

HISTORY OF THE ORME WILSON STOREHOUSE

Constructed in 1852 by Richard Thornton Wilson



MELISSA CLEMENTINE JOHNSTON WILSON



RICHARD THORNTON WILSON, SR.

From his humble beginnings in Gainesville, Georgia to his successful banking career in New York City, the story of R. T. Wilson is a remarkable one to be sure. He was born in 1829 not far from Dahlonega, where the discovery of gold prompted Cherokee removal on the infamous Trail of Tears. As the fifth son in a family of eight, Wilson left home to seek his fortune at an early age not wanting to continue in his Scottish father's tanning trade.

Wilson served as a commissary general with the Confederate Army. He traveled to Europe as the fiscal agent of the Confederate government and was active there raising money for war efforts in the South. After the war ended, Wilson invested in railroads, cotton and other commodities. He moved his family to New York City where he founded the banking firm R. T. Wilson & Co. and the Wilsons became part of the social elite. The family kept a second home in the upscale community of Newport, Rhode Island and also traveled extensively throughout Europe. The New York Times society columns were filled with tidbits of the family's activities.

In about 1851, he made his way to Loudon, Tennessee where he met and married a local Loudon girl named Melissa Clementine "Clemmie" Johnston. With the aid of his father-in-law, Wilson established his own general merchandise business. In 1852, he erected this beautiful brick building in partnership with James Chambers Orme, a conductor on the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad.

The Orme/Wilson Warehouse, which was placed on the National Historic Register in 1980, originally fronted on Wharf Street, a vital trade artery linking steamboat to railroad. Steamboat travelers would pass here on their way to the Leuty Hotel, formerly located in the vicinity of the current Loudon Post Office.



Located in the Historic Orme Wilson Storehouse

Thanks to their domestic and European connections, the family gained a reputation as "the marrying Wilsons," as R.T. and his wife brokered high profile marriages for all five of their children. They welcomed European royalty and American millionaires into the family fold and Clemmie earned the well-deserved nickname "Queen of the American Matchmakers."

Clemmie died in 1908 at the age of 77. When he died in 1910 at the age of 82, R. T. Wilson was worth an estimated \$40,000,000. Although maybe not as rich or as famous as some of the millionaires of his era, Wilson's rags to riches story is still one of great inspiration.



