



MRS. ASTOR HOLDS COURT

FOR NEARLY FOUR DECADES, New York was dominated by a stately, proud woman who used her family's name and background and her husband's millions to establish Gilded Age society. It was one of the ironies that Caroline Astor, who so controlled this society and excluded those families whom she considered uncouth parvenus, relied on money of questionable antecedents to establish herself as its arbiter. For the fortunes of the Astor family were less than a hundred years old and had come through not only hard work but also exploitation and greed.

In 1784, German-born John Jacob Astor, a twenty-one-year-old butcher's son who read with difficulty, wrote illegibly, and never lost his heavy Teutonic accent, arrived in America and, after a short apprenticeship, began trading alcohol, gunpowder, arms, and blankets with the Indian tribes of New England and Canada for expensive furs that he quickly sold at immense profits. His American Fur Company, established a few years later after hard-fought battles, negotiations, and legal challenges, not only helped finance expeditions west to the Pacific Ocean but also opened up rich new markets to exploit. Armed with a personal fortune of \$250,000, Astor used his wealth to embark on the China trade, exporting furs and arms and importing spices, tea, silks, and porcelain.¹

Astor fell into real estate by accident, purchasing in 1802 the remaining lease of a vast tract of land on Manhattan Island. Realizing that New York City was destined to expand, he followed this first purchase with many others, gradually spreading his ownership of land across the burgeoning metropolis. As social historian Jerry Patterson noted, “no family has ever owned so much of Manhattan” as did the Astors.² Among his possessions were the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street; a number of lots on Wall Street and on Pine Street; the corner of Broadway and Exchange Place; Madison Avenue from Thirty-fourth to Thirty-sixth streets; Fifth Avenue from Thirty-third to Thirty-fourth streets; and a large section of Greenwich Village, in addition to entire city blocks on the Upper West Side, including the area that later became Times Square.³ Astor was both cagey and disingenuous in his deals; most of his tenants held leases of twenty-one years and developed and improved their property only to have it revert, at greater value, to its owner.⁴

Astor was certainly the city’s wealthiest citizen, although his money did little to ease his rough edges; “He dined here last night,” one contemporary wrote disapprovingly, “and ate his ice cream and peas with a knife.”⁵ On another occasion, Astor was said to have wiped his dirty hands on the gown of a horrified dinner partner. “The social graces eluded him forever,” noted John D. Gates.⁶ Although his enormous wealth helped him win grudging acceptance among a few of New York City’s more tolerant elite, Astor always remained something of a social pariah in established circles. When he died in 1848, it was estimated that his fortune had reached \$20 million (\$600 million in 2008), making him the richest man in the country.⁷

Astor and his wife had three sons; a childhood fall left John Jacob Astor II, the eldest, mentally unfit, and it was William Backhouse Astor, the second son, who inherited his father’s empire.⁸ William was indeed his father’s son when it came to enlarging the family’s holdings, earning the epithet of “the landlord of New York.”⁹ His acquisition of land in New York often relied on questionable business deals with the corrupt city government under the infamous William “Boss” Tweed, and the same skewed, short-term leases employed by his father. Unfortunately for Astor’s reputation, unscrupulous landlords snapped up rents for much of

his property and erected squalid tenements offering some of the most oppressive and dangerous housing in the city. As waves of immigrants continued to pour into New York in the nineteenth century, many—with no financial resources—found themselves lodged in one of these shabby apartments, sharing living space with several other families in conditions that were diseased and infested with rats and lice and that lacked even the most basic sanitation.¹⁰ These tenements, complained one clergyman, “are a standing reproach against our rich men who ought, for the sake of humanity, to be using their surplus funds in erecting cheap and comfortable residences for the poor.”¹¹

