesty and economy in public expenditure. During a part of his administration Mr. Flagg was City Controller, and John Ewen, who afterward became President of the Pennsylvania Coal Company through Mr. Havemeyer’s influence, was street Commissioner. In 1846 Mayor Havemeyer, together with Robert B. Minturn and Gulian C. Verplanck, strove to do away with the abuses practiced on emigrants, and as a…

After his retirement from office at the end of his second term, Mr. Havemeyer did not lose his interest or his active participation in political affairs, although he was not as conspicuous in them for several years as he had been before. In 1859 he was put forward as the Tammany candidate for Mayor, the Democratic candidate from Mozart Hall being Fernando Wood, and the Republican candidate, George Opdyke. Mr. Wood was successful, receiving a little over 30,000 votes, while Mr. Havemeyer received nearly 27,000, and Mr. Opdyke something under 23,000. At the outbreak of the war and during its progress, Mr. Havemeyer was outspoken in his advocacy of the Union cause, and always expressed confidence that the rebellion would be put down, although he did not come so conspicuously before the public in connection with these things as he had in former years. He always favored a decisive and uncompromising policy, and was an early advocate of the abolition of Slavery as a war measure. On one occasion, before the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation, he was on the same steamer with Secretary Seward, going up the Hudson, and in urging the necessity of a prompt and vigorous policy, he said to Mr. Seward, “If a man has a gangrene he don’t notice XXX…

…result of their efforts the Board of Emigration Commissioners was established, of which Mr. Havemeyer was the first President, he being succeeded by Mr. Verplanck. The police system of the city had its foundation during Mr. Havemeyer’s mayoralty, night watchmen before that time having been the only guardians of the peace. Th e Mayor thinking that the hearty support of both parties would be necessary to the highest success of the new system, and wishing to remove its control from partisanship, appointed as Chief of Police a Whig, Mr. Taylor, but the
appointment, although confirmed by the Assistant Aldermen, was reelected by the Board of Aldermen, and it is said that the name of George W. Matsell was first suggested to the Mayor for the appointment by some of these Aldermen.

As an illustration of the care, Mayor Havemeyer at that time displayed for the city finances, the following incidents may be given: Considering on the inspection of certain bills which had been approved by the Almshouse Board that certain items of weight in rice and coffee were excessive, the Mayor invited several Front St. merchants to his office and made inquiries of them concerning proper weights in rice and coffee, which showed that there were fraudulent overcharges in the bills. The Mayor told the merchants that these frauds were in part due to their fault, because they did not send in estimates, while he refused to sign the warrants for the bills, although they had been passed by the Board, until the overcharges were corrected.

...it, or trifle with it-he cuts it out. So this evil ought to be cut out.”-referring to the evil of Slavery.

During all the years between his second and third terms as Mayor, MR. Havemeyer was strenuous in impressing on his fellow-citizens the necessity of active and intelligent work by xxx so secure good government, and he often grew impatient over the apathy of a great part of the respectable and wealthy men of New York. As the time the Reform movement of 1971 set in, and he was approached with solicitation to accept the nomination for Mayor he expressed inclination to refuse, saying that he was disgusted with the indifference the people of New York showed so long to the corruption of their rulers. In blunt, rough phrase he remarked: “These New York people haven’t been spanked enough yet. They need more.” Not long ago his disgust with the attitude of the people toward his administration found vent in a repetition of this sentiment.

