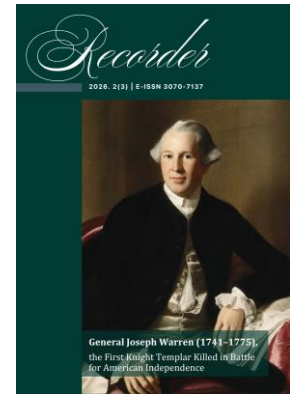




Published in the USA
 So-publisher: Cherkas Global University
 Recorder
 Has been issued since 2025.
 E-ISSN: 3070-7137
 2026. 2(3): 336-343
 DOI: 10.13187/rec.2026.3.336



Journal homepage:



John Jacob Astor (1763–1848): Businessman, Freemason, and Architect of the American Dream

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Abstract

This article examines the biography of John Jacob Astor, one of the most prominent American entrepreneurs of the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. In historiography, Astor remains a controversial figure whose life has been surrounded by numerous myths and anecdotes that lack a reliable evidentiary foundation. Consequently, his personality continues to attract the attention of both professional historians and the general public.

Born in a small German village near the Rhine River, John Jacob Astor realized at an early age his ambition to establish his own business in the New World. At the age of seventeen, he left his family home to pursue this goal. The main body of the article traces the principal stages of Astor's life and career on his path toward achieving the "American Dream."

Beyond becoming the individual who transformed American entrepreneurship in his era and the first millionaire in the United States, Astor also emerges as a figure committed to contributing to the nation's broader development. Among his most significant achievements were the establishment of trading posts on the Pacific Coast, most notably Fort Astoria; the organization of the overland expedition of 1810–1812, which helped open a route through the Rocky Mountains; his role in the expansion of New York City; and his influence on the city's architectural and social development.

One of the least studied aspects of John Jacob Astor's life is his membership in the Masonic fraternity, as well as the limited attention this subject has received in historical scholarship. The present article seeks to shed new light on this overlooked dimension of his biography.

Keywords: John Jacob Astor, millionaire, Freemason, Master of Holland Lodge, Grand Treasurer of the Grand Lodge of New York, Fort Astoria, Astor Library.

1. Introduction

Among the individuals who exemplified the realization of the **American Dream** and became models for both their contemporaries and subsequent generations, John Jacob Astor occupies a particularly prominent place. His remarkable economic and social rise in the New World continues to attract the attention of historians and other scholars.

John Jacob Astor's life was exceptionally eventful and often resembled the plot of an adventure novel, as reflected in the extensive body of both scholarly and popular biographical literature devoted to him. The present study focuses on the most significant stages of his life and career. Particular attention is given to his involvement in Freemasonry, especially his service as Master of Holland Lodge No. 8, New York City. The article also seeks to assess the extent to which this aspect of his life influenced his business career and entrepreneurial success. In addition, it briefly examines Astor's contribution to the social and cultural development of the United States.

Modern historical methods make it possible to reassess both the biography and the historical significance of John Jacob Astor, underscoring the continued relevance of research devoted to his life. A review of the

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historiography demonstrates that there remains a clear need for objective and critically grounded studies of his life, achievements, and legacy.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The present study is based primarily on biographical works devoted to John Jacob Astor. These publications draw upon a wide range of historical sources, including archival records, memoirs, personal correspondence of Astor and his contemporaries, diaries, and official documents.

One of the earliest works describing Astor's life, travels, and commercial enterprises is the narrative by the writer and Astor's friend, Washington Irving, entitled *Astoria; or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains* (Irving, 1897). Originally published in the 1830s and approved by John Jacob Astor himself, this work, although literary in character, remains a valuable source of contextual and illustrative information for historical research.

