

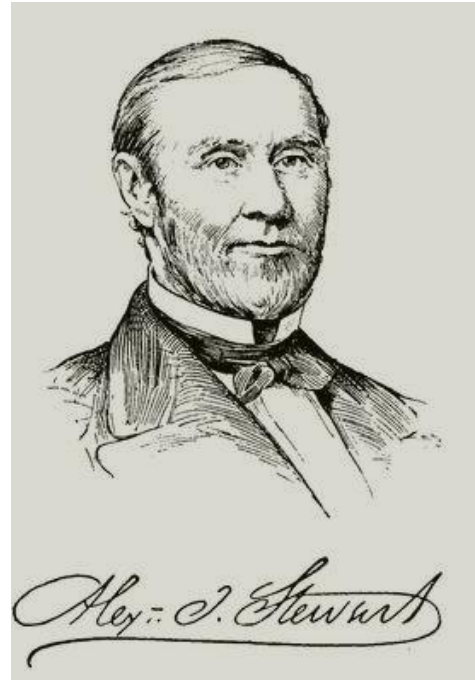
## Alexander Turney Stewart

Alexander T. Stewart is well known as a merchant king, and in Garden City he is respected as the founder of that beautiful village. Less well known is that Stewart was born in Ireland and was a benefactor to victims of the Great Famine.

Alexander Stewart was born in 1801 near Lisburn, Co. Antrim. He grew up near Laugh Neagh, not far from the home of the great Shane O'Neill. His neighbors were the poor who wove the beautiful linen and lace which has made Lisburn the linen capital. He was raised by his maternal grandfather, a Presbyterian elder who hoped that Alexander would become a minister. Stewart briefly attended Trinity College in Dublin where he made the decision, at age twenty, to emigrate to America.

He arrived in New York bearing letters of recommendation from his teachers and found a position as a teacher in a private school in New York City where Trinity educated teachers were very much in demand. He stayed with an Irish draper on West Street and looked after the store in exchange for room and board. He possibly got his first interest in retailing from this experience and from roaming the city and discovering the various businesses. A year later he returned to Ireland to claim an American friend and invested \$3,000 in Irish laces and linens. He opened his first store on Broadway in a room measuring twelve by thirty feet. The same year he married Cornelia Mitchell Clinch, daughter of a wealthy ship's chandler. The young couple soon outgrew the tiny store and returned to Ireland to renew contacts and add new materials from Belfast mills.

Upon his return to America, Stewart took New York by storm. With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 New York had become the main source of supply for the settlers in the land stretching to the Great Lakes and Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Harper's Monthly Magazine said in 1868, "Mr. Stewart has the elements of a great general, quick to discern, prompt to act, fearless and energetic in all his movements. It is added a quick insight, almost - intuitive, as it were, into the characters of men." He seemed to have, an uncanny sense for business and soon outgrew one store, then another. In 1862 he built the largest store in the world, on Broadway between 8th and



9th Streets, at a cost of \$2,750., 000. He was always fair and. Just and people came to respect the Stewart name and found that they were never cheated. His timely investments in real estate also added to his wealth. He owned several hotels in New York, the Grand Hotel at Saratoga (the largest in the world) and the Globe Theater. His firm alone by 1869 accounted for ten percent of the imports into the Port of New York. In fact, with his retailing , real estate investments, and a government contract worth millions of dollars, Alexander Stewart was the third richest person in America, surpassed only by Astor and Vanderbilt.

Alexander Stewart did not forget his native land. During the famine in 1847, he chartered a ship and with the American flag floating proudly, it entered Belfast Harbor with \$20,000 worth of provisions for the starving Irish. He also gave free passage to America for as many Irish that could be accommodated on the returning ship and found employment for all, of these immigrants in New York.

When Ulysses Grant was elected President, Stewart was his first choice for Secretary of Treasury in the fall of 1868. However, the Senate would not ratify the appointment, saying that as an importer Stewart had a conflict of interest. He offered to turn over the business to trustees and give his profits to charity during his incumbency. Grant, however, did not want to jeopardize the success of his administration and so the appointment was dropped.

Disappointed and hurt by his failure to enter public life, Stewart had some vague ideas to use his money to benefit as large a number of people as possible. His friend and architect John Kellum, a Hempstead native, gave him the idea to found a model city on the Hempstead plains. Queen Anne had given 14,000 acres to the Town of Hempstead in the early 1700s. After farmers had claimed part of it, the unfenced plains now amounted to 7560 acres. Stewart offered \$55. an acre and promised to invest several million dollars to improve the property. After much excitement and debate, the citizens of Hempstead accepted his offer in - July 1869. As well as the present Garden City, Stewart's property also included large parts of Long Island extending to Bethpage. Stewart's efforts to build were concentrated on the present Garden City. Work began, in the spring of 1870, James L'Hommedieu as architect and builder. Stewart named his new city "Garden City", which surprisingly, comes from the name for the City of Chicago. He also had a new railroad constructed. When the roads were laid out, twelve large Victorian houses, later called the "Twelve Apostles," were built. Smaller brick or frame houses called "The Disciples" were built later. He also began work on a grand hotel and a twenty-two acre park planned around it. The Garden City Hotel opened in July 1874. One of the peculiar features of his plan was that he insisted that the land, hotel,

stores and houses would remain his private domain. If people wished to live there, they would rent from him after he satisfied himself as to their family background. This resulted in the later saying that to live in Garden City one had to be "Rich, Republican and Episcopal."

Alexander Stewart became ill in early 1876 and died on April 10, 1876. His body lay in state in his Fifth Avenue mansion, and thousands attended the funeral at St. Mark's Church on the Bowery. He had amassed the largest fortune ever accumulated by one person within a lifetime. His estate was estimated to be \$50 million.. The New York Times said, in its obituary, 'His life is standing proof of the efficacy of honesty, industry and well directed intelligence in laying the foundations of vast wealth.'

Stewart Avenue, the beautiful Gothic Cathedral of the Incarnation, and St. Paul's School, all in Garden City, are some of the tangible assets of Stewart's time on earth. Monuments to grace, beauty, the mind and the spirit, they also remind us of the intangible legacies of this son of Ireland.

(written by Mary Riley, November 1991)  
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