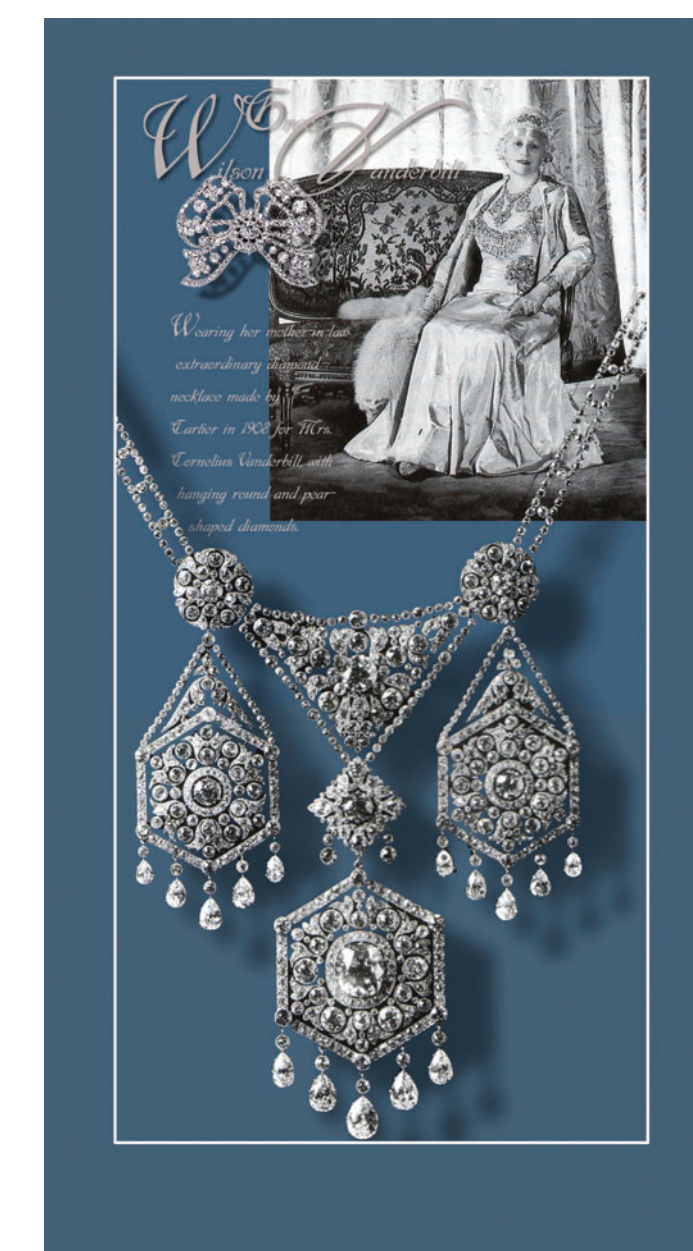
GRACE WILSON VANDERBILT



CORNELIUS VANDERBILT III

Grace Wilson Vanderbilt
The youngest of R. T. and Melissa Clementine Wilson's children, Grace was both pretty and privileged. In 1886, she married the frail Cornelius Vanderbilt III, which caused the young Nelly to be disinherited from the Vanderbilt fortunes by his parents who thought Grace too old and workfully for their son. Despite their reservations, Grace was only about 3 years older than Nelly according to census records.

Cornelius Vanderbilt III
Grandson of the Commodore himself, Cornelius Vanderbilt III married Grace Wilson in a lavish New York City ceremony in 1886. Although she became the "Queen of the Golden Age" and the most important society maven in New York City, Nelly preferred the quiet solitude of his yacht over his wife's parties, which were attended by English royalty, American presidents and anybody who was anybody in the social circles of the world.



These pictures of Grace Vanderbilt's jewels appeared in the "Royal Magazine" of Denmark.

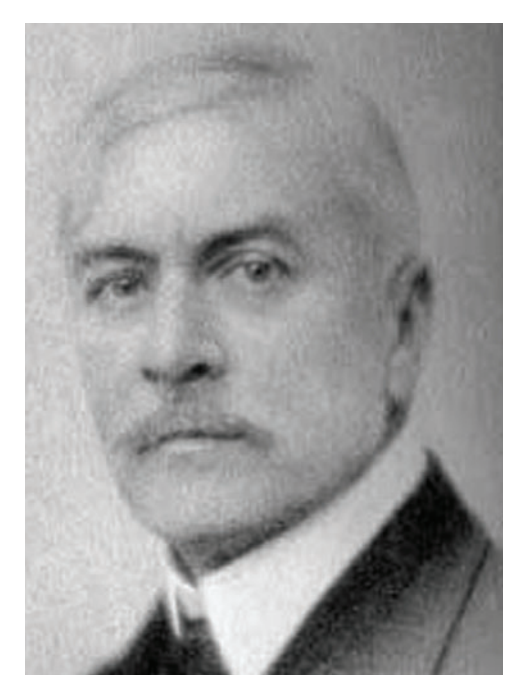
R.T. Wilson's Romeo Lost (R. T. Wilson and his dog Romeo are pictured at right) On November 18, 1899, the New York Times reported "R. T. Wilson, the millionaire banker, of 511 5th Avenue, Cornelius Vanderbilt's father-in-law, called at the East Fifty-first Street Police Station last night and asked that a general alarm be sent out for his dog, Romeo." Apparently the dog had gone missing about 6 o'clock that evening. Although the police doubted the possibility of the dog's return, Romeo, a tall-let black Schipperke, showed up the following day much to the relief of the thoroughly questioned servants.

R. T. Wilson and "Clemmie" would eventually move to New York City and become part of Mrs. Astor's first "400."



Melissa Clementine and R. T. Wilson with grandson, Cornelius Vanderbilt IV
As an adult, Cornelius IV became a well-known journalist and writer. In 1956, he wrote "Queen of the Golden Age: The Fabulous Story of Grace Wilson Vanderbilt," which chronicled the life of the Wilson and Vanderbilt families. He married seven times and followed in his father's footsteps by being disowned from the family for not living up to the Vanderbilt's lofty standards.

The Wilsons purchased a posh mansion at 511 5th Avenue in New York City (much like this one owned by their son, Orme.) The home was originally built by the corrupt politician and businessman Boss Tweed. It was here Wilson lived out the remainder of his days as an intimate insider of high society. His five children went on to marry English royalty and American millionaires with last names that include Goelet, Astor and Vanderbilt. A granddaughter, Mary Goelet, became the 8th Duchess of Roxburghe and resided in Floors Castle in Scotland.



