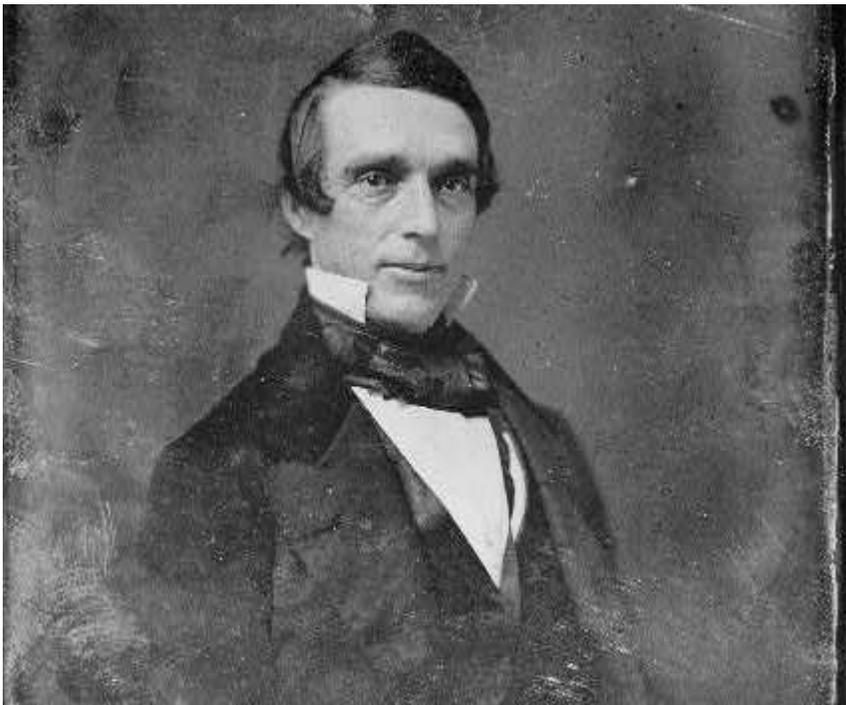


Elegant Oakey

Abraham Oakey Hall (July 26, 1826 – October 7, 1898), Mayor of New York from 1869 to 1872, was known as “Elegant Oakey,” since he was thought to be the very model of serenity and respectability. His biographer, Michael J. Rubbinaccio, wrote that his “outfits were always immaculate and fancy – the best fashions of the day” and his “mannerisms and the way he carried himself, complete with the outfit,” led to his nickname. He also had an important connection to New Orleans.