“For twenty years,” noted one historian, “the Astors stood in the way of tenement reform and they also opposed municipal plans for rapid development of the still green acres in the northern part of Manhattan. The more congested the lower portion of the island, the greater the demand for tenements and the better the returns for them.”¹² Astor merely owned the land, not the buildings and, at least in his own mind, was satisfied that he bore no responsibility for the plight of his tenants. It was, to be sure, an ethically challenged view, but one Astor apparently fully embraced. He could have imposed strict guidelines on the tenements, but he elected to simply look the other way, firmly convinced that it was better for the poor to be housed in deplorable conditions than to be living on the streets; if such reasoning also resulted in a hefty profit for his business investments, so much the better.¹³

The irony was that unlike his father, William affected the air of a rather quiet, pious man. He was not as parsimonious and crafty as his father, and gave away far more of his personal fortune to charities. He also frequently forgave the debts of his tenants and even allowed late payments—something his father would never have permitted.¹⁴ One contemporary reported that he “used no tobacco and little wine, though when in health . . . he gave quite pleasant dinners. He seldom was out late, did not attend theaters, did not get excited nor indulge in profane adjectives, sported not with dogs and guns, never kept a fast horse, never gambled. His whole life was simple and orderly.”¹⁵

Simple and orderly though his private life may have been, William’s reign marked not only a steady rise in the Astor riches but also an increase

in their social fortunes. The latter was due in no small part to William's marriage to Margaret Armstrong, a member of the prestigious Livingston family of the Hudson River Valley.¹⁶ At a time when proper New York society was still a caste dominated by the old Knickerbocker elite, Astor's union allowed his children entrée to this insular universe, and his money, coupled with their Livingston descent, opened doors that would otherwise have remain firmly closed to their ambitions.

On his death in 1875, William left an estate rumored to be some \$100 million (\$2 billion in 2008), largely divided between two of his sons, John Jacob Astor III and William Backhouse Astor II.¹⁷ John Jacob Astor III, born in 1822, was the more capable of the siblings, though he cared little for business. Determined to shake off the less than flattering reputation of his grandfather and embrace the proud heritage of his mother, John Jacob Astor III was the first member of the family to affect a truly aristocratic air. Together with his wife, Charlotte Augusta Gibbes of Charleston, he cemented the Astor family's air of social respectability. He dressed impeccably, was well-read, collected paintings from Europe, and possessed perhaps the city's finest wine cellar.¹⁸

The couple assumed what they took to be their proper place in New York's Knickerbocker society, hosting elaborate dinners and dances at their house in the city and at Beaulieu, their estate in Newport; yet, as Derek Wilson has noted, they "were perhaps too genuinely European to associate themselves totally with the shallow world of gossip and gaiety."¹⁹ In particular, Charlotte found the social game far too frivolous for her liking. She took a more philanthropic approach to her position, funding hospitals, societies for the aid of impoverished children, and, unfashionably, relief agencies dedicated to helping the city's prostitutes. On February 22, 1890, John Jacob Astor III died of a heart attack in the arms of his only son, William Waldorf Astor. "Thousands and thousands of God's poor and unfortunate," eulogized the *New York Times*, "have had their wretched lives brightened because he lived."²⁰

It was John Jacob Astor III's brother William, born on July 12, 1830, who, through his propitious marriage, was destined to leave the largest mark on society. William Backhouse Astor II was a generally genial man. After graduating from Columbia College, he embarked on a tour of

Europe and the Holy Land, but on his return he found that his junior role left him with little real responsibility in the family business.²¹ This was just as well, as John Jacob III and William Backhouse II never got along. As the designated heir, John Jacob had been doted upon and favored by their father, a fact that grated on William. William disliked his brother's superior manner and his self-anointed position as a social leader, because William himself largely condemned such pursuits as frivolous.²²

Tall and bewhiskered, with dark eyes and a seemingly permanent scowl, William was said to possess a natural and easy charm that his brother lacked, and he was—at least in his youth—possessed of better manners and temperament.²³ Left with little opportunity to test or employ his talents in the business world, he focused instead on pleasure. William purchased a large yacht, *Ambassadors*, on which he sailed with a disreputable coterie of friends, and an estate, Ferncliff, at Rhinebeck on the Hudson River, where he could indulge in hunting, shooting, and the breeding of stock and of prized racehorses. Here, not coincidentally, away from the eyes of the public, he could also indulge an increasing love of alcohol and the company of beautiful young women culled from New York City's demimonde.²⁴

In 1853, William met twenty-three-year-old Caroline Webster Schermerhorn, daughter of New York realtor Abraham Schermerhorn.



