

A full-length portrait of Henry Clay, a prominent American statesman. He is standing, facing slightly to the left, wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a dark cravat. His right hand is extended forward, palm up, in a gesture of appeal or explanation. To his right, a large American flag is draped over a globe on a stand. The background is dark and indistinct, suggesting an interior setting. The overall tone is formal and historical.

SEARCHING FOR THE INTERSECTING MASONIC AND POLITICAL WORLD OF HENRY CLAY

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Searching for the Intersecting Masonic and Political World of Henry Clay

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
The Official Surviving Masonic Record of Henry Clay	7
The Masonic Notice: The Sixth Attempt to Initiate the Formation of a National Grand Lodge	9
Sitting On the Fence	13
Clay's Death	18
Postscript	20
EPILOGUE	21
Clay: The Public Man	21
Clay: The Mason	21
Clay: The Grand Master	22
Clay: The Grand Master of America?	22
Clay: The Masonic Myth	23
About the Authors	25

Searching for the Intersecting Masonic and Political World of Henry Clay

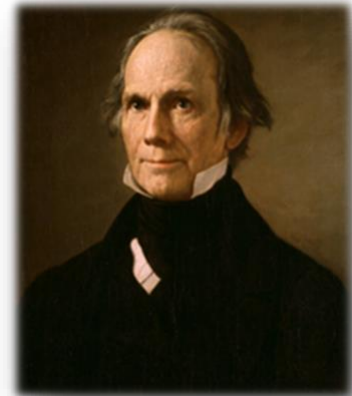
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INTRODUCTION

Since 1853, at least a dozen important, well-researched books have been published about most all aspects of the life of Henry Clay.¹

While references to Clay's status as a Freemason are found in many in these writings, few examine his involvement in the fraternity with any depth. Most treat that part of his life as merely another chapter in his ascension to national acclaim as a statesman, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Senator, three-time presidential candidate, Secretary of State, and jurist who turned down a nomination to the Supreme Court.² Clay's mark on U.S. history is considered by some to be larger than that of the men who defeated him for president: John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, and James K. Polk.³



This writing is not intended to be a broad examination of Clay's public and political life and work. Those elements are sufficiently addressed elsewhere. What is not sufficiently addressed is the connection between Clay the Freemason and Clay the celebrated statesman.

Numerous papers written by Masons about Clay are available. The material covers his political accomplishments and says little about his Masonic affiliation. In most of these papers, and in the sketches found on a few Masonic websites, his remarkable political career is summarized, his notable oratorical skills praised, and Lincoln's eulogy praising Clay's devotion to liberty and acclaiming him as the man "the times have demanded" often appear. All of the encomiums devoted to Clay are undoubtedly deserved. Usually, there is a section about his Masonic record, noting the Masonic ranks he held. Finding his specific accomplishments while in those positions, however, seems to have been overlooked or forgotten.

¹ 2018, *Henry Clay: The Man Who Would Be President*, James C. Klotter, 2011, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, 1991, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union*, Robert Vincent Remini, 2000, *Henry Clay the Lawyer*, George D. Prentice, *Biography of Henry Clay*, Hartford Samuel Hanmer, Jr., John Jay Phelps, New York, 1831, Maurice G. Baxter, 2015, *Henry Clay: America's Greatest Statesman*, Harlow Giles Unger, 2013, *America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and the Compromise That Preserved the Union*, Fergus M. Bordewich, 2010, *At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise That Saved the Union*, Robert V. Remini, 2011, *The Family Legacy of Henry Clay: In the Shadow of a Kentucky Patriarch*, Lindsey Apple, 1998, *Andrew Jackson vs. Henry Clay: Democracy and Development in Antebellum America*, Harry L. Watson, 1853, *The Life and Speeches of Henry Clay*, 2 Volumes, publisher, J. L. Gihon, Philadelphia, 1853. 1904, *The True Henry Clay*, Joseph M. Rogers,

² Maurice G. Baxter, *Henry Clay the Lawyer*, University Press of Kentucky, 2000.

³ Bob Ewegen, deputy editorial page editor, "Henry Clay Was Never President, But He Saved the Union," *The Denver Post*, July 11, 2008.

This furthers a curiosity as to how Clay's relationship with Freemasonry may have influenced his actions, and thus possibly influenced the course of not only the development of Kentucky, but also that of the nation. This question is left unanswered in Masonic writings. Naturally, we would like to think that his life accomplishments had something to do with him being a Mason; perhaps it did at times in his life. There is little, however, to show that Freemasonry served as a consistent rudder in Clay's life. In fact, when his long career is examined in context with the times, curiosity is not satisfied.

One would think that because of the attachment Masons make to Clay's statesmanship record, that his Masonic career was exemplary and parallels his public life. Clay left no such record. He is remembered today for his public accomplishments and service, and not for his Masonic membership beyond sitting as a Master of a Lodge and Grand Master of his jurisdiction. But Clay was a man of his period – an era in which there was at least the perception of an ancillary value in Freemasonry. So, in the absence of records that offer insight to his Masonic world, many Masonic researchers are left to rely on contemporary Masonic writers who wrote about Clay, merely recounting his public and political life.

The idea of the fraternity promoting Freemasonry by affiliation with the well-known is not new.⁴ Many men who happened to be Freemasons and were also notable men in history are celebrated in such a way that unintentionally suggests their Masonic affiliation was responsible for their distinction. The inference is the deeds of notable men somehow legitimizes Freemasonry. Masonry, of course, needs no such legitimization. The lessons of Freemasonry transcend time and place and are applicable in any era.

Clay, although young and new to Lexington when he arrived in 1798 from Virginia, would have been welcomed at the lodge he joined. The members of that period were largely the men who were connected to the founding of Lexington: business owners, politicians, educators, judges, and others who were considered the movers and shakers of the community. He was a lawyer, well-spoken, and almost as soon as he arrived in Lexington, he became acquainted with the town's businessmen, wealthy landowners, and politicians. In addition, his cousin was a founding member of the only Masonic lodge in Lexington at the time. Clay's burgeoning legal and political career did not result from his being made a Mason, but it certainly did not slow down his rise in status and reputation in the community, and then the state. In April 1799, a year after arriving in Lexington from Virginia, Clay married Lucretia Hart at the home of her father, Colonel Thomas Hart, an early settler of Kentucky and a prominent businessman and landowner. Hart proved to be an important business connection for Clay, helping him gain new clients and grow in professional stature. In fact, Hart was Clay's first client. Clay's likely introduction to Freemasonry, however, was Clay's cousin, General Greene Clay, the largest landowner in Kentucky at the time, and a Ferry Master, distiller, agriculturist, former surveyor and veteran of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Greene Clay was also a former Virginia legislator, and the first Senior Warden of Lexington Lodge No. 25 in 1788. In 1789, became the second Master of the Lodge.

⁴ Richard Andrew Berman, *The Architects of Eighteenth-Century English Freemasonry, 1720 – 1740*, Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Research in History University of Exeter, Exeter, Devon, Southwest England, United Kingdom, 15 December 2010, Chapter 5, The Rise of the Noble Grand Masters.

Clay's involvement in Freemasonry appears to follow the same example of some 18th and 19th century Masons who affiliated with the fraternity for those reasons that are subordinate to the aim and purpose of the Craft. Seemingly, Clay sought connections and networking rather than a path to self-improvement. It is no secret that while Freemasonry could affirm and validate the ideals that many men already held, Masonic Lodges were fertile ground for those desiring to network and connect with like-minded men in their communities that might help the advancement of career and business.



Ashland, the home of Henry Clay.
Built circa 1809 on his 600-acre estate.



Henry Clay's Law Office today
Courtesy of the Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation

It can only be presumed that Clay was well-versed in Masonry with his twenty-four years as a Mason and election to two high Masonic offices. Later in his life, however, he admitted that he was not what he called a "bright Mason." In the context of the times, it can be construed that when membership in Freemasonry was no longer expedient, he chose not to participate in the labor, or the conversations of the day, or contribute to solving existing challenges that existed in the Institution.

