

1825 - Henry Clay's Year of Tragedy

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Part II: Continued from the May 2016 *Historicalog*

The next day, Friday, July 15, 1825, the Clay family traveled only about five miles and arrived at William Ferguson's hotel in Lebanon, Ohio. The town of just over 1,000 residents was the county seat of Warren County. The Ferguson House was known for many years as the Indian Chief Tavern. This frame tavern that began in 1805 was located on Main Street a half a block east of the town square. On its west side, was the back of Warren County's first real courthouse building. Completed in 1806, the courthouse sat on the northeast corner of Broadway and Main streets on the town square.

Eliza Clay was now quite ill. A local doctor was consulted and he established that she was suffering from typhoid fever. This inflammation of the bowels is caused by digesting contaminated food or water. It was a common ailment in towns and settlements where poor sanitary conditions were prevalent. The doctor, John Ross, the brother-in-law of the avid Clay supporter and future Governor of Ohio Tom Corwin, advised the Clays not to move Eliza until she was better, which he assured them would be in a few days.

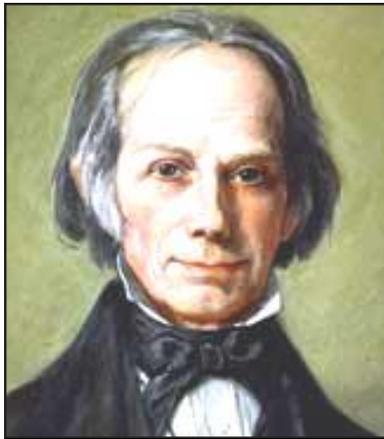
The next day, Saturday July 16, Henry Clay decided to take advantage of this temporary stop and visit Union Village, a Shaker settlement four miles west of Lebanon. Union Village was established in 1805 and was the first Shaker community in the West. Its first 15 years of existence were marred by several protests and mob actions. Some local residents feared the religious communal society because of what they perceived as their "strange beliefs." The Shakers lived celibate lives, and believed in the separation of the sexes. They also, for the most part, separated themselves from the outside world. By 1825, Union Village was more or less accepted by its neighboring communities. The Shaker settlement became quite the curiosity to visiting dignitaries to the area. Clay was said to have been impressed with Union Village and he offered his help to the Shakers if ever the need came.

Henry Clay had initially decided not to attend any public meeting or dinner in Lebanon in his honor in deference of Eliza's illness. However, while he was visiting Union Village well over a dozen men, described as "friends" of the Secretary of State Clay, came to the Ferguson House to pay their respects. Learning that he was not in, they decided to wait for him. Word spread further that the Henry Clay was in town and the number of "friends" soon grew. Upon his return nearly 40 gentlemen were waiting to dine with him in the hotel. They were all anxious to greet the great statesman who had carried Ohio in the election the year before. Clay graciously agreed to

dine with them and made a brief address "in a manner that displayed some of the powers of his matchless oratory."

On Friday, July 22, 1825, one of the greatest collections of powerful and influential men Ohio had ever seen gathered at William Ferguson's hotel in Lebanon, Ohio. The occasion was a dinner to celebrate the dedication of the beginning of the Ohio and Miami Canal that took place less than a dozen miles away in Middletown, Ohio the day before. The dinner was preceded by the firing of canon, a salute by the local militia, a procession of citizens and an address to the dignitaries in the local Presbyterian Church.

Present at the dinner were: "The Father of the Erie Canal," former governor of New York and Mayor of New York City, Dewitt Clinton; "the Father of the Erie Canal," former Ohio Governor Ethan Allen Brown; the Governor of Ohio, Jeremiah Morrow; Ohio's U.S. Senator, and future U.S. President William Henry Harrison; and by the pure coincidence of misfortune, the Secretary of State of the United States, Henry Clay. Added to this prestigious gathering were dozens of local prominent citizens.



Henry Clay

After toasts were made to "the President of the United States;" "the Vice President," "the memory of Washington," "the government of the United States," "Governor Clinton," "the County of Warren and its worthy citizens," "Governor Morrow," and "the Ohio and Miami Canal," George J. Smith, a prominent Lebanon attorney, rose. Holding high his glass he stated: "The Honorable Henry Clay, Secretary of State—an enlightened and incorruptible patriot: his past life has been identified with the interest and happiness of his country—a sure guarantee that his future days will be devoted to her glory."

