

James Gordon Bennett, Jr.
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Heritage Series Lecture Presented in the Model Room
September 17, 1998

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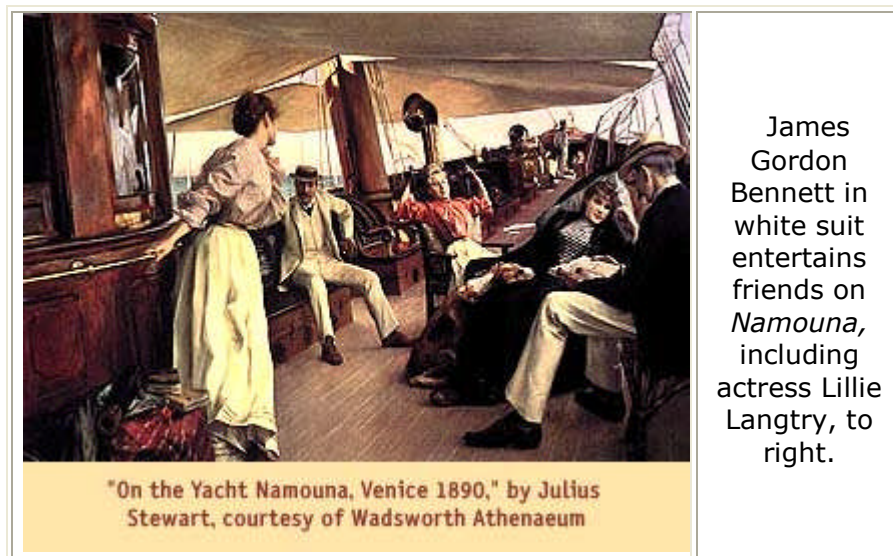


James Gordon Bennett, Jr. was the son of James Gordon Bennett, the founder and publisher of the *New York Herald*. The son was groomed to be publisher all his life, and as sole owner and publisher, he busied himself throughout his long life in finding ways to spend the largest assured income in America (with the possible exception of William B. Astor and commodore Vanderbilt) for the benefit of the paper and himself. Perhaps not in that order. Considered a dandy, a tyrant, and the first example of the horrors of the Gilded Age, he was also a devoted newspaperman, whose every foible and deed of bravado were designed to make if not headlines, at least good copy for his daily newspaper. And most important to us here, Bennett was a consummate amateur *sportsman* in the old sense of the word, a lover of the game. He was a great yachtsman and prominent member and commodore of this club, as the artifacts assembled around this room will show.

There is a great deal of material about both father and son because their newspaper figures large in the history of journalism, and in the

history of the nineteenth century, and they both took pains to associate the paper and its opinions with their own names. Both men thrived on controversy and on personal anecdote, favorable or not, and were not troubled by reversals of opinions or inconsistencies large or small. As Bennett Sr. replied when accused of flip-flopping in his editorials, "I print my paper every day."

Bennett Jr. was born with a silver spoon, and lived to turn it into a golden spoon. He was sent to France at an early age with his mother and sister, Jeanette, to be educated by tutors because New York treated Bennett, Sr. roughly. Even with Mrs. Bennett along, there would be jeers and occasionally horsewhipping on the streets of lower Manhattan whenever the family went outside. Bennett Sr. kept a large arsenal of weapons hidden behind the panels of his office on Ann Street and Broadway and was often besieged there by crowds outside.



For his sixteenth birthday, Jamie received a 77-ton centerboard sloop named *Rebecca*. He raced that year, 1857, in the Annual Cruise of the New York Yacht Club, and must have handled himself and his crew of 22 well, because he was duly elected to membership when the captains met on board the flagship on the layday in New Bedford. He remains the youngest member ever admitted, at age 16 and 3 months. *Rebecca* is recorded at or near the top of the racing results on many occasions up until 1861, though not without controversy and protests.

Bennett Jr., makes his first appearance on the newspaper scene in 1861, at an important dinner. Bennett Sr. invited Henry Villard to the Bennett mansion in Washington Heights. During dinner where the only other diner was his son, age 20, Bennett Sr. gave welcome assurances

to be passed to the new Lincoln administration that the *Herald* would henceforth stand solidly behind Lincoln and the North in the coming fury. This was a reversal of recent editorials, but it would hold throughout the Civil War. The paper vaulted to the top of its game in its war coverage: Lincoln reportedly read only the *Herald* if he read any newspaper at all: his hand-written letters to Bennett are much studied as evidence of Lincoln's sure hand on the ship of state and his skill as a statesman, even in the early days of his presidency. Also during that dinner the father offered his son's new 225-ton schooner *Henrietta* to the Revenue Cutter Service, and Lincoln made Bennett Jr. a third Lieutenant.

