

CHAPTER XIV

THE FEDERALIST ERA

CLINTON A NATIONAL FIGURE

THREE ELECTORAL VOTES

HAMILTON NOMINATES YATES AGAINST THE GOVERNOR
VICTORY FOR THE "PALLADIUM OF REPUBLICANISM"

CLINTON MISTAKES KING FOR A DEMOCRAT

THE GOVERNOR DISLIKES THE SOCIAL WHIRL

HE PLAYS THE HOST TO WASHINGTON

CITY HOME AND COUNTRY HOME

PRESIDENT AND GOVERNOR

GEORGE CLINTON was aging. His great frame was becoming stooped; his rugged features were betraying his years; his greying hair, plentiful enough where it was gathered behind in a queue, was now scanty in front; and his chin had developed a whole hierarchy of folds. Yet he had no intention of abandoning politics in his early fifties.

From 1788 to his death, Clinton was a national figure and a perennial candidate for the vice presidency or for the presidency itself. The governorship of New York has probably produced more candidates for the presidency than any other office, state or federal. Yet only two New York governors, Cleveland and Franklin D. Roosevelt, have achieved the chief magistracy of the nation without the aid of the vice presidency; four have become president by ballot or by mischance only after serving as vice president; and six others, including George Clinton, have had to content themselves with the vice presidency. New York's location, size, and generally even balance of political parties, have given the state an influence with the electoral college that dates back to the first elections under the Constitution.

Paradoxically it was Governor Clinton's provincialism and his stubborn championship of the rights of his state that made him a national figure. As Henry Adams has pointed out, Clinton's protest against the Constitution made him the leader of the northern Republicans long before Jefferson appeared upon the national scene as his rival. Because he was the outstanding Antifederalist in the northern states many people thought him the logical selection in 1789 to serve as vice president under a president who would most assuredly be Washington, the outstanding Federalist in the South. He was, consequently, the candidate of a small group of Antifederalists in New York and the South who felt that they should be represented in the new administration by a vice president pledged to secure the inclusion of the much-desired bill of rights in the new Constitution.

Patrick Henry, the aged Virginia Antifederalist, put Clinton's name "in agitation" in the fall of 1788 and William Grayson of the same state was "warm in such an election." At Fraunces' Tavern on November 13, 1788, the Federal Republican Society met and sent letters to kindred spirits in several other states. The letters urged Clinton's election as vice president and stated that gentlemen in Virginia had already agreed to support him.¹

Hamilton, however, wanted none of Clinton in the vice presidency. He knew that the governor had no love for the new system and he did not intend to have the federal establishment contaminated if he could help it. Consequently he supported John Adams as a trustworthy opponent of the plan for a second convention, and warned the Federalists to keep watchful eyes on the governor who might garner votes in South Carolina as well as in New York and Virginia. Yet he professed to doubt very much whether Clinton would exchange the governorship for the vice presidency or risk his popularity by holding both.

In the choice of electors Clinton's own state failed him. Although the Congress had determined that the presidential electors would meet to cast their votes on January 7, 1789, the governor did not call the New York legislature into special session until December 8, so late as to

