

CHAPTER XXII

POUGHKEEPSIE AND WASHINGTON

SEVEN TERMS SATISFY THE GOVERNOR

RETIREMENT TO POUGHKEEPSIE

THE FEDERALISTS ADOPT BURR

CLINTON BACKS MORGAN LEWIS

HIS VIEWS ON THE WEEHAWKEN DUEL

HE FAVORS THE TWELFTH AMENDMENT

AND BECOMES VICE PRESIDENT

BURR'S EXIT

GOVERNOR CLINTON did not want an eighth term. His health was poor; he was approaching sixty-five, and the governorship was too strenuous for a man of his years. Furthermore, he felt that his party, now at the zenith of its power, did not need his name on the ballot in order to carry the state. In arriving at his decision not to offer himself for renomination, however, he was ignoring the pleadings of his nephew who felt that no other candidate could be counted upon to keep the state out of the clutches of Burr. The governor warned DeWitt Clinton of his decision as early as November 1803,¹ pointing out that the cause of Republicanism was well established and that his health and comfort required his retirement. To persuade his uncle, DeWitt turned to the President of the United States. He wrote twice to Jefferson, mentioning the machinations of Burr, the certainty of his uncle's carrying the state by "an immense majority," and the possible disintegration of the party in New York should the old governor refuse a nomination. In spite of DeWitt Clinton's appeals, Jefferson refused

¹ Letter of November 16 in DeWitt Clinton Papers.

to interfere in the politics of the state and George Clinton stood obdurate.²

After three years' residence in Albany, Clinton was planning to return to Poughkeepsie to lead the life of a country gentleman—at least until something more alluring than another term as governor should offer itself. Poughkeepsie was the home of Gilbert Livingston, James Tallmadge Jr., and a number of other close friends of the Clintons; there the Clintons had lived from 1778 to 1783; and there or in neighboring communities the governor had from time to time invested in good mortgages and properties in land. In the fall of 1804 he was to subscribe rather generously toward the purchase of Baldwin's Hotel at Poughkeepsie so that it might be used as Republican headquarters.³

It was probably in the winter of 1804 that he purchased the house and property on the Hudson at the mouth of Jan Casper's Kill at Poughkeepsie, an estate that was to be his home for the rest of his life. The old stone house on the Casper's Kill estate, which the Clintons used from 1804 to 1806, was too small; and the governor wrote his son-in-law, Pierre Van Cortlandt Jr., in May 1804, that he intended to build a brick house about fifty feet long by forty-five wide. As soon as he was free of the governorship he joined his family at Casper's Kill and by midsummer the work was under way. In October he wrote the Genêts that although there was a lack of good "mechanicks," he hoped to finish the "works" that fall and commence the brickwork early in the spring. He needed especially a good laborer who could be trusted to drive his horses. He wished in 1805 to plant some fruit trees and build some sadly needed fences. There were delays in the building—the Vice President had a way of elaborating on his own plans as he got into the spirit of the project—and it was not until 1806 that the impatient family moved into the new house while the plastering was still under way.⁴ Although the brick house has been described as a small one, George

² Henry Adams, *History of the United States* (9 vols., New York, 1891-1901), II, 173.

³ Platt, *History of Poughkeepsie*, 83, 306.

⁴ Several useful articles on Clinton's homes and properties in Poughkeepsie by Helen Wilkinson Reynolds appear in *Dutchess County Historical Society Year Book*, 1922, 1926, 1929. Clinton's letter of Oct. 19, 1804 to Genêt is in the Genêt Papers. See also Clinton to M. B. Tallmadge, Aug. 2, 1804, in *New York Historical Society* and Aug. 6, 1804, in *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*.

Washington Clinton told his father in 1811 that "our tax" of thirty-two dollars was the highest paid by anyone in Poughkeepsie. The place, which was made over before Clinton's death to his son Washington, was valued by the family at \$20,000.⁵

When they came to Poughkeepsie the Clintons left Cornelia and Edmond Genêt at their home at Greenbush near Albany. George Clinton had bought the Greenbush house—built by Kiliaen Van Rensselaer about 1742 on the east bank of the Hudson some four miles below Albany—and had persuaded the Genêts to take it off his hands and move to Albany in 1802 to be near them at the new state capital. The house was a modest one; the estate comprised about six hundred acres. A few years later, but before Clinton's death, the Genêts left the Greenbush place and settled at Prospect Hill, a new home on the ridge to the eastward.⁶ But when the old gentleman died in 1812, the Genêts still owed him \$12,500 on the Greenbush farm.