William Backhouse Astor II, about 1880.

The Schermerhorns were an old Knickerbocker family and claimed descent from the Dutch patroons; they also were relatives of the prestigious Van Cortland, Beekman, and Van Buren families, proud of their lineage and respectful of tradition.²⁵ With some \$15 million (\$450 million in 2008), the Schermerhorn family was not as wealthy as the Astors but were among the richest in New York and, more important, possessed an impeccable pedigree.²⁶

Born September 22, 1830, Caroline—called Lina in her family—had been the youngest of eight children; she was favored and doted upon and became terribly spoiled; she was also quite precocious. Educated by nannies and governesses, she frequently traveled to Europe as a child, absorbing its culture and carefully ordered aristocratic world of power and privilege. When she reached a suitable age, her secondary education was conducted at an elite school where she learned languages, dancing, etiquette, and deportment—all the skills deemed necessary to attract a suitable husband.²⁷ Yet she also had a taste for adventure and a determination to enjoy herself: a granddaughter later recalled that once Caroline



Caroline Schermerhorn Astor, about 1880.

had bravely infiltrated the exclusively male bastion of a New York City boxing match and had quite enjoyed herself during the bloody melee.²⁸

Somewhat short and inclined to stoutness even as a young woman, with an almost hard face, thick lips, and a slightly upturned nose, Caroline was a far cry from William's usual paramours. Dark, luxuriant hair, usually worn in a cascade when she was younger, framed small, light gray eyes that seemed to be constantly on the move in an attempt to take in everything around her.²⁹ If she was not quite beautiful, she nonetheless possessed an undeniable vibrancy, an irresistible charm and delight in life that, coupled with a hint of steely determination, made Caroline attractive to many New York gentlemen.

It is difficult to say precisely what drew William Backhouse and Caroline together and led to their ultimate marriage. It has been suggested that William's mother was behind the match; as a woman who shared Margaret Armstrong's Knickerbocker heritage, Caroline was a socially prestigious consort whose inclusion in the Astor family would certainly add to its luster in the exclusive firmament of the city's elite.³⁰ Author Virginia Cowles suggested that Caroline consented to the union simply for the financial advantage it brought.³¹ Yet Caroline had her own fortune, and indeed inherited a considerable amount of money on her father's death. It is more likely that the couple simply followed expectation and family desire in consenting to the eventual marriage. William and Caroline shared a conservative background of privilege and unquestioned entitlement, bolstered by their families' respective fortunes, and such considerations formed the usual foundation of many a society union. If this was no grand romance, it did offer each partner undeniable benefits. For William Backhouse, marriage to Caroline Schermerhorn was yet another triumph on the social ladder, while she undoubtedly recognized the benefits of joining America's wealthiest family and putting her husband's money to dazzling use in New York City. Their engagement, on June 13, 1853, was followed three months later with a fashionable wedding at New York City's Grace Church.

As a descendant of the proud Knickerbockers, Caroline already enjoyed the benefits of entrée into the city's elite, yet she was keenly

aware that despite her mother-in-law's ancestry, the Astor name did not possess the social cachet warranted by their immense fortune. Determined to correct this, she launched upon a careful program designed to raise them to the heights of respectability, a campaign that took on new meaning with the births of the couple's five children: Emily, born in 1854, Helen, born in 1855, Charlotte Augusta, born in 1858, Caroline (known as Carrie), born in 1861, and John Jacob Astor IV, born in 1864. Ambitious for their futures, she convinced William to drop the use of "Backhouse" in his name, believing—probably correctly—that it reminded people too much of his father's questionable real estate dealings.³² William complied, and he opened the Astor coffers to his wife to do with as she saw fit, but this was as far as he was willing to go.³³ By the birth of the couple's only son, whatever spark may once have existed between Caroline and William had all but vanished, and he deemed her company less than compelling. "The relationship of husband and wife became a standoff," noted Lucy Kavalier: "as he pushed her out of his life, she, in turn, pushed him out of the lives of their children, allowing him to assert himself only during crises, engagements, and weddings, when a father was essential."³⁴ By the beginning of the 1870s, the Astors led virtually separate lives, intersecting only occasionally at parties and family gatherings; neither appeared to either notice or mind the absence of the other from their carefully constructed worlds.³⁵