Bennett did indeed roam the coast in his country's service for a full year at sea. He was reported off the Carolina coast in April, but he was back in New York for the social season and to join the NYYC Annual Cruise in August which confined itself to the waters of New York Harbor and the Sound. During this year at sea in *Henrietta*, in a vessel whose model... shows her hull to be very like the schooner *America*..., Bennett became quite a good sailor and amateur navigator, skills that he was to exercise for the rest of his life. He developed a great respect for the professional sailor, and a deep commitment to a life at sea, though not the life of an ordinary sailor, as we shall see.

When he returned from his wartime service, he returned to his high society circles and lunch at Delmonicos, evenings at the Union Club. Once while drinking at Delmonico's, he and his friends heard a fire alarm; he dashed outside in his evening clothes, where he began to direct the firefighting operations. He made such a nuisance of himself that one company turned the firehose on to him, and sent him sprawling. The next day he called his drinking companion into his office and asked him, "What did I do last night?" "Made a fool of yourself," was the frank reply. "You interfered with the firemen by trying to tell them how to do their work, about which they know a good deal more than you do." "Order a rubber overcoat for every man in the department," said Bennett. "Send me the bill. I was never so wet in my life."

During a late evening at the Union Club in 1866, he fell to boasting with his friends about the relative merits of their new yachts. Pierre Lorillard had a new centerboard schooner, *Vesta*, Osgood had his deep and narrow *Fleetwing*, and Bennett was eager to pit his skills against others.

The *Herald* had recently exhorted "our smooth water gentry" to "trip

anchors and start out on a cruise on blue water. Get off your soundings, trust your sea legs for a while, reciprocate the visits of your English cousins, visit your own coast, go to South America, try Europe, call on the Sultan; or if you have got the pluck, circumnavigate the world, then come home and write a book. It will perpetuate your memory, reflect luster on your deeds, and rebound to the honor of your country."

(These may not have been the words of fledgling publisher James Gordon Bennett, because he was notably poor with the written word himself, but some reporter on the *Herald* who knew his boss's sentiments well.)

Large stakes were mentioned: \$30,000 to enter the race, much more than the cost of the yachts, winner take all. These were the largest stakes in any sporting event even well into the next century, and they were shocking.

When Bennett returned from this adventure, he seemed ready to assume the reins of power. He had had a royal audience with the Queen, had done much to repair the strained relations with England after the Civil War, his reporters had employed the new transatlantic cable to transmit instant race results back home and he returned as something of an American hero. The elder Bennett moved into the background. Father and son lived together on lower Fifth Avenue and their estate at 181st Street, while the paper earned a new fortune for them every year. When Bennett Sr., died in 1872, his fellow journalists gave him the highest possible praise in the other New York papers.

Bennett's income of roughly a million dollars a year was considered to be "an inexhaustible supply of money." Once in his Paris apartment he was annoyed by a large roll of bills that interfered with the use of his pocket, and in a fit he tossed the bundle into the fireplace.

Occasionally he moved through restaurants pulling off the tablecloths on both sides of the aisle and crunching the crockery under foot. The next day a handsome bill would appear at his office, which was promptly paid.

He laid a check for \$100,000 at the foot of his nephew's cradle. He made donations of \$100,000 frequently to charities of all sorts: to Irish famine relief, to a "Free Ice Fund" for the tenements in Lower Manhattan for hot weather relief, and so on.

So far as Bennett could make it, the *Herald* was a one-man shop. In the Paris office, this was especially the case. "I want you fellows to remember," he once said to his executive staff, "that I am the only reader of this paper. I am the only one to be pleased. If I want it to be turned upside down, it must be turned upside down. I want one feature article a day. If I say the feature is to be Black Beetles, Black Beetles it's going to be."

He was a holy terror to his staff, and their fortunes rising and falling according to his whim. Once while steaming through Nice on *Namouna* (called "*Pneumonia*" by his editors), Bennett persisted in a course to ram a U.S. man-of-war that was in the wrong place in his view. When his able secretary of long standing tried to dissuade him, he was demoted and had to take a job with Hearst.

He summoned two important men overseas by cable. They departed New York, and on reaching his office in Paris, stood in the doorway and respectfully awaited attention. Bennett looked up from his writing and said: "What in hell are you doing here?" "You sent for us," said one. "Go back to New York," Bennett replied. They did.

There could be only one name identified with the *Herald*. All orders to correspondents were signed J.G. Bennett, as were all letters in the course of business. He summoned a reporter to Paris, but the editor-in-charge demurred, cabling that the man was "indispensable." Bennett sent for a list of men who were presumed to be in this class. A dozen names were forwarded. He discharged them all.

He showed a thinly veiled contempt for most everybody, especially those who thought too well of themselves. However, his imperious contempt did not extend to his mechanical departments: the foreman of his composing room and the press bosses were well-paid and treated as persons of distinction. They were given the best tools available and had great power over the editors. In all other newspaper offices, going to press was a scramble; in the *Herald* it was governed with military precision, under carefully drawn and printed schedules. "All the brains I want can be picked up any day at \$25 per week."