When the Reform movement began in earnest in 1871, and the Committee of Seventy was elected, Mr. Havemeyer was chosen Vice-President, and was one of the most active and influential members of that body. He assisted in organizing Reform Associations in all the Assembly Districts in the city, and his long experience in politics rendered his services especially valuable in aiding to organize the campaign which resulted in the overthrow of the Tweed Ring. The mass Reform meeting at the Cooper Institute on the evening of Sept. 4, which give birth to the Committee of Seventy, was called to order by James M. Brown of the firm of Brown Bros., bankers, and on his nomination Mr. Havemeyer was chosen Chairman. Mr. Havemeyer’s speech on that occasion was one of the most fearless and outspoken of any in denunciation of the official thieves who had stolen millions of the city’s money. The meeting was one of the largest ever held in that hall, and was mainly composed of business and professional men who had for several years taken no part in politics. The Committee of Seventy subsequently organized the selection of Henry G. Stebbins, Chairman; Wm. F. Havemeyer, Vice-Chairman; Roswell D. Hatch, Secretary; Emil Sauer, Treasurer. An address to the people of the State of New York was prepared and issued. On the morning of Monday, Sept. 11, 1871, it was discovered that the office of the Controller had been broken into and a large portion of the fraudulent vouchers for work alleged to have been done, and supplies furnished the city had been stolen. A storm of indignation arose among the citizens, who declared that the robbery was a plot to conceal the plundering of the city. Mayor Hall requested Controller Connolly to resign. He refused on the ground that it would be tantamount to an acknowledgment of guilt. On the following day, however, acting under the advice of the Hon. Samuel J. Tilden and Wm. F. Havemeyer, be appointed as Deputy Controller Andrew H. Green and virtually retired from the office.

During the campaign of 1872, the name of Mr. Havemeyer had been prominently mentioned as an available candidate for the Mayoralty. He had announced that he did not wish the nomination. On the evening of Oct. 21, 1872, he was nominated by the Republican County Convention for Mayor. On the following evening his nomination was accepted by the Committee of Seventy, and later by the United Reform Convention. At the ensuing election Mr. Havemeyer was chosen Mayor by a vote of 53,806 to 45,398 for Abraham R. Lawrence, and 31,121 for James O’Brien. Under the new Charter of 1873 Mayor Havemeyer and the Board of Aldermen
were empowered to reorganize the City Government. While some of his nominations were good, several were deemed by the public unfit to be made, and the Mayor lost much of his popularity in consequence. He quarreled with the majority of the members of the Board of Aldermen, and they declared that they would confirm no one nominated by the Mayor unless it should be a candidate of their own choice. Believing that the Mayor could be induced to fill the vacancies which might occur with Republicans, and especially to appoint ex-Judge Howland to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Henry Smith in the Police Commission the last Legislature, which was Republican in both branches, gave the Mayor authority to fill any vacancies which might occur without confirmation by the Board of Aldermen. The Mayor used the power thus conferred upon him to appoint Abraham Disbecker to the vacancy in the Police Board instead of ex-Judge Howland. This had the effect of alienating from him the support of the Republican leaders. In July last Police Commissioners Hugh Gardner and Oliver Charlick were convicted of misdemeanor in removing Tammany inspectors of election without complying with the requirements of the law. It was held that by reason of such conviction, the accused vacated their official positions. To evade this, the convicted Commissioners resigned. The Mayor then appointed Commissioner Charlick to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Commissioner Gardner, and vice versa. This caused much indignation on the part of the Press and the public. Three sets of charges against the Mayor were drawn up and sent to the Governor, requesting the impeachment and removal of the Mayor. One of these was signed by John Kelly, Wm. H. Wickham, and Oswald Ottendorger on behalf of Tammany Hall. The second and third were signed by John P. Crosby, Wm. C. Barrett, Ellwood E. Thorne, and other citizens. The Governor, after retaining the papers for a considerable time censured the Mayor for his course in the matters complained of, but did not deem the offenses sufficiently grave to warrant removal. Meanwhile, however, the convicted Commissioners had again resigned, and their places were filled by the appointment of Superintendent of Police G. Matsell and Excise Commissioner John R. Voorhis. As an effect to the charges which John Kelly had been largely instrumental in procuring, the Mayor, in company with Nelson J. Waterbury, proposed at various times under his charge, and thus defrauding the city to a large amount. This was intended also to break down the influence of John Kelly at the Democratic State Convention, and to have been sent to the city press and an abstract telegraphed to the country press on the eve of the convention. It could not be prepared in time, and a brief abstract was telegraphed to one of the members of the faction opposed to Kelly and the nomination of Tilden for Governor. The charges against Mr. Kelly were subsequently printed in the New York morning papers over the signature of the Mayor. For this Mr. Kelly brought suits for libel against the Mayor and Mr. Waterbury, and these were being argued yesterday when the news of the Mayor’s sudden death brought the suit in his case to an abrupt and unlooked-for...