Among the earliest biographical studies published after Astor's death is the article by James Parton (Parton, 1865), which appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1865. In this work, Parton presents Astor as a positive and influential figure in the history of American entrepreneurship. He provides a detailed account of Astor's childhood, youth, and the circumstances surrounding his immigration to the United States. The article is of particular value because it incorporates personal recollections, quotes from Astor's correspondence, excerpts from his last will and testament, and other contemporary documentary evidence.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the historian Elizabeth Louisa Gebhard published *The Life and Ventures of the Original John Jacob Astor* (Gebhard, 1915). This work presents a comprehensive study of Astor's life and career based on a broad range of historical sources. The volume is also richly illustrated, enhancing its value as both a scholarly and reference work.

Gebhard characterizes John Jacob Astor as a "great pioneer," a "pathfinder," an outstanding builder of New York City, and a visionary whose achievements distinguished him from many of his contemporaries. These assessments are supported by an extensive documentary foundation, including personal correspondence, diaries, genealogical records, nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals, and numerous other primary sources.

2.2. This historical and biographical study is grounded in rigorous scholarly research and is based on the fundamental principles of historical inquiry, including historicism, systematic analysis, comprehensiveness, determinism, and historical contextualization. To provide an objective analysis of the principal stages of John Jacob Astor's life and entrepreneurial career, the study employs both general scientific methods—analysis, synthesis, deduction, and induction—and specialized historical approaches, including the idiographic, chronological, historical-genetic, and biographical methods.

3. Discussion

Debates surrounding the historical legacy of John Jacob Astor have persisted for many decades, ranging from the predominantly negative assessments of his public image that emerged shortly after his death to the more favorable interpretations advanced by later scholars. Undoubtedly, Astor remains a complex and controversial historical figure, and for this reason his life and legacy continue to merit scholarly attention.

Given the extensive historiography on the subject, only the principal directions of research will be outlined here. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century publications relied not only on the recollections and memoirs of Astor's contemporaries but also on anecdotes that were repeatedly reproduced from one work to another without critical verification (see, for example, Irving, 1897; Jacques, 1844; Parton, 1865; Gebhard, 1915; Madsen, 2001). Consequently, these works should be approached with appropriate source criticism.

A distinct group of scholarly publications presents a predominantly negative assessment of Astor's historical role. Among these is the study by the historian and journalist Gustavus Myers (Myers, 1909), who, adopting a socialist interpretation of American economic history, argued that Astor's influence on the country's socio-economic development was largely detrimental. Other scholars, including Kenneth Wiggins Porter (Porter, 1931), Arthur D. Howden Smith (Howden Smith, 1929), and John D. Haeger, have focused primarily on Astor's commercial activities, entrepreneurial strategies, and the development of his business enterprises.

Another important strand of scholarship shifts attention from Astor's personal biography to the enterprises that he established, particularly through the American Fur Company. These studies examine such topics as the founding of the trading post of Astoria, expeditions to the Pacific Northwest, and the exploration of routes across the Rocky Mountains. Representative examples include Grace Flandrau's *Astor and the Oregon Country* (Flandrau, 1920) and James P. Ronda's *Astoria & Empire* (Ronda, 1990).

In his monograph *John Jacob Astor and the First Great American Fortune* (2013), the contemporary historian Alexander Emmerich offers a more balanced assessment of Astor by examining both his successful immigration experience and his remarkable social ascent. Characterizing Astor as an individual who achieved extraordinary material and social success, Emmerich writes: "Without any doubt, Astor's career is a clear fulfillment of the American myth of success. After his arrival in the United States as a poor German immigrant in the summer of 1784, he managed to rise as no one had done before. He became a millionaire before this term even entered the American language. So John Jacob Astor already lived the American

Dream while others—Americans and Europeans alike—only dreamt of it... Astor's life is part of the American success story that is so closely connected with the American self-image" (Emmerich, 2013: 6–7).

A distinctive feature of Emmerich's study is its analysis of Astor's personal process of acculturation and its relationship to his social mobility, demonstrating how a German immigrant became one of the leading businessmen in the United States. Emmerich also explores Astor's aspiration "to become an accepted member of American society" (Emmerich, 2013: 6), the impact of his personality on American society and culture, and introduces into scholarly circulation a number of previously unpublished archival sources and personal documents relating to Astor.

