

A Trip To Washington To Talk With Henry Clay

by Lynne Belluscio

As you read this, I have been to Washington, D.C. to present a paper about the Henry Clay painting that the LeRoy Historical Society donated to the United States Senate in 2008. (Contrary to an article published recently in the *Batavia Daily*, which stated that a Henry Clay portrait owned by the Middlebury Academy in Wyoming, is now in the Senate. Just proves that you can't believe everything you read in the newspaper. Middlebury does have a portrait of Clay painted by Phineas Staunton, but it never made it to Washington.)

The paper is to be presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums. I have collaborated with Amy Elizabeth Burton, who is the art historian at the office of the Curator of the Senate. Amy facilitated the transfer of the Clay painting from LeRoy to the Senate.

When I wrote the proposal for this session I mentioned that it was a story of a small museum, collaboration, deaccessioning, conservation and politics. Little did I know at the time, that it would be politics that would ultimately impact the proposal.

As time came closer for me to make reservations to attend the meeting, the government closed all national historic sites. Most of the sessions were scheduled at national sites. More unsettling was that I was unable to contact my co-presenter, Amy Elizabeth Burton. Like all other government employees, she was furloughed. Somewhere in my rolodex, I found her personal cell phone number. And I was able to talk with her. I told her that even if she couldn't attend the meeting, that I could come to Washington and present the paper. Luckily the planning committee for the conference was able to move all the sessions from the national historic sites to a nearby Washington hotel, so the meeting has not been canceled.

When Amy and I finally had a chance to commiserate, we couldn't help but put a historical spin on the story. After all, this is a story about a portrait of

Henry Clay, the 19th century politician who was known in his day as the great pacificator - - the great compromiser. (Washington politicians could sure use a Henry Clay during these past couple of weeks!) How ironic that in 2009, after almost two years of conservation and restoration, the portrait of Henry Clay would be installed, with the pomp and celebration of a unique gathering of Senators.

As Amy has told me, no one can remember such an evening, complete with a wonderful dinner in the Senate antechamber. It was a very cordial evening. And to think that it was during the beginnings of discussions about universal health care.

Robert Remini, historian of the U.S. House of Representatives and author of *Henry Clay, Statesman for the Union* wrote: "(Clay) always seemed to know just the right thing to do. He understood that each side must gain something and lose something --- that no one can get all the marbles." Reiterating this thought, Senator Mitch McConnell, a lifelong admirer of his Kentucky predecessor, said: "If you are going to govern yourself, you have to learn to compromise. You can either get something, or get nothing; if you want to get something, you have to compromise."

Senator Schumer, Senator from New York commented, "The hanging of Clay's painting couldn't come at a more symbolic time. I hope it will be a reminder to all of us in the Senate that bipartisan agreement can help push us toward becoming a more prosperous nation." That was



four years ago. Henry Clay, from his lofty position, overlooking the procession of Senators on the Brumidi staircase, on the way to the Senate Chamber, unfortunately, has not able to imbue his compromising talent on his successors.

It's not cheap going to Washington, so I will stay only one night. I'm driving to my brother's house outside Philadelphia, and then will take the train from Wilmington,

Delaware into Washington. On Tuesday morning Amy and I will give our presentation. We'll have lunch and then I'll have a chance to visit Henry Clay in the Senate. I'll tell him to try harder to get into the heads of those politicians in Washington!! Then I'll take the train back to my brother's and head back to LeRoy on Wednesday. I think one day in Washington is about all I can endure.

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