

White Hall State Historic Site Pocket Brochure Text

Cassius Marcellus Clay: "The Lion of White Hall"

Was he a bombastic rogue or a sincere champion of freedom for the slaves? Were the years he spent delivering fiery emancipationist speeches and publishing the newspaper *The True American* in truth a campaign waged to further his political aspirations? Was his enlistment in the army and service in the Mexican War an attempt to restore the reputation that had suffered because of his views on slavery? Were his views about women ultimately responsible for the breakup of his 45-year marriage and alienation of his children?

Clay "was born in Madison County, Kentucky United States of America, on October 19, 1810 on the uplands of Tate's and Jack's creeks, near the Kentucky River." He descended he stated, from grandparents who "had a large family of sons and daughters, of fine minds and physique."

Clay's father, General Green Clay, was at one time the wealthiest man in Kentucky. He owned thousands of acres of farmland, distilleries, a tavern and ferries on the Kentucky River. Green Clay acquired most of his land when he was a surveyor. He received half of everything he surveyed as payment for his work. "My father was a stern man, absorbed in affairs. He spent but little time with the children, and did not assume control. Yet he directed, in the main, what was to be done ..."Of his mother Sally Lewis Clay he stated, "she was not a woman to be trifled with... Calvinist in faith, Sally Lewis Clay was "the most Christian-like and pious of women in every word and thought. With her, truth was the basis of all moral character."

Despite his mother's best efforts, Cassius was constantly in mischief, skipping school to wade in the creek ... describing how, on one occasion, the schoolmaster at one school he attended "saw what a bad example I was setting ... and determined to reduce me to submission." The schoolmaster followed Cassius to the creek as did all his schoolmates. The teacher had on shoes however... "I took a position in the deepest pool, where he could not reach me with his long beech-rod." It was about this point in Clay's life when he began to consider the wrongs of slavery. He was working in his miniature flower garden one day when he heard screams, then looked up to see the slave girl Mary, her clothes bloody, running into the yard carrying a butcher's knife. Mary worked in the home of the Clay's overseer Payne who, according to Cassius, was a "drunkard." Mary had a sharp tongue and had aroused the anger of Payne's family, who decided to punish her. As they attacked her en masse, she fatally stabbed Payne with a butcher's knife and ran outside.

After hearing about the incident, the community was in arms and Mary was taken to jail. Mary went on trial and although sentenced to hang, was pardoned by the governor of Kentucky. Upon Green Clay's death, Mary was "sent South" by Sidney Payne Clay, Cassius' brother, as stipulated in Green Clay's will. Clay then observed, "Now, the most astonishing feature of the slave-system was the delusion that, as it was legal, it was morally right... Never shall I forget the scene, when Mary was tied by the wrists and sent from home and friends-into Southern banishment forever ... Never shall I forget those two faces of my brother and Mary the oppressor and the oppressed, rigid with equal agony!"

After his father's death on October 31, 1828, Clay entered Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. During this stint at Transylvania he met his future wife, Mary Jane Warfield.

In 1831, Cassius entered the junior class at Yale College in "Yankee land." With Cassius went letters of introduction to the likes of President Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, Martin Van Buren and John Quincy Adams. When Cassius returned to Kentucky, he studied law at Transylvania University, "but never took out a license to practice."

In 1835, he was chosen a member of the Kentucky House of Representatives from Madison County; was beaten the next year; then returned to the seat in 1837. Clay and his family moved to Thorn Hill, their new home in Lexington in 1838. He was chosen as a delegate to represent the Whig Party at the National Convention held at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1839. Clay was a supporter of his second cousin, Henry Clay, as a candidate for the Presidency. However, General William Henry Harrison was the nominee. In 1840, Clay was elected to the Legislature from Fayette County; this was the last election he ever won.

During the 1840s, Clay became more outspoken about the issue of slavery. He traveled throughout Kentucky and to Indiana and Illinois delivering fiery emancipationist speeches. He alienated many of his peers because of his views on slavery.

Clay was also gaining quite a reputation as a fighter. Several of his more famous fights occurred at campaign stops or as a result of his emancipationist speeches. After one fight in which Clay cut one eye out, Clay was indicted for mayhem. Henry Clay and John Speed Smith, Clay's brother-in-law, defended him. The jury rendered a verdict of not guilty.