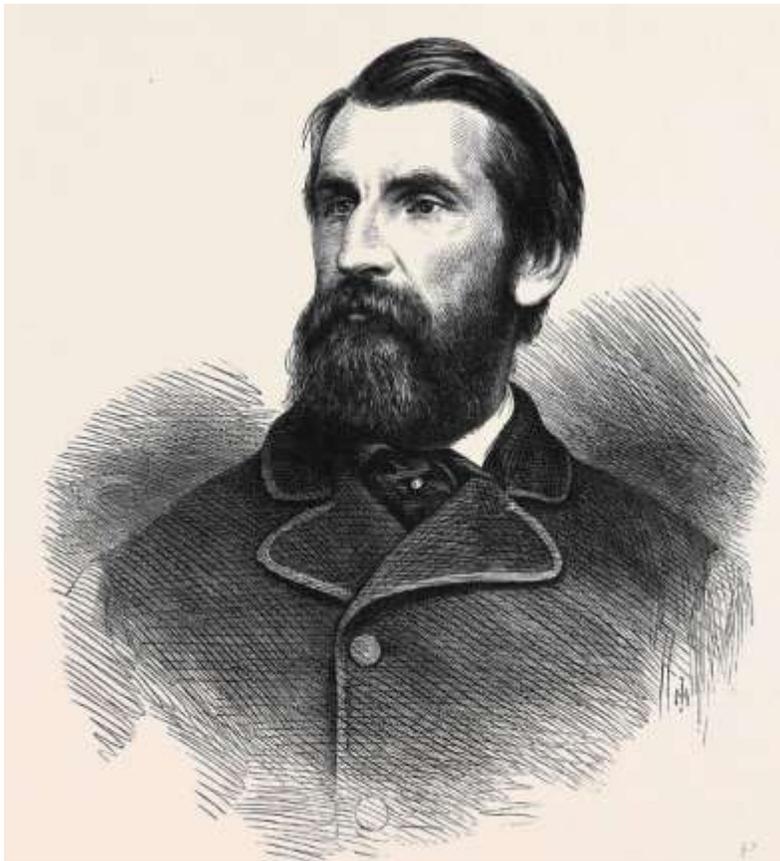


Early photograph of A. Oakey Hall, by Matthew Brady

Abraham Oakey Hall, debonair American statesman, attorney and writer, was born in his grandfather’s house in Albany, New York, the son of Morgan Hall and Elsie Oakey. Shortly after his parents’ marriage in 1825, they moved to New Orleans so that Morgan Hall could further his career as a commission agent. Elsie’s brother, Samuel Oakey, had arrived in the Crescent City in 1819 and had been successful in the mercantile trade, serving as president of the Exchange and a member of the Chamber of Commerce. Elsie returned to Albany to be with her family when Oakey was born.

Sadly, A. Oakey Hall’s early childhood was marked by poverty after the

death of his father in 1830, but the family persevered. He graduated from New York University, where he proved himself an exceptional Latin scholar. He paid his college bills by his own labor, writing for the magazines and newspapers of his day. After attending Harvard Law School until 1845, before dropping out to apprentice in order to complete his legal education, the young Hall worked in the New York law office of Charles W. Sandford before moving to New Orleans in mid-1845, where he apprenticed at the law firm of Thomas & John Slidell, New Orleans' oldest law firm (Chaffe McCall, LLP, today).



"Elegant Oakey" Hall, Mayor of New York, 1869 - 1872

Hall not only lived and worked in New Orleans for a few short years, but he was a prolific writer. While working at the Slidell law firm, Hall wrote articles using the pen name of Hans Yorkel, serving as the New York correspondent for the *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*. He also wrote for the *Delta* and the *Literary World*. In 1846, Hall sat for the Louisiana Bar exam and Judah P. Benjamin, later "The Brains of the Confederacy", was one of his examiners. By 1848, he decided to move back to New York, where he practiced law and was admitted to the bar in 1851. Also in that year, Hall authored a book entitled *A*

Manhattan in New Orleans, or, Phases of "Crescent City" Life, which offered a Northerner's observations of a bustling Southern port city. Reviews were mixed.



*New Orleans in the late 1840s, A. Oakley Hall's time in the city
Lithograph of view by Lewis Henry, published 1854 - 1857*

It was apparent that Hall was not overly fond of New Orleans, which he determined was "decidedly entitled to be called the Calcutta of America."

Here is how he expressed that concept:

"Thwarted enterprise, baffled endeavor, youthful hope, desperate plannings, all emigrate to its precincts to battle with fate, or to court fortune; to amass wealth, and if living after the 'gold hunt is over,' to return *home* to spend it. Few and far between are they who cultivate within it a home feeling, or who fall in love with it at first sight; or who, by long residence, become growingly enamored of its charms."

Hall believed "Work, work, work," to be the mantra and "unceasing cry" of each inhabitant, except among the Creoles, whom he called "the aborigines of the place". He also mentioned "Creole loaferism."

He did love, however, the charms of St. Charles Street, especially those two blocks between the magnificent St. Charles Hotel and Lafayette Square:

"I can never forget those two marvellous blocks," he wrote. "For in no other metropolis has greater vexation been brought to brick and mortar, lath and timber, than we find endured by these two blocks, which, from newborn autumn until dying spring, and redolent of oysters and lunches, juleps and punches; or filled with the echoes of falling tenpins and clicking billiard balls."

Hall also contemplated “the momentous question whether it was orthodox to eat rum-omelette with ‘pompano’-fish.”

Upon his return to Manhattan in 1849, Hall married Katherine Louise “Kate” Barnes, of a well-to-do New York family, and wrote her a Valentine’s Day poem the following spring. He had also become a very good lawyer, and at a very young age. He was soon appointed Assistant District Attorney for New York County and a short time later even argued a case before the state Supreme Court — all before he was 25 years old.



1847 photograph of the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans

The New York Herald provided this summary of Hall’s legal acumen:

“In the first place, he is unquestionably, for his years (24 years old in 1850), one of the best read lawyers at the New York Bar. On occasions his argument is close and rigid, a compact network of steel

impressions to assault. Generally, however, his legal arguments abound in coruscations* of vivacious fancy. He has a faculty of breathing into the dullest of topics material and imparting animation to the dryest of topics.” *dazzling, or sparkling, virtuosity

In 1854, he was elected New York County District Attorney on the Whig ticket, and served his first term from 1855 to 1857.

Hall also authored, in 1857, a Christmas novel entitled “Old Whitey’s Christmas Trot”.



