

1825 - Henry Clay's Year of Tragedy

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Many historians believe Henry Clay made the political blunder of his life on February 17, 1825 when he accepted President-elect John Quincy Adams's offer to be secretary of state. U.S. Senator and future president Martin Van Buren said that the political union between Clay and Adams was the equivalent of the signing of Clay's "political death warrant."

His acceptance of the post put into motion a series of events that would help make 1825, politically and personally, one of the most tragic years in Henry Clay's life. It would inadvertently lead to the death of his 12-year-old daughter Eliza in Lebanon, Ohio.

Since 1811, Henry Clay had served six terms in the U.S. House of Representatives as its speaker. Here, "Prince Hal," as he was sometimes called, ruled the House as if it was his own little kingdom. He was one of the most powerful men in America, but Henry Clay was also one of the nation's most ambitious. He wanted more.

The years leading to the election of 1824 saw the end of the Federalist Party. This left only the Democratic-Republican Party as a national political entity. In 1824, the Democratic-Republican Party splintered as four separate candidates sought the presidency. One faction, led by Andrew Jackson, would evolve into the Democratic Party; while another, led by John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, would become at first the National Republican Party and then the Whig Party.

In the presidential election of 1824, the four main candidates were Secretary of State John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts; the hero of the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812, and the newly elected U.S. senator from Tennessee, Andrew Jackson; Secretary of the Treasury William H. Crawford of Georgia; and Speaker of the House Henry Clay of Kentucky. None of the four candidates received the majority of electoral votes needed to become president. This put the choice of the next chief executive in the hands of the House of Representatives. Only the top three candidates, however, would be considered by the House. Henry Clay came in fourth.

Clay was shocked that he lost to men he felt were less worthy of the position than he was. The loss of the election did, however, put him in a very powerful position. Henry Clay could now play the role of kingmaker. He felt he could virtually hand pick the next president by throwing his support

behind him. The question now was whom he would support.

William H. Crawford was not even considered. Crawford had suffered a paralytic stroke during the summer of 1823 that left him nearly blind and barely able to walk. News of his plight had been kept a secret with only a few men knowing the full extent of his condition. As for Jackson, a fellow Westerner, Clay did not take him seriously as a political leader. This was in spite of Jackson's ability to get the largest number of electoral votes of the four. "I cannot believe killing 2,500 Englishmen at N. Orleans qualifies for the various, difficult and complicated duties of the Chief Magistracy," wrote Clay.

Besides, if Jackson became president that would mean there would be four, or possibly eight, years of a Western president. Clay reasoned the chances were not good that the nation would tolerate another Western president when it was his turn to be elected. When questioned as to whom he would support Clay wrote, "What do you desire? That I should vote for Mr. Crawford? I cannot. For Gen. Jackson? I will not." The choice had to be Adams. Politically, Adams' views were close to Clay's. The secretary of state agreed with Clay's national economic program. Personally, their relationship had been strained in recent times. Clay considered John Quincy Adams a rather pious and cold New Englander, a political lightweight compared to himself, and someone he personally did not like. Adams, likewise, had no great love for Henry Clay. He was disgusted by what he perceived as Clay's loose morals and the image that was portrayed of him—that of



Henry Clay

a womanizer, a carouser, and a gambler. He felt Clay was responsible for many of the attacks from the House that criticized his performance as secretary of state. However, Clay and Adams felt their political union would be a profitable one for both of them. Adams' ambition for the presidency was as strong as Clay's.

They corresponded through unofficial visits to Adams by U.S. Representative Robert Letcher from Lancaster, Kentucky. Clay and Letcher at the time shared the same rooming house on Ninth Street in Washington D.C. The first meeting between Letcher and Adams took place on December 12, 1824. Letcher's conversation was a little vague in substance but his

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point was very obvious to the secretary of state. Adams wrote in his memoirs, “that Clay would willingly support me if he could thereby serve himself . . . (and) have a prominent share in the Administration . . .”

Clay had in mind being secretary of state. He saw it as a natural springboard to the presidency. It had worked for Madison, Monroe and was about to work for John Quincy Adams. Clay, or rather Letcher upon his behalf, however, had never specifically asked for that position.

The Kentucky and Ohio delegations to Congress announced their decisions to cast their votes for Adams on January 24, 1825. These two states were ones Henry Clay had carried in the election the previous fall. Many Westerners were shocked that Kentucky would not support their fellow son from the West, Andrew Jackson. Four days later, on January 28, an unsigned letter appeared in the *Philadelphia Columbia Observer* newspaper. It accused Clay of delivering House votes for Adams in exchange for him becoming the secretary of state. The public outcries of a “corrupt bargain” between Adams and Clay had begun.

Henry Clay had “A Card” published in the *Washington National Intelligencer* on January 31, 1825 after the “corrupt bargain” accusation was reprinted in that newspaper. He called the unsigned letter a “vile paper” and called its author, “whomever he may be, a base and infamous calumniator (slanderer), a dastard and a liar.” He demanded the author come forth and meet him on a field of honor. Clay’s willingness to duel over the letter was embarrassing to Adams.

On February 9 the House of Representatives voted. Each state received only one vote regardless of the size of its delegation. Of the 24 states, Adams received votes from thirteen, Jackson seven and Crawford four. John Quincy Adams was declared the president after only one ballot.

Two days later Henry Clay called upon John Quincy Adams. “We had a conversation of about an hour,” Adams recorded. “I then offered him the nomination to the Department of State. He said he would take it into consideration and answer me as soon as he should have time to consult opposition and thought all the projects of that nature which have been announced were mere ebullitions of disappointment at the issue of the election, which would soon be abandoned.”