Thus, despite the substantial body of literature devoted to John Jacob Astor, much of it remains journalistic or popular in nature and is characterized by varying degrees of bias and subjectivity. By contrast, the smaller body of scholarly research strives for a more objective assessment. Nevertheless, even these studies, while addressing Astor's biography, tend to focus primarily on his commercial enterprises and business activities rather than on his life as a whole.

4. Results

The character and personality of John Jacob Astor (Fig. 1), who would later become the wealthiest man in the United States, were shaped by the social, economic, and natural environment in which he was raised. Astor was born on July 17, 1763, into an impoverished family in Germany. According to archival records of the Astor family that were still available in the early twentieth century (Gebhard, 1915: 13), his ancestors were French Huguenots who fled to Germany following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The family's own tradition that traced its origins to Crusader knights has generally been regarded with skepticism by historians (Howden Smith, 1929: 15–16).

Astor spent his childhood and youth in the village of Waldorf, in the Duchy of Baden, situated amid forests near an ancient Roman military road. Waldorf was known for its vineyards, wheat cultivation, forests, lakes, and hunting grounds. Several biographers have suggested that this natural environment contributed to Astor's physical endurance, robust health, and strength of character (Parton, 1865: 310).

Astor's father, Johann Jacob Astor, was a butcher who supported the family through seasonal work. He trained his sons in the trade, taking them with him to slaughter livestock and sell meat. Contemporary biographical accounts portray him as a harsh and extravagant man who showed little affection toward his children. By contrast, Astor's mother, Maria Magdalena Vorfelder, devoted herself to their upbringing and surrounded them with affection, particularly her youngest son, John Jacob. Despite the family's modest means, she created a warm and orderly household and was widely regarded as a practical, industrious, and frugal homemaker. These qualities were inherited by her children. As Elizabeth L. Gebhard observed, "that the mother of John Jacob was possessed of a strong character, marked capability, and sterling virtues, was amply shown in the starting of four sons, in the midst of untoward surroundings, toward successful and honorable manhood" (Gebhard, 1915: 6).

John Jacob had three elder brothers—George, Henry, and John Melchior—each of whom eventually left Waldorf to pursue independent careers. George, the eldest, settled in London, where he became a partner in a musical instrument manufacturing business. Henry emigrated to the New World, while John Melchior remained in Germany and, after establishing an independent household, served as estate manager for a wealthy nobleman. The example set by his older brothers undoubtedly had a profound influence on the young John Jacob and inspired his own ambition to leave his native village. Moreover, during his adolescence his mother died, and his father remarried (Howden Smith, 1929: 17). Astor's biographers generally agree that his stepmother showed him little affection. Several daughters were born from his father's second marriage, and the responsibility for helping to care for his younger half-sisters also fell upon John Jacob.

John Jacob Astor's worldview and religious convictions were significantly influenced by his schoolteacher, Valentine Jeune, a French Protestant, and by the Protestant minister John Philip Steiner. Astor enjoyed attending school and proved to be a diligent and capable student. Although Protestants constituted a minority in Waldorf and were generally excluded from holding the highest public offices, Astor became a committed Lutheran in his youth and remained faithful to his religious convictions throughout his life (Parton, 1865: 309).

Accounts of the New World and stories of travel to America reached Waldorf and captured the imagination of many young people. Equally influential were the letters Astor received from his elder brothers in America and England, which further strengthened his determination to leave his native village. Having formulated a plan for his future, the seventeen-year-old Astor set out to realize his ambition. Leaving his family home, he traveled through the Netherlands to England, where he joined his eldest brother George. His intention was to learn English, earn sufficient savings, and eventually emigrate to the New World (Howden Smith, 1929: 24–25). While in England, Astor worked in his brother's business, which specialized in the manufacture of flutes and pianos.

