The ambitious young New York lawyer,
the brilliant writer on corporate law, the wooer
and husband of Ida Olmstead, the indispensable
employee of John Mackay
WILL COOK WAS AMBITIOUS. He took himself from sleepy Hillsdale in southern Michigan, by way of Ann Arbor for college and law school, to New York. He must have been agog when he first arrived in Manhattan at age twenty-four in the late summer of 1882.

What he saw before him was a glorious place jammed with a million and half people intent on making as much money as possible or on spending the considerable amounts they’d already earned. Apparently, he didn’t fear the competition. Cook also saw the Statue of Liberty, the nearly built Brooklyn Bridge, gas and electric lights, elevated trains, and ten-story buildings. At that time, New York was the most technologically advanced city in the world.

Will took in the dusty, unpaved late-summer streets that would be turning slippery with mud in winter, when coal-fueled heating and dark train smoke made the air filthy. The stench of uncollected garbage and dead animals (domestic and feral) and the familiar tang of horse manure stung his nose. He passed airless, crowded tenements and saw thousands of immigrants from foreign countries, as well as others like him, from the west. Elevated electric trains rattle-clattered loose detritus down onto even the most dignified bowler hat.

Also over his head, so dense as to nearly block the sky, was a thick web of wires strung between poles that were as short as fifty and as tall as ninety feet high. The poles had dozens of crossbars, and each crossbar held dozens of wires, so that thousands of wires were going every which way, carrying telegraph and telephone messages and electric current. This was more of New York’s advanced technology.
Cook and his fellow New Yorkers must have believed nothing could stop the progress of their city. They were wrong. Six years after Cook’s arrival, the “white hurricane” of 1888 would bring everything to a frozen halt. Within a few years of this cataclysmic event, the city’s transportation and communications systems would go down under the streets, to be sheltered from the vagaries of the weather.

New York’s Great Blizzard of 1888 began Sunday morning, March 11, during churchgoing time (Cook, an agnostic, would not have been in church), with rain from a southern front growing heavier by the hour. That night, a northern front crashed in, colliding with the southern front. Overnight, the wind rose and swung from southeast to west to northeast, pulling in yet more moisture over the Atlantic. Some claimed that the wind was rotating; others said it was blowing in a straight-ahead gale. Everyone had it right. Sparrows couldn’t make any progress flying into the wind, and as the temperature plummeted, they froze to their perches. By midday Monday, the streets were impassable to horses, trains, men, and especially women, whose long full dresses, weighted with snow, pulled them down into the drifts. Piles of snow reached the second story of buildings. The spanking wind found even the tiniest crack, blowing snow right inside houses.

The gale knocked down thousands of the overloaded, ice-covered wires, causing sparks that started fires. The downed wires cut off light, power, and communications; stopped trains; and disabled the crude fire alarm system. They also electrocuted people, orange and red flames spewing out of their dead mouths.

Workaholic Cook walked to his Broadway law office that Monday, plunging through deep drifts and shielding his eyes to keep the driving sleet from blinding him. He tripped on something: the leg of a horse, frozen dead. Cook looked around him at the tangled and now useless (but still dangerous) downed wires and began to think about what the loss of these wires would mean to New York. The city’s cable and telegraph systems kept the trains running, the capital markets informed, and businessmen in touch with their customers, bankers, and suppliers.

It isn’t a great leap to wonder if it occurred to Cook on that day that getting involved in the essential business of communications might make someone very rich. He undoubtedly knew that Jay Gould’s company, Western Union, was holding that particular business in a monopolistic grip. And the young lawyer’s aversion to trusts certainly extended to monopolies. Cook saw before his eyes the type of harm that can result when a critical business controlled by one man falls into a state of chaos.
Even as Cook was pondering Gould’s monopoly over telegraph and cable communications, a man named John Mackay had already begun what would be a successful challenge to Gould. Mackay’s effort was backed by the personal fortune he had amassed from silver mining in Nevada. Cook would become part of Mackay’s success, but not for several more years. First, our young lawyer would face personal and professional challenges.

