

MAYOR  
*Erastus*  
CORNING

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Albany Icon, Albany Enigma

Paul Grondahl

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Paul Grondahl

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

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*For my parents, in loving gratitude*

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## Preface

The seed for this book was planted in Betty Corning's garden in the fall of 1992, where I spent a morning interviewing the widow of Erastus Corning 2nd for a *Times Union* profile. The autumnal mood was a harbinger of endings, both for Betty's beloved flowers and plants, and for the gardener herself, who suffered from emphysema and was tethered to oxygen tanks. I had a sense that not only Betty Corning would soon be passing, but that her family's story, and the entire chapter of Albany history that her husband's historic tenure as mayor represented, would soon fade with it. Already, the mayor and several key figures in the narrative were dead and others were old and infirm. If the story was not told now, the opportunity would be lost forever. This sense of urgency set me to work in earnest in the spring of 1993. Some biographers choose their subjects; I had Mayor Corning thrust upon me.

An unexpected symmetry emerged. I had interviewed Mayor Corning a decade earlier, in 1982, shortly before he was hospitalized with emphysema and now, during our interview sessions, I was watching Betty Corning die the same way in the house on Corning Hill where she had lived since their marriage in 1932. And yet, despite their fifty years of marriage and Mayor Corning's five decades in elected public office, little was known of the private man. Albany natives grew up assuming Corning's first name was Mayor, since he rarely appeared in public out of his guise as the aristocratic presence who sat behind the gray metal desk in City Hall since 1941. My purpose in writing this biography was to paint a full portrait of Erastus Corning 2nd, revealing both shadow and light, in an attempt to replace the reverential, one-dimensional view of Mayor Corning with a truthful, three-dimensional picture of the man.

After more than 200 interviews and archival research that took me from Albany to Maine to Groton to Yale and beyond, the pattern of Mayor Corning's life took shape in my mind more as a matter of thematic development than of chronology. The trajectory of his forty-two years as mayor was a flat line, after all, a numbing sameness he seemed to enjoy, deepening the Corning enigma. In both public and private realms, Corning preferred the unexamined life and he compartmentalized his experience to cement the essential mystery of his existence. He separated the various aspects of

his life like spokes on a wheel, himself as the hub, each spoke radiating out from him but never overlapping or interacting with each other. The secret to his durability as a politician, as well as the root of his enigmatic personality, could be found in those individual spokes. It also helped explain the sense of melancholy and sadness that pervaded his life.

I have structured this biography so that each chapter represents a major theme in the mayor's life – a spoke, if you will. There was the spoke of his family's legacy in politics and business; his early years at prep school and college; his tangled family life with his biological family and his adopted family, the Noonans; and his relationship to Dan O'Connell and the Democratic machine's ward heelers. There were other spokes that offered profound contradictions: his blue-collar World War II buddies versus his Fort Orange Club friends and deep connections to Albany's elite society; his rough-hewn hunting and fishing guides in Maine versus his friendships with judges and business leaders. Other dominant themes that ran throughout Corning's life included his record on the environment, his rivalry with Nelson Rockefeller and his relationship with the press.

I've written the book so that each chapter can stand on its own, and can be read separately as a kind of story-within-a-story. The chapters are arranged to develop a progression of themes of Mayor Corning's experience that create a revealing portrait of Erastus Corning 2nd's life and times, public and private, the whole wheel of his career told through the spokes he had kept separate and distinct for so long. Erastus Corning 2nd was an exceedingly complex man and there are many levels of truth about his life. I present one truth here, as fully and as honestly as I could discern it, through the mayor's own papers and through the memories of those who knew him best.

Paul Grondahl  
Albany

## *Acknowledgements*

Until now, my writing has been mostly a series of sprints, but this biography was a four-year marathon that presented many difficulties and challenges, demanding a level of stamina I had not imagined. I couldn't have stayed the course for the long haul and completed the race without the support and assistance of so many. I owe a deep gratitude to scores of sources I can't name here, those hundreds of people I interviewed late into the night, who poured out their stories that brought the past alive for me.

I would like first to thank the Corning family for their cooperation, given freely and without condition. The mayor's daughter, Bettina Corning Dudley, offered insight, memories, letters and photographs, as well as her generous hospitality in Maine and guided tours of the mayor's special places there. The mayor's son, Erastus III, loaned documents and correspondence and discussed his father and family over lunches at the Fort Orange Club. Interviews with the mayor's grandchildren and other relatives were helpful, in particular the invaluable reminiscences and family photo albums supplied by a Corning cousin, Wharton Sinkler III.

Perhaps the single most important archival source was the Erastus Corning 2nd collection among the Corning Papers, a roomful of family documents dating from the early 1800s and housed in the McKinney Library of the Albany Institute of History & Art. Several members of the Institute's staff provided assistance. In particular, I would like to thank Wesley Balla, curator of history, for lending perspective and guidance; and to former librarians Jean Liska and Pam Norris, for maneuvering all those Corning boxes and helping me decipher their contents. A special thank you to the Institute's inimitable director emeritus, Norman Rice, for his support and encyclopedic knowledge of Albany.

Several other archives and libraries, and specific staff members, were helpful: Jeannine Marhafer of the Albany Academy; Tom Clingan of the Albany County Hall of Records; Jim Hobin of the Albany Public Library; Douglas Brown of Groton School; Jim Corsaro and Paul Mercer of the New York State Library, who guided me through the collections during a research residency program.

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research Tip had made shortly before he died. Thanks also to Joanne and James Lenden, John Curley, Rev. Charles Sheerin, Ruben Gersowitz, Gary Cobb, Clifford Manchester and many others for supplying helpful items.

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I'm grateful to my publishers, Susanne Dumbleton and Anne Older of Washington Park Press, for believing in this project, for encouraging me to undertake it and for being so good to work with throughout the process. Serendipity and symmetry have played a big part in this book. Three of the first people I met in Albany when I came here in the fall of 1981 for graduate school at the State University of New York at Albany, outstanding literary men all, are deserving of thanks these many years later: Gene Garber, for encouragement and interest and writing a grant application letter on my behalf; Bill Kennedy, the best mentor a young writer could ever hope to find, who has always been supportive and generous to me, and whose peerless reconstitution of Albany in fact and fiction has been a source of profound inspiration; Bill Dumbleton, one of my favorite teachers, and now my editor, who took what had become the unbearable weight of the manuscript off my hands at a crucial moment and gave me hope and praise, even while his keen editorial skills helped shape and polish it into a much improved book.

None of this would have been possible, or meaningful, without the love and support of my wife, Mary, during each step of this marathon. She put up with my late nights in the attic, hammering away at the computer endlessly, and all those lost weekends when it was Corning time, enduring the disruptions to family life with understanding and encouragement. She was an early and enthusiastic reader of the manuscript. She believed in me and told me I could finish it even when I faltered. Along with her help and support, she kept me grounded and striving to strike a balance between work and play. Through it all, I have been blessed by the joy and happiness of two wonderful children, Sam and Caroline, whose laughter and kisses sustained me.

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*Introduction by William Kennedy*  
*Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Ironweed"*  
*and the Albany cycle of novels*

We used to think we knew Erastus Corning, those of us who grew up and old in the shadow of his very, very long career – 42 years in office, 1941 to 1983, longest-running Mayor in American history. We thought we knew his intellectual talent, his personal suavity, his ambition that never reached much beyond the city limits, his political wizardry at getting elected and extracting himself, and his party, from trouble, and his pres-tidigital genius at manipulating public money. We even thought we knew about his private life, which provided the town with juicy gossip for four and a half decades.

But what we knew of Erastus was as true as love and just as false; for all that most of us ever saw was what the public Erastus let us see: his veneer. We guessed that what lay beneath that bright and shining surface was, alas, a figure of wasted talent and intelligence, and neglected ambition: a half-willing victim of a corrupt political cabal. We long ago decided he could be summed up in the phrase William V. Shannon used to sum up James Curley, the jovial rascal who became Mayor of Boston and Governor of Massachusetts: "... a self-crippled giant on a provincial stage." But however true that was of Erastus, it was also patronizing and unreflective of his complex motives for living and working as he did.

Paul Grondahl, in the biography that follows, gives us the Erastus Corning we didn't know. It is a candid and surprising book that humanizes an icon, revealing a loyal, thoughtful, and likable man who had to cope with lifelong psychic wounds inflicted by parents, by marital life, by subservience to Dan O'Connell – the brilliant political boss who became a surrogate father to him – and, not least, by his own obsession with power which, though subservient to Dan's steamroller obsession, was considerable.

This is an important book for Albany, for anyone interested in political power. It widens our vision (with a view from inside City Hall) of the O'Connell Democratic organization, which controlled Albany from 1921 until the Mayor died in 1983, making it the longest-running boss machine in American political history.



Erastus emerges from the book as a man doing something he loves: playing politics, governing, exercising power, and doing it all with a passion. But then, as happens with most passion, it aged into something unexpected. He was, willfully so, a superior machine politician who from the beginning loved the game. He remained so through his last six bittersweet years when, after Dan died, he finally became party boss; but in those years he was slowly dying of emphysema. He was the voice of upstate power that convinced Mario Cuomo to run for Governor. He was the Democrats' maestro of election mathematics, the great obfuscator when meeting the press, the vindictive executive who personally purged patronage lists of anybody tainted by links to a functioning Republican or maverick Democrat.

We encounter him excited by the election struggle, joyous in victory. But we see, too, his victory was won not only – as the party liked to boast – by his popularity, but also by multiple voting, buying votes, manipulating tallies, voting the dead, intimidating voters, and making the voting machine “dance” with multiple ballots cast by one man – by all this, and much more of the scallywaggery that goes with machine politics anywhere, but especially in a one-party town like Albany used to be, and, in a sense, still is.

The book anatomizes a fascinating and conflicted man, driven to live two family lives – a sterile one with his wife and children, a robust and vital one with the family of Peter and Polly Noonan, with whom he seemed truly at home for much of his life. We are treated to the traditional Erastus, urbanely at ease among the polite affluency of Fort Orange Club bankers, but who walks out of that club into the Maine woods and turns into a raunchy, ragged, besotted, bewhiskered and legendary snoring woodsman who drinks vodka for breakfast and fishes till he drops – his respite from City Hall's oppressive monotony.

The book assiduously follows him from Albany Academy to prep school at Groton, where he was a withdrawn, inarticulate scholar; on to Yale where, amid rollicking drinking and carousing, he became a history and English major and Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year. These are significant years: the young Erastus dominated by his father, Edwin, even though the father was largely absent from his life, busy with his steel mill and the new Democratic organization he'd founded with Dan O'Connell. Parental distance was a pattern Erastus would follow with his own children, often away from home, busy with politics.

His rituals on hunting and fishing trips, his loyalty to his fellow hunters, his lifelong friendships with the pals he made during his World War II Army hitch, these traits define a strength and loftiness of character that is at odds with the persona of the suave, double-talking con man who never gave us a straight answer about where the city's money went. But he jumps off these pages at us as a man after all: no longer that charmingly cool and dignified figure in the gray suit; here a flesh and blood creature who worked himself numb in the job, but also found ways to keep his soul throbbing with life. Paul Grondahl is a stellar reporter for the Albany *Times Union* and a fine writer, and his book is a substantial contribution to the annals of Albany politics, about which not much of lasting substance has been written in this century. But Mayoral partisans will not be entirely thankful for Grondahl's scholarship and humanizing efforts on Erastus's behalf, for his conclusions on the man, on Dan, and on their minions, are harsh.

He finds Erastus a tokenist on race, who used his most favored black man to spy on other blacks hostile to the machine; and he squashed black political opposition by arrest and intimidation. Macy's and Sears, who wanted to build department stores Downtown, met "so much interference from Corning and the machine that they opted instead to open in Colonie Center." Erastus also applauded construction of highway 787, which cut Albany off from the river, barricading all future waterfront development, and Grondahl deduces a citizen reaction to this: Shame on you, Erastus.

"Mayor Corning helped create, and presided over, a city in decline," Grondahl writes. "On [his] watch the city lost population; nearly 30,000 . . . Downtown suffered a steady hemorrhage of commerce . . . Albany's infrastructure [streets, sidewalks, city buildings, parks], from years of deferred maintenance, were . . . decrepit at the time of Corning's death."

"No theme emerges from his long reign except for stability, a numb sameness . . . that ultimately amounted to stagnation," Grondahl writes elsewhere. "Holding onto power was [the Democrats'] obsession; improving the city became secondary . . ."