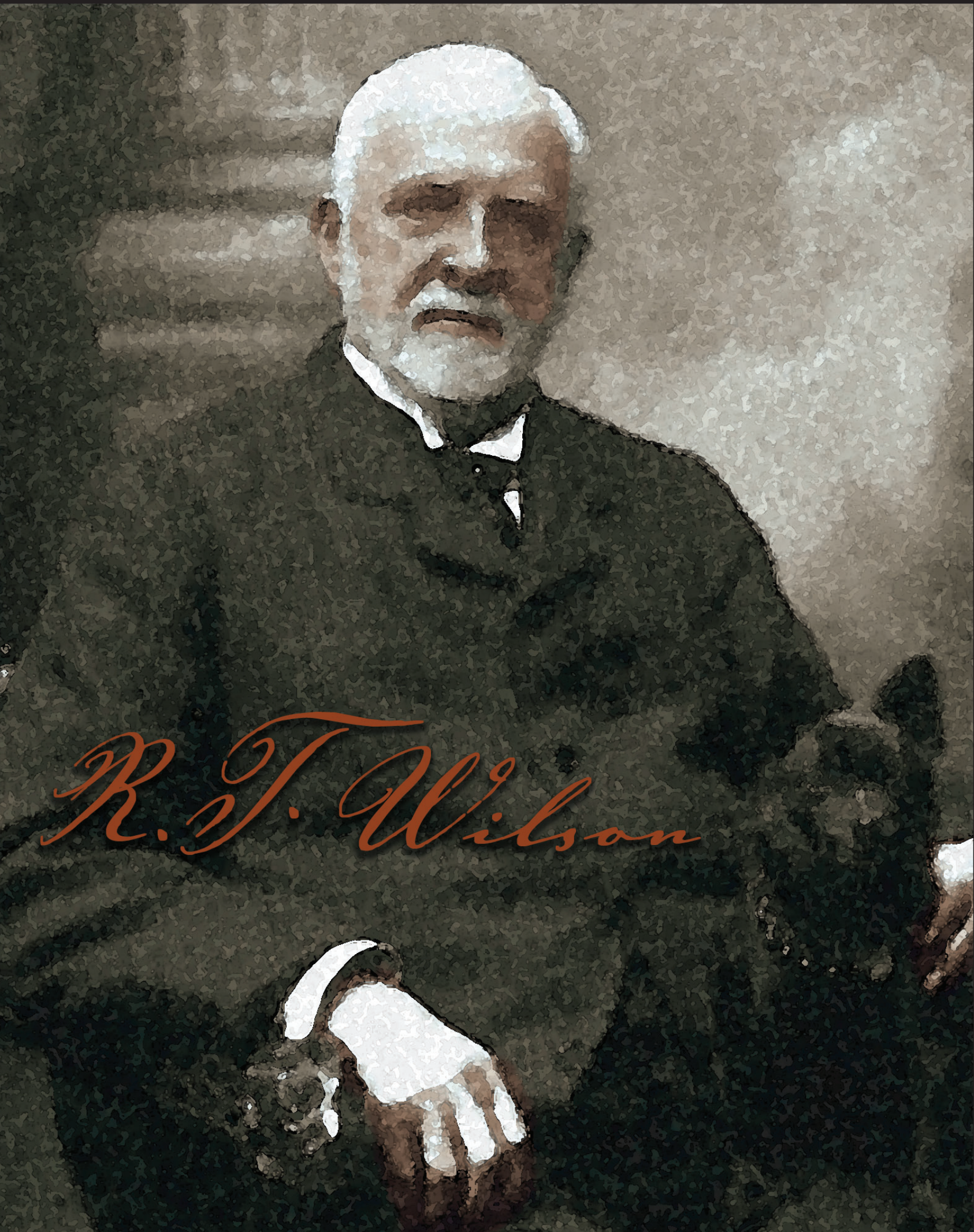
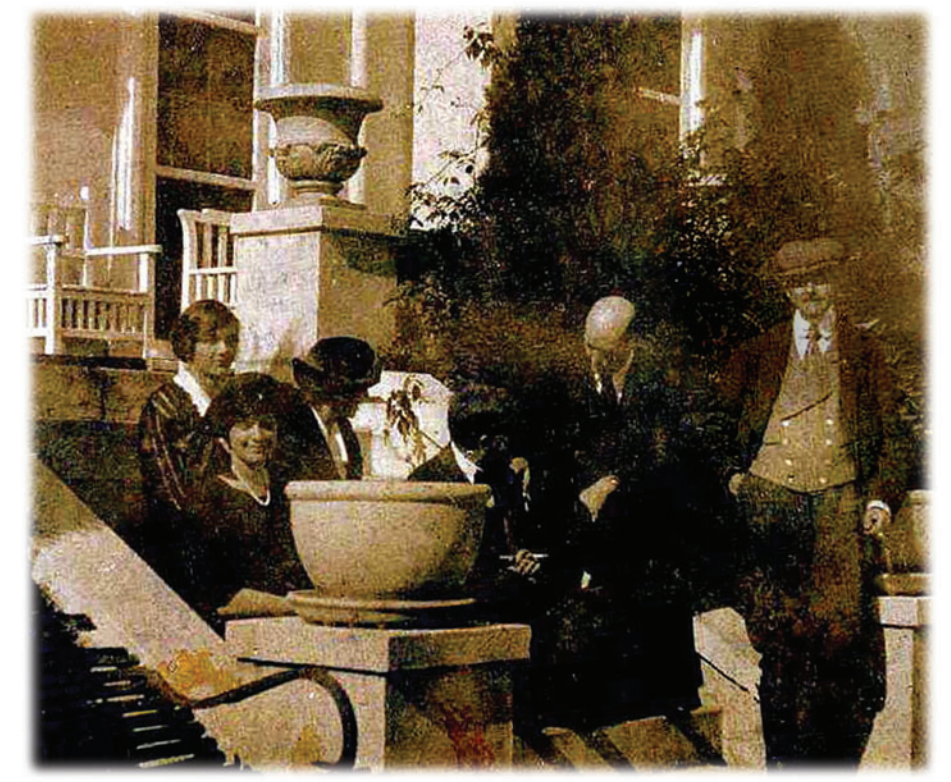
Marshall Orme Wilson and wife Carrie Astor
Marshall Orme Wilson, son of R. T. and Melissa Clementine (Johnston) married Carrie Astor, daughter of THE Mrs. Astor, New York City's leading socialite. Orme, as he was called, was appointed Ambassador "Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary" to Haiti. Carrie's brother, John Jacob Astor IV, perished in the Titanic disaster of April 1912.



