

The Trip To Washington

by Lynne Belluscio

Henry Clay's portrait by Phineas Staunton now hangs in the Senate wing of the Capitol in Washington. It's as if it should have been there all along. If it had been selected in 1866 as the Clay portrait that was to hang in the Kentucky State House, it would have never been returned to LeRoy.

If Ingham University hadn't closed in 1892 and if the painting hadn't been sold for \$60 and then given to the Union Free School ... and if the school auditorium hadn't been built and the painting given to the Historical Society ... and if James Hamm from the Art Conservation Department at Buffalo State hadn't told me that it was an important painting that

needed to be saved ... and if Annette Peck who was married to Phineas Staunton's descendent hadn't insisted on identifying all the people in the background of the painting and contacted the Senate Conservator's Office ... and if Amy Elizabeth Burton hadn't identified it as a rare image of the old Senate Chamber ... and if the team of conservators couldn't have restored the painting and the frame ... well you get the idea. Fate had a hand in Henry Clay's portrait.

Last week, forty-four people traveled to Washington to see for themselves that Henry had indeed found a good home. Most of them had never seen the portrait before, but when they saw the video of its remarkable restoration and the enthusiasm and determination of Amy Elizabeth Burton to make sure that Henry would have a place in the Senate wing of the Capitol, they understood the magnitude of the project.

Every day that the Senate is in session, the Senators climb the stairs to the Senate Chamber and pass by this portrait of Henry Clay. He was known as the "Great Compromiser" and served in the Senate during the institution's "Golden Age". Clay, Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun were called the "Great Triumvirate" and their influence on the country's future shaped economic de-



velopment, westward expansion and the question of slavery.

At that time, the Senators met in the old Senate Chamber. There are only three known paintings which show the details of the old Senate Chamber and that includes the Clay portrait by Phineas Staunton. The Senators moved out of the old Senate Chamber in 1859. Today the old Chamber has been restored and is part of the historical legacy of American democracy preserved in the Capitol.

At Wednesday evening's reception, held in the resplendent Senate Reception Room, the Honorable Harry Reid, the Senate Majority leader spoke first, welcoming the invited guests and Senators. Then Senator Schumer from New York addressed the audience and thanked the LeRoy Historical Society for their generous gift. (I have to take exception to Senator Schumer's comments that told about LeRoy students throwing basketballs at the painting. Alvin Stripp had told me that long ago, when the painting hung in the Union Free School, students threw paper wads at the painting. How paper wads became basketballs, I'll never know!)

Barbara Ramsay, who led the team of conservators told of the arduous task of restoring Henry Clay and the frame. Even though

a complete survey was done of the painting, they were not aware of the extent of the deterioration of the canvas until they actually saw the painting in their studio. The conservators worked nearly two years to restore the painting. Senator Mitch McConnell, who is the Minority Leader in the Senate and more significantly, the Senator from Henry Clay's state of Kentucky, presented insightful remarks about the Statesmen, Henry Clay and perhaps at a time when Congress is confronted with monumental issues of the day, there could be no better person to meet the Senators on the stairway to the Senate Chamber, than Henry Clay.

While the Senate reception was taking place, the bus took the rest of our group on an evening tour of Washington, visiting the illuminated monuments. The five of us that were at the reception were sorry that we were missing

a memorable experience - - that was until Senator Leahy from Vermont, invited us to the floor of the Senate Chamber for a once in a lifetime opportunity. And then, he took us down the hall and around the corner to his new office, with a door to the balcony of the Capitol. As we walked out into the night air, we could look down the mall toward the Washington Monument. The lights of Washington traffic flowed beneath us. It was a view that none of us will ever forget.

For those who would like to see the 20 minute video about the restoration of the Henry Clay painting and frame, the LeRoy House will be open on Sunday, October 11 and 18 from 1 until 4. Also on exhibit will be the reproduction of the painting and an enlargement of a photograph taken before its restoration. Everyone is invited to visit the LeRoy House.

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