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## Captains Of Industry: The Preternatural Businessman Of The Gilded Age

With industrialism looming and the first transcontinental railroad on the verge of completion, the notorious Collis P. Huntington laughed all the way to the bank as he had just invested in the railroad-building venture that would begin one of the most oppressive monopolies in American history. Huntington was a prosperous railroad magnate, but his practices were considered iniquitous and he was rendered the label of a robber baron, a businessman who amasses great wealth in unethical ways. Although Collis P. Huntington envisioned philanthropic projects as a wealthy businessman, he was a robber baron because he presided over the large railroad empire of the Central Pacific that created a de facto monopoly, and oftentimes bribed politics through money.

On October 22, 1821, Collis P. Huntington was born into a large family of the Poverty Hollow farmland in Harwinton, Connecticut. Huntington was just as penurious as he was insightful, and by the time Huntington was a young man he had become a relatively wealthy merchant with his brother of the Oneota district in New York. Huntington and a few of his siblings were removed from their impoverished family by local farmers who could provide for the Huntington's. Described as tough and valiant, Huntington sought an opportunity with the San Franciscan Gold Rush in 1848. He moved to Sacramento seeking profit by selling retailed mining equipment. While in Sacramento, Huntington did not only retail equipment, but also invest in Theodore Judah's vision of a transcontinental railroad. Huntington becomes wealthy despite his poor upbringing, growing from poverty to power by dominating industries in the Gilded Age.

A robber baron expands their control vastly across an industry, and as a result, the dominance forms a monopoly. Huntington, along with three other key investors together known as the "Big Four" were able to build an empire through the railroad ad industry. During the time Huntington presided over the industry he completed substantial amounts of construction. Huntington continued to purchase businesses in the transportation industry, and when he took over the majority of American transportation services he inflated the prices; therefore, creating a recession in the economy whilst personally receiving large sums of money. Famous American Journalist Ben Ratliff examined the the Big Four's impact on the economy, concluding that, "By the early 1870s, they had established a de facto monopoly on California shipping by establishing control in San Francisco, leaving producers and retailers no option but to meet Southern Pacific Railroad's exorbitant costs or have their product rot in the warehouse ("The Octopus and the Big Four"). Ben Ratliff's research manifests that the group of four investors including Huntington took advantage of the assets by building a monopoly that unethically

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forced other businesses to fail. Huntington, as evident in the passage, was able to expand his control across the transportation industry furthermore creating a de facto monopoly that had a detrimental effect on the economy. Huntington was a member of the group that grew the industry, but he was also notorious for scheming against his associates. He was very effective in subjugating the railroad business while also expanding his dominance across the North American Continent. Written in 1898 New York Times reporter George Miles confirms Huntington and his associates continued building lines of track from Oregon to New Orleans, reaching 3,200 miles in length. Thousands of branches were built off periodically, subsequent railroad lines were built in Old Mexico and Guatemala resulting in over 9,000 miles of track by 1896. However, while the railroad company was in progress of building westward, Huntington was independently evolving a vast scheme of building in the south. He gained immense power by expanding his control to the East (“COLLIS P. HUNTINGTON”). The paper published in 1896 takes into account all the railroads that Huntington had established, and how the progression is expanding his power across the North American continent. The text further divulges that Huntington is a robber baron because he grew very powerful in the industry, then began to gain more power individually by building his railroads throughout the East Coast and South. His expansion across America is characterized as a robber baron act.

These unscrupulous multi-millionaires were quite frequently involved with political bribery because congress had a massive effect on economics. Huntington and his associates did enough to influence congressional or state legislature to make sure laws could not hurt their lucrative practices. Matthew Josephson, a political author and American historian who initially proclaimed the definition of a Robber Baron has stated men like Huntington are:

Carving up the country into baronies, overrunning the social capitals, penetrating the schools and the churches, the captains of industry worked also with unremitting vigilance in the field of political action. Here public opinion, as it accepted the pecuniary doctrines of the railway or industrial magnate, seemed also to welcome his penetration, through the government, into the highest assemblies of the country: the Congress, the Senate, and even sometimes the President's cabinet. (Josephson, 347)

Matthew Josephson, who scrutinized the tendencies of Huntington and other railroad magnates in 1934 states that these men would keep a close eye on politics and somehow get their influence into the highest assemblies. Huntington was a prime example of these railroad magnates who secured optimal business through corruptive bribery. To go along with Josephson's claim, New York Times Journalist Gladwin Hill wrote off the basis of well developed research that Huntington and his fellow investors “served mainly as a facade of respectability for some of the greatest ravaging of the public purse and systematic political corruption on record — of which Huntington became a prime practitioner” (“The Great Persuader”). Gladwin Hill argues that Huntington was deeply involved with political corruption,

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as his lobbyist actions were used in the desire for financial growth. Richard White, a famous American Historian distinguishes Huntington's tendencies as one similar to a robber baron, saying his philanthropic efforts would have been recognized if it was at the cost of lobbyism (White, 691). Richard White's observation elucidates how Huntington is inclined to be charitable but only at the expense of lobbyism; Ultimately his actions were discerned as immoral because of his corruptive involvement with politics, which often granted him an unfair advantage in the economy. Huntington was an eminent lobbyist of the time because his business practices were as corruptive as he was unprincipled, giving him the robber baron title.

Huntington did do commendable work for his employees and charitable events, but for the most part he deserves the title of a robber baron because of the dominant empire he built in the transportation industry that was also was involved with federal bribery. He is a robber baron because while he took control of the business he maintained his position through an oppressive monopoly; forcing other businesses to dwindle eventually making Huntington an economic powerhouse. Nonetheless, Huntington was a prominent figure on the establishment of the first transcontinental railroad. His contributions made the concept of efficient coast to coast transportation a reality. Even when his motives were immoral, his impact on the American railroads shall be remembered forever.

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