When Clay's emancipationist speeches seemed to bring him little but enmity, he decided to change his tactics. "I determined to start a press of my own in the cause of liberation. My object was to use a State and National Constitutional right-the Freedom of the Press-to change our National and State laws, so as, by legal majority to abolish slavery," Clay wrote.

Although Clay knew that his newspaper, *The True American*, would be a losing business... "I was willing to make the sacrifice." Clay selected a brick building in Lexington for his office and lined the outside doors with "sheet-iron to keep it from being burned." And, he stated:

"I purchased two brass four-pounder cannons ... and placed them, loaded with shot and nails, on a table breast high; had folding doors secured with a chain, which could open upon the mob, and give play to my cannon... I furnished my office with Mexican lances, and a limited number of guns."

Clay also installed a trap door in the roof and placed a keg of powder "with a match, which I could set off, and blow up the office and all my invaders."

Clay joined the Mexican War effort "to strengthen myself so that I could take the stump, where I would be an overmatch for all my foes..." However, he was captured early in the war and spent most of his time as a prisoner of war in Mexico City. When he returned to Lexington at the end of the war, he was treated like a hero.

Once again, Clay's hunger for a political career reared its head. By the end of the 1840s, Clay was a leader in the Liberal Party, composed largely of emancipationists who wanted to elect antislavery delegates to the state constitutional convention.

In 1855, Clay gave abolitionist preacher John Fee a 10-acre portion of land known as the "glade" located in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains. Fee built a house and established a church school which would later become Berea College.

The 1850s brought Clay a series of financial setbacks including the failure of a Cincinnati bank he owned. By 1856, Clay was bankrupt and his property and household furnishings were auctioned at White Hall in a public sale. Clay's mother and his brother Brutus bought most of the property and assumed the debt themselves, giving Clay the property. Clay was forever bitter that his wealthy father-in-law, Dr. Elisha Warfield, did not help him and Mary Jane during these difficult times.

It was at Springfield, Illinois in 1856 that Clay first saw Abraham Lincoln. As Clay was delivering a speech outside the capitol - the doors had been barred to him - he saw Lincoln sitting under a tree. "Whittling sticks, as he lay on the turf, Lincoln gave me a most patient hearing. I shall never forget his long, ungainly form, and his ever sad and homely face," Clay wrote in his memoirs.

Clay saw no more of Lincoln until 1858 when they traveled north together on a train where "we renewed our old acquaintanceship ... and I, on the cars, had a long talk with him on the great issue." Clay continued, "He listened a long time-such was his habit-without saying a word; and, when I had concluded my argument, he replied: "Yes, I always thought, Mr. Clay, that the man who made the corn should eat the corn."

After Abraham Lincoln's election, it was rumored that Clay would be appointed Secretary of War. However, Simon Cameron received the appointment. When Clay was offered the position of Minister to Spain ... "I went directly to Lincoln, and told him I would not accept the mission to an old, effete government like Spain." Clay stated that, Lincoln seemed much affected, and said, 'Well, what office would you accept?'" When Clay requested the position as minister to England or France, he was told those positions were filled. He finally accepted the position of Minister to Russia. Soon after his appointment, Clay returned to Kentucky and made arrangements to take his family, except Green Clay, to Russia.

After stops in London and Paris, the Clays arrived in Russia in 1861. Cassius' reception by Czar Alexander II "was remarkable for its length and cordiality." Clay and his family were popular among the Russian aristocrats... "I gave the Russians an idea of my taste and training... if they liked flowers, I accommodated them; if painting, I had some of the rarest; if wines, I had every sample of the world's choice; if the menu was the object, nothing was there wanting."

However, the Russian climate did not agree with Clay's family and they returned home after a few months in Russia. Clay remained in Russia for a short while before returning to the United States.

Clay returned to Russia in 1863 without his family and he immediately set out to establish good relations with the Russians. I thought my first duty in Russia was to keep the Czar, if possible, on the Union side; and, therefore, my business was to please." And please he did; Clay entertained lavishly. He lived in a cottage on the estate of a wealthy German near St. Petersburg. The grounds extended to the edge of the Neva River. "It (the cottage) was taken by me; and I built a bath-house, anchored on the clear waters, with a surrounding platform where I spent much time in fishing."