Cook got off to a fast start after he graduated from Michigan. Arriving in Manhattan at the end of the summer in 1882, Cook, only months out of law school, may have first worked as a clerk for Frederic R. Coudert,1 the founder of Coudert Brothers, which was to become one of the first and best international law firms. New York City directories for 1882 and 1883 show a W. W. Cook, a clerk, living at 238 Seventh Street. This could well have been our W. W. Cook.

Two years later, in 1884, Cook was in practice with former Connecticut governor Thomas M. Waller and S. Harrison Wagner, first at 115 Broadway (1884–90) and later at 15 Wall Street (1891–94). The practice was probably a diverse one, but reconstructing it in detail without papers from the firm is impossible. The only published record for court cases occurs when a case is appealed, with the exception of some federal court cases that are published at the trial level.

Cook’s first two published cases, in 1888 and 1890, both involved Helen Newberry, the widow of John S. Newberry. Mrs. Newberry had sued the stockholders of an Ohio railroad corporation to recover a judgment of sixteen thousand dollars rendered in favor of Mr. Newberry before he died.2

The law in the Newberry case is not what matters as we seek to learn more about William Cook. Rather, our interest is in his representation of Newberry interests. John and Helen had become wealthy from manufacturing railroad cars in Detroit. (The railcar industry in Detroit laid the foundation for the automobile industry to come.) Their son, Truman Newberry, became a multimillionaire from shrewdly investing money he made from railroad cars. He served as Michigan’s U.S. senator from 1918 to 1922 after defeating Henry Ford, the founder of the industry that succeeded the railroad industry.3 The elder Newberrys gave money in 1891 to build Newberry Hall on the University of Michigan campus, which now houses the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. Their three children gave money in honor of Helen Newberry for Helen Newberry House, a women’s dorm next to Newberry Hall, which opened in 1915.

How did Cook come to represent this wealthy widow? In the summer of 1881, both Will and his brother Chauncey had clerked at the Toledo firm of Scribner,
Hurd, and Scribner (Chauncey returned to work there briefly after he graduated). Mrs. Newberry’s case arose in Ohio, where the defendant, Lake Erie and Western Railway, was incorporated. It would have been natural for her to hire an Ohio law firm, Scribner, Hurd, and Scribner, and for them to use their bright former clerk William Cook. This is an example of how Cook’s connections helped him to become successful in Manhattan.

A second example of the work Cook was doing at this time involved the city of Detroit. In 1891 Waller, Cook, and Wagner helped a group of eastern capitalists purchase all of the street railways in Detroit. Detroiters had become fed up with the lack of progress in upgrading the essential street railway transportation system from horses to electricity or steam. Detroit was the last major city still using horses. This prevented the city from growing beyond the reach of horse-drawn cars and made for messy streets and angry citizens. It was a widely held belief that the numerous owners of the street railways were deliberately denying the city better service. Riots in protest of this problem took place in the spring of 1891. When the purchase by Cook’s group became imminent, the Detroit papers described Cook holding forth in one of the city’s hotels. Cigar and drink in hand, Cook extolled to reporters the virtues of the new owners’ plans for the street railways. Improvements were instigated, but the new owners sold out in just three years.4

A third example of Cook’s law practice in this early period is his representation of seventeen-year-old Clara Carter, daughter of Samuel Carter, the man who invented Carter’s Little Liver Pills. Mr. Carter had died in 1884. The 1890 suit, Carter v. Good,5 alleged that Brent Good, administrator of the estate and Clara’s guardian, had violated his fiduciary duty to Clara by selling sixty of her one hundred shares of stock in the Carter Medicine Company for the low price of $9,180. It was alleged that the guardian’s intent was to eventually obtain the shares for himself. Within four years, the dividends alone on the sixty shares totaled $86,140, money that Cook argued ought to have been young Clara’s.

