

THE GRAND MASTER, HIS CANAL, AND FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Most Worshipful Brother DeWitt Clinton was a most outstanding man and Mason. He brought honor to the Craft in everything he did in service to mankind. Without him, there would have been no Erie Canal in New York State or canals in Ohio, at least not for many years, and westward expansion of the United States would have been much slower. Without him, the emergence of public education in New York and throughout our great nation would have been very significantly delayed. Most Worshipful Brother Clinton stood for and practiced in his daily life, the basic Masonic precepts of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. The causes that he championed in his public and private life, and the time, personal resources, energy, and considerable political influence that he gave to them, attest to this fact eloquently.

PROFESSIONAL AND MASONIC LIFE

Most Worshipful Brother Clinton was born on March 2, 1769, in Little Britain, New York. Both his father, James, and his uncle, George, were Brigadier Generals in the Continental Army. Later, Uncle George became Governor of New York and vice President of the United States under Presidents Jefferson and Madison (first term). The influence of his uncle on DeWitt Clinton's choice of politics as a career is clear.

DeWitt Clinton entered Columbia College as a junior in 1784. Two years later, he graduated at the head of his class - at age 17. He then studied law under Samuel Jones, was admitted to the New York Bar in 1789, and a year later became Private Secretary to his Uncle George who was then serving as the first Governor of New York.

During that same year, 1790, DeWitt Clinton was raised a Master Mason in Holland Lodge #16 (now #8). He served as Worshipful Master of Holland Lodge in 1793. Two years later he was elected Junior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of New York. He served in that post for two years (1795-1797) and as Senior Grand Warden in 1798. That same year, he was elected Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of New York, and remained in that post until 1801. In 1806 he was elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of New York, a post he held until 1820, a period of 14 years.

In 1814, Clinton was elected first head of the Grand Encampment (now Commandery) of Knights Templar of New York. He served in that post until his death in 1828. Thus, he was a Masonic "Three-Star General".

In 1816, Clinton became General Grand High Priest of what is now the General

Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, International. In that same year, he was made General Grand Master of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States. It is believed that Clinton, a very well respected national figure, was chosen for these posts because of his great prestige and stature throughout the nation, which would enhance the prestige of, and bring good will to, Freemasonry in general and to these organizations in particular.

In both cases, Thomas Smith Webb served in the #2 post - General Grand King (later Deputy General Grand High Priest, a new position) and Deputy General Grand Master. Webb and others, who previously had proven their dedication and interest in promoting Freemasonry in this country, were to be responsible for the actual activities and advancement of the organizations. Among these very important others were Henry Fowle as General Grand Generalissimo, John Snow as General Grand Sword Bearer, and Thomas Lowndes as General Grand Warder in the Commandery line.

Late in Clinton's career, while he was serving his fourth term as Governor of New York, Freemasonry was faced with the highly unfortunate Morgan Incident, which ushered in the Anti-Masonic period. Entire political careers were built on anti-Masonic platforms. Not only public officials but also the media voiced criticism of Freemasonry as the imagined source of this wrong. To this, DeWitt Clinton responded truthfully and courageously. He said: "I know that Freemasonry is friendly to religion, morality, liberty, and good government. I shall never shrink under any state of excitement, or any extent of misapprehension, from hearing testimony in favor of the purity of an institution which can boast of a Washington and a Franklin and a Lafayette as distinguished members - which inculcates no principles and authorizes no acts that are not in accordance with good morals, civil liberty, and entire obedience to the government and the laws."

Most Worshipful Brother Clinton's career in politics, which spanned 31 years from 1797 to his death in 1828, included service as a Representative in the New York State Assembly, New York State Senator, U.S. Senator, Mayor of New York City, Lieutenant Governor of New York, and four terms as Governor of New York. In 1812, he ran against the incumbent James Madison for President of the United States, but was defeated - 128 electoral votes to 89.

But much more important than the political offices Clinton held were his many major accomplishments while in his various offices. Starting early in his career, he worked for the passage of sanitary laws, for the abolition of slavery, for the improvement of the public police, for the prevention and punishment of crime, for the encouragement of missionary societies, for perfecting a militia system, and for promoting medical science.

As an author, Clinton published highly recognized scholarly works, including numerous scientific papers and the following books:

1. **Introductory Discourse** (1814), which concerned the state of scientific knowledge in America, and
2. **Memoirs of the Antiquities of Western New York** (1820).

Moreover, he was a founder and/or officer in the following learned societies:

- New York Historical Society (President and a Founder);
- Literature and Philosophical Society (A founder);
- American Bible Society, Education Society of the Presbyterian Church (vice President). American Academy of Art (Second Vice President).

Clinton also was a naturalist, and discovered both a native American wheat and a new fish (Salma Otsego).

But Clinton's major accomplishments, almost phenomenal in nature and extremely significant not only to New York City and New York State, but to the nation as a whole, were the construction of the Erie Canal and the establishment of a system of free public schools.

THE ERIE CANAL

In 1810, Most Worshipful Brother Clinton co-sponsored and then served on a commission to survey the route from the Hudson River to Lakes Erie and Ontario. (Not long before, President Thomas Jefferson, denying it Federal support, had characterized the idea of the Erie Canal as “100 years premature and completely impractical”). The seven-member Board of Canal Commissioners, after a seven week personal examination of the route, which was meticulously recorded by Clinton, returned a favorable report to the New York State Legislature but the Legislature took no action. Further consideration was postponed by the War of 1812.

It is interesting to note that, in his personal notes from the survey trip, Clinton made frequent reference to Masonic emblems that were displayed on inns that he passed or at which he stayed.

