

CHAPTER XVI

THE GOVERNOR TURNS FRANCOPHILE

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THE FOND GRANDFATHER

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THE GOVERNOR RETIRES TO GREENWICH

CANDIDATE FOR THE VICE PRESIDENCY

THE wars of the French Revolution added new fuel to the already blazing fires of New York politics. The democrats that donned tricolor cockades, organized Francophile clubs and greeted one another as "citizen" or "citizeness," were largely Clintonian Republicans. George Clinton's own enthusiasm for things French, which can probably be attributed in the first instance to the Revolution, was strengthened by one of the most picturesque marriages in American history.

In April 1793 Edmond Charles Genêt, the new French minister, arrived at Charleston, intent upon bringing America into the French camp. There followed his triumphal progress to Philadelphia, his tactlessness and his breach with the Washington administration, his recall and his retreat to New York. In New York City he met and charmed the Clintons, especially the governor's nineteen-year-old daughter, Cornelia, whom Colonel William Smith's lady had described four years earlier: "as smart and sensible a girl as I ever knew—a zealous politician, and a high anti-Federalist."¹ Before Citizen

¹ Roof, *Colonel William Smith and Lady*, 197.

Genêt returned to Philadelphia at the end of 1793 he and Cornelia were engaged. She was ardently devoted to him and he to her. He chafed at the distance between them, became petulant when she did not write, and, as time wore on, grew suspicious of the continued postponement of the marriage. Cornelia wrote to him frequently and tenderly, always explaining and urging patience. On July 14, 1794, she wrote her beloved Edmond from Greenwich:

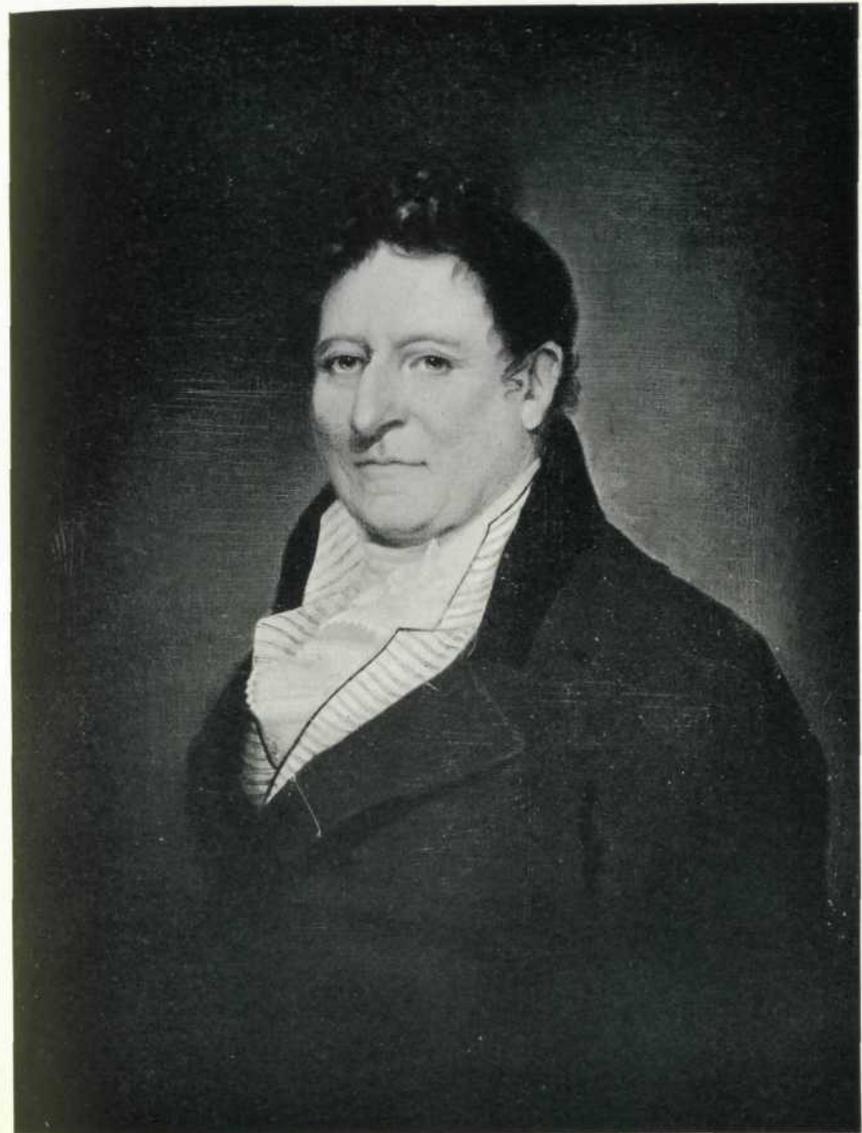
"It is not possible for me my love to explain to you my Fathers conduct as I have not had Courage enough to speak to him let me intreat you my beloved Edmond not to attribute this to any want of Affection for you, but to a natural timidity . . . Papa would never make a promise unless he intended to execute it . . . [And she referred to] the fond hope of soon being united to you for Life."²

