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A MERCHANT PRINCE
OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



William E. Dodge



by Richard Lowitt

Columbia University Press

NEW YORK . 1954

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 53-10937

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PUBLISHED 1954


PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN, CANADA, INDIA, AND PAKISTAN

BY GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, LONDON, TORONTO, BOMBAY, AND KARACHI

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I



A Connecticut Yankee



*F*rom the time of the first settlements, at Jamestown and at Plymouth, America has always been a land of opportunity. Many are the immigrants who have seen in this country fulfillment of their dreams, a land where they could by hard work win prosperity for themselves and their descendants, a land where they could worship God in whatever way they pleased.

The forbears of William Earl Dodge were in the main stream of the American tradition. William Dodge, first of the family to reach these shores, landed at Salem on July 10, 1629. He shortly afterward returned to England, married, and recrossed the Atlantic to settle with his bride in the Massachusetts colony. Richard, brother of William, arrived in Salem with his family in 1638. The brothers were tenant farmers, born in Somersetshire,

of Saxon origin. In Massachusetts they continued to till the soil, but instead of being tenants they were freeholders. The promise of the American dream was fulfilled in each case. William at one time was recommended to Governor Endicott as a "skillful and painful husbandman," while Richard was able to subscribe to Harvard College and leave an estate valued at £1,764 2s—a tidy sum for those days.¹

William Earl Dodge was a seventh-generation descendant of William Dodge. He was a great-grandson of David Dodge, who had settled in Beverly, Massachusetts, and had served as an officer in the French and Indian War (1754-1763). Before leaving for the war, he had apprenticed his sons David and Samuel to two residents of Brooklyn, Connecticut. David was apprenticed to a carpenter, Samuel to a farmer and shoemaker. Thus by the 1750s other sources of livelihood were opened to the family in an area which was no longer in a frontier stage of development and which was ill-suited to agriculture. Significant also is the fact that an early member of the family, a progenitor of William Earl Dodge, had been a Congregational minister. Religion, Presbyterian rather than Congregational, and the spirit of free enterprise in ventures other than agriculture were forces which were to influence William E. Dodge's character.

Shortly before the French and Indian War the third David Dodge, grandfather of William Earl Dodge, settled in Connecticut. In 1768 he married a woman known as the Widow Earl, whose first husband, William Earl, had died of yellow fever as an officer in the calamitous British expedition which took Havana in 1762. During the early part of the Revolutionary period, this David Dodge manufactured wagons used by the Continental Army, but in 1778, unable to make a living at this because of the rapid depreciation of paper money, he returned to farming, the traditional family occupation. His son David Low Dodge, father of our subject, was born in June, 1774.

As a youth David Low Dodge worked for his father, moving with the family as they worked one farm after another. In his

¹ Georgia Brake Todd, *God's Infinite Variety: An American* (New York, 1939), pp. 111-13.

nineteenth year the young man gave up farming and became a schoolteacher. He taught first in Pomfret, later in Mansfield, Connecticut. In 1797 he was in Norwich, Connecticut, teaching in a morning school for young ladies and in an evening school for young working men. It was here that he met Sarah Cleveland, whom he married in June, 1798. Since she was a girl of eighteen at the time of the marriage, one wonders whether she had not been one of his pupils.

Sarah Cleveland Dodge was the daughter of Aaron Cleveland, of whom President Grover Cleveland was a lineal descendant. Aaron, at the time of his daughter's marriage, was a hat manufacturer; not many years later he became an Evangelical minister in Vermont. In 1803 he resigned his pastorate and moved to West Hartford. Throughout his life Aaron was a vigorous opponent of slavery; as early as 1775 he had published a poem denouncing the institution as un-Christian. His religious zeal and his abhorrence of the anomaly of Negro slavery in a supposedly Christian country presumably had a great influence upon his daughter and her husband, and through them upon his grandson William.

For a short while David continued to teach school, but in the spring of 1799 he gave up teaching and became a shopkeeper. His first position was as a clerk in a Norwich store, which he managed while the owner lived in New London. He tried several ventures in Norwich, none of which entirely satisfied him. In 1802 he and his family—by this time there were two little girls—moved to Hartford, where he opened a store of his own. By 1804 he had opened a branch in Litchfield. It was in Hartford that William Earl Dodge, generally called William E. Dodge, was born, the fourth child and second son.