The published opinion resolves the question of whether Clara could depose Good; Clara won over the defendant’s opposition. Information in the New York Times revealed how important the deposition was for Cook’s purposes. In January 1887, a major fire had broken out in the Manhattan offices of Good’s company. The fire spread over three floors, the offices suffering serious damage. Good lost valuable papers from his desk relating to estates of which he was executor, presumably including Clara Carter’s. As a result, the only way to get pretrial information about what was in the papers was to take Good’s sworn deposition. As in the Newberry case, the importance here is not the law made but that Cook represented a very sympathetic plaintiff with a famous name.
Only five years out of law school, in 1887, Cook published the first edition of *A Treatise on the Law of Stock and Stock Holders*, which was to become the country’s leading work on corporation law. This nine-hundred-page book signaled Cook’s fresh approach to corporation law, which can be defined as “putting stockholders first.” Cook wrote, “[M]any of the most important and practical principles governing stocks had never been investigated and presented by law writers.” These included fictitiously paid up, or “watered,” stock; methods of issuing stock; risks in purchasing stock certificates; and fraud by directors. Cook saw that those subjects “occasion doubt, difficulty, danger, and lawsuits to corporations and stockholders,” which hindered corporations from garnering capital needed for expansion and made stocks less readily and reliably marketable than the corporations needed them to be. Cook said that the book, the research for which required him to find the legal principles buried in thousands of cases, “received my unremitting attention and anxious care for several years.”

Apparently this effort did not exhaust the confident young lawyer, for his *Trusts: The Recent Combinations in Trade* came out in two editions in 1888. The second edition included the report of the New York State Senate’s Committee to Investigate Trusts, which unearthed “Alps upon Alps arising” in a “precious assortment of schemes and devices.” Agreements creating trusts in cotton, oil, sugar, sandstone, mills, Brooklyn warehouses, New York meat, and envelopes were there, too. It was this second edition that caught the eye of Ohio attorney general David K. Watson, who then immediately spotted at least six violations of Ohio statutes in the Standard Oil trust agreement and initiated a successful case against John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil, then based in Cleveland.

The case became one of the reasons Rockefeller moved Standard Oil’s headquarters to New York. More important, the exposure of the agreements and Watson’s lawsuit helped to build broad public understanding of the true terms of trusts. Ida M. Tarbell recognized the role of Cook’s little book in her classic 1905 *History of the Standard Oil Company*. The contents of Tarbell’s book had previously been published in *McClure’s Magazine*, garnering wide attention. The writings of Cook and Tarbell, together with Watson’s lawsuit, helped to create deep public opposition to trusts.

In the year of Cook’s marriage, 1889, his *Corporations as Created and Regulated by the Statutes and Constitutions of the Various States . . . and England, Canada, France, and Germany* was published. The preface is dated October 19, 1889, eight months after his wedding day. Cook called this a “handbook” and “reference” work; at 162 pages, it was small compared to the nine-hundred-page *Stock and Stockholders*. Nevertheless, the task of finding and summarizing the
William Cook

Cook in an undated photo taken by a New York studio, probably from Cook's early days in New York.

Ann B. Cook collection.
laws of each of the forty-eight states, England, Canada and five of its provinces, France, and Germany would have been extremely time-consuming.\(^8\)

In that same year, 1889, the second edition of *Stock and Stockholders* appeared, “revised, enlarged, extended, and in large part re-written,” according to the preface, which also reveals that the publisher of the first edition had printed twice the usual number for such a volume. Cook’s preface expressed hope for “an equally favorable judgment” for the second edition, a “reward commensurate with the labor and thought involved in a work of this magnitude.”\(^9\)

The Kane Masonic Lodge in lower Manhattan, which William Cook joined in 1884, has always included among its membership many lawyers, engineers, financiers, and other professionals. In 1884 the lodge was twenty-six years old, with 211 members, of whom thirty-seven were lawyers. Rollin M. Morgan, a lawyer and member, proposed Cook for membership. Morgan became Master in 1889 and eventually a Right Worshipful, demonstrating that Cook had some good connections within Kane Lodge. None of Cook’s three references were members, but all were lawyers,\(^10\) and one was Frederic R. Coudert. We met him earlier as Cook’s first employer and head of the firm that was to become one of the country’s preeminent international law firms.