Henry Clay was wrong. The cries of a “corrupt bargain” would not “soon be abandoned.” They would linger all through his term as secretary of state and haunt him for the rest of his public life. Jackson supporters would constantly bring the matter up, clouding many of the important programs and issues he tried to promote during his time at the State

Department. Andrew Jackson, who referred to Clay as “the Judas of the West,” would remain his political enemy for the rest of his life.

Not being offered the position to head the State Department until after Adams was chosen president, gave Clay the opportunity to dispel the charges of being involved in the illicit exchange of political favors. All he had to do was refuse temptation of power and turn down the job he felt would lead him straight to the presidency. On Thursday, February 17, Clay informed the president-elect he would be his secretary of state.

In 1825, the State Department was housed in a building at Pennsylvania Avenue and 15th Street, NW in Washington City. Clay worked hard, putting in some 12 to 14 hours a day at his new post. He found the position, however, somewhat dull compared to his livelier years as Speaker of the House. He also had to make the adjustment of being a member of a presidential cabinet, and no longer being his own man. He was now representing a president, one he did not necessarily admire. It bothered him that many of his suggestions to President Adams were being rejected. Henry Clay was also not physically well when he undertook the role of secretary of

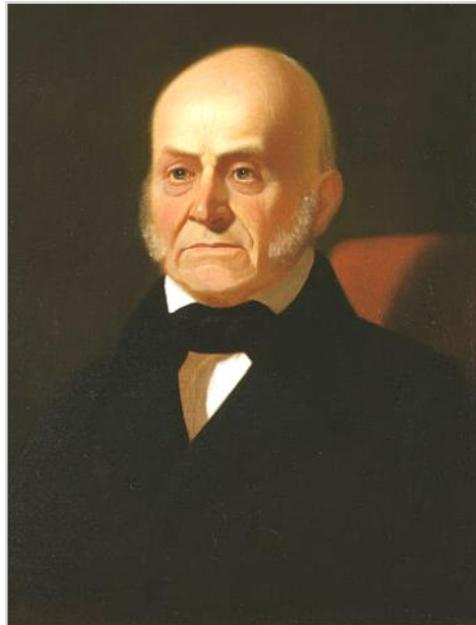
state. The pressures and strain of the job were draining his strength. He turned to his family for comfort but matters were about to get worse.

In mid-May 1825 Henry Clay returned to his home, Ashland, in Lexington, Kentucky. He had decided to move his family to Washington City to be with him. In preparation for their 500-mile journey, he had to sell much of their livestock and furniture and find a suitable renter of their home. Henry Clay’s “hard featured” wife, Lucretia, at first, was not happy about moving to Washington. Her 20-year-old daughter, Susan Hart Clay Duralde, encouraged her to “go more into the world” and leave Lexington. Susan, who was the Clays’ oldest living daughter, was married to Martin Duralde. They lived in New Orleans and had two small

children. Susan wrote her mother “although you will perhaps not like (Washington) much at first, you will soon get accustomed to it.” Mrs. Clay finally acquiesced and agreed to the move.

Lucretia was glad that she would have 11-year-old Eliza, her only unmarried daughter, as company. Mrs. Clay “anticipated much gratification from her society and from (Eliza) completing her education” in Washington City. Eliza was described in a newspaper account, some 50 years later, as the Clays’ “beautiful and intelligent daughter.” Although being “rather delicate physically,” she was said to be “wise and womanly for her years.”

Henry Clay was surprised by the warmth of the greetings



President John Quincy Adams

he had received on his journey home in the spring of 1825. “My reception West of the Mountains so far has exceeded my expectation . . . In all the villages through which I passed crowds of decent orderly citizens visited me with much kindness and cordially welcomed me.” Clay enjoyed all the attention. Although he wrote the president on June 28 he was “obligated to decline many invitations to public dinner.” He still planned on attending several public functions on his way back to Washington. He told Adams in the letter, “I shall leave my residence on the 6th or 7th of July and passing by Louisville, I shall join my family at Cincinnati and proceed to the City . . . I apprehend that it will be the last of July before we shall reach Washington.”

Eliza Clay celebrated her twelfth birthday on Tuesday July 5, 1825. Shortly thereafter she and the rest of the Clay’s “tolerable large family” left their home in Lexington and began their ill-fated journey to the nation’s capital.

They traveled by their own private coach. Besides Eliza Clay and her parents, the group included her older sister, Anne and her husband, James Erwin. Anne Brown Clay Erwin was 18 years of age and expecting her first child early that winter. Also going were Eliza’s younger brothers, six-year-old James Brown Clay and four-year-old John Morrison Clay.

The Clay family reached Cincinnati on Tuesday, July 12. The next day Henry Clay attended a large public reception celebrating the beginning of the Ohio and Miami Canal. This “Great Canal” would be officially dedicated in Middletown, Ohio the following week. Dignitaries from all over Ohio, its neighboring states, and beyond were in attendance. At the dinner numerous toasts and speeches were made. Clay was extremely pleased by the geniality in which he was received at this function. “My reception at Cincinnati was in a high degree cordial and distinguished” he wrote Adams. “On no former similar occasion was a public dinner so numerously and respectably attended. Between our political friends and mine entire concord & cooperation prevail.”

By this time, however, Eliza had come down with a fever. Dismissing it as excitement over the trip, the Clay family continued their journey. That Thursday, July 14, they reached the residence of Judge Jacob D. Lowe. The retired associate judge of the common pleas court lived some 25 miles north of Cincinnati near Mason, Ohio, where what is now the Kirkwood Inn on US 42.

END OF PART ONE - to be continued in the August 2016 *Historicalog*



Henry Clay's home, Ashland, in Lexington, Kentucky