The *Chillicothe Supporter* newspaper reported that Clay then rose and expressed how appreciative he was "for the affectionate regard manifested for his person by the citizens of Lebanon, as for their kindness and attention to his family during his stay among them."

Secretary of State Henry Clay then took the opportunity to promote greater cooperation between the United States and its Latin American neighbors, a position he and President Adams both strongly favored. He toasted General Simon Bolivar, liberator of much of South America from Spanish rule, praising him for his patriotism and the "liberty which he has established." In all some 20 toasts were made.

The Western Star, Lebanon's local weekly newspaper, reported on Monday, July 25, that Henry Clay was "still detained in this place in consequence of the protracted illness of his daughter. We are pleased, however, to learn that there are symptoms of a change for the better and that she is likely to recover, which circumstances will enable Mr. Clay in 5 or 6

days probably to proceed on his journey to Washington . . .”

Despite the optimistic report and the application of several remedies, Eliza, in reality, showed little improvement. That same day Henry Clay wrote to President John Quincy Adams the following letter:

Lebanon (sic)
25 July 1825

Dear Sir

I am still detained here by the illness of my daughter, of the termination of whose case we can neither anticipate, nor the manner. I am greatly mortified and distressed by the occurrence. Mr. Erwin, my son in law, who will have the honor of delivering you this letter, will explain her situation more fully. His business obliges him to leave us. I shall lose no time that is not unavoidable in reaching the City.

I am with great respect your ob. servant
H. Clay

On Saturday, August 6, 1825, Clay wrote a check to William Ferguson the proprietor of the hotel in which his family has been staying since their arrival in Lebanon on July 15. The amount was for \$175 or approximately \$8/day. Adjusted for inflation, that amount would be nearly \$4,200, or around \$190/night, today.

Finally, on Sunday, August 7, 1825, after receiving assurances from the doctor that Eliza would recover but still needed rest, Clay left alone for Washington. It was some 24 days after the Clay family first arrived in Lebanon. He wrote a short time later, “I regret extremely that I left it. I should not have done so but that Dr. (John) Ross was confident of the convalescence of my poor Eliza. I had some forebodings . . .”

Henry Clay left Lebanon heading first north to Dayton and then east to the National Road, which had its ceremonial beginning in Ohio in St. Clairsville, Ohio on July 4.

The August 8, 1825 issue of *The Western Star* reported, “The Hon. Henry Clay left this place yesterday in the afternoon for Washington City. His family are yet in this place, his daughter is regaining her health slowly and it may be some time before she will be able to proceed in her journey. It was intended by a member of our citizens to escort Mr. Clay as

far as the Miami River on his leave of town but the time of his departure was not known until after he was gone.”

It took Clay two weeks to reach the nation’s capital. He arrived there on Sunday, August 21. At breakfast that morning, 20 miles from his destinations, he sat down to read *The National Intelligencer*, the daily Washington newspaper. It was from reading an article in that paper that he learned that his daughter, Eliza had died on Thursday, August 11, 1825, four days after he had left Lebanon. He was devastated.

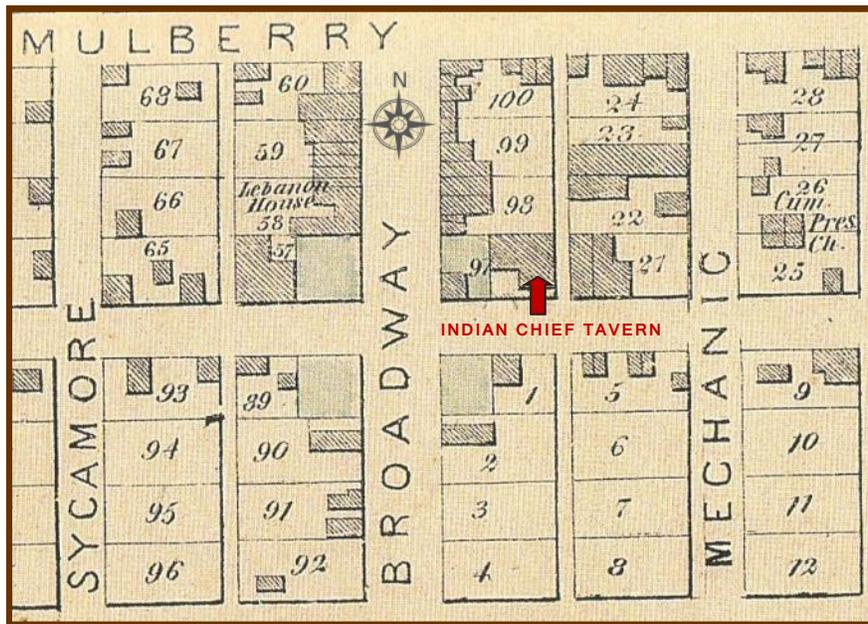
Overcome by grief, as well as guilt for having left his family, he wrote to his wife Lucretia on Wednesday August 24, “I wish, my dear wife, I could offer you some consolation for the severe affliction which Providence has seen fit to send us . . . I cannot describe to you my own distressed feelings, which have been greatly aggravated by a knowledge of what yours must have been, in the midst of strangers, and all your friends far away. We must bow, with religious resignation, to decrees which we have no power to revoke.”

