

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

“I’d Rather Be Right”

He made numerous trips to the Crescent City and was a frequent visitor to the Julia Row townhouses, known as the “Thirteen Sisters”. He was also present at the ceremony of laying the cornerstone for the New Orleans Custom House on Canal Street on February 22, 1849. Known as “The Great Compromiser” for his ability to bring opposing sides to agreement, Henry Clay (1777-1852) was front and center at the momentous event. Construction on the massive granite structure had already commenced with the cypress grillage foundation work and would take a total of 33 years.

Henry Clay was the founder and leader of the Whig Party and had significant successes in brokering compromises on the slavery issue, especially the Missouri Compromise (1820) and the Compromise of 1850. This second compromise may have delayed the Civil War for an additional eleven years. Although born in Virginia, this magnificent orator represented Kentucky both in the House of Representatives and the Senate. He was a leading proponent of programs for modernizing the nation’s economy, such as tariffs to protect industry, and internal improvements to promote railroads, ports and canals. In addition, he favored a national bank to stabilize the currency and serve as the core of a truly national financial system. In the area of foreign policy, Clay was the leading American supporter of independence movements in Latin America. Carl Schurz wrote, “His eloquence was in turn majestic, fierce, playful, insinuating; his gesticulation natural, vivid, large, powerful.”

Henry Clay was one of what was known as the “Great Triumvirate”, along with his senate colleagues John C. Calhoun and Daniel Webster. (All three of these illustrious statesmen have streets named for them in Uptown New Orleans). In 1957, a Senate committee chaired by John F. Kennedy named this “Immortal Trio” as three of the five greatest senators in American history. Clay and Calhoun worked out the Compromise Tariff of 1833 as a resolution to the Nullification Crisis, when South Carolina threatened to secede from the Union over protectionist rates.

In his early days as a War Hawk in Congress demanding the War of 1812, Clay made a serious impact in his first congressional term, becoming Speaker of the House of Representatives on the very first day of the session (which has never been done before or since). Before Clay the position of Speaker had simply been that of a rule enforcer and mediator, but he refashioned it into a position of power second only to the President. He ran for President five times but was never able to win.

Clay lost his first two presidential bids by wide margins, mainly because he failed to form a strong political organization that could match the Jacksonian Democrats. Not fond of "Old Hickory", Clay remarked, "I cannot believe that killing 2,500 Englishmen at New Orleans qualifies for the various, difficult, and complicated duties of the Chief Magistracy." Clay later lost to James Knox Polk because he opposed admitting Texas as a state feeling it would reawaken the slavery issue and provoke Mexico to declare war. That, of course, is exactly what happened. Although Clay owned slaves himself, he anguished over slavery, calling it a "great evil". He believed slavery would become economically obsolete as a growing population reduced the cost of legitimate labor. His compromises bought time, but not enough. When Clay was advised not to take a stance against slavery, he was quoted as saying:

"I'd rather be right than be President!"

This quote has been borrowed or repeated by several presidential hopefuls since, as a bold statement of principle over ambition.

In expectation of Clay's winning one of his runs for the presidency, a massive set of bedroom furniture was commissioned by some of his wealthy supporters to fit in the White House master bedroom suite. Clay lost the election and was stuck with the grandiose furniture with no place to fit it. The towering furniture eventually made its way to Rosedown Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana, where it can be seen today.

Ashland is the name of Clay's plantation in Lexington, Kentucky, in the central Bluegrass area of the state. He first came to Lexington from Virginia in 1797 and began buying up land for the farm in 1804. Outside of the city limits during Clay's lifetime, Ashland was (at its peak) over 600 acres. Merino sheep and six other species of livestock were imported and bred, but the farm's cash crop was hemp.

Under the popular mayoral administration (1854-1856) of Lexington, Kentucky-born John L. Lewis, an important step in the beautification of New Orleans was undertaken. After Henry Clay's death in 1852, a group emerged advocating the erection of a statue in Clay's honor.