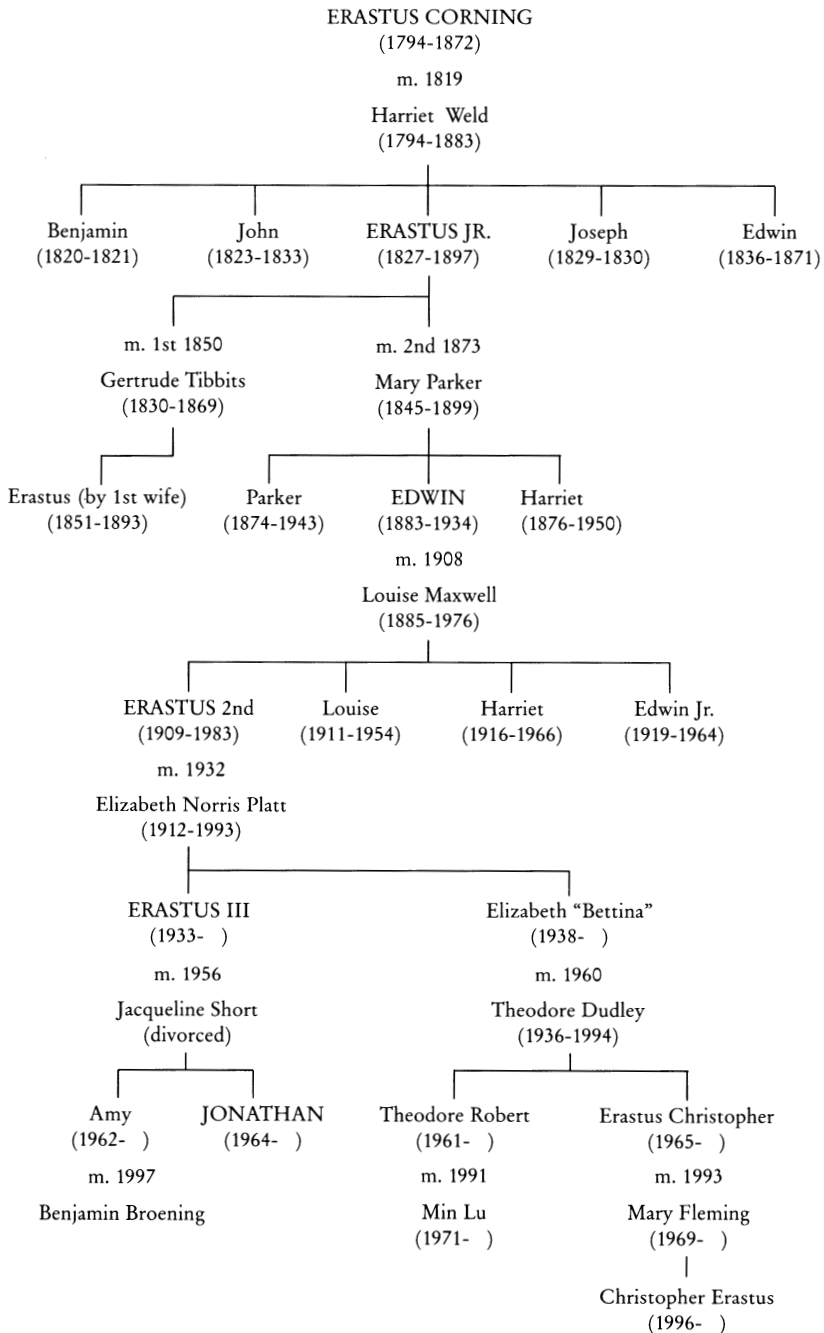
We who came of age during the sixty-two-year rule of the invincible Democratic organization learned to live with stagnation, also with the much heralded graft. It was ubiquitous and, unlike the infrastructure, was given very serious attention by the organization's behavior, which flourished mightily while the town developed Alzheimer's. But even if we didn't accept the organization's behavior, we still liked Dan (some loved him), and we liked Erastus (he was harder to love, though a number of ladies managed it),

and we loved the town, even when we could hardly recognize it as the swinging town that used to be. It'll bounce back, we said.

Erastus used to say that, too.

In a book I published some years ago, I referred to Albany as a city populated by political wizards and underrated scoundrels. Erastus was one of the wizards, also one of the scoundrels; but after Grondahl's book he will no longer be underrated.

## *Family Tree of Erastus Corning 2nd*



(This genealogy represents only those Corning family members directly descended from the original Erastus who figure prominently in the text.)

### *Chronology: Erastus Corning 2nd*

- 1909: Erastus Corning 2nd born on October 7, firstborn of Louise and Edwin Corning. They live at 156 Chestnut Street, Albany.
- 1914: The Cornings move to Washington Avenue, across from the Fort Orange Club.
- 1916: The mansion Edwin Corning built on the Upper Farm on the family estate at Corning Hill in Glenmont destroyed by fire just before the Cornings were to move in.
- 1917: The mansion rebuilt and the Cornings move in. Erastus enters Albany Academy.
- 1921: The Albany Democratic machine, formed by Edwin and Parker Corning and the O'Connell brothers, rises to power and takes City Hall with their candidate, Mayor William Stormont Hackett.
- 1922: Erastus transfers to Groton School.
- 1928: Erastus graduates from Groton, tied for top of his form with Joseph Alsop. That summer, Erastus tours Europe with his drama teacher, John Hoysradt. In the fall, Erastus enters Yale. His father, New York Lt. Gov. Edwin Corning, suffers a stroke and heart attack that ends his political career and leaves him an invalid.
- 1932: Corning graduates from Yale. Erastus and Elizabeth "Betty" Norris Platt marry on June 23 in Philadelphia. Edwin Corning sets up his son in the insurance business. Erastus and Betty move into the gardener's house on the Upper Farm at Corning Hill.
- 1933: Erastus and Betty Corning's son, Erastus III, born on June 20.

- 1934: Erastus's father, Edwin, 50, dies in Bar Harbor, Maine on August 7. Democratic machine boss Dan O'Connell taps Erastus to take his father's place as a delegate to the state Democratic convention – the son's start in politics.
- 1936: Erastus Corning 2nd, 27, elected to the New York State Assembly, one of the youngest members in the history of the Legislature.
- 1937: Corning elected to the state Senate, where he spends the next five years. Dorothea "Polly" Noonan goes to work as Senator Corning's secretary for the Scenic Hudson Commission.
- 1938: Erastus and Betty's second child, a daughter, Elizabeth "Bettina" born on June 17.
- 1941: Erastus Corning 2nd sworn in on December 31, as the 70th mayor of Albany, 107 years after his great-grandfather, Erastus Corning, served as the 39th mayor.
- 1943: Republican Gov. Thomas E. Dewey begins his investigation of political corruption in Albany, taking aim at Mayor Corning. After two years and \$1 million, Dewey achieves no substantial indictments and the investigation ends.
- 1944: During World War II, Corning is drafted into the Army on April 13, turning down a deferral and leaving Frank S. Harris in charge as acting mayor.
- 1945: Combat decorated, the G.I.-Mayor returns to City Hall and a tumultuous reception on September 20. He wins re-election to a second term by a landslide and is mentioned as a possible gubernatorial candidate.
- 1946: Corning drafted as candidate for the lieutenant governor and paired on the Democratic ticket with U.S. Senator James M. Mead of Buffalo for governor. Corning loses by 1.4 million votes to GOP incumbent Lt. Gov. Joe R. Hanley, running mate

of Gov. Dewey, the only political election Corning will lose – “by more votes than all my victories for mayor combined,” as the mayor liked to say.

- 1949:* Corning re-elected to third term as mayor.
- 1953:* Corning re-elected to fourth term as mayor.
- 1954:* Mayor Corning’s sister, Louise Corning Ransom, dies on March 1 at 42, in part due to complications from alleged alcoholism.
- 1957:* Corning re-elected to fifth term as mayor.
- 1961:* Corning re-elected to sixth term as mayor.
- 1964:* Mayor Corning’s brother, Edwin Jr., dies on January 31 at 44. He had been in a car collision five years earlier that left him in a lengthy coma with brain damage.
- 1965:* Corning re-elected to seventh term as mayor.
- 1966:* Mayor Corning’s sister, Harriet Corning Sinkler Ewing, dies on February 11 at 50, in part due to complications from alleged alcoholism.
- 1969:* Corning re-elected to eighth term as mayor.
- 1973:* Corning re-elected to ninth term as mayor, defeating Republican newcomer Carl Touhey by just 3,500 votes, the closest margin of his career. After a 50-year rivalry begun in Maine and years of battle over the fate of the largest state government complex in the country, Albany’s South Mall was officially dedicated on November 22, as the Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza. Corning takes credit for devising the complex financing scheme that allowed the 98.5-acre complex to be constructed over the course of a decade for \$2 billion.

- 1976:* Mayor Corning's mother, Louise Maxwell Corning, dies on May 24 at 91.
- 1977:* After defeating Sen. Howard Nolan in the first and only Democratic primary of his career, Corning re-elected to a tenth term as mayor. Dan O'Connell dies on February 28 at 91. Mayor Corning fends off political rivals and becomes the first person in the machine's history to be both mayor and chairman of the Democratic organization.
- 1981:* Corning re-elected to eleventh term as mayor and claims the title: longest-tenured mayor of any city in America.
- 1982:* Corning admitted to Albany Medical Center Hospital for lung complications due to emphysema; later transferred to Boston University Hospital. He spends nearly one year hospitalized, mostly in intensive care, breathing with the aid of a respirator.
- 1983:* Corning prevails once more in his rivalry with Rockefeller as the region's tallest building, the 42-story South Mall tower, is officially named the Erastus Corning 2nd Tower on March 15. Corning is too ill to attend the bill signing ceremony. Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd dies in office on May 28 in Boston University Hospital at 73 after 42 years as mayor.
- 1984:* Mayor Corning's family and the Noonans fight in court over the mayor's lucrative book of business insurance accounts. The Noonans win.
- 1993:* Betty Corning dies on September 22 at 81.
- 1994:* The estate of Erastus and Betty Corning, including their personal and household belongings, sold at public auction on New Year's Day.



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## Chapter 1:

### *Mayor for Life: He Left His Heart in City Hall*

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**“Once politics is in the blood, the only way they can take it out is embalming fluid.”**

*Malcolm Wilson, who spent 14 years as  
Nelson Rockefeller’s lieutenant governor and only  
14 months as governor.*

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**I**t was a bitter cold day in late January, 1983, when Angelo “Joe” Amore – tailor to Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd of Albany for more than thirty years at his shop just around the corner from City Hall on State Street – was summoned to Boston University Hospital. It was an unusual request, but Corning was his best customer, so Amore didn’t hesitate to make the long-distance service trip. Corning’s loyal aide, Bill Keefe, had told Amore on short notice that there was room in the mayor’s official car, the Buick with the “A” license plate. Matilda Cuomo, wife of Gov. Mario Cuomo, had canceled her intended visit to Corning in Boston at the last minute, and Amore joined Keefe, driver Dusty Miller and Judge John E. Holt-Harris Jr., one of Corning’s closest personal and political friends, for the three-hour drive.

“The mayor had written to me, saying he had lost a little weight and wanted me to take in some of his suits,” Amore said. It was typical understatement from the mayor, whose once robust 230-pound physique was gaunt, almost skeletal, and had deteriorated to perhaps 140 pounds of emaciated flesh draped haggardly over his six-foot two-inch frame. Corning had been hospitalized for the past seven months, spending much of that time in the intensive care unit, breathing with the aid of a respirator because of complications from emphysema and chronic lung ailments, as well as intestinal and coronary disease. Three months earlier, in October of 1982, the mayor had been transferred from Albany Medical Center

Hospital to Boston, where an experimental respiratory rehabilitation program – the only one of its kind in the country – had achieved some success in weaning emphysema patients off the respirator.

Over the objections of friends and family in Albany who wanted him to remain close to home, Corning had decided to try the Boston experiment. The mayor refused to relinquish the absolute control he wielded at City Hall for forty-two years – the longest tenure of any mayor in the country – and was determined to come back, against all odds and the cumulative effect of several operations that had begun to seem like medical acts of desperation. Those closest to him could see that he was dying, but Albany's mayor for life refused to go gently into that good night.