While Caroline threw herself into the whirl of New York society, William preferred to seclude himself at his country estate. As far as Caroline was concerned, this was just as well, for her husband, when present at a social function, tended to drink "everything in sight," as one gossip put it.³⁶ One of his grandchildren later recalled him as a "very trying and a disagreeable man" who busied himself in "affairs with second-rate women." When she gave dinners and balls, Caroline often resorted to drastic measures to keep him at bay, instructing her husband's friends to detain him late at his club so he would not interrupt the proceedings with inappropriate remarks and questionable behavior.³⁷

All of New York society whispered of his scandalous cruises. When he sold his yacht *Ambassadress* and replaced her with the larger *Nourmahal* (meaning "Light of the Harem," a rather unsubtle declaration of intent),

it was, noted Derek Wilson, “symptomatic of William’s rejection of the hollow pieties of polite society.”³⁸ That he filled his yacht with prostitutes was well known, but Caroline refused to become the subject of pity and affected an air of complete and benevolent ignorance. “She had so cultivated the art of never looking at things she did not want to see, never listening to words she did not wish to hear, that it had become second nature with her,” recalled one lady. If Caroline ever objected to her husband’s extramarital activities, she never let on. “Dear William is so good to me,” she would comment. “I have been so fortunate in my marriage.”³⁹

When queried about William’s absence, Caroline would airily say, “Oh, he is having a delightful cruise. The sea air is so good for him. It is a great pity I am such a bad sailor, for I should so much enjoy accompanying him. As it is, I have never even set foot on the yacht; dreadful confession for a wife, is it not?”⁴⁰ It was, one of her granddaughters noted, a convenient lie: “She used to chaperone Margaret Langdon in Newport when she went out sailing in windy weather with nautical admirers, and grandmother was the only chaperone intrepid enough to go. She was never seasick.”⁴¹

This enigmatic quality was one of the hallmarks of Caroline’s life. The lady who evinced an absolutely correct attitude in all things yet enjoyed her stolen moments at a distinctly common boxing match, who spun a tissue of lies to avoid her husband’s company yet happily took to the choppy seas, created about her an inscrutable aura of power mingled with benevolent indulgence. Thus, recalled Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, Caroline was “always dignified, always reserved, a little aloof. She gave friendship but never intimacy. She never confided. No one ever knew what thoughts passed behind the calm repose of her face.”⁴² At the same time, she was “naturally sincere and gracious and her friendship once given was not lightly withdrawn.”⁴³ While holding fast to many of the rigid conventions of the day, she could also on occasion be surprisingly enlightened in her views. Once, when a friend fell in love with a Jewish man, she sought Mrs. Astor’s advice on what to do—and this at a time when hotels in America’s fashionable resorts sported signs reading “No Jews or Dogs Admitted.”⁴⁴ Caroline urged her friend to marry, saying, “I for one will invite you both to my parties, and I think everyone else will do the same.”⁴⁵

For the first nineteen years of her married life, Caroline evinced no apparent overarching ambitions and seemed content to confine her interests to her children and to an occasional party or ball. This changed, however, in 1872, when her mother-in-law, Margaret, died; her position as social matriarch of the family should, by rights, have gone to John Jacob's wife, Charlotte, but the latter disliked what she termed frivolous pursuits and declined to assume the role. Caroline, however, was more than willing to accept the challenge. Under her influence, the Astors were to rise to the height of Gilded Age society. As one lady noted, the family "came to be accepted by the patrician social set of their day because of the women of their family."⁴⁶