Cook’s progression through the degrees to become Sublime Degree of Master Mason, on February 17, 1885, was delayed because Cook missed three meetings at the end of 1884, presumably because of his father’s illness.\(^11\) Death came to John Potter Cook at the age of seventy-two, on December 15, 1884. Whatever Cook inherited would have helped him at this early stage of his career. According to his niece Florentine, “Cook had enough income from his father’s estate so that he did not have to take fees” but instead took payment in stock.\(^12\) It was in 1884 that he first joined with Waller and Wagner.

Cook was active in Kane Lodge at least until 1893, when he was listed as a Junior Steward.\(^13\) Although no evidence can be found of later active participation,\(^14\) he must have paid dues throughout the remainder of his life, for his death was noted at the meeting on October 7, 1930, and the club’s quartet sang a requiem.\(^15\)

Cook clearly had strong Masonic connections to bring him so quickly, with such prestigious supporters, to Kane Lodge membership. There is no record of John P. Cook being a Mason, but Hillsdale Lodge No. 32 held its first meeting in May 1848. A second lodge,\(^16\) No. 45, Knights of Pythias, was founded in 1883; Chauncey Cook became its Chancellor in 1884. Walter Sawyer, the Cook family
physician and a University of Michigan regent for twenty-four years, was also a member. Surely a man so loved and respected as John Cook, a businessman, miller, lumberman, and banker, would have known Hillsdale Masons who might have helped John’s son settle into the right group in Manhattan.

Will Cook belonged to other clubs, and this was certainly part of his drive to be a well-connected lawyer with an excellent reputation. Little evidence exists that he was an active member of any of his clubs, but he would have used them as places to dine and to make connections. For example, the Lawyers Club included among its governors Frederic Coudert, who had supported Cook’s membership in Kane Lodge. The Lawyers Club—which may have inspired the name for the organization Cook was to establish in Ann Arbor in 1922—was on the upper floors of Henry B. Hyde’s Equitable Insurance Company, at 120 Broadway. Cook and everyone else would have been in awe of that 1885 building, which stood on an acre in the midst of Manhattan’s business district. It was taller than other office buildings and had not one but two “ascending rooms,” which were a new kind of apparatus (now called “elevators”) unique to office buildings. The elevators Hyde installed were steam-powered and elegant, with tulipwood paneling. Hyde’s company was extremely well known, and the pairing of business success with an impressive building sent a message. The first Manhattan office Cook worked in, from 1884 to 1890, was at 115 Broadway, across the street from the Lawyers Club.

The personal challenge of William Cook’s early years in Manhattan was his relationship with Ida Olmstead. The romance may have flamed to life on the evening of April 4, 1888, soon after Cook entered the highly decorated, already buzzing Kane Masonic Lodge. He was in such a rush that he might have neglected to leave his overcoat with an attendant. The lodge was hosting a celebratory thirtieth anniversary musicale that night, and Cook was about to turn thirty himself. The Great Blizzard’s dreadful snowdrifts had finally melted, and the first week in April had been warmer as the days lengthened and life returned to the city.

Cook’s nervous rush that evening had not been caused by the pleasant prospect of mingling with 220 fellow Masons and their guests. (The program listed 220; the New York Times reported nearly a thousand, including “an unusual array of femininity.”) Cook was anxious about one particular guest. He knew there was a great probability, for her name was printed in the program, of once again meeting Ida Olmstead, the beautiful daughter of a well-known New York real
IDA OLMSTEAD COOK

Ida Olmstead Cook in an undated photo.

*Ann and Larry McGill collection.*
From Will to Ida

Cook to Ida, 1888. This is the earliest known letter from Cook to Ida. He writes to “My Darling Girl Ida” and chides her for thinking she leads a “futile and purposeless life.”

