



History 101

Henry Clay

Henry Clay Sr. (April 12, 1777 – June 29, 1852) was an American lawyer and planter, statesman, and skilled orator who represented Kentucky in both the United States Senate and House of Representatives. After serving three non-consecutive terms as Speaker of the House of Representatives, he served as Secretary of State under President John Quincy Adams. Clay ran for the presidency in 1824, 1832 and 1844, while also seeking his party's nomination in 1840 and 1848. Though he was unsuccessful in all of his attempts to reach his nation's highest office, Clay was an important national figure from 1811 to his death in 1852. He founded the Whig Party, one of the two major parties during the Second Party System.

In 1844, Clay won the Whig Party's presidential nomination. Clay's opposition to the annexation of Texas, partly over fears that such an annexation would inflame the slavery issue, hurt his campaign, and Democrat James K. Polk won the election. Clay later opposed the Mexican–American War, which resulted in part from the Texas annexation. Clay returned to the Senate for a final term, where he helped broker a compromise over the status of slavery in the Mexican Cession.

Known as "The Great Compromiser", Clay brokered important agreements during the Nullification Crisis and on the slavery issue. As part of the "Great Triumvirate" or "Immortal Trio," along with his colleagues Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, he was instrumental in formulating the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Compromise Tariff of 1833, and the Compromise of 1850 to ease sectional tensions. He was viewed as the primary representative of Western interests in this group, and was given the names "Harry of the West" and "The Western Star." As a plantation owner, Clay held slaves during his lifetime, but freed them in his will.

Clay's Whig Party collapsed shortly after his death, but Clay cast a long shadow over the generation of political leaders that presided over the Civil War. Mississippi Senator Henry S. Foote stated that "had there been one such man in the Congress of the United States as Henry Clay in 1860-'61 there would, I feel sure, have been no civil war." Abraham Lincoln, a Whig leader in Illinois, was a great admirer of Clay, saying he was "my ideal of a great man." Lincoln wholeheartedly supported Clay's economic programs. Kentucky remained in the Union during the Civil War, reflecting in part Clay's continuing influence. In 1957, a Senate Committee selected Clay as one of the five greatest U.S. Senators, along with Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Robert La Follette, and Robert A. Taft.

Maintained and operated as a museum, today Clay's estate of Ashland includes 17 acres of the original estate grounds. It is located in Lexington and is open to the public (admission charged).