Naturally, his staff studied his habits, and it was observed that he sometimes judged men in his office by how his favorite dogs reacted to them; he was always surrounded by pedigreed dogs, Pomeranians, Pekinese and Cocker Spaniels. One Irish reporter was summoned to London in disfavor, but before he entered Bennett's offices he pinned a slice of raw liver to the inside of his toppe and held the hat firmly

against his chest. His boss received him coldly, but the pups swarmed around him, and the interview proceeded with every evidence of warm esteem and cordiality.

With its publisher's interest in maritime affairs, the *Herald* always carried a detailed shipping news section, and an extensive weather report, well before there was any weather service. It also carried full yacht race coverage, America's Cup coverage and even New York Yacht Club Board Meeting minutes on the front page. A misuse of a nautical term in any article in the paper could get the author into deep trouble. A crow's nest mentioned on a vessel that didn't have a crow's nest would excommunicate its author. "Why was that damned fool allowed to write that shipwreck story? Doesn't he know the wind and tide in that neighborhood never perform as he states it? Never let him touch a sea story again."

Bennett believed in the sports pages and promoted many gentlemanly sports into the U.S. Not only schooner racing, but steam yacht racing, ballooning, pugilism, auto racing, and so on. Each of these sports had a Bennett Cup, some of them still in competition.

He practiced the now lost sport of coaching, and would astonish his neighbors by riding through their formal gardens with a coach and four, at midnight, naked. When asked later to pay for damages, he always complied promptly. Once he drove his coach and four under a low stone arch in Paris and knocked himself out, remaining in the hospital for several weeks. Another time he and a friend disappeared for a week in a hired carriage and pair.

Another sport introduced to the US by Bennett was Polo. He brought over the entire British Polo team to show how it was done (1878). At one point he encouraged, by means of a wager, a young English team member, one Colonel Candy, to take his pony up the stairs in the famous Reading Room in Newport. For this Bennett lost his membership in the Reading Room, and in a huff he built the Casino on Bellevue Avenue, the first sports complex.

Now we get to what was originally the impetus for this evening on James Gordon Bennett. As publisher, he had a good sense, well ahead of his time, of news as entertainment. There are two famous examples of expeditions sent out, by the *Herald*, in search of adventure, to be reported as front page scoops by *Herald* reporters. Ace reporter, Henry Morton Stanley, born John Rowlands into an orphanage in London, was sent on a Bennett lark to find the great humanist Dr. Livingstone, who

was considered lost in unexplored central Africa. Stanley mounted a huge expedition to find him, with an unlimited expense account from Bennett.

A contemporary description of Stanley emerging from the jungle: "At the front marched a tall Sudanese with the flag of the New York Yacht Club. Then Stanley on a henna-stained mule, with silver-plated trappings that glittered in the sun." he was followed by "a compact force of three whites, thirty-one armed freemen of Zanzibar as escort, 150 porters and 27 pack animals."

The tragic *Jeanette* expedition was to explore the Arctic and was funded completely by Bennett, but run by the U. S. Navy. Named for his sister, Jeanette, later Mrs. Isaac Bell, Jr., the steam bark departed London for the Bering Sea in 1878. She was crushed in the ice, and her people perished in the arctic winter of 1881, except for those few who were fed by the Inuits. Several Siberian islands bear the name Bennett.

In 1868, Bennett (age 27) suddenly became vice-commodore of the NYYC, (all the flag officers had resigned) and his large schooner, *Dauntless*, became flagship in 1871. (*Henrietta* was sold and became a "fruiter".)

During his tenure as commodore, Bennett sailed her across the ocean to escort James Ashbury in *Cambria* back to the US in a transatlantic match race in preparation for the America's Cup race in 1871. *Dauntless* also participated in that dismal America's Cup race as part of the fleet that met *Cambria* on the race course. In a rematch, George Schuyler, the surviving member of the America's syndicate, convinced the commodore to defend with one boat at a time. *Dauntless* was to defend but was damaged in the tow out to the start, so *Columbia* defended the Cup against *Livonia* but not very well.

The Club acquired new quarters on Madison and 27th Street, upstairs from the American Jockey Club. Bennett hired for the club the *Herald's* editor of the ship news, one Niels Olsen, who was to remain as Club Steward or Superintendent until 1904, and who personally kept all racing records of the club during that time, in a clear longhand. Flying starts, instead of the traditional start from anchor, became the norm, and racing proceeded at an unprecedented rate: sometimes several 40-hour races in a week. In 1872, two important trophies were put up by the commodore, the Cape May Challenge Cup and the Brenton Reef Challenge Cup, both of which inspired intense racing for decades. In what would have seemed uncharacteristic earlier in his life, the

commodore limited gambling to \$5 on any game at the club.