Apparently there were rumors that Genêt already had a wife in France, and Governor Clinton wished to make certain before the wedding that they were baseless. Finally Cornelia and Genêt were married at the Government House on November 6, 1794, by Doctor Rodgers the Presbyterian clergyman. After the wedding, which was attended only by Cornelia's sister and Doctor Treat, they "went to pay their respects to Papa and Mama, & from thence the same day proceeded to the Citizen's Sandhill upon Long Island."³ For the Citizen, having decided that it would be decidedly unwise to return to France and finding himself "terribly poor," had bought a small farm at Jamaica on Long Island. After his marriage he called it "Cornelia's Farm."

There was in the years that followed much writing and visiting back and forth between the Clinton farm at Greenwich and Cornelia's Farm. The governor wrote often and both Cornelia and the Citizen replied. Mrs. Clinton and Cornelia exchanged long visits and the governor and Genêt shorter ones. It was on the occasion of one of Mrs. Clinton's visits to the Genêts soon after the arrival of a grandson

² Genêt Papers, Library of Congress, Box 1793-1801. The Genêt Papers contain considerable Cornelia Clinton-Genêt correspondence.

³ King, *Rufus King*, I, 580. See also [George Clinton Genêt], *Washington, Jefferson and "Citizen" Genêt 1793* (1899?), 38-42; Meade Minnigerode, *Jefferson Friend of France* (New York, 1928), 346, 372-78.



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EDMOND CHARLES GENÊT

From a painting by Ezra Ames

that the governor wrote, November 30, 1795, to his son-in-law that he expected to set out for Long Island shortly to bring "mama" home. "Tell her I can't think of suffering her to absent herself from my Bed & Board any longer. If neither of those Days [suggested for Clinton's visit] will admit of my going out, you must bring her Home without waiting for me if all is well with you; whether the young Democrat is a Christian or not before that Time." And the governor added that Mr. Taylor was sending two caps "to keep the Young Citizen's bigg Head Warm."⁴

Later another young Citizen was born and the delighted old governor had new correspondents at Jamaica. As early as January, 1802, one of them, George Clinton Genêt, was complaining of the governor's failure to write him. Clinton wrote a grandfatherly letter in response, insisting that he had written the boy only a short time before. To be sure, he added, I also wrote to Miss Cornelia Clinton McKnight "but this ought not to excite any Jealousy for I presume you have too much Gallantry not to know that particular Attention is due to the Ladies. . . . I hope you & your Brother continue to be good Boys and improve fast in your Learning."⁵

During George Clinton's last term as governor the Genêts moved to Greenbush near Albany, the new state capital, to be near the Clintons. In 1810 Cornelia died, still in her thirties, and four years later the Citizen married again.

The Genêt marriage gave the entire Clinton family a lively interest in the wars of the French revolutionary period. It was inevitable, however, that they, like the other democratic republicans of the time, should be thoroughly sympathetic with French republicanism. The vehemence of early pro-French sentiment in the state is reflected in a letter of March 9, 1794, to DeWitt Clinton from John C. Ludlow, his boon companion and close friend. Ludlow wrote of the French victory at Toulon:⁶ "This long looked for and much wished good news was announced on Friday morning by the ringing of Bells firing of Cannon hoisting coulours singing & dancing to the tune of the Cavinagnole

⁴ Genêt Papers, Box 1793-1801. There are numerous letters of this period from Clinton to Genêt in this collection.

⁵ Letter of Jan. 27, 1802, from Albany in the Genêt Papers.

⁶ DeWitt Clinton Papers, Columbia University.

