

AMERICAN LIVES **William Marcy “Boss” Tweed**  
*Corrupt Boss of the Political Machine*

*“There is not in the history of villainy a parallel for the gigantic crime against property conspired [to] by the Tammany Ring.”—Henry G. Stebbins, report of the Committee of Seventy that investigated the Tweed Ring (1871)*

William Marcy Tweed was the most spectacular example of the corrupt boss of the urban political machine of the 1800s. Rising from obscurity to control New York City in a time of its great growth, Tweed and his friends raked in a fortune. Then their empire quickly collapsed.

Tweed (1823–1878) was born in New York. He became a bookkeeper and seemed ready for modest success. After becoming chief of a volunteer fire company, he turned to politics, running for alderman as a Democrat. Knowing that he would probably lose the election to the Whig candidate, he persuaded a friend to run as an independent Whig. By splitting that party’s vote, Tweed won the election.

Tweed took over New York’s Democratic Party, called Tammany Hall after its headquarters. Soon he was elected to the board of supervisors. Despite having no legal training, he opened a law office in 1860. One client paid him \$100,000 in one year alone, knowing that his so-called legal advice would prove useful. Winning the election of friends to various city posts, “Boss” Tweed built his power. In 1861 his candidate defeated a rival for mayor. The campaign cost Tweed \$100,000—but he made the money back quickly.

Soon thereafter Tweed was the head of several New York politicians, a corrupt group—known as a “ring”—that took over control of city finances. They cheated the government out of millions of dollars.

In 1868, the ring controlled the mayor of New York City, the speaker of the state assembly, and the state’s governor. In 1869, the ring decided that all bills sent to New York City and the county would be doubled, with the extra money going into their pockets. Later the share was increased even more.

Because the city did not enjoy complete free-

dom from state control, Tweed had a new city charter written. It appeared to simplify city government, thus winning the support of many prominent New Yorkers as a useful reform. Its real purpose, though, was to increase Tammany control over the city government. Tweed got the state legislature to pass the charter.

By authorizing the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, Tweed collected \$40,000 in stock. The millions received from the fraudulent scheme to build the county courthouse was split five ways. Four parts went to Tweed and three friends. The final share was used to distribute among lesser politicians.

In 1870, the press began a campaign against the Tweed Ring. *Harper’s Weekly*, led by cartoonist Thomas Nast, was first. It was followed by the *New York Times*. The next year, two Democratic opponents of the ring gave the *Times* official records that showed widespread corruption. The ring offered the newspaper \$5 million not to publish the evidence—and another \$500,000 to Nast to stop drawing his cartoons. But they went ahead, and New Yorkers rose in anger. An investigating committee condemned Tweed and his partners, who were then arrested. Tweed spent his last eight years in and out of court and prison. He died in jail at age 55.

## Questions

1. What was Tweed’s first political “dirty trick”?
2. What was the secret to Tweed’s success as long as it lasted?
3. The evidence offered to the *New York Times* in 1871 included pages from the city’s account books. Why would they be damaging to the ring?