In 1783, following the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War and the recognition of the independence of the United States, Astor purchased a ticket to Baltimore. In November of that year, carrying only five pounds sterling, he embarked on his journey to America (Parton, 1865: 311). During the voyage he

experienced a chance encounter that would prove decisive for his future career: he became acquainted with a fur trader, who introduced him to the basic principles of the fur trade. From Baltimore, Astor traveled to New York, arriving in March 1784, where he joined his brother Henry, who was employed as a butcher. Inspired by the prospect of entering the fur trade, Astor soon found employment with Robert Bowne, beginning at the lowest level by cleaning and protecting furs from moth damage (Parton, 1865: 313). He subsequently engaged in commercial transactions with hunters and Native Americans and even traveled to remote frontier regions to purchase furs directly. It was in this field that his exceptional entrepreneurial abilities became apparent, particularly his talent for recognizing profitable opportunities and maximizing the return from every business transaction.



Fig. 1. John Jacob Astor (Gebhard, 1915: VI)

During this same period, John Jacob Astor married Sarah Cox Todd (Fig. 2), who came from a family of Scottish immigrants. According to contemporary sources, Sarah occupied a higher social position than Astor, being related to the prominent Brevoort family, and her dowry has been estimated at between 100 and 300 dollars (Howden Smith, 1929: 39; Gebhard, 1915: 80). Consequently, some historians have suggested that the marriage was one of convenience.

The subsequent course of their family life, however, provides little support for such an interpretation. On the contrary, Astor found in his wife a devoted companion who actively supported him in both his personal and commercial affairs. As James Parton observed: "She threw herself heartily into her husband's growing business, laboring with her own hands, buying, sorting, and beating the furs. He used to say that she was as good a judge of the value of peltries as himself and that her opinion in a matter of business was better than that of most merchants" (Parton, 1865: 314).

The marriage produced eight children, five of whom survived to adulthood, while the remaining three died in infancy.



Fig. 2. Mrs. John Jacob Astor (Sarah Todd), 1800. Author: Jarvis John Wesley.

Beginning in 1786, John Jacob Astor established his own business and soon engaged in commercial transactions with firms in London. While exporting furs to England, he imported musical instruments—including flutes, pianos, and violins—to the United States, where he subsequently opened specialized retail stores. During the 1790s, Astor's business expanded both geographically and organizationally. His commercial network extended into the Great Lakes region, while he increasingly relied on trading agents and broadened his cooperation with hunters, trappers, and collectors. At the same time, he acquired his own means of transportation, including vessels for the shipment of goods.

Alongside his growing commercial activities, Astor became actively involved in Freemasonry. He was one of the founders of Holland Lodge No. 8 in New York ([Howden Smith, 1929: 63](#)) and became its Worshipful Master in 1788 (according to other sources, in 1798) ([Gebhard, 1915: 126](#)). He also served as Grand Treasurer of the Grand Lodge of New York from 1798 to 1801. In addition to these offices, Astor was actively engaged in the administrative work of the fraternity, serving as Junior Grand Warden (1796 and 1801) and as Secretary. As Grand Treasurer of the Knight Templar Encampment, he bore the title "Sir John Astor" ([Gebhard, 1915: 126](#)). According to *Encyclopedia Masonica*, "the books which he wrote out in his own copper-plate hand are still in the vaults of Masonic Hall, New York City."

Astor's Masonic connections, including his relationships with influential American political leaders who were also Freemasons, proved advantageous to his commercial career ([Irving, 1897: 20–28](#)). These connections facilitated, among other things, permission to continue transporting goods aboard his own vessels when the federal government imposed the Embargo of 1807, the establishment and expansion of the American Fur Company, financial support for the War of 1812 followed by the strengthening of his business interests, as well as a number of successful real estate and banking transactions. In modern terms, it may be said that Astor was among the first entrepreneurs to obtain valuable insider information concerning forthcoming political and socio-economic developments and that he possessed a remarkable ability to assess and utilize such information in his commercial enterprises.

Freemasonry also enabled Astor to establish friendships with several of the most influential public figures of his era. As Alexander Cortes notes, Astor "befriended Governor George Clinton, bought a share of the Tontine Coffee House, and made important friendships with Stephen Van Rensselaer and Aaron Burr. Thanks to these acquaintances, Astor was able to slide with relative ease into the upper echelons of society, although there were always plenty of remarks made about the German immigrant..." ([Cortes, 2013](#)).

