To many late 19th century Americans, William “Boss” Tweed personified public corruption. In the late 1860s, Tweed was New York City’s political boss. From his headquarters on 14th street, known as Tammany Hall (a Democratic party political organization), he fixed elections, controlled the city’s mayor, rewarded political supporters with jobs and favors, and used his influence to steal taxpayer dollars.

Tweed held a succession of city and state government jobs, including a term as NY State Assemblyman. He formed the Tweed Ring within Tammany Hall, which sponsored city improvement schemes that funneled millions of dollars into the pockets of Tweed Ring members in the 1860s and 1870s.

His primary source of funds came from bribes and kickbacks he demanded in exchange for city contracts. The most notorious example of his involvement with urban corruption was the construction of the New York City County Courthouse, begun in 1861. Officially, the city wound up spending nearly $13 million (roughly $178 million in today’s dollars) on a building that should have cost several times less. To put it into perspective, the U.S government paid just over $7 million to purchase Alaska in 1867!

Tammany hall steadily gained influence by bringing newly arrived immigrants under its control. The Tweed Ring was successful in part because it was popular among voters, especially the Irish immigrants who had flooded the city in search of a better life. Tweed and his friends ensured that Irish-American supporters received jobs and other assistance from the city government and from companies doing business with the city. Because of the willingness of Tammany to provide them with food, clothing, fuel (coal/wood) for heating in emergencies, and aid to those in trouble with the law, these new Americans became devoted to the organization. They were willing to overlook the fraudulent election practices, the graft, corruption, and other abuses that often characterized Tammany Hall.

In July 1871, two low-level city officials with a grudge against the Tweed Ring provided the New York Times with reams of documentation that detailed the corruption at the courthouse and other city projects. The newspaper published a string of articles, which coupled with the political cartoons of Thomas Nast in Harper’s Weekly, created a national outcry. Soon Tweed and many of his cronies were facing criminal charges.

In November 1873, Tweed was convicted on 204 of 220 counts of corruption, fined $12,750 ($225,000 in 2010 dollars, adjusted for inflation) and a prison sentence of twelve years. Tweed served a year before the sentence was overturned, but was then hit with a civil suit by New York State attempting to recover $6 million in embezzled funds. Unable to put up the $3 million bail, Tweed was locked up in the Ludlow Street Jail, although he was allowed home visits. On one of these, Tweed escaped and fled to Spain.

The U.S. government discovered his whereabouts and arranged for his arrest as soon as he reached the Spanish border; he was recognized from Nast's political cartoons. He was turned over to an American warship, which delivered him to authorities in New York City on November 23, 1876, and he was returned to prison.

Desperate and broken, Tweed now agreed to testify about the inner workings of his corrupt Ring to a special committee set up by the Board of Alderman, in return for his release, but after he did so, Governor Samuel Tilden refused to abide by the agreement, and Tweed remained incarcerated. He died in the Ludlow Street Jail on April 12, 1878 from severe pneumonia, and was buried in the Brooklyn Green-Wood Cemetery. New York City Mayor Smith Ely would not allow the flag at City Hall to be flown at half staff.

The Tweed ring stole an estimated $100 million dollars (some estimates go as high as $200 million). The value of $100 million in 1871 would be $1.84 BILLION in 2010.