

A PROUD AMERICAN AND A PROUD MASON

by

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This article is a tribute to Henry Clay, one of the most outstanding leaders in the middle period of American History. Upon visiting "Ashland," Clay's famous estate in Lexington, Kentucky during September, 1988 the Executive Director of the estate, Bettie Kerr, showed me Henry Clay's Masonic Apron, which had never been placed on display. It had just been donated to the Memorial Foundation and is in a plain picture frame with ordinary glass in the front. Above the apron, there are two notations embroidered in cloth.

These notations read:

This Apron lay upon Henry Clay's coffin, 1852 when the Grand Lodge of Kentucky performed their highest Masonic Ceremonies in honour of the illustrious dead.

And This apron was worn by General Lafayette when assisting

in the Masonic Ceremonies at laying the cornerstone of Bunker Hill Monument and presented by him to Henry Clay.

THE EARLY YEARS

As the year 1777 marked the birth of the "Stars and Stripes", so did it herald in another great American symbol, Henry Clay. It was also the year that the Marquis de Lafayette arrived in America. And as the Marquis huddled at Valley Forge with George Washington and his ragged army, the infant Henry slept in his mother's arms, unaware of the struggles taking place to effect yet another birth - the United States of America.

It was this country that Henry Clay was destined to serve with a passion and ambition which has had few equals. He took up the study of law at an early age and shortly after his twentieth birthday was admitted to the bar in Virginia.

He thereupon moved to Lexington, Kentucky and swiftly rose to become the best criminal lawyer in the state. It was Clay who later successfully defended Aaron Burr in a grand jury investigation, and many other notable clients in both criminal and civil cases.

POLITICAL LIFE

Clay's political life began shortly after he arrived in Lexington. An excellent speaker, and man of dynamic action, he won the confidence of the Republic voters and in 1803 was elected to the Kentucky legislature. Then his appointment to serve an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate in 1806 provided national exposure for his political genius. From this point on, he exerted a tremendous influence in the direction of his country.

In all, Clay served as the U.S. Senator from Kentucky for nearly fifteen years. In addition, he served in the U.S. House of Representatives for thirteen years and was speaker of the House. He was one of the negotiators of the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war of 1812, and served as Secretary of State under President John Quincy Adams.

Clay's remarkable skill in effecting a compromise between differing political factions earned him the reputation as "The Great Compromiser." Indeed, largely through his efforts, the Civil War was delayed for a decade. In his connection, historians have reasoned that had the war broken out ten years earlier, it is probable that the South would have won. This is because the strength of the North was far less at that time.

Clay's distinguished political career established him three times as a candidate for the presidency of the United States. Much to his disappointment, however, the scales never tipped in his favor. True to his character, he consoled himself with his now famous statement, "I would rather be right than be President."

In his personal life, Henry Clay was a man of considerable wealth and social position. He and his wife, Lucretia had eleven children (six daughters and five sons). Of these, only four sons outlived him. His direct line ended in 1887 with the death of his son, John M Clay. Henry loved his home, "Ashland," a stately mansion on some 600 acres of beautiful Kentucky countryside.

He was fond of cards, horse racing, and appreciated fine liquor. A stroll through the old "Ashland" house also reveals exquisite taste in furnishings and decorations. An unusual "conversion seat" (a couch shaped like a backward "S:") in the master bedroom echoes the intimacy he shared with his wife, Lucretia.

Of his home, Clay once wrote to a friend: "I am in one respect better off than Moses. He died in sight of, and without reaching the Promised Land. I occupy as good a farm as any he would have found had he reached it, and "Ashland" has been acquired not by hereditary descent but by my own labours."

The Clays used their home to entertain many prominent people of the time. Such include the Marquis de Lafayette, James Monroe, William Henry Harrison, Martin Can Buren, and Abraham Lincoln. A young girl, Mary Todd, who lived in the area and frequently visited the Ashland estate, became Lincoln's wife.

MASONIC LIFE

Remarkably, Henry Clay found time to be very active in the Masonic Order. His membership, however, is not unusual as many prominent people of that period were Freemasons. Clay received his Masonic Degrees in Lexington Lodge No. 1, Lexington, Kentucky sometime between 1798 and 1801. He served as the Master of this Lodge and was the Grand Orator of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in 1806, 1807, and 1809. Later (1820) he became the Grand Master of Kentucky. He was an active member of a Masonic conference held in the senate chambers, Washington, D.C., on March 9, 1822 - the only Masonic meeting on record ever held in that room. Also, records indicate that he was present at the Grand Lodge sessions in 1829 and that he was made an honorary member of Saint John's Lodge No. 1., New York City, New York.

Henry Clay valued his association with the Masonic Order and gave it a very high priority in his life. Although, ironically, he supported and became secretary of state for John Quincy Adams, a noted Anti-Mason, Clay never deviated in his belief of the principles of Freemasonry.

When questioned on his view relative to Freemasonry he said:

"I would not denounce and formally renounce it (Freemasonry) to be made President of the United States." Knowing Henry Clay's passion, dedication, and complete personal commitment to that goal, what he said is probably one of the greatest compliments ever paid to the Masonic Order.

THE FINAL TRIUMPH

Henry Clay passed on to the Grand Lodge above on June 29, 1852. He was in the National Hotel, Washington D.C., at the time and the cause of death was attributed to tuberculosis. He was buried in Lexington with Masonic honors. His monument was Masonically dedicated on July 4, 1858. In the year 1900, he was elected to the U. S. Hall of Fame. There were 234 nominees, Clay was one of the 29 selected for this honor.