

William "Boss" Tweed - Adventures in Justice

By Toni Lee Robinson

¹ Have you ever dreamed of having your own private moneymaking machine? That's what William "Boss" Tweed considered the city of New York to be. Tweed, a school dropout known for his tendency to fight at the drop of a hat, rose to leadership in the Democratic Party and eventually dominated the whole spectrum of New York City finances.



² Tweed and his cohorts raked in millions through fraudulent contracts and inflated charges or "kickbacks." When a new courthouse that was projected to cost \$500,000 finished at \$12.5 million over budget, a committee investigated. The investigative report cost \$8,000 to print. In yet another facet of the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of swindles that continued to fatten the wallets of the Tweed ring, it turned out that the printing company was owned by Tweed. Meanwhile, New York City's debt increased by \$81 million in less than three years.

³ Finally, the inevitable happened. A disgruntled member of his ring sold Tweed out to an investigative reporter. New York Times articles revealed the web of corruption with Tweed at its center. Though he tried to pay the Times to stop, the stories didn't upset Boss Tweed too much. When you have the police and judges in your pocket, why worry?

⁴ Then, Harper's Weekly began to publish satirical cartoons by Thomas Nast, featuring the Tweed Ring. In one cartoon, Tweed and gang, portrayed as big-bellied vultures, stood over a body labeled "New York." The caption read "Let Us Prey." Tweed did get upset about the cartoons. "Stop those pictures!" Tweed roared. "I don't care so much about the papers. My constituents can't read. But they can't help seeing them ... pictures!"

⁵ With details going public, how long could Boss Tweed continue to operate? In December of 1871, several of the Tweed Ring were arrested. "Boss" immediately posted \$1 million bail and was released. In 1873, Tweed's trial began. By this time, most of Tweed's cronies had taken their money and run.

⁶ Mountains of evidence proved Tweed guilty. Jurors saw records such as bills for \$42,000 brooms and \$7,500 thermometers, approved by the conspirators and paid by the City of New York. Documents identified corresponding sums going into the accounts of Tweed and his men. The evidence was incontrovertible.

⁷ Nevertheless, all but one of the jurors voted for acquittal. In the end, the judge declared a hung jury. "I am tired of the whole farce," Boss Tweed told reporters with a martyred sigh. Besides, he smirked, "No jury will ever convict me." Indeed, his "something for everyone" approach seemed to have paid off. The jury's near-acquittal was clearly based on something other than the evidence.

⁸ Samuel J. Tilden, the reform lawyer who had been pursuing Tweed, was determined that justice would prevail. For the second trial, he instituted an intricate security system. A plainclothes officer followed each juror on a round-the-clock basis, and a detective followed each of the officers. But even that was not enough for Tilden. In what seemed to be building up to a slapstick comedy routine with a huge cast, a private detective then followed Follower Number Two. All the followers filed a report with Tilden every day. The reports were studied carefully for any attempts to bribe or intimidate jurors.

⁹ Tweed's second trial resulted in a conviction on fraud and larceny charges. He was sentenced to prison. In the meantime, Tweed had lost a civil suit launched by the city and some of its businesses, which sought to recover millions in damages. Things looked grim for the Boss.

¹⁰ But matters may not have been as grim as they appeared. Apparently, Tweed had been able to "grease the wheels of justice" to the extent that he enjoyed unusual privileges in prison. He was allowed to go home for visits from time to time, accompanied by a guard. On one visit, he flitted from under the nose of his guard, traveled to Florida, and from there to Spain. Home free!

¹¹ Alas, it was not to be. Tweed was recognized from one of the Nast cartoons that had first landed him in the cactus patch of life. He was extradited and returned to prison. In exchange for freedom, he offered to divulge the secrets of how his gang had operated. But no one thought his secrets worth the bargain. Tweed died in prison in 1878, at age 55.

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Follow-up Questions:

1. Explain how a kickback works.
2. Tweed was sold out by:
 - a) His family, who wanted him to go straight
 - b) A friend with whom he'd had a tiff
 - c) A member of the ring who was unhappy about his treatment
 - d) An honest employee who didn't like what was happening
3. Thomas Nast's cartoons were described as "satirical." Explain what that meant and why the cartoons were so effective in exposing the Tweed Ring.