S. & H. Higginson of Boston, one of the larger mercantile firms of the period, noted the ability and success of David Low Dodge in Hartford and in 1805 made him an offer of a partnership, which was quickly accepted. In 1806, after having made arrangements to continue his stores in Hartford and Litchfield, David Low Dodge proceeded to New York to establish for S. & H. Higginson an importing and jobbing business.

Shortly after his arrival in New York, David Low Dodge wrote:

I took a lease of No. 221 Pearl Street, one of the best houses and stores at that day in the street. Not being able to obtain possession of the dwelling part till next spring 1807, in the fall I took lodgings for the winter for myself, wife, my youngest child, William E., and nurse. Our three oldest children were kindly received for the winter into the family of our former pastor, the Rev. Walter King, of Norwich.²

David Low Dodge handled the New York branch of the firm, which was known as Higginson & Dodge. S. & H. Higginson had branches in Boston, New York, Baltimore, and New Orleans, and for many years were among the largest importers and jobbers in the United States. The firm was a large owner of shipping, and as a result of the Embargo (1807-1809), the Continental System, and the British Orders in Council, their losses were very serious. They finally went into bankruptcy, having lost more than a million dollars.³

David Low Dodge now turned, as did many other New Englanders during the period, to manufacturing. In 1813 he was chosen general agent for the Bozrah Manufacturing Company, one of the first cotton mills in New England, located in the town of Bozrahville, near Norwich, Connecticut. The family again moved to New England for a period of two years. In 1815, with the restoration of peace, they returned to New York, where David Low Dodge intended to enter business on his own account as well as to make purchases and sales for the company in Bozrahville on a commission basis.

David Low Dodge was just working up a profitable commission business when the Panic of 1819 put a stop to it. The family moved back to Bozrahville, where Dodge was persuaded to assume the general superintendency of the manufacturing company, which was in difficulties. He held this post until 1824, when the stockholders, by a small majority, refused to bear an expense of \$25,000 to replace worn-out machinery, and the factory was offered for sale.

In the spring of 1825 the family returned to New York for good. David Low Dodge took up the dry-goods business again,

² David Low Dodge, *Memorial of David Low Dodge* (Boston, 1854), p. 82.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

but this venture, too, did not last long. In 1827 he retired from business. In spite of his checkered career, he had apparently saved enough money to enable him to devote the remaining 25 years of his life to his many literary and religious activities.

In his autobiography, David Low Dodge writes:

I wish to say to my descendants who are engaged in business, to take their clerks and even laborers, as far as practicable, into their own families, if you wish them trusty and efficient, where their consciences will be kept alive by a tone of moral influence, where they will habitually attend church and come under the influence of the gospel of peace.⁴

The business career of David Low Dodge was a springboard for that of his younger son. His writings, too, influenced William's mind in large measure.

David Low Dodge was a pacifist; he was firmly convinced that war was un-Christian. How he became a pacifist is a matter for speculation. Was it an emotional experience which he underwent while convalescing from a serious attack of "spotted fever," or was his pacifism in part a result of his opposition to "Mr. Jefferson's embargo" and "Mr. Madison's war," which ruined his partnership arrangement? Certainly his parents and relatives were not pronounced pacifists. None of his children or grandchildren was a pacifist. He never served in any military capacity. Perhaps his pacifism was attained by the use of his own reason diligently applied to this problem without recourse to personal experience or contact with other individuals. As a schoolteacher he had come in contact with books and presumably had some time for meditation. He retained scholarly interests even throughout his fluctuating business career.

Several essays denouncing war were published by David Low Dodge. One of these, *The Mediators Kingdom Not of This World*, was published anonymously in 1809; it enjoyed a huge success, 1,000 copies being sold in about two weeks. The essay was soon reprinted and sold in other cities.⁵ In 1812 he published an essay entitled *War Inconsistent with the Religion of Jesus*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Christ. In 1815, in *Kingdom of Peace Under the Benign Reign of Messiah*, he reiterated his views. David Low Dodge's writings were the first publications in America by a non-Quaker entirely devoted to the cause of peace.⁶

Upon returning to New York from Bozrahville in 1815 David Low Dodge, with a group of similarly minded friends, formed the New York Peace Society, "probably the first one that was ever formed in the world for that specific object."⁷ He was elected president by unanimous vote. Soon after the creation of the New York society, several independent groups were organized—one in London, one in Massachusetts, one in Rhode Island, and one in Ohio.