Ann and Larry McGill collection; photo by Russell R. Serbay.
estate lawyer, Dwight Hinckley Olmstead.²¹ (It is possible, though, that Cook had invited Ida and that they attended as a couple.) Their conversation probably proceeded smoothly. Through the law, the couple had many common acquaintances, and the efforts of Ida’s father to reform the system of recording real property in Manhattan would have caught Cook’s attention. In fact, they may have met when Cook attended a wake for Ida’s brother, Lawrence, also a lawyer, who had died unexpectedly earlier that year. The wake was held at the home of a Mrs. Thayer, according to one of Cook’s several passionate letters to Ida that summer; she was probably the wife of Benjamin Thayer, a lawyer related by marriage to Ida’s family.

Cook would have been intrigued by Ida’s connection to one of the giants of early legal education, Theodore Dwight, founding dean of Columbia Law School. Dwight was married to Ida’s aunt (her mother’s sister). Both the Dwight family and Ida’s mother’s family, the Lawrences, had roots in Clinton, New York, and ties to Hamilton College there. Ida’s father had graduated from Hamilton College and subsequently read law under Theodore Dwight’s tutelage. It is likely that Theodore Dwight, Dwight Olmstead, and Cook enjoyed family dinners together, perhaps discussing legal education.

For thirty years, until the 1870s, law professors used the “Dwight method,” which combined historically oriented lectures, selected reading from treatises, and classroom soliloquies. In 1891 Dwight left Columbia University (when it abandoned the Dwight method) and founded New York Law School. Columbia had moved to the new instruction method based on case law. Harvard’s Christopher Langdell had pushed the new method, starting in the 1870s, believing that law schools needed to emulate the scientific model and raise legal education to the standards of other disciplines then developing in universities.²²

Ida’s father and uncle had impressive connections to the most important lawyers in the city. It is possible Cook valued these ties more than Ida’s feminine qualities.

The evening of April 4, 1888, was a long one at Kane Lodge. Food was served until 2:00 a.m., and it surely was a grand array. In the style of the day, the menu would have included quivering blocks of jelly, half concealing shreds of fish, flesh, and fowl; tiny croustades; pâté of pheasant or goose; salmon; fancy breads and rolls; and perhaps a pyramid of nougat baskets filled with glacé fruits. There were speeches—the best one given by the renowned Chauncey Depew, who was twenty-five years Cook’s senior but had joined the lodge at the same time as Cook. Depew was president of the New York Central Railroad and would later become a U.S. senator from New York. The evening also featured dancing, and a couple
could disappear into its own world in a crowd of nearly a thousand, waltzing to “Confidences,” “My Treasure,” and “Sweet Dreams.”

In the next stage of his wooing of Ida, Cook turned to the preferred weapons of all lawyers: words and the appearance of total confidence in himself. Will’s letters to Ida in the summer of 1888 apparently succeeded in winning her heart. A twenty-first-century woman might not find them so compelling.

Cook speaks coyly of himself in the third person: “I have heard of the young lawyer who wrote on ‘Trusts,’” he wrote in June, going on to describe the “stout heart and iron will” of that young man, who plans for the years ahead rather than for just the pleasures of the day. Someday, he predicts, he will fall desperately in love, and then his wife will be the means of a great future or a melancholy one.

Will wrote to Ida almost every Friday. When Ida expressed fears about married life, Will labeled those fears “little,” accused her of being “overcautious and self-disparaging” (June 29, 1888), and declared that his buoyant confidence in the future would prove accurate. He predicted they would wed and both be “greater, stronger, better, and more successful” (June 29, 1888) for having done so. He promised to make Ida the “brightest, sweetest, happiest wife that ever lived” (July 13, 1888).