Clay attended glittering social events such as the wedding of Princess Dagmar (Marie-Sophie-Fred-Dagmar) and Alexander Alexandrowitz (Alexander III), next heir to the Russian throne. He wrote of a party in the "White Hall," an entirely white room noted for its colonnades, huge proportions and "unique arrangements." And, he observed, "Men and women in great troops, with flying hair and ribbons streaming like battle flags." He also wrote of the Imperial Conservatory, a 3/4-mile long conservatory with "all the flowers of all the climes and all the continents."



Clay returned to America in the fall of 1869. However, he did not return to White Hall until 1870. Throughout the 1870s, Clay became a champion of the Liberal Republican movement, advocating self-government in local matters for the states. He urged amnesty for Southerners, civil service reform and "purification of the Grantites" - a reference to the administration of Ulysses S. Grant and its rampant corruption.

Cassius' long absences drove a final wedge in the Clay marriage. For several years after his return from Russia, Mary Jane and Cassius maintained a marriage of convenience. However, when Mary Jane left White Hall for the last time Cassius was virtually alone in the huge mansion. "So I sought companionship with the flowers and trees and shrubs, and with all vegetable and animal life; with books and paintings and statuary... But at night I was left all the more alone -till I often opened the wide shutters that the bats should enter to pick the flies ... Had I been worse than other men? And was this the punishment of violated law? Was it of God, or of man?"

"I, who had sacrificed all to men, was by men left to myself alone... So, I sent for my adopted child, and brought him into the courts of Madison County, Kentucky, and had his name changed and recorded ... having made up my mind as to my highest duty, I calmly shouldered all the responsibilities of my action..."

Was Clay's "adopted son" in reality his illegitimate child by the Russian ballerina Marie Surovshikova Pepita; or was he the son of Annie Petroff, "beautiful Russian lady who was of the royal family..." and wife of Jean Petroff of St. Petersburg?

The truth of Launey Clay's parentage may never be known. Clay only leaves a cloud of mystery surrounding Launey's origins in his memoirs... "In the great city of St. Petersburg, of now near a million of people - that city of isolation, infinite intrigues, and silence-was born, in the year 1866, a male child. To the secret of his parentage I am the only living witness - I who have, of all men living, the best reason to know-and that secret will die with me."

To the very end, Clay's life was filled with, in his words, "calumnies." When Clay discovered that two of his house servants, David and Sarah White, had tried to poison Launey, he "sent for David White, and told him and his wife to leave in fifteen minutes, if they desired to live." When the White's son Perry tried to ambush Clay in the woods near White Hall, Clay fatally wounded him.

After Launey's marriage, Clay was again virtually alone at White Hall. During the early 1890s, he continued writing and speaking on a number of subjects including politics, economics and agriculture. Never one to go long without controversy swirling about him, Clay created a sensation in 1894, when at the age of 84 he married a 15-year-old tenant farmer's sister, Dora Richardson. The community was in such a stir that Judge John Cabell Chenault sent a posse to White Hall to demand that Clay surrender the girl.

Clay's marriage to Dora Richardson lasted only a few years, and Clay was alone once again. He became increasingly eccentric and suspicious as the years passed; even his own relatives were warned to approach White Hall at their own risk. He barricaded himself in the huge house, reportedly firing his cannon at a would-be visitor, earning the sobriquet

"the Lion of White Hall." When the sheriff tried to arrest Clay in 1901 for non-payment of taxes, he reportedly shouted from his bastion, "Why should I pay taxes? I get no protection."

In 1903, rumors circulated throughout the Bluegrass that Clay was bedridden in his library and close to death. On the night of July 22, 1903, a severe storm struck central Kentucky. Roofs were blown off barns...roads were turned to muck by the tremendous deluge of rainfall...church steeples in Richmond were toppled...a statue of Henry Clay in the Lexington cemetery was struck by lightning. Cassius Marcellus Clay, Lion of White Hall, passed away quietly in his sleep that night, oblivious to the furor outside. The Lion of White Hall was finally at rest.



"... she was apparently the most amiable of women."