The cause of peace was to occupy a large portion of David Low Dodge's time during the years that followed his retirement from business. Besides his work with the New York Peace Society, he was associated with the New York Bible Society, the New York Tract Society, and the Young Men's Missionary Society. He was also an early leader in the movement for the abolition of capital punishment.

One of David Low Dodge's daughters has left us a sketch of her father. The son did not develop his father's "thirst for study," but many of the other traits cited below are evident in him also. The daughter writes:

My father was a man in every sense original; in mind, he measured head and shoulders above his peers; in character his individuality was never questioned. Of a highly nervous organization, he, of course, was excitable in temperament—in temper even fiery. At times his smile was ineffably winning; while at other times, in other moods, he could look terrible, especially out of his eyes. Though of medium stature and weight, his whole bearing was that of one born to command, and his was indeed an imperial will. With a rare thirst for study, but without the means for instruction which he craved, his various devices to gain knowledge proved his full capability of that self-education which made him, without the privileges even of ordi-

⁶ Merle Eugene Curti, *The American Peace Crusade, 1815-1860* (Durham, N.C., 1929), pp. 7-8.

⁷ David Low Dodge, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

nary learning, a learned man. Unfortunately, a Puritanical training by his parents tinctured his whole life with religious opinionism; and being by nature dogmatical, he was always intolerant of views differing from his own. An autocrat in his household, he was nevertheless tender in his affections—a devoted husband and father, though over-severe in parental authority. He had all the elements of popularity; was a remarkable conversationalist, and a profitable, as well as a delightful, companion; so, that as a man he was widely and enthusiastically beloved. Yet, his severity in family government, and his ever-living sense of man's superiority over woman; in short, of his kingly prerogatives by divine right, made him more feared than loved in his family; while the gentle, beautiful wife and mother of us all naturally had more than even the usual mother's share of love from her children.⁸

William E. Dodge was born in Hartford on September 4, 1805, in an old brick house on what was once known as Lord's Hill. At some time in the course of his first year he was brought to New York while his father, trying to establish himself as the New York partner of S. & H. Higginson, boarded the other three children in Norwich, Connecticut. When about three years of age he was attacked with scarlet fever. His mother was confined at the time with her next child, and it was his father who watched over him night and day, and pulled him through an illness which had been pronounced hopeless.⁹

William E. Dodge's first seven or eight years were spent at No. 221 Pearl Street, where the family had living quarters above their store. These early years were happy and even exciting for young William. Scribbling on neighbors' fences, romping through the streets, joyfully celebrating the conclusion of the War of 1812 were activities he distinctly remembered in later years. At one time both father and son were almost killed by a pair of runaway horses. His five sisters did not make a "sissy" out of William or his older brother, David, while his "beaming face, bright dark eye, hearty laugh, and perpetual activity" made

⁸ Laura Stedman and George M. Gould, *Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman*, I (New York, 1910), 5-6.

⁹ David Low Dodge, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

him everywhere welcome.¹⁰ Meanwhile the little boy received instruction from his mother and some, too, from his father. A letter written by his mother when he was five reads, "William has learned his lesson well on his birthday; and I hope it will continue through the year, for I still instruct him at home."

Since the family moved every few years, William's schooling was a haphazard affair. He attended school in New York, later in Norwich, and finally at Mendham, New Jersey. By the time he was thirteen his formal education was over. However, while never a scholar like his father, he was always an eager reader, and as a young man he read many solid works. Throughout his life he made it a regular practice to read newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets dealing with mercantile, philanthropic, and religious topics.

Formal schooling at an end, William E. Dodge went to work as a clerk in Merritt Brothers' wholesale dry-goods store. Many years later he described this experience:

Eighteen hundred and eighteen found me a boy in a wholesale dry-goods store, No. 304 Pearl Street, near Peck Slip. . . . It was a very different thing to be a boy in a store in those days from what it is now. . . . My father lived at that time at 98 William Street, . . . William Street was then the fashionable retail dry goods centre; at No. 90 stood Peter Morton's large establishment, the fashionable family store of that day. I had to go every morning to Vandewater Street for the keys, as my employers must have them in case of fire in the night. There was much ambition among the young men as to who should have his store opened first, and I used to be up soon after light, walk to Vandewater Street and then to the store very early. It was to be sprinkled with water, which I brought the evening before from the old pump at the corner of Peck Slip and Pearl Street, then carefully swept and dusted. Then came sprinkling the sidewalk and street, and sweeping to the center a heap for the dirt cart to remove. This done, one of the older clerks would come, and I would be permitted to go home for breakfast. In winter the wood was to be carried and piled in the cellar, fires were to be made, and lamps trimmed. I mention these particulars to show that junior clerks in those days did the work now done by the porters. There were comparatively very few carts used by