Beginning in June, Cook’s letters counted down the weeks until they could spend time together in the Adirondack Mountains, at Richfield Springs, where Ida was spending the summer with her family. Richfield Springs had begun to attract wealthy men like Ida’s father in 1882, when industrialist Cyrus McCormick commissioned architects McKim, Mead, and White to build him a shingle-style cottage there. The town, at the northern edge of Canadarago Lake, was famous for its white sulphur springs, which drew huge crowds. Cook promised Ida he would “monopolize her activities” and turn into a “country man” when he arrived in Richfield Springs (June 8, 1888). He wrote to her about falling in love with her: “If those mountains had ears, they would hear many interesting things about that time” (June 22, 1888).

Will promised to visit Ida during his three- or four-week August vacation (June 29, 1888). Yet Will’s hometown paper reported that he was in Michigan for all of August, except for a trip to take care of his mother’s business in Duluth and another to visit his brother in Nebraska. He could not have spent more than a day or two with Ida before going west to see his Hillsdale family, give three political speeches, counsel a client in Detroit, and then return directly to New York City.

Cook told Ida he sought to devote himself “to something besides the law”
Dwight Hinckley Olmstead, the father of Ida Olmstead, who married Cook in 1889. He made good money buying and selling real estate on the west side of Manhattan.

From Notable New Yorkers of 1896–1899 (New York: Moses King, 1899), 158.
From Will Cook to Ida Olmstead

Cook to Ida, 1892. This letter, written during their first separation in 1892, gives Cook’s view of the cause of the separation: that life to Ida “has been a dreary waste, . . . a cause of suffering to us both.”

Ann and Larry McGill collection; photo by Russell R. Serbay.
(September 1, 1888). His devotion to his family and his law career was clear. Was there going to be room for a wife? Although Ida had reservations, in the end Will’s “stout heart and iron will” prevailed (June 22, 1888). The young couple married at noon on Wednesday, February 20, 1889, in the Unitarian Church of the Messiah, at the corner of 34th Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan.26

Will made a handsome groom. He was thirty years old, with clear bright blue eyes, hair parted high on the left side in the style of the times, and a thick mustache trimmed neatly across his upper lip. He typically wore a white shirt with a dotted silk cravat, a three-piece suit, and a bowler. It was the appropriate attire for an ambitious young lawyer and author.

The perhaps uncertain bride was eighteen months younger than her groom. She was half an inch over five feet and extraordinarily beautiful. She wore her hair up, with curls all around her face, and for the wedding, she donned a gray cashmere traveling dress with matching bonnet. She carried purple lilacs. After a small breakfast, the couple went on a short honeymoon in the south.27

Ida’s fears about marriage were likely based on her experiences growing up. Her lawyer father, Dwight Hinckley Olmstead, made a better-than-good living buying and selling real estate on the edge of Manhattan’s west side, where the population was always moving northward. He almost single-handedly changed the system of recording land in Manhattan by developing the “block and lot” system still in use today, and he was quite well known to lawyers, legislators, and others in the real estate business. He was also something of a religious zealot.28

In December 1857, Olmstead, who had married Maria Noble Lawrence in February 1855, brought a habeas corpus action against his wife and his mother-in-law, Caroline Randell, asking for the return of Dwight and Maria’s two-year-old first child and only son, Lawrence. Dwight claimed that his wife had left him without cause, taking Lawrence with her. The court found that Maria Olmstead was in a state of illegal separation from her husband and ordered the two-year-old returned to the care and custody of his father.29 The boy was known as both Lawrence Dwight Olmstead and Richard Lawrence Olmstead. The parents, it seems, could not even agree on their child’s name. Ida was born two years later, in 1859, but the story of this separation must have lived on as family history. Another daughter, Agnes, was born in 1862 but died in August 1864. A fourth child, Grace, came in 1865. She and Ida remained close all of their lives, traveling and often living together. Ida even accompanied Grace on her honeymoon. Grace had a lengthy engagement to Charles Borst. The couple didn’t marry until 1902,
after her father’s 1901 death. Dwight Olmstead apparently didn’t want his daughters to have husbands. The Olmstead family moved often between the city and upstate; according to census records, both parents were not always present in the same place.