One of the last things Corning was able to write was a statement of goals shortly after being transferred to Boston. In labored penmanship, Corning wrote this never-before published summation, a sort of treatise on his purpose for fighting for life, from his hospital bed in Boston on October 27, 1982:

At seventy-three, I have had far more than my share of the good things in life, and I continue to truly enjoy it. I believe I have been productive and my basic goal is to continue to be so, accomplish things and not be a burden on others. My immediate goal is to get strong, and live easily with my present and any further handicaps, and to get back to the Mayor's office for a minimum of eight to twelve hours a week to be able to handle essential matters on a regular and orderly basis. Looking at the future it is hard for me to look at goals more than five years ahead. My family is secure with interesting careers separate from mine. As to myself, I have agreed and just started on two oral histories. These should not be time consuming and completed in three to six months, perhaps as much as nine. In September of 1984 my term as chairman, Albany Democratic Committee, expires. I have to determine if I want to work to be elected for another two year term. My term as mayor expires December 31, 1985 and in April 1985 I must determine if I want to try for four more. If I were to answer today the answer would almost certainly be no. I have simple changes to make in my insurance agency which I own 100%. I have a number of changes to make in transfer of real and personal properties, not time consuming

but interesting. Mrs. Corning and I plan to make a substantial memorial gift to our Church. I have plans to recognize as best I can some of those who have done so much to help me, to give real boosts along the road and just friends, too. There is a possibility I might want to stay on as Democratic County chairman till Sept. 1986 to have greater influence in picking my successor as Mayor. County Chairman is not a time consuming job. My negative goal at all times is: Don't be a burden. My positive goals should be reached generally in two to four years, with the future after that, reading history & nature and energy study, mild hunting and fishing and nature study. I would like to be a senior advisor with no ax to grind, but enjoying to the full the ability to help through long experience.

Throughout his life, Erastus Corning 2nd had been a masterful juggler. He was silky smooth and unflappable and made it look easy as he kept several balls in the air at once. He was a one-man City Hall, personally controlling the minute details of municipal affairs. He played many roles simultaneously: mayor and political boss, insurance company owner and astute bank director, blue-collar fishing buddy and blueblood club member, aristocrat and everyman, paternalistic provider and cunning political strategist.

Corning had been so many things to so many people, he may have gotten lost amid the personas. In the narrative of his life, Mayor Corning tried to mirror the mythic veneer overlaid upon him by a city and citizenry hungry for civic heroes. Despite four generations of outstanding accomplishment in the realms of politics and industry, the Corning family's sterling resume masks a family that, like all ordinary families, knew its share of pain and personal tragedy. Although many Albanians held him in blind reverence, Mayor Corning was far more human than his assuredly aristocratic bearing suggested. An accurate portrait of the mayor contains as much shadow as light, portions of darkness to balance the qualities of brightness and goodness the public most often wanted to find in him. The legacy of Mayor Corning is a life told through stories. Everyone in Albany seemed to have a story about the mayor. He possessed both a common touch and a larger-than-life cult of personality. A Corning encounter usually made a deep impression, a memory that lasted. He had a special ability to make people feel at ease, no matter what their station in life. His greatest quality

was being able to meet people on their own terms, from the poorest to the richest, youngest to oldest, across any spectrum one cares to define. His door at City Hall was always open. His accessibility was as legendary as his approachability. He liked people.

And yet, he kept most people, even longtime friends, at arm's length. He practiced a smiling aloofness. Very few, if any, were granted entry into the intimacies of his interior life. What his closest friends and associates saw was a single branch, whichever branch Corning chose to reveal to them, and not the whole trunk and roots of the entire man. Robert Roche, Corning's family attorney, chose a different analogy to describe the compartmentalized nature of Erastus Corning's personality: "Erastus Corning was like a great novel with twelve amazing sub-plots. Nobody ever really figured him out. The story never really ended. He just died."

State Assemblyman John McEneny, a Corning protégé who dreamed of succeeding his political idol as mayor, viewed Corning in terms of a wheel metaphor: "Corning was the hub of a wheel and all the spokes plugged into the mayor, but none of the spokes touched each other or had any interaction. One spoke was for his judge friends, one spoke for his Maine buddies, another spoke for the Noonans and Rutniks, one for his World War II pals, a spoke for his local political allies, a spoke for state and national Democratic politicians, one spoke for his own family, another spoke for his Fort Orange and society friends, et cetera." McEneny believed that the strict separation of the facets of Corning's life served his intensely private and aloof personality and also strengthened the structure of the wheel itself. "The separate spokes might have contained people who didn't like each other and were even bitter enemies," McEneny said. "But the mayor kept them separate and distinct and each spoke worked for Corning and strengthened the overall wheel that only Corning controlled."

Control was an overriding theme of Corning's life. Growing up, Erastus had almost no control, living under the thumb of his father's subjugation, succumbing to Edwin Corning's obsession to mold a son who reflected his own political ambitions. Later, as Mayor Corning, he relinquished control out of deference to political boss Dan O'Connell, a substitute father figure. In his personal life, the mayor's continuation of an arid society marriage and cultivation of domestic respectability could be seen, once more, as dutiful son proffering control to a grieving mother and widow who lost a husband and three children in their prime in part because

of the ravages of alleged alcoholism. Finally, with the death of his mother and Dan O'Connell less than one year apart, Corning had the opportunity, for the final six years of his life, to run the show himself and he galvanized power and control absolutely, with a micro-manager's possessiveness. After a lifelong quest for control, Corning was not about to relinquish it easily, even as he lay dying.

Back in Boston, for a time, the new year, 1983, had opened with promise for the ailing Albany mayor. Through sheer force of his personality, Mayor Corning, whose condition had indeed been improving slightly, convinced all around him that he would return to his office, Room 102 of City Hall, the only place he felt fully alive and in control: Mayor for life. Preparations were being made for Corning's return, as aides and ward heelers scurried about with the eagerness of serfs welcoming back their king from battle. The mayor's friend, developer Lew Swyer, and contractor Frank Letko had drawn up plans to install ramps and rails at his home at Corning Hill to make the house accessible to the wheelchair-bound Corning. A concrete pad was poured outside the house to hold oxygen tanks and Corning purchased a specially equipped van with wheelchair lift and special controls in January and had it parked outside the hospital in Boston so the mayor could drive himself home, home to City Hall.

"I went to see him in January and he had just bought the van," recalled Judge John E. Holt-Harris Jr., city traffic recorder judge and a close political and personal friend of the mayor's. "He and I talked about going out to the Alcove Reservoir in the van. Erastus was going to put special stops in the back of the van so the wheelchair didn't roll out when he was casting. He made a joke about it and said, 'That would be a hell of a thing if they found me in a wheelchair at the bottom of the Alcove Reservoir.'"

It was on that trip, too, that Corning's spirits were so high that he pantomimed out his hospital room window for a television crew outside. The mayor held aloft a bedpan, swinging it back and forth, pretending to pour it on the reporter's head and laughing with the glee of a Groton first former pulling a prank, Holt-Harris recalled. This was the same January trip on which Amore brought four custom made suits for Corning, made of a gray wool that the mayor himself selected in England. One of the suits Amore carried was forest green, the mayor's favorite color, which matched the green socks Corning wore to City Hall each day without fail – considered an eccentricity by most, but the habit was, in fact, due to Corning's color blindness.

Amore had made more than fifty custom suits and sports jackets for Mayor Corning over the years, some costing as much as \$800, with a label inside the breast pocket of each: "Erastus Corning II." Amore knew the mayor's suit size by heart – forty-six long, forty waist, thirty-one inseam. "He had relatively short legs and a long torso for his height," the tailor said. "He'd come into the store and order three or four suits a year, always gray and blue pinstripes. He was very conservative in his dress. Nothing wild for the mayor."

Erastus Corning 2nd did not like surprises. Since childhood, reared in the military regimentation of Albany Academy and the Protestant Episcopalian sternness of Groton, his life was laid out for him with patrician perspicacity. Erastus had no say in being born into a gray wool pinstripe suit, a WASP Ascendancy uniform that he donned dutifully yet regretfully. There hadn't been many days since adolescence when Corning hadn't been expected to dress formally. Although such rigid style did not suit his other side, his earthy and profane side, Corning, at least in public, rarely shed the uniform of his aristocratic breeding. As a young boy at Albany Academy in the early 1920s, knickers, tie and jacket were required, except when replaced by a military uniform. At Groton, the suit was blue serge, with stiff Eton collars and black patent leather pumps at dinner. The suit at Yale was generally brown tweed. Corning's gray and blue pinstripes became a second skin during a half-century spent in politics. Going casual for the mayor, such as at the annual Democratic Party picnic, meant khakis, a blue blazer and buttoned-down Oxford shirt, sans tie. Corning once joked that when a new acquaintance asked him to go fishing, the man expressed surprise when the mayor showed up without jacket and tie.

Clothes make the man, it has been said, and the aphorism is especially apt in Mayor Corning's case. Clothing style is more than a metaphor for the mayor, who embodied the internal conflict of nature versus nurture. As a boy, left to his own devices, young Erastus was as carefree and free-spirited as his butterfly collector grandfather, Erastus Corning Jr., with the youngster spending his days on long naturalist rambles through the woodlands of Corning Hill, studying birds and plants, collecting specimens from the forest and reading voraciously books pertaining to natural history. That was the nature side of the mayor's personality. The nurture aspect was imposed upon the boy primarily by his overbearing father, Edwin Corning, who uprooted Erastus from his cheerful and unstruc-

tured life in Albany and replanted him in the lonely and competitive prep school groves of Groton's uncompromising academe. Moreover, despite Erastus' innate sensibilities and profound interest in natural history, the father forced the son into a narrowly defined path of politics and business that would continue the Corning family legacy. In one dramatic gesture, then, the destiny of Erastus and the city of Albany was determined by a father intent on making certain his firstborn lived up to that preordained image. As a result, since boyhood, Erastus Corning 2nd felt obliged to wear the uniform his father had tailored for him, and he spent a lifetime struggling to honor the suit of his father's memory and, at the same time, trying to shed its confining shape.

None of the dozens of fitting sessions Amore had conducted with Corning over the years prepared the tailor for the condition in which he found his most loyal customer at the Boston hospital. "He hardly looked like Mayor Corning," Amore recalled. "He had lost so much weight that he was just skin and bones. He'd had that tracheotomy and couldn't talk. He struggled to stand up so I could pin the suits to where they needed to be taken in, but he was so weak. We finally got a couple of nurses and they helped him stand while I took the measurements. He was so far gone, but he insisted he wanted to do this."

Corning's forty-inch waist had shrunken more than eight inches and the pants had to be taken in drastically, as did the jackets. Amore went about his work quickly and silently, marking the alterations with pins. Amore remembered feeling stunned and saddened, unable to find the right words to thank Corning for the many kindnesses the mayor had shown him since Amore emigrated from Calabria in southern Italy in 1960. Amore had worked at first for John Cerasoli at Albany's old Ten Eyck Hotel, before it was demolished, where Corning bought his suits, and later took over the business in 1965 with the mayor's encouragement. "I was afraid my English wasn't good enough to open my own store, but the mayor said I could do it and that he would help me," Amore recalled. "The mayor sent his friends to me and the business prospered. The mayor was as good as his word."

As Amore packed up his supplies, Corning slipped the tailor a note: "Joe, I'll be coming home in two weeks. I'll have Dusty pick up my suits then." Corning never made it home. The mayor was buried in the gray pin-stripe suit that Amore had altered. The other three suits are preserved in garment bags in Amore's third-floor storage room of his shop at 123 State



Street. "I called Betty Corning [the mayor's wife] after the mayor died and she told me to keep them because she had no use for them," Amore recalled. "I've kept them all these years. I think I'll keep them always. I loved that man."

The altered suits, the custom van, the oxygen tanks and the special wheelchair ramps planned for Mayor Corning's triumphant return to City Hall – envisioned as something in the annals of Albany politics every bit as spectacular as Corning's homecoming as the combat-decorated G.I. Mayor in World War II – were left to gather dust. The hopefulness of January was quickly replaced by hopelessness and despair after Corning developed pneumonia and was placed back in intensive care, where he also developed arrhythmia, an irregular heartbeat. Still, in mid-February, 1983, Corning battled against a failing mind and loss of muscle control and scrawled out these notes from his hospital bed in the Boston intensive care unit: "Coughing up secretions is the easy way out but for the super plugs and thick secretions and copious quantities. Try at least four experiments by myself each day with suctioning with and without saline. Sit on stool in tub. Use hand held shower head. Much simpler, does the job. I will get a hospital supply co. representative. There will be twenty different things he will keep me supplied with." It was the last thing Erastus Corning 2nd ever wrote.