¹⁰ D. Stuart Dodge, *Memorials of William E. Dodge* (New York, 1887), p. 10.

the dry good dealers, most of the business being done by porters, with hand carts and large wheelbarrows, who stood at the different corners ready to take or go for a load. Each had a heavy leather strap over the shoulders, and a brass plate on the breast with his license number. Their charges for any distance below or above Chambers Street were twelve and one-half cents and eighteen and three-quarters cents respectively. There were very few carts, and those of the old-fashioned two-wheel kind; such heavy two horse trucks and large express wagons and other wagons as now fill our business portion of the city, were unknown in those days.¹¹

New York, at this time a city of less than 120,000 inhabitants, was already a thriving mercantile community. The dry-goods auction stores were located "mostly on the corners and on the blocks from Wall to Pine streets." Young William had to carry many bundles from this area to the Merritt Brothers' store on Pearl Street. Deliveries to Greenwich Village took him up Broadway and across the old stone bridge at Canal Street. In winter he may have paused here to lean against the long square timbers which took the place of railings and watch the skating on the frozen stream some fifteen feet below.

The dry-goods business was seasonal, with spring and fall peaks. While the wholesale dry-goods trade was almost exclusively confined to Pearl Street, the retail business was conducted chiefly in William Street and Maiden Lane, with the cheaper stores located in upper Pearl and Chatham streets. A firm such as Merritt Brothers, with a capital investment of \$15,000 to \$20,000, commanded a Grade A credit rating, although its annual sales rarely ever exceeded a few hundred thousand dollars.¹²

William E. Dodge worked for a year for Merritt Brothers. When he left, his employer presented him with a massive, double-cased watch, which he wore with pride for many years. He returned with his family to Bozrahville and took a position as a clerk in the country store connected with the factory his father managed. For the next six years he worked there, taking

¹¹ William E. Dodge, *Old New York* (New York, 1880), pp. 6-7.

¹² *Ibid.*

butter and eggs in exchange for dry goods and groceries. Occasionally he would purchase things from itinerant peddlers and sell them at a "moderate advance" to interested customers. After a year or two, the young clerk was put in charge of all the purchasing for the store. This work necessitated frequent trips to New York.

Long hours in the store and a neglected diet led to an attack of nervous prostration. Recovery was a gradual process. In later years he worked just as hard, even harder, but he was always more careful of his health.

In 1825, after the mill was sold and the Dodge family came back to New York, William worked as a clerk in his father's dry-goods store, first located on Beekman Street, later on Maiden Lane, and finally at 227 Pearl Street. In 1827 William took over the business upon his father's retirement. For the next six years he was an active partner in the firm of Huntington & Dodge. In his "Old New York" lecture he told how this partnership came about:

A retired Connecticut merchant, with whom I had done business most of the time while a clerk, had a son just graduated from Yale, whom he was anxious to place in New York, and having heard that I was intending to commence business for myself, proposed a co-partnership with his son. He offered to furnish an amount of capital which, with the small sum I had (mostly savings from my salary), would make, for those days, a respectable beginning, and furthermore, promised to endorse for us to any reasonable amount. There are few events in a man's life more important than that which introduces him into active business on his own account, and as my partner had no experience, I felt the responsibility the more.¹³

The Dodge family were devout Congregationalists; religion was a large part of their lives. William's grandfather Cleveland had been a minister, and his father's pacifism rested on religious grounds. Naturally the children were deeply affected by the religious atmosphere of their home. In 1809, the Reverend Lyman Beecher spent about three weeks in the Dodge household. In the 1820s, while the family was living in Bozrahville, the village

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

was visited by a revival. David Low Dodge later commented, "I think sixteen were added at one time to the Rev. Mr. Austin's Church, among whom were two of our own children, William E. and Mary A."¹⁴ From this experience William E. Dodge's great interest in revivals can be dated. Upon the final return of the family to New York, William joined the New York Young Men's Bible Society, which held weekly prayer meetings at his father's house.