The Tontine Coffee House served as a meeting place for the Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves and Protecting Such of Them as Have Been Liberated. Its committees were composed primarily of Quakers, including Samuel Franklin, John Keese, Marinus Willett, Jacob Seaman, William Shotwell, and others ([Gebhard, 1915: 67](#)). The society's president was John Jay, a distinguished American statesman and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States.

Examining the Masonic period of Astor's life, Alexander Emmerich observes that "Being a Freemason was something the public was very skeptical of." In Emmerich's assessment, although Astor's membership in the fraternity proved advantageous for his commercial success, it also contributed negatively to his public reputation. As an example, Emmerich discusses the speculation surrounding the Louisiana Purchase in the early nineteenth century, in which Astor and several prominent Freemasons were involved, concluding that

"Forming an alliance with Clinton and Morris, who were leading Freemasons themselves, would not have been received well among the New Yorkers. This would have stirred their fears of secret societies" (Emmerich, 2013: 59).

By the end of the eighteenth century, John Jacob Astor had begun exploring opportunities to enter the East Asian market, a goal he realized in 1800 when his first trading vessel reached Canton. For nearly three decades thereafter, Astor's company conducted extensive trade with China (Flandrau, 1920: 6–7), importing such commodities as tea, silk, and porcelain, while also participating in the illicit opium trade.

During the same period, Astor increasingly diversified his wealth through investments in real estate, paying particular attention to land on Manhattan Island. At the same time, the Astor family relocated to Broadway, and his personal fortune had grown to approximately \$250,000 (Parton, 1865: 315). Despite his immense wealth, Astor was known for his personal frugality and his dislike of ostentatious luxury. As James Parton observed, "his luxuries were a pipe, a glass of beer, a game of draughts, a ride on horseback and the theatre. Of the theatre he was particularly fond. He seldom missed a good performance in the palmy days of the 'Old Park'" (Parton, 1865: 315).

Another of Astor's most significant enterprises, one that carried not only economic but also political and social importance, was the establishment of a chain of trading posts extending from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean (Flandrau, 1920). In 1811, Fort Astoria was founded on the Columbia River (Irving, 1897: 120–126) (Fig. 3), becoming the first permanent American settlement on the Pacific Coast. Astor also financed the overland expedition of 1810–1812, which identified and documented South Pass, providing emigrants with a practical route across the Rocky Mountains. These initiatives not only demonstrated Astor's remarkable organizational and managerial abilities but also reflected the breadth of his strategic vision for the future expansion of the United States.

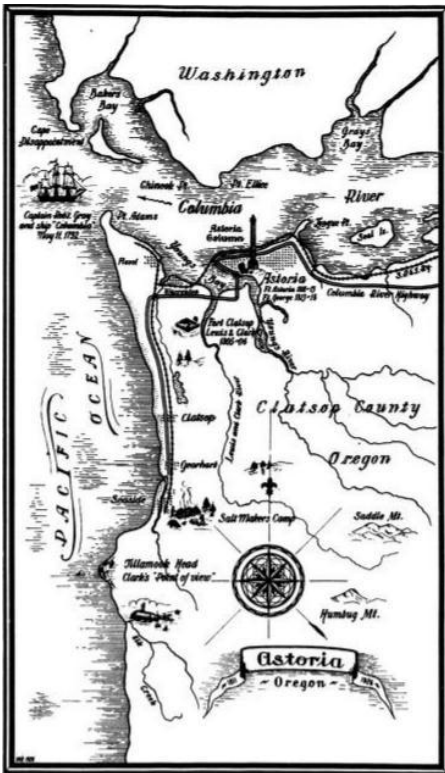


Fig. 3. Trading post Astoria, founded John Jacob Astor (Flandrau, 1920: 8).

