

CHAPTER XII

HONORS FOR THE GOVERNOR

THE MOST POPULAR NEW YORKER
INVITATION TO MOUNT VERNON
CLINTON NEGLECTS WASHINGTON
HE WELCOMES THE CONGRESS TO NEW YORK
RE-ELECTIONS
A SUCCESSFUL ADMINISTRATION
THE GOVERNOR EJECTS GENERAL SHAYS

THE end of the Revolution found Governor Clinton at the height of his fame, perhaps at the zenith of his career. He was everywhere recognized as one of the foremost heroes of the war and as one of the most capable of the war governors. Furthermore, he had accepted high office without abandoning that rugged simplicity and democratic indifference to the pretensions of office that his neighbors so admired. He was faithful to the libertarian principles upon which the Revolution had been agitated and fought, even after the war when many other patriots were finding it difficult to apply the principles of 1776. He was therefore long to remain the political idol of the masses who accepted him as one of themselves. It is no wonder that Clinton, known both as a fervid democrat and as a war hero, became the most popular man in his state.

Among the honors bestowed on the governor was a brevet major-generalcy that the Continental Congress, which had never been able to make up its mind to bestow the distinction on him during the war, gave him in the fall of 1783.¹ In the same year he was named vice

¹ Corning, *Washington at Temple Hill*, 42; F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army* (Washington, 1914), 161.

president of the New York State Society of the Cincinnati, an office that he held for three years. Yet Clinton probably came to share the growing distrust of the aristocratic tendencies of the Society of the Cincinnati, its secrecy, and its advocacy of special privilege, and by the middle eighties he was no longer an officer. The control of the society was by that time in the hands of the prominent Federalists of the state and Schuyler and Hamilton in turn received the vice presidency. This withdrawal from the Cincinnati was one more piece of evidence that there was a growing breach between the democratic Clinton and the more conservative group of New York Whigs.

Possibly the departure of Washington from the New York scene was one cause of Clinton's break with the moderates during the 1780's, although it is certain that even Washington's restraining influence could not have made a thorough-going Federalist out of him. He saw a great deal of Washington in 1783 and Mrs. Clinton came to know Martha Washington intimately. When Washington returned to Mount Vernon after the reoccupation of New York City he wrote the governor one of his friendliest letters:²

I am now a private Citizen on the banks of the Potomack, where I should be happy to see you, if your public business would ever permit, and where in the meantime I shall fondly cherish the remembrance of all your former friendship.

Although I scarcely need tell you how much I have been satisfied with every instance of your public conduct, yet I could not suffer Col^o Walker . . . to depart for New York without giving your excellency one more testimony of the obligations I consider myself under for the spirited and able assistance, I have often derived from the State under your administration.

The scene is at last closed—I feel myself eased of a load of public care—I hope to spend the remainder of my days in cultivating the affections of good men, and in the practice of the domestic virtues.

Permit me then to consider you in the number of my friends, and to wish you every felicity.

Mrs. Washington joins me in presenting the compliments of the season, with our best respects to Mrs. Clinton and the family.

Clinton seems to have neglected his correspondence with Washington, for in the late fall of 1784 the latter was acknowledging one of the

² On December 28, 1783. Anon., *Revolutionary Relics or Clinton Correspondence* (New York, 1842), 8. The letter is quoted here only in part.

governor's letters with the statement that although he had felt pain from Clinton's silence, he now realized that he should have imputed it to any cause rather than a diminution of friendship, "the warmth of which I feel too sensibly for you, to harbor a suspicion of the want of it in you, without being conscious of having given cause for the change—having ever flattered myself that our regards were reciprocal."³

Clinton sent Washington lime and balsam trees, ivy, corn, pease, and certain nuts, which were duly planted at Mount Vernon. And as some of the trees did not stand transplanting well, he also sent assorted evergreen seeds for Washington's use.⁴ The gentleman farmers of the time had a passion for experimentation with crops and livestock.

The legislature celebrated the reoccupation of New York City by meeting in January 1784 in the metropolis where it was to assemble for every succeeding session until 1788. The Clintons moved down from Poughkeepsie in 1784 beginning a period of residence in or near New York City that was to continue until they should move to the new state capital, Albany, in 1801. Clinton was one of five, together with Washington, Lafayette, Steuben, and Jay, who were honored by the Common Council of New York in the fall of 1784 with formal addresses and gold boxes containing the freedom of the city.