In 1815, having just relinquished his position as Mayor of New York City, Clinton again traversed the anticipated route of the canal, but this time on a speaking tour to arouse "grass-roots" support from the populace. His stirring formal presentation to the State Legislature in favor of the canal, presented in 1816, resulted in him being elected President of a re-formed Board of Canal Commissioners. The commissioners were charged to “consider, devise, and adopt such measures as may or shall be requisite to facilitate and effect the communication by canals and locks between the navigable waters of Hudson's River and Lake Erie, and the said navigable waters and Lake Champlain.”

The canal was to be 40 feet wide at the surface sloping to 28 feet at the bottom, 363 miles long, and 4 feet deep. It was to stretch from Buffalo, New York, on Lake Erie, to Albany, New York, on the Hudson River. Later it would be hailed as the "Eighth Wonder of the World," but during construction it was called by many “Clinton's Ditch.” Construction of the Erie Canal was officially begun on July 4, 1817, at Rome, New York. Rome, in about the middle of the proposed route, was chosen because the ground in that area was deemed easier to dig than that in other sections. The planners realized the awesomeness of the task ahead, as the canal would have to cross forests, span rivers, and

cut through hills. Somehow, it would have to climb the Appalachian Mountains. The 500-foot rise in elevation along the route required the use of 82 locks.

The construction problems were immense, and engineering experience in building canals was sparse in the United States. Moreover, there were no roads on which to deliver supplies to the workers. The power of horses and men had to be relied upon for this momentous undertaking.

Organizing the work force also was a major problem. Although it was both logical and politically expedient to utilize farmers and their hired hands along the route of the canal, the primary responsibility of these people was farming so they frequently left their shovels in the ground to tend their farms, causing construction to suffer greatly. A more reliable work force was found in Irish immigrants, who came to the United States to escape poverty. To them the 80 cents per day pay for common workers, which was good pay by the standards of an American worker, was a fortune. In Ireland, the average wage was 80 cents a week!

Clinton's heart was always on the canal. During the construction years, he frequently found excuses to leave his office as Governor and check on the progress of the canal.

The Erie Canal was opened on October 26, 1825. For this event, Governor Clinton sailed on the canal boat "Seneca Chief" from Buffalo along the length of the canal to the Hudson river and down the Hudson to New York City. Following him was a procession of other canal boats. Every few miles along the way, cannons blazed to announce the arrival of the flotilla. The trip took nine days, as the boats progressed at a speed of 4 miles per hour. At New York City, Clinton dumped into the New York Harbor a keg of water that he had brought from Lake Erie at Buffalo to symbolize "the wedding of the waters."

The total cost of the canal, excluding interest on loans, was \$9,130,373.80. In just 10 years the tolls collected by the state were to exceed the cost of constructing the canal. By 1882, the Erie Canal having paid for the cost of increasing its own depth and of constructing several feeder canals, and having contributed much to the general revenue of New York State, tolls on the canal were abolished.

The Erie Canal had a very profound effect on the growth of New York City. In fact, it can be said that the position of leadership in trade and industry enjoyed by New York State is due in large measure to this canal.

Also of great significance is the positive effect that the Erie Canal had on the growth of Ohio and other states in the area. Settlers poured west into the upper midwest, many using the Erie Canal for transportation. From their new homes they could ship farm produce back by the Erie Canal to be marketed in the East. (Ultimately, efficient Western grain production was able to undersell Eastern farmers in the New York City Market.) In return, bargeloads of manufactured goods and supplies traversed the Erie Canal westward. The use of the Erie Canal decreased freight rates between Buffalo and New York City by 90%, from \$100 per ton by land to \$10 per ton by canal.

The Erie Canal had another important influence on Ohio. In 1822 Ohio's canal commissioners hired James Geddes, who had established his professional reputation on the Erie Canal, to survey possible routes. Geddes' measurements showed that there was adequate water on the Portage Summit (Akron) between the Tuscarawas and the Cuyahoga, inasmuch as a natural spring-fed lake was situated on top of the route's highest elevation. Accordingly, in 1825 the Ohio Legislature authorized construction of the Ohio and Erie Canal. This canal started at the Ohio River and ran northward up the Scioto Valley to 11 miles south of Columbus, wherefrom it turned east across the Licking Summit. It then passed through Newark as it made its way to the Muskingum, then on to the Tuscarawas, and finally to Lake Erie.

On July 4, 1825, construction of the Ohio and Erie Canal was started, at Licking Summit (south of Newark). Most Worshipful Brother DeWitt Clinton, Governor of New York, was on hand to turn the first shovelful of earth. Likewise on July 21, 1825, Clinton participated in the groundbreaking ceremonies of the Miami Canal at Middletown.

FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION

As Mayor of New York City, Clinton recognized the inequities inherent in the then-current system of education. At that time, wealthy families were sending their sons, and occasionally their daughters, to private schools or were having them tutored at home, poor families had to teach their children themselves, if the children were to learn at all, unless they were members of one of the religious denominations that had established charity classes.

In 1805, Clinton was the principal organizer and first president of the Public School Society of New York. Not only did he convince the State Legislature to grant a charter for this society, but he led door-to-door solicitations for funds for free public schools. Later Clinton succeeded in obtaining some financial assistance from the state. He also obtained a donation of the land for the first public school from Colonel Henry Rutgers.

By 1823, there were five flourishing public schools in New York City, attesting to Clinton's success. Girls as well as boys were admitted. Thanks to Clinton's leadership, other cities now had a model on which to base free institutions of learning for the betterment of the population. Thus began a national movement toward public schools.

CLOSURE

Most Worshipful Brother DeWitt Clinton passed away suddenly and quite unexpectedly on February 11, 1828, during his fourth term as Governor of New York and while still head of what is now the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of New York. Our nation owes a large debt of gratitude to this truly outstanding man and Mason, who thought primarily of benefiting mankind and was most successful in his undertakings in this regard.

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