

Henry Clay Funeral Train Buffalo July 1852

The Tuesday evening edition of the June 29, 1852, Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* announced the following:

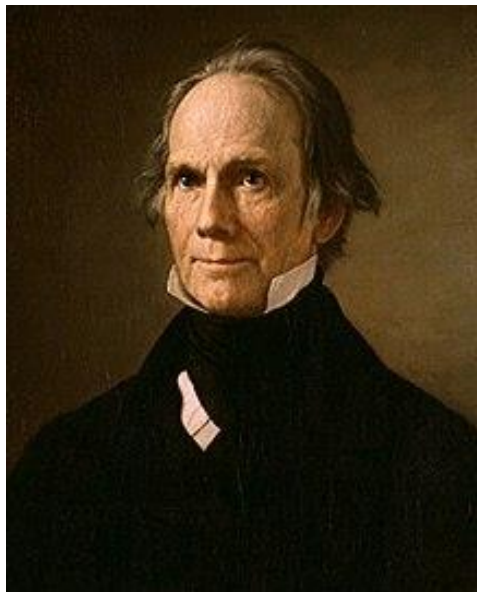
Henry Clay is Dead!

The Telegraph brings us intelligence of the death of Henry Clay. He died in Washington at twenty-five minutes past eleven o'clock this morning. He lived to the ripe age of seventy-five years, more than forty-five of which were spent in the service of his country.

The Buffalo *Morning Express* of June 30, 1852, was much more dramatic in its announcement

The thing we so greatly feared has at length come upon us. Henry Clay, the sage, the statesman, the patriot and the Christian, is no more. The tidings of his death is being spread throughout the country with eagle swiftness, and soon every inhabitant thereof shall know and appreciate its fearful meaning. "Hung be the heavens in black"- and let the plaintive lamentations of a stricken nation be heard, "as the sound of many waters".

Clay's death was not unexpected as it was known that he had tuberculosis. Authors David and Jeanne Heidler suggest that he was in the early stages of the disease as he ended the 1844 campaign for the presidency; some eight years before he finally passed away. Still, expecting one's death and then hearing about it can bring a level of shock to all.



Essentially unknown or forgotten in today's world, Henry Clay, in his day, was a household name. From the War of 1812 to his death in 1852, he was arguably the most dominant figure in American politics. He served as Speaker of the House, Secretary of State, Senator from Kentucky and unsuccessfully ran for president three times – in 1824, 1832 and 1844. He was known as “The Great Compromiser” for his leading role in both the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850. Along with Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, Clay was part of the fabled “Great Triumvirate” of American government. Loved by many, hated by more than a few, he was known to all.

The Funeral Train

On June 30, 1852, Henry Clay lay in state at the Capitol in the Rotunda. Late that afternoon, his coffin was led by four military companies to the railroad station for his final journey home to Kentucky. Six Senators were chosen to accompany Clay to Lexington, among them was Sam Houston, Senator from Texas.



According to the authors David and Jeanne Heidler, the coffin was “made of metal shaped to resemble the human form and with weighty silver mountings and handles. A large, thick silver plate bore the inscription HENRY CLAY, and another just above it could be removed to reveal the corpse’s face under a glass pane, a practice to make sure that the encased body really was lifeless in order to avoid the nineteenth century’s greatest nightmare, being buried alive.” One hopes they made good use of checking in on Mr. Clay.

His family agreed to the extended funeral procession from Washington to Lexington. It was the first of its kind; one that would be repeated 13 years later with President Lincoln. The

journey covered more than 1000 miles in 9 days as it traveled by train and steamboat to Baltimore, Wilmington and Philadelphia before heading into New Jersey and New York City; up the Hudson River to Albany, across New York state to Buffalo and finally, through Ohio and into Kentucky.

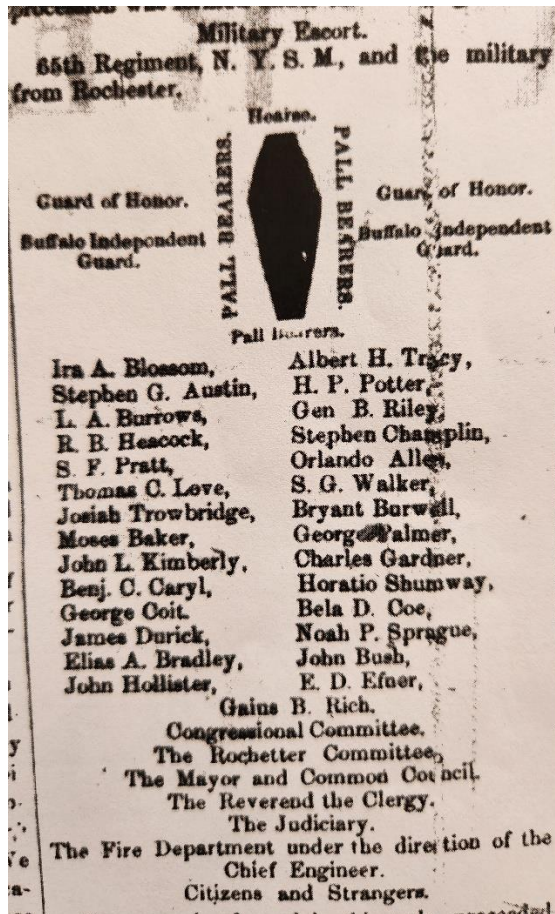


Funeral Procession in Buffalo

On July 6, 1852, the remains of Henry Clay left Albany in the morning and arrived that evening in Buffalo.

The Buffalo *Morning Express* Wednesday, July 7, 1852

The body of the lamented Statesman and Patriot passed through our city last evening. On the arrival of the cars a signal gun was fired, the bells of several churches were tolled and a procession was formed under the following order



The procession formed in this order proceeded up Exchange street to Washington, up Washington to Genesee street, down Genesee to Main street, down Main to Commercial street, down Commercial street to the Steamboat *Buckeye State*, when the body of Henry Clay was put on board and the crowd silently withdrew. Minute guns were fired while the procession was moving and the scene was solemn and earnest to the highest degree.

The *Buckeye Steamer*, according to the historians Heidler, was "an enormous steamboat of the first class, almost three hundred feet long and boasting powerful engines that made her one of the fastest of the Great Lakes packets."

Buffalo's role in the national funeral procession was over as the steamer continued down Lake Erie to Cleveland. There, the railroad once again took over and continued through Ohio and finally to Lexington, Kentucky, where Mr. Clay reached his final resting place.

It would be another 13 years (1865) before Buffalo was once again honored with the national funeral procession of a man who greatly admired Henry Clay, President Lincoln.

Sources

Newspapers from the microfilm room of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library

Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, June 29 – 30, 1852

Buffalo Morning Express, June 30, July 5, July 7, 1852

David S. Heidler & Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay, the Essential American* (Random House, NY 2010)

John Fagant
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