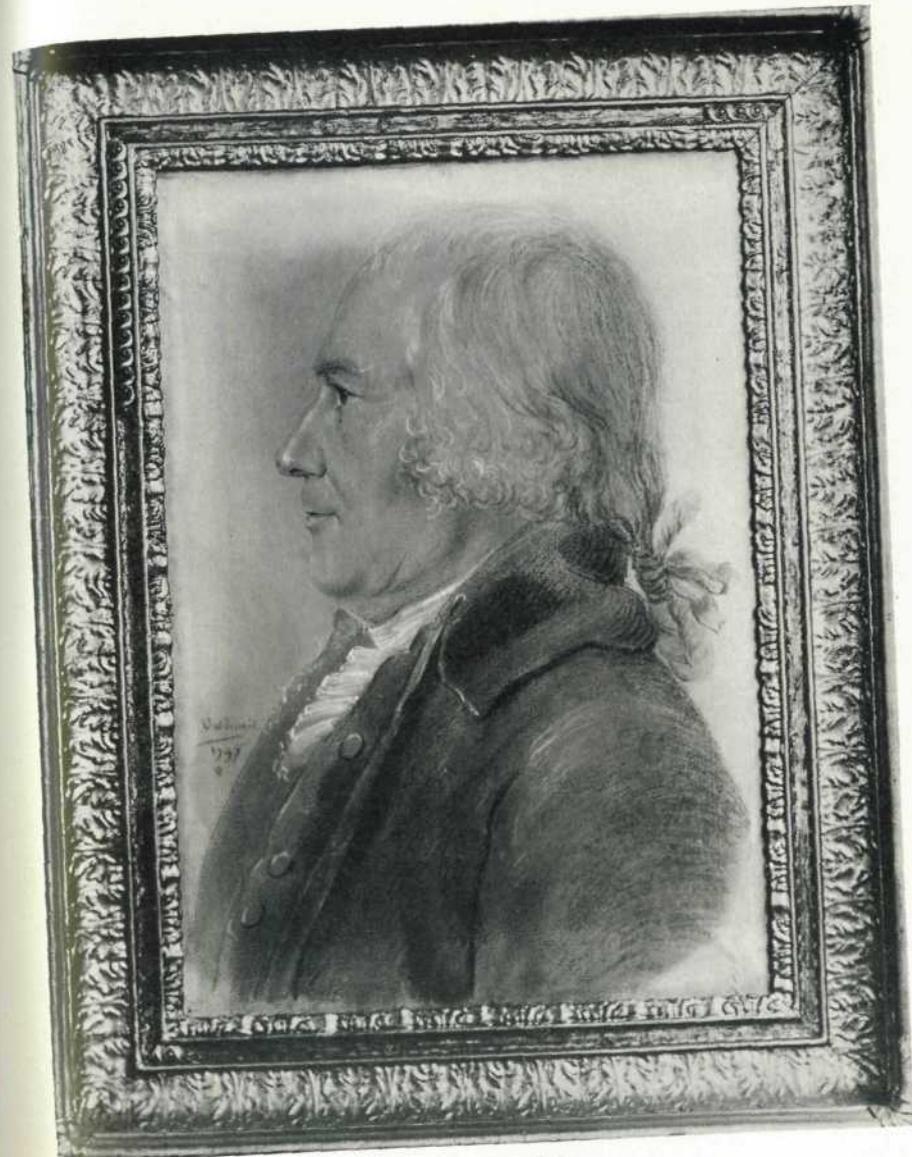
¹ William Wirt Henry, *Patrick Henry* (3 vols., New York, 1891), II, 431; Hamilton, *Works*, Lodge, ed., VIII, 203-05; John Lamb Papers, Force Transcripts in Library of Congress; Louis Clinton Hatch, *A History of the Vice Presidency* (New York, 1934), 111, 117-18.

invite a rebuke from the Federalist state senate when it replied to his message on December 26. His message contained a politically timely but obviously futile appeal for a second convention and he mentioned the necessity of preparations for putting the new government into operation. In response the two hostile houses chose representatives to the federal Congress by joint ballot, a procedure that enabled the numerically superior Antifederalist Assembly to elect the Antifederalist candidates. The Federalist Senate countered by proposing three days later that the two houses compromise in the choice of presidential electors by choosing four each. The Assembly insisted upon election by joint ballot; a conference failed to bring peace between the factions; and New York named no electors.² The Federalists had carried the day. When the votes of the electors of the other states were counted, it was found that Clinton had received only three votes, all from Virginia. John Adams was to be vice president. This was the first of the numerous failures that were to block Clinton's way to the elusive presidency. Possibly, however, he preferred a fifth term as governor.

To win the governorship both parties were prepared to make every legitimate effort—and perhaps more. The era of good feeling in New York politics that began with Clinton's election in 1777 had failed to survive the momentous struggle for the Constitution and by 1789 state politics was coasting disastrously towards the disgusting depths where the generation of Cheetham, John Wood, and W. P. Van Ness was to crown it with new infamy.