During his long decline in the hospital, the mayor had been robbed of all the legendary vitality that had made his return to City Hall seem possible. One by one, his faculties faltered. After he lost his voice and the use of his hands to write notes to visitors, his awareness of reality slipped away in a fog of pain and medication. He breathed with the aid of a respirator and was fed intravenously. The reminders such deterioration triggered in his memory during his own slow and torturous wasting-away must have been frightful, for he had watched his invalid father slide downhill like this and the image was seared into his consciousness: don't be a burden . . . don't be a burden . . . don't be a burden. It had become Mayor Corning's mantra in the hospital, a phrase he wrote over and over again, and now, after his fierce struggle, he no longer had the energy to fight the inevitable.

On February 22, Corning underwent surgery for removal of a tumor on his large intestine and to stop intestinal bleeding. Half of his intestine was removed. Several days later, he suffered a mild heart attack. Still, loyal aide Keefe continued to come to Boston with papers and reports, carrying in his briefcase the essential business of City Hall, which Corning, on his deathbed, refused to relinquish. "I made more than sixty-five trips to

Boston,” Keefe recalled. “The toll collectors on the Mass Pike got to know me. They’d send me on my way with a get-well wish for Mayor Corning’s speedy recovery.”

On March 12, Corning was operated on to treat bleeding ulcers at the base of the esophagus, where it meets the stomach. Doctors termed his condition “life threatening” because of his age and other medical problems. At this time, Betty Corning asked Holt-Harris and the mayor’s Albany physician, Dr. Richard Beebe of Albany Medical College, to meet with her in Boston. “The mayor was semi-comatose and hugely bloated and it was an extremely painful thing to see,” Holt-Harris recalled. “We tried to elicit a reaction, but the mayor was not functioning. That wasn’t Erastus Corning anymore. It was an enormous lump of flesh in bed with a face as big as a pumpkin. It was not my beloved friend.”

Holt-Harris and Beebe conferred and knew what they had to do. “The doctors had been planning to do another operation and Betty wanted us to come and make them stop,” Holt-Harris said. “She didn’t have the energy anymore to fight them. Doctor Beebe sat the Boston medical team down and said they would not invade that poor man’s body again. And that was the end of the discussion.” A few weeks before, Corning had scrawled on a note to Holt-Harris: “I’m not going to make it. I shouldn’t have come here.” Holt-Harris discussed the mayor’s sentiment with Beebe and they turned to Betty Corning and said, “I think the humane thing to do is to let him die now.” “It was tragic at the end,” Beebe said. “They try to keep someone alive and go overboard. He was courageous to the end. He didn’t give up. He was a good patient and a very brave man. I never heard him complain.” After two months of tenuously clinging to life, on May 28, 1983, the mayor died.

The moments when Mayor Corning – a man who seemed emotionally closed off to all, even his family – opened up were rare. One such example could be found in a Christmas letter Corning wrote on December 23, 1982, to his daughter from the Boston hospital, thanking her for the letter she sent the day before and trying to clarify, in shaky cursive and a mind medicated against pain, his life philosophy: “Number one, sentiment is good stuff. Number two, just a small piece of crisp bacon will make an entire sodium free breakfast much more enjoyable. Number three, we are not perfect by a damn sight and in politics that’s very clear. Politics is the art of compromise, and politics and life in general are much the same.” Corning then recalled his days at Groton School, raised under the stern

religious certitude of its founder, Rev. Endicott Peabody, an educator “who never saw a bit of gray any place. It was right or it was wrong. That’s all.” But a long career in politics had taught Corning that life could not be so neatly divided into black and white. He wrote, “In politics, a modest amount of corruption is helpful in getting along. The word is not corruption in day by day existence, but it means pretty much the same.”

Then the father’s letter to his daughter drifted and rambled across a number of cloudy attempts to make meaning of the world and humankind’s place in it, discussing the Big Bang theory versus creationism, before he gave up from fatigue. “Maybe some day I’ll get smarter and explain,” he concluded. His daughter never heard that explanation. Her father’s condition continued to decline after Christmas and his ability to speak or write was soon gone.

The few instances when someone broke through Corning’s tightly held reserve were remembered as special glimpses into the soul he worked hard to shield from view. As the mayor lay dying, his daughter read him “The Gift of the Magi” as he had done for her as a child. “We both cried and cried and it was a beautiful moment,” Bettina recalled. During one of her visits to Boston, she brought her father wintergreen mints, the kind he loved to buy during the summers of her girlhood at the homemade candy and ice cream shop in Bar Harbor, Maine, but he was too sick at that point to eat them, to allow the memory of taste to transport him back to a moment when they were a young and happy and loving family for a time.

There was no apparent closure, however, when it came to the conflicting relationships of Mayor Corning with his wife, Betty Corning, and his longtime confidante, Polly Noonan. Even in the truth-telling moments expected of life’s final chapter, the dying Corning managed to juggle his two lives, the public and the private, never resolving the secrets he had carried and buried for so long. Noonan, a frequent visitor to Boston, made sure to check the schedule with Keefe to determine the days when Betty Corning would not be at the hospital. The dual relationships continued until the end.

When it came to his estranged son, Erastus III, there were no moments of shared reconciliation in the hospital for a lifetime of regret and sadness between father and son. “There was no reconciliation, because a reconciliation implies there was damage that needed repairing and I wouldn’t characterize it that way,” the son said. “It wasn’t good or bad. It was just nothing. I visited him in the hospital a few times, the last time a

few days before he died, and nothing had changed. We simply had no relationship. He was focused on coming back to Albany to continue as mayor. He had convinced others of that, too. Everyone had lost all reason given his condition in my view."

Corning, the obsessive controller of all details, had used his wit and charm to win over even his doctors. He wanted to be back at his gray metal desk in City Hall, running his kingdom. When David Bray told Corning he intended to retire as superintendent of the Albany School District in 1982 at the age of seventy after a forty-eight year career in education, the mayor couldn't understand Bray's decision.

"Are you serious?" Corning asked.

"Yes, I think forty-eight years is enough," Bray replied.

"Not me. I'm never going to retire," the mayor had said. "They'll have to carry me out."

His words rang prophetic. Mayor Corning never made it back alive to his beloved City Hall. The closest he got was being wheeled over to the window in his Boston hospital room, where he could look out and, on a clear day, catch a glimpse of an Albany Street a few blocks away. Erastus Corning 2nd, America's most durable mayor, died in Boston, just off Albany Street, at 12:20 p.m. on May 28, 1983 at the age of seventy-three. Cause of death was cardiac arrest due to a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot that settled in the lungs.

Back in Albany on the day of the mayor's death, the city was cloaked in gray, overcast weather that felt like a shroud of doom. It was a Saturday. Downtown, word spread person to person in Albany's small-town way. "Is the mayor really dead?" a woman asked, brushing back tears, outside Saint Mary's Church, where, by 3 p.m., less than three hours after Corning's death, hundreds had gathered in the shadow of City Hall for a memorial mass. Even after his long, slow decline, the city seemed stunned. The pace of city life slowed perceptibly for the next couple of days in a stupor of disbelief. The mayor for life. Dead. Could Albany even go on? Citizens seemed unable to comprehend their city A.C., After Corning.

On Tuesday, Mayor Corning's body lay in state, casket closed, out of regard for his skeletal state, in the Episcopal Cathedral of All Saints. More than 8,000 mourners filed past, despite a heavy downpour that did not let up all day. At nine o'clock that night, Betty Corning left the cathedral with her two children, Bettina and Rasty, and they walked down South Swan Street, crossed Washington Avenue and entered the Fort Orange Club for a

late dinner in the bastion of privilege and elite society the mayor's forebears had built to preserve what they perceived as the noblest qualities of Albany.

The next morning, the sun broke through the clouds, clear and bright, for the first time in several days as they buried Erastus Corning 2nd. The funeral cortege bearing the body of Mayor Corning stopped in front of City Hall – a pause heavy with symbolism – where a huge crowd numbering thousands lined the streets ten deep encircling the landmark building the mayor's grandfather had commissioned. The carillon in the City Hall bell tower played "God Bless America" and the throngs of Albany's citizens, many of whom had known no other mayor in their lifetime, wept openly and sang along through muffled sobs. At precisely 12:14 p.m., police motorcycles roared and the cortege quickly started up, gained speed and, within a moment, the mayor for life was gone from his city. Crowds estimated at more than 10,000 people lined Washington Avenue between City Hall and All Saint's Cathedral. The *Times Union* published a photograph of the hearse bearing Mayor Corning, stopped in front of City Hall for the last time, with the headline, "The End of An Era."

At the funeral service, Gov. Mario Cuomo read from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians: "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." After the reading, the choir sang this anthem: "Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts, shut not thy merciful ears unto our prayer; but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee. Amen."

Everyone had a story about Mayor Corning and each one who had known him tried to eulogize the man, to sum up his legend.

"He was just the greatest," said his loyal aide, Bill Keefe, his voice choked with emotion.

"Albany has lost a great leader," said the new mayor, Thomas M. Whalen III.

"The Empire State mourns the loss of one of her grandest sons, Erastus Corning, the mayor," Cuomo said.

"His door was always open to those who sought him, even when he was advised to close it because of ill health," said the Republican State

Senate Majority Leader, Warren M. Anderson, a friend from the Fort Orange Club.

"Legends are hard to replace," said Albany Assemblyman Richard Conners, a machine Democrat who served on the Albany City Council under Corning for thirty-five years.

No one person can fully sum up the life and times of Erastus Corning 2nd. He did not reveal himself completely to anyone, not even family members. He was many different people, many different faces, a separate guise for each of the compartments of his life. In piecing together those various parts of his personality we begin to emerge with a more complete portrait of Erastus Corning 2nd.

## Chapter 2:

### *Of Iron and Politics: The Corning Family's Roots*

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**“Albany needed a club composed of gentlemen who represented that which was best in Albany, the men of distinction, of culture, of good manners, of high character, of attainments, of social quality, the men who were born on the top, as well as those who possessed the qualities which make good men and had risen to the top.”**

*From the history of Albany's Fort Orange Club, founded in 1880 by Erastus Corning Jr. and others.*

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**T**he Corning family burial plot at Albany Rural Cemetery commands the high ground, offering a sweeping view of the Hudson River Valley far beyond. The Corning plot is located in Section 31, in one of the oldest parts of the cemetery, founded in 1841 on the outskirts of Albany. The Corning site is a circular mound bordered on all sides by a gravel drive and shaded by a dozen trees – pine, maple, cherry, dogwood. The most striking feature is its isolation. The Corning plot is an island, self-contained and set apart. It is a very private orb, this grassy knoll the Cornings occupy in perpetuity. The plot is laid out like a wheel, with the railroad baron progenitor, the original Erastus, as the central hub from which the spokes of each successive generation radiate. On a map, the Corning family's final resting place mirrors the stern formality of military regiments, resembling troops encircled in rigid formation to repel an attack. And yet, despite the geographic isolation, even in death, the Cornings rub shoulders with their class, their kind. Neighboring monuments belong to John Boyd Thacher, Dean Sage, Maj. Gen. Philip Schuyler and assorted Pruyns and Lansings. It amounts to a roll call of Albany's former ruling class. Very WASP. Very Dutch. This cluster of monuments range from markers to mausoleums,

and while some, like Mayor Thatcher's, are extravagant edifices, they generally bear the restraint and discretion of old money.

If anyone took the time to visit the Corning plot on Memorial Day, 1995, it passed unnoticed. Nobody left flowers, or flags, or any trace of having paid their respects. It appeared as if nobody had been there in months. A long-decayed arrangement of autumn flowers moldered between the grave markers of Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd and his wife, Elizabeth. Otherwise, the site was barren of offerings of love or remembrance. Weeds and tufts of long grass sprouted between the gravestones. It was quiet and peaceful and the sense of being forgotten by time was absolute. The only sound on this afternoon – with a gathering sky filling with dark, ominous clouds amid warnings of severe thunderstorms – was the wind whispering through the leaves and pine needles on trees protecting the Corning glade, this fortification that holds its familial mysteries as surely as any rampart.

