

DeWitt Clinton and the Rise of Urban New York

Clinton's contributions to New York place him in the forefront of the nation's urban growth in the antebellum period.

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No full appreciation of the Empire State's rise to preeminence or New York City's spectacular growth can overlook DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828). He emerged among the most prominent post-revolutionary Northern leaders, largely forsaking national attention (particularly after losing his bid for the White House in 1812) and devoting his career to local and state issues. During the nation's growth to twenty-four states by 1821, New York—guided by Clinton—leapt ahead and ranked first among equals.

As the nation today gropes with awesome problems in its industrial states and inner cities, retrospection can be useful in recognizing qualities of his leadership and strategies tested in early nineteenth century urban issues. Imagine combining the brilliant foresight and aggressiveness of mega-planner Robert Moses with Governor Al Smith's social consciousness, then adding a dash of Mayor LaGuardia's political know-how. Almost two centuries ago, Clinton displayed such bold qualities as Mayor of New York City (1802-1807, 1808-1810, 1811-1815) and Governor (1817-1828). He also served briefly as U.S. Senator and, interestingly, as both State Senator (1806-1811) and Lieutenant Governor (1811-1813) during his tenure as Mayor.

Clinton's roots were upper-class Old and New Worlds. Born to James Clinton and Mary DeWitt (a blend of English, Irish, and Dutch ancestries) in Little Britain, Ulster (later Orange) County, six years before the skirmishes at Lexington and

Concord, he grew up in the tumultuous revolutionary era. His father was one of Washington's generals, and his uncle George became the state's first governor, a ranking anti-Federalist Republican, and later Jefferson's and Madison's Vice-President. It was Governor Clinton who introduced his bright and ambitious nephew to the world of local and state politics, Republican-style, helping to mold a philosophy aimed at a better quality of life for all New Yorkers, regardless of their race, ethnicity, age, or gender (1).

Young Clinton attended a local Presbyterian grammar school, Kingston Academy (considered the state's best), and then Columbia College, graduating first in the class of 1786. He studied law, served as private secretary to the governor, and in 1797 was elected to the state assembly and a year later to the state senate, representing the southern district and New York City. After a brief period in the U.S. Senate (1802-3), he became New York City's appointed mayor (2).

During this period in Clinton's life, New York State not only retained colonial practices that retarded the process of political democracy, but was also a battleground of conflicting ideologies. After the war, the vote was given to a relatively few white male citizens over the age of twenty-one who had the proper qualifications or special status to elect members of the state assembly. Far fewer participated in the election of the state senate and governor; ordinary tenants, women, and black males (for whom much higher qualifications

existed) could not vote. Also, the battle over the new Constitution in the summer of 1788 and the close ratification vote (30 to 27) illustrated an intense rivalry between Federalists and Republicans in the state. Governor Clinton (in office for six successive terms) used his immense power "with the advice and concurrence" of a council of appointment (under the state constitution of 1777) to select and remove some fifteen thousand civil and military officials. This was the ultimate in political patronage and some years later, as a member of both the state legislature and the council of appointment, DeWitt Clinton himself continued to wield such influence over friend and foe alike. In 1801, at the age of thirty-two, he was already the acknowledged leader of the Republican party in the state. He had inherited the practice of the spoils system, along with violent duelling, and other rough-and-tumble activities that governed the behavior of our early political parties (3).

Jefferson's election put New York politics in Republican hands. Having thrashed the Federalists, DeWitt and Governor Clinton (in his seventh, final term) and other Republican factions (led by Aaron Burr and the Livingstons) now joined in fragile power cliques against one another. The instigation of the strong Tammany Society and a dozen or so faction-backed newspapers in New York City made urban politics a pressure-filled, sometimes violent activity. The literature on Clinton's career between 1797 and 1828 is replete with his erratic office holding, with his ascendancy in local machine politics, and with his struggles (including a duel) against party rivals. At the same time, paradoxically, one reads of his commitment to democracy, to socio-economic progress, to educational reform, to scholarship and science, and to making New York the premier state. Once in public office, Clinton would not allow "the heavy, charmless, un-remitting pursuit of political advantage" to deter him from carrying out his deeper convictions and public duty (4).

Clinton's New York in 1800 with about



During his political career, DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828) held such positions as Governor, U.S. Senator, State Senator, Lieutenant Governor and Mayor of New York City. One of his achievements as Mayor was the founding of New York City's public schools.