OLD WHITEY'S CHRISTMAS TROT.

Running as a Republican, Hall was re-elected as the New York County D. A. in November 1861, and elected again in 1864 and 1867 as the Democratic Tammany Hall candidate. As District Attorney he is reported to have prosecuted over 12,000 cases and was also on duty during the Draft Riots, working many rioters through the court system and directly to jail. This was popular with the voters. But Tammany Hall, it must be remembered, was the corrupt powerful political machine run by William M. “Boss” Tweed. During his fourth term as District Attorney, Hall was elected Mayor of New York City as a Democrat supported by Tammany Hall and served two terms from January 1, 1869 to December 31, 1872. But just how involved was Mayor Hall in the Tammany machine? Was he corrupt, clever or just a little clueless?

In 1869, with many civic projects, ripe for graft and embezzlement,

being implemented throughout New York, "Boss" Tweed and his "Ring" counted on Hall's charm to distract the press and public from any charges of malfeasance. They appreciated Hall's confident and likable demeanor. Bearded and bespectacled, Hall spoke eloquently, related humorous anecdotes and often quoted Shakespeare.

Offering such an attractive front, Hall's level of involvement in the graft and corruption of his day is unclear. He was brought before a grand jury on more than one occasion, once during the final days of his mayoral tenure. One trial ended in a mistrial, and the other in acquittal. Despite Hall's actual signatures on numerous suspicious invoices, Hall claimed that he was much too involved in the daily running of the city to have carefully inspected every document presented before him.

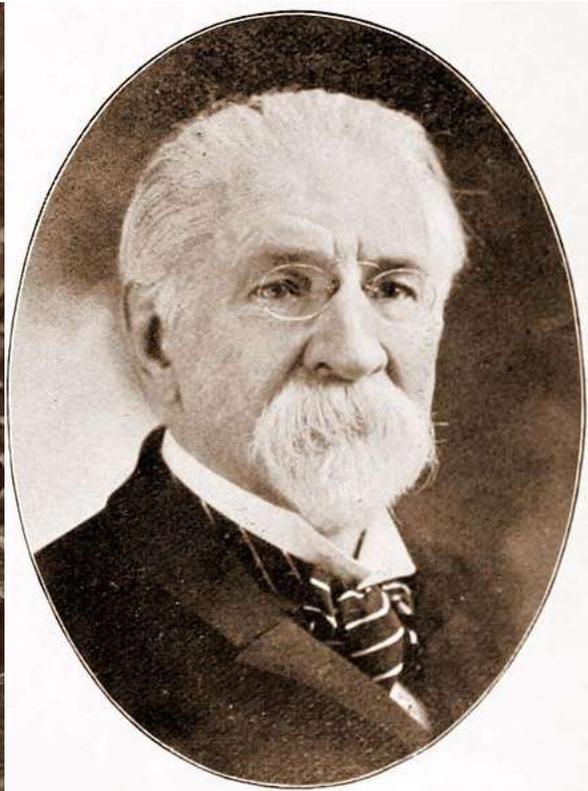


Cartoonist Thomas Nast depicted Hall, reading Shakespeare, as "Blissfully Ignorant" of the corruption around him.

As mayor, it was not easy for Hall to mediate effectively the ongoing political clashes between New York's Irish population and the Anglo "Nativists", and riots did occur. This hurt Hall's popularity, as he attempted to find a middle ground. Thomas Nast considered Hall to be

the worst of the Tweed politicians for the very reason that his education and legal credentials were of such a high standing.

Despite the stigma of corruption during his tenure as mayor, Hall did not crawl away into oblivion. He led quite an active and colorful life after his time in office, working as newspaper editor for the *New York World* and London correspondent for the *New York Herald* and the *Morning Journal*. He even managed a theatre and produced and starred in his own play, *The Crucible*, the story of a man falsely accused of stealing. It was not, however, well received, and few went to see it.