[sic] in the Tontine in the evening & the special meeting of the Democratic Society attended by congratulations & other expressions of republican Joy." Cornelia was of course enthusiastic when news of French triumphs arrived. Even the cautious George Clinton showed his sympathies from time to time as when he wrote DeWitt Clinton: "I congratulate you on the late important news from Europe. Britain will have her hands full."⁷ In 1794 he addressed his good friend Monroe as "Citizen James Monroe." And such good republicans as Edward Livingston labeled the Federalists "the English party" and regretted that war with England had not already been declared.⁸

In spite of his Gallic sympathies Governor Clinton did not lose his head. Soon after the federal executive on June 5, 1793, ordered the seizure of all vessels being fitted out for privateering, Clinton learned that the sloop *Polly* was being refitted, armed and rechristened *The Republican* in New York waters. He at once called out the militia to detain the suspected vessel, notified the French consul at New York, Hauterive, and informed Washington of his action, suggesting, however, that the militia should be empowered to act in such cases under federal authority. Hauterive was indignant, Genêt protested to Jefferson, and Clinton's republican friends did not try to conceal their disappointment.⁹ In view of Clinton's meticulous neutrality it is difficult to understand why John Adams should have written December 17, 1795, that "Had Mr. Clinton, . . . been in my place the winter before last, this country would now have been involved in all the evils of a foreign, if not a civil war."¹⁰ Yet the governor was generally regarded as an enemy of English interests. According to Secretary of State Randolph, who retired under a cloud in 1795, there was a meeting in New York in the summer of 1794 attended by Mr. Hammond the British minister and a number of his sympathizers. The object of the meeting, Randolph asserted, was to destroy him, Randolph, and George Clinton in their respective capaci-

⁷ Letter of Jan. 13, 1801, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

⁸ Clinton to Monroe, Sept. 8, 1794, Hist. Soc. of Pa.; Livingston to DeWitt Clinton, Mar. 13, 1794, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

⁹ Clinton letters of June 9, 1793, to Washington and Hauterive are in the Library of Congress. See also McMaster, *United States*, II, 104-07.

¹⁰ Roof, *Colonel William Smith and Lady*, 229.

ties as secretary of state and as governor.¹¹ Whether or not the story is a true one, both offices were occupied a year later by staunch Federalists.

Feeling ran high in New York City between the French and the British factions. In August H.M.S. *Boston* challenged and fought a duel with the French frigate *L'Ambuscade* off the Jersey coast, and republicans celebrated *L'Ambuscade's* victory as though she had been an American ship.

The British, already cordially disliked by the rank and file of New Yorkers for their refusal to evacuate the western posts, added to their unpopularity by impressing American seamen. British ships that visited New York were guilty of the practice and Clinton wrote indignantly about it to the President.¹² New York Republicans were urging war with Great Britain. Realizing that the state was entirely unprepared, the governor, in what may be called his war message of January 7, 1794, reminded the legislature "of the naked and exposed condition of our principal sea port, and urg[ed] the necessity of immediately providing for its defense." New York's extensive commerce with both belligerents, he stated, rendered the preservation of its neutrality an object of the first magnitude.¹³ The Federalist legislature was not entirely sympathetic and after considerable delay it voted the modest sum of £30,000 for the fortification of New York City and £12,000 for the northern and western frontiers. The governor was disappointed. He succeeded however in getting free labor for the work on the fortifications of New York harbor by calling on the patriotic citizenry. Columbia students dug trenches, carpenters gave whole days of labor without charge to the state, and the fifty-five-year-old governor himself organized parties of workers and showed them on Governor's Island how to use pick, shovel and wheelbarrow. It was probably while the work was still in progress that Clinton on June 12 ordered all ships and vessels of war the property of foreign powers, excepting only commercial vessels, to approach no nearer than one

¹¹ George Gibbs, *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams edited from the papers of Oliver Wolcott*, I, 265.

¹² Clinton letters of Aug. 1, 26, Sept. 14, 1794, and June 7, 1795, in Department of State.

¹³ Lincoln, *Messages*, II, 333f.

mile south of Governor's Island.¹⁴ Somewhat ironically the fortifications on Governor's Island were later christened Fort Jay by the Adams administration.

It was of course inevitable that Clinton and his following should fight the Jay Treaty. The governor himself described it as gratifying only to aristocrats and adherents of Great Britain but detested by all true republicans.¹⁵ He might have added that the merchants, always his political enemies, also championed the treaty. Clinton's position on the treaty seems to have been known a few days after the treaty's publication, for Hamilton wrote as *Camillus* on July 22, 1795, that,

It is remarkable that the toasts given on July 4, 1795, whenever there appears a direct or indirect censure of the treaty, it is pretty uniformly coupled with compliments to Mr. Jefferson, and to our late governor, Mr. Clinton, with an evident design to place those gentlemen in contrast to Mr. Jay, and, decrying him, to elevate them. No one can be blind to the finger of party spirit, visible in these and similar transactions.