The Clintons also left the Tallmadge family behind them at Albany. Matthias B. Tallmadge, the governor's son-in-law and man-of-affairs, made a tremendous hit with the old gentleman in 1804 by naming his new-born son after him. The governor was much concerned over the health of the mother, Betsy Tallmadge, and sent to Albany currant jelly, pickles, walnuts, and medicinal herbs for Betsy's use.⁷ He constantly urged her to come to Caspar's Kill to visit and promised to supply her with a reliable pair of riding horses and to let her use his safe new boat. He wrote to her frequently during those autumnal years after Cornelia's death with a tenderness and a solicitude that he seldom revealed, even to his wife and children, in earlier periods of his life.

He also found time to write to "My dear good Boys," George Clinton Tallmadge and Charles William his younger brother. Sometimes the letters were in a playful vein as when the fond grandfather wrote from Washington to "Captain George Clinton Tallmadge," then four years old:

⁵ Letter of December 1811 in George Clinton Papers, vol. XXXI; Memorandum of papers examined by the family of the late Vice President . . . July 17, 1812, in New York Historical Society.

⁶ Helen W. Reynolds, *Dutch Houses in the Hudson Valley* (New York, 1929), 117-18, 166. See also Genêt Papers, Box 1802-1843.

⁷ Letters of July 25, 28, and August 4, 1804, and April 15, 1805, Clinton to Tallmadge, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

"My dear Sir,

Being informed by your aunt Maria that your Papa is gone to Poughkeepsie and consequently that the care of the Family has devolved upon you I cannot refrain expressing the confidence I feel in you, and that your Mama and every other member of it will find themselves safe and happy under your protection and patronage. Your Mama's delicate Health and the Tender age of your little Brother render them objects of your peculiar care and Tenderness. I need not remind a young Gentleman of your prudence of the necessity there is of having the Door shut and bolted, and the Fires well covered before you go to bed or at least to give directions to have these Things done.

Give my Love to your Mama and Aunt Maria kiss them and your little Brother for me—remember me also to your good Mamy

Yours very affectionately,

Geo. Clinton."⁸

Although George Clinton might see in 1804 that New York was most unlikely to revert to Federalism or Burrism, there were those in New York and out who hoped that a combination of those two factions might bring about the triumph of both. Federalist New England, impatient of Jefferson's ascendancy, was turning decisively and unmistakably toward secession. Scores of New England's leading statesmen approved and many more accepted the amazing project as inevitable. But New England was a small section. Its Federalist leaders felt that New York should be invited to join the new confederation and that that state, which had so little in common with the Virginia dynasty, might respond if properly approached. There was in New York only one outstanding political figure who might be counted upon to defeat a Clinton-Livingston candidate for governor and who might also be receptive to Federalist overtures. Burr's friends had for some months been supporting Federalist candidates⁹ and Burr himself had been repudiated by the dominant wing of the Republicans. New England Federalists like Pickering and Griswold therefore looked to Burr as a rallying post for the forces of defection and consequently urged the New York Federalists to give him their ballots. In spite of the outspoken opposition of Hamilton, Burr was nominated both at Albany and at New York City

⁸ Letter of Feb. 25, 1808; New York Historical Society.

⁹ E.g., John Randolph to Monroe, June 15, 1803, James Monroe Papers, Library of Congress.

late in February and with the exception of a few leaders the New York Federalists gave him their support, "at the same time admitting to [their] own Honor and that of the Party that they considered him a man wholly Destitute of principle."¹⁰ Hamilton told Rufus King that he feared Governor Clinton's decision to retire gave Burr a real chance of success.¹¹

