

Henry Clay In Brooklyn

by Lynne Belluscio

I was in New York City a couple of weeks ago and on the last day I took the subway to the old Brooklyn City Hall. It was built before the Civil War and was designed by the architect Calvin Pollard. The imposing Greek Revival marble building was nearly destroyed by fire in 1895, but was rebuilt and in 1898, when Brooklyn became part of New York City, it became the Brooklyn Borough Hall.

I arrived at 10 in the morning and went to the security desk. "I'm looking for a very old painting - a very large painting of Senator Henry Clay. I'd like to take some pictures of it. It was painted by a man from the town that I am from. A "sister" of the painting now hangs in the United States Capitol in Washington." I was told that they were setting up for a very important event. "Could I come back tomorrow?" "No. I'm flying out tomorrow morning and I came a very long way. All I want to do is take a picture of it. The art curator at the Senate called several times but no one could help her and I'm here to verify that it is still here. And no I don't know where it is. All we were told was that there were lots of paintings of old men here."

It seemed that I wasn't going to get inside, but finally, after about 20 minutes I was told to go up to the second floor. The painting was on the balcony to the left. And "you are only to take a picture and then come right back down here." I took the elevator up to the second floor and turned to the left and the "huge painting of the old man" turned out to be George Washington, but just on the other side was Henry Clay.

The canvas was just as big as the one that the Historical Society gave to the Senate, but it has a gold frame and there are no people in the background. But right behind Henry is one of the Senate's pudding stone pillars - much better than the pillars in the Capitol there is a huge pudding-stone pillar behind Henry Clay and the detail of the pillar is much better in the Brooklyn painting.

To the right is a Senate desk, almost obscured by the dark varnish and on the floor are Senate books dated 1833 and 1821. The paper reads "In the Senate 1850." To the left is a leather covered Thomas Constantine chair with castors. The red carpet shows the gold stars and in front is the metal step that appears in the Washington painting. Curiously,

over Clays right shoulder is a cherub. I think that it is not supposed to be in the painting, but may have been beneath the paint and is now "bleeding" through."

According to an article in the *New York Times* that I found, the 1895 fire did a lot of damage to the interior of the City Hall and although the portrait of George

Washington was not damaged, the portrait of Henry Clay was severely damaged, so perhaps when it was repaired, a paint layer was removed and exposed the ghost of the cherub. It's curious.

A label gives information about Henry Clay and mentions that no one knows why the city of Brooklyn paid \$1,000 for the portrait. A brief note about Phineas Staunton accompanies the label, but I noticed that his name is spelled both ways - Stanton and Staunton. It also mentions that the portrait was painted in 1847, nearly twenty years before the Capitol portrait. It was painted when Clay was still alive.

According to an article in the April 1, 1847, *Daily Picayune* from New Orleans, Phineas Stanton had a studio on St. Charles Street and on exhibit was a portrait of Henry Clay. The portrait "preserves not only the more obvious and characteristic features of his marked countenance, but has caught the attitude and air of the original and the lurking expression of the face. As a work of art, apart from its fidelity as a portrait, it will excite admiration." The Brooklyn portrait could be the one from New Orleans.

There is at least one other portrait of Henry Clay that exists,

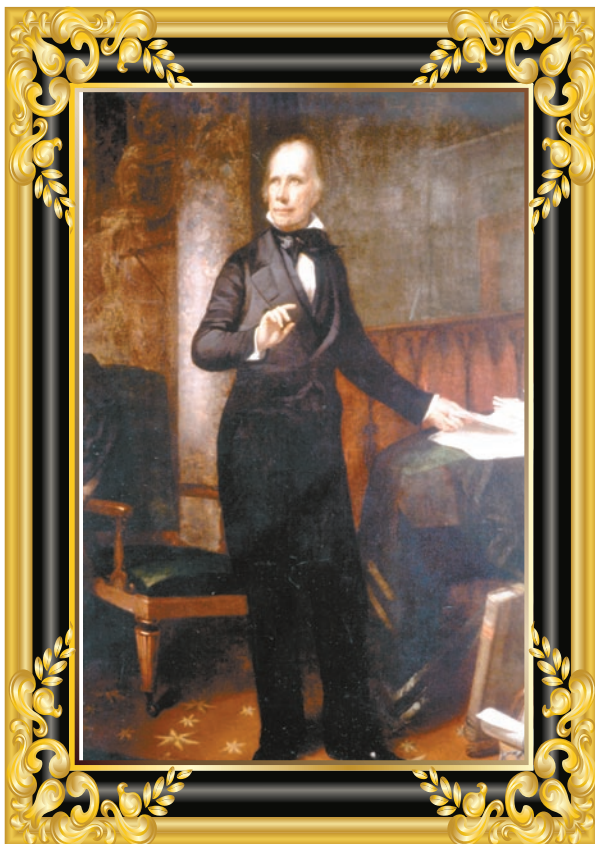


Henry Clay in Washington.

but only of his head and shoulders and that portrait is in Wyoming, New York at the Middlebury Academy. While I was looking at the Brooklyn painting I decided to call Amy Burton in Washington to see if she had any questions about the painting, so we talked for a while and I took more pictures.

"Amy, this is the fourth known view of the interior of the old Senate Chamber. The pudding stone pillar is great. The desk is hard to see. The chair has a shawl on it. It looks plaid. There is no flag. I can see a doorway on the right. There have been repairs. There is inpainting but no infilling. And the cherub is really curious. I don't think he's supposed to be in the picture.

There might be another painting beneath Henry Clay. I think I can see a shield on the metal grate step." "Are Henry's eyes blue?" "The varnish is so dark, his eyes are more hazel or gray." When I finally came back to the security desk, the officer said "Well you certainly were up there a long time. You were only to take one picture!" "I had to call Washington to talk with the curator and we needed to take a lot of pictures. Thank you for your efforts. I really appreciate your help." And I was out the door, into the rain and on to the Brooklyn Museum.



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