It is entirely possible that "the finger of party spirit" was involved. The verdict of history, however, has branded the Jay Treaty as one of the most unfortunate capitulations in American diplomatic history. The eminent author of the outstanding study of that treaty could only conclude that it was a necessary evil. Politics or no politics, the Clintons saw that a treaty that ignored impressments, that allowed trade with the West Indies only under a system of stifling restrictions, that provided no compensation for slaves taken by the British, but did provide for the settlement of debts owed to British merchants, and that had to be explained away to our old friends the French, came dangerously near to sacrificing our national self-respect. The Livingstons joined in the assault on the treaty. "May the present coolness between France and America produce, like the quarrels of lovers, a renewal of love," was a toast proposed at the time by Chancellor Livingston.¹⁶

The Clintonians in New York worked with the Pennsylvania republicans to defeat the treaty in the federal Congress. DeWitt Clinton

¹⁴ E. C. Genêt, *Communications on the Next Election* (1808), 39; *New-York Journal*, May 3, 1794; *New-York Advertiser*, June 13, 1794.

¹⁵ Clinton to Monroe, Apr. 14, 1796, Monroe Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁶ Alexander, *New York*, 79.

corresponded with John Beckley of Pennsylvania. He urged the circulation of petitions in upstate New York.¹⁷ And at Little Britain George Junior, was occupied with preparing the way for the petitions, writing over the pen name "Polybius," and making arrangements to obtain signatures.¹⁸ Jay was amazed at the virulence of the opposition. Those who fought the treaty were, according to him, Jacobins, "disorganizing politicians," and demagogues.¹⁹ Fortunately for him he had been elected governor of New York in April 1795, over two months before his treaty was made public.

The legislature of 1792, which chose New York's presidential electors, was the state's last Republican legislature for some years. The state elections of April 1793 and 1794 gave the governor hostile legislatures which plagued him and annoyed his young secretary, DeWitt Clinton, in innumerable ways. Even his daughter Cornelia was distressed "at the conduct of the miserable Men you have in the Legislature: is the Devil in them—!"²⁰ They returned the Federalist King to the federal Senate. They filled the Council of Appointment with partisans who contested the governor's right to control the nomination of officers to serve in his administration. They called Clinton "a delectable Rascal" when, in his message of January 1795, he referred disparagingly to the "children of the opulent."²¹ They procrastinated when the governor urged that the port of New York be better fortified.

Governor Clinton faced the Federalist majorities in the legislatures of 1793 and 1794 with all the assurance that he could muster and on certain issues he was even able to persuade them to follow his recommendations. In his statesmanlike message of January 7, 1794, he showed his old distrust of centralizing measures when he urged support for the Virginia and Massachusetts resolutions limiting the "suability" of a state. "The decision of the supreme federal court, which gave rise to these resolves," he declared, "involves so essentially the sovereignty of each state that no observations on my part can be necessary to bespeak

¹⁷ John Beckley to DeWitt Clinton, July 24, Sept. 13, 1795; Thomas Tillotson to DeWitt Clinton, Oct. 24, 1795; DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹⁸ George Clinton, Jr. to DeWitt Clinton, October 19, 1795, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹⁹ Jay, *Correspondence*, IV, 191-93.

²⁰ To DeWitt Clinton, January 15, 1794, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

²¹ King, *Rufus King*, II, 2.

your early attention to the subject matter of them."²² After Congress had passed a resolution a few weeks later proposing what became the Eleventh Amendment to the Constitution, to protect the states from suits by citizens of other states, Clinton was able to forward to President Washington notice of the prompt approval of the proposed amendment by the legislature of New York.²³

In spite of a few such triumphs, the aging governor had had quite enough of the governorship by 1795, the gubernatorial year. He had been criticized for accepting office at all after the unfortunate contest of 1792. The legislature during his last term had been the most bitterly partisan of his career and it was clear that 1795 would be a Federalist year when a Republican governor would be completely stultified by another bitterly hostile legislature.

Entirely aside from these political reasons, there is reason enough to believe that Clinton's health, always uncertain, made it impossible for him to accept another term. The governor was so ill at the Greenwich farm that he had to have his message read for him when the legislature met on January 6, 1795, at Poughkeepsie.²⁴ A few days later James Kent, the future chancellor, wrote to his brother that there was little prospect that the governor would be able to leave his house that winter, that it was expected the legislature would remove from Poughkeepsie to New York to be near him! Kent added that "It is doubtful whether he ever recovers."²⁵ On the legislature's removal Kent prophesied correctly. Perhaps the Federalist legislature, always ready to meet in New York City, was only too willing to join the Republican governor. At any rate it voted on January 13 to meet at the metropolis a week later. Clinton seems to have been somewhat better in February but he was still decidedly unwell in the fall.²⁶

"The declining condition of my health" was the principal reason for his decision not to accept a renomination as given by the governor in

²² Lincoln, *Messages from the Governors*, II, 334-35.