The veteran governor was no longer the master of a political situation that had become very much muddled. He had failed at Poughkeepsie; the hundred pound freeholders had given him a hostile state senate; and New York had failed to present him with its electoral vote. Perhaps it was even more unfortunate for him that crops had been bad in 1788. Nevertheless the Antifederalists showed no hesitation in supporting him for his fifth term as governor. To oppose him the Federalists would have preferred a dyed-in-the-wool Federalist like Justice Richard Morris. Pierre Van Cortlandt, who had served patiently for twelve years as lieutenant governor, was more than willing to accept a nomination for governor from any party that would offer it. Mor-

² Lincoln, *Messages*, II, 292-300.



GEORGE CLINTON

From a crayon drawing presented to the Oneida Historical Society
by Miss Julia Clinton Varick

ris, that portly old patriot whose "full, rounded face and commanding presence appeared to advantage among the stately and dignified personages who supported knee breeches and silk stockings,"³ would probably have been delighted with the nomination. But as a wealthy aristocrat and an enthusiastic champion of the new Constitution he could win no votes from the moderate Antifederalists who must be tempted away from Clinton if the election were to be won. Hamilton, never at a loss, rationalized the situation by explaining that the Federalists must not expose themselves to criticism for undue partisanship or for encouraging the "heats of party." Consequently the Federalist party leaders resolved to give the nomination to a renegade from Clinton's own camp.

The renegade who offered himself was Judge Robert Yates, the man who had left the Philadelphia Convention to protest its work. He had more recently made judiciously conciliatory remarks to an Albany jury indicating his conviction that all good citizens should support the Constitution—with, apparently, no reference to a second convention. On February 11 Judge Yates was nominated by a meeting of Federalists in New York City; he accepted thirteen days later and the campaign was on. It was a bitter one.

Most of the Antifederalists of 1788 were to be found in the Clinton ranks and many of them, such as Melancton Smith and Marinus Willett, on the Antifederalist campaign committees. The earnest energetic chairman of the New York City Federalist committee was Alexander Hamilton, actively seconded by none other than Aaron Burr, an intimate friend of Judge Yates.⁴ The committee published an address charging the governor with planning to subvert the federal Constitution, and its chairman wrote a series of political letters—clever, malignant, and often dishonest—which appeared in Childs' newspaper. Hamilton called them the "Letters of H. G." In them he traced

³ Quotation from Alexander, *New York*, I, 39. See also *Dictionary of American Biography*. James Clinton discusses the candidates in his letter of February 13, 1789, to William Cross, Clinton Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴ Jabez Delano Hammond, *A History of Political Parties in the State of New York* (3 vols., Syracuse, 1852), I, 39; James Cheetham, *A View of the Political Conduct of Aaron Burr* (New York, 1802), 13; *New-York Advertiser*, March 31, 1789. Parton's life of Burr states that Burr and Hamilton never again joined in politics, Volume I, 173.

Governor Clinton's career, belittling each phase of it, and painting the governor a sly, cunning mediocrity inveterately opposed to the union of the states. Clinton was not a brilliant lawyer nor even a good soldier, "H. G." maintained, and as governor his record had been a shameless one. He had, for instance, behaved contemptuously toward the federal Congress, had continued his opposition to the new Constitution, and was unfriendly to the residence of Congress in New York.⁵ It is difficult to believe that these shrewd but malicious and unprincipled letters did not cost the governor hundreds of votes.⁶ His party had no penman with half of Hamilton's ability.

