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Clement Comer Clay

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Reeves: Clement Comer Clay
Madison County - Clement Comer Clay

JACQUELYN PROCTER REEVES



Clement Clay was born in Halifax County, Virginia and moved to Tennessee as a child. He graduated from East Tennessee College in 1807 and was admitted to the bar in 1809. In 1811, he came to Huntsville, then part of the Mississippi Territory, with one slave and enough money to last three days. He served as an adjutant in the 1813 Creek Indian War with future notables Andrew Jackson, John Coffey, and Davy Crockett.

Alabama had been part of the Mississippi Territory, but with Mississippi's 1817 admission into the Union, Alabama remained a territory. Clay served in the 1817-1819 Territorial legislature and again in the 1819 Constitutional Convention held in Huntsville. At that convention, Clay served as chairman of the 15 men assigned to draft the constitution that, upon approval of the U.S. Government on December 14, 1819, would make Alabama the 22nd state of the Union. As a side-note, Clay was encouraged to run for the office of Alabama's first governor, but the constitution stated the governor must be 30 years of age. Clay was 29. In that same year, he was elected as a circuit judge.

Clement Clay served on the state Supreme Court from 1820-1823. In 1827, he was elected to the Alabama state legislature where he served as Speaker of the House. In 1829 he was elected to the U.S. Congress and in

Huntsville Historical Review, Vol. 32 [2007], No. 1, Art. 9
that position, helped arrange the 1833 negotiations with Governor Gayle and Francis Scott Key to discuss the removal of Creek Indians.

In 1835, Clay was elected as the eighth governor of Alabama, and during this difficult term of office, the removal of Creek Indians resulted in the now-famous Trail of Tears. Many Alabamians served in the militia to fight against the Seminoles and in 1836, many Alabamians were massacred at Goliad, Texas.

In 1836, Clay helped establish Spring Hill College in Mobile, the third oldest Jesuit College in the United States. In 1837, he was appointed to the U.S. Senate and resigned as governor. He remained in that position until 1841 when he resigned to prepare a digest of state laws under the direction of the Alabama General Assembly. Clay's Digest, finished in 1843, is still referenced today. In 1843, Clay was appointed to the State Supreme Court, and in 1846, he served on a committee to resolve problems with the Bank of the State of Alabama. Other noteworthy appointments: he served as chairman of the Committee on Engrossed Bills and the Committee on Militia.

Clay encouraged his son Clement Claiborne Clay to enter politics and follow in his footsteps. But times were different and his son entered at a time when talk of a civil war was on everyone's lips. Young Clay announced Alabama's secession from the United States and took his place in the Confederate Congress. At the end of the Civil War, he learned that he was wanted by the Federal government and turned himself in, not knowing that he was charged with being part of the plot to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln. He was imprisoned at Fortress Monroe for one year in solitary confinement until his release. His mother died while he was in prison, and he made his way back to Madison County to spend the last remaining months of his father's life with him.

Clement Clay's second son, John Withers Clay, became editor of the Huntsville Democrat, and found himself in trouble with the occupying Union Army for publishing his opinions. Clay's third son, Hugh Lawson Clay, also an attorney, served in the Mexican War as a captain and later as a Colonel in the Confederate Army.

During the Union occupation in the Civil War, Clement Clay was arrested as a prominent Huntsville resident. Guerilla forces along the Memphis and Charleston Railroad route were wreaking havoc with the Union forces and he was one of 12 Huntsville leaders held in retaliation. His fortune, earned by tenacity and hard work, was decimated as a result of

Reeves: Clement Comer Clay

the War. Clement Comer Clay died in 1866 and was buried in Huntsville's Maple Hill Cemetery. In 1931, a bridge was built over the Tennessee River and named in honor of Governor Clement Clay. It was torn down in 2006.

Clement Clay's early law office has been restored as part of the Alabama Constitution Village in Huntsville. At that time, he rented the upstairs to land surveyors and the other half of his office served as the first Huntsville post office.

Sources:

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