A visitor to the historic Albany Rural Cemetery, home to the grave of President Chester Arthur and other luminaries, would not be drawn to the Corning circle. The expansive plot contains four modest monuments and fourteen simple head stones on a site with room for fifty-six graves. There is nothing in the design or the epitaphs that would give a visitor any indication of the prominence and influence of the Cornings on the business and political life of Albany for more than 150 years. The dominant monument is reserved for the first Erastus, titan among merchants, maker of iron and railroads, creator of the family fortune in Albany, an empire builder who put his indelible stamp on the capital city on the Hudson in countless ways. It is from this Erastus that all wealth and prominence for the family flowed in Albany. He was the wellspring of greatness, the familial font, and his monument symbolizes such. Set on an imposing black granite slab measuring twelve feet by six feet, the top is a solid copper sculpture in the shape of a cathedral, with a roof in a cross pattern and a decorative border of carved plants beneath the eaves. One side is reserved for his wife, Harriet Weld Corning, born July 31, 1793 and died May 26, 1883. "I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord," reads her epitaph. Erastus Corning's reads, "My hope is ever in thee," next to his dates: Born December 11, 1794 and died April 8, 1872. Erastus and Harriet had five children: two died before their second birthdays, another lived only until the age of nine and two survived into adulthood.



For the most part, the Cornings were not expressive when it came to memorials. They list only the name of the deceased and the dates of their birth and death. Nothing is revealed, neither the agonies nor the ecstasies, the triumphs nor the failures, the joys nor the pains. Albany Rural Cemetery is the final resting place for a family that spans eleven generations of American life. The roots run deep in this country for the Corning name, which, according to lore, is believed to be derived from the French name *de Cornu*, "horn of a hunter," which then became Cornus and, finally, Corning in the English translation. The ancient Corning arms are said to have depicted the horn of a hunter and the motto, "*Crede Cornu.*"

The American tale for the Cornings began when Samuel Corning, a Puritan, born in England in 1616, left his homeland at the age of nineteen for reasons of religious persecution. One of ten children raised in the Belstone parish of Devonshire, England, Samuel Corning sailed to the colony of America, landing apparently at the popular port of Salem, Massachusetts, just up the coast from Boston, and eventually settled with his wife, Elizabeth, in Beverly, Massachusetts across the harbor from Salem. After eking out an existence for his first six years in the new world, it was in Beverly that Samuel Corning gained prominence after starting as a farmer in 1641 with one acre of land, on which he grew hemp. Corning quickly gained respect among his fellow settlers and they rewarded him with positions of responsibility, including his selection in 1665 to Beverly's first board of selectmen, which incorporated the town three years later. Samuel Corning established the family's deep and lasting interest in politics and, like successive generations of Cornings, was a proven vote-getter: Corning was elected five terms as a selectman. Moreover, trust in him ran so high he was named Beverly's collector of taxes in 1676. A few years later, the citizens turned to Corning again, this time to negotiate a settlement in a boundary dispute with neighboring Wenham, Corning's former hometown. Corning's other civic duties included acting as an early land planner when he served on several committees formed to lay out a blueprint for growth and development in the town. Beverly records also show Corning secured twenty trees for a windbreak and soil conservation, perhaps foreshadowing a tradition of land stewardship that reached down many generations and took hold in Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd. Samuel Corning and his wife, Elizabeth, had three children, a son, Samuel Jr., a daughter, Elizabeth, and a second girl named Remembrance. Samuel Corning Sr. amassed a large farm and substantial land holdings, the extent of which is

unclear. His estate was divided at the time of his death in 1694, at the age of seventy-eight, between Elizabeth, his widow, and their three children.

Corning's only son, Samuel Jr., married Hannah Batchelder and the couple settled in Beverly on the family farm. They had four children, all boys: Samuel 3rd, John, Joseph and Daniel. Samuel Jr. died in 1714 at the age of seventy-three. His wife, Hannah, died in 1718 at seventy-two, ending the second generation of Cornings in America and extending the family legacy as proven leaders and prominent land owners.

The third generation of Cornings on American soil confirmed a family habit descendants find amusing, but historians find annoying – the repetition of certain names. Trying to tease apart the various Erastuses, for instance, can prove unnerving, for there were no fewer than eight Erastus Cornings in the family tree by 1995 and several had no middle name or distinguishing feature to differentiate them from each other. A ninth Erastus was born in 1996, the mayor's great-grandson. It was no wonder, then, that the third Samuel – although the family did not use junior or senior or numerals, Roman or otherwise – should be given the same name as his father and grandfather. The third Samuel and his wife, Rebeckah Woodbury, had five children: Hannah, Joseph, Josiah, Martha and Nehemiah. The son, Joseph, moved his family from Beverly to Norwich, Connecticut, before dying at the age of thirty-nine in 1718. His widow was left to raise their five children, who ranged in age from one year to sixteen years. After his father's death, the middle son, Josiah, married a Norwich girl, Jane Andrews, in 1733 at the age of twenty-four and they moved to Preston, Connecticut just west of Norwich in southeastern Connecticut near Long Island Sound and the Rhode Island border. This generation of Cornings, with their eleven children, had now earned the moniker of Connecticut Yankees.

The Cornings, at this point the fifth generation of Americans, now become a blur of Biblical names and a bushy family tree with a thick network of branches upon which hang a few leaves of historical interest. Josiah's son, Ezra, born in Preston in 1737, was the first of the Corning clan to forsake the familiarity of the country lifestyle for an early urban experience in Hartford, Connecticut, where Josiah worked as a shoemaker and ran a grocery store. He married a captain's daughter, Mary Hopkins, who died young, and then Josiah remarried twice more, fathering ten children in all. A cousin to Josiah, Joseph Corning, born in 1746 and a Whig, was taken prisoner by the British in the Revolutionary War, put aboard a

prison-ship in New York and never heard from again. Another cousin to Josiah, Benjamin Corning, born in 1748, moved his family out of the Corning conclave at Preston to Voluntown, Connecticut, about ten miles to the north, on the edge of Pachaug State Forest. While Benjamin's uncle and other relatives had moved to Hartford and sought a living in the mercantile trade, Benjamin established himself as a farmer. This return to the family's agrarian foundation set the stage for the upbringing of the sixth American generation and the rearing in rural Columbia County in New York state of the first Erastus Corning, founder of the New York Central Railroad and great-grandfather of Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd, who so proudly bore his great-grandfather's name.

It is here that references to Corning family history blossom, for the original Erastus was the wellspring from which subsequent Corning achievement flowed. Erastus Corning set an unsurpassed benchmark for family accomplishment, a remarkable record of entrepreneurship forged by dogged determination. He possessed an uncanny sense for predicting business trends far ahead of the curve and then marshaling the forces of politics and commerce to bring his vision of the future into sharp focus. Although his was not a rags-to-riches story, the rapid rise and high level of wealth and prominence – both political and social – that Erastus achieved could not have been dreamed of by the five previous generations of Cornings working the soil in southeastern Connecticut.

Erastus Corning was the only family member, after all, who, up to this point, achieved the immortality of a life preserved in print. The fine biography, *Erastus Corning: Merchant and Financier, 1794-1872* by Irene Neu of Cornell University, published by that university's press in 1960, is a detailed chronicle of his entrepreneurship. Relying heavily upon business records and related legal documents, Neu delineates how Erastus came from a modest background to found the New York Central Railroad, earning wide acclaim as one of the richest and most powerful men in New York state, with a nationwide reputation as industrialist, land speculator and financier. As her book's title indicates, Neu focuses on Corning's business career and does not explore her subject's private life and does not offer a critical evaluation of the public impact of Corning's financial deals, which often were assisted by his political machinations.

Its strengths as a text on economics aside, Neu doesn't fully evaluate that nexus of politics and business, yet it is precisely that potent combination that Erastus Corning managed to exploit in such an early and innova-

tive way that, I believe, largely accounts for his success. Leveraging business opportunities through political connections became a family legacy that Erastus Corning passed on to future generations.

Erastus Corning was born in Norwich, Connecticut on December 14, 1794, the sixth generation of Cornings in America, the grandson of Nehemiah Corning and the son of Bliss Corning, who married Lucinda Smith. Erastus' father served in the Revolutionary War and fought against the British alongside the family of his wife, Lucinda, who came from a long-established American family. Accounts of Erastus' father have called him unstable financially, even shiftless, and often on the brink of leaving his family destitute. Nonetheless, his boy Erastus grew into a bright and gifted child and, in 1802, at the age of eight, was chosen to attend a select school for outstanding students run by Pelatiah Perit, a recent graduate of Yale. Erastus was later taught by Rev. Daniel Haskell, also a Yale man. A Yale education would become in later generations of Corning men an unspoken rule. But Perit's school was costly and Bliss Corning did not have the money for Erastus to attend. In stepped the boy's uncle, Benjamin Smith, Erastus' mother's bachelor brother, who had no children of his own upon whom to shower his largess. Benjamin Smith recognized Erastus' unusually high aptitude and wanted to foster the boy's ability as his benefactor.

What makes the achievements of Erastus Corning all the more remarkable is that he accomplished them despite physical disabilities in an era that was not as enlightened as our own when it came to handicaps. Erastus Corning had fallen from his crib at the age of two and injured his hip to such an extent that for much of his life he could walk only with the aid of crutches. His sheer intellectual power and financial wizardry overshadowed the physical disabilities, though. In fact, accounts of Erastus Corning in newspapers of the day never mentioned his crippled condition or that he was hunched over and could walk only haltingly, supported by crutches.

In 1805, after more than a century and a half of Corning settlement in Connecticut, Bliss Corning decided – as was common after the Revolution – that it was time for his family to strike out for New York State. The Cornings followed the lead of other Connecticut neighbors and sought out new opportunity amidst the rich farmland of Chatham, Columbia County. Erastus Corning's uncle and benefactor, Benjamin Smith, now lived nearby in Troy. Smith was an early settler there in the late eighteenth century and was a prominent citizen of Troy, where he became co-owner of a hardware and iron store, Heartt and Smith. In 1807, when

Erastus was thirteen, he was given permission by his parents to leave the family home in Chatham (with eleven children, the boy's departure meant one less mouth to feed) to go to Troy to work in his uncle's store. It was there that Erastus, already well schooled in arithmetic, spelling and the classics, would learn the art of the deal. There were other lessons awaiting, particularly political ones. His uncle Benjamin was an ardent Jeffersonian who strongly influenced the young Erastus in that direction, which establishes the Corning family's zealous support of the Democratic Party despite the more familiar Republicanism of their later status as members of the wealthy class.

His uncle's store was a crossroads for buying and selling materials carried from New York up the Hudson River by sloop, items then re-sold to merchants who carried wares into the western interior by wagon or river portage. Erastus underwent a typical apprenticeship. He was in charge of cleaning up the store, sweeping the floors and straightening the inventory. His handicap apparently did not seem to deter him, nor did it stifle his progress. Within two years, when he was fifteen, his uncle encouraged the boy to begin a small side operation of buying and selling goods ranging from tobacco to sugar to lemons. His uncle helped him out with cash advances to purchase more goods and Erastus always immediately repaid his debts; even as a youngster, he understood the value of good credit.

Erastus wasn't afraid of a hard day's labor. He hobbled down to the Hudson wharf early in the morning for his boxes of goods, worked into the evening at his uncle's store, and to earn extra money did bookkeeping at night for other merchants. He'd occasionally hire a horse and buggy for a visit with his family in Chatham, where he lent money to his struggling father – although Erastus kept accounts of these loans to his dad in his ledger book. He was determined not to end up in the dire financial straits of his father. By early 1814, at the age of nineteen, Erastus was worth \$500, a sizable sum considering the value of a dollar then and that he had scraped it together without assistance, by profits on his small side selling venture and by hustling freelance accounting jobs at night.

When young Erastus moved to Troy at thirteen, he became financially independent and lived in William Pierce's lodging house across from the hardware store. One of the other boarders was William L. Marcy, who later became governor of New York and for whom the state's highest peak, Mount Marcy in the Adirondack Mountains, is named. After six years in Troy, at nineteen, Erastus was ready to move on. The Troy years taught him

much. He learned the mercantile trade and became interested in politics. With the blessing of his uncle, whose apprenticeship had run its course, Erastus took his \$500 stake and went to work across the river in Albany for John Spencer and Company. It was a March day in 1814 and Albany would never be quite the same again.