Here at New York new horizons were opened to the governor and his family. The Continental Congress which was there at intervals, brought to the city the prominent and notorious from all of the other states and even from abroad. When Richard Henry Lee, the president of the Congress, and a group of delegates entered the city in January 1785 amid the discharge of cannon and the applause of the populace, they were met at Whitehall by Governor Clinton and conducted to his very respectable residence in Queen Street. Clinton could never be accused of trying to ape the ceremonials of the old world by holding a gubernatorial court of his own, but he did play the host when occasion demanded. When the Fourth of July was celebrated in 1786 "with every demonstration of joy," the governor visited the president

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ In 1784 and 1785. *Ibid.*, 9; Washington, *Diaries*, Fitzpatrick, ed., II, 343.

of the Congress and presented the compliments of the day.⁵ It is difficult to understand Hamilton's contention, made a few years later, that George Clinton was personally unfriendly to the Congress while it was in New York.

During the 1780's the three oldest sons of General James Clinton, Alexander, Charles, and DeWitt, were much of the time in New York City. Of these the eldest, Alexander, was a pleasant young man who had received a lieutenancy during the Revolution, joined the Cincinnati, and gone to Queen Street to live with his Uncle George and serve him as his private secretary. In 1787 Alexander met a tragic death by drowning while crossing the Hudson just above New York City in a "ferry periagua."⁶ The death left a void in two households and to replace him the governor selected Alexander's brother DeWitt who graduated from Columbia College in 1788 when he was not yet twenty. The choice was the foundation of the Clinton dynasty in New York politics.

Clinton must have been greatly pleased to be reelected both in 1783 and in 1786 with virtually no opposition. In 1786, to be sure, Schuyler tried to find a candidate to put up against him, contending that Clinton was fortifying himself in public office through his influence over appointments. Schuyler thought that he himself, Jay, or Livingston should oppose Clinton. He told Jay that the "person, at present in the chair of Government, so evidently strives to maintain his popularity at the expense of good government, that it has given real concern to many."⁷ Jay, however, did not think the situation critical; he had heard no general demand for a change, and he himself did not wish to run for the governorship.⁸ He knew, as apparently Schuyler did not, that Clinton's reelection was inevitable.

At first glance it may be difficult to see just why Clinton was so strongly entrenched in his office. As a general rule the political effect of bad times is to oust the "ins" and bring in the "outs." In the middle

⁵ Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan*, V, 1198; *New-York Packet*, July 6, 1786.

⁶ He was born on June 20, 1765 and died March 15, 1787. (*Poughkeepsie*) *Country Journal*, March 28, 1787; Ruttenber, *New Windsor*, 139; DeWitt Clinton Papers, Columbia University Library.

⁷ Jay, *Correspondence*, Johnston, ed., III, 151.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 154-56, 187. Jay was then Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

1780's the United States were experiencing one of the greatest depressions of their history. Trade was at a standstill; money was scarce; thousands were in bankruptcy or hounded by their creditors; and prices, which had reached amazing heights during wartime inflation, fell to distressing lows in 1785 and 1786. Men did not realize at that time that serious depressions follow great wars, and they inclined therefore to throw the blame on their governments. It was the great depression of the so-called Critical Period of American history that made it possible for such nationalists as Hamilton to curb the powers of the states by substituting the Constitution of 1787 for the Articles of Confederation. Yet not only the New York constitution but also the Clinton administration weathered the economic storm. Hamilton and his associates somehow failed in their attempt to brand the governor with responsibility for the bad times.

The explanation lies in the fact that only a minority of the good people of New York were so concerned over the depression as to want to change their government; and even Hamilton's eloquence and wit could not make them so. The merchants of New York, Albany, and certain of the Hudson River towns suffered seriously when foreign trade all but ceased in 1785. The traders of Albany wanted the fur trade that Canada was taking to itself. The bankers of New York City feared that the state might depreciate its currency by turning on the printing presses. The ex-Loyalists in southern New York were afraid that the radical Whigs would never observe the treaty with England. And creditors and men of wealth and property generally, including the great patroons and landlords of the Hudson Valley, wanted no levelling movements. All of these classes could rally about Hamilton, Jay, Schuyler, Duane, and Robert R. Livingston in the movement for a more vigorous central government that would protect commerce, maintain credit, enforce treaties, and uphold law and order. These merchants, bankers, traders, ex-Loyalists, and great landlords were, however, only a minority of the population of the state.

