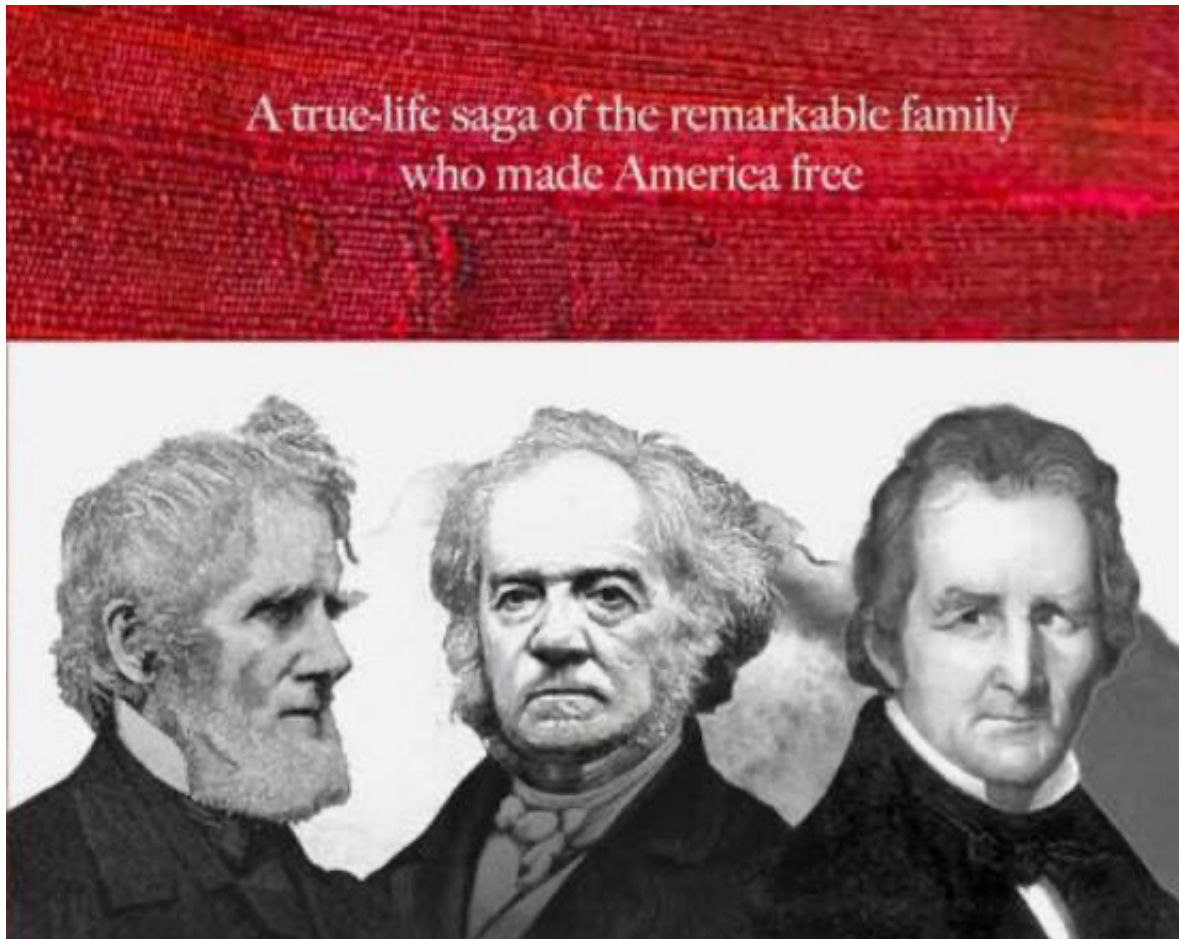


# When Money and Virtue Went Hand In Hand — Book Review of The Brothers

By [Robert Bradley](#) | January 8, 2025, 14:46 EST



## [The Brothers](#)

by Karl Zinsmeister

Encounter Books

651 pages

February 2024

*The Brothers* is a historical novel that tells the fascinating story of the three Tappan brothers – Benjamin, Arthur, and Lewis — who changed the course of American history during the three decades before the Civil War.

They were raised in Northampton, Massachusetts by their father, who was a merchant and goldsmith, and their mother, Sarah, the great-niece of Benjamin Franklin and a devout Christian. Northampton was the home of Jonathan Edwards, perhaps America's greatest theologian, who led the first "Great Awakening" which swept through New England during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was a very different Northampton from the city of today, which has become one of the most relentlessly secular and anti-Christian cities in New England.

But it was in Northampton that Arthur and Lewis, greatly influenced by their mother, grew to become committed evangelical Christians and the leading philanthropists and abolitionists of the pre-Civil War period. They lived out their faith as leaders in the abolitionist cause with astonishing courage and as social activists through remarkable works of philanthropy.

