

Henry Clay and the Masons

Henry Clay arrived in Lexington in 1798 seeking to start a legal career and establish himself as a member of Lexington society. Having few contacts to aid his efforts, Henry Clay decided to join the freemasons and became an Entered Apprentice in Lexington Lodge Number 1 in his first few years in town. Henry Clay remained active in the lodge through the beginning of his career in the House of Representatives and negotiating the Treaty of Ghent. In 1820 Henry Clay became Master of Lexington Lodge No. 1 and simultaneously took the post of Grandmaster of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky. This was the first and remains the only instance of one man jointly holding both offices. On March 9, 1822, Henry Clay was asked to attend a Masonic conference in the U.S. Senate Chamber to discuss the formation of a national lodge for members of congress in Washington, D.C. who were not able to attend their home lodges. Henry Clay opposed the idea and later wrote that he motivated the state grand lodges to vote it down. In 1825, Henry Clay's friend the Marquis de Lafayette toured the nation and at some point gave to him a Masonic Apron that he had been given and wore at the laying of the cornerstone of the monument at the Bunker Hill Battlefield. This apron is now in the Ashland collection and hangs in the Henry Clay Bedroom.

After 1825 Henry Clay seems to have lost interest in the Masons and he may have simply found himself too busy to attend. Clay ceased to be an active member of the order and no longer participated in Masonic activities. In the 1844 presidential campaign Masonic activities were raised as an issue by Anti-Masonic partisans. These individuals campaigned against candidates who belonged to the Masonic order and promoted the idea of governmental restriction of Masonic activities. Henry Clay refused to recant his Masonic association but said of it in several letters that he joined only for the social aspects and never lived a Masonic life or particularly subscribed to Masonic ideals. He said further that he really did not care at all about the Masons but "I would not denounce it or formally renounce it (Freemasonry) to be made President of the United States." It is difficult to know how seriously Clay meant his comments about Masonry made around the 1844 campaign. While Clay certainly joined the Masons to connect to Lexington society, he probably did care more than he purported to given the length of time he remained active and the offices he held. Henry Clay probably did become too busy to remain active but probably always had some affinity for the Masons. Clay, as a consummate politician, likely felt a need to try to appease the Anti-Masons to increase his chances to win the 1844 election.

When Henry Clay died on June 29, 1852, he was still officially a Mason. When his body returned home for burial, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky arranged for Masonic rites. The Masons were allowed to remain alongside the bier and during the services performed their rituals. On Clay's coffin was placed the apron given him by the Marquis de Lafayette.

Finally, the Masonic fraternity and the members of the Committee of the Clay Festival Association bore Clay's remains to the vault where he was laid next to his mother and other family