Exactly when William E. Dodge lost his heart to Melissa Phelps, the second daughter of Anson G. Phelps and Elizabeth Eggleston Phelps, is not known. Anson G. Phelps had moved from Hartford to New York in 1815, and the Phelps family and the Dodge family were on fairly intimate terms. Certainly upon his return to New York in 1825, young William saw Melissa more and more frequently; many an afternoon or evening would find William at the Phelps home on Beekman Street, or later on Cliff Street, taking tea, attending a prayer meeting, and then perhaps escorting the young ladies on their visits about town. Melissa later confessed that other suitors had small favor with her, "because she always remembered two bright black eyes and the attractive owner of them."¹⁵

In his twenty-first year William proposed and was accepted. To seal the engagement the pair took a drive in a gig all the way to Coney Island. They were married on June 24, 1828, at the Phelps home, No. 32 Cliff Street, by Dr. Gardiner Spring of the Brick Church. They spent their honeymoon traveling in easy stages through Connecticut in a comfortable two-wheeled chaise.

At the time of the marriage Melissa was eighteen years old, but she had already taken part in the management of her parents' household. She was a tall, graceful, and charming woman, and an accomplished hostess. The Phelps family were also deeply religious, and Melissa had served as a Sunday-school teacher and as a visitor among the needy.

Upon their return to the city, the young couple found a house to live in. Dodge later wrote:

¹⁴ David Low Dodge, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-7.

¹⁵ D. Stuart Dodge, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

I commenced housekeeping in the upper part of the city, in Bleeker Street, between Broadway and the Bowery. There were eight new two-story attic houses just finished, twenty-three by forty feet, and three or four of us, young married people, took houses adjoining, and each paid \$300 a year rent, and when newly furnished we thought them very fine. Young business men could afford to marry in those days. I had the curiosity to call a short time since and ask the present occupant what rent he paid. He said the rent had been reduced, and he was now paying but \$1,500. I told him I only inquired from curiosity, as, *when the house was new I paid just one fifth of that.*¹⁶

At the time of his daughter's marriage, Anson G. Phelps, of the firm of Phelps and Peck, was one of the leading merchants of New York. Of a religious and philanthropic nature, he belonged to many of the groups with which David Low Dodge was connected. As a member of the Peace Society, he most certainly knew David Low Dodge; as a member of the Tract Society, he undoubtedly observed and was eminently satisfied with William E. Dodge. As president of the New York branch of the Colonization Society he proclaimed his opposition to slavery.

Phelps had had a most interesting and varied career. He was born in Simsbury, Connecticut, in 1781. As both his parents had died before he was twelve years old, young Anson learned the saddler's trade from an older brother. Possessed of boundless energy and a natural business talent, he soon proceeded to Hartford, where he put his trade to use with a firm engaged in manufacturing saddles, harnesses, and trunks. For the purpose of extending this trade, he spent several winters at Charleston, South Carolina, then opened a store of his own in Hartford. In 1815 he and his wife and children moved to New York.

Anson G. Phelps made his mark in New York. In 1818, with a fellow Connecticut Yankee, Elisha Peck of Hartford, he organized the firm of Phelps & Peck to import metals from abroad. Peck handled the European end of the business from his headquarters in Liverpool, while Phelps managed the distribution of the metals from his office, first located at No. 181 Front Street at the corner of Burling Slip, and in the 1830s in Cliff Street.

¹⁶ William E. Dodge, *Old New York*, p. 17.

The firm soon became the leading metal importers of the nation. To pay in part for these metals, which were sold to merchants throughout the country, they exported cotton to Liverpool.¹⁷ The cotton-metal trade of Phelps & Peck, and later of Phelps Dodge & Co., generally conformed to the pattern of the triangular cotton trade described by Robert Greenhalgh Albion in *The Rise of New York Port*. Cotton was exported to Liverpool; the English partner sold it and, with the proceeds, purchased metals for shipment to New York.

Phelps & Peck had three separate mercantile houses in operation; one was in New York city, another at Haverstraw, on the Hudson River in Rockland County, New York, and the third in Liverpool. At Haverstraw, they tried to develop a foundry where partly finished metals, at that time chiefly imported from abroad, would be worked into final form. Both partners also made large and profitable real estate investments.

Thus the firm of Phelps & Peck established the pattern which Phelps Dodge & Co. were to follow and expand. The metal trade, the exporting of cotton, and the manufacturing and processing of metals, together with real-estate operations, were the major foundations of the later firm.

¹⁷ Anson G. Phelps also had an interest in a line of Charleston packets, which no doubt handled most of the cotton the firm shipped to Liverpool.