It was not mere want of social power and personal recognition that drove Caroline in her quest. At eighteen, her daughter Emily was ready to make her debut in society, with Helen just a year behind, and Caroline believed their ancestry coupled with the Astor money demanded a suitable stage. For the first time, Caroline faced the implications of a New York society left adrift in the aftermath of the Civil War. The old, carefully ordered world of the Knickerbockers had been thrown into disarray, their influence declining under the continuous onslaught of newly wealthy industrialists, profiteers, merchants, and speculators who poured into the city. Armed with considerable fortunes, they had begun their assault on the establishment, creating chaos of that which had once been taken as unalterable. In these years, money was power: it eroded the old social barriers, bought influence, even occasionally purchased entrée into the very heart of a system that, confused and uncertain of where to look for guidance, appeared to be crumbling into oblivion. Caroline realized that in a country without a court or aristocracy, the wealthy elite helped shape fashion and mold taste, defining in the absence of a central, titled authority what was acceptable and what was not. What post-Civil War New York needed was such a figure, someone who could serve as ultimate arbiter of distinguished society.

Caroline Astor had no desire to witness the passing of the old order, yet she was keenly aware that the status quo could not be maintained against such a persistent threat. All around her she saw the uncertainty, the need for a firm and guiding hand capable of imposing order to fill the

social vacuum. Other leaders of society were too old, too unimaginative, too determined to either close ranks and completely exclude these new forces or too willing to indulge them. Armed with supreme self-confidence, Caroline determined that she would provide society with the leadership it lacked, to create, as one turn-of-the-century commentator wrote, “an original etiquette” that defined her new vision for an illustrious American elite.⁴⁷ She would preserve the traditions of her aristocratic background, but she also would bow to the inevitable changes, shining a light on a new path forward over which she could boldly lead the remnants of the Knickerbockers into the future. By using her husband’s money and her own proud heritage, she would craft a new social order in which his riches and her status would dominate the city’s elite into the twentieth century.

In her quest to create this new society, Caroline turned to Ward McAllister. Born in 1827, Samuel Ward McAllister was the scion of a wealthy Savannah family but had abandoned the family’s traditional legal professions to strike out on the social stage.⁴⁸ After he married Sarah Gibbons, daughter of a Georgia millionaire, McAllister spent several years in Europe, carefully absorbing the heritage and culture of the countries he



Ward McAllister, Caroline Astor’s social arbiter, in about 1890.

visited.⁴⁹ Sarah cared little for society and was content to let her husband use her money to make a name for himself. McAllister immersed himself in the rituals of European courts, studied architecture, read the most fashionable newspapers and periodicals, and paid attention to how society dressed, how and what it ate and drank, and where it went on holiday. “His cult of snobbishness was so ardent, so sincere,” recalled Elizabeth Drexel Lehr, “that it acquired dignity; it became almost a religion. No devout parish priest ever visited his flock with more loyal devotion to duty than did Ward McAllister.”⁵⁰

A “paunchy, pompous” man with a bushy imperial on his chin and a decidedly odd wardrobe, McAllister—termed “the most complete dandy in America” by Elizabeth Drexel Lehr—was eventually propelled to the apex of society.⁵¹ The very proper Maud Howe Elliott was among the minority in calling him “a man of social gift and charm who did much to preserve the more elegant traditions of an earlier day.”⁵² Most simply recognized him for what he was: an unapologetic snob.

McAllister was not a complete outsider in New York City: his cousin Samuel Ward had married William Backhouse II’s sister Emily, and thus Ward was able to infiltrate the same circles as Caroline Astor. In her, McAllister later wrote, “I at once recognized her ability and felt that she would become society’s leader, and that she was admirably qualified for the position. It was not long before circumstances forced her to assume the leadership, which she did, and which she has held with marked ability ever since, having all the qualities necessary. Coming herself from an old colonial family she had a good appreciation of the value of ancestry; always keeping it near her and bringing it in all social matters, but also understanding the importance and power of the new element: recognizing it and fairly and generously awarding it a prominent place.”⁵³