Hamilton would have preferred to nominate a thoroughgoing Federalist like King in the hope that the united Federalists could defeat the hopelessly divided Republican factions. Failing that, Hamilton was willing to throw his support to the first nominee of the Republicans, Chancellor Lansing, a conservative gentleman whose nomination aroused no real opposition from the Federalists and no enthusiasm from the Republicans. But a few days after the nomination, the Chancellor reconsidered and declined to stand. Three years later Lansing explained that shortly after he was nominated during an interview with Governor Clinton "an attempt was made by them [the Republicans] to induce me to pledge myself for a particular course of conduct in the administration of the government of the state," and that he had declined to make any pledges. He had been given to understand that he would be expected to defer to the political advice of DeWitt Clinton, Ambrose Spencer, and their associates. When this was denied in 1807 by the two Clintons and Spencer, Lansing added that George Clinton had suggested he make DeWitt chancellor of the state, a proposition which he was compelled to reject. DeWitt Clinton countered with the statement that the disposition of the chancellorship had never been mentioned during the Clinton-Lansing conversations.¹² However that may have been, Lansing withdrew and DeWitt Clinton speedily secured the nomination for Chief Justice Morgan Lewis, a son-in-law of Robert R. Livingston, who seemed likely to prove amenable to the Clintonian whips. This easy-going, respectable, but vain and scarcely distinguished individual, had been appointed attorney general by Governor Clinton in 1791; he had been elevated to the supreme court two years later and made chief justice in the Republican year,

¹⁰ Morgan Lewis to DeWitt Clinton, April 4, 1804, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹¹ Letter of February 24, 1804, Hamilton, *Works*, Lodge, ed., VIII, 609; McMaster, *United States*, III, 51.

¹² Hammond, *New York*, I, 241-43.

1801. In 1803 he had been disappointed of the mayoralty of New York when DeWitt Clinton, choosing to doubt Lewis's good faith, had himself volunteered to assume the burdens of that office. Both of the Clintons distrusted the Livingstons and feared their approaching defection from Republicanism, but no better candidate than Morgan Lewis offered himself in 1804.¹³

The retiring governor at Albany watched the elections with much interest and with entire confidence. He did not agree with Hamilton that Burr could be elected. He first predicted Lewis would win by 4600 votes; late in April he told DeWitt that he would alter his opinion only to increase the majority; and early in May he suggested DeWitt inform his friends, particularly the President, that Lewis would be elected by a majority of about 8000 ballots. The actual margin of Aaron Burr's defeat was nearer to nine than to eight thousand, the most decisive defeat administered to any major contender for the New York governorship in its entire history up to that time. Traditionally strong in New York City, Burr carried that metropolis by a fair margin and the city of Albany by a few votes. Elsewhere there was no great enthusiasm for the anomalous Federalist-Burr ticket.¹⁴

In view of Morgan Lewis's impressive majority, it is most unlikely that Hamilton's guarded and under-cover opposition to candidate Burr was responsible for his defeat. Hamilton's opposition to the adoption of Burr by the Federalists in 1804 brought on the famous duel at Weehawken, not because it kept Burr from the governorship, but simply because it was one more in the now considerable series of grievances between the two men. Burr shot Hamilton on July 11, 1804, about two months after the spring elections, and his victim died on July 12. "The malignant federalists or tories," wrote Burr, "and the embittered Clintonians, unite in endeavoring to excite public sympathy in his favour and indignation against his antagonist." "Our most unprincipled Jacobins are the loudest in their lamentations for the death of General Hamilton . . ."¹⁵

¹³ C. W. Spencer, "Morgan Lewis," *Dictionary of American Biography*; Bobbé, *DeWitt Clinton*, 97-99; George Clinton to DeWitt Clinton, September 17, 1803, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹⁴ George Clinton to DeWitt Clinton, April 27, 1804, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹⁵ Davis, *Burr*, II, 327.

Some time after the duel George Clinton told a United States Senator that New Yorkers "in the habit of approving duels" considered Hamilton to have been under no obligation to accept the challenge since (1) Burr did not name the exact time, place, or particular word of offense in his challenge, and since (2) so much time had elapsed between the time of the offending remarks and the challenge. Furthermore, the circumstance that Burr's intention to challenge Hamilton was known to others "induced many to consider it more an assassination than a duel." In this conversation with Senator Plumer, Clinton had no redeeming comments for Burr. He told Plumer, however, "that Hamilton was a great man—a great lawyer—a man of integrity—very ambitious—& was very anxious to effect that ruinous measure, a *consolidation of the States*."¹⁶ Clinton was still an Antifederalist.

Well might Clinton congratulate himself and his party on the unity of the "Republican interest" in state and nation. The Weehawken duel not only eliminated the most capable Federalist leader in the nation, but it also completed the political downfall of that equally troublesome free-lance, Aaron Burr. Opposition in New York to Republican domination seemed in 1804 to have melted away. At Washington Jefferson's reelection was a certainty, and, to the great satisfaction of the Clintons, Burr would not attempt to stand for a second term as vice president.¹⁷

The adoption of the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States early in 1804 changed the entire nature of the vice presidency. For by providing that the electors vote separately for candidates for president and for vice president, the Twelfth Amendment made the vice presidency a thing for politicians to barter. It would through the rest of its history be awarded by astute politicians to wavering states or to sections in return for votes. Although this lowering of the prestige of the office was most unfortunate, it was of course necessary in order to prevent a recurrence of the disgraceful Jefferson-Burr contest of 1800.

