

Henry Clay Has Arrived In The Senate

by Lynne Belluscio

Last weekend, while the Senate was on recess, the huge painting of Henry Clay on the floor of the United States Senate was hung in the East stairway of the Capital, framed by the bronze Brumidi Staircase built in 1850.

Perhaps you remember when I announced that the Senate had agreed to take the painting which had been in storage here at the Historical Society since the 1950s. The portrait of Henry Clay was painted in 1866 by Phineas Staunton, who was the husband of Emily Ingham, the founder of Ingham University.

Phineas was born in nearby Wyoming in 1814 and taught at Ingham. He was a self taught artist, who studied briefly under Grove Gilbert in Rochester. (Gilbert's father had a blacksmith shop on the corner of Gilbert Street.) Phineas painted the huge portrait of Henry Clay when the State of Kentucky offered prize money for a likeness of Clay to hang in their state house.

Clay had died fourteen years earlier, but Phineas had supposedly painted Clay from life. The huge canvas that Staunton produced included several other notable Senators, who had played prominent roles in the political life of Henry Clay. Many of the Senators lurked in the shadows and couldn't be identified. Now that the painting has been restored, these men have been identified and include: Lewis Cass, Joseph Underwood, Sam Houston, Daniel Webster, George Robertson, Winfield Scott, Robert Letcher and William Seward.

The depiction in the painting isn't a particular event, since all of these men weren't in the Senate at the same time, however books and a newspaper in the painting commemorate the first session of the 32nd Congress. The restoration of the frame and the painting has taken a year and a half, but the results are well worth the time and effort.

In September, the Senate will host an event to com-

memorate the addition of the painting to the vast collection of the Senate. A small group of people from the Historical Society will be invited to attend the celebration.

The importance of the painting is not because of Henry Clay or the artist Phineas Staunton, rather it is one of only three views of the old Senate chamber and it was obvious to the curators at the Senate, that Phineas Staunton had indeed been in the room at some time and recorded the desks and furnishings.

I have said that the painting was an albatross for us. It was in such sad condition that it would have been a financial burden for us to restore it and even if the funds could have been found, the painting was so big that we didn't have a place to hang it. It had been relegated to be in permanent storage, resting on it's side in the basement behind the transportation exhibit. In fact, we built a special storage place for it, never to see the light of day.

That all changed when I received a phone call from Amy Burton from the Curator's Office of the U.S. Senate. Would the Historical Society agree to donate the painting to the Senate. I didn't even hesitate. Some people might ask why we didn't sell the painting to the Senate. Well, we

didn't buy it. We were given the painting in perpetuity. It really bothered me that we couldn't take care of it properly and we couldn't display it.

Back in the 1960s it was offered to the White House when Jackie Kennedy was redoing the president's home. Later I offered it to the University of Kentucky and Henry Clay's home, Ashland. They said they would take it but we had to get it there and they would not promise to restore it or to exhibit it. I was so relieved when someone offered to restore it and place it on exhibit and who would have

imagined that it would be the United States Senate.

So this is a Cinderella story, about an old forgotten painting, of a famous man in a famous place, that was destined to be lost in obscurity. Thanks to the tenacity of Amy Burton and the Senate Art Commission, Phineas Staunton's portrait of Henry Clay has become a national treasure. You can visit the web page that has lots of pictures and lots of information about the project. www.senate.gov and it is the lead story on the page.