Twentieth century Masonic scholar, Henry W. Coil, may have described Clay's Masonic career best. He wrote that Clay's time in Masonry could only be called "inglorious" in comparison with his long, brilliant political contributions.⁵

Kentucky's longest serving Grand Secretary, H.B. Grant, wrote that Clay was "an active and zealous Freemason, as the records of the Grand Lodge abundantly prove,"⁶ but Grant, and those who may have believed that, then or now, have failed to offer specific examples of that "abundant" proof. Some researchers believe that Grant offered that praise because Clay's service was only perfunctory in his year as Grand Master. Although Grant's emergence as a force in the Grand Lodge occurred over a half-century later, Clay's approach may have pleased Grant who was often thought of as the behind-the-scenes Grand Master during his thirty-five years of uninterrupted occupation of the Assistant and Grand Secretary chair.⁷

In the absence of that proof, we are left only to examine Clay's incomplete Masonic record in the context of his ascension to high titles, and against the backdrop of his accomplishments and setbacks from a remarkable political career in which he gained the esteemed reputation for which he is primarily known.

⁵ Henry W. Coil, Coil's *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Macoy, 1961, 1995.

⁶ H.B. Grant, *Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1800-1900*, Masonic Home Book and Job Office, 1900.

⁷ Grant served the Grand Lodge of Kentucky for 35 years beginning as Assistant Grand Secretary 1877, and Grand Secretary ten years later until his death on August 29, 1912. *Grand Lodge Proceedings*, Necrology Report, 1912.

THE OFFICIAL SURVIVING MASONIC RECORD OF HENRY CLAY

On November 17, 1788, the Grand Lodge of Virginia chartered Lexington Lodge No. 25 in the Kentucky territory over which it held jurisdiction. The Lodge was re-designated as Lexington Lodge No. 1 when the Grand Lodge of Kentucky was formed in 1800.

Surprisingly to most Masons, Clay first appears in official Masonic records in 1802 as Junior Warden at Lexington Lodge No.1. He would have been twenty-five years old at the time.

Only two official Masonic records (Returns) from Lexington Lodge No. 25 exist from 1788 -1800. One Return was for 1794, and the other one is dated December 1799. Clay moved to Lexington from Virginia in 1797. His name does not appear on the 1799 Return that lists all members of Lexington Lodge No. 25.⁸

Annual Returns for Kentucky lodges do not appear in the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky until 1802, when Clay was noted as Junior Warden of Lexington Lodge No. 1. As a result, the exact date he was initiated is unknown. At most, he was a Mason for two years prior to election to that principal officer's chair.

All records and minutes of Lexington Lodge No. 25 and No. 1 were destroyed in a fire in 1819. In 1836, a second fire destroyed the lodge facility and destroyed all records from 1820-1836.⁹

Notwithstanding, it is highly likely that Clay was not a member of Lexington Lodge No.1 prior to 1800. Only the Grand Lodge proceedings prove his membership.

Aside from being elected Master in 1820, Clay is not recorded as holding any other elected or appointed Masonic office at Lexington Lodge No. 1, or at any other subordinate lodge in Kentucky.

Grand Lodge records tell us that Clay was appointed to a Grand Lodge committee in 1806 to assist in preparing a constitution for the Grand Lodge. There is no record in later proceedings of his direct involvement in that work, beyond the appointment to the committee. He was not, contrary to claims by some Kentucky Masons, attributed in proceedings as author of the first Constitution for the Grand Lodge of Kentucky.

He was appointed Grand Orator¹⁰ and held that position from 1807 through 1819, but there is no record of any presentations he may have made at an Annual Communication or other Masonic events or about the labors he performed during those years in that capacity. He served on a Grand Lodge committee in 1813 that was charged with examining how to raise funds for a new Grand Masonic Hall in Lexington and was elected Grand Master in August 1820 (there was no progressive line practice commonly used in that period).¹¹

⁸ John W. Bizzack, *A Summarizing History of Lexington Lodge No. 1: 1788-2019*, Lexington Lodge No. 1, Preservation Committee, BSF Foundation, Lexington, 2019.

⁹ *IBID.*

¹⁰ Orator is recorded in English since c.1374, meaning "one who pleads or argues for a cause", from Anglo-French *orateur*, Old French *orateur* (14th century), Latin orator ("speaker"), from *orare* ("speak before a court or assembly; plead"), derived from a Proto-Indo-European base *or- ("to pronounce a ritual formula"). The modern meaning of the word, "public speaker", is attested from c.1430. "Grand Orators have commonly been appointed by the Grand Master of a jurisdiction, and their appointment usually lasts one year. Topics for their orations are generally chosen by the author, and at times may be a subject chosen by the Grand Master. The duties of the Grand Orator has evolved since the use of them appeared in in early English Freemasonry when their initiate duties involved proving means to inform, develop and advance Masonic knowledge to lodges with the aim of fostering curiosity and developing Masonic understanding.

¹¹ Annual Proceedings, Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-1852, Lexington Lodge No. 1 records, 1788-1824.

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After 1822, Clay is mentioned in Grand Lodge Proceedings only three times. He was first listed as a visitor to the Annual Communication in 1829, which was strange since he demitted six years earlier, and secondly in 1852 when his death was announced and \$250 was approved by the Grand Lodge as a contribution toward a monument at his grave site in Lexington.¹²

The third time Clay is mentioned in Grand Lodge records is six years later at the 1858 Annual Communication. During the Address to the Craft, Phillip Swigert, the outgoing Grand Master, stated that Henry Clay was a remarkable man of the anti-Masonic period, crediting him with being instrumental in calling together a “convention” of Masons in Washington to “devise a National Union of the fraternity.”¹³ He went on to say that “After he [Clay] became so profoundly immersed in political matters and was so much absent from Kentucky, that until 1847 or 1848, he did not afterwards attend the Grand Lodge.” Perhaps, as Swigert implies, Clay did visit Grand Lodge communications later, but was simply not mentioned in the record as he was in 1829. If not, then it appears the Grand Master was stunningly unaware that Clay had demitted in 1824 and was no longer an active member of the Masonic fraternity.

No record exists of the six months Clay served as Master of Lexington Lodge No. 1 except for his name appearing in the Annual Returns made to the Grand Lodge (Annual Returns that customarily report the names of all members and officers of lodges). Because of the fires that destroyed records of the lodge, what is known to have taken place at Lexington Lodge No. 1 during Clay’s years is pieced together primarily through written histories of the city and state, biographies of its notable citizens, letters, newspaper accounts of the period, and Grand Lodge Proceedings. Clay’s name is not found among any of the materials and documents in connection to Freemasonry in those years, with the exception of those seven entries made in Grand Lodge records.

Masonic historians often mention and celebrate Clay, as especially do many Masons in his home state, because he was elected Master of his Lodge in 1820 and elected Grand Master of Kentucky in the same year. While that circumstance suggests noteworthy achievements resulting from Clay’s leadership in the fraternity, there is a lesser told backstory.

¹² Annual Proceedings, Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-1852.

¹³ Philip Swigert, Grand Master, Address to the Craft, Annual Communication, Grand Lodge of Kentucky Proceedings, 1859.

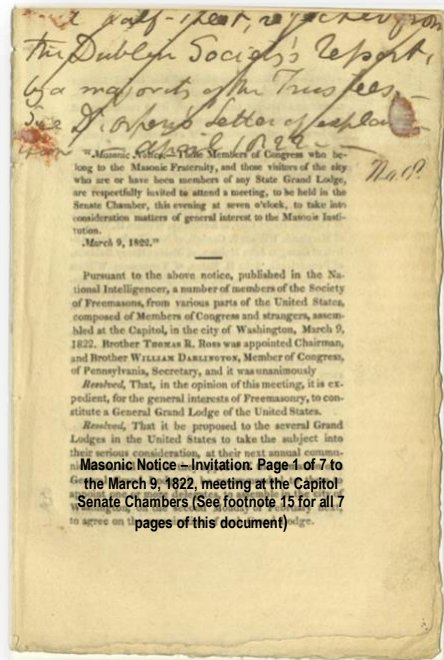
The fact is, many of the Masters at Lexington Lodge No. 1 in the years before Clay's election, and for some years after him, typically served only a six-month term unless re-elected for the remainder of the year. Clay served as Master only through the first part of 1820, then was elected Grand Master in the second part of that year when he was a Past Master. He was not both Master of his Lodge and Grand Master at the same time. Moreover, the year Clay was elected Grand Master, he followed in the footsteps of seven previous Masters of his lodge who were also elected Grand Master. In fact, the Grand Master he followed, Samuel Hughes Woodson, was a Past Master of Lexington Lodge No.1.

