

HISTORY

# Cassius Marcellus Clay

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The annals of Kentucky's history are full of colorful characters whose exploits often seem the stuff of legend, but the reality of Cassius Marcellus Clay, a cousin of Henry Clay, transcends folklore. He was egotistic, opinionated, and hot-tempered. With a reputation for blind courage and violence, he was an abrasive, combative and often dangerous man. Yet Clay also possessed the exquisite manners of a Southern gentleman. He was one of those rare men in the South before the Civil War—a member of the landed gentry who rejected his slave-holding heritage to advocate elimination of slavery. Toward this goal he dedicated his talents as an orator, political propagandist and strategist, and sought political power to bring his vision to reality. His rewards were few,

for in the process, he made many enemies and was denied significant offices and appointments.

In the end, when his mission had been accomplished and slavery abolished, he spent the remainder of his life without a guiding purpose, honored by his countrymen but becoming more and more eccentric.

Clay was born in Madison County on October 19, 1810, on the family's 2,000-acre estate, known as White Hall, which he inherited in 1828. As a young man, he attended several schools in Kentucky. Clay enrolled in Yale University in 1831, and set on a course that changed his life.

While at Yale, he attended several anti-slavery lectures, but what most impressed him about the North was its industry and prosperity. Clay returned



**Cassius Clay**

*Source: Lithograph, c April 1846*

*Engraved by Hoffy from a  
daguerreotype by Plumbo*



Cassius Marcellus Clay inherited the estate, known as White Hall, in 1828

*Source: Kentucky Historical Society*

to Kentucky infected with a desire to bring about an end to slavery on economic grounds—he advocated economic diversity and industrialization, convinced that a system based on slave labor and an agrarian economy was retarding progress. Clay favored gradual emancipation and compensation to slave owners. Not until the eve of the Civil War did he change his opinion, when he came to believe that force was the only solution.

Clay married Mary Jane Warfield in 1833 and was elected as state representative from Madison County in 1835 and again in 1837. Soon after, he moved his family to Lexington in order to run for the more influential seat from Fayette County. Denouncing the slave system, he ran on a platform supporting free labor and industrialization—using statistics to show that free states were more prosperous than slave

in 1844, and in 1845 established an anti-slavery newspaper, the *True American*, in Lexington. Anticipating violence, he fortified the building with sheet iron and set up two cannons facing the door. His opponents waited until Clay fell ill, when a “Committee of Sixty” descended upon his office, dismantled the press and shipped it to Cincinnati. Because of the hostility he provoked,

Clay took to arming himself heavily whenever he left home, usually carrying a brace of pistols and his trademark Bowie knife. Over the years leading up to the war, he was involved in numerous altercations, ranging from formal duels to bloody brawls.

Clay had come to the attention of Abraham Lincoln, but never realized his dream of becoming Lincoln’s running mate. After Lincoln’s election, Clay expected to be rewarded with a cabinet post. Pres. Lincoln, however, considered Cassius to be too radical, and instead shipped him off as ambassador to Russia (1861-1862

and 1863-1869). Clay’s mission to Russia was successful; he socialized easily with the nobility, and was able to win political support for the Union.

Returning to the U.S., Clay remained sporadically active in politics, but with the abolition of slavery accomplished he no longer had a firm direction. He retired to White Hall in 1875, divorced his wife of almost 50 years in 1878, and ended all political participation by 1884. He became increasingly paranoid and reclusive, turning his home into a virtual fortress, ignoring or abusing visitors, or, on occasion, shooting at them. In 1894, at the age of 84, Clay scandalized his neighbors when he married a 15 year-old orphan. She only remained a few months, however, and in 1898 he divorced her for separation.

In the summer of 1903, Clay fell ill. One day in July, annoyed by a large fly buzzing around his sickroom, he ordered a servant to bring his rifle. Cassius propped himself up in bed, took aim, and eliminated the fly with a single shot. A few days later, on July 22, the man known as the “Lion of White Hall” was no more.



**Cassius M. Clay**  
Source: Engraving  
From Allen Thorndike  
Rice, *Reminiscences of  
Abraham Lincoln*



**Building on N. Mill Street, east side, where Cassius Clay ran his anti-slavery paper “The True American,” Lexington**  
Source: *Kentucky Virtual Library*

states. He narrowly won the election, but alienated the entire planter class by his anti-slavery views.

This victory gave Clay the last elected office he would ever hold. He remained active as political gadfly and campaigned for organization of an Emancipation Party. Clay freed his own slaves