Back in Lebanon, Eliza Clay’s body was placed in a narrow black walnut coffin and was buried in the Baptist graveyard on the corner of Mulberry and West streets some five blocks west of the town square. Years later, an attendee of Eliza Clay’s funeral said, “It was the most largely attended of any that ever occurred in the county.” People from 20 to 30 miles away came to the service.

Just one month later, tragedy struck again with the death of Susan Duralde, Clay’s 20-year-old daughter. Susan, who was said to be Lucretia’s favorite, died from yellow fever on Sunday September 18, 1825 in New Orleans. It was reported to Henry Clay that the “news of her sister (Eliza’s death) weighed heavily on her” and that “it depressed her spirits and perceptibly affected her death.”

Overcome with despair, Henry Clay worked even longer hours at the State Department to block out his sorrow. Lucretia was left to deal with her grief on her own, receiving little comfort or support from her husband. She often sat in their rented three-story brick house on F Street in Washington looking “bleak and desolate.” She turned to her faith in God for consolation.

President John Quincy Adams was very sympathetic to Clay’s situation. He wrote in his diary, “Mr. Clay is in deep affliction having lost two daughters in the course of a month . . . his own health is so infirm that he told me he feared he should



Downtown Lebanon, OH: William Ferguson's Indian Chief Tavern, where the Clay party stayed during Eliza's illness, and where Eliza died, was located on lot No.97.

Continued next page

resign his office: but said he would retain it through the winter, and himself entirely satisfied with my conduct toward him, and with the course of the administration hitherto.” The president did not interfere with Clay’s department and the secretary was able to complete the term.

Henry Clay’s performance as secretary of state, however, dissatisfied his supporters as well as himself. Throughout his time in office he was haunted constantly by the renewed charge of his supposed “corrupt bargain” with Adams by his political enemies. They were the cause of many of his diplomatic failures in Congress.

It is also true that during his four years as the secretary of state his physical and emotional strength had been severely drained. Henry Clay’s famed vitality and spark were not evident. Margaret Bayard Smith, a prominent Washington society leader visited the secretary of state in the latter days of his term. She was shocked by his “pale appearance” and wrote that “his eyes sunk in his head and his countenance (was) sad and melancholy.”

Eliza Clay’s burial in Lebanon was initially intended to be temporary, but Clay had allowed several years to go by before returning to the village. By that time it was decided that the Baptist churchyard in Lebanon would be Eliza’s final resting place. Henry Clay had a Clinton limestone sarcophagus built. It was a little less than three feet high and about six feet long. The inscription on the upper tablet read:

*In memory of
ELIZA H. CLAY,
daughter of
HENRY AND LUCRETIA CLAY
Who died on the
11th day of August 1825.
Cut down in the bloom of a promising youth,
While traveling through Ohio, hence
From Lexington, Kentucky to Washington City.
.....
Her parents, who have erected this monument
To her memory, console themselves
With the hope that she now abides in heaven.*

The sexton for Lebanon’s Baptist Church agreed to look after Eliza’s grave. The church was located on the northwest corner of the graveyard, what is now the northern part of what is the Lebanon Pioneer Cemetery. For more than 25 years the resting place of the remains of Henry Clay’s little girl was well cared for. In the 1850’s, however, two events greatly affected that care.