During the Annual Cruise, *Dauntless* had a collision with the Sow and Pigs light ship and suffered severe damage, as did the lightship. That was about the end of Bennett's personal racing career. In subsequent mentions of *Dauntless* in the press she was owned by others, notably Caldwell Colt, son of Samuel. Her beautiful model alongside *Coronet* shows her under Colt's ownership.

In the last year of his first commodoreship, 1874, much of the board minutes are taken up with reports of the Badge Committee, when our current badge and motto were established. Also a Ladies Day Regatta was held, June 25, where vessels were expected to race in cruising trim, with working sails, and all guns secured.

In 1877 on New Years Day, Bennett performed a misdeed, at the house of Dr. William May in New York. Bennett attended an open house at the home of Miss Caroline May, who was noted for her charm and daring. Already well-served with punch from other open houses, he proceeded to insult his host most grievously. The next day, Miss May's brother stepped up to Bennett's carriage as he arrived for lunch at the Union Club, and they grappled in the snow. A duel was called for, even though dueling was as anachronistic then as now. A formal duel at twelve paces, with a retinue of surgeons attending, took place across the Delaware-Maryland state line, and both men fired wild. They declared themselves satisfied. Bennett, however, was embarrassed, removed himself from New York society, and took up residence in Europe and on his yachts, only returning briefly to New York and Newport. He never married until four years before his death in 1918.

In 1883, Bennett built the most magnificent steam yacht of its day, the beautiful *Namouna*. At 616 tons and 226 feet she was far larger than the next largest, the first *Corsair* at 185 feet. He was elected commodore again in 1884, (perhaps on the strength of *Namouna*) and relocated the clubhouse, again, to 67 Madison Ave, with a dining room to seat 100 diners comfortably. Capt. and Mrs. Henn challenged for the America's Cup in *Genesta*, and the commodore built a 94-foot cast-iron centerboard sloop named *Priscilla* (designed by A. Cary Smith) to defend. She competed in all the trial races, but was beaten by *Puritan*. At the end of his second term, Bennett accepted another America's Cup Challenge, again from Wm. Henn in *Galatea*. His terms as commodore were busy and formative ones, and characteristic of both Commodore Bennett, and of the yacht club itself.

Bennett used *Namouna* to travel up the Nile, to India and Ceylon, across the Atlantic regularly, and he did the navigation himself. He was always in touch with the *Herald* by telegraph and dispatches, and he entertained a regular stream of famous guests.

Commodore Bennett always had a great interest in the latest technology, and his reporters kept him informed: in 1899 he heard about an experimenter named Marconi, and he sent \$5000 to him if he would come to America and report on the America's Cup, transmitting the news directly to the *Herald* by wireless. In 1907, stock quotes were transmitted to a vessel by wireless courtesy of the *Herald*, to be hoisted in signal flags for the benefit of members during the NYYC Annual Cruise.

In 1900, Bennett lived on Louis XIV's estate in Versailles, and he built his yachting masterpiece, the 301-foot *Lysistrata*. She had a crew of 100, all clean shaven in the manner of the British Navy. At any moment, the crew had to be ready to respond to the commodore's whim; it might be dinner aboard for 70 guests, or immediate departure for the Mediterranean. A troupe of performers were invited aboard for an evening, and were so popular with the guests that Bennett sailed off with them for a week's time, causing their manager to cancel all shows ashore. This was turned into excellent publicity, of course, when they returned.

Lysistrata had, among other accommodations, a padded stall for a milk cow, with electric fan, to provide fresh cream to the table. She had three "owner's suites" on separate decks, (in addition to guest quarters) to accommodate the fancy of her owner, and she carried a French automobile, a De Dion Bouton. Mark Twain, a regular contributor of over 200 articles and letters to the *Herald* since 1868, was apoplectic when Bennett arrived in Bermuda with the first car ever seen there, 1906, and lowered it from the deck of *Lysistrata*. Twain, with the help of his friend Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton, drafted an edict for a "motorless Eden." "It would be a fatal error to attract to Bermuda the extravagant and sporting set who have made so many other places entirely intolerable to persons of taste and cultivation." Bennett toured the island at a noisy 15 miles an hour with a crowd of schoolboys running behind him. Twain was successful in temporarily banning cars from Bermuda in 1910.

Life aboard *Lysistrata* is clearly depicted in paintings. *Lysistrata* was sold to Russia in 1914 where she served as a fisheries protection

vessel, appearing in *Jane's* as late as 1966.

After Bennett's death in France in 1918, at the age of 78, the *Herald* was sold for \$4 million and appeared for the last time from its own presses in 1920. It was merged with the *Sun*, then with the *Tribune*, and is still printed as the *International Herald Tribune*. For the most part, however, the paper died with its owner.

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