Marshall Orme Wilson



R. T. Wilson, Jr.
R. T. Wilson, Jr. was a successful banker and businessman like his father. The younger Wilson also loved thoroughbred race horses, and was an expert horseman and breeder. In 1916, his horse, Campfire, was not only the top money-winner in North American racing, but also the American Champion Two Year Old Male. In 1922, Wilson's horse, Pillory, won the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes. Wilson owned stables in New York and Kentucky, and at his estate, Palmetto Bluff, in Bluffton South Carolina. The Wilson stables' racing colors of yellow and green were in winner's circles around the country.



THE BIOGRAPHY OF R. T. WILSON

Richard Thornton (RT) Wilson was born in Hall County, Georgia near Gainesville in 1829. The son of a Scottish tanner and shoemaker, Wilson was free to pursue his "own proposals" upon his father's death in 1849. Rumor has it that when he left home all he had was \$40 in gold and a mule.

According to the 1850 census, he made his way to Dalton, Georgia where he found employment as a clerk in a store owned by Levi Brotherton, a Methodist clergyman and missionary. He then went into the "general merchandise" business with W. R. High.

He took his business on the road buying small articles in Atlanta to sell upcountry in exchange for cotton. It was during this time he likely met James C. and William P. Orme, who both worked for the emerging East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad.

The railroad would certainly play an important part in Wilson's life and fortunes and it was probably with great fascination he observed it as it made its way north out of Georgia. He eventually headed toward Knoxville probably up what is now Highway 11. One night, he found himself in the town of Loudon, Tennessee and, exhausted, he slept on the doorstep of Ebenezer Johnston's store.

Johnston owned a handsomely cultivated 712-acre farm with a manor house and slave quarters. The South Carolina native and was married to Hannah Hughes who was the daughter of a wealthy Virginia family. Wilson must have made quite an impression on the Johnston family. Not only did he talk Ebenezer into financing him in business, he also talked him out of his eldest daughter's hand in marriage. R. T. Wilson and Melissa Clementine Johnston were married on December 23, 1852.

As Wilson's finances grew he built a warehouse in about 1852 on Wharf Street in Loudon with the backing of his silent partner, James Chambers Orme. He continued to do business here until about 1860, when he moved to Nashville and eventually went back to Macon, Georgia where his confederate sympathies could be put to better use.

During the War Between the States, Wilson was appointed Commissary General by Jefferson Davis, and sailed to London to sell cotton to the British. It was here his luck really began to turn and he made a tidy profit. The handsome, charismatic Wilson was rumored to be the inspiration for the character Rhet Butler in Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind."

When Wilson returned home, he followed suit of many of his contemporaries and began buying up defunct railroads. He purchased a home at 511 5th Avenue in New York City. (The former home of a corrupt politician known as Boss Tweed.) It was here Wilson lived out the remainder of his days as an intimate insider of high society. His five children, Mary, Leah Belle, Marshall Orme, R. T., Jr., and Grace, went on to marry English royalty and American millionaires with last names that include Goelet, Astor and Vanderbilt. A granddaughter became the 8th Duchess of Roxburghe.

Listed as a banker on the census records, Wilson founded R.T. Wilson & Co. to help manage his investments. His wife died in 1908 and he was soon to follow dying of heart disease in 1910. It has been written that he was worth more than \$40,000,000 upon his death. That's an amazing return on an initial \$40 investment.

Wilson's five children married English royalty and American millionaires with last names that include Goelet, Astor and Vanderbilt. A granddaughter became the 8th Duchess of Roxburghe.