

Famous New Yorker: DeWitt Clinton

DeWitt Clinton's political career began when he and the country were very young. He worked the rest of his life to help his state and nation grow stronger.

DeWitt Clinton was born in Little Britain, Orange County, in British-ruled New York on March 2, 1769. During the American Revolution, while DeWitt attended grammar school and the Kingston Academy, his father was a general in the Continental Army, and his uncle was governor of New York.

After the war, DeWitt was the first graduate of Columbia College. Family ties made politics his main interest. His uncle, Governor Clinton, wanted New York to build canals to strengthen trade ties within the state. As an anti-Federalist, he feared that the Constitution of 1787 would hurt state governments. DeWitt agreed with his uncle and wrote anonymous anti-Federalist newspaper articles, but ultimately accepted the new federal government.

After his older brother died, DeWitt became his uncle's private secretary. By the age of twenty, he was secretary of the boards of regents and fortification. He worked for the government until his uncle retired in 1795. He lost his first election one year later, but won an Assembly seat in 1797.

In 1798, DeWitt Clinton advanced to the state Senate. In 1801, the Assembly named him to the Council of Appointments that ratified the governor's nominations for state offices. Clinton believed councilors should make nominations themselves. A constitutional convention agreed, increasing Clinton's political influence.

In 1802, the legislature appointed Clinton to the U. S. Senate, where he helped create the 12th Amendment to the Constitution. He left the Senate when the governor appointed him mayor of New York City. Mayor Clinton supervised firefighters, inspected markets and ports, and judged court cases, sometimes while serving in state government simultaneously.

By 1812, Clinton was a respected figure nationwide. The Federalist Party nominated him for the Presidency, even though he was an anti-Federalist Republican. New York's Republican legislators also nominated Clinton, who lost the election to James Madison.

Defeated nationally, Clinton focused on state issues. Since 1810, he had served on a commission to plan a canal linking Lake Erie to the Hudson River. The War of 1812 delayed plans until 1817, when Clinton's successful leadership of a petition campaign for the project led to his election as governor.

The Erie Canal extended for 363 miles, cost more than \$9,000,000, and took eight years to build. Critics thought that Clinton was wasting taxpayers' money on an impossible project. Others complained that some counties would benefit at others' expense, while supporters believed that trade would flourish all along the canal route.



Little Britain, New York is located in Orange County, about 75 northwest of New York City.



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Governor Clinton left office in 1823, but remained a canal commissioner. When the legislature abruptly removed him from the commission in 1824, the public backlash led to Clinton's re-election as governor. Soon after he dedicated the finished canal in 1825, New Yorkers realized that the whole state would benefit from expanded trade, and other states imitated his example. DeWitt Clinton remained governor until his death on February 11, 1828, and has remained a major figure in state history ever since.

For more information about DeWitt Clinton and the Erie Canal go to www.eriecanal.org/UnionCollege/Clinton.html. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2004.