By the 1830s, having accumulated a fortune measured in millions of dollars, John Jacob Astor gradually withdrew from active business. He devoted increasing attention to his family, which by then included numerous grandchildren, and cultivated a deep interest in literature while maintaining close relationships with some of the leading literary figures of his time. Among the frequent visitors to his home were the writer Washington Irving and the poet and orator Fitz-Greene Halleck.

In politics, Astor was a supporter of the Whig Party, particularly of its leader, Henry Clay. He regularly welcomed Clay into his home and actively supported his presidential campaigns.

Astor's contemporaries often ridiculed his frugality and criticized him for what they perceived as a lack of public philanthropy. John Jacob Astor died on March 29, 1848, surrounded by members of his family. Following his death, his last will and testament became public, revealing a number of significant charitable bequests. Most notably, Astor allocated \$400,000 for the establishment of a public library (Fig. 4). The new

library building was officially opened in 1854 and soon became one of New York City's most distinguished cultural landmarks. Its original collection comprised approximately 80,000 volumes.

The first Board of Trustees included several of the era's most prominent public figures: Washington Irving, William Backhouse Astor, Daniel Lord, Jr., James G. King, Joseph Green Cogswell, Fitz-Greene Halleck, Samuel B. Ruggles, Samuel Ward, Jr., Charles Astor Bristed, John Adams Dix (who succeeded Henry Brevoort, Jr., following his death in 1848), together with the Mayor of the City of New York (*Astor Library Records*). In the late nineteenth century, the Astor Library became one of the institutions that merged to form the New York Public Library.



Fig. 4. The Astor Library (Gebhard, 1915)

The German Society of New York, of which John Jacob Astor had been a member since the late 1780s, received a bequest of \$30,000, subject to the condition "of their investing it in bond and applying it for the purpose of an office and giving advice and information without charge to all emigrants arriving and for the purpose of protecting them [from] imposition" (Parton, 1865: 322). An additional \$30,000 was bequeathed to the Home for Aged Ladies, while the Blind Asylum and the Half Orphan Asylum each received \$5,000, and the German Reformed Congregation was granted \$2,000. Astor also left \$50,000 to assist the poor of his native Waldorf, where the charitable institution known as Astor House was subsequently established.

5. Conclusion

John Jacob Astor remains one of the most enduring embodiments of the American Dream. Having left Germany at the age of seventeen, he rose to become the first millionaire in the United States. His path to material prosperity and social prominence, however, was far more complex than is often portrayed in popular historical literature. The environment in which Astor was raised and the circumstances of his family life exerted a profound influence on the formation of his entrepreneurial ambitions and his determination to achieve financial success. The hardships of his youth fostered habits of thrift, discipline, and careful financial management. His courage, perseverance, determination, and ambition enabled him not only to cross the Atlantic and establish himself in the New World but also to venture into remote frontier regions, where he traded directly with Native Americans and fur hunters during the formative years of his business career. His foresight, exceptional ability to cultivate influential social networks, and talent for analyzing and effectively applying information obtained from a variety of sources became essential factors in the success of his numerous commercial enterprises.

One of the least studied aspects of Astor's life remains his involvement in Freemasonry. This dimension of his biography has received comparatively little attention in historical scholarship and warrants further investigation. Astor was among the charter members of Holland Lodge No. 8 in New York and distinguished himself through his commitment to the fraternity and his active organizational leadership. He served as Worshipful Master and later held the office of Grand Treasurer of the Knight Templar Encampment. Membership in the Masonic fraternity enabled Astor to establish lasting relationships with influential political leaders and members of the American elite, connections that he skillfully employed in the development of his commercial enterprises.

John Jacob Astor's influence on the development of the United States was both broad and enduring. He not only transformed the nation's commercial landscape but also made substantial contributions in several areas of lasting national importance. His achievements included the establishment of trading posts on the Pacific Coast, the financing of the landmark overland expedition of 1810–1812 that opened a practical route across the Rocky Mountains for thousands of emigrants, and his significant role in the transformation of New York City, influencing its architectural character, cultural life, and social development.

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