The Federalist press, finding but little to criticize in Clinton's twelve-year administration of the state, stooped to personal abuse. The governor was sneered at for "not keeping a house of elegant entertainment"; he was accused of dominating the Council of Appointment; of hoarding his salary until he had become a rich man; of seeking to overthrow the new federal system; and of accepting his salary during the war only in hard money.⁷ Shortly after the campaign William Grayson wrote that,

"There has been a most severe attack upon Governor Clinton, he has been slandered and abused in all the public newspapers for these five months by men of the first weight and abilities in the state. Almost all the gentlemen, as well as all the merchants and mechanics, combined together to turn him out of his office: he has had nothing to depend on but his own integrity and the integrity of an honest yeomanry, who supported him against all his enemies. He did me the honor of a visit yesterday, and gave me such an account of this business as shocked me.—As this gentleman is the g't palladium of republicanism in this State, you may guess at the situation of anti-ism here . . ."⁸

The republican governor, without any lieutenants of note or influence, was still supported by his loyal yeomanry.

⁵ For the "Letters of H. G.," February 20—April 9, 1789, see Hamilton, *Works*, Lodge, ed., I, 539-79.

⁶ Cf. a letter from a gentleman in New York printed in *Daily Advertiser*, February 29, 1792, which states, "We were both of opinion at the last election, that the scurrilous letters of H. G. did the Governor no harm. He was detected in many misrepresentations, . . ."

⁷ *Hudson Weekly Gazette*, March 17; *New York Daily Advertiser*, February 20, 21, March 23, 1789.

⁸ W. W. Henry, *Patrick Henry*, III, 389-95.

As the elections approached the Federalists grew optimistic. Kiliaen Van Rensselaer wrote in mid-March that "A Change in Administration is the cry in Claverack and its neighborhood—*Col. H.* has taken a very active part in favour of Judge Yates from which circumstance much is expected—I believe old Clinton the *sinner* will get *ousted*—Columbia County is five Weeks gone with Electioneering sickness." The Federalist Webb replied hopefully a few days later that in New York City the governor was despised by all but a few sycophants whom he himself had put in office.⁹

Indeed, Clinton was to lose New York, the three counties on the east of the Hudson, and Albany and Montgomery. These were the counties which were dominated by the mercantile interests and the great landlords, always Clinton's opponents. On the other hand the more democratic counties of Long Island and the west bank of the Hudson stood by the governor. His own Ulster County backed him almost unanimously and faithful Orange rejected Judge Yates to the tune of four to one.

Clinton's victory, 6,391 votes to 5,962 for his opponent, was not an impressive one, but a margin of even four hundred votes was significant in a year when the Federalists captured a majority in the Assembly and strengthened their hold on the Senate. Hamilton had beaten Clinton at Poughkeepsie in 1788 but in 1789 Clinton held the governorship against the assaults of a carefully picked Federalist candidate that was no Federalist, and against the wily pen of "H. G." That was some satisfaction.¹⁰ The Clinton men celebrated it on June fifth with a "Grand Jubilee" at Fraunces' Tavern.

In July the Clinton forces suffered a serious but inevitable defeat in the election of New York's two United States senators. During the winter session of the legislature the Federalist state Senate had blocked the election of United States senators by refusing to participate in a joint ballot. Consequently, when the first federal Senate met on March 4, 1789, New York was unrepresented. As soon as he was certain of his reelection Clinton called a special session of the legis-

⁹ S. B. Webb, *Correspondence*, III, 125; Stokes, *Iconography*, V, 1236.

¹⁰ Werner, *Civil List*, 166. The vote by county appears in contemporary newspapers, especially the *New York Daily Advertiser*, issues for May, 1789.

lature to meet on July 6 expressly to select the two senators. Both houses were now Federalist and it was only a question of what two Federalists would be chosen. After ten days of debating and balloting Philip Schuyler and Rufus King were named. The choice of Schuyler was not a surprising one, for his son-in-law was now virtual dictator of the Federalist forces of the state; but King's selection was remarkable in more than one respect. He was chosen in preference to the plodding Duane, a Livingston son-in-law, who claimed the senatorship as his right; to General Lewis Morris of Morrisania; to Ezra L'Hommedieu the gentleman farmer of Long Island, and to Robert R. Livingston who had every reason to expect that Hamilton would support his pretensions. King was a Massachusetts man who had been only a few weeks in New York. Furthermore, King was probably Governor Clinton's candidate for the office.