THE MASONIC NOTICE: THE SIXTH ATTEMPT TO INITIATE THE FORMATION OF A NATIONAL GRAND LODGE

If there is anything with which Clay's name will be strongly associated in the factual history of American Freemasonry, aside from being elected as Master of his Lodge and Grand Master of Kentucky, is that he was, at least nominally, an advocate for establishing a National Grand Lodge in the United States. His involvement in that movement came in what actually was the sixth out of nine times between 1779 and 1857 that such a call was made in American Freemasonry. This sixth attempt is primarily known because the meeting to initiate the call took place in the Senate Chamber of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. and was the first time a Masonic event had ever taken place inside the Capitol. That meeting occurred on March 9, 1822, eight months after Clay completed his term as Grand Master of Kentucky.

By that year, Clay, aside from his elected positions in the Order, was already a well-known, successful lawyer, large landowner, agriculturist, sheep, cattle, and horse breeder, former Speaker of the House in Kentucky, the 7th Speaker of the House of Representatives in the U.S. Congress, United States Senator, and potential presidential candidate.

The meeting has been characterized by several Masonic writers (and the source of other writings by non-Masons) as being an historic Masonic event that Clay had arranged that supposedly demonstrated his deep commitment to Freemasonry since no "meetings" of Masons had ever taken place in the Senate Chamber. Many of the Masonic writings allude to that March meeting as if it were a Masonic Stated Communication, which it clearly was not.¹



The meeting has been characterized as a historic Masonic event that Clay had arranged, demonstrating his deep commitment to Freemasonry, since no “meetings” of Masons had ever taken place in the Senate Chamber. Many of the Masonic writings allude to that March meeting as if it were a Masonic Stated Communication, which it clearly was not.¹⁴ It was, however, taking place on Clay’s home turf, as it were: a place where attention could be drawn to not only his standing as a Past Grand Master, but as a very well-known and popular national political figure with a bright political future.

The invitation appeared in an unusual way in the *National Intelligencer*, the first newspaper published in Washington, D.C. which published the debates of the United States Congress.¹⁵

The invitation carried the title: “Masonic Notice,” and reads:

“Those members of Congress who belong to the Masonic Fraternity, and those visitors of the city who are or have been members of any State Grand Lodge, are respectively invited to attend a meeting to be held in the Senate Chamber, this evening, at 7 o'clock, to take into consideration matters of general interest to the Masonic institution.”¹⁶

That “matter of general interest” referred to establishing a General Grand Lodge in the United States, and would involve a resolution identifying reasons for it, as well as outlining the steps to be taken to form one.¹⁷

Seven out of the twenty-four Grand Lodge jurisdictions sent delegates to this meeting. The appetites of the other seventeen existing Grand Lodges in 1822 were not whetted by this invitation to discuss the “matter of general interest.” In the end, Grand Lodges proved unwilling to compromise their sovereignty and independence by pledging allegiance to a General Grand Lodge. Like all the five previous calls to consider forming a National Grand Lodge, the 1822 initiative failed to produce a convention at all.¹⁸

Kentucky Grand Lodge records tell us that by 1824 the matter of a General Grand Lodge had been settled. In addition to Kentucky rejecting the idea, so too did the Grand Lodges of Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, and Louisiana.¹⁹ The fact that nine jurisdictions as well as Kentucky (representing forty-two percent of Grand Lodges at the time), discarded the “matter of interest” illustrates the influence of some jurisdictions to affect the thinking of others that remained silent and

¹⁴ Van Gordon-Williams Library and Archives, Digital Collections: Masonic Notice. - Those members of Congress who belong to the Masonic Fraternity... " Alternative Title Circular regarding the creation of a Grand Lodge of the United States, <https://digitalgw.omeka.net/items/show/483>, accessed, January 2022.

¹⁵ The *National Intelligencer*, & *Washington Advertiser* began as a tri-weekly newspaper in the new city of Washington, D.C., on October 31, 1800. It claimed to be the "first Paper printed in Washington" and is remembered for its extensive coverage of the congressional debates during the early years of the republic.

¹⁶ Ray Baker Harris, *Sesqui-Centennial History Of The Grand Lodge Free And Accepted Masons District Of Columbia. 1811 – 1961*, 1962, Grand Lodge District Of Columbia, <https://www.dcggrandlodge.org/history-of-dc-freemasonry.html>, accessed January 2022, and Van Gordon-Williams Library and Archives, Digital Collections: Masonic Notice. - Those members of Congress who belong to the Masonic Fraternity... " Alternative Title Circular regarding the creation of a Grand Lodge of the United States. Description Circular from appointed committee of eleven members submitted to several Grand Lodges and distributed among Masons concerning the establishment of a General Grand Lodge of the United States. Circular contains report of meeting held on March 9, 1822, among "members of Congress who belong to the Masonic Fraternity" as well as "visitors to the city who are or have been members of any state grand lodge... held in the Senate Chamber" to discuss the establishment of a national Grand Lodge. Includes list of Committee members on last page: Henry Clay, William H. Winder, William S. Cardell, Joel Abbot, John Holmes, Henry Baldwin, John H. Eaton, William W. Seaton, Christopher Rankin, Thomas R. Ross, and H. G. Burton, <https://digitalgw.omeka.net/items/show/483>, accessed, January 2022.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Volume 1, Moss & Company and A.G. Mackey, 1873.

¹⁹ Grant.

sent a message to those behind the proposal that attempts to continue to pursue the idea would be in vain. The fact that Clay was unable to gain support from his home state sent a particularly discouraging message.

The Committee on Foreign Correspondence in Kentucky recommended against sending delegates in 1822,²⁰ and in 1823 a select committee appointed to further examine the result of the initial meeting that was held presented a scathing review of the proposal. That committee declared that the call for a National Grand Lodge was an “innovation.” Their report was peppered with other intended pejoratives, and phrases: “improper,” “unnecessary,” “absurd,” “impractical,” and “an unhallowed perversion of the Order.” The report concluded by expressing suspicion of political purposes and bristled at any hint of the notion that Washington might be the location of a Grand National Lodge, or even a place to meet to discuss such a “matter of interest,” because it would give Freemasonry “political overtones.”²¹ That final remark seems clearly a volley directed at Clay.

Clay’s involvement in the 1822 call for a general grand lodge may have rankled some, however, the fact that this was the sixth call spanning two generations of Masons since 1779, should have more clearly signaled that something was not working well in the Institution of American Freemasonry.

Masonic leaders, writers, and researchers can debate that consideration (as quite a few have) or they can ignore it, as is most common. But the call itself, especially given that there were nine of them over seventy-eight years and four generations of Masons, should have been enough to raise such an alarm. The reasons that it did not need to be examined first, because that explains why there were so many calls.²²

The regular calls finally ended after 1859 because of the mood of Masons and their Grand Lodges after nearly five years of national upheaval in the 1860s as a result of the Civil War. By the end of the War, and on into the next two decades, the astounding increase in membership and new lodges resumed as Freemasonry moved into a different era, and slowly erased the institutional memory or concerns in American Freemasonry about what had previously occurred.

In 1779, the first of the nine calls to discuss the formation of a National Grand Lodge did not recommend as such a Grand Lodge with power to oversee the daily working of all sovereign Grand Lodges in America.