Mr. Havemeyer was married to a daughter of Hector Craig who was a member of Congress and was afterward appointed by Gen. Jackson Surveyor of the Port of New York, and held the position for several years. Mr. Craig afterward moved from New York to Orange County, where the town of Craigville was named from him. This lady survives Mr. Havemeyer. He leaves six sons and two daughters. The sons are named John, Henry, Hector, James, Charles, and Wm. F., jr. The daughters are Mrs. Armstrong and Mrs. Maclay. Mr. Havemeyer lived in Vandam St., where he built a house near his father’s. about a quarter of a century ago he built the house No. 355 West Fourteenth St., where he resided up to the time of his death. He was brought up in the Lutheran faith, but in his early manhood he attended St. Luke’s Church (Protestant Episcopal) in Hudson St. But differences of opinion with Mr. Forbes, the rector of that church, who afterward became a Roman Catholic, caused him to leave that church and for some time he attended religious services in Vestry St. Since the building of the Seventh Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church he has been a regular attendant there, although not a member of that or any other religious body. The religious belief of his wife guided him in the selection of a place of worship after he ceased attending St. Luke’s Church.
Tribune Editorial 12/1/1874
Mayor Havemeyer

In the sorrow with which the friends of Mayor Havemeyer contemplate his sudden death there is certainly a great compensation. He has died in a manner he might himself have chosen. The irresistible summons came to him at his post of duty, just as he had sat down to his day’s work. He was an active, combative man from his youth up—work was always pleasure to him, and rest was the most irksome of tasks. He was nearing the end of his term of official service, and it is only fair to suppose that the struggles and contests of his busy career would have ended with this year. His was not the character which would have delighted in a long and indolent sunset of life. It was fitting that his last moments should have been passed in the chair where the suffrages of his native city had placed him, and that he should have been spared the slow process of disabling age and gradual decay. However various may be the judgments passed upon his political career, there will be no discord in the praises in which all who knew him will join in relation to his character as a man and a merchant. His life has been passed in the sight of all, and his good name is without blemish. He was honest, energetic, and public spirited—he wished only good to his fellow-men and to the city which three times paid him its highest honors. He wanted to gain ends which seemed to him just by honorable means. He was frank, open, and prompt, incapable of deceit or treason. He had his full share of enemies and a multitude of devoted friends. The enemies were those who knew him little; the friends were those who had known him from boyhood. The former will readily forgive him, and the latter will never cease to mourn him.

As to his recent administration, it would be idle, even in this moment of sincere regret for his loss, to attempt to deceive ourselves or others. It was thoroughly wrong and unfortunate. He was placed in office at a time which would have taxed severely the best efforts of a younger and broader man. His sterling honesty was the only quality to which his supporters called the public attention, and in the enthusiasm of the day, when the city had hardly recovered from the delighted surprise with which it had seen the downfall of Tweed, mere honesty and the Republican vote were enough to carry him in over a candidate like Mr. Lawrence, who was equally honest and far more capable. He entered upon the duties of Mayor, one of the most unfit men who could have been found for the purpose in the City of New York. If he had been ignorant, it would have been far better. As it was, his knowledge was out of date, but all the more cherished for that reason. His mind was full of prejudices that he clung to as if they were principles. His very honesty was a stumbling block, for he resisted new ideas as if they were crimes; and conscious of rectitude himself, suspected the integrity of all who differed from. These defects of his own idiosyncracy were heightened by the anomalous circumstances by which he was surrounded. He was elected by the votes of citizens of both parties intent upon reform. He therefore felt himself free from partisan dictation. But unfortunately he knew of no way in which to show his independence of all parties, except by trying to serve both. His first important official act was seen to be fatal. He formed the most weighty administrative commission in the city government of notorious politicians, and imagined he was insuring their integrity by taking them from hostile camps. In his anxiety to guard against Rings, he caused them to spring up wherever he put his hands. Of course it soon became evident that he could not carry on a non-partisan administration through partisan means. But he could devise no other way. What had been called in former days his firmness of character prevented him from every admitting an error or retracing a false step. When his plans became impracticable but he relied upon mere caprice, taking counsel only from his personal friendships and antipathies. He alienated both political organizations, and did not show sufficient sagacity or teachableness to draw around him the support of the best citizens, who could have made him equally independent of Tammany Hall and the Custom-house. He was not merely persistent; his obstinacy was sometimes supplemented by a cunning decidedly lacking dignity. His reappointment of his convicted Commissioners to each other’s vacancies, his protests
against the passage of laws which he instantly took advantage, are specimens of this. He grew at last so angry at the public opinion which had become hostile to him, that he seemed to take pleasure in thwarting and denying it. He had been recently so much in the habit of opposing the prevailing sentiment, that even in the kindly concern with which every one yesterday received the news of his death there were many who could hastily refrain from a passing smile, not far removed from a tear, when they read that the sturdy old man in the last hour of his life had “walked two miles in the face of a strong wind.”