590,000 people (and over 20,000 slaves) was on the threshold of urbanization. New York City (with 61,000), Albany and Hudson were its first incorporated cities while Rochester, Utica, and Buffalo were little more than tiny villages adjacent to waterways or old forts. The decline of the Oneidas and other Indians; the steady migration of Vermonters; the impact of land companies and early turnpikes; and the expanding wheat farming and forestry stimulated settlement of the Upper Mohawk and some of the remote areas. By 1810, the state's overall population had risen to 960,000 with a 38 percent gain (to 121,000) in the size of its cities (5).

In his debut as state legislator and senator, Clinton looked beyond local issues and as a young nationalist introduced, for example, a resolution that provided separate electors for the President and Vice-

President (later, the Twelfth Amendment), and spoke out against French and Spanish violations of American neutrality. He also displayed social concern in 1799 by initiating legislation for the gradual emancipation of slaves—an outcome fully attained, with his backing, in 1827 (6).

Clinton resigned his senate seat and became the mayor of New York City to join the governor in serving state and local needs, control the party apparatus, and (because his finances were so often in disorder) to benefit from the higher salary.

As mayor, Clinton accomplished much between 1803 and 1815. He addressed the city's basic human needs; improving fire control and sanitation; raised the quality of the uniform police force and local militia; quelled a riot of rowdy sailors; protected Irish immigrants against native attacks (upholding their rights to a free education

and, later, to jobs on the Erie Canal project); helped incorporate a company to supply the city with fresh water and reduce yellow fever epidemics; surveyed and laid out future street patterns as well as the town of Manhattanville; completed a new city hall; as stockholder, gave active support to local banks (while bitterly opposing the national bank); took trips to become familiar with the city's outer limits, such as Spuyt den Divul; and promoted steamboat travel on the Hudson. As local diplomat and reappointed senator (in a dual role), Clinton used state funds to fortify the city's harbor and deter the warring British from seizing French and neutral vessels with their sailors (7).

Politically, Mayor Clinton, in command of the council of appointment, fired scores of Federalists and rival Republicans (and was himself removed from office in 1807, 1810 and 1815). An active leader, he ended the practice permitting freeholders to vote in every ward where they owned property, and helped enact statutes for the relief of persons imprisoned for debt. In 1806, he advocated the removal of political disabilities from Roman Catholics and, as chief judge of the common pleas and of the criminal court, he ruled in favor of a priest's right not to disclose what had been heard in confession—a clear step toward greater liberty of conscience. And, in a case involving a student brawl at Columbia College's commencement exercises in late 1811, Judge Clinton (ignoring the wrath of political foes) called the incident outrageous and imposed heavy fines. He was a law-and-order mayor (8).

Clinton's part in New York's culture contributed to its maturity as an urban center. New Yorkers, like others, were stimulated in the post-Revolutionary period to develop a national culture, giving prestige to patriotic ceremonies and advancing the arts and sciences. Receptive patrons in the rising professional and business classes united behind municipal leaders like Clinton in such significant urban projects as lyceums, historical societies, and free schools.

Clinton's name became synonymous

with public education. A man of letters, he had fervently backed his uncle's goal (as Chancellor of the State University of New York) to develop statewide schools and colleges, and encouraged by the proximity of students, housing, and hospitals, worked hard to make Columbia College and the College of Physicians and Surgeons into urban schools. He believed his whole life that "knowledge is ecstatic in enjoyment, perennial in fame, unlimited in space and infinite in duration." He advocated the Lancastrian system (based on the founder's London method in which a thousand pupils, assigned to only one teacher, received actual instruction from monitors) because of its "economy in expense and rapidity of instruction." He was also a strong devotee of teacher training and supervision of instruction (9).

In New York City in 1805, Clinton founded the Free School Society "for the education of poor children who do not belong to, or are not provided for by a religious denomination," and opened Public School No. 1 in lower Manhattan. Starting in 1812, the state organized its own schools, voters elected representatives to local districts, and funds for public schools went up. By 1829, over 468,000 pupils in the state's 8,609 districts were in common schools (10).

Clinton's social conscience reached its zenith in his advocacy of higher education for women; of mental, moral, and agricultural training for Native Americans and African-Americans ("... two unfortunate races of men, who will be forever insulated from the great body of people, by uncontrollable circumstances, and who ought to receive our benevolence and sympathy."); of special education for the deaf and dumb ("fellow creatures shut out from the blessings of social communion"); of state aid for Catholic and Jewish schools; of human penal reform for criminals and juvenile delinquents; of a professional society for artists; and, of medical education that secured more qualified doctors and better care for the indigent. Clinton was president of the Literary and Philosophical Society, a prominent Mason, and a member of the Ameri-

can Antiquarian Society, Academy of Arts, the New York Military Society, and of several agricultural and scientific societies, here and abroad (11).