The final paragraph of the petition presenting the first call included a plea for an immediate departure from the current oversight of Grand Lodges [meaning English, Irish, and Scottish and existing Grand Lodges in America at the time] to “save us from the impending dangers of schisms and apostasy.” In closing, the petition stated: “To obtain security from those fatal evils, with affectionate humility, we beg leave to recommend the adopting and pursuing the most necessary measures,” and went on to say the most effective way to avoid these “impending dangers” was to appoint a Grand Master” in and over the Thirteen United

Clay was unable to muster interest from even the Grand Lodge of Kentucky whose appointed select committee denounced participation in the movement for a General Grand Lodge and were unwilling to recommend delegates from Kentucky to attend such a convention.¹

²⁰ Charles Snow Guthrie, *Kentucky Freemasonry, 1788-1978, The Grand Lodge and the Men Who Made it*, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1981.

²¹ Grant, *Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings*, 1822-23-24.

²² By the 1820s the rapid expansion of American Freemasonry in its membership and the chartering of so many lodges without ensuring the consistency of the fundamental infrastructure necessary and deserved, led to a lack of widespread oversight, quality leadership, and well-instructed aim and purpose of the fraternity that cleared the way for the infectious thinking that such rapid expansion along was an effective measurement of the success of the Institution. The rise of Anti-Masonic sentiments in this era, the 1826 Morgan Affair, the emergence of an Anti-Masonic Political Party, the loss of over 60,000 members from the late 1820s through the mid-1840s, the continued calls for uniformity in ritual and lectures alone create evidence-troubled arguments in the defense of the notion that all was well in the governance and administration of grand lodges overseeing their sovereign jurisdictions.

States of America.”²³ That the petition used the words, “in and over,” suggested to some historians that the proposed Grand Master might also be authorized to create a grand lodge of America. However, later research untangled that notion and determined that such a proposed position of Grand Master would only have had the authority to preside over and govern Masonic conventions and the warranting of lodges in new territories, but no authority to oversee sovereign grand lodges.²⁴

Regardless, due to suspicions of Grand Lodges (jealous for their own prerogatives and influenced by the early ideas and later political doctrine of states’ rights), the enthusiasm for an overarching, central Masonic authority was unlikely from the start. If such a Grand Lodge was ever going to have a chance to offer and accomplish what its proponents claimed it would, the birth would have taken place as a result of the first, or maybe the second or third attempt to form one.



Depiction of the December 27, 1779, meeting of American Union Lodge No. 1 at Arnold’s Tavern in Morristown, New Jersey, where the first call was made, and petition read to form a National Grand Lodge. *The Petition* is used with permission from the New York Museum and Historical Society. ID 1945.1 The Petition; by John Ward Dunsmore, 1926; Oil on canvas; Overall: 44 x 60 in. (111.8 x 152.4 cm).

That 1779 call was to address exactly what the petition presented: the perceived solution to the problem of restoring the ancient principles and discipline of Masonry, correcting “many irregularities and improprieties,” and the “present dissipated and almost abandoned conditions” of lodges, “relaxation of virtues,” and to “save” Freemasonry from the “impending dangers of schisms and apostasy.”²⁵ That alone should have been enough then, as it is now, to see that these calls were not simply a result of seeking to alter the governance of the fraternity, but to bring about meaningful change that would constructively advance the historical intent, aim and purpose of Freemasonry.

The resolution, adopted unanimously that evening on March 9, 1822, was that all Grand Lodges in America be invited to attend a convention to take place in Washington, D.C., in February 1823 to pursue the establishment of a General Grand Lodge. The details of how that might be structured, the powers and authority it would have, and who would be involved were not included in the discussion.

No matter, although not discussed at the meeting, Clay was, at least in the minds of many, and likely Clay himself, now in position for nomination as the Grand Master of a General Grand Lodge if the proposed convention took place. However, responses from Grand Lodges to the invitation were indecisive or unenthusiastic, so a second call for the convention to meet the next year in February 1824 was made, but that convention, too, was cancelled due to the lack of response.

A few months later, Clay demitted from Freemasonry.

²³ The Petition,” New Jersey Edition of Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons, 2, no. 9, David McGregor, “Contribution to the Early History of Freemasonry in New Jersey: Freemasonry at Morristown during the Revolutionary War,” Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons 2, no. 9, March 1927.

²⁴ *IBID.*

²⁵ *IBID.*

SITING ON THE FENCE

The worst years for American Freemasonry were about to take place. Although anti-Masonic sentiment, mostly in the upper eastern states of the Union, was at simmering level in 1822, the flash point would not occur until late 1826, when Masons in Batavia, New York kidnapped William Morgan, who was never seen alive again. The fallout lasted for a decade-and-a half, and the Institution of Freemasonry appeared to be on its way to oblivion.²⁶

Perhaps, had the 1822 call for a National Grand Lodge occurred after that scandal, a different perspective would have emerged on the merit of the idea, especially in New York and Kentucky where the rapid expansion of lodges and membership had skyrocketed.



From 1822 through 1832, Clay fared no better, at least with regard to his presidential ambitions. While he was defeated by John Quincy Adams for the presidency in 1824, he was appointed Secretary of State, which was considered a steppingstone to the presidency. He lost the 1832 presidential race to Andrew Jackson. In 1844, he lost his third bid for the office to James K. Polk.

Masonic writers attempt to explain that Clay's demit in 1824 was because he was too busy with his political responsibilities in Washington to continue any involvement in Freemasonry in Kentucky. However, with eight Masonic Lodges in the District of Columbia,²⁷ that excuse is suspect, particularly when it is examined in context with what else was going on in America at the time.

²⁶ Defoe.

²⁷ Ray Baker Harris, *Sesqui-Centennial History Of The Grand Lodge Free And Accepted Masons District Of Columbia. 1811 – 1961*, 1962, Grand Lodge District Of Columbia, <https://www.dcggrandlodge.org/history-of-dc-freemasonry.html>, Accessed January 2022. (Clay died in Washington in 1852. At the close of 1850, eight lodges were working, with a total membership of 405. The New Jerusalem Lodge No. 9 led with 62 members: Federal Lodge No. 1, with 61 members; Naval Lodge No. 4, 58; Potomac Lodge No. 5, 36; Lebanon Lodge No. 7, 48; Hiram Lodge No. 10, 42; St. John's Lodge No. 11, 61; and National Lodge No. 12)

It cannot be successfully argued that Clay was not busy over the next twenty years. He ran for president in three general elections, losing each.²⁸ His first presidential loss (in 1824) was only months following his demit from Freemasonry. He also served the subsequent four years in John Quincy Adams's administration as Secretary of State (and was accused of a "corrupt bargain" to be appointed to that seat²⁹). He was then re-elected to the Senate in 1831 where he served until 1842 when he resigned to again run for president in 1844. After losing that presidential election, he returned to the Senate in 1849, where he served until his death in 1852.

In his first presidential race, Clay displayed the eloquence and intellect to become president, but not the prestige. In his second, he was well-respected, but not at the level of incumbent Andrew Jackson. However, in 1844, the political climate was ripe for victory. He was revered by many as the "Great Compromiser," "Father of the American System," and "Founder of the Whig Party." In 1831, biographer George D. Prentice, and many others, regarded him as "the most influential statesman in the country." But for the third and final time, he came up short against James K. Polk. Clay lost the election of 1844 because his noted record of compromise, and its accompanying rhetoric, ironically led to inconsistencies and charges of hypocrisy in his candidacy, allowing the opposition to successfully counter his bid.³⁰

Masonic writers celebrating Clay's status as a Mason usually disregard the need to search for and chronicle his "active and zealous" involvement and commitment as was alleged by Grand Secretary of The Grand Lodge of Kentucky, H.B. Grant. Like most other Masonic writers, Grant, relied on Clay's election to the office of Grand Master as the evidence of his involvement. Also missed is the true context of Clay's participation in Masonry prior to, during, and following the anti-Masonic period in the United States that, in 1826, found energy from The Morgan Affair. The scandal threw fuel on anti-Masonic sentiments, sharply reducing the reputation of the fraternity. The public slaughter of the once preeminent standing of the Institution reverberated into the 1840s, causing the loss of over 60,000 members and the closings of many Lodges and one Grand Lodge.³¹ Those events affected Clay's future decisions and political path.