McAllister became an indispensable broker in Caroline’s rise to power, acting not only as adviser but also as a kind of unofficial chamberlain to her burgeoning court. “She recognized his usefulness,” noted one commentator, “and he was clever enough to appreciate her good qualities and ability, and always deferred to her judgment.”⁵⁴ McAllister urged her to surround herself with the trappings of European aristocratic privilege: soon her servants were bedecked in dark blue liveries with gold

piping, adapted from those worn in Queen Victoria's household; paintings by the most fashionable Parisian artists soon graced the walls of her ballroom; she hired a French chef to prepare the most elaborate dinners the city had ever seen, served on the finest French and German china and gold plate; and the most prominent visiting singers and pianists from London and Berlin graced her drawing room to enchant her guests.⁵⁵ Through these efforts, and under McAllister's constant tutelage, Caroline—whom McAllister dubbed his “mystic rose”—assured not only her acceptance among the city's most influential grandes dames but also dominance over them.⁵⁶

The new society conceived by Caroline and McAllister was a curious amalgam of old and new. McAllister divided society between those he labeled “Nobs” and “Swells.” “Nobs” were possessed of old money and distinguished lineage, while “Swells” were the Gilded Age's nouveaux riches who were aggressively climbing socially. The integration of these two elements called for tact and prescience. While McAllister advised that “it is well to be in with the Nobs, who are born to their position,” he also warned that it was unwise to cling too ferociously to their past glories. “If you see a fossil of a man,” he wrote, “shabbily dressed, relying solely on his pedigree, dating back to time immemorial, who has the aspirations of a duke and the fortunes of a footman, do not cut him; it is better to cross the street and avoid meeting him.” In this way, associations with remnants of the old Knickerbocker elite unlikely to offer social benefits could be avoided. At the same time, he acknowledged that “the support of the Swells is more advantageous, for Society is sustained and carried on by the Swells, the Nobs looking quietly on and accepting the position, feeling they are there by divine right.”⁵⁷

This sometimes uneasy coalition was key to the fulfillment of Caroline's social aspirations. Ironically, in view of her husband's background, Caroline sought to rigidly confine dominant membership to those of respectable lineage and old money. Together with McAllister, she decreed that those seeking acceptance into society must be separated by at least three generations from the individual who had first made the family fortune—a convenient determination for the wife of the great-grandson of the first John Jacob Astor.⁵⁸ They also concluded that a minimum

fortune of \$1 million in cash (approximately \$20 million in 2008) was necessary; indeed, McAllister once declared, “A fortune of a million is only respectable poverty.”⁵⁹ Yet they also allowed for the inclusion of a number of McAllister’s “Swells.” It was impossible to keep their ever-increasing numbers at bay, and the addition of money—always carefully vetted and determinedly respectful of tradition—not only added luster to this burgeoning elite but also recognized the inevitable. By combining the disparate factions under a unified code of acceptable behavior and standards, Caroline could eliminate any potential rivals to her own set and thus maintain her hold on power. As a result, she quickly became the self-appointed arbiter of social acceptance: if one met her requirements, one was in; if not, one was condemned to social death.

Yet beyond the merely social functions that drove this new ruling elite lay deeper ideas. Mrs. Winthrop Chanler later declared that members of Caroline’s milieu “would have fled in a body from a poet, a painter, a musician or a clever Frenchman.”⁶⁰ Intellect may not have figured largely in their gatherings, but Caroline also envisioned her society as an evocation of finer instincts and cultural promotion, designed to embrace the aristocratic idea of *noblesse oblige*, that with great money and privilege came great responsibility. As America developed its industry and power, it began to assume its place on the world stage, yet an overwhelming sense of inferiority wounded the collective national pride. Europeans looked down on the United States as a country without tradition, filled with admirable ambition but lacking both manners and artistic heritage.⁶¹ Establishing a social order to rival that of the Old World offered one direct challenge to such deeply held beliefs, but there was no denying that the country was largely bereft of the great architectural monuments, centuries of painting and sculpture, and munificent patronage that had endowed Europe with such cultural treasures. Her new society could seize upon the proud example of Renaissance princes and enrich their country. Elegant dinners and splendid balls provided one expression of this desire, enacted for the elect but often viewed as adornments for the masses, who could share in their aesthetic triumph through accounts in the press and thus be themselves inspired to more cultivated heights. Exceptional clothing and exquisite jewelry testified to refined

