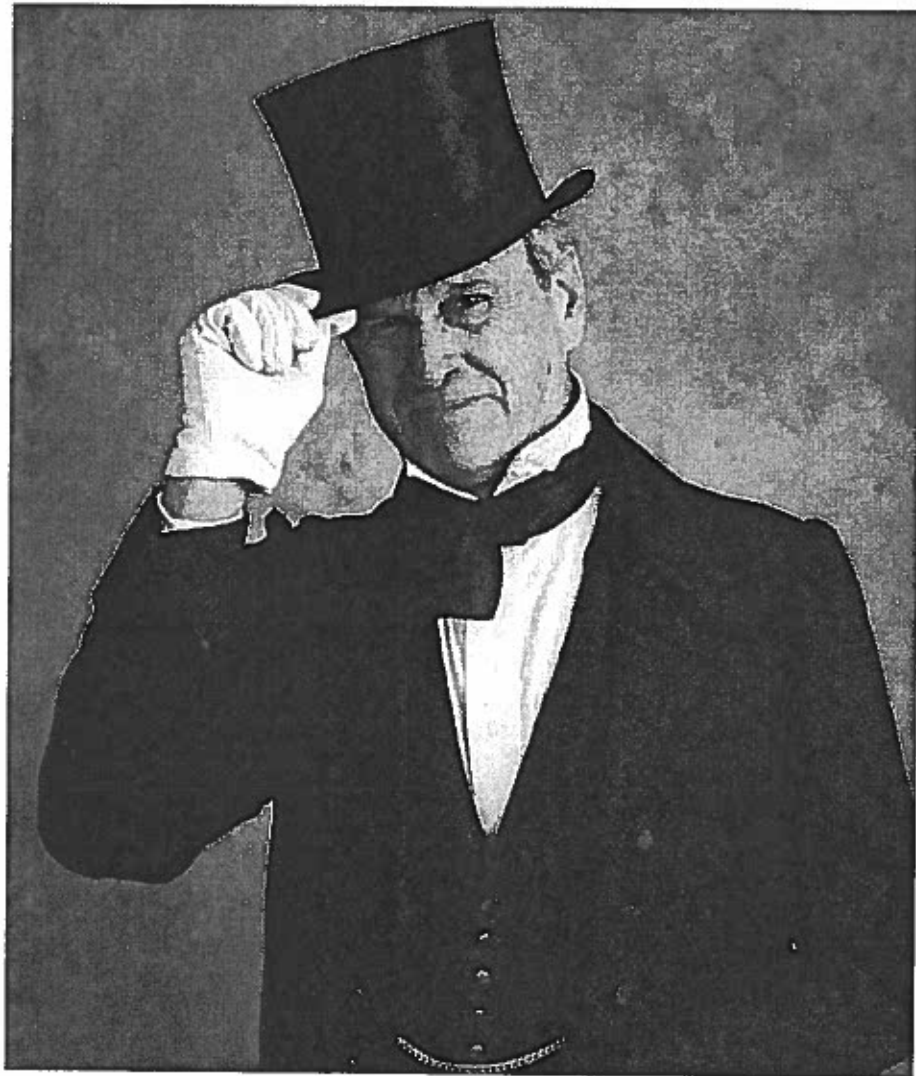


Kentucky Humanities

presents George McGee as

Henry Clay

Kentucky's Great Statesman



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Henry Clay: Kentucky's Great Statesman 1777-1852

Above all, Henry Clay wanted to be president of the United States. Despite never quite making it to the White House, Clay made an indelible mark on the history of his country, which he served with high distinction as a senator, speaker of the house and secretary of state. Passionately devoted to the integrity of the Union, The Great Compromiser, as he was known, fought at every turn to keep the Union from breaking up over whether to allow slavery in the new western states and territories. Personally and politically, slavery was the issue that troubled him more than any other.

Clay was born in Hanover County, Virginia, the son of a Baptist minister who died when Henry was 4. When he was 15, his mother and stepfather moved to Versailles, Kentucky. He stayed behind as a clerk in Virginia's High Court of Chancery, spending four years as copyist for the chancellor, George Wythe, a scholar whose guidance helped Clay acquire the mastery of the English language that made him one of the great orators in American history. After a year of further study in a law office, Clay earned his law license. In November 1797, he took it to Lexington, Kentucky, where he embarked on what turned out to be more than a half-century of success in law, politics and farming.

Clay won political office for the first time in 1803 when he was elected to the Kentucky legislature. Three years later, he was appointed to fill an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate. Returning to the legislature, he became speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives in 1808. In 1811, he won a seat in Congress, and was promptly elected speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. He held the job for 14 years, until President John Quincy Adams appointed him secretary of state. The appointment followed Clay's loss the year before in a four-way presidential race that included Adams and Clay's bitter rival, Andrew Jackson. Since no one got a majority of the electoral votes, the election went to Congress, where Clay helped Adams win. Jackson called Clay's appointment as secretary of state a payoff.

Jackson won the presidency in 1828. In 1832, Clay ran against him, and lost decisively. In 1831, the Kentucky legislature sent Clay to the Senate (U.S. senators were elected by state legislatures until 1913), and he stayed there for 11 years, doing all he could to block President Jackson's programs. As the Whig party formed in opposition to Jackson in the 1830s, Clay emerged as its leader. In 1842, he retired from the Senate to prepare for another run at the presidency in 1844 as the nominee of the Whigs.

For the third time in 20 years he lost, this time to James K. Polk. One of the reasons was his support for the annexation of Texas, where slavery was legal. This cost Clay dearly among voters who opposed slavery and didn't want a new slave state in the Union. Slavery was the great quandary

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Clashes over slavery in the west threatened to tear the country apart, and on at least two occasions Clay led the way to compromises that saved his beloved Union from civil war. The Missouri Compromise (1820-21) allowed slavery in Missouri, but otherwise prohibited it north of latitude 36° 30' (Missouri's southern border). Near the end of his life, Clay came out of retirement and returned to the Senate to help fashion the Compromise of 1850. It admitted California to the Union as a free state while strengthening the notorious fugitive slave law. Civil war was averted until 1861, nine years after Clay's death.

In 1799, Henry Clay married Lucretia Hart, the daughter of a prominent Lexington family. They were the parents of 11 children. When he was not politicking, Clay was often farming. He once wrote that he would "make a better farmer than statesman," and he turned Ashland, his Lexington estate, into a model agricultural operation. His horse breeding program, carried on by his descendants, played a major role in the development of Kentucky's thoroughbred industry.

To learn more about Henry Clay:

Peterson, Merrill, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay and Calhoun* (New York, 1987).

Remini, Robert V., *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union*, W.W. Norton and Co. (New York, 1991).

Heidler, David S. and Jeannie T., *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (Random House, 2010).

The Presenter: George McGee

Henry Clay is portrayed by George McGee of Georgetown. McGee is director of theater at Georgetown College and a veteran actor who has worked on the stage, in films, and on network television. He also portrayed Elijah Craig for Kentucky Chautauqua.

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