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²⁸ Clay's first loss was around the time he demitted in 1824, losing the presidency to John Quincy Adams. He ran as the nominee of the National Republican Party in 1832, losing to Andrew Jackson, and finally as a Whig in 1844, losing to James A. Polk.

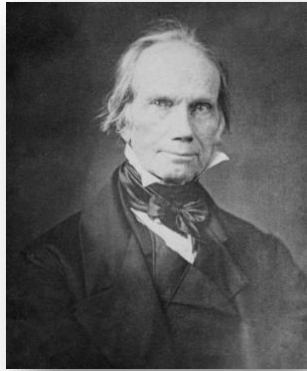
²⁹ Paul C. Nagel, *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life*, Knopf, 2012.

³⁰ George D. Prentice, *Biography of Henry Clay*, Hartford Samuel Hanmer, Jr., John Jay Phelps, New York, 1831, Nate Jackson, Price Withers, Henry Clay The Downfall of America's Greatest Statesmen and the Election of 1844, March 2016, https://saundersfamilylibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/USHistoryProjectEssay_Withers.pdf, accessed January 2022.

³¹ Stephen DaFoe: *Morgan: The Scandal That Shook Freemasonry*, Cornerstone, 2009, John W. Bizzack. *The Age of Unreason: Dissecting the Infamy of The Morgan Affair and Its Aftermath*, BSF Foundation, Lexington, 2020, Erik McKinley Eriksson, "Effects of Anti-Masonry on The Masonic Fraternity, 1826 1856," *The Builder Magazine*, February 1927, Volume 13 - Number 2. (The number of Masons in the United States dropped from 100,000 to 40,000 over a ten-year period. New York alone plunged from 20,000 members to 3,000 and from 480 lodges to only 82. The largest defection was in the rural districts. In 1834 the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania conveyed its property to trustees and did not reincorporate until 1859. In New Jersey, 33 of 39 lodges closed their doors. Kentucky lost nearly half its members and lodges. Masonic clergy were dismissed from their churches. Lodges were burnt and public Masonic participation at funerals, cornerstone layings, and parades declined, and in some places disappeared. The Craft was characterized as a discredited intellectual society at best, and dangerously subversive at worst. Men were no longer eager to join. Masonry was accused of serving many members in place of a church, to the exclusion of true religion. Rumors that the oaths took the Lord's name in vain, and that alcoholic beverages were used in its various ceremonies irritated a growing sensitivity on the subject of temperance.)

Clay's status in gentry society, bolstered by his well-known, and wealthy clients, his highly publicized trials (most of which he won), his reputation as a sheep, cattle, and horse breeder, and his respected state and national political leadership does not appear to all have been a result of only his competency and aspirations, but also a result of his connections. Freemasonry presented the kind of connections and opportunities to Clay, as it did many in that era, which were beneficial to his career. Clay often sought out ways to increase his connections.

Those willing to dwell on the subject of Clay's involvement in Freemasonry and his impressive rise in fame as an attorney, landowner, businessman, politician, and statesman, see the context of these events intersecting with his demit and statements he would later make about Freemasonry as he approached his second run for the presidency.



The context of the circumstances surrounding his demit appear to have two causes. One, the failure of his status and reputation to move forward the 1822 movement to establish a National Grand Lodge dashed the opportunity for him to become the most viable candidate for its leadership. That failure closed the door on his involvement in Freemasonry as anything more than another Past Grand Master of one of the several jurisdictions in the United States. Two, he read the pulse of the growing anti-Masonic mood of the country, and saw it as a disadvantage, as a national political figure who was planning a run for president in 1824.

Clay may not have seen the advantage of being a Freemason in the 1824 election, but it did not seem to be a factor in the 1828 election when Andrew Jackson, who was Past Grand Master of Tennessee and a confirmed active and zealous Mason, won the presidency. Jackson was elected not only in that year, but again in 1832 during the most volatile period of brutal anti-Masonic sentiment in the nation.

Clay could not have foreseen the devastating consequences of the despicable event surrounding the kidnapping and presumed murder of William Morgan in September 1826 in Batavia, New York. What came to be known as "The Morgan Affair" shook American Freemasonry to its very foundation, and the aftershocks linger to this day.

If one of Clay's reasons to demit was to separate himself from the fraternity during the earlier smoldering periods of anti-Masonic sentiments prior to The Morgan Affair in order to advance his political appeal, he certainly demitted at the right time (two years before that scandal occurred in Batavia, New York). No matter, the anti-Masonic mood of much of the country continued to greatly complicate Clay's already difficult chances of becoming president.³² At one point, his 1824 demit seemed to offer him an opportunity to gain the support of a rising third party in the United States, the Anti-Masonic Party,³³ that would later hold a convention to draft a presidential nominee in 1832. Clay, although no longer a member of the fraternity, did not seek the support of that Party.



³² William Vaughn, *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*, University of Kentucky Press, 1983.

³³ Ronald P. Formisano, Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Anti Masonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827," *American Quarterly* 29, No.2, 1977.

In 1831, he was asked by a leading advocate of the Anti-Masonic Party to write a letter denouncing Masonic “mischief,” under the belief that doing so would get Clay the nomination of both the National Republican Party and the Anti-Masonic Party.³⁴ Even John Quincy Adams, a staunch anti-Mason, concluded that Clay could win the presidency [in 1832] if he would renounce Masonry.³⁵

Although throughout his career, Clay had usually chosen “the best means to the end,”³⁶ he never publicly repudiated Freemasonry, even during the height of the anti-Masonic sentiment in the country. Instead, he sat on the fence. By doing so, he did not directly offend either side of the issue, but neither did he gain ground in his strategy to win the presidency.

In spite of Clay’s track record of choosing the “best means to the end,” he appears to have taken a stand based on principles over politics. He did not write the suggested letter denouncing Freemasonry but instead wrote one that stressed a *nonaligned* position, saying that Freemasonry “practically does neither much good nor harm.” This seemed a much different position to his early stand when he said that, “I care not a straw for Masonry,” but would not renounced it, “even to be made president of the U.S.”³⁷ Aside from the contextual scent of political fence sitting, Clay’s letter, at least for a while, projected the position that he simply did not see that personal inclinations, such as Masonry or temperance, should be injected into politics and that such matters should be private, individual decisions, and leading to his conclusion that “principle and policy are both opposed to my meddling with it [Masonry].”³⁸

By 1828, the anti-Masonic movement was picking up considerable steam across the country.³⁹ One of the causes pursued by the movement was the prevention of any member of the fraternity to serve in any public office.⁴⁰ Interestingly, Clay’s personal papers show that he was perhaps formulating a response to this mounting problem to his future candidacy as early as 1828.

Peter B. Porter, a former U.S. Congressman, Secretary of War under President John Quincy Adams, and at the time, Speaker of the New York Assembly, was a friend and ally of Clay. In fact, he was Clay’s chief organizer and key point man for New York in 1823 when Clay was anticipating his first run for the presidency.⁴¹ He would continue in that role for Clay as he planned his candidacy for president in 1832.

On March 24, 1828, Clay wrote a letter to Porter who happened to live in the county in New York where The Morgan Affair took place two years previously.



³⁴ C. Francis, *Memoirs Of John Quincy Adams: Comprising Portions Of His Diary From 1795 to 1848*, Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott & Co. 1874, *Henry Clay Family Papers: 1732-1927*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (166,599), Repository Washington, D.C. <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.home>, Library of Congress Control Number mm78016105. (Richard Rush to Henry Clay, June 1, 1831).

³⁵ *IBID.*

³⁶ James C. Klotter, *Henry Clay: The Man Who Would Be President*, Oxford University Press, 2018, Hugh Chisholm, ed. “Anti-Masonic Party,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th Edition, Cambridge University Press, 1911, Charles McCarthy, “The Antimasonic Party: A Study of Political Anti-Masonry in the United States, 1827–1840,” in the *Report of the American Historical Association for 1902*, Washington, 1903, Thurlow Weed, *The Autobiography of Thurlow Weed*, 2 vols., Boston, 1884, A. G. Mackey and W. R. Singleton, *The History of Freemasonry*, vol. vi. New York, 1898, J. D. Hammond, *History of Political Parties in the State of New York*, 2 vols., Albany, 1842.