First, on June 20, 1850, the Lebanon Cemetery Association was formed. The old Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist graveyards, all small and situated on the west end of Lebanon near Main Street, were getting crowded. With the village growing, a new site for future burials was needed. Initially some 8 ½ acres were set-aside on the north side of West Silver Street for the new Lebanon Cemetery. By the 1880s it had grown to nearly 50 acres. The first interment there took place on August 20, 1850. Use of the smaller church graveyards fell off sharply and eventually came to a halt.

The other event was the death of Henry Clay on June 29,



Henry and Lucretia Clay outlived seven of their 11 children

1852. This great Kentucky statesman, arguably one of the nation’s greatest, had actually led a rather tragic life. Politically, despite some 43 years of public service, including being speaker of the house, secretary of state and a U.S. senator, for many he is remembered as simply a man who ran for president three times and lost them all. The election of 1824 was only his first attempt.

Personally not only did Henry Clay have to bear the loss of his daughters, Eliza and Susan, in 1825, but he would also outlive seven of his 11 children, including all six of his daughters. This outgoing, charming, high-spirited, ambitious political gambler’s life was filled with tremendous sorrow.

In an 1880 newspaper article, a Lebanon resident commented on the state of Eliza Clay’s grave, “During Mr. Clay’s life the grave was kept clean . . . but when he died no one seemed to take an interest in it, and the leaves and briars were allowed to clamber over it without hindrance. The whole graveyard was allowed to develop a rank growth of grass and underbrush and rubbish rapidly accumulated.”

To make matters worse, students from the National Normal University, established in Lebanon in 1855 by Alfred Holbrook began to vandalize Eliza Clay’s tombstone. Her sarcophagus provided an excellent source of Clinton limestone for geology class. The students got into the habit of chipping the slab for specimens. Attempts were made to stop the practice. A crude fence of barbed wire was stretched to four unhewn posts around the grave but it proved ineffective. Except for the interest of a few of Lebanon’s older citizens, the stained and moldy stone sarcophagus of Eliza Clay was neglected.

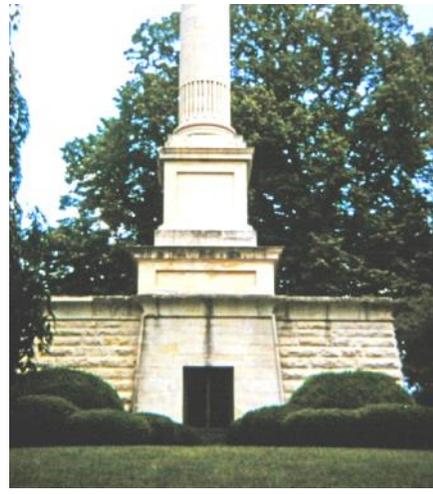
Finally, after nearly 69 years to the day of her death, Eliza Clay was going home to Lexington, Kentucky. On Thursday, July 26, 1894, her body was exhumed at the request of Mrs. John Morrison Clay, the widow of Eliza’s youngest brother. John was 4-years-old when Eliza died in Lebanon. No Clay family member came north to Lebanon, Ohio for the disinterment.

The Western Star newspaper, reporting on the exhumation, stated that “there were traces of the black walnut coffin left, and the bones were in a good state of preservation, the teeth being perfect.” The slab with the epitaph was boxed and shipped by freight. It had been mutilated so much that little of its original shape was left. The remains of Eliza Clay left Lebanon for Lexington by express train.

Eliza Clay’s final resting place is in the Lexington Cemetery. It is just over two miles west on Main Street from the Clay family home, Ashland. Her simple marker reads:

ELIZA H. CLAY
Daughter of
Henry and Lucretia Clay
1813 - 1825

Across the narrow cemetery road within a handsome marble mausoleum are the remains of her parents Henry and Lucretia Clay. Above the monument is a towering column topped by a 12-½ foot statue of the great Kentucky statesman Henry Clay. It gives the impression that Eliza’s father is now watching over her.



From Left to Right: The Frankfort, KY, grave marker of Henry Clay, Jr., (Eliza’s sarcophagus in Lebanon would have appeared similar to this), the Lexington, KY grave marker of Eliza Clay, the Lexington, KY mausoleum of Henry and Lucretia Clay, and the statue of Henry Clay that sits on top of the mausoleum