Will’s certainty that his marriage would be mutually satisfactory and that Ida would be a loving wife was likely not based on a clear assessment of Ida’s experiences and personality. He was probably under the mistaken assumption that his marriage and family life would mirror the stable, loving family of his childhood. We have already learned that Cook’s father, John Potter Cook, held his family together through the death of his first wife and remarriage. He settled the large family he had with his second wife, Martha, in the finest house in Hillsdale. Martha was a deeply nurturing woman and a vivid presence within her family. She managed her large household alone for long periods when John traveled to his lumber business in Montague on the west side of the state or to Lansing for political meetings.

After their marriage, Ida and Will lived with her family. Was that a financial necessity or at the insistence of her father? The latter seems more likely, because Will could not have been struggling financially. He had been practicing law and writing for over six years and had received an inheritance from his father. Of course, back then this type of living arrangement was more common than it is today. We can’t know whether living with his in-laws was Will’s preference or not.

Between his marriage in 1889 and 1892, Cook produced two books. He could not have spent much time in those first months after the wedding with the “over-cautious, self-disparaging” bride he had described in his letters. What had become of his promise to Ida that once they were married they would make “far reaching plans for their mutual pleasure, travel, life, and happiness”? Ida may have concluded that she’d married a man like her father, someone who would place her a distant second after his work.

Will and Ida separated in January 1892, after only three years of marriage. Cook took up temporary residence at the Park Avenue Hotel and wrote to Ida from there. He admitted to her that if he had only acted differently, each of them would have been “better, stronger, and happier.” It was an eerie repetition of the words he had used four years earlier as a reason for them to marry. He also wondered how soon she would be well enough for him to be with her, telling her he did not wish to “retard your complete recovery” or cause “mental distress to you.” What happened? Ida might have been unstable, perhaps depressed. Surely a miscarriage
THE PARK AVENUE HOTEL

The Park Avenue Hotel, between 32nd and 33rd streets, around the time Cook lived there in 1892, during his first separation from Ida.

*From King’s Views of New York, 1896–1915 (New York: Moses King, 1915), 21.*
COMMERCIAL CABLE BUILDING

The 1897 Commercial Cable Building, twenty-two stories high, at 20–22 Broad Street in Manhattan.

POSTAL TELEGRAPH BUILDING

The building at 253 Broadway on City Hall Park in Manhattan where Cook worked from 1895 until his retirement in 1920. Built in 1894, at fourteen floors high, it was both older and shorter than the Commercial Cable Company Building.

or a stillbirth is a possibility. What is known for certain is that the couple separated at least twice in five years and that it was Ida who initiated the separation each time. They reunited but separated again in 1894. Cook relatives say that Ida deeply resented Cook’s financial help to his brothers during the Depression of 1893. Niece Florentine Cook Heath said that Cook “stood by the family through thick or thin,” including being ready to sacrifice everything to ensure that his brothers weathered the financial storm. Ida and William Cook’s future together remained unclear.

By 1895 Cook was general counsel for John W. Mackay’s companies, Postal Telegraph and Commercial Cable. During his first years in New York, Cook would certainly have noticed Mackay’s fierce fight with Jay Gould’s Western Union, as the silver-enriched multimillionaire Mackay was striving to break Gould’s monopoly on telegraph and cable communications. The October 12, 1889, issue of Harper’s Weekly may have caught Cook’s eye, with its description of Mrs. Mackay’s precious gems: a “flawless sapphire nearly half an inch in diameter, said
to have cost $185,000; the finest emerald ever known to exist; an almost priceless set of rose-pink coral jewelry; and a pair of diamond solitaires valued at $400,000.”

Mackay had begun to compete with Western Union in 1882, when he partnered with James Gordon Bennett Jr., owner of the New York Herald, who was seeking lower rates than Gould offered for the telegraph wires essential to his newspaper. The two men bought the Postal Telegraph, a struggling local company, and combined it with other companies to form the Postal Telegraph-Cable Company. Mackay wanted to first build cables across the Atlantic before he extended telegraph lines across the country. His plan was to then link the cables to a nationwide telegraph system. After that, he planned to build cables across the Pacific and become the first telegraph company to circle the globe. His number one goal was to provide lower rates and better service than Western Union.