³⁷ Klotter.

³⁸ *IBID.*

³⁹ Vaughn.

⁴⁰ Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union*, W.W. Norton, 1993.

⁴¹ *IBID.*

He wrote:

I trust that I need not contradict to you the story of having got up, or contributed, to the Anti Masonic spirit prevailing in your State. I have looked upon it as one of those delusions to which men are unfortunately sometimes exposed. If Morgan has been murdered or carried in captivity, I certainly could not approve of it; but if the one or the other has been done, I presume it has been the work of some misguided individuals which however reprehensible it may be, ought not to affect the whole order. I am myself a Mason, and although not a bright one nor regular attendant of the Lodge, I respect the craft, and its members generally.⁴²

Clay's papers do not contain a reply from Porter to that letter.

In the letter, Clay refers to himself as still a Mason, although he had demitted four years earlier, suggesting his continued awareness that even a resignation from active membership in the fraternity is not a repudiation of the Institution, and that non-Masons would be aware of that fact. There is no reason to believe his letter to Porter was not heartfelt. In context with the times, however, it does suggest that Clay was carefully designing his position so he could remain upright on the fence no matter which side public sentiment was on in the months ahead. Interesting was the way that he noted that he was not a "bright" Mason, nor regularly associated with the Lodge, the latter of which historical records affirm.

Clay's public responses and refusal to denounce Masonry are still applauded by Masons and should be. Those who broadcast them loudest in their writings, however, seem unaware that he was not an active member of the fraternity at the time he made them. Likewise, in the context of the times in which he made his refusal to renounce Freemasonry, there were additional reasons for his public proclamations. Always calculating, Clay's comments were made in the hopes of benefiting his political objectives. His resignation from the ranks, after at least twenty-one years of membership, spoke for itself regarding his personal commitment to the Craft. Clay's demit could perhaps be more easily understood by Masons who continued to support his political ambitions, but an outright denunciation of the Order would be highly unlikely to do the same. It should be no surprise that Clay, indeed a great compromiser, would find the right words to the temper of the times, which usually turned out to be the best means to the end for any matter at hand, and for Clay.

Perhaps if Clay had never demitted, and there was evidence supporting the description of him being an "active and zealous" Mason (as there was in case of Andrew Jackson, who went on to win the presidency in his run against Clay and the Anti-Masonic Party nominee, William Wirt) then Clay's statements at that time would carry a different meaning and the history of the United States leading to the Civil War would be much different.

⁴² *Henry Clay Family Papers: 1732-1927*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (166,599), Repository Washington, D.C. <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.home>, Library of Congress Control Number mm78016105.

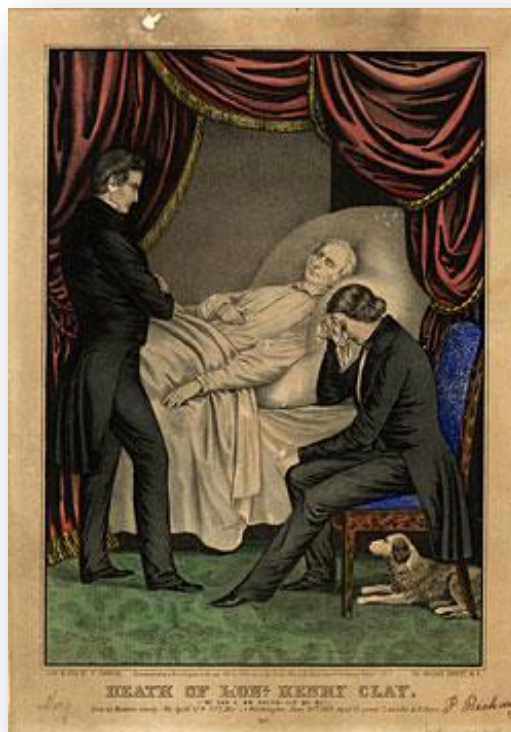
CLAY'S DEATH

In the June 29, 1852, edition of the *New York Times*, we read:

The announcement of the death of the great patriot, Henry Clay, has thrown a gloom over the whole city. The stores are closed, and the principal streets are draped in mourning. Congress, upon its announcement, immediately adjourned and all the public offices were closed.

The article went on to say that Clay was “A man too great to be President.”⁴³

Clay died from tuberculosis at the National Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. From there, his coffin was brought to the Capitol and into the Senate Chamber, where a funeral service was conducted with the president and the cabinet in attendance. Afterward, the coffin was brought into the Rotunda and placed in the center of the room. Clay was the first American honored with his remains lying in state.



Henry Clay's funeral on July 10, 1852, was the largest ceremonial occasion ever witnessed in Lexington, Kentucky, until that time. When the correspondent from the *Frankfort Commonwealth* arrived in town at 6 a.m., he “found the streets already thronged with strangers and citizens, while every road leading to the city poured in a continual stream of carriages, horseman [sic] and pedestrians. The number of people assembled at Lexington” [a town with the population of 9,000 at that time], was greater than ever was seen in her streets before,” he wrote. Estimates from other observers ranged between 30,000 and 100,000 in attendance. Lexington's businesses closed, and black crepe, banners, and portraits of the dead senator adorned streets and houses all over town.⁴⁴

President Zachary Taylor received a large funeral when he was buried in the family cemetery at Louisville, but the public mourning for Taylor, which was quite impressive in 1850, paled by comparison to what took place when Clay died in 1852.⁴⁵ Daniel Boone's reinternment in Frankfort, Kentucky in 1845 drew an estimated 25,000 people, but even that did not compare with Clay's funeral.

After an Episcopal service at Clay's estate, Ashland, a solemn funeral procession of local, state, and national government officials and dignitaries accompanied Clay's remains to the Lexington Cemetery at the western edge of town. The people of Lexington and out of town visitors followed on foot for hours as church bells tolled. The reporter claimed that the procession “was the most imposing demonstration of sorrow we ever

⁴³ “Henry Clay's Death--The Funeral Obsequies,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1852, Page 2, <https://www.nytimes.com/1852/06/30/archives/henry-clays-deaththe-funeral-obsequies-c.htm>, accessed January 2022.

⁴⁴ Sarah Purcell, “All That Remains of Henry Clay: Political Funerals and the Tour of Henry Clay's Corpse,” *Commonplace, The Journal of Early American Life*, Issue 12.3, April 2012.

⁴⁵ Winston J. Coleman, *The Last Days, Death, and Funeral of Henry Clay*, Lexington, 1951, Sarah Purcell, “All That Remains of Henry Clay: Political Funerals and the Tour of Henry Clay's Corpse,” *Commonplace, The Journal of Early American Life*, Issue 12.3, April 2012.

saw. The carriages in it passed two abreast, and by far the greater portion of its length was occupied by persons on foot marching ... its length must have been from a mile and a quarter to a mile and a half long.”⁴⁶

Masonic writers, and others, have reported that Clay was buried with “Masonic Honors.” Some have describe it as a formal “Masonic funeral.” At Daniel Boone’s reinterment in 1845, Masons and Odd Fellows gathered in full regalia to pay their respects, and well known Masons were pall bearers and even delivered a eulogy, but Boone did not receive a Masonic funeral, nor was he ever referred to at that reinterment as a Freemason. In fact, there is no evidence Boone was ever Mason.⁴⁷

Apparently, much the same thing occurred at Clay’s funeral. There is no record at Lexington Lodge No.1, or the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, that Clay received a Masonic funeral, as would be noted. Again, in fact, since he had not been an active member of the fraternity since 1824, he was not entitled to the ceremony as a matter of right, although one could have been given at the discretion of the lodge. Regardless, Masons were present for the same reason they were present at Boone’s reinterment: respect.