²³ The President's message to Congress, Nov. 21, 1794; *Annals of Congress*, 3d Congress, p. 894. Senate, Assembly and Council of Revision approved the resolution on the same day, Mar. 27, 1794.

²⁴ Lincoln, *Messages from the Governors*, II, 348.

²⁵ Letter of Jan. 12, 1795, James Kent Papers, Vol. II, Library of Congress.

²⁶ George Clinton to E. C. Genêt, Nov. 30, 1795, Genêt Papers, Box 1793-1801, Library of Congress.



CORNELIA CLINTON GENÊT

his letter of January 22, 1795, addressed to the freeholders of the state.²⁷ He pointed out that he had served continuously in elective office for nearly thirty years and that his duty to his family as well as his health dictated his retirement. Two days later General Van Cortlandt, Clinton's lieutenant governor since 1777, announced that he also would not accept a renomination.

Burr, it seems, had already been working against Clinton's renomination. The only result, however, of the approaches made by Burr's friends to members of the legislature at Poughkeepsie was a meeting of the Republican members which determined to support the old governor should he run again.²⁸ When Clinton refused, as it was generally expected he would, the Republicans turned not to Burr but to Robert Yates who had run against Clinton in 1789. The Clintons were active in Yates' cause.²⁹ Eight years later a close friend of Burr's was to maintain that George Clinton brought about the defeat of New York Republicanism in 1795 by his obstinate refusal to support Burr for governor.³⁰ But had the Clintons supported and helped to elect Aaron Burr, they would have elected a man who had gained his majority only by flirting with the Federalists—which Burr was doing as early as December, 1794.³¹ There is little reason to believe that any Republican short of Clinton himself could have been elected governor of New York in 1795.

Jay, the grievance candidate, had agreed to run as early as 1793. He was, his friends urged, the only man who could beat George Clinton. His supporters, including Schuyler and Van Rensselaer, were campaigning for him in December 1794 and he was named by a kind of Federalist legislative caucus early the next year. A colorless campaign followed and the unpopular Republican candidate, who was accused of being place-hungry, received less than 12,000 votes to almost 13,500 for Jay. On July 1, after eighteen years' service as governor, George Clinton yielded the office to Jay.

²⁷ Printed in *Albany Gazette*, Jan. 30, 1795, and other papers.

²⁸ James Cheetham, *View of the Political Conduct of Aaron Burr*, 20.

²⁹ DeWitt Clinton served on a Yates campaign committee. DeWitt Clinton Papers.

³⁰ "Aristides" [W. P. Van Ness], *Examination of the Various Charges Exhibited against Aaron Burr* (1802), 9.

³¹ King, *Rufus King*, I, 583-84.

The next five years was a period of retirement for the old patriot. He spent much of the time convalescing, enjoying his Greenwich estate, where the chronically peripatetic Clintons took root from about 1794 to 1799 or 1800, visiting Cornelia's family at Jamaica, and recouping his private fortune.

For months the state of his health was precarious. "My enquiries after your health have been constant," Washington wrote him in November of 1795, "and my concern for the ill state of it has been sincere." But by February 1797, Washington was congratulating the old warrior on his complete recovery and expressing the hope that he might visit with him at Mount Vernon.⁸²

In 1796, when Burr, now his constant rival for national honors, aspired to the vice presidency, Clinton did not wish to become a candidate for vice president and his friends made no determined effort on the ex-governor's behalf. New York Republicans probably favored Jefferson for president and Clinton for vice president, but as it was clearly a Federalist year in New York, they had less voice than usual in the selection of candidates. Clinton himself favored Jefferson for president but showed no great enthusiasm in his behalf.⁸³ Nevertheless three Virginia electors and all four Georgia electors cast ballots for George Clinton. Governor Jay received five votes from Federalist Connecticut, and Burr a fairly imposing total of thirty votes from Pennsylvania and states farther south which gave him third place in the electoral balloting and left him a candidate to be reckoned with four years later. Burr was, however, chagrined and angry at the failure of the Republicans to unite on his candidacy.⁸⁴ Certainly the New York Republicans would be able to unite on no New York candidate until either Aaron Burr or George Clinton should be eliminated politically once and for all.

⁸² Washington Papers, Library of Congress, copies, Vol. XV, 5, 15.

⁸³ Hammond, *New York*, I, 103. George Clinton to DeWitt Clinton, Dec. 13, 1803, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

⁸⁴ Hatch, *History of the Vice Presidency*, 127.