Cook must have seen the headlines in February 1884 in the New York Times announcing Mackay’s new cable that would allow users to “escape the necessity of using lines even indirectly controlled by Gould.” He surely read the stories about the Bennett-Mackay cable that praised the new “competition with the existing company” and hoped for more than a “show of competition with a view to compelling a new consolidation.” The latter quote refers to Gould’s pattern of running newly established competitors into the ground by lowering his prices below theirs, forcing them to sell to him in order to break even.

The October 25, 1884, issue of Harper’s Weekly described the dramatic landing of the Bennett-Mackay transatlantic cable on Coney Island, which made New York “the only large city in the world having the terminus of a sub-oceanic telegraphic cable in its very heart.” The cable continued underground from Coney Island to the East River Bridge and on underground to the office of Commercial Cable at the corner of Wall and Nassau streets. It was the latest of the company’s sixty-five hundred miles of cable in two transatlantic lines. According to Harper’s Weekly, it was “the finest and most carefully constructed [cable] ever laid beneath the Atlantic.”

By the late 1880s, Cook would have been well aware of Mackay, but how the two met is less clear. Mackay apparently did business with the Coudert firm and may have first met Cook when he worked there as a clerk. Or they may have met through a mutual friend, New York lawyer Charles F. Beach, who persuaded Mackay to invite Cook along for a weeklong cruise on Mackay’s yacht. On this cruise, Mackay discovered that Cook had the uncanny ability to express Mackay’s exact opinions even before Mackay had fully formed them.

Cook and Mackay shared a fervent desire to get rid of “watered” stock, monopolies, and trusts. They also shared an equally fierce desire to develop strategies
to make Mackay’s companies competitive with Western Union, the premier monopolizer of cable and telegraph services. Cook was the perfect lawyer for Mackay: he was a shrewd businessman and the national expert on corporation law, and he and Mackay shared the values of “morality, virtue, industry and economy”—values handed down to Cook by his father.45

For twenty-five years, from 1895 until 1920, Cook would devote his professional life to his writing and to the numerous companies John Mackay and his only surviving son, Clarence, acquired over the years. After John Mackay died in 1902, Clarence ran the Mackay Companies. By the time Clarence died in 1938, the Mackay Companies had been subsumed into Western Union.

During the quarter century Cook worked for the Mackays, he was a key strategist as they bought more telegraph and cable companies and extended their reach. By 1903 the Mackay Companies had collectively gone global. A brief description of how these companies grew shows Cook’s legal expertise and ability to strategize within the law.

When John Mackay began building his assault on Gould’s monopoly in the 1880s, he owned several companies that operated independently. Some became national in scope (for example, Postal Telegraph), while others operated only in individual states. Cook’s knowledge of the corporation law of all the states would have made him very valuable to John Mackay. Cook created new corporations, adhering to the laws of the relevant state. Usually the name given to the corporation revealed whether it was a cable or telegraph company or both and indicated the area of the world in which it operated, such as Cuba, the Pacific, or Haiti.

In 1904 Cook created something called a “Massachusetts Trust,” which became the Mackay Companies, a holding company. It was complicated, although not by today’s standards. Here’s how the annual report of the Mackay Companies in 1905 described its operations:

The Mackay Companies would receive, by way of dividends, only an amount sufficient to pay whatever may be declared, on a conservative basis, on the Mackay Companies shares, and leave the surplus earnings for the development of the business and increase of reserves of the operating companies.46

By 1928, right before the Mackay Companies were consolidated with Western Union, they were comprised of the following companies: Commercial Cable Company, Commercial Pacific Cable Company, Postal Telegraph-Cable Company, Commercial Cable Company of Cuba, All America Cables Inc., German
But before he plunged into the most productive years of his work for the Mackays, work that would make him fabulously wealthy, Cook had a personal transition to accomplish.