In 1826, a year after the Erie Canal was completed, Arthur and his brother Lewis moved to New York City, the new national center of business and retail trade, where they established a silk importing business. Lewis, who had accumulated some capital from business ventures in Canada and Boston, lent \$12,000 to Arthur to assist him in opening his business in New York City. His goal was to become the preeminent dealer in silks in the United States, and he succeeded.

Silk, of course, was imported from China, and in order to get the business off the ground, Arthur went into business with John Jacob Astor, sailing on his 95-foot brig to China to establish trading partners. But Arthur refused to compromise on one point in his dealings with Astor: Unlike many other

traders, his business would not bring opium into China. Astor finally agreed after Arthur agreed to cut his commission for the goods on the voyage by 35 percent.

In addition to the silk business, Lewis and Arthur founded the *New York Journal of Commerce* with Samuel Morse. Some years later, after the depression years of the 1830s had forced them to close their silk-importing business, the brothers founded the first commercial-rating service, the Mercantile Agency, a predecessor of Dun & Bradstreet.

However, Arthur and Lewis Tappan never viewed success in business as their primary goal. They made money in order to save souls and reform society. Their counterpart in the United Kingdom was William Wilberforce. Most Americans are not aware that the abolitionist cause was unpopular in many northern cities – especially New York City. In July 1834, New York City was the scene of a huge anti-abolitionist riot, which lasted for almost a week. Over a period of two days and nights, Lewis Tappan's home was targeted by mobs made up largely of newly immigrated Irish Catholics incited by Tammany Hall Democrats. During the first night, Lewis and his family remained in their home, as a mob of thousands gathered outside, threatening to ransack and burn the house on Rose Street. The next day, Tappan sent his family away, and that night, the enormous mob entered his home, hauling furniture and paintings into the street and burning his house. Eventually the New York militia was called out and together with the police, the riots were quelled.

Three years earlier in 1831, Arthur Tappan's summer home in New Haven was destroyed by a mob along with several properties owned by blacks. Why? Because of his support to establish a college for African-Americans in New Haven. During the 1830s, there were numerous advertisements placed by individuals and committees in the newspapers in Southern cities offering

rewards of between \$50,000 and \$100,000 if Athur or Lewis Tappan were delivered to them – dead or alive. Both brothers showed enormous physical and moral courage, as they never backed down or compromised their abolitionist organizing or principles.

Arthur and Lewis Tappan's older brother, Benjamin, was cut from a different cloth. He was an early settler of the Connecticut Western Reserve in northeastern Ohio in 1803. By trade, he was a lawyer, admitted to the bar in Hartford, Connecticut, and he went into private practice in Ohio. Later appointed to a seat on the U.S. District Court in Ohio by President Andrew Jackson, he was ultimately elected as a Democrat from Ohio to the U.S. Senate in 1839 and served until 1845. In voluminous correspondence with his brothers, he always maintained that he was against slavery, and that as a Democrat, he could do more good fighting for abolition within the party. But the words never rang true, as the Democratic Party continued to be the party of slavery until the Civil War, and even afterwards when almost every Democratic legislator in Congress voted against the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery.

The lives of Arthur and Lewis Tappan are about much more than abolitionism. They used their significant wealth privately to fund many campaigns to change hearts and minds and solve some of the nation's worst social ills. For example, they helped found the Sunday School movement in New York City in the 1830s, which saw 15,000 children go to Sunday School, one-quarter of whom were black. They helped to establish Oberlin College by putting up more than 50 percent of the funds needed to get the college off ground. Oberlin was founded with groundbreaking commitments to abolition and women's rights. The Tappan brothers were also major supporters of the temperance movement.

The story of the Tappan brothers is well told by the author of *The Brothers*,

Karl Zinsmeister. A journalist, author, and public policy official, Zinsmeister worked for the American Enterprise Institute for many years and served in the White House under President George W. Bush as director of the White House Domestic Policy Council in from 2006 to 2009. After three years of in-depth research, he published a reference book, the *Almanac of American Philanthropy*, which is an authoritative source on private giving in America.

As noted above, *The Three Brothers* is fiction based on historical fact. Several fictional characters play important parts in the book, demonstrating Arthur's and Lewis's outreach to the poor and needy in New York City. Zinsmeister also re-creates a series of letters between two brothers – Benjamin and Lewis – which show how family members can maintain love and harmony despite fiercely different political leanings.

It is a fascinating but largely unknown story of brothers whose Christian faith led them to do extraordinary things for the common good in America. We need more philanthropists and activists like Arthur and Lewis Tappan.

**Robert H. Bradley is Chairman of Bradley, Foster & Sargent Inc., a \$7.75 billion wealth management firm with offices in Hartford, Connecticut; Wellesley, Massachusetts; and four other locations. Read other articles by him [here](#).**