* Generally speaking, the Twelfth Amendment was supported by the

¹⁶ E. S. Brown ed., *William Plumer's Memorandum of Proceedings in the Senate*, 451-52.

¹⁷ Burr mentioned his approaching retirement to Jefferson January 26, 1804; F. B. Sawvel, *Complete Anas of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1903), 224-25.

Republicans and opposed by the Federalists. DeWitt Clinton championed the measure in the United States Senate and quarreled violently with Senator Dayton's proposal that, to achieve the same end, the vice presidency itself be abolished. After passage by the United States Senate and House on December 2 and 8, 1803, only three states, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Delaware, all notoriously Federalist, failed to ratify. In New York Governor Clinton called for ratification in his January message and the legislature responded in less than two weeks. Only fourteen assemblymen, most of whom represented the Federalist counties of Albany and Oneida, opposed ratification.¹⁸

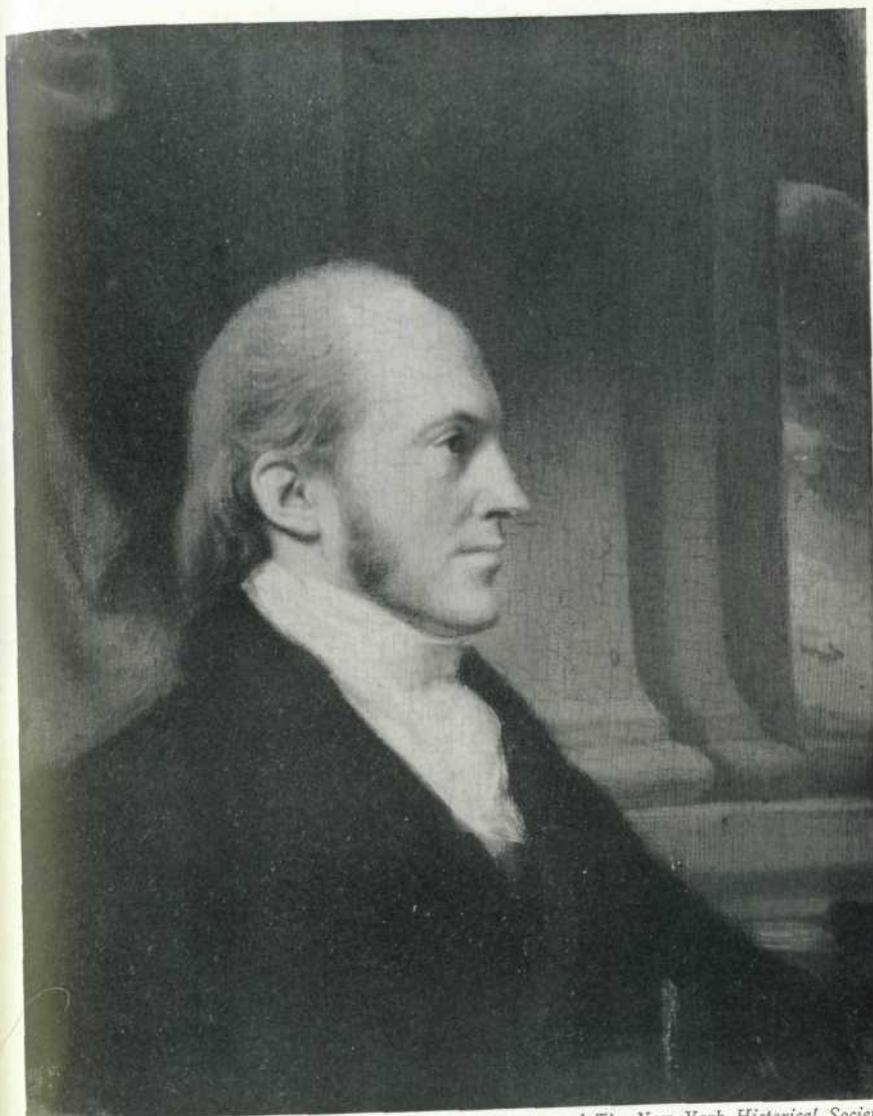
George Clinton had one more reason than other men to favor the Twelfth Amendment. There was under the system of 1789 some danger that a Federalist who had the united support of his own party might snatch the vice presidency away from a somewhat divided Republican field, much as Jefferson had become vice president to the Federalist Adams in 1797. This Clinton did not wish to see happen for the practical reason that he himself expected to be the Republican candidate for vice president. He was now an old man—"the venerable Clinton"—and if the prize should this time slip through his fingers, it was clear that he would spend the rest of his days at Casper's Kill.