What Albany offered Erastus Corning – aside from a more cosmopolitan air as the state's capital and the state's second most prominent city behind New York – was a deep connection, an intense intermingling, of the Dutch ruling class heritage and the corridors of political power. Erastus Corning found his niche on the periphery of Capitol Hill, on what is now South Broadway, known in the nineteenth century as "Hardware Row." Corning's promotion to clerk in the Albany operation was once again assisted by a benefactor, Joseph Weld, a Troy hardware merchant. Weld had recommended Corning to Spencer for the opening. Although Spencer was initially reluctant to hire a handicapped person, Corning won him over in an interview and his disability proved no impediment to his success. He also subsequently won over Weld's daughter, Harriet, whom he married on March 10, 1819.

Corning's rise in the Albany hardware trade was swift and decisive. Two years after joining John Spencer and Company, when Corning was twenty-one, he bought into the firm as a partner. In 1824, when Spencer died, Corning at twenty-nine became sole owner by purchasing the Spencer share from his deceased partner's heirs. One of the main goods traded by the hardware company – later named Corning and Norton after he took on John T. Norton as a partner – was iron imported from Sweden, England and Russia, and steel from Germany. Corning hired an agent in New York City to get him the best deals on imported iron and steel, which were then sailed up the Hudson by sloop and later by steamboat. The metal goods and other supplies were then either sold in Albany or shipped west by wagon to merchants along the young nation's sparsely populated interior.

Corning's learning curve as a young entrepreneur was a sharp one and he made rapid headway in the competitive arena of business by being a risk-taker. Corning was among the visionaries who early on foresaw the vast potential for an east-west link of trade and ignored the naysayers who criticized the Erie Canal as "Clinton's ditch." Only thirty years old, as thanks for his support, Corning was invited to help plan and participate in Albany ceremonies celebrating the opening of the 363-mile Erie Canal linking

Lake Erie with New York City via the Hudson River. Corning had a hand in importing material to build the eighty-three locks and was a backer of Gov. DeWitt Clinton, catalyst for the fifteen-year long engineering feat and masterwork of political maneuvering.

Corning's idealism and belief in forward-looking projects such as the Erie Canal, however, were balanced with a fierce pragmatism. Corning learned early on, for instance, how to deal with merchants who fell behind on paying up their accounts. Bankruptcy was common in the boom-or-bust western lands. Corning generally tried to negotiate terms with a failing merchant, to cut his losses and take a percentage of what he was owed. A lawsuit was a last resort that generally won nothing. Often, in a negotiated debt settlement, Corning wound up with some sort of collateral, particularly parcels of land – in Ohio or Michigan or Wisconsin – the foundation for his later interest in western land speculation.

Corning's partner, Norton, was not a risk-taker and ended their partnership after four years and sold back his share in 1828. Norton felt that Corning was too much of a speculator who allowed the firm to become over-extended with too many outstanding loans and not enough capital and cash flow – despite an average day's receipts of \$2,000 in 1828. "Norton was doubtless right," Neu wrote, "since a tendency to overextend was a characteristic of Corning at almost any period of his career. It might be argued (as it was by Norton) that this was an entrepreneurial weakness, but from the long view it probably was not, for Corning's temerity in operating on slim reserves permitted him to go ahead when a more timid man might have faltered."

Perhaps his boldness in business was, in part, a response to his disabilities. In letters to friends, Corning sometimes complained about his lameness, particularly as a young man, when he expressed shame and loathing about his condition in respect to courting young women. Corning had no trouble, apparently, in his courtship of Harriet Weld. Their marriage was a union of similars. She, too, was from an old New England family, centered in Roxbury, Massachusetts, hers being the eighth generation of Welds in America. The Cornings had five children, all boys, although only two of their sons survived to adulthood. The family plot in Albany Rural Cemetery commemorates these lost innocents, with the three markers for their deceased children grouped in front of the couple's notable monument. Erastus Corning honored his mentors in the naming of his children. Benjamin Smith, named for his uncle and benefactor, died on September

18, 1821 at the age of one year, eight months and eighteen days. John Spencer, named after his Albany hardware partner, died on February 25, 1833 at the age of nine years, three months and twelve days. The third, Joseph Weld, died on August 14, 1830 at the age of seventeen months and six days. Erastus Jr. and Edwin were the surviving boys.

Corning's own life was marked by health concerns. At one point, he traveled south to recuperate from an unspecified illness. It was most likely a respiratory-related ailment, since lung trouble ran in the family. Erastus Corning 2nd, the mayor, was sent south on more than one occasion during Albany winters as a young boy suffering from asthma. The first Erastus Corning's strength and drive overcame the misfortunes of his life as he established himself, while still in his early thirties, as a prominent business and civic leader. He became known among merchants from Albany to New York City, Philadelphia to Boston, and along the western frontier. Naturally, this ambitious and entrepreneurial merchant moved into politics. In 1828, he was elected an alderman in Albany. That same year, he moved from a rental apartment on Beaver Street into a substantial row-house at 102 State Street in the heart of the residences owned by the city's ruling elite. Corning bought the house in the fashionable district for \$18,000, using a bequest from his uncle Benjamin Smith, who had died two years earlier. Most importantly, through perseverance and grueling physical therapy, Corning was able to discard his crutches and walk with a single cane. He would need such determination for his next Albany incarnation.

After years as a middleman, buying and selling imported iron and steel, Corning had gained the expertise and had accumulated the capital needed to move from merchant to manufacturer and to control a product from beginning to end in addition to the middle – the entire cycle of production and sale. In 1826, Corning bought an iron mill on Wynants Kill, a creek just south of Troy, and named it the Albany Iron Works. The plant produced 825 tons of rolled iron each year from bar iron imported from Russia and Sweden. The rolled iron was cut primarily into nails and also band iron, nail plates, hoops and rods. Corning also recognized the benefit of diversifying, and invested in the early 1820s in banks and insurance companies. A visionary who understood that money was power, politics was power and new ventures were power, Erastus Corning seized power in all three realms. As early as 1831, Corning invested in railroads, still in their infancy at that time, most notably Mohawk and Hudson, a fourteen-mile road between Albany and Schenectady that was the state's first. He was



elected to positions of leadership in both the Mohawk and Hudson and the Utica and Schenectady lines, the latter selecting him as president in 1833.

Corning's influence in the sphere of politics was growing just as rapidly. In 1834, as a prominent member of the powerful Albany Regency – the Democratic organization whose members included Martin Van Buren, a group some historians consider the country's original political machine – Corning was elected mayor of Albany by a divided vote of twelve to eight among the aldermen. The *Microscope*, a Whig paper, sought to discredit Corning by calling him "the wealthy nabob of State Street." The name calling didn't hurt Corning, who was re-elected to three more one-year terms as mayor (1835-1837). He was later elected a New York State senator (1842-1845) and a member of Congress (1857-1859 and 1861-1863). While Corning, by all accounts, performed competently in these positions, he seemed less motivated by a commitment to a life of public service than by the potent use of elected office as a means of gaining connections and political influence that would further enhance his business deals.

Corning's career was marked by an extraordinary ability to foresee connections and opportunities and shrewdly position himself to exploit those openings ahead of the competition. Corning perfected the corporate strategy of double-dipping – and even triple-dipping. For example, spikes from the Albany Iron Works were used in the building of the Utica and Schenectady Railroad, of which Erastus Corning happened to be president. Consider this typical convoluted chain of Corning command: His agents bought bar iron from Russia, the iron was rolled into nails at Corning's iron works, then sold from Corning's hardware store to Corning's railroad. Corning later invested in the source itself, the mining operations. Corning earned profit each step of the way – as beginning, middle and end man. Corning's business derring-do was a *tour de force* that attracted the attention and sometimes the wrath of competitors. Henry Burden, who owned the prosperous Burden Iron Works in Troy, battled Corning and his Albany Iron Works through the courts in scores of patent right infringement cases spanning three decades. Burden fought Corning not only over patent disputes, but over the flow of the Wynants Kill, which Burden claimed Corning unfairly diverted, resulting in unfair competition.

Corning's reign as Albany's iron king was not trouble-free. Fires destroyed the factory in 1849 and again in 1852, a combined loss of nearly \$100,000 above what insurance policies reimbursed. Nonetheless, Corning rebuilt. Corning played hardball when it came to labor negotiations, too.

His factory's wages were never considered munificent to begin with, yet when production costs rose, company policy was to slash salaries. As a result, Corning's Albany Iron Works was rocked by labor disturbances and strikes several times. Corning's solution? Lock out the workers and let the factory sit idle until employees accepted Corning's provisos.

Corning never let such local concerns cloud his broader vision. He was an early investor in the Mount Savage Ironworks in Allegheny County, Maryland. It was there, in 1844, that the first heavy iron rails in the United States were made. Corning got in on the ground floor of an industry critical to the advancement of railroads in America. The former crippled boy that shop owners once shunned from hiring was now sitting at the throttles of one of the most powerful engines poised to drive America's Industrial Age.

In 1850, Corning was jubilant when the Mount Savage Ironworks churned out 1,000 tons of rails for his own Utica and Schenectady Railroad (doubling Corning's profits). Sometimes, his own multiple layers of profiteering got him into trouble. For instance, Corning wavered on his position toward import tariffs, a double-edged sword to a businessman who was both a domestic iron maker and a railroad president who needed cheap imported iron. He was a capitalist divided. Corning's ethics derived from the bottom line. At one point, he served as president of the Ironmasters Association of New York to work toward raising the tariff on foreign iron competitors. A few years later, he hired a lobbyist in Washington to argue against raising the tariff because he had two large rail mills in operation. Erastus Corning's malleable ethics were most in evidence during the Civil War, the early years of which he was an elected member of Congress. By supplying the Union Army with iron products, Corning secured a substantial profit for himself while the death toll climbed from the bloody conflict. A Democrat, Corning at first spoke out strongly against the Civil War and later criticized the Lincoln administration. Privately, he was sending his agents to Washington where, with the help of his Congressional connections, Corning's Albany Iron Works nailed down lucrative war contracts that amounted to production of eight tons a day to supply the war effort, mostly cannons and rail hardware. There was profit in war and Corning was not a squeamish capitalist.

Corning gained recognition as a fierce political enemy of Abraham Lincoln and worked actively against his election. Erastus Corning 2nd, the mayor, was fascinated by this historical footnote and often recounted the

rivalry in correspondence he received from history buffs. In a November 8, 1951 letter to Joan Stroud of Spartanburg, South Carolina, the mayor wrote, "Thanks for the information about the correspondence between Lincoln and my great grandfather. I did know of it as my great grandfather was a rabid Democrat in those days and fought with Lincoln frequently. As a matter of fact, when my great grandfather was president of the New York Central Railroad, he tried to hire Lincoln as a general counsel to get him out of politics. Another interesting Civil War item, I think, is that it was my great grandfather's steel mill up in Troy that made the armored plate for the *Monitor*."

Corning's baiting of Lincoln – through a group of northern Democrats, known as the Copperheads, who opposed the war and sympathized with the South – drew a sharp written rebuke from the president himself in what some historians consider one of Abraham Lincoln's most remarkable political letters. Addressed to Corning "and others," Lincoln wrote a stinging defense of his war policy and a pointed criticism of the Corning-led Albany naysayers. An excerpt from Lincoln's handwritten draft dated June 12, 1863 from the Executive Mansion in Washington reads:

... Prior to my installation here it had been inculcated that any State had a lawful right to secede from the national Union; and that it would be expedient to exercise the right, whenever the devotees of the doctrine should fail to elect a President to their liking; and accordingly, so far as it was legally possible, they had taken seven states out of the Union, had seized many of the United States Forts, and had fired upon the United States' Flag, all before I was inaugurated; and, of course, before I had done any official act whatever. The rebellion, thus began, soon ran into the present civil war; and, in certain respects, it began on very unequal terms between the parties. The insurgents had been preparing for it more than thirty years while the government had taken no steps to resist them. The former had carefully considered all the means which could be turned to their account. It undoubtedly was a well pondered reliance with them that in their own unrestricted effort to destroy Union, constitution and law, all together, the government would, in great degree, be restrained by the same constitution and law, from arresting their progress. Their sympathizers pervaded all departments of the government

and nearly all communities of the people. From this material, under cover of 'Liberty of speech' 'Liberty of the press' and 'Habeas corpus' they hoped to keep on foot amongst us a most efficient corps of spies, informers, suppliers, and aiders and abettors of their cause in a thousand ways.

Lincoln's letter goes on for several more pages. Historian James G. Randall deemed it "one of those dignified, carefully worded statements addressed to a person or occasion, but intended as a kind of state paper." The letter was widely published in newspapers and magazines of the day. Corning pooh-poohed the soaring oratory and deeply felt sentiments, calling Lincoln's missive "misty and clouded" and "a monstrous heresy" and "a plea for absolute power."

