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Richard Canfield: The Gentleman Gambler of New York

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Description: At the turn of the 20th century, Richard Canfield brought Monte Carlo type class to New York City. However, not everyone enjoyed what he was offering. Read the story of Canfield vs the State.

RICHARD CANFIELD

The Gentleman Gambler of New York

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For years I have admired the beauty and elegance of ivory chips. Knowing the kind of collector I am, I have refrained for adding even one to my collection. Like potato chips, you can't have just one! However, when a friend of mine came across some ivory chips from the famous Madison Square Club in New York City, I couldn't resist. My love for history and the significance that these chips played in illegal gambling history made it impossible for me to refuse. These chips are now the oldest in my collection, and also some of my favorite. Let's see who was the man behind them...

Richard Canfield was the epitome of a self-made man. Unlike many of his future partners, Canfield's roots were humble and his road towards being a wealthy gentleman was anything but easy. Born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1855, Canfield was tasked early to help out his family financially. His father, a New England whaleman, had sustained serious on-the-job injuries in a time long before workers could seek compensation. Young Richard spent his days working odd newspaper jobs, and evenings learning the gambling trade at some of the area's casinos.

By the age of 21, Canfield was quite the gambler, amassing a sizable reserve of \$20,000 that he had squirreled out of a small stakes casino he opened on New York City's Westminister Street. In the next few years, his reputation grew and was eventually noticed by a faro house owner named Thomas Sprague who

convinced the young gambler to open a casino with him in Providence, Rhode Island. This venture would not last long however as within one year, both Canfield and his partners would be busted, arrested and sentenced to six months in jail. It was a shocking outcome as until this point, gamblers were routinely just given small fines and released.



As the city's gamblers did a collective scratching of their heads, information about Canfield's personal life started circulating. It seems that the young and good-looking gambler had a wandering eye, and his appetites were primarily satiated by the wives of local businessmen. It was becoming evident that this was more of a personal matter than a legal one. Message received. Canfield did his time and headed out of Rhode Island and back to the big city of New York.

This time, Canfield, now a little older, wiser and richer, decided to take his gambling ventures to another level. He created two of New York's finest casinos – the Saratoga and the Madison Square Club.

The Saratoga Club, located at 5 East Forty-fourth St, was a four story narrow brick building that functioned both as a personal art gallery and a casino. Canfield named the place after the Club House in Saratoga, New York, that he admired (and would eventually himself own). He even went so far as to have the architect of the Saratoga house brought in to oversee the \$400,000 renovation. Everything about the Saratoga Club was upscale. The

club's great bronze doors opened automatically for the well-dressed patrons who were treated to gourmet meals and choices from the club's \$75,000 inventory of fine wines. All of this elegance was of course designed to loosen the wallets of the visitors and service the high stakes gambling that occurred upstairs.

Canfield also opened the Madison Square Club at 22 West Twenty-sixth Street. This four story conventional type brownstone house was a great location and helped diversify his holdings. The first floor had a reception area, with a back room for roulette and faro play. The second floor had poker tables (later replaced with the more profitable faro tables), with the third and fourth floors reserved for living quarters. Like the Saratoga Club, the Madison Square Club was not the place for the casual gambler. A large bank roll was needed to enter and more times than not, a smaller bankroll would accompany the player on the way out of the club.

There was a misstep in the Madison Square Club however, and it came in the form of his partnership with local gambler David Duff. What must have seemed like a good idea at the time quickly turned into a nightmare. In theory, the sharing of the responsibilities would help Canfield manage his multiple locations, however, instead of a help, Duff quickly became a hindrance as his rise in success changed him for the worse. Duff drank more than he could handle and made a general spectacle of himself around town. Preferring to spend more time in other people's casinos, he quickly lost large sums of money – mostly settled on the "Duff and Canfield" account. By the end of 1890, Canfield had had enough, purchased Duff's debts and threw him out of the business. Lesson learned, Canfield would proceed on his own.