Now that he is gone, the short and thought-less popularity of two years ago will revive again. The honest man, the good citizen, the honorable merchant will be remembered and deplored. His civic administration will be little recalled, except by those who take pleasure in reviving the recollections of his humorous pugnacity and his frank antipathies. It will be said in his favor, and with justice also, that his quarrels never sprang from any sordid scramble for spoils, nor were inspired by any motives he was not always willing to avow. He would neither steal himself nor permit others to steal when he could prevent it. He would no sooner waste or divert into private channels the public property than his own. But while we join heartily in these eulogies, we ought not to forget that integrity, though the most indispensable of qualities, is not enough for a public man, and that a man of blameless life may do great harm to a community which he governs if he lacks a practical knowledge of laws and of men. That Mayor Havemeyer failed in just this point is no stain on his name. It does not prevent us from honoring his useful life among us for nearly three quarters of a century. But if would be deeply to be regretted if it taught no lesson to those who nominated and elected him Mayor of New York.
Commercial Tributes 12/2/74
Action of the Pennsylvania Coal Company, Butter and Cheese Exchange, and Mechanics’ and Traders’ Exchange

At a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Coal Company yesterday the President, John Ewon, stated that the meeting had been called to consider the sudden decease of the Hon. Wm. F. Havemeyer, one of the oldest members of the Board, and with a view to an expression of the feeling of the members of the Board thereon. The following resolutions were thereupon unanimously adopted:

Resored, That this Board has received with profound regret, Intelligence of the sudden death of the Hon. Wm. F. Havemeyer, one of the original projectors of this Company, and a member of its Board of Directors, and identified with the promotion of the interests of the Company from the commencement to the present time. This Board therefore desires to place upon record its sense of the very great loss sustained by this Company and its shareholders by decease of Mr. Havemeyer, whose energy and sagacity have contributed in no small degree to the success of the Company from its inceptions.

Resolved, That this Board, with the whole community, desires to express its sense of the incorruptible fidelity, enlarged public spirit, and great and valuable services of Mr. Havemeyer in the various relations public and private, in which he has so well borne his part in his long and honorable career.

Resolved, That the Secretary of this xxx be requested to communicate a copy of these resolutions to the family of Mr. Havemeyer.

New York Times 12/1/74
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In business, Mr. Havemeyer attained the success due to hard, unremitting labor, patient thrift, and cautiously conservative policy. He was simple in his mode of living and rigidly careful of his money; but he did many generous things, which those whom he befriended will remember long after he has gone. There are successful men in New York today who largely owe their success to the timely aid of WILLIAM H. HAVEMEYER. In commercial life, he was seldom mistaken in the capacity of his friends, and those to whom he took a liking secured his unwavering confidence. He came of a sturdy, long-lived race, whose ambition was to attain a solid respectability and keep it. He seldom knew what it was to have a day’s illness and he would have scorned the suggestion that the wear and tear of a troubled public career might impair the elasticity of a splendid physique. And even now, it is not absolutely certain that it did so. His brother died recently from the effects of an apoplectic stroke, and the same hereditary predisposition might have proved fatal to the Mayor at this time had he never left the retirement of his private business. Still, the spectacle of a strong man struck down near the close of an exciting political career suggests the conclusion that the public life of today is even more exacting in its demands than our feverish commercial activity, and that he who would occupy a prominent public position would do well to cultivate that even balance of character and of conduct which disarms adverse criticism, and helps to neutralize the worry which adds to work the element that kills.