Even while Corning was criticizing the Lincoln administration and doing his utmost to prevent implementation of the president's policies, the iron baron of Albany was maneuvering to profit from the young nation's horrific conflict. In 1861, even though he was a member of Congress and barred by federal regulations from entering into a business contract with the government, Corning's Albany Iron Works secured the contract to make the iron plates for the famous ironclad warship, *Monitor*. The *Monitor* gunboat, with its inventive revolving turret, defeated the Confederate *Merrimac* on March 8, 1862, a turning point in naval superiority in the Civil War. Corning got around the sticky business of conflict of interest on the *Monitor* deal – which netted Corning personal profits of as much as \$20,000 – by having his agents at the Albany Iron Works conduct the negotiations. "But they kept him [Corning] informed of the negotiations with Washington and later of the progress of the ironclad," Neu wrote. Corning played his Congressional colleagues with mastery. Just six days after the *Monitor* defeat of *Merrimac*, having sidestepped even the slightest hint of wrongdoing, Corning's ironworks closed a deal to supply iron plates for six additional gunboats slightly larger than the *Monitor* for \$400,000 each – more than \$100,000 of which was expected to be profit. It can be said that Erastus Corning made a killing in the Civil War.

After the Civil War, as he continued his visionary ways and explored a new steelmaking method developed in England, the Bessemer process, Corning once again became embroiled in a patent infringement lawsuit. Corning and his ironmasters were clearly violating an earlier American patent, according to Neu, but Corning prevailed by overpowering or buy-

ing out his challengers. By 1875, the Troy Bessemer plant owned by Corning and others was cranking out more than 270 tons of ingots a day, producing what was considered one of the best grades of steel to be found anywhere in the United States. The numbers were staggering. In 1872, the year Corning died, the Albany Iron Works was producing a remarkable 15,000 tons annually of cut nails, spikes, rivets, band, bar, rod, scroll iron, railroad car axles and other hardware for the railroads.

Corning's success lay in his innovative, organic approach to business in which he saw the whole of an industry, as well as its parts, well in advance of his competitors. Neu wrote, "Not a little of his early interest in railroads may be explained by his recognition of the new transportation medium as a first-rate market for iron." And, further, Neu commented, "No one who has worked with the Corning Papers can doubt the close tie-up between Corning the railroad president and Corning the iron manufacturer and dealer." In addition, Corning's political connections were used to buoy his considerable power and finances. "... He was not without political influence when it seemed desirable to exercise it," Neu wrote. "His association with the Albany Regency assured him of favors from his own party, and his friendship with Thurlow Weed [Albany newspaper publisher, a Whig, and political power broker], whom he had early taken pains to cultivate, gave him a strong ally among the opposition."

The power of the Albany Regency and the state's railroad tycoons was legendary, as indicated by a piece of legislation in 1858 that nearly ground state government to a halt. Corning and eighty-six prominent New York State capitalists lobbied hard for a bill that called for dropping the executive and legislative branches and turning power over to the directors of the New York Central Railroad. The bill was called "a burlesque memorial . . . intended as a joke" by the *New York Herald*, but it passed both the Senate and Assembly. The editorial writers of the *New York Times* were not amused in a March 3, 1858 editorial: "Of course it is intended as a joke, but it conveys a bitter satire – a satire which is deserved and just. Substantially, the Central Railroad has made and violated laws as suited their interests or their caprices. When the Democrats are in power, it is Corning, Richmond & Co. that direct and control. When the Republicans are in the ascendancy it is . . . guided by the same firm of Corning, Richmond & Co." The bill that would have created a railroad-controlled oligarchy was defeated in a general referendum on November 2, 1858. Remarkably, the statewide vote was close, 141,526 against and 135,166 in favor. This epitome of voter apa-

thy and anger meant that just 6,360 votes stood between a democracy in New York state and a railroad-run State of Corning!

Corning's cornering of the political game at the local, state and federal levels was only the beginning. Corning shrewdly covered every angle. Through his directorship in Albany banks, including presidency of the Albany City Bank, and extensive banking connections, competing railroads were indebted to Corning for iron and occasionally had to ask for an extension of credit. Corning also served on the board of directors of the Michigan Central Railroad and made annual visits to inspect the line in which he was a major stockholder. More importantly, this railroad line served as a critical link between Corning's railroad in the east and his land speculation in the west. Furthermore, Corning was president of the Mutual Insurance Company of the city and county of Albany. He was a kind of one-man treasury, seemingly making profit everywhere he turned, as if he had a license to print money. The insurance business foreshadowed a source of personal wealth for his great-grandson, the mayor, owner of the insurance firm Albany Associates, which benefited from Corning's forty-two years as mayor.

Erastus Corning managed to deflect his failures with a dry wit that would become a Corning family trademark. When the Albany and Northern (Vermont) Railroad failed in the late-1850s, Corning, a director, not only suffered substantial losses, but so did friends whose investments he had solicited. There was a public outcry that "certain men should be hung," namely Corning. Corning replied dryly, "If at any future day this threat should be carried out I should like to have good company."

By the time he was in his early forties, the late-1830s, Erastus Corning, already a millionaire, stood astride Albany like a colossus, disability and all, and had become the city's most prominent citizen – risen from the stockroom of the hardware store on Broadway. His world was insular, comprising a triangle of commerce and residence from lower State Street to Broadway, but the House of Corning was built upon a substantial foundation of iron. From that solid base, he branched out into railroads and land development and banking and, ultimately, politics, which became the engine that drove his commercial possibilities. Corning's political clout stemmed from his involvement with the Albany Regency, the Democratic political machine of New York that controlled the state Legislature. The Albany Regency's chief architect and leader was Martin Van Buren, governor of New York, who used the state capital as his stepping stone to the presidency.

Corning's assistance to Van Buren's political career was rewarded when Van Buren got to Washington and championed lenient banking laws that allowed a bank to extend loans to its officers. Erastus Corning was an officer of more than one bank in Albany, ensuring him a steady source of working capital needed to fuel his ambitions for an expanding business empire, which gave Corning the bank president an inside edge over his competitors seeking loans from Corning's banks. During the Van Buren administration, Albany City Bank, of which Corning was president, was designated a bank of deposit for public funds. Corning's early political investment in Van Buren began to pay handsome dividends.

Corning also managed to combine pleasure with business. In the spring of 1840, Corning imported the first documented herd of Herefords in the United States. In the fall of that same year, he took his wife on a trans-Atlantic sailing journey, complete with a grand tour of Europe. Besides sightseeing excursions, Corning met with his British iron trading partners and tried to peddle some of Albany City Bank's stocks and bonds it held from New York State that had plummeted in value. Corning remained president of what later became The State Bank of Albany, until his death in 1872. He went daily to his office at the bank at 47 State Street and "was something of a trial to the cashier and clerks" because of his overbearing demeanor; the bank staff breathed easier when Corning made his annual summer retreat to Newport, according to Neu.

Corning was not confined to his comfortable domain of State Street and Broadway, though. As an early and central backer of the Erie Canal, opened in 1825, Corning was among the progressive thinkers who saw exceptional business opportunities in westward expansion. Banking on a fledgling network of canals and, later, an integrated system of railroads to open up western lands as profitable trading partners, Corning became a major land speculator in the western New York communities of Corning, Irving and Auburn. He later branched out to Iowa, Wisconsin and Michigan, where he was a leading developer of the Sault Ste. Marie Canal that linked Lake Huron with Lake Superior. At each site, Corning and his investment associates controlled the fate of hundreds, even thousands, of acres of prime real estate.

The ownership of the renowned Corning Glass Works has long been mistakenly attributed to the Corning family. The town of Corning in the western part of New York, in Steuben County, situated along the Chemung River, was originally named Painted Post. The name was

changed to Corning by citizens grateful to the Albany financier for bringing the canal and railroad to the town along with substantial investment and the development of hundreds of building lots. The Corning Glass Works took its name from its location, not from any ownership by the Corning family. The town fell short of Corning's vision for it as a major inland shipping port and cosmopolitan city. Still, there is a monument to Erastus Corning on the town green and today Corning is known internationally as the home of Corning Glass Works, which the citizens of Corning enticed there in 1868 by putting up \$50,000 in incentive money.

Corning's land speculation elsewhere was less prosperous. Despite exerting leverage in the state Legislature and the U.S. Congress, federal money for the townsite of Irving along the Cattaraugus Creek in Chautauqua – which Corning hoped would become a booming railroad terminus – never materialized and dreams of hitting the jackpot withered. Not that Corning ever got severely burned in his land grabs. He was generally able to buy the acreage dirt cheap and recouped his investment even in the worst market. And if his hunches were correct about future growth, Corning's profits were enormous – selling for as much as ten times what he had paid.

Occasionally, Corning's manipulation of the banking system, coupled with favors from political friends in high places, drew criticism from the press. For instance, Corning was a major shareholder in The American Land Company, which purchased hundreds of thousands of acres of property during the 1830s in a dozen states, including massive tracts in Ohio, Michigan, Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee and Florida. A scandal erupted in the newspapers when investigation into the multi-million dollar land speculation firm revealed that among those who had a financial stake were President Martin Van Buren, Attorney General Benjamin F. Butler, Senator Silas Wright and presidential advisor Amos Kendall – Corning associates all, linked from their Albany Regency days. But the controversy died quickly and the company paid handsome dividends to its shareholders throughout the 1840s and 1850s, before the Civil War crippled the company because of its heavy position in the wartorn South.

Corning's image as a leading citizen and upstanding businessman was further tarnished, albeit briefly, from his speculation in the so-called Half-Breed Tract in Iowa. The 119,000-acre region in the southeastern corner of the state originally was set aside in the early 1830s by the U.S. government as an entitlement for the children of Native American women and white



men during what were common frontier-era unions. Congress passed a law allowing the half-breeds to sub-divide and sell off their land if they so chose. Corning and a handful of other shrewd speculators who formed the New York Land Company were waiting for just such congressional action (perhaps even playing a role in the legislation) and pounced on the property. The Half-Breed Tract affair ended up embroiled in controversy and in the courts, with accusations of bribing of judges and swindling the rightful owners out of their land – another passing storm of bad publicity that Corning seemed to weather with little ill effect.

It is difficult, of course, to hit a moving target and Corning the financier never stood still. He kept his investments moving forward at a dizzying pace, always looking ahead for the next big opportunity and simultaneously juggling numerous capital ventures. Corning amassed tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of acres of land in Wisconsin and Michigan in a second phase of speculation, in the 1850s, and parlayed those holdings with investments in the creation of shipping-canal systems through those states – most notably the Green Bay and Mississippi Canal Company and the Saint Mary's Falls Ship Canal Company. Corning was a director, and briefly president, of both concerns. These few examples only hint at the extent of Corning's intricate land holdings in a dozen states. The Albany capitalist ruled this domain expertly, selling off parcels piecemeal, buying others, corresponding with agents and prospective buyers. Corning seemed to derive satisfaction from playing his own real-life Monopoly game, because he handled all land transactions himself after retiring from running his railroads.

If Corning's financial plate seemed full with his myriad business and political dealings, it was just a prelude for the enormous organizational and negotiating effort required of his greatest accomplishment, the creation of the New York Central Railroad. Consider Corning's coup: chartered in 1853, Corning raised \$23 million in capital for the New York Central Railroad, making it the largest corporation in America at the time. In an era of intense infighting and turf battles among competing rail lines, Corning managed to merge a sprinkling of ten minor railroads – between Albany and Troy, Buffalo and Niagara Falls, Rochester and Syracuse – into a major and historic rail network. Once again, Corning played his Albany Regency trump card by gaining unanimous approval from the state Legislature for consolidation of the lines. Corning was elected the New York Central's founding president and held that position, despite considerable pressures

from rivals, for a dozen years. He was at the height of his powers, the architect of a 300-mile interconnected railroad system stretching from Albany to Buffalo. Russell Sage, of Troy, a major capitalist himself with a reputation as a ruthless businessman, begrudgingly congratulated the New York Central's founder, and Sage's sometime rival, as "one of the greatest railroad men in the country" in a December 20, 1853 letter to Corning. Corning's sweetest deal, his financial *tour de force*, was complete. Corning enjoyed his usual pattern of profiting twice, even thrice, by owning the companies that made the iron and shipped the hardware that expanded the New York Central. The *New York Times*, the leading voice of criticism against Corning's *modus operandi*, pointed out that Corning was profiting to the tune of \$250,000 a year by supplying iron to the railroad of which he was president. The negative press never picked up steam, though, and Corning ruled the Central with an iron fist, dismissing board members who questioned his practices, including former business associate Russell Sage. Neu wrote, "Corning, as usual, paid little attention to the tirades in the papers. Rather he concentrated his energies on the obtaining of proxies."