Life during the 1890's was good for Richard Canfield. Known about town as a gentleman gambler, he grew his empire to include not only the much admired Club House in Saratoga, but also the popular Nautilus Club in Newport, Rhode Island. His casinos were earning him

millions, and wise investments in the stock market were making him even more. He was the man with the golden touch and for a time seemed like an unstoppable force. But of course, nothing lasts forever.

The century wasn't the only thing turning in 1900 as this year would mark the beginning of the end for Richard Canfield's carefree days. The attitude of the average New Yorker against gambling was no longer ambivalence. Their voices grew louder and their cause needed a spokesman. Entering the scene was local judge William Travers Jerome (below) and his antigambling Committee of Fifteen.

In late 1900, Jerome and his band of raiders broke down doors and seized gambling equipment all over town. Despite not actually taking an axe to Canfield's doors, Jerome took his displeasure to the courts and newspapers declaring that gambling in New York centered on Canfield. He started spreading rumors about Canfield's clubs such as cheating and (perhaps the worst of all) allowing women to gamble!



There was no doubt where Jerome's efforts would be centered from here on. For the next couple of years, Canfield and Jerome (now District Attorney) played cat and mouse, each declaring victory at different times. Finally, in December 1902, the raid heard around the world occurred at the Saratoga Club on Forty-fourth street.

Canfield had been tipped off about the impending raid a couple of days before and took immediate action. When Jerome arrived to serve the warrant, the building was locked tight. Unable to budge the massive bronze doors, Jerome borrowed a ladder and entered the building from

the second floor. Once inside, the raiders were met with emptiness. Each floor inspected brought them closer to failure. As they were getting ready to leave, an inspector noticed that one of the rooms on the top floor was significantly shorter than all the others. After a closer inspection, it looked as though a new wall had been put up recently. With the swing of an axe, the wall collapsed, revealing a hidden room filled to the ceiling gambling equipment. It was the bonanza they were looking for.

Although the next morning's newspapers misreport a basement entry, their information of the equipment seized was right on. Along with tables and roulette wheels were 50,000 ivory chips. Descriptions of the chips are said to be monogrammed "M.S.C." and "D&C" (Duff and Canfield). The D&C chips have not yet been found, but the M.S.C. have come out in very scarce limited numbers. Where the thousands of others chips are is a mystery.

What followed was months of public gamesmanship played primarily through the newspapers in a way that could only come from this time in America between two gentlemen bent on the appearances of grace and elegance.

In response to Canfield asking for Jerome's arrest for breaking and entering, Jerome responded in an editorial with "It amazes me that a gang like this should be so stupid as to play into my hands as they have done... The

best thing for a lawbreaker to do is to engage in just as few legal contests as possible." He proceeds to then quote a Lord Tennyson poem to wrap up his point.

Canfield replied the next day with his own response, tongue firmly in cheek, "It is absolutely impossible for an unlettered felon to cope with the intellect, culture and refinement of a person like the district attorney, therefore I would make a most pitiable spectacle of myself in attempting to reply. Besides, I have employed lawyers to do the talking for me. The district attorney evidently thinks the place to try this case is in the newspapers. Maybe he is right and I must bow to such a superior intellect."

Canfield did let his attorney's do a majority of the heavy lifting. Refusing to yield, he fought the case tooth and nail for years. Finally, in December 1904, despite his desires to proceed further, his lawyers came to the end of the road and could do no more. He either had to give a plea or face possible jail time. Richard Canfield entered a plea of guilty for being a common gambler and was fined \$1,000. He paid it (easily) and left the courts a free man. The state had won a victory – albeit a moral one.

The legal fight had cost Canfield much more than a \$1,000 fine (and an estimated \$100,000 in lawyer fees). It had taken the fight out of him. He gave up most of his gambling interests and focused on art collecting and investing in stocks.

The market panic of 1907 took a fair amount of his fortune, but he persevered.

In 1914, the tired and overweight 59 year old Canfield took a misstep and fell down the stairs in a subway station. The injuries, although seemingly insignificant at first, would prove his undoing. The next morning he was found unresponsive and died shortly after, ending the life of a true gambling legend.