The Lexington Observer and Kentucky Reporter newspaper carried a story on July 14, 1852 titled, “Order of Arrangements for the Funereal of Henry Clay.” The story said: “At the cemetary [sic] the Episcopal service was read, followed by ceremonies peformed by Masons of the local lodge. A handsome Masonic apron given to Clay by Lafayette was thrown over the coffin. Then the body was placed in a vault by the Masonic fraternity, to be removed upon the completion of a monument to be built specially for Clay.” Again, there is no Masonic record of this taking place, but the article is the likely source of the story that the apron gifted to Clay by Lafayette was placed on his coffin and that there was a Masonic funeral.

The common belief that the apron that was gifted to Clay during Lafayette’s May 15-16, 1825 visit to Lexington was the one he wore at the dedication of the monument at Bunker Hill creates a confusing cirucumstance since the Bunker Hill ceremony did not take place until June 17, 1825 and Layfayette’s visit to Lexington was on May 15-16, 1825. Either it is not the same apron, or Lafayette, who was greeted by Clay in Washington, D.C. in December of 1824 when he arrived in America for his tour, later arranged for the apron to be sent to Clay after the Bunker Hill ceremony the next year.



Apron on display at Ashland – The Home of Henry Clay, Lexington, Kentucky. Image courtesy of Eric Brooks, Curator/Site Manager Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate, January 2022.

Confusing the matter for some Masons is an 1848 story in the *Freemasonry Monthly Magazine*, Volume 7. Submitted to the magazine by B. Perley Poore, the story relates that “Brother Whiston, of Boston,” exhibited the “Grand Lodge apron worn at Bunker Hill by General Lafayette, when the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument was laid on June 17, 1825.” It was described as “one of those now worn, of white, trimmed in

⁴⁶ *IBID.*

⁴⁷ John W. Bizzack, Dan M. Kemble, editor and contributor, “Unraveling Tall Tales: A 21st Century Investigation Into The Disputable Masonic Claims That Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett Were Freemasons, Notable Men Who Happened To Be Freemasons, BSF Foundation, Lexington, 2019.

purple.” Whiston was said to have announced his determination to have the apron “deposited” in the Grand Lodge after his death.⁴⁸

Based on the description in that article, the apron now in possession of The Henry Clay Estate in Lexington and Whiston’s apron are not one and the same.

POSTSCRIPT

Regardless of what was in the mind of Henry Clay when he helped arrange and participated in the March 9, 1822, meeting in the Senate Chamber of the Capitol on establishing a National Grand Lodge, he was right to do so. Although the effort failed, it may be reasoned that through the commitment and attachment of his national reputation to the purpose, and by further making the resolution himself, that the event was the demonstration of his personal interest and concern for Freemasonry. Clay did not have a reputation for reluctance to bring to the table unpopular, complex issues for logical, sensible, debate and balanced discussion.

The “matter of interest” that led to that meeting was proven to be of no interest to the backward thinking, status-quo loving leaders of the fraternity in that era, the men who refused to attend, or at least send delegates to the arena of ideas and possibilities. That may be the very thing that greatly distinguishes Clay, the Freemason, from that group.

James C. Klotter, State Historian of Kentucky, wrote that at Clay’s death, the United States had been a nation less than a year longer than Clay had lived; for almost a half century of that time, he had served as a leader in that new country’s development. Clay and the United States grew up together, and he had played a vital role in the maturation process.⁴⁹

This essay is not offered to disparage Clay, or his professional, political life, or the years he spent as an active member of the fraternity and the positions that he held. But a more in-depth, balanced, and factual look at the man and Mason should be considered by Masons who write about him and the fraternity before copy and paste styled celebrations of his affiliation are made, based only on his remarkable public career and his role in American history.

What this essay does illustrate is that, just like Freemasonry itself, there is much more below the surface than what is readily visible much less known or searched for, by too many members.

⁴⁸ B. Perley Poore, *The Freemason Monthly Magazine*, ed. Charles W. Moore, Volume VII, Boston, 1849.

⁴⁹ Klotter.

EPILOGUE

CLAY: THE PUBLIC MAN

In 1721, the Grand Lodge of England installed John, Duke of Montagu, as its Grand Master. So began Freemasonry's fascination with celebrity, a phenomenon that most certainly includes its relationship with American demigod Henry Clay.

Although the exact date of Henry Clay's admission into Freemasonry is unknown, existing records indicate that he was received into Lexington Lodge No. 1 a short time after that body was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in 1800.

Clay, a native Virginian, arrived in Lexington at roughly the same time that the Grand Lodge was organized. An ambitious and capable young attorney, Clay likely viewed membership in Freemasonry as an avenue for access to many of the political and economic leaders of his adopted city. Clay would certainly not be the first man attracted to Freemasonry for this reason.

Clay's ascension into the public life of the young Commonwealth of Kentucky was meteoric. By 1803, he had been elected to the Kentucky General Assembly. In 1806, he went to Washington, D. C. to fill a vacancy in an unexpired term in the U. S. Senate. By 1807, he was back in Frankfort, this time serving as Speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives. In 1810 he was again back in the nation's capital, once more filling a vacancy in a U. S. Senate seat. Elected to the U. S. House of Representatives, he took his seat as a freshman legislator in 1811 and was immediately elected Speaker of the House, an unprecedented feat.

Although he was identified with the "War Hawk" faction of Congress that belligerently supported war with Great Britain, he was appointed a Peace Commissioner, participating in the negotiation of the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812.

Back in the U. S. House of Representatives, and again serving as its Speaker, he guided the controversial Missouri Compromise legislation to passage in early 1820.

A presidential candidate in 1824, 1832 and 1844, and a presidential hopeful in 1840 and 1848, Clay occupied a position at or near the center of the national political stage for nearly forty years prior to his death in 1852.

CLAY: THE MASON

What, then, of Henry Clay and Freemasonry?

Prior to his election as Master of Lexington Lodge No. 1 in 1820, there are no records to indicate that he ever served the Lodge in any other capacity. His election to serve as Master in the first half of 1820 (six-month terms being then the norm) is problematic. While no Masonic records may exist to describe his service as Master, we know from Congressional records that he was in Washington, D. C. from December 1819 until at least the end of March 1820. During that period of time, the U. S. House of Representatives was debating the Missouri Compromise legislation, and Clay, as Speaker of the House, was engaged constantly in the legislative process.

Although Clay returned to Lexington at the close of the session of Congress, he likely returned to Lexington at the end of March, at the earliest. In a best-case scenario, he could have presided over Lexington Lodge No. 1 for only half of his term as Master.

A far more likely scenario is that Clay's service as Master of his Lodge is comparable to George Washington's service as Master of Virginia's Alexandria Lodge No. 22 (a comparison that would have appealed to Clay). Washington was elected as Charter Master of his Lodge in 1788, and was re-elected in 1789, while he was President. Although credited with being a Past Master, Washington never attended or presided over his Lodge while nominally being Master.

CLAY: THE GRAND MASTER

Clay went on to be elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in August 1820. Here, the Grand Lodge records reflect that the demands on Clay's time prevented him from being more than elected and installed into office. Clay was elected Grand Master on August 29, 1820, and was installed on that same date. The next day, August 30, 1820, while the Grand Lodge was still in session, Clay left for Ohio to attend to business matters there.

It should be noted that when Clay arrived in Lexington in March of 1820, he was in considerable financial distress. The Panic of 1820 had crippled the local economy, and Clay, who had co-signed several notes for friends and relatives, found himself liable for not only his debts, but the debts of others as well. It was necessary for Clay to devote considerable attention to his law practice to generate revenues to revive his fortunes. Before leaving Washington, D. C., Clay had been retained to represent the Bank of the United States in certain matters, and his subsequent trip to Ohio after being installed as Grand Master was in relation to that representation.

The combination of political considerations, financial woes, and family matters suggests with some resonance that Clay's attention devoted to Freemasonry was secondary, at best. Although Clay was certainly a man of great ability, it appears that, given the demands on his time and resources, Freemasonry could never have been a priority in his life. As a practical matter, one wonders exactly when it would have been that Clay would have had any time to devote to the pursuit of Freemasonry as anything other than a diversion. Given the incessant demands on his time from his political and business interests, the difficulty of travel in his era, his precarious financial situation and his relentless pursuit of the presidency, the fact that he maintained any semblance of a personal life at all is remarkable.