The majority of New York's population consisted of farmers, farm laborers or tenants, artisans, and modest tradespeople. They lived for the most part in small towns or in the rural districts where men were not directly concerned with foreign trade, where currency of any kind

was seldom seen but was always welcome, and where men had not forgotten the recent war against centralized government and haughty Tories. Many of these people were forced into bankruptcy during the lean years, but suits at law by impatient creditors only convinced them that they already had too much government, not too little as Hamilton would have them believe. By and large, however, the depression did them no great harm. The farmers lived much as usual. After a week in New York during the worst year of the depression, David Humphreys wrote to Jefferson that, "to judge by the face of the country, by the appearance of ease & plenty which are to be seen everywhere one would believe a great proportion of the poverty & evils complained of, must be imaginary."⁹ This relatively contented majority had no complaint against the Clinton administration or, for that matter, with the Articles of Confederation, and its votes kept George Clinton in office throughout the depression.

Unfortunately for George Clinton's place in history this great body of his followers,—farmers, laborers, and tradespeople,—was largely inarticulate. They might vote faithfully for him at the polls, but unlike their Federalist opponents who knew how to use the pen and who controlled virtually the entire press of the state,¹⁰ they have left comparatively few written records for the historian. History has been written, therefore, from the point of view of the Hamiltonian school which "viewed with alarm" so many of the measures for which Clinton and his friends stood, and statesmen of Clinton's school have been damned with very faint praise or carefully ignored.

Indeed, New York was during the Critical Period among the best governed of the states. A successful fiscal policy is one essential test of a good administration, and in New York the tax burden was very small. Yet the state was to emerge from the decade with a per capita debt of only \$3.50 as compared with about \$22 in South Carolina.¹¹ The impost was yielding approximately £50,000 in currency each year which helped to relieve the citizenry from direct taxation. The state's paper money was circulating at par by 1787 although there

⁹ Letter of June 5, 1786. Humphreys, *David Humphreys*, I, 353.

¹⁰ Spaulding, *op. cit.*, 39. *The New-York Journal* was the only Antifederalist newspaper in the state.

¹¹ *History of the State of New York*, IV, 332.

had been an emission of paper—the only one in New York during the period—the previous year. This issue of paper had been approved by George Clinton and favored in the legislature by the representatives who were generally partial to the measures of his administration.¹² The amount of the issue, £200,000, was not extravagant; for money was very scarce and the demand for more of it was overwhelming. Clinton was generally conservative in his fiscal policies, but he realized that if the state made no concessions to the paper men, agitation and violence were certain to follow as they did in Massachusetts.

Clinton wanted no Shays' Rebellion in New York and he took vigorous steps to prevent the Shaysites from crossing the Massachusetts line. In February 1787 after the suppression of the Shays movement in the Bay State and when there was danger that the agitators would make New York their center of operations, Governor Clinton offered a reward for the capture of the intrepid Shays and his associates. The legislature authorized him to call out the militia. He ordered out three regiments and hurried without any guard to New Lebanon "in very ungenial weather for the purpose of chasing away Captain Shays." The malcontents were dispersed. It was said, however, in later years by a certain rude critic of the governor, that only a few months afterwards he set "a pious example of humility and forgiveness by cordially shaking the hand of the said Capt. Shays."¹³ Certainly he saw to it that there was no Shays' Rebellion in New York.

Another indication that Governor Clinton would not tolerate disorder or mob rule was the suppression of the famous doctors' riots in April 1788. The sight of an anatomy student at work on a human specimen in the New York City hospital aroused an intolerant mob that broke into the hospital and rioted for hours in the streets. Governor Clinton later enjoyed telling the story of how he, Mayor Duane, Jay, Steuben, and a number of other prominent gentlemen tried to quiet the rioters by persuasion. Clinton had called out the troops but although a number of citizens had been injured, the troops had been kept out of the fray. Soon the governor's patience became ex-

¹² *Ibid.*; Humphreys, *loc. cit.*; Spaulding, *New York in the Critical Period*, 151.

¹³ *New York Daily Advertiser*, April 16, 1792; Clinton to General Lincoln, March 6, 1787, *New York Historical Society*; Stokes, *op. cit.*, V, 1215; John Bach McMaster, *People of the United States* (8 vols., New York, 1883-1913), I, 328.

hausted. Steuben was remonstrating with him against ordering the militia to fire when Steuben himself was struck by a rock, at which he quickly changed his advice and cried to Clinton, "Fire, Governor, fire!" The soldiers fired and several were killed.¹⁴

The Shays episode and the doctors' riots show that even in an era that was notorious in other states for governmental laxity, Governor Clinton ruled New York with a firm hand. Clinton's conception of the functions of government was a narrow one, but within the narrow range of its powers Clinton expected the government to tolerate no interference. It was difficult for the political opposition to Clinton's administration to brand as weak or demagogic a government as vigorous as New York's.

¹⁴ R. W. Griswold, *The Republican Court* (New York, 1868), 102. Jay was severely injured.