tastes; fine horses and fast yachts indicated an appreciation of the importance of more genteel pursuits. Houses, too, offered not only personal expression but also public beautification, lining avenues and raising the standard of American life. Private collections of important paintings and sculptures, often opened for view to the curious or bequeathed to museums, gave the United States an artistic legacy, albeit one often imported from Europe. One social commentator encapsulated these ideals perfectly, writing, "The primary business of society is to bring together the various elements of which it is made up—its strongest motive should be to lighten up the momentous business of life by an easy and friendly intercourse and interchange of ideas."⁶² While not everyone admitted to Caroline's circle fulfilled such aspirations, the idea of society, its way of life, and its attendant accoutrements as bastions of culture infused the first half of the Gilded Age, leaving an inheritance that was to far outlast its brief tenure.

It was a staggering gamble, such direct challenges to the old order, but Caroline and McAllister maintained the delicate balance between ostentation and propriety in a way that eventually won approval. Together they established the Patriarch Balls, headed by a cadre of twenty-five gentlemen from a mixture of old Knickerbocker families and the most respectable elements of newer society, including the Schermerhorns and Van Rensselaers at one end of the spectrum and the two Astor brothers at the other. "We resolved," wrote McAllister, "to band together the respectable element of the city and by this union make such strength that no individual could withstand us."⁶³

These twenty-five patriarchs were charged with drawing into their circle the most socially prominent members of New York society for dances at Dodsworth's Dancing Academy and, later, Delmonico's Restaurant. "The whole secret of the success of these Patriarch Balls," McAllister recalled, "lay in making them select; in making them the most brilliant balls of each winter; in making it extremely difficult to obtain an invitation, and to make such invitations of great value; to make them the stepping-stone to the best New York society."⁶⁴ For young scions and eligible daughters making their debuts, McAllister devised the Family Circle Dancing Classes, known as the Junior Patriarchs.

This society encompassed the most exclusive and fashionable elements of New York, who received invitations to dance in Caroline's lavish ballroom. Large as the room was, however, it could—according to legend—accommodate only four hundred guests. This, according to McAllister, was an ideal number: “There are only about 400 people in fashionable New York society,” he said. “If you go outside the number you strike people who either are not at ease in a ballroom, or else make other people not at ease.”⁶⁵ Thus was born the famous four hundred, an elite group that, for aspiring social climbers, represented the pinnacle of acceptance. In fact, the list encompassed just over three hundred individuals, not four hundred, but the point was made.

Some of the old Knickerbocker elite, including prominent members of the Roosevelt, Rutherford, Fish, and Stuyvesant families, considered the four hundred a vulgar creation, teeming with thoroughly unsuitable people who would never have been admitted to their exclusive brownstones.⁶⁶ Caroline had established a bastardized version of society; McAllister's insistence that a certain number of wealthy social climbers—arrivistes—be included not only added an aura of money but also let others know that their potential acceptance, too, was a goal for which to strive.⁶⁷ This mingling of the old families with the new, of established fortunes with those of the nouveaux riches, and of traditional ideals with European influences set the four hundred apart, marking it as an intrinsically artificial American society, although one that quickly eclipsed the last remaining vestiges of the proper Knickerbockers.

It was Caroline's accomplishment, remembered Lloyd Morris, that she “transformed society into a secular religion.”⁶⁸ By the turn of the century, commented the *New York Times*, her position was such that they could aptly describe her as “a landmark of New York.”⁶⁹ She had come to symbolize the best elements in America, showing society the ideal through her determined leadership. Thus McAllister could write without any hint of irony that Caroline Astor “was, in every sense, society's queen. She had the power that all women should strive to obtain, the power of attaching men to her, and keeping them attached; calling forth a loyalty of devotion such as one imagines one yields to a sovereign, whose subjects are only too happy to be subjects.”⁷⁰