Since the great Kentucky statesman had had been a greatly admired visitor to the city, the Clay Monument Association was formed "manifesting their veneration for the character and public services of Henry Clay". It raised the necessary money to commission the sculptor Joel T. Hart to create a bronze image of heroic proportion. Molded by Muller of Munich, the statue cost approximately \$50,000. Erected on a seven-tiered granite base at its initial location at the intersection of St. Charles and Royal with Canal Street on April 12, 1860, the statue was unveiled amidst much celebration, speeches, fanfare and a military parade.

In 1891, the Clay Statue was the scene of a formidable gathering. In October of the previous year, Police Chief David Hennessy's was assassinated, resulting in a sensational trial. A group of not guilty verdicts shocked the populace, and an angry mob gathered at the Clay Statue and stormed the prison. The crowd rushed in and 11 of 19 Italian men indicted for the murder were lynched.

The Clay Statue was relocated in 1900 to its present home in Lafayette Square in order to facilitate a greater flow of streetcar traffic on Canal Street. The great speaker looks down today at wonderful concerts in the park.

New Orleans was a source of happiness to the long-tenured politician, as well as much sadness. His wife, Lucretia Hart Clay, was terribly fond of "good fresh Macaroni," and her husband was glad to ask his sister-in-law Julie Duralde Clay to send some up from New Orleans. (Apparently being a port city made New Orleans the place to buy one's pasta in those days.) Clay and his wife Lucretia had eleven children (six daughters and five sons). All six daughters had died of varying causes by 1835, and Henry Jr. was killed in the Mexican-American War.

Married to Martin Duralde, daughter Susan Hart Clay was born February 14, 1805, and died (after an illness of nearly a week) of yellow fever on September 18, 1825, in New Orleans at only 20 years of age.

The news of the death of Susan's younger sister Eliza (age 12) just the month before "weighed heavily on her," George Eustis wrote Henry Clay. What's more, "it depressed her spirits and perceptibly affected her death." Her last reported words were "I regret to die without seeing my father and mother." She left a husband and two young boys, Martin (the oldest by a year and a half) and the younger boy (Henry Clay Duralde, still teething). Henry Clay, then John Quincy Adams' Secretary of State, and his wife were extremely saddened by their losses. The two Duralde sons both died before reaching age 26, and before their grandfather.

Another Duralde, Julie (Clay's macaroni source), was married to the statesman's brother John (a New Orleans businessman). They had no children. One of Henry Clay's other daughters, Ann Brown Clay, was married to James Erwin. Clay was dealt another terrible jolt from New Orleans when he was informed that a "favorite grandson" James Erwin Jr. (born 1828) inexplicably shot himself in the St. Charles Hotel in 1848. It is unclear whether it was an accident or suicide, but Clay commented that the circumstances "greatly aggravated our grief."

It is interesting that Henry Clay's statue is the focal point of Lafayette Square, for in the City of Lafayette Ordinance Book is recorded in 1852:

"Resolved, that the Public Square contracted to be purchased of Mollard and Armstead for the use of the City, be called 'Clay Square' in honor of the illustrious statesman, Henry Clay."

A *New York Times* article dated August 5, 1852, mentions New Orleans' purchase of this "magnificent square in the Fourth District, formerly the City of Lafayette" to be called Henry Clay Park in which it was proposed "to erect a full length statue of America's greatest statesman." Clay died June 29, 1852, and was the first person to lie in state in the United States Capitol. His headstone has this simple inscription:

"I know no North - no South - no East - no West."

Clay Square is there today, a park bounded by Second, Annunciation, Third and Chippewa Streets. A city ordinance states its opening "Dec. 1, 1913" with its location "Annunciation and Second Streets". But the Clay Statue that did get financed ended up in Lafayette Square after a forty-year stint on Canal Street.

Among the countless accomplishments of Henry Clay, perhaps the most overlooked is his having first brought the mint julep to the nation's capital. He introduced the renowned Kentucky potable at the Round Robin Bar in the famous Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C. So popular at the Kentucky Derby (over 120,000 served), the mint julep first appeared in print in a book printed in London in 1803, described as "a dram of spirituous liquor that has mint steeped in it, taken by Virginians of a morning." The book did not specify the use of bourbon as the "spirituous liquor" or that Kentuckians now claim the refreshing cocktail as their own – and the illustrious Henry Clay.

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