Through the medium of DeWitt Clinton a letter was obtained from the governor expressing his willingness to be nominated for vice president. The letter was read before the caucus of 108 Republican senators and representatives—excepting Burrites—who met at the Capitol in Washington on February 25; and the caucus gave the governor the hitherto elusive nomination by the convincing vote of 67 to 20 for the western candidate who was Breckenridge of Kentucky, and 21 for the remainder of the field.¹⁹ Burr, who was reported as "intreaguing," received no votes. Jefferson was of course nominated by acclaim. A national Republican campaign committee was named consisting of one member from each state.

On only one front was there disharmony. Apparently the New

¹⁸ *New York Assembly Journal*, February 9, 1804; Hatch, *Vice Presidency*, 5-9; Brown ed., *Plumer's Memorandum*, *passim*. DeWitt Clinton and Hamilton both advocated amending the Constitution as early as 1802; *American Citizen*, February 6, 1802; Hamilton, *Works*, Lodge, ed., VIII, 595.

¹⁹ Levi Lincoln 9; Langdon 7; Gideon Granger 4; Senator Mackay, 1.



Courtesy of The New York Historical Society

AARON BURR

From a painting by John Vanderlyn

England representatives felt that the Clinton nomination was being crammed down their throats and they attempted to adjourn the caucus. They finally gave way, however, and in March Granger was able to write to DeWitt Clinton that all New England was entirely agreed upon the vice presidential nominee. Indeed, he added, "I believe there is not an eastern man who did not consider his pretensions superior to those of any citizen in New England."²⁰

The only doubt about the outcome of the election was the size of the Republican majority. That majority was as a matter of fact overwhelming, allowing the Federalists only 14 electoral votes, all in their old strongholds, Connecticut, Delaware, and Maryland, against 162 for the Jefferson-Clinton ticket. George Clinton must have felt that such a triumph had been indeed worth waiting for. It was a dramatic scene when the votes of the electors were opened in the old Senate chamber before crowded galleries on February 13 by an aspirant for their favors who was to find amid the parchments and seals not one vote cast in his favor. The vice president was indeed a pathetic figure. Generally neglected after the Weehawken duel by men of all parties he was, however, by the last weeks of his term of office more noticed than formerly, "whether from commiseration or from hatred to H—," George Clinton Junior would not attempt to say.²¹ With striking "regularity and composure," Burr supervised the opening and counting of the ballots and then proclaimed Jefferson and Clinton to be duly chosen president and vice president of the United States.

Two weeks later, on March 2, this remarkable man made his final adieux to high public office. "This day I have witnessed one of the most affecting scenes of my life," Senator Samuel L. Mitchill wrote to his wife from Washington. At two o'clock the vice president rose unexpectedly to pronounce his farewell address. "He did not speak to them, perhaps, longer than twenty minutes or half an hour, but he did it with so much tenderness, knowledge, and concern that it wrought upon the sympathy of the Senators in a very uncommon manner . . . When Mr. Burr had concluded he descended from the chair, and in

²⁰ Granger to Clinton, March 27, DeWitt Clinton Papers. Hatch, *Vice Presidency*, 137-38; McMaster, *United States*, III, 187-88.

²¹ Letter to DeWitt Clinton, February 20, 1805, DeWitt Clinton Papers. Cf. American Antiquarian Society, *Proceedings*, 1923 (Worcester, 1924), 134.

a dignified manner walked to the door, which resounded as he some force shut it after him. On this the firmness and resolution many of the Senators gave way, and they burst into tears. There solemn and silent weeping for perhaps five minutes. . . . Burr is of the best officers that ever presided over a deliberative assembly.

²² "Dr. Mitchill's Letters from Washington 1801-1813," in *Harper's Magazine* LVIII, 749-50.