After Green Clay's death, 17-year-old Cassius entered Transylvania University in Lexington. It was during his stint at Transylvania that he met Mary Jane Warfield, the daughter of prominent Lexingtonian Dr. Elisha Warfield, who bred the famous racehorse, Lexington.

In Cassius' words, Mary Jane Warfield "had the complexion of her Irish ancestors-fair smooth skin, at times touched with rose color; a face and head not classical, with rather broad jaws, large mouth, flexible lips ... her hair was of a light auburn or nut-color, long and luxurious... In disposition, she was apparently the most amiable of women."

In 1831 before Cassius left Lexington for Yale, he gave Mary Jane a copy of Washington Irving's Sketch Book. When he returned from Yale, he again visited the Warfield's home in Lexington.

After learning of Clay's infatuation for Mary Jane, a friend of Clay's, Mrs. John Allen, warned, 'Cousin Cash, I see that you are much taken with Mary Jane. Don't marry her; don't you marry a Warfield!'" Clay did not heed Mrs. Allen's warning, however. Cassius Marcellus Clay and Mary Jane Warfield were married in 1833.

After their marriage, Cassius and Mary Jane settled at Clermont in Madison County. Cassius soon began pursuit of a political career. The Clay's first child, Elisha Warfield, was born May 18, 1835. Mary Jane and Cassius were to have ten children, six of whom lived to adulthood.

In 1838, the Clays moved to Lexington after purchasing the Lord Morton House at Limestone and Fifth Streets. Clay stated he "acceded to Mary Jane's wishes" to be in a more central location. However, he did not seem to object to this move because it placed him in the center of political activity.

When Cassius was appointed Minister to Russia by Abraham Lincoln in 1861, Mary Jane and five of their children went with him. For her introduction at the Court Alexander, "I selected a golden silk covered with white velvet figures, a goods somewhat resembled my old rose colored velvet of Grandmother Barr's. I bought a headdress of feathers and gold cords... to wear with it for which I paid 20 rubles."

Although Mary Jane was very much a success among the Russian nobility, her longing to be in Kentucky was apparent in her letters... "I wish I was with you all or at any rate might hope to be with you next spring. I do not feel now that I can remain away four years."

In a letter of July 20, 1861 Mary Jane wrote, "I will not allow myself to indulge in thoughts of home, but I think of our county as it once was. I do not realize it's sad, sad condition now - brother warring against brother." And about Russia: "We continually are seeing churches, gardens and the like, all on a magnificent scale. The churches are as gorgeous as gold and silver and precious stones can make them. The gardens remind me of the Arabian Nights - it is a fairyland."

The severe winter in Russia was not to Mary Jane's liking with her four daughters and son Brutus. Cassius apparently was unhappy with this decision because he said she left... "contrary to my wishes and regardless of my protest." When Clay was again appointed Minister to Russia in 1863, Mary Jane refused to go with him.

Despite this refusal, Clay left Mary Jane his power of attorney. In part due to Mary Jane's management of his properties, Clay was able to pay off all his debts totaling \$60,000.

Mary Jane wrote Sarah in January 1866... "Dear me! I begin to long for your Father's return, I am so weary of attending to so much business. Household and business matters are too much for me." Her patience began to wane even more. She remembered the beauty of the women of the Russian court, the elegant balls, the meals with numerous courses, picnics at country estates and trips to the Imperial Ballet. Cassius wrote her letters describing the lavish parties he hosted while cautioning her about spending money... I would like to gratify you in regard to Laura's trip to Europe-but I regard it as now almost impossible - we must first pay our debt..."

After arriving in the United States in 1869 at the end of his mission in Russia, Clay spent a year in the northeast. It was not until 1870 that Cassius returned to White Hall. According to Clay, the atmosphere in Kentucky was a great deal more frigid than that of New York... "on my return home, she ventured to treat me as a stranger - putting me in a separate room; and, when the weather turned suddenly cold, she moved all my clothing, without consulting me, into another room." Mary Jane left Cassius and moved to Lexington. She did return once in order to make amends; however, Cassius left White Hall and did not return until Mary Jane had gone back to Lexington. "Then she left once more, never to return," stated Cassius. The Clay's finally divorced in 1878 after 45 years of marriage.



