Shipping and railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877) was a self-made multi-millionaire who became one of the wealthiest Americans of the 19th century. As a boy, he worked with his father who operated a cargo ferry in New York. After working as a steamship captain, Vanderbilt went into business for himself in the late 1820s, and eventually became one of the country’s largest steamship operators. The “Commodore” gained a reputation for being fiercely competitive and ruthless. In the 1860s, he shifted his focus to the railroad industry. He began consolidating the New York Central line, which resulted in cheaper fares and faster lines. He also began using steel rails, which were stronger, lasted longer, and didn’t rust as fast. When Vanderbilt died, he was worth more than $100 million.

John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937), founder of the Standard Oil Company, became one of the world’s wealthiest men and a major philanthropist. Born into modest circumstances in upstate New York, he entered the then-fledgling oil business in 1863 by investing in a Cleveland, Ohio, refinery. In 1870, he established Standard Oil, which by the early 1880s controlled 90% of U.S. refineries and pipelines. Critics accused Rockefeller of engaging in unethical practices, such as predatory pricing and conspiring with railroads to eliminate his competitors, in order to gain a monopoly in the industry. In 1911, the U.S. Supreme Court found Standard Oil in violation of anti-trust laws and ordered it to dissolve. During his life Rockefeller donated more than $500 million to various philanthropic causes.

Scottish-born Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) was an American industrialist who amassed a fortune in the steel industry then became a major philanthropist. Carnegie worked in a Pittsburgh cotton factory as a boy before rising to the position of division superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1859. While working for the railroad, he invested in various ventures, including iron and oil companies, and made his first fortune by the time he was in his early 30s. In the early 1870s, he entered the steel business, and over the next two decades became a dominant force in the industry. In 1901, he sold the Carnegie Steel Company to banker John Pierpont Morgan for $480 million. Carnegie then devoted himself to philanthropy, eventually giving away more than $350 million.

One of the most powerful bankers of his era, J.P. (John Pierpont) Morgan (1837-1913) financed railroads, helped develop General Electric, and grow U.S. Steel into the world’s first billion-dollar company. He followed his wealthy father into the banking business in the late 1850s, and in 1871 formed J.P. Morgan & Company, a predecessor of the modern-day JPMorgan Chase. Morgan helped stabilize American financial markets during several economic crises, but faced criticism that he had too much power and was accused of manipulating the nation’s financial system for his own gain. Morgan amassed a vast art collection, and was a benefactor of the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harvard University, and Trinity College.