Clay was present to preside over the Grand Lodge of Kentucky at the 1821 annual communication. Records of this communication contain nothing to distinguish Clay's service as Grand Master. In fact, the proceedings are remarkably silent as to any remarks that he might have made, or any actions that he may have proposed to the Grand Lodge. It is difficult to conclude anything other than that Clay was a mere figurehead during his term as Grand Master.

CLAY AS GRAND MASTER OF AMERICA?

Back in Washington in 1822, Clay lent his name to the call for a meeting to discuss the establishment of a general grand lodge for the United States. The meeting, held in the U. S. Senate chambers, failed to effect any result.

Clay, ever the genius at political calculation, likely thought that should a general grand lodge be established, he would likely be the choice for grand master of that body. Such a perch would further cement his status as a nationally recognized leader. When the movement to establish a general grand lodge failed, Clay's interest in Freemasonry waned perceptibly, and, two years later, he demitted from the Fraternity.

CLAY: THE MASONIC MYTH

Clay's attitude towards Freemasonry can best be gleaned from his writings to his friend, Peter Porter. In his 1826 letter to Porter, written during the Anti-Masonic frenzy of The Morgan Affair, Clay wrote that he considered himself a Mason (even after his demit), and that, in general, he had respect for the Craft and its members. Clay also conceded that he was not regular in his attendance at Lodge (an understatement), and that he was not a "bright" Mason.

In other personal correspondence, Clay wrote that, in his opinion, Freemasonry, as a practical matter, did little good or harm.

Clay's writings are probably the best reflection of his genuine attitude toward Freemasonry. Recall that at the time Clay made these pronouncements, he had been a member of the Fraternity for over twenty years, was a Past Master, a Past Grand Master, and had been a key figure in the call for a national grand lodge. Yet Clay, to all appearances, had no more attachment to Freemasonry than he would have had to any other civic organization to which he might have belonged.

Let us, for a moment, consider what Clay did not say. There is no record of Clay, at any point, ever giving credit to Freemasonry for shaping his thoughts or attitudes in any way. At no time did Clay ever suggest that his involvement with Freemasonry influenced his feelings about morality, the purpose of government, or man's relationship with the Creator. The philosophy of Freemasonry is so absent from Clay's public persona that it is reasonable to conclude that he was either unaware of its existence, or, being aware, dismissed it out of hand.

To believe that Freemasonry was ever anything more to Henry Clay than a convenient, and possibly pleasant, civic club is to ignore the weight of the evidence. In his own words, Clay believed that Freemasonry was neither a force for good or bad, and his participation in it reflected that belief. Simply put, to Clay, Freemasonry was not a factor in any of the important aspects of his life. That he had been a leader in it was merely attributable to the fact that he was leader in all that he did. Freemasonry was merely another organization that recognized that it needed his leadership.

The mythology of Henry Clay the Mason began immediately following his death, and continues to the present time.

Clay doubtlessly deserved all the tributes paid to him at his funeral. It was fitting and proper for the Masons of Kentucky to join in that tribute, and his relationship with Kentucky Freemasonry made such tributes all the more understandable. But in the following years, Clay has become Kentucky Freemasonry's, and perhaps, to an extent, American Freemasonry's, Duke of Montagu.

Clay's affiliation with Freemasonry has been used as a celebrity endorsement of the Fraternity, just as Montagu's status as a member of the nobility was used as an inducement to membership in 18th century England.

Henry Clay was certainly a notable man. He achieved tremendous success on the national political stage, despite his failure to win the presidency. In many ways, his stature as a statesman transcended the presidency.

His affiliation with Freemasonry brought luster and recognition to the Fraternity. But to search within Clay for inspiration or insights into the truths and teachings of Freemasonry, is a quest for that which does not exist.

Henry Clay was not a shrinking violet, nor was he given to false modesty. With respect to Freemasonry, we should take him at his word; that he considered it to be without much force. Regarded in this light, Clay's attitude toward Freemasonry is best described in the word that Henry Coil used to describe Clay's Masonic achievement: inglorious.

One of the more curious examples of the way Clay is deified by contemporary American Freemasons is found in editions of "The Masonic Home Journal," the official publication of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, from the years 1961 and 1962.

The November 1, 1961, edition of the "Home Journal" included an article attributed to the "Virginia Masonic Herald." The article duly noted that Clay was a native Virginia who rose to great fame. Roughly three-fourths of the article recounts Clay's political career, and is generally accurate in its presentation of the facts. In describing his affiliation with Freemasonry, however, the article veers from fanciful, to outright incorrect.

The article states, "He [Clay] was an active and zealous Mason according to his biographers and they refer to the records of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky." Concededly, the terms "active" and "zealous" are relative, and may be given wide construction. Given the paucity of extant records related to Clay's Masonic involvement, however, one wonders exactly what it was to which his "biographers" may have been referring. The article goes on to say, "He [Clay] was elected Grand Master in 1820 and must have still held the office in 1822." That statement is, of course, incorrect. Clay did, in fact serve as Grand Master for one year from 1820 to 1821, but was succeeded in 1821 by John McKinney, Jr. Following his term as Grand Master, Clay never again held any formal Masonic office.

It is puzzling that the official publication of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky would include, without any editorial note or explanation, such an obviously incorrect statement. One is left to wonder if the Grand Lodge of Kentucky actually knows who its Grand Masters were at any given time.

The article closes by stating, "He [Clay] died at his home 'Ashland,' in Lexington, Kentucky, on June 29, 1852 ..." In reality, Clay died in Washington, D. C., and his remains were transported to Lexington for interment.

It is curious enough that "The Masonic Home Journal" would add to the hagiography of Clay by printing an article that grossly overstates his importance to Freemasonry, but, even more curiously, a mere two months later, the January 1, 1962 edition of the "The Masonic Home Journal" reprinted exactly the same article, this time attributed to Archer B. Gay of the "California Freemason."

The two articles are word-for-word identical. The January 1962 article, like the preceding one, contains no editorial notes or explanation. Some sixty years later, one may only surmise as to why "The Masonic Home Journal" found it advisable to print an article that portrays Clay's commitment to Freemasonry in a far more favorable light than it deserves, and then, a mere sixty days later, reprint the same article attributed to a different source.

At the very least, this episode reflects the extent to which the myth of Henry Clay the Mason has become embedded in our collective Masonic psyche. It further illustrates the negligent manner in which Masonic editors and publications, at all levels, have approached their duty to present an accurate account of the personalities and events that have shaped the history of the Craft. Regardless, its net result was to add one more layer of gloss, hardening the finish to the myth of Henry Clay the Freemason.



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Chair of the Lodge Education Committee for a decade, he was elected to two consecutive terms as Master of the historic Lexington Lodge No. 1, Lexington, Kentucky. He served as Chair of the Mission Advancement Committee and member of the Education Committee for the Grand Lodge of Kentucky.

He is a Fellow and former member of the board of The Masonic Society, a current member of the board of the Masonic Restoration Foundation, Founding Member and Vice-Chair of The Rubicon Masonic Society, Third Vice-President of the Philalethes Society, co-editor of *The Transactions of The Rubicon Masonic Society*, Volume I, and a co-producer of *The Masonic Table*, a documentary released in May 2022 about Masonic Festive Boards and Harmony dining in Freemasonry. He is a member of the Texas Lodge of Research and American Lodge of Research, and a life member of Kentucky's William O. Ware Lodge of Research, where he was named to the initial class of Fellows. He serves as Chair of the Research Committee for the Lodge of Research.

He is the author of sixteen popular books about Freemasonry, along with dozens of essays, commentaries, and other papers about the Craft. His other books and writings address the subjects of leadership, criminal investigation, police standards, and the behavior of organizations and their administration. He speaks nationwide on a variety of issues related to Freemasonry, the Fraternity, the criminal justice system, and critical thinking.

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