Clinton talked frankly with King early in June, explaining that Lansing would not serve and Melancton Smith had disgusted many of his party by voting for the Constitution. Clinton thought that King would be a suitable selection and believed that many of the country members agreed with him. He then went on to explain that it was his aim to prevent the concentration of the great offices "in a certain party or family association." "Formerly," he pointed out, "there were two great Families or Parties, namely Delancys and Livingstons; that from their Opposition they kept a constant watch on each other, that neither dared any measure injurious to the mass of the people; that the case was now different, the Delancy party was extinct by the Revolution, and all the great and opulent families were united in one Confederacy; that his politicks were to keep a constant eye to measures of this Combination, and thought the people should be on their guard . . ." ¹¹ Evidently Clinton hoped to make a democrat out of King and bring him into the Antifederalist camp. Usually an excellent judge of men, he failed to foresee that Rufus King would prove a thorough-going Hamiltonian and no defender of popular rights. But Hamilton also erred in supporting King for by it he deeply of-

¹¹ C. R. King, *Rufus King* (6 vols., New York, 1894-1900), I, 354-56, 363. The manuscript copy of King's memorandum of the conversation is in the New York Historical Society.

fended the Livingstons who were the most powerful of the great landed families of the state.

The governor whom Hamilton accused of treating the Congress with contempt was called upon to offer New York's hospitality to the new federal government. It is more than likely that the shrewd Clinton realized that the presence of Congress in New York City would contribute to the cause of Federalism there. Clinton nevertheless played the host with as much cordiality as he could muster, and insofar as his old friend Washington was concerned, his cordiality was genuine enough. He did not, however, exert himself to welcome many of the others who composed the federal invasion.

Unfortunately for the governor's prestige with those historians who have admired the dash and brilliance of the "republican court" that the Federalists created at New York in the first two years of the reborn republic, Clinton did not shine refulgent in the society of his time. Perhaps it was because Mrs. Clinton was not well that they did not entertain. Perhaps as a sturdy democrat he disliked the balls and ceremonial dinners that to him smacked of monarchy. His instinct for economy may have made him a reluctant host. Or perhaps it was merely because Clinton did not want to entertain. His brother General James had none of the social graces and his nephew and successor DeWitt was never noted for qualities of that kind. Although George Clinton had a faculty for winning men and cementing friendships that his brother and nephew lacked, he seems still to have shared the Clinton dislike for the social whirl. During the period in 1788 when all New York City was hostile toward the governor for his opposition to the Constitution, Colonel William Smith's "Lady" wrote the following illuminating comment: ¹²

We were invited to dine with the Governor, which was a very particular favor. He nor his family neither visit, or are visited by, any families either in public or private life. He sees no company, and is not much beloved. His conduct in many respects is censured, perhaps unjustly. To me he appears one whose conduct and motives of action are not to be seen through upon a slight examination. The part he has taken upon the subject of the new Constitution is much condemned, . . . Mrs. Clinton is not showy, but a kind, friendly woman.

¹² K. M. Roof, *Colonel William Smith and Lady* (Boston, 1929), 197.

Certain more hostile critics complained of the governor's unsocial life in the midst of New York's Federalist gaiety. The anonymous author of *The Milkiad*,¹³ for instance, enquired in heroic couplet:

Fair first [?] C[hie]f M[agistrat]e of Y[or]k's fair state—
Does dignity stand porter at thy gate?
Does hospitality enhinge thy door,
Prais'd by the great, and pray'd for by the poor?

Why C[linton] stays here is what no man can tell,
Unless condemned to Q[uee]n S[tree]t as his hell—
For Q[uee]n S[tree]t is a fashionable place
And folks live there in plenty with some grace,
Not shut like Hermits in a gloomy Cell . . .

It was of course the socialites and social climbers of the time that resented Clinton's indifference to the society that exhibits itself at balls and banquets. Among that class he was clearly "not much beloved." The general run of mankind, that elected him seven times governor of New York, seems to have had considerable regard for him.