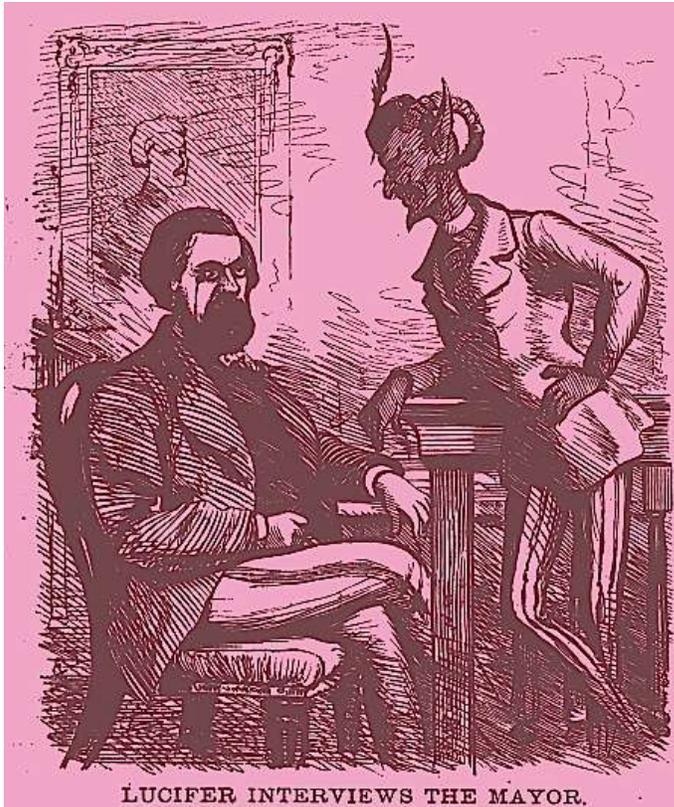
A. Oakey Hall, circa 1870

and in 1898, the year he died

In his later years, A. Oakey Hall once again returned to the practice of law, this time in London, England, where he became a passionate spokesperson for municipal reform. There, Hall brought suit against Liberal politician, jurist and historian, Viscount Bryce, for defamation of character and libel, but the case was eventually dropped.

Hall returned to New York, where he defended the famous anarchist, Emma Goldman, in 1893 on charges of inciting a riot. Despite all the

hoopla and press coverage surrounding these two noteworthy New Yorkers, Goldman and Hall lost the case and she was sentenced to a year in prison. Nonetheless, having the charges against her reduced, she was pleased with Hall's defense and described him as a great champion of free speech. Goldman gained iconic status, after decades of obscurity, by a rekindling of interest in her life by various scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, and she was portrayed in Warren Beatty's 1981 film, *Reds*.



Did the devil get to Mayor Hall? "Want your place paved, you say? Certainly, Sir; how will you have it done, with good intentions or with broken promises? We will supply you with either at the City Hall." (appearing in *Punchinello*, April 1870)

Hall died of heart disease on October 7, 1898, at age 72, at his home at 68 Washington Square South, just blocks from where he first attended college. Leaving a widow, four daughters and one son, he was laid to rest at Trinity Cemetery, located at 155th Street and Broadway in Manhattan. He and his wife had converted to Roman Catholicism the Spring before his death. He was originally a Presbyterian, and Mrs. Hall an Episcopalian.

One friend, an ex-editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, wrote in 1893, "It was always clear enough that Oakey Hall had not shared in the plunder of the Tweed Ring. This might imply, but it does not necessarily follow, that he was the dupe of Tweed and Tweed's associates. I have always thought that he was the victim of a singularly optimistic temperament. To him nothing ever seemed awry except the past."

This ex-editor also wrote of Hall, "His amusements were literary and artistic and his tastes were scholarly. His library was at one time one of the best private collections of books in New York city."

A brilliant figure in the courtroom, yes - a public figure whose administration was tainted by corruption whether he was a party to it or not, yes - but what did Hall think were the prerequisites of "the perfect citizen"? Hall gave the answer in a public address, perhaps his first, to the Irving Literary Union Club's first annual meeting at the Hope Chapel:

"A portrait" of such a man, he said, "will be of him whose honor, when reflected in truth's mirror, shows no stain of meanness or deceit; who hath proved himself a good son and watchful father; who never points irreverently to the lofty hills of Zion; who hath purchased the truth, not to sell it again; who is a law-loving, law-abiding man, embracing no higher law doctrine (the measure of idiosyncrasy); who is tender of his neighbor's name and rights; who hath a heart for the despised and oppressed of the earth; who is a Christian gentleman in purity of thought and speech; who remembers and practices the patriotism of his forefathers; who never shrinks from public services, and yet never seeks them, and whose mind, from day to day, expands under the genial influence of high-toned letters."

Abraham Oakey Hall, elegant in his oratory, as well as in his appearance, clearly believed in the examined life. For Socrates, the unexamined life was not worth living; and philosophy - the love of wisdom itself - was life's highest pursuit. For Cicero, the examined life was a life rooted in honesty and serving the public. For Oakey Hall, it was a life much like the one he described above in his early speech. Hopefully, that is the one he achieved.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia

"Elegant Oakey"
Ned Hémard
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