Corning's biggest test of leadership came with a challenge to his presidency in 1863, a decade after he formed the New York Central. Corning and his coalition, including strong support from Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, trounced the opposition. Vanderbilt was rewarded by Corning with board membership. Call it a Trojan Horse strategy by Vanderbilt, who shrewdly concealed his long-range motives to wrest control of the New York Central for himself. Even as Corning scored his impressive victory, there were other considerations. He was about to turn seventy, was in faltering health, and he had endured more rebukes about his iron company's profiteering. A bitter strike at the railroad's West Albany shops was directed at Corning and required troops of police to restore order. On April 28, 1864, at a meeting of the New York Central directors, Corning resigned as president.

Corning had not anticipated Vanderbilt's power play. Corning's Achilles heel, despite his progressive transportation vision, was a stubborn reliance on shipping cargo via the Hudson River. Corning had banked on the river for trade between Albany and New York City since his boyhood days as a clerk in the hardware store. Corning's prejudice for moving freight cheaply on the waterway (Corning held a financial interest in Hudson River steamboats) opened the door for Vanderbilt, who had amassed a fortune in ocean shipping. The Commodore built up the two rail

lines, The Hudson River Railroad and the New York and Harlem, that eclipsed Hudson River steamboat freight service. Vanderbilt controlled the vital missing north-south railroad link in New York State and thus possessed the power to bring Corning and the New York Central to its knees. Vanderbilt used his leverage to toss out Corning and his board at the December 11, 1867 annual shareholders' meeting in the Albany offices of the New York Central. After fourteen years running the great railroad, often touted as "the road of the century," Corning was relegated to a spectator while Vanderbilt and associates seized control. The two towering capitalists never quarreled publicly, however, and apparently remained on good terms personally after the dust of the takeover settled. The far-flung financial empire of Erastus Corning – a traveler could ride coast to coast on railroads in which he held a financial interest – paid substantial dividends. When he died in 1872, Corning's estimated net worth was \$12 million, an extraordinary sum in that day, making Corning Albany's wealthiest resident and one of the two or three richest men in New York – a state loaded with successful capitalists.

Although historians focus on his role as railroad tycoon, financier and empire builder, Corning's home life deserves some attention. Corning and his wife, Harriet, who encouraged her husband's shift from a Presbyterian upbringing to membership in the Episcopal church, opened their luxurious State Street mansion (on the site of today's Omni Hotel) to many guests. In addition to their five children, the Cornings raised four nieces – repaying, in a way, the debt he felt as recipient of his uncle's largess. The Cornings maintained a lavish lifestyle and threw large parties. One of their closest friends was John V.L. Pruyn, Corning's able assistant in railroad and other business affairs, and a neighbor just around the corner on Elk Street. Harriet and the youngsters spent summers at a family farm in Canaan, New York. The Cornings also owned summer homes in Sachem's Head, Connecticut and Newport, Rhode Island, where they were active in the social scene. The Cornings and their extended family also were a fixture at Saratoga Springs during the spa's busy summer social season.

But the Corning family's heart and soul, the place where it established a sense of permanency for successive generations, was at the 700-acre parcel in Bethlehem on the outskirts of Albany along the Normanskill gorge that became known as simply "The Farm." Erastus Corning purchased the wooded property and farmhouse in the 1830s in a district known as

Kenwood as a simple retreat for his family to escape summer's heat in Albany. Future generations would turn it into a sort of upstate Shangri-la.

In civic matters, Erastus Corning was a leader in Albany's major municipal projects during a boom era for public works. Working from the recommendations of architect Philip Hooker, Corning engineered the grading of State Street, leveling off the precipitous incline. In the early 1840s, Corning also leveled Madison Avenue, directing the work of 250 laborers and dozens of teams of horses which shaved down the sharp incline and filled in the fetid, unsanitary Rутtenkill stream. They used the loads of Madison Avenue soil also to fill in other dangerously steep ravines to render several side streets passable to horse and buggy for the first time.

In 1850, Corning also headed Albany's first water commission, which purchased for \$150,000 all sources of drinking water that converged into Patroon's Creek; formed a forty-acre, 200-million gallon reservoir on the western edge of the city now known as Six-Mile Waterworks along Fuller Road in the Pine Bush; replaced wooden pipes with iron ones that were carried in brick-lined culverts beneath what is now Washington Avenue four miles downtown to the thirty-million gallon Bleecker Reservoir in the heart of the city. They also added two new auxiliary reservoirs in Albany known as upper and lower Tivoli lakes. Erastus Corning created the clean drinking water supply that the Democratic machine in his grandson and great-grandson's era would take credit for and ride to electoral success.

Not all Corning innovations were embraced. Over the opposition of many citizens who thought it would hamper navigation and bury river ferry companies, Corning built the first railroad bridge over the Hudson River at Albany. Corning's finesse closed the missing link that had hampered Albany's growth as a railroad terminal. Work began in 1856 and the bridge opened just before Corning's death in 1872. The half-mile span cost \$500,000 and was built twenty-five feet above the river to let boats pass under. No dissent was heard when Corning bought 250 acres of the Van Rensselaer estate and used his influence to locate the vast repair shops for the New York Central Railroad in West Albany in 1853, creating hundreds of stable, well-paying jobs. They named Corning Street in his honor in West Albany, a memorial well deserved, according to Codman Hislop, who published a history of Albany in 1936. "Railroads brought prosperity to Albany and an end to the charge that the city was 'more Dutch than decent,'" Hislop wrote in his book, *Albany: Dutch, English and American*.

One of the enduring works of civic leadership for which Erastus Corning will be remembered is the All Saints Cathedral of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany. He was the catalyst for devising a strategic plan for the cathedral in 1871. Corning died a year later at the age of seventy-eight. The actual construction of the great cathedral, as well as other unfinished business, would be left to his son, Erastus Corning Jr. He is the only one among the five children who survived into his later years; three siblings died in childhood and his brother Edwin died in 1871 at age thirty-four.

When measured against his father's sparkling accomplishments, Junior, as he was known, was an unrepentant underachiever. It has been said that greatness in a family line seems to skip a generation, a kind of cyclical pause for mediocrity, and Junior confirmed that sociological generalization. The father's personality resembled the iron upon which he built his fortune, while the son was a dreamy idealist who let money flow through his fingers like spring runoff. He liked to spend it much faster than he made it and, eventually, the seemingly bottomless well of the Corning fortune ran dry. But what a fine time Junior had in reaching bottom. Almost immediately, Junior "began to scatter the millions bequeathed him," according to a newspaperman of the day familiar with Junior's ability to run through a \$12 million inheritance. He lacked his father's business acumen, especially when it came to responding to volatile market conditions such as the free fall in steel prices in the late 1800s that caused Corning's fortune to drop \$3 million, on paper at least, in a single day.

Born on June 16, 1827, Erastus Jr., the middle child and first to live beyond childhood, grew up as a spectacularly spoiled boy. His education was at private schools, including Union College in Schenectady, followed by a special business apprenticeship arranged by his father. As his father grew old and infirm, he handed over the reins of his various enterprises to Junior. This outsized silver spoon seemed to fit easily in the mouth of his son. Passed from father to son were the various presidencies and directorships: Albany Iron Works, Albany City National Bank, Albany City Savings Institution, the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad and the All Saints Cathedral, to name just a few.

Erastus Corning Jr. was not cut from the same entrepreneurial cloth as his father and the progenitor realized it. "Corning had little respect for the business acumen of either of his sons," Neu wrote. Albany businessman John Bigelow wrote this withering assessment to William B. Beach on May 29, 1876 about Erastus Corning Jr. "Corning of Albany," Bigelow

said, "is a man of pleasure, who inherited a large fortune and a name associated with the triumphs of a political dynasty in this state in the last generation, of considerable influence. The heir, however, never had the ability to acquire these patrimonies, neither has he the ability to preserve them; and he has already squandered so much of them that he is only the shadow of a name."

Erastus Jr. was not the least bit interested in politics. He accepted the nominal appointment of city alderman, but once remarked that he was "reluctant to abandon his business for the uncertain and often unsatisfactory honors of the political arena." Historians said Corning could have had the Democratic nomination for governor in 1881, which went instead to Grover Cleveland after Corning declined the offer. Corning substituted his father's passion for politics and business with leisure activities, ranging from horticulture to animal husbandry to civic volunteerism. He became known around the world for his cultivation of flowers, particularly orchids. Erastus Jr. possessed, as Cuyler Reynolds noted, "ample means to gratify his fine taste."

Erastus Corning Jr. inherited the family farmstead, named it *Ta-wass-a-gun-shee*, an Indian variation of Tawasentha, meaning mouth of the Normanskill, and transformed it into an exotic paradise for flora and fauna. Corning continued to nurture the nation's first herd of Herefords established by his father. He also raised prize-winning Jersey cows, Southdown sheep and thoroughbred racing horses, sparing no cost in constructing numerous stables, training tracks and a mile-long oval horse racing track where he held stakes races and printed programs for spectators. The finesse of his breeding would pay off for his son, Parker, one of whose horses would win the prestigious Travers Stakes at Saratoga Racetrack.

Junior also erected a network of conservatories where he raised his world-renowned orchids and other flower varieties, employing master gardeners brought over from England, including William Gray, Frederick Goldring and Harry C. Eyres. Gray developed a new variety of orchids for Corning named the *Vanda Corningii*. Corning published a "Catalogue of Orchids" that ran nine pages and included more than 1,000 species and varieties of orchids he propagated. Corning was considered to have the "the finest orchid collection in the Western Hemisphere," according to Milan Fiske, of Burnt Hills, an officer of the Northeastern New York Orchid Society and an orchid scholar, who wrote in the March, 1986 issue of the society's newsletter, *Orchidoings*: "Greenhouses, a staff of orchid

growers and thousands of the choicest varieties made Albany something of a mecca for the orchid fancier of a century ago. Warm houses, cool houses, houses given just to odontoglossums . . ." Corning gained recognition for developing new orchid varieties, among them one for Mrs. Erastus Corning, *Cattleya Corningiae*, and the *Phalaenopsis Harriettiae* (named for his daughter Harriet).

Orchids were only one aspect of Erastus Corning Jr.'s passion for growing plants. "The choicest floral productions of the world were to be found in his conservatories," according to Cuyler Reynolds. The Corning Farm became Junior's living experiment in horticulture. He imported tropical flowers from the Himalayas in India, from the Pacific island of Borneo, from the highlands of Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Brazil and Madagascar. From foreign lands came ginkgo and tulip trees and other unusual species. He planted lemon and orange trees, cultivated grape arbors and banana groves. Corning also donated exotic floral specimens that were planted in newly created Washington Park, including Egyptian lotus and other rare water plants that were fashioned into a lush aquatic garden ringing the edge of the park – giving Lake Avenue its name.

Corning's desire for surrounding himself with all creatures great and small, all things bright and beautiful, didn't end there. He collected moths and butterflies. But this was no simple boyhood fascination. Over the course of his lifetime, the dedicated lepidopterist amassed one of the country's finest private collections, containing more than 10,000 specimens of moths and butterflies. Corning's extraordinary array today is in the permanent collection of the New York State Museum in Albany.

When he wasn't on The Farm, Corning was very much a man about town. Known as an easygoing fellow, a congenial sort who wasn't tight with his money, Corning got the reputation as something of an easy touch, freely offering handouts and loans, often to ill-conceived and short-lived business ventures. Corning was a founder and first president of the Fort Orange Club, incorporated in 1880, a bastion of WASP ascendancy and power. An oil portrait of Corning hangs in the foyer of the club, which occupies a luxurious Federal-style brick mansion built in 1810, located at 110 Washington Avenue near the Alfred E. Smith State Office Building. Its founding filled a gap as the only private club for men of means in the city. It replaced the defunct Albany Club at Lodge and Steuben Streets, which died of disinterest and an apparent lapse in elitism. Corning, the leading benefactor among the 182 charter members, intended the Fort Orange