The governor might dislike the display and glitter of New York society, but he always enjoyed the company of his friends. Nor was he any foe of the cup that cheers. He is said to have frequented the Merchants' Coffee House at the corner of Wall and Water Streets. Years after Clinton's death Charles Carroll remembered "with pleasure a conversation at [John Jay's] house over a bottle of good old Madeira, between him and Mr. Clinton afterwards Vice-President, at which [Carroll] was present but not bearing any part . . ."¹⁴

It must also be admitted that the governor showed every courtesy to Washington. On March 10, 1789, six days after the first Congress met at New York City, Clinton wrote to Washington inviting him to use his house when he should arrive at the capital and until more suitable accommodations should be provided. Washington replied from Mount Vernon on the 25th, stating that he considered this kind

¹³ M. S. Austin, *Philip Freneau* (New York, 1901); Martin Martial (pseud.), *The Milkiad* (1789).

¹⁴ Kate Mason Rowland, *Charles Carroll of Carrollton* (2 vols., New York, 1898), II, 355.

invitation "as a testimony of your friendship and politeness, of which I shall ever retain a grateful sense. But," he added, "if it should be my lot (for Heaven knows it is not my wish) to appear again in a public station, I shall make it a point to take hired lodgings or rooms in a tavern until some house can be provided."¹⁵ On April 23 the President-elect arrived at New York from Bergen Point in an "elegant barge of thirteen oars, with colored awnings and silken curtains," amid the thunder of cannon and the acclaim of the crowd. A carpet was laid at the wharf to guide him to his carriage. It is said, however, that instead of taking the carriage he walked arm in arm with his old friend Clinton, through the crowds, followed by a line of dignitaries, to his house at No. 3 Cherry Street. That evening he dined with the governor and a number of notables at Clinton's home which was near by on Queen Street. This was only the beginning of the governor's most active social season at New York.

The governor's home at No. 10 Queen, later Pearl Street, opposite the end of Cedar Street, was his city house. It was a large mansion of three storeys which had been built by the rich mayor Abraham de Peyster late in the seventeenth century and occupied by Washington in April and May 1776. The neighborhood was one of the most fashionable. The house was forfeited by its Loyalist owner Henry White, held by the Commissioners of Forfeitures and turned over in 1784 to the governor. Two years later the Commissioners sold the house to Henry White Jr., but the governor stayed on while the state paid White a rental of £300 a year. Later, probably from 1791 to 1794, he was to occupy the Government House which was built on the site of Fort George at Bowling Green, designed to be the residence of the President, but unfinished when the federal government moved away to Philadelphia. The Government House, with its two high storeys, Greek portico and elevated position, was an even more pretentious mansion for a democratic governor than was No. 10 Queen Street.¹⁶

¹⁵ W. S. Baker, *Washington after the Revolution 1784-99* (Philadelphia, 1908), 119. In 1811 Caleb Street offered to rent the Pearl Street house from Clinton for \$500. Clinton Papers, Albany, Vol. 30.

¹⁶ T. E. V. Smith, *The City of New York in . . . 1789* (New York, 1889), 22, 23, 31; *Magazine of American History*, 1889, p. 185; New York City directories. The Government House is of course not to be confused with Federal Hall which was the old city

The home of which the governor and Mrs. Clinton were to make more and more use was their farm on the Hudson at Greenwich a suburb of the city. It had evidently been a part of the old Mandeville farm known as "The Burgomasters' Bowery," which was later acquired by that notorious old rascal, printer and bookseller, James Rivington. George Clinton bought a substantial portion of the property from Rivington in 1790, apparently untroubled at dealing with a man who only ten years earlier had been anathema to all good patriots. The house was a "long, low, venerable, irregular, white, cottage-like brick, and wood building, pleasant notwithstanding, with a number of small, low rooms and a very spacious parlor, delightfully situated on a steep bank, and some fifty feet above the shore, on which the waves of the Hudson . . . dashed and sported. There was a fine orchard, too, and a garden on the north . . ." ¹⁷ We can well imagine that it was this home of which the Clintons, in all the years after their precipitate flight from New Windsor, were most fond.