New York City's cultural life received other boosts from Clinton. He and close friends formed the New York Historical Society in 1804 to preserve the state's past—including that of vanishing tribes—and later, in Albany, he supported a new library system as well as lyceums in New York City, Troy, and Utica. Though removed as mayor in 1815 by party foes who, in gaining control of the state council of appointment, had not forgiven him for Federalist backing in his losing bid against President Madison in 1812, Clinton had left an indelible mark on the city, and emerged the statesman in fighting for the most spectacular internal improvement of all: the trans-state canal (12).

Clinton's gubernatorial years from 1817 until his death in 1828 were his most rewarding. Tremendous change took place as more transplanted New Englanders settled in central, western and northern New York, increasing the number of counties to fifty-five. With his support, a new state constitution was approved in 1821: the council of appointment, a server of patronage, was abolished; the governor now had the power of veto and of judicial appointments with senate approval. Most of all, the franchise was extended to white male taxpayers, laborers, militiamen, and firemen but was still denied to black males by state voters—five times between 1826 and 1869—until the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified. Amid the changes, New York City's mayor was chosen by a popularly elected city council from 1822 to 1834, and afterward by the voters.

The Erie Canal was Clinton's major achievement, and its construction (1817-1825) resulted from the timely convergence of many factors: the state's favorable geography, the role of canal advocates (such as Governor Morris) and private canal companies, the national political climate fostering internal improvement plans (such as Albert Gallatin's), and Clinton's powerful leadership after the War of

the North. With these changes, and with the accruing pluses and minuses, the shape and much of the political, economic and social substance of modern-day urban America was already in place by mid-century (16).

Clinton's contributions to New York's development also place him in the forefront of the nation's urban growth in the antebellum period. Denied the White House in 1812 and declining the prestigious post of minister to England a year before his death, Clinton was, first and foremost, a New York Jeffersonian whose brand of partisan democracy and sincere concern for the welfare of others mirrored that of the Virginian. He too had his detractors, critics who magnified his faults as a political brawler and excessive dispenser of patronage, but who minimized his creative talents as an urban politician. New York State, with its teeming downstate metropolis, was certainly destined by location and resources to merit the accolade of "Empire." But it took the political genius of Clinton to give it focus and direction in the budding years of the nineteenth century. He was ahead of his time as the prototypical mayor and the modern governor in marshalling the collective energies of people for the common good. Urban New York was his legacy and today's city planners and dwellers owe him much for his vision and deeds. □

Notes

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4. Alvin Kass, *Politics in New York State, 1800-1830* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 1-54; Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1801-1840* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 58; George Dangerfield, *Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of New York 1746-1813* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 299.
5. John H. Thompson, ed., *Geography of New York State* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 148-169; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 8, 32.
6. Bobbe, *Clinton*, 72; Renwick, *DeWitt Clinton*, 49-60.
7. Howard B. Furer, ed., *New York: A Chronological and Documentary History, 1524-1970* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1974), 21-23; Kenneth R. Nodyne, *The Role of DeWitt Clinton and the Municipal Government in the Development of Cultural Organizations in New York City, 1803-1817* (Ph.D., NYU, 1969; Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1969), 6-12, 213-214, 220-221; Renwick, *DeWitt Clinton*, 61-113.
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9. Edward A. Fitzpatrick, *The Educational Views and Influence of DeWitt Clinton* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1911), 26-29, 109-120; David Hosack, *Memoir of DeWitt Clinton* (1829; reprint, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1967), 81.
10. Fitzpatrick, *Education Views*, 47-69; James G. Wilson, ed., *The Memorial History of the City of New York, Vol. III* (New York: New York History Company, 1893), 168; M.J. Lamb and B. Harrison, *History of the City of New York: Its Origin, Rise and Progress*, Vol. III (New York: The A.S. Barnes Company, 1896), 505-517; Hosack, *Clinton*, 159-164.
11. Fitzpatrick, *Educational Views*, 78-140; "State Aid for Jewish Schools," in *The Annals of America*, Vol. 4, 1797-1820 (Illinois: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1968), 282.
12. Fitzpatrick, *Educational Views*, 78-88; Hosack, *Clinton*, 141-144.
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