The Den of the Lion...

"I write in the house in which I was born. It is a well-burned brick structure, with heavy range work of Kentucky marble and grey limestone, and of the Grecian style, having three porticos of imperfect Corinthian and Doric columns. It was added to after 1861; but the old building, after the English manner, was preserved almost intact." -from the memoirs of Cassius Clay.

The lion's den, White Hall, is really a house within a house. The "old building," as Clay referred to his father's home, Clermont, was built in 1798-1799 in the Georgian style. Clay wrote that the brick structure was "the first of that class" in the country. The new building, White Hall, was built above and around Clermont by Cassius Clay in the 1860s. Also of brick, it is an interesting combination of Georgian and Gothic Revival style architecture with Italianate influences.

Though sophisticated for its time and location on the Kentucky frontier, Clermont was simple in design. Situated on a small rise, the home was located at the center of Green Clay's extensive empire which included distilleries, taverns, farms, and ferries across the Kentucky River. The first floor of the two-story home consisted of a large hallway on one

side, a bearing wall in the center, and, on the other side, a dining room and parlor each with stairways leading to the second floor. Upstairs there were four bedrooms, all of approximately the same size. All seven rooms in the house had fireplaces.

Steps under the dining room stairway led to the cellar in which a winter kitchen extended under both the parlor and dining room. In addition, a recessed, arched hatch on the south side of the house allowed access to the cellar from the summer kitchen. The existing kitchen addition was added to the house sometime between 1805 and 1810. Food is thought to have been cooked in the outside stone kitchen, then brought to the "new" warming kitchen and transferred to serving dishes and taken to the dining room.

The transformation of Clermont into White Hall occurred in the 1860s when Cassius Clay was in Russia. Prominent architect Thomas Lewinski and builder-architect John McMurty designed and built the addition, more than doubling the size of the house. The first floor of White Hall was made level with the older section of the house. Clermont's old stairways were removed; however, despite the addition of front and rear staircases, circulation throughout the house was very awkward.

Noteworthy features of the addition include 16-foot ceilings, a sweeping staircase of nearly thirty steps almost 50 inches wide, and a forerunner of a central heating system-modeled after a system the Clay's had seen in Russia-fueled by two fireboxes in the basement with ducts leading to fireplaces in several rooms of the newer section of the house. Unique for its time was an indoor bathroom, divided into three closets, one containing a washbasin or wastewater disposal area, another a commode and the third a bathtub made of poplar log lined with zinc. Rainwater from the roof was collected in a storage tank on the 3rd floor of the house and piped to the bathroom below.

Mary Jane Clay supervised the renovation of Clermont while Cassius was in Russia. She relied on Brutus Clay, Cassius' brother, not only for advice about the renovation, but also for advice about management of the extensive farm properties. Mary Jane wrote to Mary Barr about her responsibilities... "I have a large family to support and heavy bills to pay for our house which I must attend to, for no one else is here to do it so I am constrained to stay at home and work early and late."

When Cassius finally returned to Kentucky in 1870, he and Mary Jane entertained at White Hall even though Mary Jane spent much of her time in Lexington living with her sister Anne. After the Clays divorce in 1878, Cassius "was left entirely alone in a large house, which made my isolation more gloomy..."

White Hall was sold at auction in 1903 after Clay's death. Warfield C. Bennett, Sr., grandson of Cassius Clay, bought 350 acres of the White Hall estate for \$83.50 per acre. Until 1966, the house was occupied by tenant farmers who stored grain, tobacco and hay in the once-elegant ballroom. Chickens roosted on the 1859 Steinway piano. After the tenant farmers moved out, vandals moved in... the original banister of the front staircase was torn out. Fires were lit in the hall. Windows were broken. Eventually a tall, chain-link fence was put up around the house in an attempt to keep out the vandals.

In 1968 the Commonwealth of Kentucky purchased 13 acres immediately surrounding the house. The house and outbuildings were donated to the Commonwealth by Miss Esther S. Bennett and her brother Warfield C. Bennett, Jr., great-grand daughter and great-grandson of Cassius Marcellus Clay.

Restoration of the house began in 1968 and the house was opened for tours in 1971.