There is perhaps little wonder that Jefferson, when he arrived at New York from France, was amazed at the unrepugnant character of the Federalist "court." There were levees and receptions and teas and fine dinners without end. The lean years had passed; Federalism was in its heyday, and it meant to enjoy it. It was an age of optimism, of lavishness, and of speculation. Bourgeois America was enjoying the liberty for which it had fought. Even the governor, sceptical Anti-federalist that he was, seems to have become infected.

He was received by the President on May Day with "a great number of other persons of distinction." He attended the Columbia College commencement exercises on May 6 with Washington, Adams and the other notables. A day later he attended "an elegant Ball and Entertainment to his Excellency the President" which was given by the "Dancing Assembly." On the eleventh he and Mrs. Clinton were the President's guests at the old John Street Theatre to see the "Old Soldier" and "School for Scandal," which that crabbed democrat from

hall on Wall Street converted by L'Enfant to serve the federal government. Clinton's account book in the State Library shows he paid Henry White £130 on April 16, 1790 for the rent of the Queen Street house. See New York City Hall of Records, Liber 111, pp. 4ff. for the sale of No. 67 Pearl Street in 1815 for the benefit of Clinton's heirs.

¹⁷ Description in the *New York Evening Post*, December 17, 1831.



CORNELIA TAPPAN CLINTON

From a crayon drawing presented to the Oneida Historical Society
by Miss Julia Clinton Varick

Pennsylvania, Senator Maclay, branded "an indecent representation before ladies of character and virtue." On the fourteenth of the same month Washington and Clinton attended the French minister's ball. When the First Lady arrived at New York from Mount Vernon late in May, Clinton escorted her to her residence and later attended that truly "elegant entertainment," the so-called inaugural ball.¹⁸ The Clintons were invited when the President and his lady entertained on August 27 at what Maclay called "a great dinner, and the best of the kind I ever was at." It was also, Maclay explained, the most solemn dinner in his experience. "Not a health drank; scarce a word said until the cloth was taken away. Then the President, filling a glass of wine, with great formality drank to the health of every individual by name round the table . . . Everybody imitated him, charged glasses, and such a buzz of 'health, sir,' and 'health, madam,' and 'thank you, sir,' and 'thank you, madam' never had I heard before. . . . The ladies sat a good while, and the bottles passed about; but there was a dead silence almost. Mrs. Washington at last withdrew the ladies."¹⁹ Federalist society seems to have been elegant but scarcely hilarious.

During the fall of 1789 and the first half of 1790 the President and the governor entertained each other frequently. Washington not only called informally at Queen Street to chat with the governor or take tea with "the Governor's Lady," but he attended on December second what must have been for the Clintons a rather formidable dinner party, including, as it did, "Mrs. Washington and all the family, (except the two children)," Vice President and Mrs. Adams, Colonel and Mrs. William S. Smith and Mayor and Mrs. Varick. Washington's curt diary contains no comments on the success of this occasion.²⁰ In 1790 the vestry of Trinity Church set aside a pew for the governor as well as one for the President, a gesture that must have pleased Clinton with his views on the coördinate position of the state and federal governments.²¹

¹⁸ Smith, *New York in . . . 1789*, Ch. VII; W. S. Baker, *Washington after the Revolution, 1784-99*, 132-35; Fitzpatrick, ed., *Diaries of George Washington*, IV, 17, 53, 55, 58.

¹⁹ E. S. Maclay, ed., *Journal of William Maclay, United States Senator from Pennsylvania 1789-91* (New York, 1890), 137-38.

²⁰ *Diaries of Washington*, IV, 58.

²¹ Stokes, *Iconography*, V, 1262.

When Washington visited Rhode Island in late August, with Jefferson, the new Secretary of State, and several other gentlemen, he invited Clinton to join the party. Possibly the association with Jefferson was of more importance to the governor than the hasty visit to Newport, Providence and the college. On August 30, eight days after their return, the governor escorted the President to the pier on his way southward. The federal government was leaving New York and the Congress was to meet in Philadelphia in December. Clinton probably had but few regrets.